

Marxist Shakespeare/Shakespearean Marx

Convenors: Hugh Grady & Christian Smith

Papers:

Dr Louis Geddes

Adelphi

“Bloody Poetry”: *Measure for Measure* in the Hands of Howard Brenton

This paper examines how socialist playwrights in late twentieth-century England used Shakespearean theatre to enact a political agenda that went hand in hand with their radical reassessment of the theatrical form. Faced with the failure of the post-war socialist utopia, Howard Brenton, in his 1972 adaptation of *Measure for Measure*, parodied his early modern source material to create an intramurality that aggressively engaged with its own subjective position as art, to reinforce the place of art as cultural intervention. Although Jacobean literature, which can arguably be viewed as nascent crisis literature, operates within the bounds of the Marxist principle of “usable history,” the deliberate engagement – and then disengagement – of a Jacobean aesthetic recognizes attempts at historicity as part of a malleable culture in which history is encountered through a refracted lens, in which the present is not only clearly identifiable, but ripe for change. Brenton’s play is an example of a theatre that challenged its audience to explicitly identify Shakespeare its own contemporary, and in doing so, demanded recognition of the radical value of Shakespearean theatre.

Ms. Heather M. Ackerman

Arizona State University

A Merchant’s Word: The Economic Trajectory of Accommodation

My seminar paper illustrates how “accommodation” functions as a Janus-word that describes both collectivist and capitalist attitudes. Initially appearing in the sixteenth century to identify non-interest property loans, accommodations were frequently defined as the antithesis of usury and were denied commodity status (they were forbidden from entering the market or being financially approximated). However, the word was soon co-opted in the early seventeenth century in order to signify bilking schemes, mercantile credit systems, and, eventually, high-interest emergency loans. In the shifting semantics of the word and the commentary that accompanied this conversion, we witness a proto-Marxist critique: a recognition of how exchange-values were eclipsing use-values, a marked preference for form over substance, and the disintegration of social relationships. Drawing from this context, the final section of the paper considers how King Lear’s “unaccommodated man” captures the word’s recalibration of social and economic obligations.

Dr Marcia Eppich-Harris

Marian University

Whoring Shakespeare: The Commodification of the Bard

Jean Howard’s assertion that “There are no innocent uses of Shakespeare,” rings true because invoking Shakespeare signals an attempt to heighten value, or perhaps inflate value beyond warrant. American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco (ACT) has used the Bard’s cultural capital in a different way entirely – as a contextualizing commodity to help engender a revival of Shakespeare’s

contemporaries: John Webster, Christopher Marlowe, and John Ford. Wittingly or not, ACT's gradually increased use of Shakespearean contextualization while favoring alternative early modern playwrights, I argue, subverted Shakespeare's iron grip on the staging of early modern theatre, at least on a local level. Resurrecting Shakespeare's contemporaries may or may not have been a consciously subversive project for ACT; however, ACT's rejection of the hegemonic Shakespeare in favor of *The Duchess of Malfi*, *Edward II*, and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* seemed to be an attempt to radically level the early modern playing field in San Francisco. While the effort to promote "lesser known" playwrights was bold and audacious, it became clear that, without associating these plays with Shakespeare, audiences would balk at their style and content, as well as ACT's daring production choices. Through ACT's educational publications for *Duchess*, *Edward*, and *'Tis Pity*, we can see the evolution of how ACT came to grips with the fact that performing early modern plays without contextualizing — specifically through Shakespeare — would alienate their audiences. Thus, ACT used the Bard's cultural capital through explicitly linking, especially, Marlowe and Ford to Shakespeare in their educational publications after their audiences' remarkably negative reaction to ACT's production of Webster's *Duchess* in order to create a level of familiarity that the Shakespearean brand provides.

Dr Ryan Farrar

Northern Arizona

The Noble Exposure of Christopher Sly in *The Taming of the Shrew*

In William Shakespeare's early comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*, the Induction featuring the tinker, Christopher Sly, exploits the fiction of hierarchical ideology in portraying how the trick the Lord plays on Sly contradictorily crafts the desire for social mobility at the same time that his contrivance tries to ridicule it. The seemingly trivial prank imaginatively suspends the lower standing that had previously shaped and governed Sly's social identity, furnishing him with a new, privileged one. In a carnivalesque spirit, a new rank, a new fiction, permits Sly to fraternize with other noblemen and indulge in the same luxury. From the perspective of Sly, the sudden transition from a world of penury to one of excess is as new and radical as a utopia.

Rather than serving as a framing device that strictly repels the desire for social mobility, Shakespeare's playful elimination of Sly's vocation actually pricks upon the wishes of audiences belonging to the lower ranks to experience the life of those in higher stations. The tinker's newfound luxury as a nobleman may have inspired the lower-ranks to hope for a similar change in that the plot device highlights the state of their own dispossession. The manner in which Shakespeare designs Sly's transformation suggests that early modern identity is groundlessly prefixed, not by individual will, but by the widespread ideological forces of the crown and church, and the permeation of the boundaries between ranks through playacting subjects these forces to a utopian reimagining. Yet, while Sly's prospects appear auspicious, the reality of his transformation is superficial as the aristocratic hierarchy remains intact and undisturbed; merely his position within it has changed. Sly may appear content living in aristocratic comfort, but he tragically and comically embraces his identity while remaining ignorant to the fact that it is the Lord and his men who mold it for him. The dynamic of the prank and the highlighting of the noblemen's power both undermine and validate the utopian dimensions of Induction. Sly's ascension is made more ambivalent by how he proves equivocally able to fulfill the role of a lord as a man alien to the life of a nobleman and how his assumption of the role reaffirms what Stephen Greenblatt argues about identity: "any achieved identity always contains within itself the signs of its own subversion or loss."¹ Thus, Sly's transformation places him in a liminal state between ideology and utopia that renders any interpretative conclusion regarding his predicament opaque.

Dr Sarah A Hogan

Wake Forest University

“Midnight Notes on Shakespeare”

A little more than a decade ago, Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (2004) staged a crucial intervention in the Transition Debates, rethinking Marxist approaches to proto-capitalism from the vantage point of the enclosure of female bodies, witch hunts, and a new sexual division of labor. Federici’s Shakespearean title delivers on what it promises: more than merely alluding to Shakespeare, *Caliban and the Witch* deploys *The Tempest* (and other works by Shakespeare) as a systematic “historical allegory”ⁱ in her Marxist-feminist reorientation of capitalism’s early history. This paper will examine the way Federici’s alternative sites of study, both women’s lives and early modern literature, endorse and develop a more global, imperial, and anti-stagist understanding of “ongoing” primitive accumulation. Interestingly enough, this attraction to Shakespeare is shared by Federici’s career-spanning intellectual collaborators, the Midnight Notes Collective, and is especially echoed in Peter Linebaugh’s scholarship. I’ll argue then that Shakespeare offers the Autonomist Marxist school of thought more than cultural capital and more than a historical reference point; indeed, I’ll suggest that Shakespeare offers the Midnight Notes Collective one rhetorical means for making their historicism relevant to contemporary politics. This is to suggest that Shakespeare’s continued cultural relevance becomes a means for demonstrating how the specific material and social innovations of early modernity persist in present forms, most significantly within debates about “new enclosures.”

Ms Zorica Jelic

Belgrade

Marx wrote that society (and life) shapes one’s consciousness and that social and economic conditions influence one’s values and beliefs. If so, then our way of life, social status, education, and political views influence the way we interpret literature. Furthermore, one can conclude that society in general dictates which texts will be published, printed, or performed. Marx believed that this is what links literature and society. This paper will address Marxist ideology in the play *Coriolanus*, the interaction of the author’s ideology with the reader’s, and the (lack of) adaptations of this play during the XX century.

Dr Matthew Kendrick

William Patterson University

Why Helena’s Cure Works in *All’s Well That Ends Well*

This paper will examine the representation of logics of monetary and commodity exchange in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, contending that the play can be seen as an early exploration of the contradictions and tensions of a nascent commodity system. The play is fascinated with acts of exchange, from Paroles’s insistence on Helena’s “vendible” sexuality to the exchanging of rings to the bed-trick in which Helena and Diana exchange identities. The most significant event in the play, Helena’s magical cure of the King, also appears as an act of exchange. The cure is framed as a kind of quid pro quo in which Helena will receive Bertram in exchange for the King’s health. The cure itself is signified in the form of Helena’s “receipt,” a term that could denote both a medical or magical prescription and a record of monetary transaction. Moreover, the negotiation between Helena and the King regarding the cure suggests mercantile speculation, with the King describing the cure as a

“venture” and a “hazard” with uncertain potential for profit. Finally, the cure, like the fetishized commodity, seems to possess the magical power to override or abstract from the sensuous body of the King, inexplicably erasing his fistula and restoring him to health. Ultimately, I want to suggest that Helena’s cure is mysterious because it constitutes the play’s effort to represent the fundamentally un-representable nature of the commodity as both sensuous use value and abstract exchange value. However, the play does not criticize the commodity form so much as it seeks, far more radically, to expose the grounding of fetishism in fantasy. Drawing on Žižek’s notion of fetishistic disavowal, I argue that the play not only anticipates Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism but goes beyond Marx to reveal the symbolic efficiency sustaining the commodity form. Helena’s receipt, her cure, is a proper fetish, a fiction that becomes real to the extent that belief in it facilitates symbolic cohesion, in this case the play’s comedic resolution. The fetish is a source of fantasmatic value. By extension, the play suggests, the true power of the emerging commodity form rests in its practical effects, its ability to establish and maintain social coherence – which is another way of saying that the fetish has value insofar as it enables everything to “end well.”

Dr Gloria Olchowy

Grant MacEwan University

“A Rupture in Birth Order: The Work of Suffering in *King Lear*”

In my paper, I complicate the conventional Marxist reading of the play as a dramatic enactment of problems, both familial and political, marking the transition from a feudal to a capitalist system of relations, by examining crucial aspects of the incarnational paradigm of artisanal/guild culture informing the play. This paradigm prevailed in towns for the centuries leading up to the Reformation, perhaps most compellingly in the Corpus Christi Cycles, and, as a growing body of recent work makes clear, Shakespeare indubitably was acquainted with it (see, for example, the 2013 collection *Medieval Shakespeare*, edited by Ruth Morse, Helen Cooper, and Peter Holland). The incarnational frame of relations at the heart of the artisanal culture of towns provides a distinct alternative to systems of power predicated upon either male birth or acquisitiveness/exploitation. To illuminate these relations, I explore the historically specific significance of the paternal power the play opens with, the disintegration of families based on genealogical relations shortly thereafter, the formation of alternative families based on charitable relations over the course of the play, the transformation of various characters into the ambiguously-gendered constructions of Christ integral to the inherited version of Christianity, and the rich resonance of the inverted pietà at the end of the play. I suggest that early modern audiences, stuck in the crux of the trauma of monumental religious and economic change, may have experienced *King Lear* more as a kind of Corpus Christ play than anything else—or, at least, as a pronounced gesture to the multi-faceted value of work, whether artisanal, charitable, or theatrical, at the heart of the inherited incarnational paradigm, which was very much in the process of being forcibly diminished and suppressed at the time of play’s performance.

Dr Carolyn Sale

University of Alberta

The “Unbolted Villain”: Shakespeare’s Common Law

My paper presumes that we must read Shakespeare’s dramatic writing for the stage in relation to Marxist premises to do justice to its engagement with and critique of early modern English common law. While my reading of Marx has not been extensive enough for me to make a case of any confidence for Shakespeare’s influence on Marxist thinking about law, the paper will seek to demonstrate the power and urgency of the ways in which the Shakespearean drama manifests and

critiques the common law's premises in ways consistent with later Marxist thinking. I will offer this critical perspective in relation to some material from Lear that may not seem to be about law at all, Kent's violence towards Oswald in 2.2. I aim to show how this material, an exemplary instance of the Shakespearean drama's representation of the effects of forms of social life on human psychology and conduct, represents the historically rotten premises of the common law, especially as they attenuate legal personhood and legal capacity along an axis of class. It should be of serious significance to us that the Shakespearean drama does this kind of work at a historical moment in which the legal rhetoric of the "liberties" of the subject and the common law as the English subject's "best" or "highest" inheritance pretended to a commonness for the common law that did not in fact obtain.

Mr Tristan Alexander Samuk

University of Toronto

Marx, Thersites, and Raillery

Shakespeare's Thersites was one of Marx's favorite literary characters. He quoted Thersites in articles and letters, and sometimes even deployed him as a kind of stand-in. For Marx, Thersites embodied a satiric approach that was central to his own task of ruthlessly criticizing everything existing. "I will begin at thy heel," Thersites says to Ajax, "and tell thee what thou art by inches, thou thing of no bowels, thou!" (2.1.46-48). Marx spent his life trying to do the exact same thing to capitalism. In this paper, I will explore both Marx's attraction to Thersites and the character's function as a satirist in *Troilus and Cressida*. Affirming that literature for Marx was not, or not only, an ideological deformation of social reality, I will argue that satire intrigued Marx because it suggests the possibility of reciprocal action between art and the world. In the preface to *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx looks back on the 1850s and observes that "French literature has made an end of the Napoleon legend with the weapons of historical research, criticism, satire, and wit," effecting a "tremendous mental revolution." Marx does not believe that railing alone can bring about revolution. Yet he also acknowledges that satire is capable of an ideological critique that can, in the words of old Nestor, "weaken and discredit" (1.3.194) the elite in a very real way. Reading Shakespeare's Thersites alongside Marx's own raillery, I will argue, can help nuance our understanding of literature's place in Marxist thought more generally.

Professor Charles Whitney

University of Nevada-Las Vegas

Metabolic Rift in Marx, Shakespeare, and the Present

The powers that be have failed thus far to curb greenhouse gases and to prevent the breaching of three of the crucial environmental planetary boundaries identified by scientists—climate, biodiversity, and nitrogen fixation. This failure has lent new urgency to the question of whether capitalism by its very nature may destroy the earth as humans have known it. Arguing in the affirmative, John Bellamy Foster develops Marx's notion of metabolic rift as outlined in *Capital* vol. 3, which diagnoses a loss of balance between nature and exploitative economic growth. Shakespeare offers accounts of the depletion and destruction of natural riches by overreachers (Gaunt on England, Burgundy on France), and presents transgressive, tormented aspirers like Claudius and Macbeth for whom all causes must give way, as well as, in *King Lear*, terrible forces of nature that seem to punish humans. But Hamlet's carnivalesque discourse on the decay of corpses offers a closer relation to Marx's notion of a regulative metabolism that joins social and natural worlds. On the one hand the dead fertilize the soil in useful ways, but on the other this environmental cycle uncrowns the aspirations of the mighty. The comparison is apt both in relation to Marx and to our

possibly terminal ecological crisis today. Marx often quoted Shakespeare with a carnivalesque irony of his own, and Marx emphasizes the metabolic rift specifically reflected in soil depletion and the role of fertilizer, topics bearing on the crucial process of nitrogen fixation, which is dangerously out of whack today.

Mr Matthew Williamson

Queen's Belfast University

'Pericles and the food-gift: A Marxist analysis'

My paper will explore the representation of gift exchange in *Pericles*, with a particular focus on its articulation of the period's transition from a feudal to a capitalist mode of production. I will draw upon the work of theorists including Costas Lapavistas, Slavoj Žižek and Pierre Bourdieu, as a means to identify issues of temporality and use-value. And in doing so, I aim to highlight ways in which the text explores the erosion of the intra-personal bonds characteristic of gift-exchange, at a time in which economic processes came to be defined by the commodity. I will place the play's depiction of the distribution of food to the hungry against the context of the 1607 Midlands uprising and contemporary debates about the engrossment of corn. And I will argue that by viewing the representation of gift exchange within this political and economic context it becomes possible to discern a rift within the period's ruling classes, which can productively be interpreted through James Holstun's categories of 'monarcho-populism' and 'aristo-capitalism'.

The value of a Marxist approach to these issues is manifold. Attention to use-value and temporality is invaluable as a means of moving beyond the false dichotomy which characterises many theoretical accounts; between commodities, defined by their investment in networks of exchange, and gifts, defined by their apparent detachment from them. But more significantly, by acknowledging the part played by hunger in highlighting the centrality of the gift's relationship to use-value, it becomes possible to discern the role of England's lower-classes in determining the nature of gift-exchange. The opposition of the paternalist distribution of gifts and the proto-capitalist emphasis upon market exchange emerges as in equal measure defined by their relationship to issues of order and sustenance. And the result is a model of early modern society which acknowledges the defining role played by a specific configuration of class forces.

Dr Christian Smith

University of Warwick

Karl Marx at Tomis: The role of Shakespeare in the transformations of Marx's juvenilia and university writings.

My doctoral research found that Karl Marx's readings of Shakespeare's plays resulted in the formative influence of Shakespeare on the development of Marx's writings. He used quotations from, allusions to, and paradigm of Shakespeare's plays at critical junctures in the development of his work. More than simply ornamental or descriptive, Shakespearean intertextuality in Marxism plays a fundamental role. In this paper, I am traveling to Marx's early years to close-read his juvenilia – including school essays and poems – and his university writings. I am defining three periods to Marx's development: 1835-37 – his dogmatic school essays to his Romantic poetry and drama; 1837 – his transformation into a Hegelian, his aesthetic research and his novel writing; 1838-42 – his transformation into a Left Hegelian and critique of Hegel. There is almost no visible Shakespearean influence on his first phase (except for an imitation of Sonnet 40 in a poem to his girlfriend). The

influence begins at the point where he is transforming into a critic of Hegel. Marx begins using lines from Shakespeare to make inversions in the plot of his novel. This same technique (dialectical inversion) will become one of his most effective rhetorical moves in his journalism and theory. Frequently, Marx will use a line, image or plot device from Shakespeare at these points of inversion. Key to understanding the transformation that Shakespeare had on the young Marx is to set this transformation in the context of Marx's reading of Hegel's *Science of Logic* and *Aesthetic Lectures*. In 1837, Marx became a member of the Doctors Club, a group of students who read Hegel. He was steeped on Hegelian philosophy and then in criticism of that philosophy. He planned to edit a journal of theatre criticism that included contributions from Heinrich Hotho, the student who copied Hegel's Aesthetic lectures and wrote them for publication. Marx used Shakespeare to radicalise Hegel's philosophy. The evidence to support this claim sits in a chapter of my thesis. In this paper, I will be concerned with the way in which Marx's reading of Shakespeare prepared him for that task during his university years.