

Staging Poiesis

Seminar leaders:

Scott Trudell, University of Maryland, College Park
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Seminar description:

Poiesis, at the root of “poetry,” is Greek for “making.” The term brought together a variety of imaginative and craft-like endeavors and was not limited to writing — Renaissance authors used “poesie” to describe song, theatrical performance, inscriptions on jewels or other miniatures, and even a collection of flowers or nosegay.

Renaissance plays are full of enactments of poesie, when audiences witness a poem, song, dance or piece of theatrical writing in the process of creation. From amateur actors hammering out scenes during rehearsal to aspiring sonneteers proofreading their masterpieces before sending them to their mistresses, acts of staged poiesis raise many questions about Renaissance making. In his halting song for Beatrice in Act 5 of *Much Ado About Nothing*, for example, Benedick cannot decide whether he is a writer in the “high style” of courtly verse or an improviser of “festival terms.” This ambiguity extends to print, where the Folio’s failure to set the lines of Benedick’s inchoate song off from the surrounding prose seems to signal its liminal status as a work-in-progress. To complicate matters further, early readers would likely have joined audiences in recognizing Benedick’s extempore song-smithing as, in fact, an outdated ballad.

Such theatrical representations of poiesis present the opportunity to explore the semiotics of drama, the perceptual modes of playing and relationship between page and stage. They raise questions about how cultures of staging and production are enmeshed with, but not reducible to, print culture and written discourse. Poetic activities including singing competitions, rehearsals and extempore versifying provide opportunities for playwrights to wink suggestively at methods of authorial self-fashioning, at once offering and withholding a glimpse into the material habits and conditions of playing and literary production. Moments of staged poiesis also draw attention to activities that border on the literary, asking how theater combines and hybridizes musical, gestural, verbal and other types of making.

This seminar invites papers that examine the role of poiesis in Shakespeare studies. What happens when poetry is improvised, remediated and remade in performance? How are varying forms of Renaissance “poesie,” from sonneteering to painting to playwriting, categorized and redefined in the theater? How were they theorized in the period and now? Attending to the messy “stuff” of literary production as it is worked out onstage, we will think collectively about how musical, gestural, verbal and other types of making are represented onstage.

Abstracts:

Darlana Ciraulo
University of Central Missouri

Night and Apostrophe in *The Rape of Lucrece*

I want to look at moments of highly charged theatrical scenes in narrative poetry, specifically the function of the apostrophe in *The Rape of Lucrece*. Lucrece, after her brutal rape, invokes several sinister entities, including the baneful goddess Night. Lucrece summons the sable mantle of Night, for example, to cover her shame and disgraceful violation. Lucrece's invocations to such ill-favored deities serve to dramatize her immense emotional suffering and physical trauma. Yet, rather than function as mere set pieces of rhetoric, the apostrophes in the poem suggest a type of spontaneous, if not extempore, response to feelings of pain and betrayal. Lucrece's histrionic outbursts of grief, ones that seek to concretize the terror that she experiences before and after Tarquin's ravishment, stage a poetic space that allows Lucrece brief moments of relief from despair and self-reproach. Interestingly, these apostrophes resemble Shakespeare's use of ekphrasis in this narrative when Lucrece, gazing on a picture of the fall of Troy, searches for images of agony and ruin in the faces of those defeated and destroyed, all in order to assuage her own feelings of anguish. Both literary devices offer Lucrece a measure of solace—though each fleeting and ultimately nugatory. Although the painting of Troy is static, Lucrece's invocations (dynamic and impulsive) provide a place, a locus, of comfort before her death.

Allison K. Deutermann
Baruch College, CUNY

How to Hear the 'fatal screech-owl': Resilient Listening in *3 Henry VI*

In a famous passage from *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit* (London, 1592), Shakespeare is accused of appropriating or at least imitating an existing theatrical *sound*: the sound of bombastic, scene-shaking speech. “[T]here is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and beeing an absolute Johannes fac totum, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a country” (84-85). The blank verse that is said to shake the scenes of *Henry VI, Part 3* is at once both old and new, part of a play that is familiar and experimental. Like *Tamburlaine* and numerous other 1580s plays, *3 Henry VI* is loud, suffused with the sounds of battle; it is also bombastic and “braving”; and, finally, it is liberally decked with references to revenge. My paper argues that this play represents a revolutionary formal and sonic experiment. Reading *3 Henry VI* as an example of a dramatic genre in flux, or in the midst of its own production, I ask questions about the development of early modern dramatic form. The paper aims to

rethink the patterns of relationships through which early modern commercial theater was experienced, felt, and understood by its audiences; and to ask how the experiencing, feeling, and understanding of its sounds may in turn have shaped the formal and aesthetic history of early modern drama.

Miriam Jacobson
University of Georgia

Necromancing Antiquity

The project of rejuvenating classical poetry in early modern England was a vexed one, continually conceived of as grave robbing, corpse reanimation, and necromancy. This paper examines one of the tropes continually tied to the process of unearthing the literary past in early modern English culture: Medea's resurrection of Aeson in Book 7 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. This episode—a resting place between the voyage of the Argonauts and Medea's revenge on Jason's new wife—is almost certainly attributed only to Ovid, and it becomes very popular in early modern art as well as literature. It is one of the most easily identifiable Ovidian quotes in early modern drama. Early modern mythographers and moralizers (Conti, Sandys etc) reference and analyze the tale, and it also appears in text and woodcut in sixteenth and seventeenth-century vernacular translations of Ovid as well as in Lodovico Dolce's abridged summary of the *Metamorphoses* ("No Fear Ovid"), *Le Transformazioni*. The Medea invoked in early modern performance is a classical poetic persona, created and augmented by Ovid (*Met* 7. 1-424; *Tristia* 3.9; *Epistolae* 4; *Heroides* 12) and his contemporaries Vergil (*Aeneid* 4), Horace (*Epode* 5), and Tibullus (de Fascinatrice, lib. I Eleg. 2). Poetic and lyric utterance have long been associated with extratheatrical and metatheatrical import: the songs of a madwoman point to deeper truths. This paper points out the way that the staging of Medea's resurrection speech creates textual and performative metamorphoses, all of which point to the dangers and risks of bringing back classical antiquity from the dead.

Laura Kolb
Baruch College, CUNY

Ben Jonson and the Stuff of Poetry

Both *Volpone* (c. 1606) and *The Magnetic Lady* (1632) make arguments for *wanting* as essential to *making*, and for desire as a crucial component in creativity. In so doing, they draw on a strain of Renaissance poetic theory that associates the attractions of poetry with the allure of worldly things and experiences. In *The Advancement of Learning* (1609), Francis Bacon describes poetic fictions as worlds more aesthetically pleasing and imaginatively stimulating than our own. He writes:

Feigned history gives some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it, the world being in proportion inferior to the soul; by reason whereof there is, agreeable to the spirit of man, a more ample greatness, a more exact goodness, and a more absolute variety, than can be found in the nature of things.

Bacon posits a poet, or reader of poetry, who is fundamentally dissatisfied by the world, which is “in proportion inferior to the soul.” Crucially, though, this person does not turn to poetry to find something different in kind. Rather, he or she goes looking for *more* of what the sensible, sublunary world has to offer: more “magnitude,” “more rareness and more unexpected and alternative variations.” Bacon goes on to invoke the standard defenses of poetic fiction: poems edify readers; a poem’s pleasing surface attracts and holds attention, but ultimately discloses higher truth. Even here, however, he insists on dissatisfaction and desire as the conditions for reading. Poetry “was ever thought to have some participation of divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind, by submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind.” Poetry improves the mind by giving it what it craves, and what it craves are re-creations of the world, intensified by art.

Critics of poetry, as Sidney notes, condemned it for directing “men’s wit” towards “wanton sinfulness and lustful love.” I think that Jonson repurposes this line of thinking in connecting poetry not with lust, but with greed. Bacon’s poetic subject is greedy for temporal experience: for magnitude, rarity and plenty. Jonson’s is greedy, period. In *Volpone* and *The Magnetic Lady*, *poiesis* is the province of those who have much but want more. Each of these two plays articulates a correspondence between the world of goods and the “second worlds” created by the poetic invention, and between the airy nothings poetry brings before the mind’s eye and the solid things proliferating in the marketplace. They trace the circuit between the subjective desire for things and imaginative ability, between wanting and making. In so doing they articulate a poetics that is particularly apt for the stage.

Brian Pietras
Rutgers University

Ravished Orpheus: Shakespeare, the *vates*, and the Sibyl of Cumae

In both *Titus Andronicus* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, Shakespeare makes the odd choice of identifying sexually vulnerable or violated female characters with the divinely inspired poet Orpheus. I argue that these choices reflect the influence of Virgil’s Sibyl of Cumae, whose possession by Apollo in Book VI of the *Aeneid* linked divine inspiration with sexual coercion—and, hence, the role of the poet-prophet (or *vates*) with a violent loss of personal agency. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid responds to this purported loss by rewriting Virgil’s Sibyl, making her into an emblem for his defiantly immortal authorial voice. By contrast, Shakespeare’s revisions of the Sibyl in *Titus* and *Lucrece* outline a

theory of authorship that preemptively discards the agentive self, looking instead to uncanny objects for models of poetic production.

Jacqueline Wernimont
Arizona State University

Fragments of Worlds: poesis, mathesis and performative world-building

“Fragments of Worlds” asks how contemporary theories of performance and performativity might change our understanding of early modern poesis and mathesis as world-building technologies. Taking Shakespeare’s *Tempest* as a case study, I am working through the ways that performance may act as “a guide” to how generative texts “live” in our world and the worlds they create. This work draws not only on modern theories of performance, but also on emerging trends within the history of science and literature to bring formalist and historicist methodologies together to bear on early modern knowledge production.

Seth Williams
Columbia University

Edmund Spenser’s Kinetic Verse

While early modern theater often vivified poetry onstage, this paper attends to the inverse: the way in which poetry often treats performance as its matrix. Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* offers one prominent instance of this, depicting poetic composition as both originating in and struggling to represent the supposedly ephemeral art form of dance. The dance of the three Graces on Acidale shows Spenser adapting familiar iconography in order to create an etiological myth about the origins of courtly grace. If we read this episode not for its ekphrastic but for its choreographic investments, we see the extent to which Spenser’s moral instruction depends upon our failure to read a series of impossible motions. To put this in Sidneian terms, Spenser instructs not through a speaking picture, but through a speaking dance. In turn, he figures poesis as a form of dance accompaniment, suggesting that the *rithmos* of poetry owes a debt not just to music but also to embodied understandings of performance. What results is a dance that refers to no external or actual form of dance, but is only live in its poetic mediatization.