

**2017 SAA Seminar: Testing Knowledge on Shakespeare's Stage Abstracts
Leaders: Benjamin V. Beier, Hillsdale College bbeier@hillsdale.edu
and Professor Howard Marchitello, Rutgers University marchitello@camden.rutgers.edu 1**

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“Testing Knowledge in *Cymbeline*”

Like his other plays centering on slander (*Much Ado* and *Othello*, for example), the language of Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* frequently resorts to the evidentiary language of law: the “proof” and “testimonies,” for instance, conducive to securing belief. But in probing the limits of knowledge and the conditions that structure belief, this play’s language extends beyond legal metaphors to incorporate the complementary discursive concerns of experimental philosophy. In the early seventeenth century, the tropes and terminology of law, of course, carried over into the practice of science Francis Bacon advanced; but *Cymbeline* is fascinatingly invested in both the physics of seeing and the idea of experience (in its seventeenth-century scientific sense of proof by trial or demonstration) as an instrument of knowledge-making. In one of the play’s most striking passages, Imogen speaks of observing Posthumus’s departure by boat until her “eyestrings” “broke” and the physics of perspective had “melted” him “from / The smallness of a gnat to air”; moreover, several characters, including Posthumus, Imogen, and Arviragus, privilege experience above “report”; and most curiously, the Queen styles herself as a natural philosopher in her professed intention to “try,” on non-human specimens, “the forces” of the poisons she believes she has procured from her doctor. Despite the epistemological currency of experience, however, when the play performs trials of knowledge in the crucible of experience (Iachimo’s deception of Posthumus, Belarius’ expectation of the response to Cloton’s killing, Imogen’s conclusion of Pisano’s culpability upon her waking from seeming death), characters repeatedly judge wrongly despite their reasoned weighing of circumstances. While these moments tend towards suggesting the play’s, and by extension Shakespeare’s, skepticism regarding the limits of a ratiocination grounded in sensory perception, this paper seeks to examine *Cymbeline*, and these moments of failure in particular, in terms of early seventeenth-century views on the mind’s workings. Specifically, I hope to consider: how, for example, Bacon’s figuration of the mind as a crooked mirror that distorts our perceptions might help us to understand the play’s staging of misjudgment; and how his advancement of experiment as an artificial instrument for correcting the limits of sense perception might model for us a way of thinking about the stage itself as a experimental mechanism suggestive of a recuperative methodology alternative to the self-assured reasoning employed by *Cymbeline*’s characters.

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**“A RARE AND STRANGE LANGUAGE: DOUBTING SPEECH IN *THE WHITE DEVIL*
AND *CYMBELINE*”**

Francisco’s remark in *The White Devil*, “How strange these words sound,” could well serve as a description of the first decade of Jacobean England. “Strange” speech, language, and rhetoric were at the centre of political and religious discourse in this period, and their ubiquity points, fundamentally, to philosophical doubts about “words.” This paper considers the way

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contemporaries make language “strange” in these years, both stylistically and conceptually. While strange language can serve, in Montaigne’s words, to “deceive and beguile,” in the hands of dramatists it also offers a reminder of verbal artifice and the forms of doubt it generates.

The beginnings of Jacobean England were marked by concerns about the “strange doctrine of Equivocation” (Henry Garnet’s Trial, 1606) in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot of 1604, particularly the complex relationship of such speech to lying, evasion, and dissimulation. In similar terms, John Florio’s translation of Montaigne’s essays (1603) presents a sceptical attitude to contrived language by dismissing rhetorical terminology: “would you not thinke they [rhetoricians] meant some forme of a rare and strange language[?]”.

Yet such “strange” language dominates the stage in the first decade of Jacobean drama. The word appears repeatedly in Shakespeare’s writing of this period, and Webster fills *The White Devil* (1612) with “strange creatures” and “strange tongues.” In particular, the complex and contorted styles of *The White Devil* and *Cymbeline* can be considered forms of “rhetorical strangeness,” proving both convincing and confusing. However, their frequent invocations of rhetorical terminology and of the term “strange” point to the artifice of speech and attendant doubts about language. Not only do these plays sound and look “rare and strange,” they suggest that dramatic language might itself be one articulation of “strange doctrine.”

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“Shakespeare’s Genres as Epistemological Modes”

Scholars sometimes approach epistemological modes in literature by associating them with a particular literary period (Jacobean), author (Shakespeare), or artistic medium (drama). I propose that we can better understand epistemology in literature by examining its relationship to genre. The best way to know the world depends on the nature of the world and of the knower. The conditions of a world determine how we can understand it. In a literary work, the conditions of its world are given by the conventions of its genre.

In my paper, I look briefly at four genres (tragedy, comedy, satire, and romance) as given by four Shakespearean plays (*Othello*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *The Winter’s Tale*). Each play proposes a similar epistemological puzzle: how am I to know another person in romantic relationship to myself? But each play proposes a different solution to the puzzle because each play portrays its world according to different generic conventions. Whether characters discover the truth by listening to others or by blocking them out, by attending to what they see or ignoring it, depends on the genre of their play. In comedy, humans are represented as essentially similar to each other; in tragedy, as essentially different. In comedy, the most successful epistemological mode is dialogic and dialectical; in tragedy, it is introspective. In satire, the world is represented as essentially material; in romance, as essentially spiritual. In satire, the key epistemological faculty is vision; in romance, it is memory and revelation. I argue that a work’s commitment to a certain epistemological mode and that mode’s success depend most fundamentally on the genre of the work.

In linking philosophy and genre, my approach offers a new way of addressing philosophical questions in literature by revealing their relationship to specifically literary forms. The paper will

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briefly and schematically outline some key implications of this approach. I hope the seminar will generate new insights as to its applications and limitations.

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“"Truth's a dog must to kennel. He must be whipped out": knowledge-testing in *King Lear* and Montaigne”

The feather Lear places on Cordelia's lips, the mirror he asks for to hold to her nostrils, or the pin he pricks himself with to determine that he is conscious are all instruments used in experiments to distinguish one internal human state from another. So is the love-test with which the play opens. So are the savage parodies of forensic investigation by which Edmund uses forged written evidence and false eyewitness testimony to convince Gloucester of Edgar's murderous disloyalty or by which Cornwall and Regan use torture to interrogate Gloucester about Gloucester's alleged treason. We might wish to distinguish the second sort of instrument -- a discursive process resembling a trial -- from the first. We might suggest that the kind of evidence provided by a misting mirror or a stirring feather or the pain-reaction to a pointed stimulus is more empirical and repeatable, carries less of the trail of the human serpent, than that provided by orchestrated constrained deeply contingent question and answer. The use of analogues from animal behavior to demystify human habits and institutions might count as a somewhat similar move in the direction of empirically-derived knowledge in *King Lear*.

Some suppose that *King Lear* shows the influence of Montaigne's massive inquiries into what he can know in *Apologie for Raymond Sebond* as well as Montaigne's discussion of parent-child relations in "Of the Affections of Fathers for their Children." My paper will investigate these possible links with specific reference to the reliability of tests and the utility of animal analogues.

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“To “Beguile Nature of her Custom:” Spectacle, Uncertainty, and the end of theatre in *The Winter's Tale*”

For an on and off stage audience, the statue of Hermione coming alive at the denouement of *The Winter's Tale* is one of the most striking examples in the canon of Shakespeare putting uncertainty on display. Many in the theatre would not be attentive to the slight lexical clues of Hermione's sixteen-year absence. They would not know if indeed Shakespeare staged the statue to come to life, or if he staged Hermione all along playing a statue. The textual evidence is largely uncertain. This idea is all the more striking when we consider that early modern performances were given in a non-illusionistic manner on a relatively bare stage with few symbolic properties and no curtain, which the playgoers accepted without qualms (Weimann/Fuchere). Playgoers attended a play without suspending their disbelief that it was just a play. In this scene, however, Shakespeare induces the playgoers to doubt what they see by

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manipulating an untenable event. That is, Shakespeare puts theatre on display as a spectacle (Artaud/Brecht) giving rise to a skeptical suspension of judgement due to the querying of appearances (Montaigne ii, 12). Further, this understanding of a spectacle can be likened to a paragone where Shakespeare critically engages the public so as to elevate the lowly status of the early modern theatre. This is because most paragone discourses, while ignoring the theatre, contentiously debated issues of the various arts and sciences and their related professions. (Sokol). In the scene under discussion, Shakespeare evokes an ancient and contemporary commonplace by employing a “speaking picture” (Sidney) with the result that the scene “hold[s] ... the mirror up to nature” (Ham.). Montaigne echoes this second commonplace in his essay on the education of children (i, 25). My point, Shakespeare uses the idea of the “mirror” as a synecdoche for the theatre, which Louis Montrose posits, is the relatively sole consistent “stable ideological position” in the corpus: theatrum mundi. Thus, the “form and pressure” (Ham.) of the last scene in *The Winter’s Tale*, suggests that Shakespeare endeavours to instruct the playgoers about the theatre so that they may reify the spectacle as epistemologically uncertain.

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“On Belief in Shakespeare and Montaigne”

Perhaps the biggest question about Montaigne’s skepticism is why it fails. Faced with Judeo-Christian claims about transcendental reality, original sin, the immortal soul, and omniscient, omnipotent deity, Montaigne cannot complete the thought-trajectory urged by Sextus Empiricus in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, despite relying upon the book repeatedly in his *Essays* (both for cognitive modeling and for examples). What prevents him from doing so? It’s clearly not the case, for instance, that atheism is unthinkable in early modern Europe (pace Lucien Febvre); and Sainte-Beuve’s famous quip – that Montaigne is Catholic but not Christian – is amusing but finally unsatisfying due to its failure to grapple with key assertions in the “Apology for Raymond Sebond.” I will suggest that partial answers to my question lie scattered in a range of pre- and postChristian writings, particularly those of Cicero and Bacon, and thus in works alternately available and unavailable to Montaigne himself. I will then extend my discussion to issues of knowledge-testing in Shakespeare, specifically to moments wherein conflicting accounts of reality and/or disputes over fact are understood as resolvable through recourse to strategies seen as underwritten by divine authority. The “trial by combat” (e.g. in *King Lear*, *Richard II*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*) is a standard example of such a strategy, but I will concentrate on less conspicuous dramatic moments, possibly from *All’s Well*, *Measure for Measure*, or elsewhere in *Lear*. Divinity has no need of epistemology, but humans – fictional and otherwise – struggle with the extent to which annexations of faith can offer satisfying approaches to worldly uncertainty.

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**““By Manifest Proceeding”: Ciceronian rational argument and Double Intent in
Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*”**

This paper investigates the stakes involved in the knowledge or ignorance of Ciceronian models of rhetorical argument in the trial scene of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. The widely available rhetorical manuals such as the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* and Cicero’s *De Inventione*, which formed the basis of humanist education in early modern England, all divide legal cases into two kinds – those concerning actions such as crimes, and those concerning the interpretation of legal documents such as contracts or wills – each with a distinct model of argument, comprising specific “topics” and their arrangement (*dispositio*). Unbeknownst to Shylock, the rhetorical arrangement of Portia’s examination of his bond is overlaid with the topics of a different argument. Portia wins the case not simply by challenging the definition of the term “flesh” in the bond, but by rhetorically transforming the status of the proceedings themselves into the occasion of and evidence for a separate act, that of attempted murder. She thus transforms the action, evidence, and nature of the case through her mastery of Ciceronian forensic argument. Shylock’s ignorance of the conventions of humanist rhetorical argument displays the costs of a rejection of humanist rational modes of knowledge. Thus, on trial too is the ability of Ciceronian rhetoric to fulfil its promise of legal protection that spans “both public and private affairs”, in the enfranchisement of citizens and “the surest...protection of one’s friends” (*De Inventione*, I.V). In Shylock’s plight, however, Shakespeare simultaneously unmasks the mechanisms of alienation implicit in the humanist investment in Ciceronian rational argument – a rationalism which aligned state, law, and friendship in such a way as to position all alien others as intrinsically disenfranchised.

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“Doubted Women: The Reciprocity of Uncertainty on Shakespeare’s Stage”

What can the effects of doubt on women, in Shakespeare’s plays, contribute to our understanding of the theatrical experimentations with skepticism in early modern England? In the introduction to *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, Stanley Cavell argues that “so far as skepticism is representable as the doubt whether your children are yours, skepticism is not a feminine business” (16). He then goes on to suggest that “skepticism on the feminine side might bring into focus not, or not only, a different object but a different passion” (17), for instance, “a woman’s doubt over the identity of the father of her child” (16). Contrary to Cavell’s suggestion that male and female doubt is distinctly focused, I will argue in this paper that Shakespeare’s plays staged the skepticism that results when women are doubted by men. As part of a culture fascinated by female infidelity, Shakespeare’s stage entertained—and in so doing, experimented with—the reciprocity of uncertainty.

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The doubt women express in Shakespeare's plays, as the result of having been accused of adultery, often echoes the circumstantial skepticism of Sextus Empiricus while at once displaying glimmers of the all-encompassing doubt of Descartes. In *Cymbeline*, a play that dramatizes the circumstantial failures of perception, Imogen questions where she is, and where she must go, after learning Posthumus believes she has committed adultery, with a statement that registers the impossibility of pinning down the location of Britain itself: "I' th' world's volume / Our Britain seems as of it, but not in't" (3.4.139-40). The effects of Othello's doubt take Desdemona to a "half asleep" space between life and death (4.2.99), even before she seems to cry out from beyond the grave. In *The Winter's Tale*, Hermione tells Leontes at her trial for adultery that her own waking life exists "at the level" of his dreams (3.2.78). The effect of doubt on all three of these women is all-encompassing, bringing on its own kind of world-altering uncertainty. Focusing variously on *Cymbeline*, *Othello*, and *The Winter's Tale*, I will contend that the doubt women experience on Shakespeare's stage, while engaging with the revival of classical skepticism in the period, at once anticipated the egoistic uncertainty that Descartes and others would later attempt to overthrow.

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"Nature and Imagination in *The Winter's Tale*"

In the early seventeenth century, advocates of experimental natural philosophy collapsed the Aristotelian distinction between the natural and the human by arguing that the artificial conditions of the laboratory could reveal the workings of nature. And yet, many of these same thinkers also believed that the failure to distinguish natural phenomena from human thoughts and feelings had been holding natural philosophy back for centuries. Thinkers like Francis Bacon who wanted to separate nature and imagination were, in many ways, simply catching up with Philip Sidney, who asserts in the *Defense of Poesy* that poetry's concern with the way the world "could or should be" makes its truths both qualitatively distinct from and epistemologically superior to the truths of the historian or the natural philosopher. My paper will examine this emergent distinction between worldly and imaginative knowledge in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, a play that hinges on the epistemological status of sensory experience and the transformative potential of the aesthetic. Specifically, I'm interested in the play's movement from a situation in which Leontes' imagination leads him to destroy his own family, to a situation in which his imagination, or at least his willingness to believe in art, can begin to redeem the tragedy of the first acts. The Bohemian scenes are central to understanding how this movement occurs, and not simply at the level of plot. The shipwreck, the bear attack, the sheepsheering festival, and especially Perdita and Polixenes' discussion about the art of breeding flowers are all successive attempts to think through the implications of failing to distinguish between the human and the natural. I argue that this is a version of the same distinction that Leontes fails to make in the first half of the play: he doesn't see the difference between what he imagines and what he's actually observing in the world around him. It's only when the Bohemian scenes have attempted to interrogate and delineate the distinction between art and

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nature that the aesthetic, expressed most clearly in the purported statue of Hermione, can become redemptive knowledge—a way of perceiving how the world might be transformed for the better.

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“Rationalist and Realist Shakespeare”

My paper will question the supposition of Shakespeare's commitment to a skeptical point of view with regard to epistemology. It will not question his awareness of this point of view. The claims will be that in *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare presents something very close to Cartesian skepticism, but presents it as a mistake. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, skepticism is of the Reginald Scot sort -- about supernatural creatures and powers -- rather than of the epistemological sort, and I will argue that the play largely adopts Scot's point of view, though seeming to allow it to be ironized. Finally, I will question the assumption that *Othello* adopts a skeptical epistemology, and will argue that it is more like *The Comedy of Errors* than like the skeptical portions of Descartes *Meditations*. It will not see Shakespeare as adopting a Montaignian pyrrhonism.

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“Shakespeare’s Skeptical Silences”

Studies of Shakespeare’s engagement with epistemological doubt have rightly explored what his characters do and, more importantly, *say* in expressing their conflicting values, their moral uncertainties, their metaphysical speculations, their opposing points of view, and their limited powers of perception. This paper, in contrast, focuses on the skeptical dimensions of Shakespeare’s silences. In his Sonnets, Shakespeare compares himself to a tongue-tied “actor on the stage” but hopes his beloved can “learn to read what silent love hath writ.” Montaigne suggests that such a feat is indeed possible, observing that “[t]here is no movement that does not speak...a language intelligible without instruction”; however, he also acknowledges that “external objects surrender to our mercy; they dwell in us as we please.” If silences are open, then, to interpretation, this is compounded by an individual dumb with indecision, disbelief, or deliberation. In this respect, a taciturn character may not merely provoke wonder but, in Paulina’s words, “show[] off” her own.

To test this idea, I analyze the silences of Isabella (*Measure for Measure*), Jessica (*The Merchant of Venice*), and Volumnia (*Coriolanus*) at the end of their respective plays. Situating them within the context of philosophical skepticism, I read moral critique in Jessica’s nearly forgettable presence, skeptical indecision in Isabella’s ignoring of the Duke’s proposal, and suspension of belief in Volumnia’s silent acknowledgement of Roman praise. Although scholars and directors have rushed into the vacuum created by these silences in an attempt to ravel out the matter, less attention has been paid to how these moments contribute to our understanding of

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Shakespeare's skepticism – and how our own (perhaps dogmatic) judgment of the plays' protagonists partly hinges on our interpretation of the silent woman.

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“Process and *Pericles*: Reading Natural Philosophical Knowledge in Romance”

Scholars often begin discussions of Shakespeare's *Pericles* with a show of throat-clearing: its episodic structure, supposedly flat or archetypal characters, and contested publication history all contribute to the sense that this play is, in some ineffable way, un-Shakespearean. Or, rather, *Pericles* fails to adhere to some of the dearly held teleological narratives we tell ourselves about Shakespeare the playwright, who miraculously “never blotted out a line” (Jonson). The play's inconvenient elements as well as its contested histories—performance, critical, and biographical—provide many of the reasons for why *Pericles* is not typically considered a cerebral masterpiece like, say, *Hamlet* or *Merchant of Venice*. Despite *Pericles*'s many “imperfections,” this essay seeks to rehabilitate the play by offering alternative theories of how Shakespeare's odd romance stages natural philosophical knowledge.

Unlike the great tragedies, *Pericles* does not feature extended disquisitions on humanity's place within a changeable cosmos. Ostensibly, the drama engages contemporary scientific debates on cosmography or astrology in a merely perfunctory way. How, then, might we read a clearly fantastical, imaginative narrative alongside, or perhaps in tension with, the early seventeenth-century production of knowledge? As I show, *Pericles* repeatedly stages trials that test the ontological status of various kinds of knowledge. Often, these tests turn, not simply on wit, but rather on understanding nature and her changeability. In particular, for our conversation, I pair two disparate scenes for their revelation about ontological inquiry as a *process* in Shakespeare more broadly: first, I examine the scene of the boisterous fishermen who lug *Pericles* from the sea and interpret the watery nature of fortune's variability. Second, I juxtapose the fishermen with Cerimon's mystical revivification of Thaisa. Elevating intuitive and experiential forms of understanding in both scenes, *Pericles* exposes that the natural philosophical method relies on processual cognition, even when that process features what we now would consider specious or “superstitious” knowledge.

I conclude that we should step back from progressive narratives of both scientific understanding and Shakespeare's own development as a playwright, and instead take *Pericles*'s presentation of testing knowledge on its own terms. These tests are messy, ranging in tone from the crude to the ceremonial, and yet they prove themselves effective for pinpointing the protagonist's place in an enigmatic cosmos, a location that cannot be entirely captured with the net of studied, “rational” inquiry. *Pericles* celebrates this fact rather than condemning it, allowing for processes of understanding to outweigh their verity. This, I argue, is the insight that reading the “science” of *Pericles* might furnish for us; despite the seemingly contrarian/inconvenient morphology of the play, we uncover serious considerations for the value of acquiring knowledge from and by disparate processes of inquiry, including the contributions of the fishermen who make their living among the elements. *Pericles* is itself an experiment, and moments of weighing alternatives and methodological inquiry into natural philosophical issues

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resist ready dismissal of the play as mere romance or crowd-pleasing spectacle. Instead, *Pericles* speaks stridently to contemporary paradigms of natural knowledge.