

## **Katharine Cleland (Virginia Tech) and Jay Zysk (University of South Florida)**

Our main goal was to keep our seminar's conversation at SAA focused on meta-questions related to the seminar's topic on Shakespeare and ritual (what is ritual? what do Shakespeare and his contemporaries do with ritual in their works?). To accomplish this goal, we required participants to perform some pre-seminar work in addition to writing their abstracts and papers. Once we had the papers, we first divided them into four related subgroups. We then required each seminar participant to write a brief critical response to another paper in his/her subgroup before the seminar—this ensured that each seminar member got written feedback on his/her individual work in advance. For the seminar itself, we required seminar participants in each subgroup to prepare a one-minute statement putting all of the subgroup's papers into conversation with one another and the seminar topic. Participants read their statements at the beginning of a discussion on their assigned subgroup during the seminar itself. To stay on track during the seminar, we were very strict about time, letting people know as their minute was about to run out. We also limited discussion on each subgroup (during which everyone could participate after the subgroup members delivered their comments) to 25 minutes. This meant that every subgroup got an equal amount of airtime, and we had time at the end to discuss the seminar topic as a whole and take questions from auditors. Despite our focus on the meta-questions, every individual paper still got discussed, and participants seemed pleased with the format and resulting discussion.

No matter a seminar's structure, it's important to keep track of time to ensure that every subgroup (if applicable) and individual seminarian has a chance to participate and discuss. It's also important to give auditors a chance to participate in the end.

One final piece of advice: seminar leaders should try to prepare for any extracurricular activities with their seminars, like post-seminar dinner outings, well in advance. Making dinner reservations for large groups in unfamiliar cities can be logistically difficult.

21 October 2015

Dear Colleagues,

Welcome to “Ritual Shakespeare”! We are pleased that you’ve chosen to participate in this Shakespeare Association of America seminar and are happy to report that it is fully enrolled with 16 members. This should make for lively and productive conversation in New Orleans.

This initial communication provides you with essential information intended to keep us on track in the months leading up to our seminar in March. Below you will find an extended description of our seminar along with a set of framing questions. We have also included key deadlines for submitting various materials. **In charting the schedule, we worked backward from 15 February 2016, which is when we have to turn the official list of participants into the SAA office.** Per the SAA guidelines, only those participants who have submitted a complete paper by this date can be listed in the official program.

The focus of this seminar, “Ritual Shakespeare,” derives from the observation that Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote for a world vested in ritual practice. From wedding feasts, banquets of state, and sacramental suppers to spectacles of punishment, royal progresses, and festive pageants, ritual language and practice orchestrated protocols of statecraft, religious devotion, and theatrical performance. This seminar invites papers that approach the representation of ritual from a variety of perspectives: anthropological, political, linguistic, religious, and theatrical. How does Shakespeare handle ritual in both serious and parodic registers? Do poetry and prose use ritualistic language differently than drama? Does ritual serve a different purpose in comedy than in tragedy? We are also interested in linguistic aspects of ritual. In what ways do rituals “do things with words”? How do ritualistic words and acts differ between the sacred and secular?

By inviting consideration of all forms of ritual (sacred, secular, juridical, sacramental, theatrical, domestic, etc.) in a wide range of genres (poetry, prose, drama) and cultural institutions (theater, pageants, sports/games, church ales, domestic practices) this seminar encourages a range of critical approaches and theoretical methods.

You will see that we have not presumed to define “ritual.” Rather, we hope that the papers will take diverse approaches to the term, which has received less considered attention in Shakespeare studies than it should. Participants are encouraged to discuss what constitutes a ritual and the different forms (generic, linguistic, material, political, etc.) that rituals take. The “turn to religion” in early modern studies offers one context, but there are many others. The more diverse our approach, the better we can explore ritual’s critical import.

Toward that end, we suggest that our seminar conversation take shape around a set of meta-critical questions. We ask that you keep these two related sets of questions in mind as you prepare your papers and, eventually, your responses in subgroups:

- 1) How are you using the term “ritual”? What does ritual *mean* in the work you are considering, and furthermore, what does ritual *do* in this text?

- 2) How does the particular work you are considering shape working definitions or ideas about ritual practice—in the works of Shakespeare and/or his contemporaries, in early modern culture, and/or in contemporary culture?

While the seminar will raise many other exciting and unexpected questions, these two sets of questions can provide a critical scaffolding for our shared work over the next several months.

### **Seminar Timeline**

#### ***General Notes:***

- (1) Please send all correspondence to both seminar leaders: Katharine Cleland ([kcleland@vt.edu](mailto:kcleland@vt.edu)) and Jay Zysk ([jzysk@usf.edu](mailto:jzysk@usf.edu)).
- (2) We will use email as the primary mode of communication. We will also use a shared Dropbox account for the submission of papers and responses. Dropbox accounts are free and easy to set up. If you don't have a Dropbox account, please go to [www.dropbox.com](http://www.dropbox.com) and set one up. We will send out a finalized list of participants and contact information as soon as we receive all the confirmations.

**Within 10 days of receiving this letter:** Send an email to both leaders that confirms your participation in the seminar and corrects any inaccurate contact information. **In this email, please also identify a particular ritual or aspect of ritual practice that you might work on in your paper.** This is entirely non-committal and can be broadly focused (i.e. “marriage” or even “secular”), but we would like to get an idea from the start of the possible range of rituals we might be discussing.

**4 December 2016:** Submit to the Dropbox a title and short abstract (200-250 words) for your paper. In the abstract, set forth the thesis or central idea of your paper and the text(s) it will work on, its methodological approach, and a brief description of where the argument might go. Include bibliographical information for two readings that are most relevant to your work. We will put together a collective bibliography for the seminar and post it to the Dropbox once all the abstracts come in.

**8 February 2016:** Submit your final seminar paper (**8-10 double-spaced pages in Word format, ca. 2400-3000 words**) to the Dropbox. Please adhere to this word limit. Keep in mind that each seminarian has to read 15 papers. For the purposes of our seminar, a shorter, more focused paper is preferable to a longer submission. Please remember that we must let the SAA office know by February 15, 2016 who has completed their papers; that is, if you do not submit your paper by that date, your name will not appear in the program. After we receive all the essays, we will organize response groups and send out some ideas for responding to each other's work.

**4 March 2016:** Submit your responses to the Dropbox. These responses should be short and suggestive, highlighting the major points of argument and contributions made by the paper to our seminar topic. Responses should accomplish two tasks: (1) offer suggestions for revision or

expansion; and (2) identify the paper's major contributions to our seminar topic. Also, if the final version of your paper is different from what you set forth in your original abstract, please send us a revised abstract by this date.

**23-26 March 2016:** The SAA Meeting in New Orleans. To anticipate a question you may have, we do not yet know the date and time of our seminar meeting. We will communicate that information as soon as we are notified by the SAA office.

We would also like to organize a dinner for our seminar group. As the date draws closer, we'll make necessary arrangements for all those interested and their guests.

Lastly, we hope that you will share any ideas about how we might improve this seminar or make it more fully rewarding for this group. We very much look forward to working with you in the coming months and to our eventual conversation at SAA in late March. Please do not hesitate to contact us at any point during the process with questions or suggestions.

With all best wishes,

Katharine Cleland ([kcleland@vt.edu](mailto:kcleland@vt.edu)) and Jay Zysk ([jzysk@usf.edu](mailto:jzysk@usf.edu))

SAA Seminar 2016:

## **Ritual Shakespeare**

February 29, 2016

Dear Participants in “Ritual Shakespeare”:

With the SAA Meeting in New Orleans just a month away, we want to be in touch about preliminary activities for our “Ritual Shakespeare” seminar. We have greatly enjoyed reading your papers and hope that what we have planned will reflect the rich diversity of topics and perspectives; we hope also that our proposal will help us to focus on the big questions of the seminar, namely, “What is ritual?” and “What do Shakespeare and his contemporaries *do* with ritual in their plays and poems?”

**As confirmed by the SAA office, our seminar will meet on Saturday, March 26 from 4- 6 p.m.** We would like to plan a dinner for our seminar group immediately following at an area eatery. More details are forthcoming, but we hope you will join us. (Spouses, partners, and guests are of course invited). We will call for a final count as the SAA meeting approaches.

### Seminar Preparation

In addition to reading all the papers, we ask that you do the following to prepare for our seminar:

**(1) Respond with a detailed comment (one single-spaced page) to one paper in your subgroup.** We have divided the seminar into subgroups listed on the following page and have also assigned respondents in each subgroup. We want to ensure that every participant leaves the seminar with a detailed read of his or her work. These comments should be suggestive and constructive; they should help the writer to understand the argumentative strengths of the paper and should offer some additional directions for argumentative development.

**Respondents should email these comments directly to the author no later than Friday, March 18.** Include us ([kcleland@vt.edu](mailto:kcleland@vt.edu) and [jzysk@usf.edu](mailto:jzysk@usf.edu)) on the email, but please do not post the responses to the Dropbox. You can find your partner’s email address on the attached participant list.

**(2) Prepare a one-minute spoken comment** to share at the seminar. This comment should address what you see as one dominant thread or strand of thought that connects all of the papers in your subgroup. In other words, when you take the 3 or 4 papers in the subgroup together, what do they together reveal about ritual and/or Shakespeare and other early modern authors’ representation of it? The purpose of this advance work is to enrich our discussion of the seminar’s major questions—namely, “**What is ritual?**” and “**What do Shakespeare and others do with it?**”

Please bring these one-minute comments to the seminar meeting (you don’t need to post them to the Dropbox). So as not to lose focus in the seminar, we will strictly enforce the one-minute timeline and thus advise you to write out/outline/rehearse your comment in advance rather than

deliver it extemporaneously.

Lastly, we'd also like to remind you about the recommended readings in the Dropbox. We encourage you to have a look at these readings as they suit your interests as you prepare for the seminar.

### Seminar Organization

In order to survey the wide range of topics reflected in the papers, we will divide our seminar meeting into four 25-minute conversations focused on the subgroups. We will begin each conversation by hearing the prepared one-minute contributions of the group members, and will then invite all participants to contribute to a discussion on the subgroup. We will save the final 20 minutes for a general conversation that will attempt to bring together ideas raised over the course of the seminar.

We are so grateful to you all for sharing your papers and ideas. Please be in touch with any questions leading up to the SAA meeting. We look forward to seeing you in NOLA!

Best wishes,

Katharine and Jay