Political Aesthetics I

Christopher Pye (organizer)
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Ryan Farrar

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"A Greater Power than We Can Contradict": Utopian Love and Institutional Weight in Romeo and Juliet

In Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, the desire that the young lovers express for each other serves as a utopian antithesis to the ideological predilections of their respective Veronese families. In trying to create a space apart from the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues, Romeo and Juliet serve as utopian protagonists that carve out a marginal enclave where the amity of their attraction can be expressed free from the disapprobation of their families. The most apparent utopian symptom of their relationship surfaces during the window scene. In professing their love, Juliet and Romeo undermine their families' enmity by extricating themselves from familial identifications altogether, placing themselves in a utopian fantasy built on mutual attraction and a devotion to the idea of love. In the vein of Theodor Adorno and Paul Kottman, I argue that despite the pair's attempts to establish an independent affection, the preexistence of their families' grudge cruelly tantalizes the lovers' desire as it ultimately prevents them from openly celebrating and professing their amorous relationship.[1] By ignoring the distemper of their families, Romeo and Juliet tragically and shortsightedly attempt to forge a bond independent of social constraints that they inevitably cannot escape. With characters like Tybalt, Paris, and Capulet drawing Romeo and Juliet back into the feud's space, the lovers ultimately cannot uncouple themselves from the inherent animosity shared between their families, resulting in the effacement of their lives and, with it, their utopian love.

[1] Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, trans. Roberth Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 247 Paul Kottman, "No Greater Powers Than We Can Contradict," Criticism 54, no. 3 (2012): 445-454. ---"Defying the Stars: Tragic Love as the Struggle for Freedom in Romeo and Juliet," Shakespeare Quarterly 63 (2012): 1-38.

Hugh Grady
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From the Political to the Aesthetic: A Shakespearean Trajectory

Shakespeare himself thematized both the political and the aesthetic over the course of his works, in a variety of ways over his two decades of active writing. In this essay I want to describe part of this variety by looking at the trajectory created in his treatment of these two themes from the markedly political plays of the period of 1595-1600 (Shakespeare's Machiavellian Moment) to a new emphasis on the idea of the aesthetic in the late plays, including aspects of *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1606-7) and the tragicomedies or romances (1607-1614).

Julius Caesar is a convenient example of the plays dominated by the political, with aesthetics present in the form and practice of the work, but of only minor importance in its thematic armature. All these plays (including *Richard II*, *1 and 2 King Henry IV*, *Henry V*) use dialogic structures to represent competing political agents caught up in impersonal forces of Machiavellian logic. If aesthetics appears at all as a theme, it is in close imbrication with the subjectivity of "losing" politicians--most markedly in the cases of King Richard II and of Falstaff. In these cases (but not in others, like Hamlet), it seems to be subordinated to the autonomous functionings of power politics. The idea of the aesthetic and of subjectivity (in the sense of a dynamic, layered interiority which can both embody and resist ideology) share some important commonalities, and they are often linked in Shakespeare's works. Indeed, one important aspect of art generally is to crystallize complex subjectivities in the act of perceiving/constructing the lived world.

Starting with *Antony and Cleopatra*, the aesthetic (as an idea and theme) becomes more prominent in Shakespeare's plays. It is the force that creates the sense of positivity in the death of Cleopatra, immortalizing her image even as she suffers a decisive political defeat. A muted version of this dynamic is involved in the otherwise nihilistic *Timon of Athens*, and a similar version emerges in the fantasy-like ending of *The Winter's Tale* and in the various utopian visions of *The Tempest.* Towards the end of his career, Shakespeare is much more utopian and aesthetic than he was in his beginnings. He never loses sight of the realities of political power, but his focus in these works is elsewhere.

Jeff Griswold
University of Maryland

Apostrophe, Animation, and Macbeth's Thick Night: the Political Ecology of a Dark Scotland

This essay argues that Macbeth's apostrophes to Night conceptualize political action as inseparable from the nonhuman forces in the play. Shakespeare reworks his source material to create a more complex relationship between human politics and the darkness that enshrouds Scotland. Macbeth's many apostrophes to Night explore the borders of himself and his capacity for action. In this brief paper, I hope to complicate scholarship on *Macbeth* that understands political attachment in terms of an autonomous subject and attributes Macbeth's demise to an over-susceptibility to natural and supernatural forces. By putting accounts of the humoral constitution of the night air in conversation with theories of apostrophe, I will argue that these calls to Night portray the political as grounded in the relationship between human and nonhuman forces.

Ethan Guagliardo
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Questionable Shapes: *Hamlet* and the Experience of Pseudo-Authority

 Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, Carl Schmitt, Victoria Kahn, and others, this essay explores what I call "the experience of pseudo-authority" in *Hamlet*. On the surface, it would seem impossible to experience religious or political authority as something false. After all, to reject some supposed authority as fake is precisely to deny its authority. Yet early modern Roman Catholics and Protestants held that many, indeed almost all, people were under false authority's spell. They explained this near-universal credulity through aesthetic experience: the power of art, whether demonic or human in origin, was such that images and simulacra of authority could easily replace the genuine article. On the other hand, no authority, true or otherwise, was free from aesthetic modes of persuasion. If true and false authority looked and felt the same, then how could anyone tell the difference between them? *Hamlet*, I argue, confronts this anxiety by uncovering a mode of affect that must have been felt by many: the simultaneous attraction toward authority and repulsion against its likely trumpery that I've described as the experience of pseudo-authority. This experience is not one of simple skepticism; on the contrary, Hamlet is a figure who, though desperately committed to an abstract need for authority, nevertheless fails to locate to his satisfaction its concrete bearer. As Hamlet pursues it, this experience leads to an unfounding or negation of the political; unmoored from its traditional ground in transcendent authority, the political risks becoming instead a superficial multitude of possibility and play—a condition Hamlet, far from celebrating, finds sickening. At the heart of political aesthetics, Hamlet finds, is aesthetic politics and vice versa—a discovery that, for this hero of conscience, can finally amount only to an anti-political aesthetics.

Joan Pong Linton
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Timon's hunger in the forest: towards a political aesthetics of theater

Thinking with and through Marx, this paper approaches *Timon of Athens* as a text enacting theater as embodied political aesthetics. By giving Timon a backstory as a charismatic philanthropist, the play explores the making of "Misanthropos" as a subjectivity tied to gold, the medium and agent of power within an economy of credit. The term "Misanthropos" appears once, strategically in Act Four, when a famished Timon digging for root in the forest finds gold *first*. I argue that gold's preemptive appearance doubly alienates Timon: from nature as provider of food, and from his own sociable nature. Although Timon voices hatred of Athens and his fair-weather friends even before finding gold, it is only after that he calls himself Misanthropos and begins using people, including true friends and a loyal servant, as instruments for society's destruction. In his famous allusion to Timon cursing gold, Marx calls circulation the "great social retort" in which gold the "money crystal" renders "everything … purchasable and salable," and enables the diversion of social wealth and power into private hands. While Marx aligns Timon's cursing with his critique of political economy, the play has Timon *reenchanted* with gold nonetheless, actualizing, in alchemy's language of ambivalence, gold's power to corrupt as well as ennoble human nature. In this context, I see Timon's hunger as a bio-psycho-social phenomenon that grounds a paradigm for what I call *addiction*, even as it renders him relatable to all in his utter inability to relate to anyone. Misanthropy thus becomes a general human potential—pointedly so, when Alcibiades, victorious over Athens (in a campaign financed with Timon's gold), reinstates Timon's memory within the political-economic status quo. Even as Timon embodies for audiences a participatory theater aesthetics of hunger, Alcibiades, by consciously incorporating misanthropy into the political unconscious, heterotopically renders that participation political.

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(Weber on charisma figures in this paper as well, but the focus in on Timon's hunger in the forest.)

Philip Lorenz
Cornell University

The Shakespeare File: The Encryption of Sovereignty in *Henry VIII*

Part of a larger project on the after-lives of early modern sovereignty, "The Shakespeare File" takes as its point of departure a call made in a special issue of *Telos* for a return to a "political theology of the new bureaucratic regime." The project focuses on the pre-history of this regime as it could be said to appear prefigured in the late plays of Shakespeare, a century or so before the rise of modern bureaucracies. How does sovereignty's story unfold when it ceases to take the form of a succession of kings' names but is accompanied rather by a merger between anonymity and authority in conjunction with monarchy's withdrawal? How do Shakespeare (and Fletcher) work out the relationship between sovereignty, politics and time? The late plays on the whole suggest a political aesthetic, requiring a different form of diagnostics than the one formerly available via a reading of the king's two bodies, including a new understanding of the encryption of power. "The Shakespeare File" focuses on this encryption as a sovereignty *thing* marked in the stage directions of *Henry VIII*.

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Rebecca Moore
University of Arkansas

What Henry Wrote: The Legacy of Henry VIII's Political Aesthetics in *Henry VIII, or All is True*

When Shakespeare and Fletcher wrote *Henry VIII, or All is True*, they were responding to and codifying a political mythology developed within the preceding century. The planned paper will offer an overview of the legacy Henry himself created through his poems, masques, and political performance. Then, the paper will move into a discussion of how this narrative was transformed during his children's reigns and what Shakespeare and Fletcher receive, preserve, and alter in their depictions, specifically of Henry, his closest courtiers, and the two queens featured in the drama: Katherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn. I am particularly interested in whether Shakespeare and Fletcher's efforts at communicating particular elements of courtly performance had some influence on the uncharacteristically high number of stage directions in the play. My larger question, though, is how Henry's investment in political performance affected later performance of his politics, as it were. Primary sources, aside from the play, will include Erasmus's letters on Henry's kingship, Henry's own poetry, early Tudor coronation and masque records, Samuel Rowley's *When You See Me You Know Me*, and, of course, Holinshed. Secondary sources will include Peter C. Herman's and Raymond G. Siemens's works on Henry as author and courtly maker, as well as David Norbrook's *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance.*

Rebecca Munson
Emory University

The King's Men's Incestuous Sheets: "Likeness" as Political and Aesthetic Problem in *The Winter's Tale*

Incest can be described as a problem of too much likeness, indicative of a closed-off world in love with its own image. It also represented a total failure of self-government, a privileging of passion over reason. Many of the King's Men's greatest repertory successes of the second decade of the seventeenth century turn on the possibilities—social, political, and dramatic— raised by incestuous desire. Using Caroline Levine's definition of form as an "organizing principle" that operates in both the aesthetic and political realms, this paper considers the form of the incest plot as it relates to problems of over-likeness in Jacobean politics—specifically King James's belief that the king's will is above the law, his refusal to call parliament, and his elevation of unqualified favorites to governmental positions. Though for reasons of space this paper focuses only on *The Winter's Tale*, the chapter from which this paper is drawn treats the co-evolution of aesthetic and political forms of "likeness" in greater detail, connecting the plays and politics of Shakespeare's final years with the King's Men to the heavily self-referential world of the repertory theater and its "brother" playwrights and coauthors to argue that at the end of Shakespeare's career the King's Men developed a new form of drama that was heavily referential and highly formulaic: an aesthetic form perfectly in harmony with the form of Jacobean politics.

Secondary works (tentative): Jim Marino, *Owning William Shakespeare*; Jeremy Lopez, *Theatrical Convention and Audience Response in Early Modern Drama*; Fran Dolan, *Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy*

Anthony Oliveira
University of Toronto

The King Rises: Political Theology, *Hamlet*, and the Baroque

This paper is interested in the aesthetic by which the 17th century's political theology crisis, with its attendant disintegration of sovereign and subject, becomes culturally legible. Drawing on the work of cultural theorists like Walter Benjamin and, more recently, Roland Greene, it designates this aesthetic "The Baroque."

It so names a period of artistic/cultural production that figures a reality in which a proliferation of radically contradictory epistemologies (Lucretian atomism, the geo-political vistas of the "New World," the schisms of Reformation, the Copernican revolution, the waning of the Church's power, and the rise of the Absolutist state) must nevertheless coexist. These destabilizing, seditious, and even blasphemous elements are worked incompletely and asymmetrically into the Baroque texts' designs, focalized only to be then suspended in dynamic tension with one another, and often culminating in a moment when a figure from within the text considers the irreconcilable logics in which they are now enclosed, and imagines a self-annihilation that would afford an escape from an unstable and collapsing system, even puncturing the tissue of the fiction itself.

Hamlet is a play in which the aesthetic and the political are mutually inextricable and entangled. Elsinore as a psychic space is obsessed with style and its turns (the play literally begins with a changing of the guard, in which performative language encodes identity) and Hamlet, the "glass of fashion," links this new courtly mannerism to Denmark's new monarch. The explosion of *The Mousetrap* is the quintessential moment of this aesthetic revolution – a reoccupation of the old forms even as it radically destabilizes the world as it now exists: a dissipation of divinely sanctioned regal power, even as it manipulates the haunted past's cultural bulwarks and set-pieces to do it.

This paper will try to understand – like the baffled courtiers and downmarket actors at *The Mousetrap* – how the Baroque aesthetic, nominally meant to fete the monarch and the divinity that appointed and anointed him could, in the fullness of time, so spectacularly detonate both. This negotiation is the seed of our own contemporary "post-secular" era; to study the Baroque's unfolding, then, reveals western liberalism's contours and limitations.

♦

Some key texts:
Carl Schmitt *Hamlet or Hecuba*
Roland Greene *Five Words*, particularly the chapter on "World"
Walter Benjamin *Origin of German Tragic Drama*
Graham Hammill & Julia Reinhard Lupton *Political Theology and Early Modernity*
Victoria Kahn *Future of Illusion*

Simon Ryle

Macbeth and the language of terror

This paper explores terror, anteriority, and typographic play in the language of *Macbeth*. It combines a media archaeology of early seventeenth century terror (the printing press as the media device that gave rise to the modern possibility of terror by allowing, perhaps for the first time, for the mass circulation of an event, the Gunpowder Plot, as media phenomenon), with a reading of Shakespeare's homonymic punning in *Macbeth* (and especially the repeated exchange of "e" for "a") as a kind of proto-Derridean *différance*. My claim, which goes by way of the horror that Emmanuel Levinas finds in *Macbeth* whilst in the captivity of the Nazis, and the horrific separation between matter and image that Levinas's immediately postwar writing claims is effected by aesthetic form, is that by drawing attention to the typographic letter, *Macbeth* plays with, resists, and aestheticizes the general shift to the standardized typographic dissemination of knowledge of the Gutenberg press, and the subjective and discursive political changes such as – centrally – the political mobilization of terror, that arise with this shift.

At the heart of the play's language of terror there is a futural dimension, and especially that of the future perfect, which arises from both the diachronic deferral of the linguistic traces by which, in Derridian *différance*, meaning is given (and which the play, thus, anticipates), and also the relation of terror to horror. In the classic gothic definition terror denotes the anticipation of a horror to come (as such, Levinas's horror would seem to constitute an example of the anteriority anticipated by the terror of the play). I argue the anterior futures aimed at by Shakespeare's letteral punning (such as the "letters" that Lady Macbeth feels transport her to the "future in the instant") constitute a new poetics of the letter, a self-consciously alphabetic fragmentation as specific response to the typographic media technology of the era. In so doing, Shakespeare's poetics of the letter subversively aestheticizes the official Jacobean discourse of terror.

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Andrew Sisson
Johns Hopkins Unviersity

No Toy But Was Her Pattern: Constituting the Aesthetic in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*

The tendency of recent critical work on *The Two Noble Kinsmen* has been to set aside the traditional problem of whether and how Shakespeare and Fletcher collaborated in the play's composition, in favor of thematizing "collaboration" as a social and political category suggested by the kinsmen's relationship. That is, the sphere of artistic production continues to be presumed as the real referent of the play's action, even as the questions of formal coherence and stylistic individuality that might define the problem of collaboration in an aesthetic sense fade from view.

Yet it's arguably precisely the play's intensity of attention to questions of the latter sort that makes it legible as an investigation into the relations between aesthetic and political subjectivity. A number of features of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* seem to call out for a reading in broadly aesthetic terms: the emphasis on displays of gracefulness or skill in performance (dancing, singing, wrestling, horse riding, etc.); the repeated staging of scenes in which groups of characters comment on the relative physical attractiveness of other characters; more generally, the peculiarly spectatorial arrangement of the play's action, so that significant events often turn not on direct interaction but rather on one set of characters' observation of another from a distance.

More than this, however, I want to argue that in developing this material Shakespeare and Fletcher collocate a certain set of concerns that as yet fall under no single organizing concept but that in the subsequent century would come to cohere as the subject matter of "the aesthetic." *The Two Noble Kinsmen*'s political interest, as I see it, is not so much a matter of its staging collaboration as an alternative to the primacy of the individual in the later regime of aesthetics. Rather, that interest lies in the degree to which the play anticipates the later regime by treating individuals simultaneously as the producers of aesthetic judgment and as nodes for the overlapping judgments of others.

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Jacques Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, trans. Debra Keates and James Swenson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

Luke Wilson
Ohio State University

Cute Shylock

My seminar paper will begin where I've left off on work I've done recently that explores the idea of multiple aesthetic registers in the Renaissance by way of Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories*; in two earlier papers I was trying to locate the category of the cute in Shakespeare, but only in the form of what I called the pre-cute, what isn't cute yet but has what it takes to be cute someday: namely, Shylock. This involved thinking through Ngai's category of the cute in relation to the different aesthetic orders of *Merchant*, and specifically the relation between the cute and the affect (the aesthetic?) of disgust. So I think that for our seminar I will examine the relation between the aesthetic as a meta-category and the idea that aesthetics may be multiple. This is part of what is for me a wider investigation of the useful, from Augustine to Milton. I am beginning to see how much this investigation will involve the prehistory of the idea that aesthetics as a meta-category is an Enlightenment phenomenon designed to escape political and social instrumentality and to behave as a model for a free subjectivity (Eagleton). But what of a pre-Enlightenment aesthetics? I wish I could be more clear on which texts I'll be looking at. Certainly, to start, *Merchant*. Then, maybe, *Errors*, *The Tempest*, *Othello*.

Dianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012)
Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990)
Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (1951) and *Aesthetic Theory* (1970)

Jayme M. Yeo
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The Politics of Absence in Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*

Critics of Mary Wroth have recently commented on the political dimensions of her love sonnets, finding enfolded in her idealized court of love a critique of tyrannical Jacobean politics. However, in this essay, I explore the possibility that the political impulse of Wroth's poetry is informed less by cruelty than absence. For, in the vast majority of Wroth's sonnets, the beloved is nowhere to be found. I investigate how this absence forms the cornerstone of an affective economy in the poem that ultimately raises an intriguing question for seventeenth-century political history: if monarchy depends on the love of the subject, what does the subject love when the monarch disappears? Utilizing Freud's *Group Psychology* as well as Sarah Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, I argue that the answer to this question for Wroth ultimately spins the subject into a state of ungovernable isolation.

This affective economy is initiated, first and foremost, through an aesthetics of absence—an aesthetics that replaces the beloved with an idealized image figured through memory and iconography. Contextualizing Wroth's interest in the image within early modern theories of sight as well as the disputed status of the image amid contemporaneous iconoclastic debates, I argue that Wroth's isolationist turn has uncanny resonances with the forms of political affection normally found in a republic. I suggest that, rather than prefigure a coming republicanism, Wroth's work ultimately hints at the possibility of family resemblances between different forms of group affect that underlie and orient subjects within seemingly disparate forms of political organization.
Jayme M. Yeo

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Various theorists on love, including Freud (particularly "On Narcissism"), Sarah Ahmed (*Cultural Poetics*), and possibly Levinas.