

**2019 Seminar Abstracts: Race and/as Affect in Early Modern Literature**  
**Carol Mejia LaPerle, Wright State University**

**Session Respondents:**

**Margo Hendricks, University of California, Santa Cruz**  
**Drew Daniel, Johns Hopkins University**

**Othello's Unfortunate Happiness**

**Cora Fox, Arizona State University**

*Othello* begins with Iago urging Roderigo to set a plan to change the color of Othello's joy: he tells him to "poison his delight," and he then suggests "Though that his joy be joy,/Yet throw such chances of vexation on't,/As it may lose some color" (1.1.65, 68-70). The plot of the play, in which Othello's status within the community declines from a position of honor to one of disgust and pity, records the workings of the politics of happiness, and it displays and explores what Giovanni Tarantino has called "emotional orientalism." Dilating on Othello's emotional state and his racialized body's affects, the play insistently and self-consciously operates as a document in what Sara Ahmed has called a Western "unhappiness archive." Happiness, according to Ahmed, is at the center of philosophy and ethics because it is "what we want, whatever it is," and *Othello* is a play that does the work of challenging the appeal of happiness itself, as Othello is offered and then shut out from the happiness associated with narratives of being Venetian and being married. As Ahmed points out, "through narrative, the promise of happiness is located as well as distributed" (45), and *Othello* both supports and qualifies Ahmed's analysis of the dangers of the promise of happiness in a number of ways outlined in this essay. *Othello* also has the power, when it is performed now, to represent and possibly help to define the conditions of life for immigrants and racialized others, which makes it a particularly dangerous and important play for understanding how happiness functions as an idea in contemporary politics.

**Blackness, Pity, and English Petrarchism**

**Dennis Austin Britton, University of New Hampshire**

This paper will examine the ways in which blackness becomes a desirable figure for racializing male suffering and female pity in English Petrarchism. Repeated images of darkness—dark skies, dark looks, dark valleys, for example—in Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* are used by the speaker to elicit both Laura's and the reader's pity. Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* and Shakespeare's sonnets, in contrast, seem to prefer images of embodied blackness—black feelings and black complexions—to represent their speakers' emotions and the behaviors of their mistresses, suggesting that blackness becomes more useful than darkness as a tool for moving readers to feel pity. In this paper I seek to understand why this is the case, and to consider how Petrarchism contributed to early modern feelings about and desires for racial otherness.

**Racism and Renaissance Reading**

**James Berg, Middlebury College**

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This essay will explore affective implications of race as an epitome of that about a person which is treated as a sign of something else—*of that about a person which is to be read*. What we see as race was largely, in Shakespeare’s time, Providential reading material (“outward character,” as it were), where reading people meant treating them as mere indicators of something else, at the (often violent) expense of their visibility as beings in their own right. If being thusly read is akin even to modern experiences of racism, we can use literary examples of such reading to investigate affective experiences of both the racist and the victim of racism, not only in early modern but also in modern contexts. We can also study in them a mechanism enabling the unlikely early modern empathy many claim to see toward the racial “other” in the treatment of figures such as Othello and Shylock. In order to embark on such study, I expect to use an episode or two from Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* involving the reading of persons allegorically, together with their more obtrusively race-conscious source-episodes in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*—one involving the Redcrosse Knight’s battle with Sans Joy with Duessa’s reactions, in comparison to Ruggiero’s battle with Mandricardo with Doralice’s reactions; and one involving Artegall’s battle with Pollente, together with the subsequent murder of Munera, in comparison with the story of various Christian knights’ battles with Rodomonte, before his monument to the dead Isabella. Both of these sets of episodes involve not only allegorical reading distilled from racial differentiation but also explorations of the actions and emotions involved in reading and being read by both the readers *of* the text and the characters *in* the text. Hence, they should make fruitful ground for investigation of the affective implications of race as a kind of reading material and racism as a kind of reading.

**“The Printer to the Reader”:  
 The Role of Print Materialism in Evoking English Racial Panic**

**Averyl Dietering, University of California, Davis**

What can the history of the book and the history of reading offer to scholars theorizing the complex relationship between race and affect in early modern England? Answering Elizabeth Spiller’s call in *Reading and the History of Race in the Renaissance* to bring book history and critical race studies into conversation with each other, this paper uses book history to explore the racialized emotions evoked by anatomical woodcuts. As a genre that attempted to establish boundaries around the human body and codify what amount of bodily difference was acceptable within those boundaries, anatomies are particularly useful in encountering early modern ideologies of racial and affective difference. Within these anatomies, illustrative woodcuts regulate readers’ emotions through portraying dissected corpses as statuesque, Greco-Roman bodies in pastoral scenes, beautifying the otherwise horrifying specter of mutilated flesh. In these woodcuts, Greco-Roman ethnicity, pastoral scenes, and feelings of peace and comfort cannot be separated: ethnicities, environments, and emotions are a package deal. This paper focuses on an anatomical woodcut, entitled “The Printer to the Reader,” that muddles, if not entirely subverts, the anatomical woodcut’s typical role in comforting the reader and regulating their emotions. In this woodcut, the corpse poses elegantly in a pastoral scene, but without the typical Greco-Roman features; at the same time, the accompanying descriptive passage employs a plethora of emotional insults—“cruel,” “truculent,” “wicked,” “foul and ulcerated”—and physical descriptions that appear to traffic in various early modern racialized stereotypes. Using print materialism and book history to unpack this complex web of affect and racialization, I argue that although this woodcut positions itself as a visual warning to beware bodies that resemble this “cruel”

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corpse, it is actually training readers to produce visceral responses of racialized fear and panic. The woodcut relies heavily on visual racial cues, but it does so in order to create a racialized emotive experience.

**Friends and Others:  
 Race and Feeling Space in the Writing of Alice Curwen**

**Meghan Elizabeth Hall, University of Pennsylvania**

This seminar paper considers the affect subtending the racial and spatial dynamics of Alice Curwen's testimonial, *A Relation of the Labour, Travail and Suffering of that Faithful Servant of Our Lord, Alice Curwen* (1680). Curwen was an itinerant Quaker preacher; her testimonial recounts her journeys throughout New England and the Caribbean in the 1670s. Although she was one of many Quaker women to travel abroad in this period in support of the Society's mission of conversion, Curwen's writing stands out in two respects. For one, it evinces Curwen's deeply-felt investment in the global expansion of the Quaker religion through (non-violent) conversion. Her predictions that Quakers will soon "spread over the face of the earth" contain some of her most moving language, and her passionate commitment to the Society of Friends – and to her fellow Friends – inspires others in her narrative to the same depth of emotion. These feelings and particularly the feelings of "Friendship" between Quakers, I suggest, underpin the Quaker model of expansionism. I analyze the affectionate rhetoric passing between Curwen and her Friends – including those she has not yet met – alongside her descriptions of traveling to develop an account of her *feelings of/in space*. The second respect in which Curwen's writing stands out in its relationship to race. A staunch abolitionist, Curwen was an outspoken critic of the transatlantic slave trade and, indeed, of racial hierarchies altogether. Yet, her dehumanizing portrayals of the indigenous populations that attack Quaker settlements raise questions about the limits of her Quaker universalist stance within certain contact zones. Her feelings of space and her use of racial rhetoric, I suggest, are related. By examining Curwen's spatial politics, I explore how Curwen defaults to race to obscure the violence of occupation and legitimate her own missionary activities.

**Disgust, Wonder, and the Perils of Strange Queenship in Spenser's *The Fairie Queene***

**Mira Assaf Kafantaris, Ohio State University**

Spenser's *Fairie Queene* has an anxious relationship with female rule. In the spirit of the poem's royal compliment framework, however, the inadequacy of a native queen's gender is mitigated by her Englishness and divine anointment. Indeed, the perils of female sovereignty's true colors surface in Spenser's treatment of "strange" queens—examples include the Amazon Radigund, Acrasia, and of course, the much-maligned Duessa—a treatment that taps into intertwined feelings of wonder and disgust. This essay investigates the presentation of racialized foreign queens as an instance of a gendered hierarchy, wherein I argue that Spenser's racial encoding legitimizes and naturalizes the repudiation of non-English queens despite England's long history of cultural mixing. I do so by reading episodes of the poem alongside Natural Law theories that positioned intermarriage within the nascent discourse of expansion, conquest, and colonization. Focusing on the wondrous and disgusting in *The Fairie Queene*'s presentation of foreign queens opens up critical paths that involve more expansive scopes than are possible with strictly allegorical approaches to reading the

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poem. My goal is to examine how categories of political opposition and belonging were applied to “unnatural” women, in the allegorical sense, as monstrous, disgusting, eroticized, errant, and who embodied a direct threat to the myth of a racially pure commonwealth.

**Affecting Place and Displacement in Heywood’s**  
***The Fair Maid of the West* Parts I and II**

**Kirsten N. Mendoza, University of Dayton**

As a central element to seventeenth-century English popular culture, the commercial theater provides a rich medium for analyzing the complex and knotty development of national consciousness in relation to a global early modernity. In this paper, I interrogate the performance of race in Thomas Heywood’s *The Fair Maid of the West* Parts 1 and II (ca. 1597-1603). Specifically, I will focus on the role of geographic (dis)placement as it influences the affective registers by which characters recognize and articulate racial and gendered belonging and difference. Bess Bridges, the female protagonist of Heywood’s two-part play, begins as a tapster in Plymouth who is lauded by male patrons for her beauty and chastity. Despite her reputation among locals, she is nonetheless regarded with suspicion concerning her virtue—the very characteristic of hers that receives commendation. The threat that Bess could be something other than what she purports to be—a whore rather than a virgin—occupies the thoughts of her romantic interest Spencer and serves to justify his need to test the English maid. Over the course of Part I, Elizabeth Bridges, the chaste Plymouth tavern worker, becomes “English Bess,” a cross-dressing and swash-buckling privateer who serves as an avatar for Queen Elizabeth I and for the English more generally. While in the Moroccan court, the English are repeatedly asked to reflect on themselves and to describe their people in relation to their hosts. Furthermore, the incredulity that Bess faces while in England is effaced by the threat of her sexual contamination in the Moroccan court. In these staged encounters, in which the English characters repeatedly verbalize a strong and sometimes comic sense of national identity, they also express their curiosity, desires, revulsion, and fears. Thus, they perform a relationality between ‘self’ and alterity made possible through the imagined process of being supplanted from their homes in a land where their bodies take on a new value in a foreign economy.

**Bed(lam): Racialization and Rape Culture**

**Alicia Jordan Meyer, University of Pennsylvania**

This essay examines Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *Two Noble Kinsmen* and the agency of the Jailer’s Daughter as a “base” woman. I suggest that the Jailer’s Daughter illuminates the raced aspects of lower-class identity as well as the lower-class woman’s relationship to “whiteness” afford to elite women like Emilia. I set my analysis of the Daughter against the historical backdrop and material presence of Bedlam, or Bethlem Hospital, and consider the way in which its institutional history informs her pathology, sexual availability, and racial presentation. I argue that the Wooer’s assault of the Daughter (which operates under the guise of being a “cure”) indicates larger, political efforts to control racialized, poor women in early modern English society. By political efforts I refer to the extralegal measures taken to control the maidservant: her confinement in the prison as well as the pathology assigned to her. To show this to be the case, a large part of the work of this chapter is devoted to reading how Shakespeare and Fletcher construct the Daughter’s voice and agency within her status as a

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maidservant. Her voice allows the tether between race and sexuality to surface. I then examine the extralegal use of the prison to stage the rape of the Daughter. The juxtaposition of her agency next to extralegal tactics creates a systemic environment intent on the sexual abuse of the maidservant class.

**Affect and Cleopatra in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra***

**Mary K. Steible, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville**

Whether or not “affect theorists and . . . neuroscientists” are correct in believing “there is a gap between the subject’s affects and its cognition or appraisal of the affective situation or object” or that “affective dispositions . . . are independent of consciousness and the mind’s control” (Leys 443), such thinking by members of the scientific or the humanities’ communities at the least recognizes that human emotions are worthy of study, no matter how they manifest. Brian Massumi’s idea that affect is an intensity felt prior to a conscious emotion (24) seems useful in examining Act 2 scene 5 of *Antony and Cleopatra*: Cleopatra’s physically violent response to the messenger who brings her news of Antony’s marriage to Octavia--she knocks him down, hales him, threatens to spurn his eyes, and “unhair his head”(2.5.65)—is a case in point. Already vulnerable to her jealous love of Antony, not to mention the subsequent political fallout from Antony’s binding himself to Octavian, Cleopatra’s bodily response to the messenger speaks first, before she seems aware of the complexity of her feelings for Antony: “I am pale, Charmian” (2.5.60), that sensation felt through the skin. Then immediately following, Cleopatra releases her anger upon the messenger: “The most infectious pestilence upon thee!” *Strikes him down* (2.5.61). While Cleopatra strikes and verbally threatens the man, Charmian pleads that Cleopatra be patient and “keep herself within herself”(2.5.76) but “herself” is out, free, exposed. The intensity of her response to the messenger, moreover, is a prelude to Cleopatra owning the truth about her love of Antony: “These hands do lack nobility, that they strike / A meaner than myself, since I myself / Have given myself the cause” (2.5.82-84). To be jealous in love is one thing—to love is a responsibility.

**Gypsies and the Racialization of Witchcraft**

**Sydney Wagner, Graduate Center, CUNY**

Fear is a great motivator. By creating, heightening, and enabling fear of the Other, nations, like early modern England, have been able to harness a tool to create notions of community and citizenship out of that shared fear. Of course, very few figures in early modern England struck fear in the hearts of many like the figure of the witch. In the literary and cultural imaginary, the witch was a pervasive threat because it was likened to an internal Other. While many scholars have pointed out the transgressive gendering of witches in early modern literature, very little scholarship has focused on the relationship between witchcraft and race. Alongside skin color, clothing, and sexuality, witchcraft was another “devilish and naughty device” plaguing representations of Gypsies in early modern English literature and culture. These portrayals, both visual, literary, and cultural, relied on a pre-existing, often-gendered, monstrous portrayal of witchcraft to sculpt the now pervasive trope of the Gypsy fortuneteller or necromancer. But the relationship between witches and Gypsies, at least in terms of representation, is a reciprocal one, since many depictions of witches, such as Jacques de Ghen II’s artistic renderings, use Gypsies as models for their supernatural counterparts. By

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focusing on the affective responses to witches and Gypsies, as well as the imagined racialized affect shared between witches and Gypsies in literature like *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), this paper argues that representations of witches and witchcraft are inherently racialized in early modern England, leading to shared biopolitical responses.

**Touching the web: Spiders in Shakespeare's Othello**

**Leslie Wexler, University of Toronto**

If there is one certain fact concerning the position of the spider in a expansive consideration of European thought, it is the relative predominance of interest in the web. My paper investigates the web in Shakespeare's *Othello* through two insects: the spider and the silkworm. I suggest that the web of both insects includes a rich antonymic comparison between useless and useful threads, webs, and weaving. The spider and the silk handkerchief both operate on the level of theatrical emblematics; they signify in extremely condensed form a nexus of very powerfully negative emotions and dangerous anxieties about female agency and miscegenation. My argument follows two strands in the play:

1. The spider's web and net of Iago

Although the spider has long been associated with Iago, early modern literature posits that lurking beneath the surface is a gendered fear associated with women. Spiders in early modern natural history are predominantly female and their use in Shakespeare provoke the disgust and fear associated with anxious masculinity. Three crucial moments in the play's treatment of women involve spiders, venom and weaving generated by Desdemona and the agency of women within the play.

2. The racial significance of Othello's first gift of Desdemona (3.3.349)

The magic within the web of the handkerchief is sewn with "fury" by "hallowed" silkworms (3.4.72-4). This gift is understood as one of great material worth, and not to be taken lightly. It was reported in 1593 that two silk handkerchiefs valued at the considerable sum of 22 pounds were deemed a suitable gift for Elizabeth I from Sultan Murad III. These gifts were part of a diplomatic and mercantile exchange that saw Elizabeth issue the Levant Company's first charter for trade throughout the Ottoman Empire, including the play's setting – Cyprus in 1581. It also saw the tentative exploration of military alliance in the face of a common Catholic enemy, Spain, an instance of how interaction with Turks was desired in economic or political realms as it was simultaneously detested socially. Encoded into the handkerchief are Anglo-Turkish anxieties that underpin crossing and multiplying in threads that bring together the multiculturalism of the island and its main export.