In Print

Renaissance drama, the history of gambling, and more capture the scholarly interest of faculty authors.

STORY BY BARBARA CLOUD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY R. MARSH STARKS

*Early Responses to Renaissance Drama*
*By Charles Whitney*
*Cambridge University Press, 2006*

If researchers want to know what contemporary theatre audience members think of a play, they can simply ask them — usually through a survey or a personal interview.

Or, better yet, they can look at ticket sales.

But for scholars seeking to understand the thinking of audiences long dead, the challenges are, well, a bit more daunting.

It takes the resourcefulness of a scholar like UNLV English professor Charles Whitney to sort through archives to find pertinent materials, interpret their meaning, and reconstruct the responses of those who attended plays more than 400 years ago.

Whitney’s clever approach to the subject is observed in his award-winning book, *Early Responses to Renaissance Drama*. The book has been called “remarkable” and “brilliant” for its success in uncovering the thoughts of those — including the “ordinary” people — who attended Shakespeare’s plays in the 16th century. The book has been awarded the 2008 Elizabeth Dietz Memorial Prize from *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* for the best book in early modern studies.

Whitney says the impetus for *Early Responses* dates back some two decades, before his 1988 arrival at UNLV. He had decided he wanted to write a book on English
Charles Whitney
English Professor

Renaissance drama because, "It was at the center of exciting new movements in literary studies." But, he notes, he was a latecomer to the study of drama and felt that he needed a previously unused approach.

"Eventually, I realized there was a lot written on how people had responded to and interpreted Renaissance drama through the later centuries, but no one had written on responses during the period of the Renaissance itself," he recalls. "No one thought there was enough evidence around to know how the earliest audiences responded. Yet, the earliest group was the most important because the plays were written for it."

"I was attracted to the challenge of this project because it required thinking outside the box," he continues. "I loved the idea of trying to turn things upside-down by showing how the experiences of ordinary people could be as interesting in their own ways as the work of the Bard."

During the 11 years or so after deciding on his focus, Whitney traveled to England to examine historical documents in the British Library and the archives of craft guilds around London. He also visited the Huntington Library in southern California, which has a huge collection of rare books from the Renaissance.

"I met many fascinating people who had been dead for hundreds of years until we brought them to life through research, imagination, and writing," he says.

He "met" these people when he delved into a treasure trove of commentary in letters, diaries, pamphlets, poetry, and other materials; some of these materials have been published since they were written hundreds of years ago, but others were originals found in dusty archives.

As for his findings, Whitney discovered that the "earliest audience members of Renaissance drama weren’t polite and respectful."

"They appropriated what they saw or read to suit their own purposes, creating their own interpretations of Shakespeare’s work and that of his worthy contemporaries, Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson," Whitney says.

The earliest audiences included a considerable number of women, and Whitney deals with both gentlewomen’s and street vendors’ reactions to the plays. Acknowledging that the sources of some responses attributed to women "are not unimpeachable," he offers convincing reasons for accepting them in the book.

Today, Whitney continues to explore the implications of his work by examining the artistic goals of Renaissance playwrights, which, he asserts, seem to be different from those of today’s playwrights. "Renaissance playwrights seem to have deliberately provided material for audiences to re-work," he notes.

He is also taking a thematic approach to the subject of Renaissance drama, "working with religious responses and what they imply about understanding plays such as King Lear."

He is also developing a new area of research in the growing field of ‘ecocriticism’ in order to study early literary representations of the natural world through the lens of today’s perspective.

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Prison City: Life with the Death Penalty in Huntsville, Texas
By Ruth Massingill and Ardyth Broadrick Sohn
Peter Lang, 2007

When Ardyth Broadrick Sohn moved to Huntsville, Texas, in 2000 to serve as an endowed scholar at the university located there, she was fascinated by the campus’s proximity to the nearby prison.

It was four blocks away from Texas’ infamous “Huntsville Unit” prison facility, where, at one time, more legal executions took place than in any other location in the world.

"When I arrived, I was astounded that I seemed to be the only one on campus who would pause when the whistles blew to count the inmates," recalls Sohn, now the director of the Hank Greenspun School of Journalism and Media Studies. She was surprised at how little attention the prison seemed to garner from her colleagues.

"I knew that the prison and the university [Sam Houston State University] were both important to the economy of the town of Huntsville. Beyond that, I didn’t see more than a superficial relationship between the town, the university community, and the prison – at least initially."

As time went on, however, Sohn realized that she was wrong.

"There was actually a great deal of interaction between all these entities," says Sohn, who immediately recognized the potential for research on this subject. "As we began to explore the fabric of the community, we learned just how complex that relationship is."
Sohn was joined in her research by Ruth Massingill, a native Texan and a communication department colleague at the time. The two began interviewing Huntsville residents with the help of communication students.

Through their research, Sohn and her team learned of some fascinating connections between locals and the prison. They met a criminal justice professor who opposes capital punishment and, thus, keeps public vigil outside the death house for every execution. They interviewed faculty members who teach courses to prisoners as part of their service to the community, as well as students who work as guards or support staff at the prison to pay for college.

They also talked with residents who would host members of the victims’ families – as well as the families of those being executed – during the week preceding each execution.

“Town leaders, including the former warden, who now runs the new prison museum, are thoughtful, pragmatic individuals who are well aware of the role their community plays in Texas criminal justice,” Sohn notes.

Sohn and her colleague also examined media interaction at the prison. Members of the community frequently encountered “outsiders” – including some very hostile international or national reporters – visiting town for “an insultingly quick take” on the Huntsville Unit prison and the surrounding community.

“The research took me on a journey that tested cultural boundaries,” Sohn says. “We began the book wondering how this town could so comfortably coexist with the prison, given its reputation and activities. Our research led us to a much greater understanding of how these people have adapted to what is essentially the primary industry in their community. It has implications for all communities, particularly those where prisons reside.”

Roll the Bones: The History of Gambling
By David G. Schwartz
Gotham Books, 2006

In his third book, Roll the Bones, David Schwartz offers a comprehensive exploration of the history of gambling – from its most primitive forms to today’s high-tech world of high rolling.

Schwartz, director of the Center for Gaming Research, previously examined Las Vegas as the modern mecca for gambling in Suburban Xanadu: The Casino Resort on the Las Vegas Strip and Beyond (2003). Later, he analyzed the newest – and most far-reaching – venue for gambling in Cutting the Wire: Gaming Prohibition and the Internet (2005).

In Roll the Bones he takes a comprehensive look at his subject, going back – way back – to pre-Christian times when priests “rolled the bones” to foretell the future and when hunters did so, perhaps, to divide up the results of the hunt.

One of Schwartz’s first orders of business in the book is to explain the origin of the term “bones”: The earliest dice were made from the astragalus, a bone found in the ankle of hoofed animals; it could be thrown to produce a more or less random result, similar to dice of today. Schwartz cautions, however, that, “Modern-day craps players bear little resemblance to Sumerian priests ‘rolling the bones’ for hopeful supplicants.”

Schwartz’s book covers a wide range of topics associated with gambling, including cheating, lotteries, and the 16th-century origins of the science of gambling.

Schwartz conducted much of his research at UNLV’s Center for Gaming Research, located in Lied Library’s special collections department. The department possesses an outstanding collection of works on gambling from which Schwartz gathered information as he traced gambling activity through the millennia.

But Schwartz pursued his topic at other locations as well, including the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., casinos in Macau, and the Wynn Las Vegas Resort and Country Club.

Las Vegas figures prominently in the book’s 592 pages, which cover such diverse topics as the poor ventilation in a Macau casino to the latest technologies employed in Las Vegas megaresorts.

The final section of the book focuses on Steve Wynn’s achievements on the Las Vegas Strip, including the Mirage, which opened in 1989 and his opening of the Wynn.

Schwartz recalled that during his tour of the Wynn Resort on opening night in 2005, he saw elements of décor from virtually every period and location he had discussed in his history of gambling. “That one casino,” he says in the book, “had in its DNA the entire history of gambling.”

Schwartz’s research on gambling continues with his current project, a biography of Jay Sarno, the man who built Caesar’s Palace and Circus Circus, thus introducing themed casinos to Las Vegas.

Obesity Surgery: Stories of Altered Lives
By Marta Meana and Lindsey Ricciardi
University of Nevada Press, 2008

It started as a graduate student’s thesis project.

UNLV psychology professor Marta Meana was serving as faculty mentor to master’s student Lindsey Ricciardi, who was conducting her thesis research on the psychosocial impact of dramatic weight loss through gastric bypass surgery.

“A colleague of ours had told us that there was a gastric
bypass surgeon in town who was very interested in the psychological impact of the surgery as well as the ways in which psychological factors impeded or facilitated progress after surgery,” Meana says.

When contacted by the psychologists, the surgeon, Dr. Barry Fisher, immediately agreed to cooperate, so Meana and Ricciardi decided to attend a workshop he offers to prospective patients.

“We were fascinated by the topic and by the people we heard speak at that workshop,” Meana recalls. “We wanted to know how the lives of people who had been morbidly obese changed when they lost vast amounts of weight. We approached Dr. Fisher about the idea of interviewing his patients, and he was extremely cooperative.”

Six years later, the resulting book provides valuable insight into the psychological complexities that accompany profound weight loss.

“We went looking for a story about losing weight and found a story about finding self – a story about what happens when you get rid of the one thing you are convinced is standing between you and your dreams,” the two authors wrote in the introduction.

The psychologists suspected that the weight loss “would involve a cascade of other effects that would seriously alter the system that had been their interpersonal lives.”

Indeed, they found extensive changes and complicated stories in the interviews they conducted with 33 patients. Ricciardi’s master’s thesis, which was based on the interviews, resulted in two scholarly publications reporting the findings.

“However,” Meana says, “we felt that the richness of the patients’ narratives were lost in these articles, which were by necessity rather short.” The authors also realized that the general public probably would not access articles in scholarly journals.

“We wanted the stories we had heard to have a broader audience of individuals going through the surgery or the decision process, as well as individuals who counsel these patients,” Meana says, noting that writing a book was a natural choice.

Most of the interview subjects were women, Meana says, adding that the preoperative weight averaged 372 pounds; three individuals weighed more than 500 pounds before the surgery. The majority of the interviews were conducted within three years of the surgery.

The interviews tended to focus on the patients’ changes in self-image and in interpersonal relationships, especially with family and friends. The interviewees described their lives before the surgery and explained why they decided to have the procedure.

The excessive weight they had previously carried often prevented the individuals from participating in activities that many people take for granted. One woman told the researchers that after the weight loss she could finally show her 10-year-old daughter how to properly shampoo her hair. “I’ve had to backtrack a lot and teach them,” she told the researchers.

Health changes made by parents also influenced their children’s health habits. Prior to the weight loss, many obese parents felt they set a poor example for their children.

“I’m teaching my children a different way of eating,” one said. “My children got involved in caring for me after the surgery,” said another, “and it has also made them more health conscious.”

Several patients told the researchers that after years of being invisible to salesclerks and others, they wondered why they had been ignored. One woman said, “People looked past me before. I don’t know why. I don’t even know if I’d call it discrimination. I don’t know how at 290 [pounds] I could have been invisible. But I was.”

Women patients who had been tolerating unsupportive, sometimes alcoholic husbands gained a new and stronger sense of self that gave them the confidence to be more independent – so independent, in fact, that they sometimes filed for divorce.

Yet, a few said they still felt like the fat person they had been, despite the new image in the mirror.

After completing her master’s degree, Ricciardi went on to complete her Ph.D. in 2005 under Meana’s mentorship; today, she provides clinical services to individuals struggling with eating disorders. Meana’s current research focuses on female sexuality and sexual dysfunction. Both say they hope that their book will be helpful to those considering gastric bypass surgery in the future.