



Shakespeare the (Un)natural Shaper: Addressing, Transgressing, and Redressing the Natural-Cultural Balance

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The concept of ‘the natural’ was central to English Renaissance and primarily referred to what pertains to nature, to the intrinsic essence of things; ‘the natural’ was, however, also meant as what conformed to a culturally constructed norm, and was often codified in prescriptions of bodily, behavioural, and social paradigms designed to achieve human perfectibility and to preserve power hierarchies.

Shakespeare’s plays are strewn with transgressive, multi-layered representations of such prescriptive constructions of ‘the natural’, a transgression that often results in the destabilising emergence of bodies, behaviours, and situations deemed unnatural – i.e. monstrous in early modern culture. Monstrosity does not only relate to exotic creatures and atmospheric phenomena of the medieval teratological imagery. It also more broadly refers to hybrid, non-normative bodies and relations, problematic social and gender constructions, shifty paradigms of sovereignty, the superimposition of natural and supernatural, etc.

Given that the subversion of cultural norms has long been at the core of contemporary philosophical and critical debates on identity, alterity, and power struggles, it comes as no surprise that many instances of Shakespeare’s addressing, transgressing, and redressing ‘the natural’ should have prompted critical or creative re-readings of his plays that further enhance their subversive matter. Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets also cross the border between nature and culture and benefit from the transformative possibilities of liminal spaces, much in line with Latour’s and Haraway’s anti-essentialist critique.

This seminar seeks to investigate the representations of the ‘unnatural’ in Shakespeare, as well as in subsequent transhistorical and transcultural migrations, translations, rewritings, and adaptations of Shakespeare’s works, from the seventeenth century to the present day. We invite papers from different fields of study. Topics to be explored include, but are not restricted to, monstrosity; the non-normative body; representations of alterity and of the foreign; the supernatural, witchcraft and magic; disability and madness; subversive gender and power relations; unruly sexuality; epistemological metamorphoses.

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