

Chris Barrett, Louisiana State University

Catchwords and the Problem of Obvious Life

Introduced to English printing in the late fifteenth century, catch-words were positioned by early modern compositors at the bottom of each page, to ensure the pages stayed in sequence during imposition and to guarantee the accurate folding of the printed sheets. This essay constitutes an attempt to think about the role catch-words play in early modern English literature, both as part of the signifying material of the collaborative social product that is a printed book, and as a kind of life that reproduces itself across pages, leaves, and signatures. The catch-word has long been oddly invisible to critics, despite the fact of being doubly visible—indeed, literally, ob-vious—and insistent on its presence in the text, sometimes yielding surprisingly poignant or suggestive extensions of its text. This essay considers the advantages of thinking the catch-word as a kind of living phenomenon: after all, the catch-word reproduces itself across pages, grows into sequences of text, accomplishes navigational and sometimes conceptual functions, and undergoes regular change. Looking specifically at the catch-words in a state of the 1632 second folio of Shakespeare's works, I propose that allowing the category of the living to encompass the catch-word might alter the way we understand the curious in/visibility of typographical elements on early modern pages and reformulate our sense of the material interconnectedness of the codex's component; at the same time, this definitional expansion might allow us to reformulate the concept of life in ways that incorporate serendipitous assemblages and their situational affects and effects.

JF Bernard, Champlain College

Generative Contagion and the Failures of Containment in *Measure for Measure*

Stanley Wells' *Shakespeare & Co* opens with a hypothetical story on the morning of the premiere of *Hamlet*:

Early one morning in 1600 or 1601, boys ran around London sticking up bills announcing that if you went to the Globe playhouse on the south bank of the River Thames that afternoon you could see a new play called *Hamlet*. They pasted the bills on the doors of taverns and houses, and on pissing-posts provided for the convenience of those who walked the streets. The lads pulled down out-of-date bills announcing earlier performances and chucked them away (1).

The passage provides at once a striking image of theatrical publicity and of the metaphorical power of contagion, as the "carriers" go around London to disseminate information to populated social areas. Wells writing stresses the aliveness such a process by emphasizing speed and movement.

My paper looks at contagion as a generative phenomenon, in its literal and scientific sense (multiplication of viruses/bacteria, moving from host to host, etc.) as well as within its figurative dimension, as a productive metaphor for communication and storytelling on the early modern

stage. I look to the problems comedies (*Measure for Measure*, mainly) as offering a dramatic representation of in which the anxieties surrounding contagion's generative capacities are represented in Shakespeare. The plays make dual use of sexually transmitted diseases as both the propagation of vice (and disease), but also as an avatar of the anxious failure to contain and control information (and stories). The paper's central premise is that both contagion and theatrical storytelling showcase the precarious nature of the reproduction and circulation of stories, particularly in terms of control, containment and regulation.

Kenneth Connally, University of California at Davis

The Philosophy of Reproduction in *All's Well That Ends Well*

In this paper, I argue that the governance of reproduction is a central concern of Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*. I show that the play's language suggests a pessimistic view of cultural and biological reproduction while simultaneously underlining the potentially disastrous consequences of a failure to reproduce. This critique is intertwined with and partially dependent on the play's engagement with the arguments of the ancient Skeptics, brought to the cultural forefront in Shakespeare's time by writers like Montaigne and Francis Bacon. Nonetheless, *All's Well's* contribution to the debate around governed and ungoverned reproduction is not entirely negative. Certain key moments in the play gesture optimistically towards an alternative to traditional (i.e., heteronormative) models of reproduction: adoption, figured in the play as a kind of grafting.

Brent Dawson, University of Oregon

Men as Plants Increase

My paper is provisionally titled "Men as Plants Increase," and it will look at the frequent comparisons *Shakespeare's Sonnets* makes between the ways humans and plants live and reproduce. While Shakespeare's attention to reproduction in the *Sonnets* has been frequently—exhaustively—commented on, there has been less analysis of his reduction of humanity to the principles of creaturely and vegetal existence. ("From fairest creatures we desire increase...") I mean to make strange the mode of life Shakespeare imagines plants and people share—"increase"—and to describe its differences from reproduction as imagined within a patrilineal society. Thinkers from Aristotle to Michael Marder have been fascinated by plant "increase," which seems at once the most primitive degree of life, inert and deprived of any aim outside itself, but also a common aspect of all living things. If there's time, I'll reflect on how Shakespeare reflects on his own writing in the *Sonnets* as a form of vegetal thought, as accretive and endless as the growth of plants themselves.

Adhaar Noor Desai, Bard College

**“So long lives this, and this gives life to thee”:
Imperfection and the Aging Poem**

How does a poem die? Poets throughout early modernity insist on their capacity to “eternize” and breathe life via poetry. At the same time, however, they frequently appear conscious of poems’ material finality as, inevitably, “papers, yellowed with their age.” Using Shakespeare’s famously enduring cluster of sonnets 15-18 as a starting point to discuss of the poetics of obsolescence and barrenness, this paper will attend to poems that reflect their own capacity to age and decay. It hopes to understand what kinds of “life” a poem was capable of having in order to reflect on the kinds of life ‘old’ poems might still have today in our classrooms and across new media. Building on scholarship by Lucy Munro and Matthew Zarnowiecki on archaism and poetic reproduction in relation to recent proposals about the “uses” of literature, this paper will propose that self-conscious “imperfection” affiliated early modern poesis with a form of life we might conceive of as work in progress. “Imperfection” implied both “unfinished,” but also the state of needing correction; by inviting readers’ impulses to amend or augment a text, poets invited them to help in resuscitating their work.

Megan Herrold, University of Southern California

**The Problem of Marriage:
Heterosexual Reproduction, Queer Decapitation in Spenser**

My SAA paper will focus on the connections between female decapitation and sexual consent in the early modern imagination. While I may consider the various decapitated women in Spenser’s Book V of *The Faerie Queene*, my specific focus will be Britomart’s decapitation of the Amazonian Radigund, which I read as an allegorical self-decapitation. On one hand, the beheading is a wife’s repudiation of a her capacity to dominate her husband—by vanquishing Radigund, Britomart, the Knight of Chastity, saves her husband Artegall, the Knight of Justice, from sexual humiliation and slavery at her (Radigund’s but also Britomart’s) hands; but on the other hand, Spenser renders the combat between Radigund and Britomart as sexually charged. When the two relentlessly attach each others’ “dainty parts,” linking hymeneal rupture to decapitation through an implicit pun on “maidenhead” and “maiden head,” they spill blood that Spenser refers to as “fruitless seed”—that is, at once materially generative and impotent.

I’m curious what the “The Problem of Life” seminar will make of the paradoxes this image invokes. Why does Spenser imagine Britomart’s hymeneal rupture—the foundational genesis of the entire English line, which will eventually lead to Gloriana (the titular *Faerie Queene*, avatar of Elizabeth I)—in terms at once so queer and so subject to obliteration/death/ruin? I hope to elucidate these issues with reference to Maggie Nelson’s notion that “no one set of practices or relations has the monopoly on the so-called radical, or the so-called normative.” But I also suspect that the new materialist turn can help me figure out just what is going on here—what links heterosexual reproduction to headlessness and death.

Sarah Kunjummen, University of Chicago

**Embryos and Corpses:
Form and Matter and the Early Modern Body**

Early Modern accounts of pregnancy and fetal development, in texts such as Jane Sharp's *The Midwives' Book* (1671), Nicholas Culpeper's *Directory for Midwives* (1651), Sir Kenelm Digby's *The Nature of Bodies* (1644), William Harvey's *Exercitationes de generatione animalium* (1651), and Malpighi's *Dissertatio epistolica de formatione pulli in ovo* (1673) were centrally engaged with establishing a mechanism for the formation of a new body. Early Modern anatomists suggested variously that the male (and perhaps female) seed contained in miniature the bodily organs ready for growth: either that, as Digby held, the development of the fetus was a wholly undirected response to physical stimuli, or, in Harvey's case, that the embryo itself, once its heart had been formed, oversaw its own development. In rejecting Aristotelian processes of teleological form, early modern anatomists retained an understanding of form as central to identity, one which would be important for philosophical accounts of the continuity of the self, but increasingly decoupled it from intention and thought. Thus, as Justin Smith has argued, seventeenth-century mechanists often turned to the imaginations of the mother to explain not only fetal irregularities but even the forming of the external parts of the body, by the early eighteenth century, the debate became a choice between pre-formationism, which imagined a nesting doll set of interior homunculi containing all future generations, and an epigenetic account in which germinal seeds developed organs under specific physical pressures.

In *Generating Bodies and Gendered Selves*, Eve Keller draws our attention to the gender politics implicit not only in the attribution of maternal or paternal impetus in determining the form of the child, but especially of choosing to regard the fetus as self-developing and autonomous, freed from the powerful co-presence of the mother. I contrast this search for an identity-stabilizing source of form, whether paternal or maternal seed or the embryonic soul, with the strong early modern sense of bodily matter as indelibly sourceless and recombined. This concern manifests itself in the anxieties of inevitable cannibalism and grave disruption widely found in the period, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603) to Donne's *Devotions On Emergent Occasions* (1624), and Browne's *Hydriotaphia* (1658). I'll suggest that, returning to *Hamlet*, we might find its "grave-talk" less occupied with the problem of the bodily resurrection of the dead than with the problems of tracing origin, replaying the questions of maternal or paternal descent that Janet Adelman establishes in *Suffocating Mothers*, in a wholly different register: the impossibility of tracing one's descent given the unknowable chain of contributors to one's own bodily matter. I'll further ask why problems of form seem to attach to the beginning of life and problems of matter to its end.

Ben Moran, Ohio State University

Lear's Dead Earth

In the last scene of *King Lear*, the titular king enters with the body of Cordelia in his arms. Howling in misery, he cries out, "she's gone for ever. / I know when one is dead and when one

lives; / She's dead as earth." My essay will proceed from a simple question: why should Cordelia's body be "dead as earth"? Outside of Lear's fictional world, the culture of early modern England had long held fast to its maternal metaphors when it came to thinking about the earth. The Earth was a mother, the soil a womb. So how is it that in one of the most important moments in one of the most important plays of the Renaissance, Shakespeare can turn the oft-invoked liveliness of earth on its head? And why does Lear not only reverse the commonplace but also hold earth up as the measuring stick of death? Drawing upon recent insights in ecocriticism, I will argue that in this final scene *King Lear* engages a tension between older, animist understandings of soil and burgeoning, mechanist views of a lifeless ground.

Vin Nardizzi, University of British Columbia

Tulips and the Problem of Reproducibility

In 1597, John Gerard published *The Herball, Or Generall Historie of Plants*. Chapter 77 in the herbal's first book is an entry on the tulip, which is a "strang and forraine flower" that poses a natural-historical problem in reproductive knowledge. Gerard's inability to describe the tulip fully can help us trace some outlines of this problem. Although Gerard includes in this entry 7 woodblock illustrations and 14 prose descriptions for different kinds of tulips, neither media, Gerard would be the first to admit, adequately captures the flower's "excellent diuersitie." Tulips elude the inventorying that "all studious and painefull Herbarists" supervise. To elaborate this point, Gerard recounts the experiments of Master James Garret, "a curious searcher of Simples, and learned Apothecarie in London" who "hath vndertaken to finde out if it were possible" to enumerate the tulip's "infinite sorts": "by diligent sowing of their seedes, and by planting those of his own propagation, and by others receiued from his friends beyond the seas," Garret worked for 20 years (since the 1570s, then) to try to exhaust the tulip's variety and could not "attaine to the end of his trauaile, for that each new yeere bringeth forth new plants of sundrie colors not before seene." As Gerard concludes, tulips would thus merit their own "particular volume" of botanical natural history, but even then the herbalist's task would amount to "roul[ing] Sisiphus stone, or number[ing] the sandes." The only recourse Gerard has for accounting for the tulip's characteristic diversity – its unguaranteed reproducibility – is to propose that "Nature seem[s] to plaie more with this flower, than any other I do know."

In this paper, I begin to track how sixteenth-century herbalists imagined the tulip's diversity and how they recorded their own incomprehension when confronted with its infinite variety. Whereas historians of gardening can now explain why it was, in biological terms, that the early modern tulip did not reproduce in predictable ways (among other reasons, the plants were infected with a virus that intensified the vibrancy of their colors and created novel color patterns), I am interested to think through how the tulip – that spectacularly unique flower – simultaneously also became such a reproducible sign in other media, such as the still life painting, Gerard's woodblock illustrations, and the example of early seventeenth-century Dutch tile that inspires my contribution.

Lisa Robinson, St. John's University

**Posthuman Queer Ecosexuality:
Love On and In the Heath**

The Early Modern body has the ability to morph and transverse the limiting structures of its physical boundary. Utilizing the ideas of the one sex system, a spectrum of life forms and shows binarized male and female bodies for what they really are, mere temporal moments. *King Lear* will be my primary text to expose the posthuman implications of spectrums of life within the Early Modern. If bodies can move across genders (i.e. Lear's feminization on the heath, and Cordelia's military prowess as France's hand), then they can also move from physical human existence into the landscape. Lear and Cordelia's non-normative love/relationship exceeds the trappings of societal nomenclatures of incest. Only in their death can they truly be together, creating a productive/reproductive relationship with the earth. Their death can be considered the orgasmic end to the story, where they consummate and foster new life in the weather stricken heath outside of the declining and defunct kingdom. The instance where life would end for most, is instead a fulfilling truth of posthuman ecstasy. It incites a throwing off of limitations of society/humanism, and accepts that queered bodies always move towards death. Finally a non/human reproductive cycle fosters landscapes that revive the queer allowance of multi-hued existences.

Maria Vrcek, Rutgers University

Let Confusion Live

In my paper, I argue that Shakespeare and Middleton's *Timon of Athens* theorizes human ontology as confused. "Confusion" and its cognate "confound" occur more times in this play than any other by Shakespeare. Throughout the play, they refer not to a phenomenological or cognitive condition but rather to a condition of relationality. Timon perceives the vile and uncompassionate Athenians who have forsaken him and others as confused in the sense that their behavior suggests they are creatures with human and nonhuman characteristics. Their behavior actually leads him to question—and ultimately denounce—the hierarchy that celebrates the human as the most refined and intelligent earthly creature. Instead, the boundary between humans and nonhumans is porous. Furthermore, in his despair he suggests that confusion can be productive when he wishes that humankind would "Decline to your confounding contraries, /And let confusion live!" (4.1.20-1). This curse is provocative because it suggests that confusion can be a way of living. In my paper, I am interested in responding to two questions: How does ontological confusion enable and/or limit the life humans lead? And to what extent does "confused" describe the mimetic relationship between the fictional world a play creates and the real world?

Rob Wakeman, Mount Saint Mary College

**What's this? what's this?":
Stockfish and Piscine Sexuality in *Measure for Measure***

In Act 3 of *Measure for Measure*, Lucio tells us that Angelo “was not made by man and woman after this downright way of creation,” and that that his queerly asexual, “too crabbed” inhumanity must be the result of some other procreative process: “Some report a sea-maid spawned him; some that he was begot between two stockfishes” (3.2.99-110). The reference seems to indicate that Angelo’s body is drained of heterosexual fertility. His flesh is cold and shriveled; the stiff, bloodless stockfish is more wooden than animal. Angelo’s fishified flesh seems incapable of creating life. But this also the play about the “rebellion of a codpiece” (3.2.116). In addition to the reference to the peculiar men’s fashion that accentuated the male sex organs by obscuring them, I argue that *Measure for Measure*’s rebellions of the “cod”piece fits into the play’s piscine theme of “Groping for trouts in a peculiar river” (1.2.90). Hardly an animal at all, stockfish were fit for early modern Lenten meals designed to inhibit procreation. Yet, despite their seeming impotence, fish imagery has an erotic charge throughout the play. Even when a man “scarce confesses / That his blood flows” (1.3.51-52), even when Angelo denies both his humanity and his animality, the chaste fish within remains as given to rotten immorality. In this paper, I propose to think through early modern views on the sexual reproduction of fish and how understandings of piscine sexuality negotiate between the lurid and chaste.