

**2019 Seminar Abstracts: Shakespearean Revulsions  
Claire McEachern, University of California, Los Angeles**

**“Stay, dog, for thou shalt hear me:  
Masculinist Revulsions and Margaret’s Feminist Ethics in *Richard III*”**

**Cristina León Alfar, Hunter College CUNY**

In this essay I would like to think about Queen Margaret’s curses in *Richard III* as part of a feminist ethics on the early modern stage. I am interested in ethical stands taken by female characters whose acts and points of view are in some sense repulsive but also compelling in light of certain moral questions posed by their plays. Specifically, I want to think about how such stands retain an ethical force that is contradicted by other problematic or immoral acts committed by the same characters that pose problems of interpretation or reception. In this essay I will read her as a parrhesiast, one who speaks truth to power as a right of all citizens, but whose truth is troubled by her own violent and tyrannical past. Guilty of murder, adultery, and violence against her subjects, Margaret nonetheless makes a forceful case for rebelling against the tyranny of Richard's rise to power. Speaking truth to power and thereby claiming a right of citizenship, Margaret’s resistance emerges from her role as queen, but also from her role as wife and mother. That Margaret elicits universal revulsion from the other characters while also holding a unique, though not untroubled, position of ethical authority is uncovered by the play’s women, who initially agree with their men but come to see her as a powerful speaker who will teach them how to curse. Thus Richard’s tyranny opens the opportunity for the moral and ethical critique they make. I hope to come to a working definition of feminist ethics by examining the unity of these women whose rejection of Richard is also a rejection of corrupt and violent masculinist state power from which they have benefitted.

**“Staging the Literal in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*:  
Second Thoughts about Revulsion”**

**Judith H. Anderson, Indiana University**

Many discussions of *Titus Andronicus* treat myths as “literalizations of metaphor,” meaning the physicalization, materialization, or else the *staged* embodiment of Ovidian myth, for which the word “literal” is a misleading choice. A *literal* meaning is one still in letters, or language. Distinctions between language and physical act—mind and matter, if you will—bear both on the aestheticizing and the sensationalizing of violence, specifically physical violence. The speech in *Titus* that has generally caused the strongest assertions about the disparity between poetic rhetoric, notably metaphorical symbolism, and the representation of brutal, physical violence and human suffering is the one Marcus utters when he unexpectedly sees Lavinia in the near distance. Besides rhetorical context and contrast, the *development* of understanding and feeling in Marcus’s lament is basic to its character and effect, as is the staged presence of his addressee. Marcus addresses Lavinia, at some times more than others including himself but always with awareness of her and her unutterable need. The keynote of his lament is *sympathy*. for—literally, his “feeling together with”—her (< Greek *sun* [syn], “together, with,” and *pathos*, “experience,” “passion of the soul,” “feeling”). Too readily or steadily seeing her as patriarchal object risks not making enough imaginative effort to infer and respond to *her* feelings and *her* point of view, as,

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through Marcus's words, the text implies and conveys them. Her horrifying figure is a challenge to sympathy and a call for it far more than an object of outrage.

**“Men's Anxious Boasting about Their Women”**

**David Bevington, University of Chicago**

The interest of this paper is particularly in the phenomenon of boastfulness that prompts men to challenge other men as potential rivals even when there is no serious case for such quarreling. It bespeaks a deep-seated anxiety in men that some imagined rival for the beloved woman will succeed because the woman's legal partner is insufficiently able to fulfill his presumed role as sexual male. Posthumus Leonatus in *Cymbeline* is a case in point. His boasting of Imogen's chastity provokes the villainous Iachimo into making an assault on her chastity; when that fails, he instead poisons the mind of Posthumus by his having secret knowledge of Imogen's bedchamber. Troilus, in *Troilus and Cressida*, boasts of Cressida's virtues, he arouses a competitive instinct in Diomedes to take possession of her at least partly as a way of putting Troilus in his place. Lucretia, in *The Rape of Lucrece*, is victimized by her husband Collatinus's boasting of her chastity in a way that stirs Tarquin to an attempt to ravish her, and, failing that, to insinuate to Collatinus that Tarquin possesses damning information about Lucrece. The conclusion seems compelling: as Shakespeare presents the matter, male boastfulness betrays an inner anxiety that leads too many men to fear the women to whom they should owe so much.

**“The taste of fear, the smell of mortality:  
Plumbing the lower senses in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear*”**

**Barbara Bono, SUNY at Buffalo**

Aristotle's Influential materialist treatise Περὶ Ψυχῆς (*De Anima*, or *On the Soul*, c. 350 B.C.) is a kind of biopsychology which layers the rational soul of human beings over the sensitive soul of animals and the vegetable soul of plants. Its arguments emerged with new urgency in the early modern period with the Lucretian/neo-Epicurean revival and the anxious questioning of the immortality of the soul. Shakespeare's tragedies, and especially his simultaneously-composed *Macbeth* and *Lear*, expose and plumb these lower souls in a stripping process which speaks powerfully to us in our post-human era. They call forth a characterization set against an electric environment largely unresponsive to human needs. My paper will invoke these lower depths, and based in part on my fall semester experience in the Folger Institute seminar in “What Acting Is,” discuss the subtext of nothingness and sensation in relation to the acting of the play.

**“Horrible Conceits:  
The Discomfort of Reading Shakespeare's Characters”**

**Nicholas R. Helms, The University of Alabama**

In my recent work on Shakespearean character and cognitive science, I have focused on how both contemporary and early modern theories of cognition struggle to represent neurodiverse

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states of mind. For our SAA seminar “Shakespearean Revulsions,” I will look at elements of horror and disgust in Shakespeare’s representations of neurodiversity, particularly at soliloquies of extreme melancholy. While characters such as Juliet, Hamlet, Claudio (*Measure for Measure*), and the Jailer’s Daughter frequently gain sympathy with readers through melancholic soliloquies and monologues, these speeches describe moments of horror and disgust that can also create antipathy in readers: Juliet’s fear of the corpse-filled Capulet tomb, “Environèd with all these hideous fears” (*Rom.* 4.3.51); Hamlet’s contemplation of the world as “an unweeded garden / That grows to seed,” (*Ham.* 1.2.139-40); Claudio’s anxiety over the grave, “To lie in cold obstruction and to rot” (*MM* 3.1.134), and the Jailer’s Daughter’s desire for death: “The best way is the next way to a grave” (*TNK* 3.2.33). How is it that readers willingly imagine and empathize with the perspectives of Shakespeare’s characters, even as those characters conjure up abhorrent images and emotions? While this fraught symbiosis of empathy and antipathy has long been a preoccupation of tragedy, my hope is that a careful examination of the cognitive mechanisms behind perspective-taking might better explain how readers navigate revulsion.

**“Anger, a ‘Poison of the Heart’ and a Complex Revulsion”**

**Bella Mirabella, New York University**

Anger is certainly one of the most reviled of the “Shakespearean Revulsions.” Condemned by the ancients, Medieval scholars, and Shakespeare’s contemporaries as a “poison of the heart,” anger is usually portrayed as an extreme, irrational emotion. Lacking decency and truth, anger can usually lead to danger and destruction. Angry women, more reviled than angry men, are attacked for being compulsive, and weak. Believed to be prone to extremes, women are disregarded when they get angry, belittled for easily getting excited and dismissed as an irritant and a nuisance.

But anger is a complicated revulsion, one that interacts with or is often paired with patience and impatience, two other impulses and actions that can instigate anger, mitigate against it or enhance it. In this paper, I will expand on earlier research and propose to explore how anger can be both repulsive as well as efficacious. I will examine the complexities of anger within its dark manifestations, as well as its interactions with patience and impatience through written documents and visual portrayals from the period with an eye to how Shakespeare manipulates these emotions to sometimes alienate us, encouraging us to turn from characters or to embrace them in unexpected ways. I want to consider the portrayals of angry women, such as Margaret, particularly in *Richard III*, and Emilia in *Othello*, as well as male characters such as Othello himself.

**Critical Revulsions:**  
**Character as Taboo, Vice and Fetish**

**Harry Newman, Royal Holloway, University of London**

The rise of “new character criticism” is a new chapter in a story of love and loathing in Shakespeare studies, and gives occasion to take stock of character’s long cultural and critical

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history. I want to ask what it means to return to a category which has been stigmatized by critical scepticism, antipathy or even “revulsion,” and how the perceived fetishism of the character critic, revelling in that which s/he should revile or disregard, might be related to the moralization and commoditization of “characters” in early modern England. This paper will attempt to dance between ideas about character in modernity and early modernity, and more specifically between the early twenty-first century, with its new wave of character-focused studies, and the early seventeenth century, when “character” was central to a new lexicon and a new commodity fetish in the English book trade. Critical histories of character tend to start with the Romantics, or—at the earliest—with Margaret Cavendish’s celebration of Shakespeare’s capacity to express “all sorts of Persons” in 1644. I want to suggest, however, that we can make more sense of our peculiar love-hate relationship with character in light of the much scorned Theophrastan character-sketch, popularized by the Thomas Overbury collection published in 1614 and rapidly reprinted and augmented thereafter. As a genre which engaged directly with what it meant to write, print, sell and read “characters,” and which impacted the development of drama, the character-sketch can tell us much about how the early modern canon and Shakespeare studies have been shaped by critical attractions to and revulsions from different kinds of character.

**“Praying to the Devil, or Not:  
 Shakespeare’s “Festive Devils”**

**Milla Cozart Riggio, Trinity College**

Law-disdaining wickedness, allied with charismatic wit, is attractive. Horror films allure; gangsters and maverick noir detectives captivate film audiences. Shakespeare too highlights the seductive charm of villainy, often allying it with the daemonic. Shakespeare’s witty “devils” seduce audiences as well as characters in plays like *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. However, while Aaron the Moor and Iago are cut from the same cloth, the latter an adaptation of the former, Shylock is a different character. Aaron tells Chiron and Demetrius, the sons of his Gothic mistress Tamora, to “pray to the devils”; Iago calls on “hell and night” to “bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light,” and prays directly to all the “devils of hell.” In contrast, Shylock the Jewish usurer, characterized by Christians in the play as a “devil,” lodges his “sacred” vows in heaven. Drawing from *Festive Devils of the Americas* (2015), this paper will analyze these three Shakespearean witty “devils.” By saying that the gods have given him over, Aaron the Moor foreshadows the resistance of festive devils to situations in which the gods of a master culture are not on their side. In *Othello*, Shakespeare has given the racial distinction to the Moorish general with a “perfect soul” rather than the villain. Iago nevertheless embodies attributes of a festive devil, calling on hell to help him overthrow the authority that he feels has belittled him within the military hierarchy of Venetian society. Both Aaron and Iago exult in their demonic plans to destroy others. In contrast, Shylock represents an alternative religious order, complicated by his need to do business with the Christians who have cursed and spat upon his “Jewish gabardine.” Though a “comic” villain, who would cut out the heart of a Christian, Shylock is not a devil, festive or otherwise. Aaron and Iago embrace their daemonic otherness, while Shylock feels himself to be and ultimately becomes the victim of cultural and religious oppression.

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**“The Opposite of White:  
Aesop, Alterity and learning to be silent in *King Lear*”**

**Charlotte Scott, Goldsmiths College London**

This paper seeks to investigate the function of Aesop’s fable in the production of character. Focusing specifically on *King Lear* I will consider how the fable supports the language of difference as well as transformation through a mobile network of empathy and revulsion, affiliation and separation in which both resistance and acceptance can be accommodated. Considering the complex ways in which the play presents toxic power relations, the cultures of enslavement, the precarious position of ‘nothing’ and the value of silence, I will examine the story of Apollo’s crow, the bird who becomes, by virtue of its loquaciousness, ‘the opposite of white’ and the regime of value through which both silence and protest take hold. Beginning with the ambiguous power of nothing as it resides in the figure of Aesop, who recommends himself to the slave market ‘as a modifier of wisdom’ (Patterson), I will consider the crow in both Chaucer’s and Lydgate’s retelling of the bird who learned ‘to kepe wel thy tonge’ and love its loss of liberty.

**“Laughter without Ambivalence:  
Comedy and Misogyny in *Othello*”**

**David Carroll Simon, University of Maryland, College Park**

This essay seeks to describe the relationship between laughter and erotophobia in *Othello*. It redirects attention away from the issue of deception itself—from those epistemological questions that have guided many of the most persuasive interpretations of the play—to the specific content of Iago’s deception: sexual propriety. In my view, the play is not only preoccupied with why and how Othello is deceived but also with the question of *how much it matters* whether the charge of infidelity is true or false. The gravity of the charge is just as important as the fact that it is fiction. Why does Othello believe he faces a choice between the perfect chastity of Desdemona and world-destroying “chaos”? How does Iago exploit the dead-seriousness with which Othello contemplates the question of fidelity? Looking to the history of misogyny and erotophobia and drawing on recent work in feminist theory, I discuss the strange alternation between gravity and levity that characterizes discussions of eros—and especially feminine sexuality—in the period. I develop a reading of Iago’s plot against Othello as a humorless practical joke that transforms the stage into a torture chamber—one that relies on the fear of eros in order to do its cruel work. I also show how the play raises the possibility of comic sexuality—of re-calibrating the gravity of sexual experience.

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**“A will most rank”:  
 Male Disgust with Female Desire in *Hamlet* and *Othello*”**

**Joel Elliot Slotkin, Towson University**

A lot of my previous work has engaged with the appeal of the horrific and disgusting. In this paper, I will discuss how *Othello* and *Hamlet* use revulsion to frame male anxieties about women desiring morally, socially, and/or aesthetically inappropriate objects. In *Othello*, Iago offers racist explanations of Desdemona’s desire for Othello as satisfying a perverted (and easily cloyed) taste for the exotic. Iago thereby helps Othello transfer his own latent self-disgust to Desdemona. What do these scenarios reveal about the relationship between desire and revulsion for the characters, or for audiences relating to those characters? How do the accounts of female desire tie together emotional responses and moral judgments? Finally, these examples also raise questions about the role of misogyny in explaining aesthetic perversity. Why does female desire specifically get figured as perverse? How are accounts of these perverse tastes affected by being ascribed to women, and what do they say about early modern representations of femininity and masculinity? Does the male characters’ obsession with female perversity reflect another sort of perversity that the plays are trying to expose?

**“Perverse Intimacy”**

**Whitney Sperrazza, University of Kansas**

In this paper I will argue that rape elicits intimacy in Shakespeare’s Rape of Lucrece. Tarquin’s rape of Lucrece creates a bond between the two characters, forged through the close contact of the violent sexual act and Tarquin’s subsequent knowledge of Lucrece’s body. Drawing on recent work on intimacy in both gender studies and queer theory, I will explore how Shakespeare’s poetic treatment of sexual violence works at the intersection of the violent erotics of rape and the intimacy that arises from shared experience. Through my close reading of the poem, the essay will map the contours of what I term perverse intimacy, a relationship built on the tension between invasive forms of bodily violence and the intimate knowledge of the female body that often emerges from such violence. Our seminar theme then prompts a series of questions about how to theorize perverse intimacy in relation to our reading experience: how are we as readers asked to engage with the perverse intimacy at the poem’s center? how does the poem position its readers in relation to the rape? how might perverse intimacy work simultaneously alongside and in conflict with a concept like empathy?

**“To blot old books and alter their contents”:  
 Rereading Revulsion (with)in *Lucrece*,”**

**Mary Helen Truglia, Indiana University**

As a narrative poem with extended complaints and as a minor epic, *The Rape of Lucrece* remains ambivalent - it is presented in a regressive lyric mode while simultaneously pushing toward a

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teleological epic conclusion. The ways in which time (as a concept, generic convention, and figure) figure into the poem help to reveal Shakespeare's (and Lucrece's) positionality to agency and wordplay. Time is used in its adjectival form early in the poem in reference to Tarquin: "some untimely thought did instigate/ His all too timeless speed" (l. 43-44), but comes to bear more pertinently in Shakespeare's shifts between modal and active verbs: Tarquin begins his "graceless disputation" with "if" and "might;" Lucrece's first speaking lines command: "reward not," "mud not," "mar not," "end thy ill aim" (l.575-79).

While a traditional mode of reading *Lucrece* would view Tarquin as the main (and perhaps sole) character to be detested for his abhorrent actions, this paper will explore Lucrece's own revulsions. As Amy Greenstadt posits, "ironically, in order to represent herself accurately she must learn to distrust her body as a source of representation" (55). Lucrece must instead utilize her voice/the text as her method of agential performance. Her revulsion towards Tarquin, towards the disbelieving Roman society who will only be convinced of her chastity by her death, and of herself (unable to fully separate her mind from her body) is complicated not only by the language she uses, but because of the mixed genres she speaks from/with.

**"Shifting Forms and Faces of the Expression of Revulsion"**

**Andrea F. Van Nort, USAF Academy**

Complexity of Shakespearean contexts, in tragedy as in his narrative poetry, impedes audience identification with any one character. Indeed, whereas comedy may more easily afford identifying at least superficially with any given character, tragedy thrusts forward the fallen human, one with whom any far-reaching affinity would be unwelcome. One approach to understanding Shakespeare's expressive density with regard to his tragic characters would involve studying their statements about one another. My paper will thus pursue one character's revulsion for another, considering the impact the expression of disgust has in shaping the audience's viewpoint. At times, these are vulnerable characters who are repulsed by the excesses of others; one also finds strong-willed or passionate characters who reflect at length upon their loathing for others. Or, finally, one may find certain characters given to violent perversions express loathing for characters they manipulate with ease. How do these complicating assertions of abhorrence alter the audience's understanding of the ethical paradigms at work in tragedy? While rendering the drama more realistic, as reflective of a complex world, do these expressions of aversion nonetheless prohibit an audience from gaining in proximity with the characters?