

2019 Seminar Abstracts: Early Modern Sexual Knowledge
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Respondents:

Melissa E .Sanchez, University of Pennsylvania
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Hermione's "Slippery" Pregnant Body in *The Winter's Tale*

In this paper, I argue *The Winter's Tale* takes part in a theatrical tradition that dates back to antiquity—the representation of sexually dissident pregnant bodies onstage. Hermione's "goodly bulk" is characterized by disruptions and interruptions of time and is thus—like the play at large—queer in its time-keeping. I consequently take up Elizabeth Freeman's theories on queer time and "erotic activities out of reach of the unconscious soldier-speaker" to argue that Hermione's pregnancy is queer in its unexpected temporalities: She is spread of late into goodly bulk (2.1.26-27), delivered before her time (2.2.31), and slides "o'er sixteen years" in a lesbian-like lying-in ceremony before being reunited with her daughter, Perdita (4.1.24). I also argue, however, that Hermione is queer in her sexual deviance. The "nine changes of watery star" that frame act 1, scene 2 mark a striking parallel in the timeline between Polixenes's arrival and stay in Sicilia and Hermione's pregnancy. From Hermione's subsequent threats to flog Polixenes with a rod if he does not stay in Sicilia (1.2.37), to her "limber," and "potent," vows (48, 51), to her crammed and big-bellied body (90-91), I argue the goodly queen's sexual potency is inextricable from her pregnancy, and has something to teach us about early modern sexual knowledge, how it is circulated and frustrated, and the present-day conditions that divorce sexual knowledge from the pregnant body.

Anthony Barthelemy
University of Miami

**"The Work of Generation, the Deed of Kind:
 Carnal Knowledge in *The Merchant of Venice*."**

When Shylock justifies the taking of interest he uses the story of Jacob and the sheep from the Book of Genesis (27, 30:25-43) to provide a religious justification for his financial dealings. Specifically, Shylock uses folk wisdom about sex and conception to provide a counterargument to Antonio's condemnation of taking interest. We know that Shylock's science is not accurate, but he acts with great self-confidence in the matter. On the other hand, Antonio confesses ignorance as to the cause of his anxiety, but confidently declares it is not love. I am interested in what the homosocial clique of Venetian men who surround Antonio know about his feelings/relationship with Bassanio. Do they know or suspect that the rich merchant desires more than friendship with Bassanio? Given the English attitudes toward Venice and knowledge of its reputation for venery, can Venetians not have sexual knowledge? Are Salerio and Solanio

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willing to overlook what they know because it's impolite to acknowledge sodomy, or are they practitioners of the Italian vice?

After being won by Bassanio, Portia protests herself to be “an unlessoned girl, unschooled, unpracticed,” but she quickly recognizes Antonio as a threat to her marriage (3.2.159). Has the reputation of Venice reached Belmont? How do the ladies of Belmont understand Antonio's attraction to Bassanio and his eagerness to be a martyr for love? Portia's testing of her husband in a series of vaginocentric tropes and ploys suggests that the “unlessoned girl” of Belmont is neither ignorant about sex and more particularly sodomy than her protestations might initially imply. Given that she is not passive in the casket selection scene, perhaps Portia's carnal knowledge is a further indication that the Lady of Belmont is at least as much a fraud as her husband.

Eric Brinkman
Ohio State University

“You kiss by th' book”: Kissing and Its Representation on the Early Modern Stage

With the knowledge that historical distance makes our understanding of early modern cultural practices rather opaque, this essay will complicate the current notions of the historical representation of kissing on the early modern stage. Despite the assertions of scholars such as Ann Pasternak Slater, who asserts in *Shakespeare the Director* that kisses in Shakespeare's plays “need little historic or symbolic gloss... their essential meaning does not change,” recent work in the field of early modern sexuality studies has demonstrated that we cannot simply map our understanding of sexuality onto the people of this period, nor can we assume proscriptions that appeared in print reflect the actual historical reality of their sexual lives. The meaning of kissing is contextual and across time and space its performance has varied widely: socially or sexually it might be performed mouth-to-mouth, mouth-to-cheek, mouth-to-hand, or mouth-to-fingers-to-lips, while standing or kneeling, and can vary in number, duration, and the presence of an auditory component. Each of these divergent practices potentially signals something different, and these cultural differences would have been represented on English early modern stages. For example, editorial emendations that insist that the original texts of *Romeo and Juliet* imply that Romeo and Juliet must perform a heteronormative mouth-to-mouth sexual kiss during their shared sonnet are anachronistically misreading a staged public, social moment performed by boy actors as one in which a private, sexualized gesture between cisgender actors occurs. In fact, despite the assertion by generations of editors that readers need the stage direction “he kisses her” to understand the text, on English stages the actors did not kiss for almost 150 years. This lack of an onstage heteronormative kiss is significant, because by removing anachronistic interpretations of this gesture and recontextualizing kissing historically, we can potentially avoid heteronormative biases and make visible the possibility of queer or feminist interpretations of early modern plays on both the page and stage.

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Heather Frazier
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Golden Showers: Urinary Discipline in *The Tamer Tamed*

Early modern drama often makes sense of erotic desire through excretory metaphors. As a genre intimately concerned with scatology and bodily fluids, comedy frequently works through issues of transgressive sexuality by blurring the usually carefully delineated boundaries between the body's erotic and excretory functions. Indeed, of all early modern plays staging urination as a central trope, at least four of those plays feature characters throwing urine or directly urinating upon another character. All four dramas render male characters the recipients of this punishment. This paper will focus upon one comedy from this group of plays: John Fletcher's *The Tamer Tamed*. As I will argue, *The Tamer Tamed* suggests that excretory degradation is the natural response to unnatural erotic relationships, especially the relationships between Petruchio, Maria, and Maria's father. The essay will examine Maria's wedding-night barricade in light of Petruchio's earlier conversation with Petronius, as both exchanges contain puns that link sexual intercourse to excretion. Petronius' banter regarding his daughter's sexuality before the wedding night perversely aligns him with his son-in-law, and I will argue that the play responds to this taboo expression of erotic desire through Maria's subsequent method of disciplining Petruchio with chamber pots.

Gillian Knoll
Western Kentucky University

**"I dare not myself describe it":
 Making Sexual Knowledge in John Lyly's *Galatea***

When Cupid pierces Diana's nymphs in John Lyly's *Galatea*, his arrows catapult them into a frenzied quest for sexual knowledge. As their bodies grapple with strange new desires and pleasures, their attentions fix on the task of naming the new sensations that overtake them: "How now?" the nymph Telusa asks in bewildered soliloquy, "What new conceits, what strange contraries, breed in thy mind?" (3.1.1-2). My paper explores the capacity of John Lyly's "conceits"—artful tricks of language, from puns to parallelism and euphuistic phrases—to construct sexual knowledge for the women of *Galatea*. Lyly's erotic language operates less by illumination or revelation than by provocative obstruction. Such obstructions, I argue, dramatize a queer mode of inquiry that reaches for—and grasps—sexual knowledge by what Telusa calls "strange contraries."

Making sexual knowledge is a collective endeavor for the women of *Galatea*. Although the nymphs struggle to name the erotic sensations they share, each recognizes her own experiences in the others' frustrated efforts to define them. These flashes of recognition carry their own unique erotic charge, sparked by the pleasurable friction between the language of inward contemplation and outward-reaching speech. Lyly's euphuistic love language patterns this

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rhythm: his “contraries” proliferate, moving forward, but they also abrade and clash, pulling back. As the women of *Galatea* turn inward and reach out to make sexual knowledge, they learn the pleasures of hearing one’s own desires shaped in another’s language, dressed in “new conceits” that make sex both familiar and “strange.”

Matt Kozusko
Ursinus College

“And” or “or”? Sex Jokes in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* 5.1

This paper addresses a topic covered in the final sentence of the seminar description—the “present-day conditions” that complicate what we can know about sex, or in this case, bawdy humor in Shakespeare. We tend to see bawdy jokes in Shakespeare by mapping our own present-day understanding of sex jokes onto the topography of early modern writing, but that familiar historical error is only one part of the problem of recovering and/or decoding sex jokes. I use as a representative case the staging of Wall in the *Pyramus and Thisbe* playlet in *Midsummer* 5.1, because it nicely demonstrates challenges in reading that arise at the intersection of textual editing issues, theater history questions, and the complex semiotics of stage directions, all in the context of the larger project of historical and theoretical inquiry into sex and sexuality. I try to show how the bawdy physical humor presumably embedded in the staging of Wall is produced and conditioned by editorial assumptions and by analogous assumptions about early staging practices. The editorial assumptions are visible in a kind of textual crux: the editorial history of Q’s “Now is the Moon used between the two neighbors” versus F’s “now is the morall downe,” and in the editorial convention of printing “*and* let him hold his fingers thus” at 3.1.69, where all three early texts print “*or* let him hold his fingers thus” (emphasis added). The assumptions about performance practices we can see in often unexamined conventions of reading descriptive moments in play texts as embedded or implied stage directions. The “thus” in Bottom’s 3.1 line bridges the two halves of the essay.

Ian Frederick Moulton
Arizona State University

“Fellator Cunniling.’: How Jonson Read His Martial”

This paper explores the role of Latin commentaries on Martial as a medium for the transmission of sexual knowledge among an educated, mostly male elite in early modern Europe. Written in the first century AD, Martial’s twelve books of epigrams contain hundreds of texts dealing frankly with a wide range of sexual behaviors, including homoeroticism, oral sex, anal sex, and masturbation. Martial’s sexual attitudes are relatively typical of an upper class Roman male: he writes openly of his desire for boys and young men as well as for women. He is critical of sexually aggressive women, of lesbians, of anyone who engages in oral sex in any capacity, and of men who take pleasure from being sexually penetrated.

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Martial's epigrams, whether sexual or not, were highly regarded in early modern humanist culture for their wit, humor, and rhetorical concision. Unexpurgated Latin editions of Martial were common from the earliest days of printing, and most editions came with copious Latin commentary, which explicated the texts in enormous detail. These commentaries—widely available to those who could read Latin—deal frankly with varieties of non-procreative sexual behavior seldom discussed openly in early modern literary culture.

My paper for our seminar focuses on editions of Martial published or circulating in London in the first years of the seventeenth century. Though expurgated editions of Martial were beginning to be produced, several editions readily available in early modern London included the complete text of all the epigrams. Ben Jonson owned several editions of Martial, and my work will analyze his manuscript annotations to these volumes (now in the Folger Shakespeare library). My argument is that Latin commentary on sexually explicit poems constituted an important and often overlooked site for the transmission of sexual knowledge, especially about transgressive or non-procreative forms of sexual activity.

James Y. Mulder
Tufts University

“Would Thou Wert As I Am, And I A Man”: Queer Affect and Orificial Erotics in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*

This paper takes up the question of Adonis's body and its role in the erotics of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. I argue that while prevailing frameworks for theorizing gay and queer desire in the poem make visible many ways in which Adonis poses a problem for the future-oriented movement of a “straight” erotic narrative, nonetheless scholarship on Adonis's queerness tends to engage an sexual paradigm that is limited by its reliance on the normativizing reinscription of sexual difference. Such readings of Adonis both flatten out the material contours of his body and constrain the kinds of sex he is thought to be available to engage in. Instead, I argue that the queerness of Adonis's sex, so often understood within a binaristic penetrative framework, might more powerfully be located in his embodied resistance to that penetrative paradigm. I attend to the way in which purported scenes of penetrative contact are supplanted in the text by scenes of cognitive, sensory, and affective uncertainty, such that even as the poem labors to *produce* the penetrative act, the scene of sex as such evades or resists its own materialization. Mobilizing and extending Mario DiGangi's persuasive claim that “we cannot always be entirely confident that we know which bodily acts count as ‘sexual,’” I pursue the radical indeterminacy of what “counts as” sex. In so doing, I remap the topography of Adonis's body with particular attention to the pronominal multiplicity and orificial figurations that shape the poem's depiction of his body, building on recent critical conversations in early modern sexuality studies and philology that, rather than seeking to decode or translate sexual language of the period, emphasize the constitutive role of indeterminacy and unclarity in the production of sexual meaning.

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James Newlin
Case Western Reserve University

**“I Have Suffered With Those That I Saw Suffer”:
Perceiving Trauma in *Brigsby Bear* and *The Tempest***

In this paper, I examine the unexpected parallels between the 2017 “indie” comedy *Brigsby Bear* and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. *Brigsby Bear* tells the story of James, a young man abducted as a child, who abruptly learns that what he had considered to be ordinary life was actually an extended imprisonment. In detailing its protagonist’s entry into a “brave new world,” the film presents James as an analogue to Miranda.

The film’s subtle portrait of James reckoning with this trauma illuminates the play’s ambiguous portrayal of Miranda as a survivor of an attempted sexual assault. With its male Miranda, the film is far from faithful to the original text of the play. On the other hand, that means the film may be all the more faithful to the original *performance* of *The Tempest*, where Miranda would have not only been played by a boy, but quite possibly by an exploited boy. Dympna Callaghan has argued that the early modern theater was “implicitly based on the forced expropriation of child labor and the threat of sexual victimization.” It is likely that some members of Shakespeare’s audience may have perceived Miranda as not just a mimetic representation, but also the literal exhibition, of a survivor of sexual assault.

I argue that reading *Brigsby Bear* as an uncannily faithful adaptation of *The Tempest* helps us to articulate an understanding of the original, affective experience of Shakespeare’s romance. Moreover, such a reading will clarify how Shakespeare anticipates our present ethical challenge of consuming potentially exploitative art in the era of the “me too” and “time’s up” campaigns.