Letter From the Director
Professor Michelle M. Dowd

It has now been a year since I became Director of the Hudson Strode Program in Renaissance Studies at The University of Alabama, and what an exciting year it has been! During the 2016-2017 academic year, our program hosted a wide range of scholarly and community events, continuing its longstanding mission to “bring the Globe to Alabama.”

One of the highlights of the year was the February visit of the highly acclaimed American Shakespeare Center’s touring company. Through events such as this one, the Strode Program seeks to provide opportunities for students, faculty, and community members from around the West Alabama region to share and develop their mutual interests in Shakespeare and his world.

I invite you to read more about the ASC tour and other Strode-sponsored events in the pages that follow (and look out for a second newsletter installment, which will be published in winter 2018!).

In the meantime, please follow us on social media to keep up with all the latest Strode Program events!

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Southeastern Milton Seminar
By Laura DeFurio

Once a year, scholars of the poet and polemicist, John Milton, and interested students travel from colleges and universities near and around the University of Alabama to attend the Southeastern Milton Seminar. The seminar, founded in 2009 by English department professor, David Ainsworth, and sponsored by the Strode Program in Renaissance Studies, has welcomed a number of internationally recognized Milton scholars including William Shullenberger, Paul Stevens, David Lowenstein, and most recently Laura Knoppers to present their work and to lead a collaborative discussion with seminar attendants surrounding their current research.

A companion to the Northeast Milton seminar, the Canada Milton Seminar, and the Milton seminar hosted by the Newberry Library, the Southeastern Milton seminar is the only annual gathering of its kind in the region. The seminar typically welcomes forty or more attendants, many of whom travel out of state to spend the weekend exchanging ideas about their own work as well as engaging with the work of the visiting scholar. The first day of the seminar follows a common presentation structure, where the scholar delivers a keynote followed by a question and answer period. This past year, Professor Knoppers (Professor of English at University of Notre Dame and editor of the journal, Milton Studies) presented a paper entitled, “Golden Bands and Gaudy Slaughter: Milton’s Samson Agonistes, Dryden’s All for Love, and the Politics of Luxury,” that explored the political instrumentality of luxury goods as depicted in Restoration poetry and in drama. Much in the mode of her monographs, Constructing Cromwell: Ceremony, Portrait, and Print (Cambridge UP, 2000) and Politicizing

Laura Knoppers giving her lecture on the politics of luxury.
Domesticity from Henrietta Maria to Milton’s Eve (Cambridge UP, 2011), in this talk Professor Knoppers prompted her audience to consider the intersections of visual art and literary production, displaying stunning portraits of the mistresses of Charles II and the opulent interiors of European estate houses alongside poetic and dramatic text.

On the second day of the seminar, the visiting scholar leads a seminar on an article or book chapter that is ‘in-progress.’ The reading is precirculated so that seminar participants come prepared with detailed queries, robust interventions, and research leads to enrich and enliven conversation. Professor Knoppers began by describing the origin of the project and plans for its development. She then led a discussion of her paper, “Death’s Grin, or Monstrous Satisfaction in Paradise Lost and Frankenstein,” that considered the disconcerting smile of Dr. Frankenstein’s newly-animated Creature, reading Mary Shelley’s multivocal monstrosity as a critique of Milton’s Satan and his broader theodicy. The cooperative nature of the seminar structure allows participants at different stages in their careers to engage with one another using a common text. The ensuing discussion not only affords the presenter with feedback, but also provides an opportunity for emerging scholars to reflect on their own research. Geoffrey Emerson, a PhD candidate in the Strode program, observed of the seminar: “I learned a great deal over the weekend, both about developing scholarship and how to approach issues of authority in my own work on Milton and early modern science.”

Faculty and graduate students also had the opportunity to socialize with one another over dinners and lunches at restaurants around Tuscaloosa. At the graduate student lunch, Professor Knoppers generously offered advice to students about preparing for the job market as well as successful strategies to turn student writing into journal articles. The success of the Southwest Milton seminar – its reputation for warmth and collegiality – make the University of Alabama at Birmingham, Huntsville, and Tuscaloosa the ideal hosts for the newly relocated Conference on John Milton (formerly of Middle Tennessee State University), which met for the first time in Birmingham in October 2017.
Shakespeare and Performance Practicum
By Courtney Parker

Last fall, amidst the hustle and bustle of registering for spring classes, the consensus among our cohort was that the Shakespeare in Performance Practicum, a required course for Strode MA and PhD students, was sure to be an interesting experience. Not knowing much about the class beyond the title and that it would be co-led by English and Theater professors Michelle Dowd and Steve Burch, we signed up expecting an adventure in performing Shakespeare’s works. The class was certainly an adventure, but we were not doing the performing. The seminar focused on analysis of performance in concert with textual interpretation and was designed around local and regional productions of Shakespeare’s plays that we read and saw together.

In the classroom, discussion of the plays largely revolved around the productions we saw and the differences in how we might interpret a playtext as scholars, directors, and actors. Because our conversations were mostly based on actual performances, script cutting became a major topic of discussion. When working with playtexts like Shakespeare’s, directors face the challenge of deciding which parts to include or not include in their productions, and since those texts can be quite lengthy, cuts are necessary to accommodate modern audiences’ needs and expectations. We had some firsthand experience with this (unexpectedly difficult) process. In addition to individual final projects, the class undertook a semester-long project of cutting As You Like It for a local theater company’s summer production directed by Professor Burch. In small groups, we worked with large scenes, attempting to wrestle them down to a length that could still convey the meaning and spirit of the whole without some of the extra weight of extraneous plotlines, characters, or speeches. As a class we agreed on several major cuts, but everyone approached their cuts differently, and we debated about whether the play is really still the play without the famous “Seven Ages of Man” speech (the consensus seemed to be “not really, but maybe” and the jury is still out on this particular matter).
Outside of the classroom, we observed the effects of those kinds of cutting decisions and the myriad other acting and technical details that make each theatrical production unique. A highlight of the semester for our class, and for the greater Tuscaloosa community, was the American Shakespeare Center’s touring company performing *Romeo and Juliet* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* at the Bama Theater in February. The ASC is based in Staunton, Virginia, and performs the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries with original Renaissance staging conventions, making it an experience about as close as we can get to what early modern audiences would have enjoyed. They have a regular repertory season at the Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton, which is a replica of Shakespeare’s original indoor theater space, and their touring company takes several shows to locations all over the United States. In addition to the stellar performances, the touring group also offers interactive workshops geared toward deepening participants’ understanding of the texts themselves. As part of their tour to Tuscaloosa, the ASC provided two workshops for Strode students and faculty: one on Shakespeare’s embedded stage directions and one on textual variants of *Romeo and Juliet*. The practicum course itself did not cover acting, but we got a little taste of the work actors do with Shakespeare scripts in the workshops onstage at the Bama.

Bringing the ASC to Tuscaloosa was big job, and it definitely paid off. Strode PhD student and program assistant Geoffrey Emerson played a major role in organizing the event, which included coordinating between the ASC, the Bama Theater, and the Humane Society of West Alabama, all of whom, he says, were “an absolute pleasure” to work with. This ASC tour cooperated with local shelters in most locations to feature dogs available for adoption, the Humane Society graciously allowed one of their rescues, Brittany, to star as Crab in *Two Gentlemen*. Geoffrey added that “meeting Brittany...was a particularly rewarding experience.”

Other memorable performances of the semester included the UA Opera’s production of Otto Nicolai’s *Merry Wives of Windsor*, a lyric opera adaptation of Shakespeare’s play entirely in German, and the Atlanta Shakespeare Company’s *Much Ado About Nothing* at the Shakespeare Tavern. Both provided some great conversation about adaptation and what we value when it comes to the elements that make Shakespeare recognizably “Shakespeare.” Adaptation was a theme that cropped up again in several students’ final projects for the course. In addition to exciting research essays on topics ranging from linguistic nationalism in *Merry Wives* to the ubiquitous use of the “dead girl” trope in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado*, some students opted to undertake creative projects. A short dramatic adaption of *Merry Wives* featured radio transmissions and messages in bottles, adding a little gravity to the mixed-up message comedy of Shakespeare’s original. A reworked version of Machiavelli’s *The Mandrake* provided a new look at the original text by exploring the imagined aftermath of the play’s action. Finally, a collaborative effort produced an adaptation of *Titus Andronicus* that explores the play’s complex gender and power dynamics by reimagining the title character as a woman.

Though it was not quite what we initially imagined it would be, the collaboration between the Strode program and the UA theater department helped make this seminar a unique experience.
On December 2, 2016 the Hudson Strode Program in Renaissance Studies held an in-house graduate student conference to close out the fall semester. During the conference, eleven students presented their research on a variety of aspects of Renaissance culture. Following these presentations, the members of the Strode faculty each gave a brief talk describing his or her current research.

The day’s first session, chaired by the director of the Strode Program, Michelle Dowd, brought together two well-researched presentations on subjects somewhat removed from the Program’s typical focus on English Renaissance literary culture. Dan Holtsberry, an M.A. student in history, provided a fascinating look at the usefulness of heavy cavalry armor during an age of increasing firearm use in sixteenth-century France, while Jess Hamlet, a PhD student in the Strode Program, discussed performances of Shakespeare’s plays, especially those concerned with tyrannical rule, in Civil War Richmond, Virginia.

With the second session, chaired by Strode instructor Chris Koester, the conference began its focus on English Renaissance literature. Geoffrey Emerson, a PhD candidate in the Strode Program, discussed the ways author Francis Godwin reconsiders morality in light of the new sciences of seventeenth-century Europe in The Man in the Moone, an early work of science-fiction. Matt Smith, a PhD student in the Strode Program, examined the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—and Adam and Eve’s experience of the tree—in John Milton’s great epic, Paradise Lost.

The third session, chaired by Strode instructor Russell McConnell, focused on The Changeling, a melodramatic tragedy co-written by Thomas Middleton and William Rowley. M. K. Foster, a PhD student in the Strode Program, delivered a polished presentation on the uses of Alsemero’s closet, the private room in which Alsemero, one of the play’s protagonists, analyzes and catalogues the human body, and where Beatrice, his fiancé, attempts to find a cure for her pregnancy, a result of her infidelity. Erin Hildebrand, an M.A. student in the Strode Program, returned to Alsemero’s closet and the moment in which Alsemero forces Beatrice and her lover, Flores, inside, and seemingly encourages sexual violence, a major concern of the play. Courtney Parker, a PhD student in the Strode Program, paired The Changeling with the anonymous play Arden of Faversham, to discuss the nature, and especially the location, of occult phenomena: where, she asked, does the occult take place during a play?

The final session of the day, chaired by Strode instructor Nicholas Helms, concentrated on questions of literary influence. Shannon Dullard, a PhD student in English literature, spoke about the Biblical resonances of George Herbert’s poem “Decay,” while William Roudabush, an M.A. student in the Strode Program (now graduated), talked persuasively about Milton’s attempts to outdo his poetic predecessors through his manipulation of the words of Virgil, Augustine, and Dante. Haden Bell, an M.A. student in English literature (also graduated), drew on her master’s thesis to give a witty talk in which she adapted C. S. Lewis’s approach to literature in order to elucidate how Edmund Spenser constructed Englishness through the use of Arthurian legend in his great allegorical romance, The Faerie Queene. Jordan Green, the day’s sole undergraduate presenter, wrapped up the student presentations by arguing that Christopher Marlowe satirized humanism in his famous play Doctor Faustus.

After the student session, the Strode faculty presented their research. Michelle Dowd, David Ainsworth, Alexandra Cook, Cassander Smith,
Tricia McElroy, and Emma Wilson each gave a very brief talk about their current projects, which was a treat for the students, who rarely get to hear about their professors’ scholarly work-in-progress.

It was an enjoyable conference, thanks to the labors of Emma Wilson, Michelle Dowd and the Strode Instructors Committee, and the Program plans to continue the event in future years.

**Strode Shakespeare Film Series**
By Tyler Sasser

The 2016-2017 academic year marked the 3rd anniversary of the Shakespeare Film Series, started in 2014 by then Strode Ph.D. student, Dr. Nicholas Helms. Each May, a group of Shakespearean cinephiles (English faculty, Theatre faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students) put together a list of eight films to be screened throughout the academic school year. This year our selections included Burton’s *Hamlet* (1964), Whedon’s *Much Ado about Nothing* (2012), Welles’s *Chimes at Midnight* (1967), Kurosawa’s *Ran* (1985), Branagh’s *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), Sidney’s *Kiss Me, Kate* (1953), Xiaogang’s *Legend of the Black Scorpion*, and Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1985).

Our primary goal is to use movies to increase local enthusiasm for Shakespeare. Therefore, our film series is always free and open to the public, and it works in cooperation with several of our other community-based events, such as our staged-reading series *Improbable Fictions* and the Shakespeare in the park series performed by Rude Mechanicals. We continue our attempt to balance movies that aesthetically and/or culturally challenge our audience (such as *Legend of the Black Scorpion*, a loose Kung Fu version of *Hamlet* told from Gertrude’s point-of-view) with more conventional, crowd-pleasing movies (such as Joss Whedon’s contemporary adaptation of *Much Ado about Nothing*).

We not only celebrate Shakespeare on film, but we also are delighted to bring big name directors to the screen, since so doing brings in a different sort of audience. This year, for instance, we screened films by Orson Welles as well as Akira Kurosawa. Likewise, although our primary audience is Strode graduate students and Alabama undergraduate students, we also consider the larger local community when we select the films for the series. This year *Hamlet* and *Kiss Me, Kate* were effective in helping us to branch out to communities in Tuscaloosa young and old.

We also ramped-up our social media presence this year by monthly advertising our events on Facebook and Twitter. With over 100 people in the audience, our best attended screening was *Chimes at Midnight*. We continue to be grateful to the Bama Theatre and the Tuscaloosa Arts Council for hosting our series. Our undergraduate students frequently comment on how much they enjoy this venue, and it’s common to hear them sharing their positive experiences with classmates. It’s almost always the first time they have been in a movie theatre other than a centerplex, and we look forward to continuing to use the Bama for future screenings.
Members of the Strode Community

Tenured and Tenure-Track Faculty
David Ainsworth (PhD, University of Wisconsin-Madison)
Alex Cook (PhD, University of California, Santa Barbara)
Michelle M. Dowd (PhD, Columbia University)
Tricia McElroy (PhD, University of Oxford)
Emma Wilson (PhD, University of St. Andrews)
Brad Tuggle (PhD, University of Virginia)

Associated Full-time Faculty
Emily Fine (PhD, Brandies University)
Nic Helms (PhD, The University of Alabama)
Chris Koester (PhD, Indiana University)
Natalie Loper (PhD, The University of Alabama)
Russ McConnell (PhD, University of Western Ontario)
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Cordelia Ross (PhD, University of California, Davis)
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