

2017 SAA Seminar: Renaissance Afterlives Revisited Abstracts
Leaders: Chloe Kathleen Preedy, University of Exeter
and Joseph Sterrett, Aarhus Universitet 1

Agnes Matuska

‘Renaissance Afterlives Revisited – Through Scholarly Lenses’

Taking the topic of our seminar with a twist, what I intend to examine is not so much fictional representations of the Renaissance in a broad sense and their influence on academic understandings of the topic, but rather two related things. One is the image of the Renaissance as it is formed, shaped and changed in critical discourse (fictive in itself if ‘fictive’ is taken as referring to a cultural construct), and the second is the way the debates within this discourse become implicit and explicit sites where contemporary conflicts of social and political beliefs are played out. The starting point of the investigation is a pragmatic task I am involved in as member of a group of researchers writing the new/updated history of English literature in Hungarian, and as the co-author of the chapter on the questions of periodization in connection with the Renaissance as an era. I wish to present some dilemmas that characterize this task, with special focus on the presentation of the English Renaissance in the previous such undertaking: the so far latest History of English Literature written in Hungarian, dating back to the socialist era of the 1970s. I would also like to point to the curious ways in which some ideological influences live on, are transformed or replaced, and suggest issues that make the rethinking of our image of the Renaissance urgent and topical.

L. Monique Pittman

‘History by Candlelight: Authenticity Claims, Shakespeare, and the BBC’s *Wolf Hall*’

In the “Author’s Note” concluding *Wolf Hall* (2009), Hilary Mantel recognizes George Cavendish’s, *Thomas Wolsey, Late Cardinal, His Life and Death* (1554-58), as a powerful affective source both for her novel and the drama of William Shakespeare. She writes: “Its influence on Shakespeare is clear.” This provocative conviction locates Mantel’s novel in an adaptative genealogy—Cavendish-Shakespeare-Mantel—and reveals her own substantial knowledge of *Henry VIII* or *All is True* (1613), Shakespeare and John Fletcher’s co-authored play (though Fletcher’s authorship goes unacknowledged in Mantel’s note). The BBC film adaptation of Mantel’s novels (*Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*, 2012)—Peter Kosminsky (director) and Peter Straughan (teleplay author)—aired on BBC Two (January 2015) and on PBS in the United States (April-May 2015). Notable for its effort to maintain Mantel’s deft non-linear movement back and forth across time, the series likewise displays faithfulness to a particular brand of visual verisimilitude. Though the original novels’ disruption of time may undermine filmic naturalism, the series’ mimetic techniques strive for significant levels of “authenticity” in on-location filming and interior photography. Produced with scrupulous attention to the ornamental details of its interior spaces and a determination to film at night by candlelight alone, the BBC’s *Wolf Hall* jeopardized the safety of its actors and equipment in order to present a “truer” visual representation of lived experience in Renaissance England. For this project, I will consider how the BBC series exploits naturalistic technique as an authorizing representational gesture. Further, I wish to examine that effort at “authentic” history-telling in relation to the mechanisms of omission and dilation found in Shakespeare and Fletcher’s play and Mantel’s own highly positional narrative of Thomas Cromwell’s rise. This project will thus unpack the seeming tension

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between the claims to visual veracity in film technique and the insistent destabilizing of historical certainty found in both the seventeenth-century play and its twenty-first century novelistic appropriation by Mantel.

David Moberly, “No One is Exempt”: Sulayman al-Bassam’s Suicide-bomber Ophelia’

Key moments in the history of Shakespeare’s reception in Arabic diversified not only the gender dynamics of Arab Shakespearean audiences, but also the content of his adapted texts and the body of people authorized to re-produce them. While Arabic-language renditions of Shakespeare’s works in the early 20th century were often used to support the values of an exclusive, well-educated, male Arab “elite,” by the latter end of the century, that had changed. Women became more integrated into Shakespeare audiences, productions, and translations, and as they did, male-centric values slowly gave way. In the early 21st century, Shakespeare has become a potent tool with which Arab playwrights and scholars can interrogate concepts of gender identity in Arab culture.

This paper considers the shifting role of Ophelia in recent Arabic-language adaptations of *Hamlet* (particularly Sulayman al-Bassam’s *al-Hamlet Summit*), pointing out the way in which Arab playwrights have used the character to suggest the limited choices Arab women have in the face both of Western influences and of oppressive, Middle Eastern regimes. In doing so, this study aims to counterbalance recent studies in Arab Shakespeare, which have shed much-needed light on the political contexts of Shakespeare’s Claudius and Prince Hamlet in the 20th century, but at times left his female characters largely in the shadows.

Jennifer Low, ‘Shakespeare in the Artists’ Book: Sequence and Adaptation’

This paper examines two artists’ books that contain text from Shakespeare: Harry, Graf Kessler’s *Hamlet* (1930) and Arne Wolf’s *Hamlet II.2* (1991). Artists’ books are volumes whose medium is conceived as an art-work--an *original* work of art. Responding to Printed Matter’s statement that moving through an artists’ book “implicates notions of sequence, repetition, juxtaposition, and duration,” this paper draws attention to new uses of Shakespeare by examining the treatment of sequence in these artifacts (‘What Is An Artist’s Book?’, *Printed Matter*). This scrutiny of two works whose creators self-consciously draw attention to their medium offers an opportunity to consider the nature of adaptation itself.

Once we acknowledge that spatial play and materiality are forging the text, the nature of text is redefined. In the works I examine, text is print—and the means of printing (metal type, woodcuts, and linoleum blocks) become part of the text. *Hamlet* is the base, or perhaps the basis for the artwork, but Shakespeare’s words, while valuable, are merely one element among others. Both the collaborators who created the Cranach Press *Hamlet* and Arne Wolf, the sole creator of *Hamlet II.2*, find ways to challenge the codex’s privileging of series. In both works, the forward movement of the series yields to the multivalent pleasures of sequence. White space becomes visual silence that “creates a privileged space for the text and its individual images.” (Bohn, *Aesthetics of Visual Poetry 1914-1928*, p. 4). The results are new forms of *Hamlet*. With that change in signifier, the signified is transformed as well.

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Joseph Haughey

‘Harvard University, Francis James Child, and the Hasty Pudding Club’

Based on my study of primary sources from the Harvard University Archives, this paper analyzes the roles that the revered Shakespeare Professor Francis James Child and the Hasty Pudding Club played in the nineteenth-century development of the study of Shakespeare at Harvard University. When Child first enrolled as an undergraduate at Harvard in 1842, the formal study of Latin and Greek still dominated the curriculum; Child, however, uncovered opportunities to satisfy his literary interest outside of the classroom as a member of the Pudding. Only a few months after his initiation as a junior in 1844, in fact, the group took its first active interest in performing theatricals. And just weeks before their first theatrical, the Pudding minutes, written in their customary verse, in three brief scenes of dramatic verse depicted Child as the chief singer amongst a chorus of Pudding classmates. Alluding to *Hamlet*, Child responds Horatio-like to the sight of a Pudding ghost in its second scene: “It beckons you to go away with it, / As if it some impartment did desire / To you alone” (99-100).

In the 1850s, after Child had graduated from student to professor, the club staged two productions of *Macbeth*. The official minutes of October 20, 1854, tell the story of their second *Macbeth* performance, measuring it once again through the gaze of a suspicious Shakespearean specter; the entry’s whimsical verse, in a series of sixteen septets, depicts the ghost of Shakespeare coming through a window in the shape of a book, a “quarto,” with “leathern coat,” “marbled pages,” and “fortified with pastelboard straight and strong.” In inviting Shakespeare himself, even if only metaphorically, its members defend the notion that Pudding performances could balance between being sophisticated and serious, but also playful and pleasurable, affairs. Over the course of the century, there would be six additional Shakespearean performances, the last a student-composed riff on *Hamlet* in 1894. The paper will analyze these and other nineteenth-century meeting minute entries related to and referring to Shakespeare.

Both Child and the Pudding directly influenced thousands of students. Other distinguished Harvard graduates who later became noted Shakespeareans – Horace Howard Furness, George Lyman Kittredge, and Barrett Wendell, all three students of Child and the last two later his peers and eventual successors of the Harvard English department – would also gain at least part of their formative literary experience as members of the Pudding. And though Child’s formal teaching never broached the theatrical, always tethered to the philological study of Shakespeare’s words, his extracurricular involvement with Shakespeare nonetheless was part of a larger literary society tradition that would influence American classroom experience with Shakespeare for decades.

Hank Dobin

‘Bad Romance: Elizabeth and Essex’

For the past several years, I have been engaged in a digital humanities project concerning the imaginative afterlives of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex. The story of Essex’s rapid rise and even more precipitous fall—ending in his execution for treason in February 1601—has been retold countless times in fiction, drama, poetry, music, images, and

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film. My project chronicles those re-imaginings in the form of an interactive digital timeline; I will happily demonstrate the timeline as one possible model for our work on “afterlives.”

A recurring thread running through many of these texts is the romanticization of the Essex-Elizabeth relationship. Despite the 32-year age difference between the two and little historical evidence, writers and filmmakers have typically romanticized—if not overtly sexualized—their relationship, turning a political debacle into a personal tragedy of unrequited love and betrayal. From the 1680 novella *The Secret History* to Donizetti’s 1837 opera, *Roberto Devereux*, to the 1939 film *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*, the Queen and Earl have been depicted as star-crossed lovers.

The newest genre is what I’ve labelled the “mashdub” – a recut short video from a film or TV series re-scored by setting it to a contemporary song. Thus the title of my paper: there are two Youtube videos (one from *Private Lives* and one from the 2005 mini-series *Elizabeth I*) set to Lady Gaga’s 2009 hit *Bad Romance*. Among 20 other videos are ones re-scored to Billy Joel’s *Uptown Girl* and OneRepublic’s *It’s Too Late to Apologize*. (I could not resist: I created one myself, set to Madonna’s *Like a Virgin*.)

My paper will investigate this phenomenon: the jarring but fascinating juxtapositions of video and music, the cultural appropriation of historical and artistic material, and the problem of an increasingly attenuated history retold by and for a popular, unknowing audience. Do the videos in any way contribute to our understanding of Elizabeth and Essex? What do they tell us about history in our intertextual and intermedia age? What artistic or cultural function do they perform? Or are those the wrong questions?

Darlana Ciraulo, ‘Susan Herbert’s *Shakespeare Cats*: The Renaissance in Popular Book Art: “He’s a cat to me”—*All’s Well that Ends Well*’

Susan Herbert’s paintings of “cats in costume” have become a well-known pleasure for connoisseurs of felines in contemporary culture. The author of nine books in her lifetime, published by Thames and Hudson, Herbert’s *Shakespeare Cats* (1996) finds a celebrated place in the artist’s oeuvre. This charming table book consists of thirty-one paintings of cats posed in iconic scenes from twenty of Shakespeare’s plays, ranging from *Hamlet* to *Richard III* to *Taming of the Shrew*. These witty vignettes of anthropomorphic cats offer poignantly humorous interpretations of Shakespearean moments. At times Herbert draws on famous artistic renderings to stage her paintings; in others, she freshly imagines with her paintbrush new expressions of character and setting. Although *Shakespeare Cats* carries a popular, if not cultish, reputation, its witty presentation of these beloved furry creatures dressed largely in Renaissance garb provides significant insight into the afterlife of Shakespeare in commercial art. Of course, surely this Renaissance writer enjoys nine afterlives.

Chuck Conaway, ‘The Renaissance Magus and the Anthropocene: *Tempestuous Afterlives in The Lightkeepers*’

Abby Geni’s 2016 novel, *The Lightkeepers*, recounts the (mis-)adventures of Miranda, a nature photographer who travels to the Farallon Islands, a National Wildlife Refuge about

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thirty miles off the coast of San Francisco. The islands, once called the “islands of the dead” by Native Americans and “the devil’s teeth” by nineteenth century sailors, are more than a little inhospitable, and the islands’ inhabitants make them no more welcoming. The worst of Miranda’s companions is Andrew, who not only attempts, in Caliban-like fashion, to ravish Miranda, but is not foiled in his plan to do so by any all-seeing Prospero. After she is raped, Miranda seems to take justice into her own hands when Andrew is found early one morning face-down in the water at the foot of one of the island’s many cliffs. Shortly thereafter, Charlene, one of the other scientists on the island, confides to Miranda that she heard Andrew talking to someone outside their cottage on the night that he died, and Charlene is soon mysteriously and otherwise inexplicably attacked. Finally, when Miranda’s closest companion, Mick, tells her that he knows her secret—she is pregnant with Andrew’s child—he is attacked by birds and driven by them over a cliff and into the sea. For the longest time, the novel fails to clarify Miranda’s role in these incidents, thus inviting us to imagine, given the novel’s loose allusions to Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, that she has harnessed the elemental forces of the island in Prospero-like fashion and is using them against those who have wronged her and those whom she perceives as threats.

Ultimately, however, after mapping Prospero’s island onto the Farallons of our imagination and gesturing toward the possibility that Miranda might be a modern-day representation of the Renaissance magus, Geni’s novel reveals its own sleight of hand. The Epilogue encourages us to rewrite our assumptions about the allusions to Renaissance magic, suggesting instead that the appropriate context for interpreting the novel’s setting is the Anthropocene—the geological age defined as the period of time during which mankind has had a dominant and negative influence on the planet’s environments and its climate. Such a context, which calls to mind other geological eras, reminds us that human intelligence might not be the only intelligence at work in the universe. The literarily appealing but otherwise unlikely idea that Miranda might have harnessed the elemental forces of the island in her quest for revenge gives way to our recollection that the birds that attacked Mick needed no human intelligence to direct them to act. Perhaps, then, the dominant threat of revenge comes not from Miranda but from the natural world, and it might be coming for all of us.

Kristen Aldebol-Hazle

‘Playing with the Renaissance: Video Games and the Aesthetic of Participation’

Whenever I tell people I’m a medievalist, they think I mean I attend Renaissance fairs. Putting aside the erroneous periodization, this popular association of history with modern forms of recreation points to an important Renaissance afterlife in modern culture: play. This connection between play and the Renaissance becomes especially apparent in video games, forms of play that use Renaissance texts and tropes to create settings and narratives. What is it about the Renaissance that lends itself so well to providing a setting for play and pleasure? This paper will take the 2004 video game *The Bard’s Tale* as its subject for investigating this question. *The Bard’s Tale* inhabits space as a Renaissance afterlife in two ways. First, it self-consciously borrows from Renaissance tropes in terms of the game’s setting (vaguely early modern). Second, this game engages with the concept of play on multiple levels. This game is a tongue-in-cheek satire of traditional role-playing games (RPGs). RPGs require a player character to play the game in order to develop the narrative; the narrative will not proceed on its own without interaction from a player. In addition to this interactive nature, this game is iterative, sharing an ephemeral quality with staged performances of drama in that each

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player's experience in each iteration of the game will be different from previous experiences of the same game. No two performances are the same. This ephemeral nature of iterations of the narrative shares attributes with staged plays, which, while following narrative rules (scripts), nevertheless offer versions of the narrative that differ slightly with each performance. Thus study of *The Bard's Tale* offers insight into the way modern popular culture has received the Renaissance and also suggests an aesthetic connection between video games and staged performances.