

October 21, 2008

Dear Sponsored Research committee members:

I am writing to apply for sponsored research funding in order to complete an important new collaborative project. Together with a colleague from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Jane Degenhardt, I am proposing to edit a collection of essays entitled *Religion and Drama in Early Modern England: Studies in the Materiality of Performance*. We began soliciting conference papers last winter and led a seminar on the topic at the Shakespeare Association of America meeting in March of 2008. The excellent discussion of key methodological problems at the seminar, along with our subsequent conversations with prospective publishers, have convinced us that the project is worth pursuing as a book.

This collection is explicitly interdisciplinary, bringing together the study of theatrical history with the latest research on popular religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the past, research on religious elements in early modern drama has been limited to discussions of Shakespeare's own personal beliefs, which are notoriously difficult to pin down. As a result, previous generations of scholars have argued that Shakespeare and other playwrights tended to avoid depicting religious subjects on the stage because they hoped to avoid controversy. We argue, on the contrary, that actors and playwrights had a variety of tools at their disposal for engaging with the most pressing religious debates of the day. Our approach acknowledges the impact of the Protestant Reformation, which fundamentally changed the way ordinary people practiced their religious beliefs. The Reformation coincided with the rise of international trade, and we are particularly interested in work that explores the effect on Christian culture of cross-cultural contact with Jews, Muslims, and pagans during the early stages of colonization. But we are also interested in how the theater, which still had much in common with Christian ritual practice, evoked the most personal aspects of religious faith. In order to cut across the artificial boundaries that have been drawn between plays that appear overtly secular, plays that deal explicitly with Christian theology, and plays that address cross-cultural contact, we plan to use the social function of the theater as our organizing principle.

The collection will likely begin with detailed case studies of individual performance conditions, featuring work by up and coming scholars with interdisciplinary backgrounds who examine the theater as a constellation of visual and aural effects. Their approach produces a much more nuanced picture of the theater's engagement with religious subjects than previous studies, which have focused primarily on the dialogue. Having laid this groundwork, later sections of the book will move on to discussions of individual plays, including but not limited to Shakespeare's, that undermine fixed ideological categories. Two of our senior contributors, Maurice Hunt and Michael O'Connell—both of whom have recently published major works on the study of religion and theater—will be discussing plays that promote a blending of religious faiths as a response to the intolerance of religious radicals on both sides of the Protestant/Catholic divide. With their help, we hope to demonstrate that the complexity of early modern religious ideology was actually mirrored in the dynamic conditions under which the plays were performed.

The idea for this collection comes at an opportune moment in my own professional development, as I will be spending this year working on early modern religious history and

the subsequent year teaching a core program with an emphasis on performance. Researching the book while planning my current program has already given me a better understanding of how to incorporate religious studies into my work as a teacher of literature. In 2006-7 I taught a program called "Tradition and Transformation" that attempted to analyze the so-called secularization of early modern England and the rise of colonialism. In future programs with a similar focus (which I hope to offer on a regular basis to upper division students), my work will be informed by the work of scholars such as Anthony Dawson, Professor Emeritus at the University of British Columbia. Dawson, who will be writing the coda for our book, argues convincingly that religious "habits of thought" continued to influence English culture (and especially English theater) despite the violence that had been done to religious institutions by the Protestant reformers. This concept will also allow me to talk to students about the unspoken "habits of thought" that govern our contemporary worldview, helping them resist the tendency to exaggerate the gap between "us" and "them." The project's emphasis on theatrical history will also provide a natural transition to my 2009-10 program, in which my work with Arun Chandra will add to the critical and experiential tools I use to teach students about performance. In terms of my work as a writer and teaching of writing, I expect that the process of editing essays by my colleagues from other institutions will significantly broaden my thinking about the revision process, as well as giving me new models for my own research.

At this point in time, my co-editor and I have accepted paper proposals from twelve of our colleagues—six junior scholars and six tenured professors who have recently published major critical studies. We have also received letters of interest from several presses. Our conversations with the editor at Ashgate, in particular, indicate that the project's focus on combining articles on cross-cultural contact with studies of early modern Christianity will give it a particularly compelling edge. Ashgate, one of the most aggressive distributors in our field, will be publishing my own book length study of stage properties, and is thus a good candidate for the volume, but we are also considering several university presses; we hope to have a contract by winter quarter. In the Spring of 2009, I will be released from teaching in order to carry out my duties as Planning Unit Coordinator. I expect to use this time to finalize the introduction while Jane finishes collecting essays from our authors. She and I have roughly divided the duties of editing the essays, and additional funding in the summer would allow me to complete this portion of the work before submitting the entire manuscript to our publisher.

For the sake of keeping up the momentum begun in the spring, I am asking for five weeks' worth of pay at the beginning of the summer, from approximately June 22 to July 24. Because this is the first summer session, and because I do not regularly teach courses that are prerequisites for other programs, this award will have no impact on the curriculum. On the contrary, I expect it to expand the range of interdisciplinary teaching techniques available to me in future programs, while significantly benefiting my scholarly work and professional connections.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration,

Elizabeth Williamson
williams@evergreen.edu

Religion and Drama in Early Modern England: Studies in the Materiality of Performance

Contributors and essay titles

Holly Pickett, Washington and Lee University

“The Idolatrous Ear?: Religious Experience and Theatrical Effects”

Andrea Stevens, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

“Entombment, Resurrection, and Blackface Disguise”

Jacqueline Wylde, University of Toronto

“Singing a New Song in *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*”

Erika Lin, George Mason University

“Popular Worship and Visual Paradigms on the Early Modern Stage”

Paul Whitfield White, Purdue University

“Plague, Pageantry and the Prayerbook: The 1592 Croydon Palace Staging of Nashe’s *Summer’s Last Will and Testament*”

John Cox, Hope College

“Religion and Suffering in *Macbeth*”

Susannah Monta, University of Notre Dame

“‘It is requir’d you do awake your faith’: Belief and Shakespeare’s Theatre”

Dennis Britton, University of New Hampshire

“Religious Conversion and Circumcision as Theater”

Musa Gurnis, Columbia University

“Martyr Acts: Playing with Foxe’s Martyrs on the Public Stage”

Maurice Hunt, Baylor University

“Syncretistic Religion in Shakespeare’s Late Romances”

Michael O’Connell, University of California Santa Barbara

“Christianity and Eirenicism in Early Modern Drama”

Anthony Dawson, University of British Columbia

Coda

Potential market

This collection’s commitment to a more expansive and sophisticated approach to both England’s religious culture and the theater’s transformation of religious content will be of

great interest to literary scholars, as well as scholars of early modern religion, drama, theater history, and cultural studies. The book is unique in its attention to how the specific theatrical conventions and material practices of the early modern stage shaped its representation of religion. It is also unique in its thematic organization, which illuminates shared concerns and innovations between plays by Shakespeare and other playwrights of the period. Scholars of early modern literature have for the most part moved beyond debates over Shakespeare's personal religious allegiances, but have continued to limit their study to his plays. Taking a cue from Jean Howard, who argues for a historically-minded approach to dramatic genres, but also from theater historians such as Alan Dessen who have continued to expand and complicate our view of early modern stage productions, this collection allows for a more comprehensive set of answers to the question of how the theater responded to shifts in early modern religious culture. The intersection of religion and drama is a topic of ongoing and growing interest, and we anticipate that the book will be useful to several groups of scholars—including those working in the fields of early modern literature, religion, theatrical history, and cultural studies—as well as to graduate students training in these areas.

The intersection of religion and drama has been an ongoing interest of Renaissance literary scholars for many decades, but such interest has been particularly intense since the 1990s and again in the past couple years, as evidenced by the numbers of publications and conference panels on the topic. Most recently, Philip Collinson and Kenneth Graham's (ed.) *Shakespeare and Religious Change* (forthcoming, Palgrave Macmillan) addresses the relationship between Shakespearean drama and post-Reformation religious culture. Our proposed collection shares this volume's interest in parsing out the complexities of early modern England's changing religious culture and rethinking the relationship between sacred and secular, but it provides a more focused examination of how the specific conventions and material properties of the theater were used to explore questions of faith. Moreover, in privileging the theatrical medium rather than an authorial approach, our collection offers a broader examination of dramatic practice that encompasses but also extends beyond the Shakespearean canon.

Religious topics have been a regular feature of panels at major conferences. The Shakespeare Association of America, for instance, featured three seminars on religion and drama at its 2008 conference, including the one that inspired this collection. In addition, works such as Jean Christophe-Mayer's *Shakespeare's Hybrid Faith* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), Julia Reinhard Lupton's *Citizen Saints* (Chicago, 2005), Debora Shuger's *Political Theologies in Shakespeare's England* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), and the edited collection *Spiritual Shakespeares* (Routledge, 2005) indicate a continuing interest in the topic that was reinvigorated by the work of historicist scholars in the late 1990s. Seminal studies of religion and drama in this vein include Huston Diehl's *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage* (Cornell, 1997), Michael O'Connell's *The Idolatrous Eye* (Oxford, 2000), Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, 2001), and Jeffrey Knapp's *Shakespeare's Tribe* (Chicago, 2002). In *Shakespeare's Religious Allusiveness* (Ashgate, 2004), Maurice Hunt rejects the notion that one overarching hypothesis can explain the theater's interest in Reformation-era theology, arguing that each of Shakespeare's plays negotiates a slightly different position vis a vis the confessional divide. In this collection, Hunt and other contributors likewise stress the importance of examining post-Reformation religion as a series of ongoing negotiations, while emphasizing generic and material continuities within the drama that helped to structure its approach to questions of religious faith and identity.

SUPPORT LETTER FOR ELIZABETH WILLIAMSON

October 24, 2008

Mr. John McLain, Academic Grants Manager
The Provost's Office
The Evergreen State College
2700 Evergreen Parkway N.W.
Olympia, WA 98505

Dear Mr. McLain:

I am writing in support of Elizabeth Williamson's application for a research award in the form of a paid leave for five weeks in the summer of 2009. Elizabeth and I are collaborating on an edited collection of essays that is currently titled, *Religion and Drama in Early Modern England*. Over the past six months, we have assembled a strong and diverse group of contributors for this volume and have received enthusiastic interest from several publishers who indicate that our project meets a substantial need in the field and would be a desirable addition to their publishing lists. Recent panels at national conferences and emerging books and articles reveal a significant interest in our topic--the intersections of religion and drama--among scholars in the field of Renaissance literary studies. We would like to capitalize upon this current interest by completing our volume during the summer of 2009. Accordingly, we have set up a timeline for our contributors (and have proposed this same timeline to potential publishers) that requires their completed essays by Spring of 2009. We plan to spend several months over the Spring and Summer of 2009 editing these essays and finalizing our introduction to the volume, in order to submit to a publisher the complete version of the manuscript by August of 2009. Elizabeth is requesting five weeks of paid leave time over the summer in order to make this work possible. This leave will not impact the curriculum, and will enable us to maintain the momentum on our project and meet our proposed deadline before the start of fall classes.

The merits of our collaborative project include its unique contribution to a current scholarly debate, its interdisciplinary approach, and its influence in informing and revitalizing the kinds of courses that Elizabeth and I can offer to our undergraduate students. In focusing on the materiality of early modern theatrical performance (props, costumes, performance spaces, visual and auditory effects, actors' bodies, etc.), our book offers fresh insights into questions of how religious subjects were represented on the stage. We argue that by taking account of the complex effects of the stage's own material conventions, we open up a new understanding of how the stage evoked and transformed the meaning of religious content. Such a consideration is especially warranted by the particular characteristics of post-Reformation English religious culture, which itself involved controversies centering about the significance and value of material objects, performative ceremonies, and theatrical miracles. Our book's interdisciplinary approach targets readers in the fields of Renaissance literary studies, drama and performance, and religious history.

The merits of our project have been further indicated to us through a highly successful seminar that we conducted for Renaissance scholars at the 2008 Shakespeare Association of America meeting, an

annual conference that draws leading scholars in the field from around the country and abroad. Oriented around the topic of religion and drama, our seminar drew a wonderful range of participants and produced a lively discussion as well as a promising set of preliminary essays. Based on this seminar, we carefully selected the three strongest essays and solicited nine others from scholars outside the seminar in order to comprise the contents for our collection. The success of our seminar in turn drew interest from several publishers who requested a book proposal. We are currently in the process of putting together representative drafts of the essays as well as a 25-page introduction that we are co-writing, so as to be able to negotiate a book contract. Thus far, the responses to our initial proposal have been promising. Erika Gaffney, the editor for Early Modern Studies at Ashgate Press, sent us the following response:

“This project strikes me as interesting, original and important. I haven't seen any other books or book proposals which consider the issue of religion in the context of the material conditions of playing; and it adds to the appeal of the collection that "religion" includes Islam and other religions as well as Catholicism and Protestantism. I also find appealing the focus on early modern dramatists who are not Shakespeare, and the addition of auditory, visual, and olfactory effects to other perhaps more conventional considerations in theater studies. So I would be truly delighted to get to work further with you on this project!”

We are encouraged by this response, and are hoping for support from our institutions in order to bring this project to completion. Elizabeth's qualifications as an individual who can successfully execute this project are very evident. First, her exceptional publication record, including articles in peer-reviewed national journals as well as a book contract recently signed for her own monograph with Ashgate, offer clear evidence of her scholarly abilities. Second her dedication to undergraduate education and her ability to integrate her research and teaching in mutually-enhancing ways is exemplified through the diverse range of collaborative courses she has taught since coming to Evergreen four years ago, as well as her valuable administrative service to the college. Third, Elizabeth's high level of professional competence has been demonstrated to me many times over the past ten years that I have known her. In fact, her professionalism, her commitment to teaching and research, and her immense scholarly generosity may be attested to by anyone who has worked with her, including senior faculty, junior faculty, and students alike.

Sincerely,

Jane Hwang Degenhardt
Assistant Professor of English
University of Massachusetts-Amherst
janed@english.umass.edu

October 19, 2008

Office of Sponsored Research
The Evergreen State College
2700 Evergreen Parkway, N.W.
Olympia, Washington 98505

Dear Colleagues:

I am writing enthusiastically to recommend Elizabeth Williamson for a Research Award for five weeks in June and July of 2009 in order to finish the work of editing an important collection of essays entitled *Religion and Drama in Early Modern England: Studies in the Materiality of Performance*. This is an extremely important and timely project, and it will receive a great deal of scholarly attention when published. I have read the introduction to the volume and several of the contributors' essays, and I am convinced that it is going to be a first-rate book of significant importance.

I have known Ms. Williamson since I taught her in an independent study when I was a Visiting Professor at the University of Pennsylvania in 2002. She wanted to read Renaissance plays containing devotional objects such as crucifixes, tombs, altars, and relics in order to think about the kinds of responses devotional objects connected to Catholic worship would have generated on the early modern stage: the extent, for example, to which they might have evoked aspects of religious controversy or called forth emotions connected with suppressed, but persistent structures of religious practice and affect. In order to have a cultural and dramatic context for approaching these plays, we also read religious history dealing with the Reformation and its aftermath, and work on iconoclasm, attacks on stage idolatry, and the use of objects in the Renaissance theater, including the dual status of those objects as commodities and also as bearers of affective and symbolic meanings.

I have seldom had more fun in an independent reading course. Ms. Williamson was not only an imaginative and rigorous reader of plays, but—what especially delighted me—she loved to think about how plays work on stage and was enthusiastic about reading endlessly in the less-frequented parts of the Renaissance dramatic canon. The interests Ms. Williamson pursued in that course shaped both her excellent dissertation project and the collection of essays she is now editing. The dissertation, *Staging Sacred Things*, investigated the way in which objects from an older religious practice could continue to provoke powerful responses even in a site as secularized as that of the public theater. She wrote first-rate chapters on plays that stage crucifixes, altars, tombs, and religious books. It was a brilliant dissertation, and it is soon to be an equally brilliant book: smart, lively, and original.

Religion and Drama in Early Modern England: Studies in the Materiality of Performance moves beyond Williamson's own particular interest in religious objects that appear on the early modern stage to talk more broadly about the particular way in which the theater participated in the circulation and the transformation of early modern religious thought. Taking down the barriers that separate theater history and religious history in this period, the book aims to look at how the materiality of performance affected the ways religion was figured on the stage. I am convinced that she and her co-editor, Jane Degenhardt, are right when they argue that early modern religious experience was more varied and more paradoxical than present scholars often recognize, and the performance aspects of theater could conjure up various forms of religious ritual and religious practice in unpredictable and complex ways. The scholars they have assembled as contributors to this project are a distinguished lot and include notable critics such as Michael O'Connell, Maurice Hunt, John Cox, Paul White, and Susannah Monta, as well as a group of lively younger scholars such as Musa Gurnis and Erica Lin. It is a fabulous line-up, and I have no doubt the resulting book will be a distinguished contribution to contemporary scholarship.

Putting collections such as this together requires a huge amount of work. It is impressive that Williamson and Degenhardt have already gotten as far as they have. Essays are pledged, and in most cases, drafts are in hand. But there will be an enormous amount of work required next spring and summer to edit the final essays, finalize an introduction, and deliver a coherent collection to the press. It is therefore extremely important that Professor Williamson receive a Research Award that will allow her to work on this project during the first summer session.

I recommend her for such a Research Award with the greatest enthusiasm. It will surely have a major impact on her future teaching and on her national scholarly standing.

Sincerely,

Jean E. Howard
George Delacorte Professor in the Humanities and
Chair of English, Columbia University