

“EARLY MODERN AESTHETICS”  
SAA 2015, VANCOUVER, BC  
ABSTRACTS & BIOS

**“Macbeth’s Raptness, or The Aesthetics of Fascination”**

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“[T]he longer we gaze, the more we crave, yea so forcible they are, that afterwards being but thought upon, they make us seeke for the like an other time.”<sup>1</sup> As suggested by Stephen Gosson, Early Modern theatre worked as an ocular drug. It fascinated spectators not only by its immediacy and inclusiveness, but especially by its ability to stimulate seemingly contradictory aesthetic responses, as suggested, for instance, by the aesthetic credo (‘foul is fair and fair is foul’) of the three weird sisters, whose appearance leaves Macbeth rapt. The discourse of ocular contagion is closely linked to Early Modern notions of fascination, i.e. the notion of bewitchment through corrupted ‘spirits’ that infected spectators’ eyes and minds, which culminated in the belief in the evil eye. As I will argue in my paper, Early Modern drama responded to and countered antitheatrical attacks by employing what I refer to as an aesthetics of fascination, which arises from the simultaneous stimulation of attraction and repulsion. This aesthetic tension can be traced in several plays: the seductive hunchback Richard Gloucester in *Richard III*, the sweet verse of brutish Caliban in *The Tempest*, the playful combination (and inversion) of demonic black and angelic white in *Othello*, or the exotic otherness and infinite variety of the Egyptian queen in *Antony and Cleopatra*, who as epitome of seductiveness and femme fatale, inhabits an imagined, deferred presence. As I will strive to show, part of the attraction of Early Modern drama is based on a newly established aesthetics of fascination, which challenged aesthetic standards of the time to promote a new kind of theatre – a theatre of fascination, which did not only aim to attract, but also disclosed to the audience the aesthetics of fascination it employed to counter antitheatrical sentiments.

**Bio:** I am currently W1-Professor of English Literature and Culture at the University of Mainz, Germany. Trained at Heidelberg, Cambridge, UC Santa Barbara and Munich, I have previously taught at the universities of Warwick, Giessen, and Stanford. Following my first book on Shakespeare and the art of physiognomy, I established an interest in literary fascination and, more generally, the aesthetics of fascination, which became the topic of my next monograph (*Medusamorphoses: Literature and Fascination*), which I am currently preparing for print. This monograph covers a broad range of works, from Shakespeare to McEwan, and traces the various discourses of fascination presented and discussed in key works of British fiction. I have published an article on physiognomy and fascination in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in the *Shakespeare Survey*, but I would like to further discuss the topic of fascination in the context of Early Modern aesthetics. Therefore, I am very excited to be part of the seminar and look forward to our discussions in Vancouver.

**“The Aesthetics of Strangeness in *The Tempest*”**

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<sup>1</sup> Gosson, *Playes Confuted in Five Actions*, sig. G6r.

There is a spectre haunting early Jacobean England: the spectre of “strangeness.” It frights the long tradition of popular print, with its providential pamphlets or broadsides; possesses the “engines” and technologies rapidly developing in the period; and echoes across the discussions of new world societies, animals, and landscapes. “Strangeness” is connected not only to “newness” but also to all forms of uncertainty, unfamiliarity, and moral or stylistic confusion. Yet, the term “strange” and its associations have been little considered by early modern historians or literary critics. Why should we continue to heed Prospero’s warning against “beating on / The strangeness of this business” (F B4r)? I contend that *The Tempest* represents an “aesthetic of strangeness” prevalent in the late 1600s and early 1610s. The term appears with unusual frequency in the play—even occurring three times as a stage direction. This paper examines the “strangeness” of spectacle in *The Tempest* by considering the materials and metaphors of its mechanics and stage technologies. I argue that strangeness brings together scientific and rational enquiry with moral, spiritual, and even ineffable experiences; “strange” so often signals an interest in materials and the material world that is undermined by a dogged uncertainty over meaning. Strange doubts are (literally) manifest in *The Tempest*, and I also briefly consider how Shakespeare’s “late style”—with its syntactic circuitousness, metrical ruggedness, and elision—melds language with the play’s mechanics. *The Tempest*’s aesthetic of strangeness elicits a sceptical approach to the material world—and to theatrical spectacle itself, which proves a curious puzzle, a challenge to description, and a marker of confusion. Yet, the “strange doubts” of the play also prove the means for apparent moral illumination. “Strangeness” represents that double spirit of enquiry and anxiety that may be considered a hallmark of the Jacobean stage—and age.

**Bio:** As part of my PhD research into the mechanics and meanings of stage devices in Jacobean drama, I was (and am) constantly drawn to the term “strange,” which appears prominently, specifically at moments of interest to me. It seemed to fit into my thinking about the materialisation of moral issues, prompting me to ask: Is early 17th-century spectacle really so strange—and why? Paying attention to the language that surrounds spectacle in plays like Heywood’s *Ages*, Webster’s *The White Devil*, and Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest* (all of the late 1600s and early 1610s), I could not escape its insistent repetition—in speech and in stage directions. Its prominence led me to explore the meanings and significance of “strangeness” across other genres and forms, its manifestation in rhetorical style, and its role in visual display.

**“Rocky Faces and Fallen Tongues:  
On the Unruly Aesthetics of Jonson’s Poetic Indentation”**  
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This paper examines Ben Jonson’s lyric poem, “On My Picture Left in Scotland” (1619), amidst his other poetic works as a means to better understand how poetic indentation and the layout of verse in manuscript and print might have influenced seventeenth century poetic craft. More exploratory than definitive, my paper considers the traditions of indentation in manuscript and printed English poetry in relation to the compositional principles driving poetic practice in the period. Inspired by scholarship on the materiality of early modern texts as well as recent considerations of the development of “sinister,” “incomplete,” “inarticulate,” or otherwise imperfect aesthetics (which I term “unruly aesthetics” as a reflection on the conceptual substance and political status of a “rule” in early modernity), this

paper links analytical bibliography with historically grounded formal and prosodic analysis. Jonson's visually ragged poem and its seemingly haphazard line spacing, I argue, witness the poet challenging readers to exercise aesthetic judgment based only on the poem's sound despite also recognizing the inevitability of readers failing this challenge. Through considering Jonson's thoughts on the relationship between poetry and the visual arts, this paper suggests that unconventional indentation allows verse lines to become sites of contestation between prevailing aesthetic norms associated with aurality and the steady assimilation of poetic language to physical pages.

**Bio:** I defended my dissertation in August at Cornell University and am currently Visiting Assistant Professor at Bard College. My dissertation research informs my monograph project, *Unruly Lines: Poetic Measure and Dramatic Technique in Shakespeare's England*, which explores how the line, as a unit of literary form, forges conceptual bridges between literary representation and the formal habits of discourses like mathematics, the visual arts, architecture, and law. I place my research at the intersection of early modern material culture and the historicity of literary form and seek to unpack—line by line—how the habits of literary composition intertwine with the technical and material conditions of writing and performance. My work for the seminar relates with the portion of my project on poetics, as it extends out of my explorations of how the visual figure of the written line, as a marking on both manuscript and print pages, became a significant element of verse. Whereas elsewhere I consider aspects of the line that are more obviously visual, such as the diagrammatic logic of pattern poems, and aspects that are primarily aural, like the vernacular embrace of accental “number,” my exploration of poetic indentation considers more fully the intersections between aurality and visuality as they pertain to early modern poetic aesthetics.

### “Couplets and Quintessence: Jane Cavendish's Royalist Aesthetics”

**Jennifer Higginbotham**

**The Ohio State University**

In Jane Cavendish's poems, the word “quintessence” appears with striking frequency, recurring nine times in her manuscript writings. She uses the term, which designated the alchemical fifth principal, to praise a variety of people, most often Queen Henrietta Maria, but also her father, brother, sister, aunt, and mother. “Quintessence” for her designates both the embodiment of an ideal and the element that makes up heavenly matter in the Aristotelian theory of the elements. In that system, quintessence or “aether” was believed to be the fifth element beyond fire, water, earth, and air. The association between perfection and quintessence came from the idea that the matter making up the heavens must be pure and uncorrupted, and medicinally, quintessence referred to the pure extract left after removing the impurities from any ingredient. Alchemists believed that if you could distill the element that made up heavenly bodies into an elixir or cordial, its consumption could cure all illnesses. While imprisoned by Parliamentarians at her family home of Welbeck Abbey, Cavendish describes her grief as a form of physical sickness, one that leaves her with no will to live if not for the “cordial” of quintessence that she receives in the form of her family or news of her exiled father. This paper argues that Cavendish employs heroic couplets as a mechanism for delivering that quintessence, drawing upon a royalist aesthetic that adhered to a correspondence between poetic form and a particular view of the universe.

**Bio:** I've been teaching early modern women's writing for quite some time, and this paper is partially a product of me trying to figure out why so many of my students don't think early

modern women writers are “good.” Even when teaching someone like Katherine Philips (who was admired in her own time), I have had students question the value of reading her poetry in the twenty-first century. At least one factor seems to be a modern prejudice against couplets. My current research focuses on historical aesthetics because I think it works against universal aestheticism that would value certain forms and styles as objectively “better” or “higher” than others.

**“*Campaspe*’s Antithetical Prose: Honoured, not Obtained; Painted, not Possessed”**

**Jennifer Royston**

**Michigan State University**

*“for give me pleasure that / goes in my mouth, not the ear; I had rather fill my / guts than my brains” (1.2.54-6)*

*“be thou a painter to amend / thine ill face, and thou, Psyllus, a philosopher to correct / thine evil manners” (2.1.33-5)*

*“Your Majesty must know it is no less hard to paint / savours than virtues; colours can neither speak nor / think” (3.4.78-80)*

Lyly’s distinctive use of antithetical statements is present throughout his 1584 drama<sup>2</sup>, *Campaspe*, and I argue that although these phrases seem to function to separate media, such statements actually reveal underlying social and artistic commonalities shared between Renaissance verbal and visual arts. By placing the painted arts in conversation with the verbal, Lyly’s statements suggest the professional struggles painters and dramatists shared, thereby revealing a greater sense of a counter-*paragone* English Renaissance artistic culture. I argue that Lyly’s euphuistic prose serves an ornamental purpose to elevate the dramatic event, but through his comparative antithetical statements, Lyly also presents a defense of verbal and visual forms, reflects upon the changing artistic landscape of Renaissance England, and argues for a larger acceptance of these media—most of all, his own dramatic form.

**Bio:** My dissertation explores how Renaissance playwrights dramatize paintings and painters in order to examine their own artistic significance and value within Renaissance English society. Dramatists, I argue, participated in the *paragone* and yet transformed these debates by subverting the traditional binary purported between verbal and visual. *Campaspe* became an interesting play to examine within this context because its characters question the value of the humanities, thereby opening up the *paragone* debates for English audiences.

**“The Aesthetics of Appetite in *Titus Andronicus*”**

**Andrea F. Van Nort**

**USAF Academy**

Often dismissed as one of Shakespeare’s least original plays, *Titus Andronicus* has nonetheless received recent critical attention for its innovative use of sources. Beyond simply

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<sup>2</sup> Performed at court in 1584; separate prologues for both the courtly and Blackfriars performances survive.

an exploration of all forms of violence from the domestic to the religious, the play questions individual agency within chaos, the generation of appetite, and the boundaries of its gratification. Swiftly provoking a desire for vengeance in the spectator, the aesthetics of the play's revenge paradigm vie with the Herodotean complications, placing the ethical dilemmas into a larger, tragic sphere. This paper will first consider the symmetry of the revenge paradigm before observing the parallel development of appetite in its major characters. We will conclude with a discussion of the tragic space and its balancing of violence and desire.

### **“Love, Portraiture, and Aesthetic Judgment in English Renaissance Drama”**

**Yolana Wassersug**

**Shakespeare Institute**

The trope of falling in love at first sight is a familiar plot device to any reader of Renaissance drama. At its core, the moment of falling in love at first sight is an act of aesthetic judgment: the lover assesses the beauty and virtue of his or her beloved, and deems him or her worthy of love. The purpose of this paper is to consider three plays that engage with the love at first sight trope in a somewhat different manner. In these dramas—the unattributed *Fair Em* (1590), Phillip Massinger's *The Emperor of the East* (1631), and William Cartwright's *The Siege* (1637)—the male protagonists experience love at first sight upon seeing their beloved's portrait only, rather than seeing her in reality. Portraits mediate the experience of falling in love, clouding the three characters' ability to make sound judgments about the beauty of the women they desire. Through a close reading of the relevant moments in the three plays, I will argue that the authors use the plot device of mediated love at first sight in order to characterize their protagonists as rash, irrational, and lacking in common sense. These plays satirize more typical love at first sight narratives, allowing judgments of visual art to intervene in, and ultimately subvert, the courtship process. The plays critique love at first sight and, more pointedly, critique the portraiture itself; they suggest that these art objects, though aesthetically pleasing, have a detrimental effect on the ability to effectively judge another person's virtues and character.

**Bio:** This topic, and the broader subject of how portraits are used in Renaissance drama in general, has been of interest to me for some time now. I recently successfully defended my dissertation entitled *'My picture I enjoin thee to keep': The Function of Portraits in English Drama, 1558-1642* (Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham), and I am currently revising the dissertation to prepare it for publication. This work that I am submitting for our SAA panel is borrowed and adapted from this doctoral research, particularly the chapter of the thesis investigating the use of portraiture in plays that depict courtship rituals and marriage arrangements.