

**2017 SAA Seminar: Queer Theology in Shakespeare Studies Abstracts  
Leader: Melissa Sanchez, University of Pennsylvania 1**

**Group 1**

**Respondent/Discussion Leader: Russ Leo**

**Will Stockton**

**Marriage and the Body of Christ**

My contribution to the seminar is a portion of the introduction to my forthcoming book *Members of His Body: Shakespeare, Paul, and a Theology of Nonmonogamy*. This book toggles between the epistles of Paul (both genuine and deuterio-Pauline) and the plays of Shakespeare to critique the evangelical Christian equation of monogamous marriage with traditional marriage. If the Paul who authors 1 Corinthians would prefer that unmarried believers remain single to focus instead on the messiah's return, the pseudonymous Paul of the epistle to the Ephesians argues that marriage affords the couple membership in the body of Christ. For neither Paul is plural marriage the antithesis of Christian marriage. For the Paul of Ephesians, whose writings center Reformation arguments over marriage's status as a church sacrament, plural marriage is rather the *telos* of Christian community. Building on scholarship regarding early modern genders and sexualities, as well as on political-theological conversations about Pauline universalism, *Members of His Body* argues that marriage functions in *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *The Winter's Tale* as a contested vehicle of Christian embodiment. Shakespeare's plays query the extent to which man and wife become "one flesh" through marriage, and the extent to which they share that fleshly identity with other Christians. Juxtaposing the marital theologies of the different Pauls and their later interpreters, these plays explore the racial, religious, and gender criteria for marital membership in the body of Christ. Finally, they suggest that marital jealousy and paranoia about adultery result in part from a Christian theology of shared embodiment: the communion of believers in Christ. In the wake of recent arguments that expanding marriage rights to gay people will open the door to the cultural acceptance and legalization of plural marriage, Shakespeare's plays remind us that much Christian theology already looks forward to this end.

**Marie Hause**

**Margaret Cavendish's Material Soul and Queer Theology**

Turning to the central tradition for affirmation and authority is a frequent move in queer theology, but I would like to look instead to a marginal theological figure, Margaret Cavendish, to ask what queer theology today can take from her thought. In her *Philosophical Letters* (1664), Cavendish's material soul, which extends from her system of vitalist materialism, contrasts with the incorporeal souls put forward by René Descartes, Henry More, and Johannes Baptista Van

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Helmont to offer a view of the human soul as material, multiple, and in motion. Cavendish's material soul offers possibilities for queer theology in that it dispenses with the body/soul dualism that underscores hierarchies of gender and sexuality; it opposes ranking lives, human or otherwise, in terms of rationality or vitality; and it allows for mutability and multiplicity as qualities of the soul itself, rather than as negative results of living in a fallen world.

**Elizabeth Weckhurst**

**A Just Pound: Rhythm and Retribution in *The Merchant of Venice***

This paper aims to bridge the divide in scholarship on *The Merchant of Venice* between religious and queer approaches to the play. I integrate these approaches by focusing on the significance of sexuality, sexual knowledge, and what I call "queer reading" in the relationship between Antonio and Shylock. In order to make these elements in their scenes together intelligible, I turn to the neglected role played by rhythm in the play, which I argue operates as an urgent but indistinct counterpoint to the play's glorification of music. I work toward a consideration of Shylock's "just pound" as a pun that is primarily devised to evoke the rhythmic quality of certain sex acts ("doing the deed of kind" [1.3.93]), inviting recognition not only of Antonio's sexual identity but also of Shylock's worth as a reader. Only secondarily is Shylock's bond transformed into a sign of interpretive literalism confirming his religious identity. The paper concludes with an analysis of how the evocation of rhythm in Shylock's bond is registered, neutralized, and reoriented in the Trial scene.

**Group 2**

**Respondent/Discussion Leader: Richard Rambuss**

**John Garrison**

**Queer Figurations of the Afterlife in *Measure for Measure***

In Shakespeare's work, we find diverse descriptions of what happens after death. Different characters imagine figurations that are at times pagan, Protestant, or Catholic and at other times unrecognizable within the terms of a single, coherent theology. Claudio in *Measure for Measure*, for example, states that "If I must die / I will encounter darkness as a bride, / And hug it in mine arms" (3.1.93-5). While he ultimately pictures the afterlife as a traumatic environment alternatively fiery and frozen, he links death closely to sexual longing. This essay takes the afterlife as a focal point for reconsidering the evocative intersection between death and eroticism that has long interested scholars. On one level, Shakespeare's characters often imagine entry to the afterlife as marked by erotic release and an encounter with a beloved. On another level,

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characters' imagined visions of life after death frequently constitute a reflection of their own anxieties and desires in the living world. For Claudio, his entry into the afterlife mirrors the earthly dynamics that brought him to the situation where he must confront imminent death.

**Megan Herrold**

**The *Stabat Mater* in *Hamlet* and *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*:  
Marian *Compassio* and Procreative Tears**

I argue that a palimpsest of the *stabat mater dolorosa* tradition should inform our reading of the Player's speech in *Hamlet*. A poetic and musical sequence that constructs a greater emotional connection to Christ's passion through the contemplation of Mary as she contemplates the crucifixion, the *stabat mater* was both widely popular and troubling because of its focus on the spectacle of female mourning. Although it was both suppressed by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century and, with the growth of Protestantism, increasingly associated with Catholic (and feminized) public mourning rituals, it retained its power to forge affective bonds between subjects. I argue that Hamlet's remaining "unpregnant of his cause" after the Player's speech refers to his self-conscious refusal to risk the feminized, demonstrable, and procreative aspects of Marian compassion. I then show that Aemilia Lanyer later appropriates these risks in her self-conscious and female-centric version of the *stabat mater* in her *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*.

**David Orvis**

**Eros, Agape, and Queer Theologies of Love in Shakespeare**

My paper examines the entanglement of eros and agape in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, with the aim of explicating a queer theology of love that undermines, if not radically opposes, dominant traditions and belief systems. Drawing on traditions associating Christ with Cupid and vice versa, I want to show that Amor's cherubic presence in *Two Gentlemen* unsettles boundaries between erotic and spiritual love. Calling into question any easy distinction between one and the other, the play allows one to draw the radical conclusion that any act or desire practiced in the name of Amor or Love always-already possesses divine sanction—even, perhaps especially, in the face of societal or cultural prohibitions. Given the multiplicity typically ascribed to Cupidean desire, this prospect is at once terrifying and potentially liberating, for the plays' characters and for playgoers alike.

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**Group 3**

**Respondent/Discussion Leader: Melissa E. Sanchez**

**Evan Choate**

**Proverbs and No-Verbs: Falstaff and the Obscenity of Confession**

In this essay, I examine the ways that the putative identification of Falstaff with the proto-protestant Martyr Sir John Oldcastle persists throughout the *Henriad* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in spite of its erasure. In particular, I am interested in the relation between this censored truth and the peculiar dynamics of confession as a narrative form. I argue that the obscenity—by which I intend both indecency and representational absence, often literally off stage—that authorizes confession also contains the potential to glimpse a necessarily ineffable outside to the Mobius strip of narrative representation. The dynamics of Falstaff's obscene doubling elides the particulars of theological disputes to address the formal question of what the unstable remainder that haunts Falstaff reveals about the excruciating, magical relation of theatricality, sexuality, and theology to reality.

**Paul Hecht**

**Drunken Punch-Up at a Mock Wedding: On Lodge's *Rosalynde***

This essay explores the religious and sexual components of two scenes of arousal and deflected desire in Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde: Euphues' Golden Legacy* . . . (1590), the main source text for Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. In one scene, the hero Rosader is inspired by an exchange of amorous glances with Rosalynde to throw down and crush to death the king's champion wrestler, after the champion has "massacred" two sons of a franklin. In the other, Rosader agrees to "marry" his cross-dressed beloved. Lodge's use of "substance" and "conceit" highlights his interest in exploring social and religious conduits for sexual desire, and the underlying queerness of their biblical models.

**Melissa Welshans**

**Queer Political Theology in Shakespeare's *Richard II***

This paper draws from scholarship on both queer theology and political theology to explore the relationship between Richard's queer sensibilities and his Christ-like presentation in Shakespeare's *Richard II*. After beginning with a brief overview of Rupert Goold's production of *Richard II* and its depiction of Richard as a queer Christ figure, I shift attention to the text itself

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to argue that Richard's penchant for his male favorites does not seem entirely incompatible with his attempt to fashion himself as Christ. While the play at first appears to link Richard's same-sex desire with his inability to be God's "minister" on earth, a consideration of the fundamentally queer nature of Christianity reveals that it is perhaps not Richard's homo-erotic tendencies per se that undermine his place as king (I.ii.41). Instead, it is Richard's receptivity, his submission to the "will" of his courtiers that threatens his right to rule (II.i.28).