

SAA 2012  
Poetics of Possession  
Abstracts

Accommodation Fetishism in Shakespeare and Jonson  
Heather Ackerman, Arizona State University

My paper focuses on the emergent word *accommodation* and its variants, which present a complex case from the fetishist perspective because they arrive as assemblages across various classifications—inanimate objects, humans and their labor, favorable aspects of environment, and language—that collectively determine a suitable situation. For example, *King Lear*'s Poor Tom is called unaccommodated because he is poor, bare, and forked, which means that he requires accommodations in the shape of clothing, social assistance, and an improved evolutionary design. Due to their composite makeup, accommodations engage with the major issues of the Latoureaan fetish, but with the advantages of approbation, ambiguity, and appeal.

Additionally, both Shakespeare and Jonson point out that the word *accommodate* could operate independently of its context—that it could be emptied of semantic value and circulate purely as cultural capital, as “a good phrase” in *2 Henry IV* or “a perfumed term” in *Discoveries*—which mirrors Marx's description of how the commodity divests its particular qualities in order to become a placeholder for monetary value. All kinds of components can be rendered as *accommodations* and enter into linguistic exchange to gratify various expressive needs. For Shakespeare and Jonson the word circulates by turns as a soldier's word of command, bawdy innuendo, and a “good phrase” that garners esteem. My paper will draw on Latour's and Marx's theories of fetishism to examine how Renaissance thinkers parse and evaluate hybrids via the term *accommodate*.

“Expedient manage”: Kingship and Husbandry in *Richard II*  
Hillary Eklund, Loyola University New Orleans

This paper explores the connection between husbandry and kingship in Shakespeare's *Richard II*. In particular, I am interested in how the king's failure is cast in terms of both the Xenophonic labor of economy—household management—and changing perspectives on Adamic labor at the turn of the seventeenth century. Richard's failed husbandry—reflected through his interest in naming, his fantasy of weaponizing the ecosystem, and his wasting of the realm—meets uneasy alternatives in the political ideas of John of Gaunt, the Gardener, and Henry Bullingbrook. Framing this discussion according to the play's use of the word “manage” (a noun that, in English, refers at once to administration, horsemanship, and housekeeping), this paper treats husbandry as more than a metaphor: *Richard II*, I argue, stages changing conceptions about work that newly include the monarch as a member of a work force newly conceived as national.

Materializing Freedom in Early Modern England and the English Caribbean  
Valerie Forman, New York University

This paper develops out of research I am conducting for my current book project that explores property, freedom, and the economics of representation in early modern England and the English Caribbean. This paper focuses on the ways economic and political freedom became entangled in one another throughout the seventeenth century as the trope of the political slave to tyranny collides with the material institution of slavery. Remarkably, those who see their economic freedom limited (e.g., colonists, planters, and even members of parliament) view their political status through the lens of their slaves. I then explore what is still, for me, a tentative thesis: this collision--in which colonists see their lack of freedom through analogy, and even identification with, their slaves--opens the door for the market, as opposed to property ownership, to frame their understanding of political liberty. Liberty becomes the right to participate in a free market, and a regulated market that controls one's ability to be a free market actor emerges as tyrannical. At the same time, I am interested in exploring what it means for political liberty to be understood through the framework of the free market. I begin to investigate the way this turn paradoxically produces a more material notion of liberty as planters claim that their liberties are threatened because their labor is, like that of their slaves, in effect, being stolen. I conclude by exploring how literary representations of slaves negotiate the ways that this new understanding of political freedom is also subject to the materialities of the political subject's context and activities in both the New World and in England.

Reconstituting Shakespearean Property: "The Phoenix and the Turtle"  
John Garrison, Carroll University

This paper argues that "The Phoenix and the Turtle" offers an apt narrative for describing the status of literary property in the early modern period. Themes of ownership and possession occur throughout the poem. At its climax, the distinction-dissolving union of the two birds, where "either was the other's mine," causes Shakespeare's embodiment of "Property" to become "appalled" (l. 37). I explore the possible causes of this reaction within the logic of the poem and within the context of how property was defined during Shakespeare's time. The paper then discusses how the poem itself constitutes an unstable object of intellectual property, especially in light of early modern copyright law and the poem's publication history. I ultimately suggest that the depicted relationship between the phoenix and the turtle offers a useful heuristic device for understanding the status of the poem-as-property.

The "deuine Ariosto his ring," Italian Jealousy, and *The Merchant of Venice*  
Andrew S. Keener, North Carolina State University

My paper addresses the "ring episode" at the conclusion of *The Merchant of Venice* and its climax in Gratiano's bawdy couplet: "Well, while I live I'll fear no other thing, / So sore, as keeping safe Nerissa's ring." This pun, which likens the wedding band to the female body, would have reminded playgoers of a fabliau about a jealous husband that first appeared in Poggio Bracciolini. Modern scholarship has also located the tale in Rabelais, La Fontaine,

and Matthew Prior, but, to my knowledge, only Harry Levin has noticed that it appears in Ariosto's fifth satire as well. I draw from research on the ring episode and its sexual implications, as well as from the work of scholars interested in Shakespeare's Italian settings, so as to suggest that the exchange of rings in *The Merchant* owes much to Ariosto's distinctly Italian retelling of this jest as well as the set of stereotypes about jealous Italian husbands that accompanied it. In this way, the ring, something of a verbal fixation in this play, is an index of both Italian jealousy and sexual license, and anticipates the proliferation of these themes in Jacobean drama.

Coverture and its Discontents: Legal Fictions on and off the Early Modern English Stage  
Natasha Korda, Wesleyan University

Although coverture was certainly quite real in its constraining influence on early modern women's lives and property relations, it was nonetheless grounded in a legal fiction: that of marital unity of person, a counterfactual premise known to be false, yet ostensibly accepted as true. The degree and nature of this acceptance, however, is no simple matter and should be taken for granted. Disputes over marital property were common during the period and provide the plots for many plays. Domestic comedies and tragedies in particular reveal the degree to which early modern playwrights and their audiences were attuned to the suspense and dramatic potential of the discovery space hidden behind the veil of coverture. With married women's increasing use of trusts for separate estate to circumvent the common law of coverture in the early seventeenth century, however, wives' property would become a subject of outright satire in the newly topical genre of city comedy.

Circling the Contract: The Presentation and Absence of Marriage in *As You Like It*  
Nathaniel Cates Leonard, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

This essay will focus on the unique relationship between Shakespearean Comedy, as seen in *As You Like It*, and the restaging of both marriage's common law requirements and the ecclesiastical rite itself, or, to be more specific, the truncation, interruption, and absence of those moments. This circumnavigation of the forms of matrimony invites modern readers to consider the sort of threats posed by the restaging of marriage (both as a ceremony and as a contract) on the early modern English stage. *As You Like It* is a play that demonstrates not only a fascination with both the legal, economic, and liturgical ramifications of marriage, but also deftly navigates the cultural and religious taboos associated with its practice. This essay will examine how the partial staging and the absence of staging marriage creates its own types of dramatic layering which in turn allows for the use of alternative social rituals, which are able to substitute for the presentation of marriage itself. In each case Shakespeare is toying with the potentially taboo nature of restaging oral contracts and sacraments and in so doing creates and then releases a certain cultural tension within his early modern audience.

Vagabond King  
Katharine Eisaman Maus, University of Virginia

"Vagabond King," my paper for your SAA seminar, will be excerpted from the first half of a two-part chapter on Henry VI, part 2 and King Lear, which looks at issues of distributive justice in these plays. In some of Shakespeare's plays, I argue, the figure of a royal or noble "vagabond," theoretically entitled but actually dispossessed, raises fundamental questions about property relations and social organization. The chapter will be the conclusion of my book, *Being and Having in Shakespeare*, to be published by Oxford University Press in late 2011.

The Will of the Body: Suicidal Desire and Lines of Inheritance in *Hamlet*  
Kelly Neil, University of California, Davis

In this essay, I investigate intersecting discourses of inheritance and suicide in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. I am interested, then, in two kinds of possession: that of the property passed down from father to son, which could include lands, money, and, in this play, the throne of Denmark, and that of the property of one's body. The legal term for a criminal suicide, *felo de se*, or felon of the self, provokes inquiry into one's ownership of the body: who is the self and who the felon? In this paper, I ask how the play can inform our understanding of the relationship between suicide and inheritance as Hamlet, consumed with but resisting suicidal desire cannot claim the inheritance that is rightfully his. Building on Eric Langley's 2009 *Narcissism and Suicide in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* in which Langley asserts that suicidal figures emerge "within the context of a sense of mutually constructed individuality, reliant upon interlocution and relation" (3), I also question how the suicide of Ophelia, who serves in some ways as a foil to Hamlet, can elucidate and complicate our understanding of the connections between suicide and stymied inheritance.

"Terms! Names!": A Legal Jest in Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*  
Joel Rodgers, University of Toronto

This paper, which is part of a larger project on the "personating fictions" of early modern law and literature, explores how Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* juxtaposes legal and literary forms of fiction-making. In particular, it reads the play in terms of the fictional characters deployed in the English common law. It argues that Shakespeare's only English, citizen comedy illustrates the potential genesis of a legal fiction in Mr Brook, the persona Mr Ford adopts in order to test his wife's chastity, as the disguise acquires a sort of proper reality in the fantastic calculus of the English comedy's resolution. This resolution, in which a legal fiction must technically obtain in order to render an entirely comedic ending, suggests that Shakespeare's comedy, rather than delight in the fictions used by law, renders their absurdity more palpable, at the same time that it seems this rendering of legal system into an absurd joke may be the only recourse for citizens and playwrights necessarily caught up in its very real social consequences.

Hamlet's *Poetics of the Commons*  
Carolyn Sale, University of Alberta

My paper will be primarily interested in the Shakespearean theatre as a site and practice for cultivating an intangible possession, one that can achieve its force only as a thing held in common: the “discursive” potential of its audience as the “commons.” I propose to pursue this “discursive” power — by which I mean the powers of collective reasoning as well as the powers of public speech — in relation to a couple of facets of *Hamlet*: first, the play’s poetic representation of the singular voice, agonized in its solitude and speaking of its inability to constitute itself as action, as a cultural dilemma that the play, as cultural practice, works to resolve, as a matter of urgency for its audience in relation to the question of the political agency it might or could have had in regard to the question of succession; but also in relation to the many tropes that construe and mobilize the play’s auditors as a reasoning collective (in contrast to the “distracted multitude” that is its dialectical opposite) that constitutes itself in the first instance as hearers collecting and botching up the words of others in order to realize itself as the “ratifiers and props of every word” that would make a “world” that “were now but to begin” (Arden 4.3.103-105). This will be part of a book chapter, but for the purposes of this paper, I’ll leave the succession question out, and focus on the theoretical discussion of the discursive power that the play generates, or its poetics of the commons.

“These are the blessings promised to the Jews’: Wealth, Jewishness and Identity in *The Jew of Malta*  
Adriana Streifer, University of Virginia

A curious feature of *The Jew of Malta* is its simultaneous obsession with wealth and near-total lack of interest in how that wealth circulated and was generated. Barabas exemplifies this strange attitude: effortlessly prosperous, he cares more for his riches’ beauty than he does for their financial worth. His attractive possessions, which, “being valued / Amount to more than all the wealth in Malta,” elicit a joyous reaction akin to spiritual ecstasy (1.2.134-135). Through Barabas, Marlowe represents material wealth for its aesthetic pleasures rather than its uses, and he codes such non-utilitarian pleasure as a particularly Jewish trait.

I believe that *The Jew of Malta* stages this odd relationship between a Jew and his possessions in order to contemplate questions of self-definition in a globalized culture. Barabas’ treatment of property taps into commonly held perceptions of Jews as greedy materialists, spiritual literalists, and Machiavellian schemers – perceptions which the play both upholds and subverts. Because Jews lacked obvious national and cultural affiliations, material wealth becomes the instrument through which their identities are forged and understood. Carefully reading the complexities of Barabas’ Jewishness, I believe, can allow us to reevaluate definitions of identity for Jews and non-Jews alike in a cosmopolitan and commercialized early modern world.

Politics as Common Possession in More's *Utopia*  
Henry S. Turner, Rutgers University

This paper offers a reading of More's *Utopia*, especially of Book II. It argues that the problem of common *property*, which is so often taken to be the signature of *Utopia* as a work of political philosophy, is in fact a species of a much larger genus, which involves the problem of defining the "political" concept in the first place as a problem of unity that results from common possession. As is well-known, Utopia is distinctive among human communities because it has a unique *telos* and because every aspect aims to fulfill this end: its laws, buildings, mechanisms for allocating resources, religion, demeanor and beliefs of its inhabitants all work together to preserve the common good. More's purpose is to provide a philosophical explanation of how such a coordination of purpose might be possible at a large scale and to find a representational mode for rendering the collective form of life that results from it. The result is not simply a new definition of political association, nor the resolution of a contradiction, but the opening of a virtual space of inquiry that is somewhere between philosophy and fiction, one in which several possible hypotheses of political community—number, value, institutions, and law—may be juxtaposed with one another.

Had, having and in quest to have: Possession and Property in Actions and Affects  
Luke Wilson, Ohio State University

In Sonnet 129, as Booth noted, what's had and what's having is subject a drift as we move across the three forms of *have* in line 10; beyond persons having and persons had, affects and actions themselves fall into the orbit of what can be possessed and even, perhaps owned. This paper will consider the language of possession and property at places where it comes closest to the person. Whether we *own* ourselves or our bodies are not unfamiliar questions. Less considered, I'm thinking, are questions about what it might mean to own what we do or how we feel. Aristotle describes a person's ethical state as a *bexis*, a having, but what exactly is had in such cases, whether former acts or rather dispositions or habits, is unclear, as is the relation between habit itself and having (hence *habitus*). We can own *up* to what we do (and this is what is meant popularly by owning one's actions), but what if anything does this have to do with *ownership*? Does the difference resemble the difference between using and using *up*, where *up* signals exhaustion or consumption and thus the cessation of the use relationship, so that to own up has as its end a *disavowal*? Who knows? And who knows where, beyond Sonnet 129, this will take me?