Oceanic Shakespeares

Seminar Proposal for SAA 2012 in Boston

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This seminar builds on recent early modern scholarship about maritime expansion and oceanic encounters in order to assess how turning to the sea is changing our habits and practices as researchers, writers, and Shakespeareans. The past decade in early modern literary scholarship has seen a flood of interest in voyage narratives, global culture, and other expansionary themes. This work has productively connected with other scholarly trends including “Atlantic History,” environmental and ecological scholarship, Mediterranean studies, cultural geography, the “new thalassology,” and “oceanic studies,” which produced a recent essay cluster in *PMLA* (May 2010). This seminar will solicit papers that connect these oceanic movements to Shakespeare studies and also assess this salty new sub-field historically, methodologically, and theoretically. To be “oceanic” requires literary scholars to take seriously the vastness and omnipresence of salt water in our globe. The challenge of the ocean is always to expand, without losing oneself entirely. The sea has generated many of literary culture’s defining metaphors from Homer’s “wine-dark sea” through Freud’s “oceanic feeling” and beyond. In the early modern period, these metaphors confronted new physical experiences of the deep blue. This seminar investigates literary culture’s responses, and our own responses as critics.

An oceanic perspective should stretch familiar scholarly boundaries. To facilitate this methodological expansion, the seminar will bring in two specialists from cognate disciplines to serve as respondents and provocateurs to encourage the group to move through and beyond existing scholarly boundaries. To help expand early modern scholarship’s sense of history, the seminar will include as a respondent the medievalist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen of George Washington University, whose expert knowledge of medieval oceanic and archipelagic networks should help us avoid overly narrow understandings of “early modernity” as simply a historical sea change. To expand geographically and linguistically, the seminar will include as another respondent a specialist in early modern Portuguese literature, Josiah Blackmore of the University of Toronto. Professor Blackmore’s work on sixteenth-century Portuguese Africa (*Moorings*, 2008) and early modern shipwreck narratives (*Manifest Perdition*, 2002) provides global context for the half of the Anglo-Portuguese alliance that Shakespeareans often ignore. Both Professor Cohen and Professor Blackmore teach Shakespeare, though neither is a Shakespearean per se. Their responses to the seminar will, I hope, challenge us to expand our oceanic perspectives. I have contacted both respondents already, and they will join us in Boston in 2012.

Topics and Questions Anticipated:

* How do Shakespeare’s plays respond to the “transoceanic turn” of European culture after the fifteenth century?
* Many modern critics believe, following Derek Walcott, that “the sea is history.” How do Shakespeare and his contemporaries historicize the world’s oceans?
* Beyond Atlantic and Mediterranean: Much recent historical research in oceanic studies has focused either on the Atlantic, including historical work by Bernard Bailyn, Jack Greene, and others, or the Mediterranean, in the tradition of Braudel and more recently Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell’s *The Corrupting Sea* (2000). But early modern voyagers also sailed on other seas, including the Indian and Pacific Oceans. How do literary representations characterize different maritime spaces? Can oceans be meaningfully and historically distinguished from each other?
* If the voyages of Magellan and Drake are, as Peter Hulme has claimed, “founding acts of globalization,” how do early modern writers respond to this global vision? How do early modern representations of maritime travel figure this supposedly new era in world history? Do oceanic narratives contain a theory or representation of cultural change?
* How do early modern ocean-writers employ or change the maritime tropes of classical and medieval literature, including shipwreck, piracy, homecoming, and being cast away?
* How can literary studies connect with and benefit from the recent surge in oceanic histories, including “Atlantic History,” Mediterranean studies after Braudel, the “new thalassology,” and other forms of scholarship?
* How might the cognate fields of medieval studies and early modern Iberian literature influence our understandings of Shakespeare and English literary culture?
* Early modern oceans and sailing ships were multicultural zones of contact and conflict. How can oceanic contexts influence our understandings of multicultural exchange?
* Freud’s “oceanic feeling” has come to epitomize a kind of psychological depth that has a vexed history in Shakespeare studies. Can the ocean help us better understand changing ideas of early modern selfhood?

Seminar Leader: Steve Mentz is Associate Professor of English at St. John’s University in New York City. His recent work in early modern oceanic culture includes a book, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean* (London, 2009), a gallery exhibition at the Folger Shakespeare Library, “Lost at Sea: The Ocean in the Early Modern Imagination, 1550 -1750” (Summer 2010), and articles for the *Shakespeare International Yearbook* (2008) and *Literature Compass* (2009). He is also author of *Romance for Sale in Early Modern England* (2006), co-editor of *Rogues and Early Modern English Culture* (2004), and has written numerous other articles and chapters. A member of SAA since 1995, he has participated in over a dozen seminars, chaired one seminar (“Shipwreck, Piracy, and the Maritime Cultures of Early Modern England”; 2005 in Bermuda), and presented and organized a Paper session (“Shakespeare and Ecological Crisis”; 2008 in Dallas).