

# B.U. English • Annual Newsletter

Winter 2015

Boston University Department of English

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## Letter from the Chair

Maurice Lee

Dear Friends,

Greetings from the B.U. English department. Around campus the autumnal colors are blazing and recall some words that Henry David Thoreau wrote 150 years ago. He described the height of fall as "evidence of our ripeness," and urged, "Let your walks now be a little more adventurous; ascend the hills." As this newsletter suggests, students and faculty in the English department have been pursuing all sorts of adventures—from original scholarship to classes that explore the rich history of Boston to the work of a recent undergraduate teaching English in Comoros, Africa. The English department continues to live up to its legacy by fostering the knowledge, wisdom, skills, creativity, and pleasure that the study of literature brings. We hope that your experiences in the English department at B.U. have guided your own life adventures and helped you ascend your own hills. And we hope that you'll stay in touch through our website ([bu.edu/English](http://bu.edu/English)) and new Facebook page ([facebook.com/bostonuniversityenglish/](https://facebook.com/bostonuniversityenglish/)).

Best wishes,

Maurice Lee

Chair and Professor of English



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<http://www.bu.edu/english/alumni/make-a-gift/>

## NOTES FROM COMOROS: ALUM SAM MALONEY ON HER WORK WITH THE PEACE CORPS

Sam Maloney has stayed true to the passion and generosity she showed during her time at B.U. After graduating with a B.A. in English last May, she moved to Comoros and joined the Peace Corps as a Secondary English Education Volunteer. She currently teaches language classes at a government-sponsored high school in Patsy, a village on the island of Anjouan, and runs a bi-weekly club where high school students can practice communicating in English.

Sam had her sights set on the Peace Corps for some time—in fact, before even coming to B.U. "I'd been researching Peace Corps since I was a junior in high school. I've always been interested in both travel and non-profit work, and Peace Corps is sort of the perfect way to combine both ideas. The summer before my senior year, I volunteered at an English for Speakers of Other Languages center in Chelsea, MA, and loved how constantly inspired I was by my students and their constant enthusiasm, so when I looked into the Peace Corps Education program, it seemed like a perfect fit."

Though she has long been interested in non-profit work, she notes that studying literature in college did deepen her longing for adventure. "You spend years reading about all these amazing places, so it's hard not to end up wanting to go see the world for yourself as well." At Professor John Paul Riquelme's suggestion, Sam took Samuel Beckett's *Three Novels* with her to Comoros. "Beckett is the type of author that you could spend your entire life reading, and

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**BOSTON  
UNIVERSITY**

### THREE QUESTIONS FOR BONNIE COSTELLO



*Could you tell us about your upcoming book?*

My manuscript, which is still a work in progress, is called *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others*, and it is about the use of the first person plural in poetry, especially modern poetry. It is interested in the first person plural in all its different manifestations. The book begins with the royal “we,” and it ends with the universalizing “we.” There are chapters that explore the “us” vs. “them” dynamic in literature; there’s a chapter that explores love poetry and the intimate “we”; there’s a chapter that deals with crowds and groups, and the dissolving of the individual into the group. So as you can see, it’s kind of a typology of the first person plural, with W.H. Auden as the case study.

*How do you see yourself as a critic?*

If I had it all to do over again, I would write from the beginning much more for a broad audience. When I started out as a literary scholar, it was the heavy days of post-structuralism, and literary criticism had turned inwards in many ways, and become very abstract and systematized. Now we’re in an era where I think literary criticism is turning outward again, and the boundaries between journalism and literary criticism aren’t as strict as they were at that time. I think this is mostly a good thing. I would wish it upon any future scholar-critic. On the other hand, I bemoan the loss of focus on scholarship. It’s still there, but if we don’t keep a place for very serious literary scholarship, we’re going to regret it. I think I seek a balance between a rigorous literary scholarship that knows the critical conversation and knows deeply the background and conventions of the writers, and also tries to make literature matter for those who aren’t already assuming or compelled to assume it matters.

*Which poets do you find yourself returning to?*

Wallace Stevens, always. Because I feel he’s the real thing; he writes poems because he must write poems, and because imagination is so deeply involved in him with what it means to be alive, a conscious agent in the world. I think we can learn about the purpose of the arts and the humanities from reading Stevens—not just to reflect our own reality, but to help us imagine more amenable realities and to make reality connect to us as subjects; people with feelings and thoughts and ideas. There are other, earlier poets I love: George Herbert, Ben Jonson, poets of the seventeenth century are very important to me, also.

### READING THE CITY: W.H. HOWELL’S EN128 “REPRESENTING BOSTON”

One of the most popular English courses at B.U., W.H. Howell’s “Representing Boston,” is on its fifth year now. It has attracted students from a variety of fields, including history, mathematics and political science. “I wanted it to be general interest,” says Professor Howell, “open not just to English majors or fellow travelers, but people who simply had an interest, and a desire to get out there and learn more about the city.”

The appeal of this course no doubt lies in its innovative approach to the teaching of literature, both in and out of the classroom. A session on the African American poet Phillis Wheatley begins with a discussion of the frontispiece to her 1773 book: a portrait of the poet at her desk, quill in hand, gazing steadily into the distance. One student mentions the emphasis on Wheatley’s independence as the author of her own words; another points to the radical effect this image must have had on its original audience, as a statement of racial equality in a period hostile to such ideas.

Professor Howell’s course is full of such moments, in which literary texts are discussed alongside other kinds of works, from illustrations to sermons and pamphlets, with particular attention to the physical books themselves. “I’m interested in getting the students to think historically, to analyze what we might think of as historical materials in literary ways.”

Beyond the classroom, there are field trips to the Museum of Fine Arts and Fenway Park, and a special tour of the Freedom Trail, during which a



interpreter (this year, John Singleton Copley—pictured above) leads the group through the city’s historic district. Students are then asked to record and analyze their impressions in the form of personal diaries. As Professor Howell puts it, “They act like anthropologists or sociologists for their own lives. The wager there is that this kind of exercise will make them think more systematically about the grand cultural forces that inform their own experiences—that’s a happy thing.”

Olivia Wiles, a junior who took the course last year, recalls the final assignment with enthusiasm: “We had to research a historical Boston event or figure that was not on the syllabus, and argue why that topic should be included in future syllabi for the course. It was a practical assignment that allowed us to contribute to the future of the course. It was a great feeling knowing that our academic opinion was being taken seriously; plus it was really fun presenting new information to the class.”

*Alumni Profile (continued)*

with each reread, you're going to find something new. It's sort of been my life-vest on those difficult days, when I'm asking myself if I made the right decision coming here. As odd as it sounds, reading Beckett has helped me remain sane."

Sam's work in Comoros is far from over. In early November, she joined Espace Jeunesse, where she teaches English language classes for adults; and next year, she will be joining a local environmental organization to address such problems as litter and deforestation. Once her contract with the Peace Corps runs out, she hopes to return to the United States and pursue a Ph.D. in English, with a focus on drama and gender politics. But her sense of adventure leaves all possibilities open. "I still have two years left here, so who knows how many times I'll change my mind between now and then!"

**SHAKESPEARE AT 400**, by William C. Carroll

April 23, 2016 will mark the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death—at least we think that's the day. The Stratford register records that on April 25, "Will Shaksper, gent." was buried, and since he surely wasn't buried on the day he died, the date of death has conventionally been given as April 23. That date has been asserted in part because he (probably) was born on April 23, 1564—the register records the baptism of "Gulielmus, filius Johannes Shaksper" [William, son of John Shaksper] on April 26. To clench the mirroring of dates, April 23 is also the day of the feast of St. George, the patron saint of England. So surely the patron saint of English literature must have been born, and died, on the same day as the patron saint of his country? Perhaps.

It is often erroneously claimed that we "know very little about Shakespeare's life," but to the contrary, a great deal is known, even if, as in the precise birth / death day, there's a bit of speculation, and much of what we know is merely factual. But we also know something about him that is dazzling: he was the author of around 40 plays (co-author on a few of them), now widely thought of as the central works of English literature, as well as endlessly fascinating sonnets and narrative poems. Seven years after his death, his theatrical colleague and rival Ben Jonson described him as "not of an age, but for all time." Jonson's sentiment appeared in the first poem that (with three others) prefaced what is now known as *The First Folio* of 1623, a collection of 36 of his plays that his theatrical colleagues from his company, *The King's Men*, had published. Had they not thought his works worth preserving, we might never have known 18 of them, published there for the first time, including *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*.

Shakespeare's body is buried in Holy Trinity Church, in Stratford-upon-Avon, but, as Jonson also noted, "Thou

*Continued on page 4*

**DEVIN BYKER ON SHAKESPEARE, MARLOWE AND DYING WORDS**

What can literature tell us about the way people have imagined death in the past? That is what Devin Byker, a graduate student in English and fellow of the B.U. Center for the Humanities, is hoping to answer with his dissertation, *Glimmering Worlds: The Drama of Dying in Shakespeare's England*.

"I'm writing about how the characters in Shakespeare and Marlowe's plays experience the world as they die," he says, "and about the intersections between this drama and late medieval and early modern approaches to dying." His research has led him to explore a variety of historical materials. "In addition to looking at drama, I'm also looking at various resources like the *ars moriendi*, martyrology depicting the deaths of martyrs, and archival accounts of the deaths of others that have been set down in letters and legal documents."

Devin first became interested in this topic when he took a directed study with Professor Amy Appleford, who has recently published a book on the *ars moriendi* tradition in late medieval England. "The more I thought about last dying words and dying moments, the more I noticed how they were very concerned with revelation, confession, and unveilings, which made me think more about worldly awareness as well."

His dissertation makes a compelling argument about the early modern period—one that invites us to rethink our own contemporary assumptions about death. "When we think of dying, we often think that means relinquishing the world and no longer thinking about the world. But one of the things I've been noticing in the plays and in the historical texts is that these approaches to dying are actually very concerned with the world—thinking carefully about the world you are about to abandon as well as the world to which you're going, and also maintaining sensory involvement in the world in order to achieve a good death."

Professor James Siemon has praised Devin's work as an important contribution to the field. "Devin has tackled a fascinating topic with wide cultural ramifications, and with his characteristic blend of energy, enthusiasm and intellectual precision, he has vigorously engaged previous scholarship in a debate about the positive value of death and extremity on the late-medieval and renaissance stage. His readiness to enlist archival and other non-aesthetic period evidence lends great weight to his arguments about values and attitudes in literature and drama. This is an important intervention."

Looking ahead, Devin hopes to pursue a new project on the representation of faces in Shakespeare's plays. "My work on dying moments has led me to think a lot about interiority, and the accessibility of interiority as it's communicated through exterior surfaces—when those things align and when they diverge."

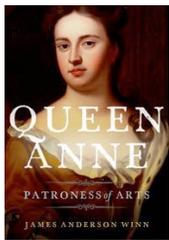


*Shakespeare at 400 (continued)*

art a Monument, without a tombe, / And art alive still, while thy Booke doth live, / And we have wits to read, and praise to give." There will be commemorations world-wide in 2016 to mark Shakespeare's death, with many academic papers and solemn conferences, but the best way to commemorate

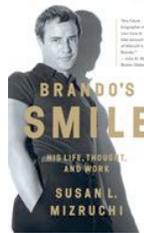
him is – as the two editors of the First Folio urged—"Reade him, therefore; and againe, and againe." As someone who has been reading and teaching Shakespeare's works at Boston University again and again since 1972, I can only add to this one further piece of advice: "And see his works produced on the stage."

## RECENT BOOKS BY FACULTY



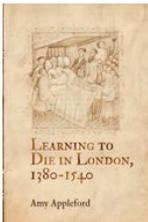
**Queen Anne: Patroness of Arts (Oxford University Press), by James A. Winn** • As the last Stuart monarch, Queen Anne (1665-1714) received the education thought proper for a princess, reading plays and poetry in English and French while learning dancing, singing, acting, drawing, and instrumental music. As an adult, she played the guitar

and the harpsichord, danced regularly, and took a connoisseur's interest in all the arts. In this comprehensive interdisciplinary biography, James Winn tells the story of Anne's life in new breadth and detail, and in unprecedented cultural context. Richly illustrated with visual and musical examples, this is the definitive biography of Queen Anne.



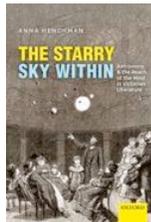
**Brando's Smile: His Life, Thought, and Work (W.W. Norton & Company), by Susan L. Mizruchi** • When people think about Marlon Brando, they think of the movie star, the hunk, the scandals. In *Brando's Smile*, Susan L. Mizruchi reveals the Brando others have missed: the man who collected four thousand books; the man who rewrote scripts, trimming his lines to

make them sharper; the man who consciously used his body and employed the objects around him to create believable characters; the man who loved Emily Dickinson's poetry. More than seventy stunning—and many rare—photographs of Marlon Brando illuminate this portrait of the man who has left an astounding cultural legacy.



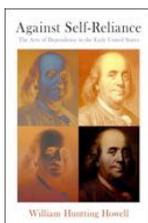
**Learning to Die in London, 1380-1540 (University of Pennsylvania Press), by Amy Appleford** • Taking as her focus a body of writings in poetic, didactic, and legal modes that circulated in England's capital between the 1380s—just a generation after the Black Death—and the first decade of the English

reformation in the 1530s, Amy Appleford offers the first full-length study of the Middle English "art of dying" (*ars moriendi*). An educated awareness of death and mortality was a vital aspect of medieval civic culture, she contends, critical not only to the shaping of single lives and the management of families and households but also to the practices of cultural memory, the building of institutions, and the good government of the city itself.



**The Starry Sky Within: Astronomy and the Reach of the Mind in Victorian Literature (Oxford University Press), by Anna Henchman** • Tracing unexplored connections between nineteenth-century astronomy and literature, Anna Henchman offers a new understanding of literary point of view as

essentially multiple, mobile, and comparative. Astronomy revealed a cosmos of celestial systems in constant motion. Stars, comets, planets, and moons coursed through space in complex and changing relation. As the skies were in motion, so too was the human subject. Astronomers showed that human beings never perceive the world from a stable position. The mobility of our bodies in space and the very structure of stereoscopic vision mean that point of view is neither singular nor stable.



**Against Self-Reliance: The Arts of Dependence in the Early United States (University of Pennsylvania Press), by William H. Howell** • Individualism is arguably the most vital tenet of American national identity. But in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a number of

American artists, writers, and educational philosophers cast imitation and emulation as central to the linked projects of imagining the self and consolidating the nation. Tracing continuities between literature, material culture, and pedagogical theory, William Hunting Howell uncovers an America that celebrated the virtues of humility, contingency, and connection to a complex whole over ambition and distinction.



**London and the Making of Provincial Literature: Aesthetics and the Transatlantic Book Trade, 1800-1850 (University of Pennsylvania Press), by Joseph Rezek** • In the early nineteenth century, London publishers dominated the transatlantic book trade. No one felt this more keenly than authors from Ireland,

Scotland, and the United States who struggled to establish their own national literary traditions while publishing in the English metropolis. Authors such as Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson, Walter Scott, Washington Irving, and James Fenimore Cooper devised a range of strategies to transcend the national rivalries of the literary field. From within the messy and uneven marketplace for books, Joseph Rezek argues, provincial authors sought to exalt and purify literary exchange.