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“This is and is Not Cressida”: Resisting Anthropocentrism in a Shakespeare of Things

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“This is and is Not Cressida”: Resisting Anthropocentrism in a Shakespeare of Things

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In crafting this paper, I have spent much of my time thinking about what this project does not want to be, a concern that has only snowballed since the paper’s birth in the halcyon days of a pre-Trump 2016. Now, after the post-election tumult of 2017 and the gathering avalanche of the #metoo movement in the first quarter of 2018, I must approach my engagement with our group’s anthropocentric concerns from the negative space between this work and the paper I will not write. At the outset, I intended to continue the work I began in 2015 on reciprocal performing objects, delving deeper into an object’s uncanny ability to surpass the human in performance. That work continues to fascinate and beguile me. The potentials for misuse, however, and the implications of conflating the human with the object make me personally and professionally uncomfortable in our current political climate. Object-oriented work that rippled with possibility in 2016 sours in the harsh light of 2018, particularly from my personal perspective as a woman, a feminist, and a voice from the alto section of the #metoo choir.

From this positioning inside of a movement that speaks my own personal truth, the world around me continues to pulse with cyborg possibility and becoming human potential. I am, however, suddenly hyper-aware of the potential of the inverse of my work on objects to displace my own tenuous position as a human in the world right now. In these trumped-up times, that is, I grow increasingly afraid of my own ability to see the becoming human drive in objects given our current political administration’s vehemence towards reducing the human to its object nature. This exposes a deeply personal anxiety as well, that perhaps I am guilty of considering my placement within my own life in object rather than subject-oriented terms, somehow tacitly inviting (if not outwardly condoning) my treatment as such by others. How like Cressida have I become, inviting criticism of my behavior as rationalization for treatment I must have brought upon myself. After all, in Shakespeare’s play, Ulysses dissects Cressida, noting that, “there's language in her eye, her cheek, her lip; Nay, her foot speaks, her wanton spirits look out at every joint and motive of her body” (4.5.56-68). Out of fear, perhaps, Ulysses fractures Cressida’s singular voice into discordant parts as an act of
control, a restraining tactic that sticks in my own throat as I write about objects and the objectified female character today.

This project then is perhaps a primer for (and a cautious defense of) an object-oriented feminist theatre practice in terrifyingly anti-human times. Here, I rely on theorist Katherine Behar as my companion and guide, who reminds us that, “object-oriented feminism’s intervention is to approach all objects from the inside-out position of being an object, too.” In this work, I embrace the prescience of being inside of a #metoo moment to embed myself within the object world and allow this paper to give into its compulsion to become object as well. In the process, I will argue for the elevation of the object in our human consciousness while also critiquing the ethics of my privilege inside an object practice in this historical moment.

From OOO to OOF

In his provocative book Alien Phenomenology, or, What It’s Like to Be a Thing, philosopher and video game designer Ian Bogost observes that, “if we take seriously the idea that all objects recede interminably into themselves, then human perception becomes just one among many ways that objects might relate. To put things at the center of a new metaphysics also requires us to admit that they do not exist just for us.” Expressed more glibly, things do things whether humans notice or not. And, as humans, we are things too. When I originally conceived this project, I envisioned that I would begin from this place of inertia, exploring the world of Shakespearean noumena; that is, objects that exist without (or in spite of) human sense and perception with a particular focus on the intersections between human and object actors in Compass Shakespeare Ensemble’s small-scale Troilus and Cressida. This production, also referred to as #5bodytroilus, premiered in 2016 in Staunton, VA as part of my MFA work at Mary Baldwin University. To draw from the vocabulary of object-oriented ontology, I anticipated that this project might posit that the creation of a Shakespeare of Things within the form of the small-scale anti-heroic narrative magnifies human concerns through abstraction of the landscape of the human inside the terrain of the object. When grappling with Troilus and Cressida, however, an insurmountable ethical dilemma dogged my work; in point of fact, Cressida literally becomes an object throughout the pages of the play, passed from one prince to another, kissed in (and by) generals, and reduced visually to a glove that appears on stage in the play’s final scenes as a token or quasi-memento mori while the character remains offstage (but still very much alive). Within Shakespeare’s narrative structure, Cressida offers the counterpoint to the notional existence of Helen: Helen’s capture and subsequent complicity in remaining with Paris causes the Trojan War but Cressida’s displacement becomes the reflecting pool in which the effects of the conflict ripple. Inside an object-based exploration, then, replacing Cressida with an object simply reinforces her silenced position within her own narrative and this troubling paradox became the Trojan Horse that dogged my work. A Troilus and Cressida that
excises Cressida from her story simply reinforces what Shakespeare has told us from the play's outset—Cressida is the "and," the afterthought, the companion piece to Troilus’ story who survives the play’s action but is neatly amputated from the narrative once her contact with the drama’s male characters recedes into the tent(s). As Troilus will detail, Cressida is indeed a pearl, coveted by the play’s male characters and bounded within her own oyster-shell, a questionable queen of an infinitesimal space.

An object-oriented ontology risks reinforcing Cressida’s tokenization rather than exposing its shortcomings and the ethics of this reduction of the play’s central woman halted my original trajectory through this project. Consider, for example, that theorist Andrew Cole suggests three rules to frame an object-oriented ontological engagement, which are particularly relevant in the context of theatrical performance. As Cole notes:

First, everything is an object, including you and each of your thoughts. Second, and accordingly, no object relates to any other object, because the universe itself is devoid of all relation. Why is there no relation in the universe? It's because objects sever relations with every other object and withdraw into themselves to become self-subsisting, autonomous beings. It's also because relation is typically a human mode of apprehending, describing, and interacting with the world. Given that not every object is a human, though every human is an object, you can't have an object-oriented ontology if humans are at the center of it. Such an anthropocentric object-oriented ontology would be a contradiction in terms, because objects are not a means to our ends. They are meaningful whether or not we perceive them. Third—and finally—all objects are equal and, ontologically speaking, on the same plane. You, a speck of flea shit, an electric chair, and a solar flare are all equal objects.

In the abstract, this conception makes logical sense. Through the lens of OOO, all objects are equal and filled with comparable levels of potential energy for action, interpretation, and projection from a human perspective. This way of seeing the world aims to close the gap between subject and object and to initiate a dialogue between objects in a shared language. As Steven Shaviro expounds, "likeness-in-human-terms, if it is projected imaginatively enough, may work to dislocate us from the correlationist position of understanding these other entities only in terms of their resemblance, and relationship, to ourselves." While OOO opens up a productive channel towards an equality of objects, it also forgets that in order to see objects as equal, some object positions must first be elevated in order to level the ontological field. In terms of privilege, an uneven topography allows some objects to be unseen by those at higher elevations and this chasm of visibility reifies the distinction between humans and objects rather than blurs its boundaries. To put this into practical context, consider the gender-based inequalities in current American society with regard to bodily autonomy, equal work for equal pay, and protections against sexual harassment and domestic
violence. Viewing all human objects as equal in an OOO context requires elevating female objects to the same agential level as their male counterparts in order to achieve balance. Thus, “objectifying” humans who already occupy object positions, including women, minorities, the poor, and the politically vulnerable presents an ethical dilemma that needs unpacking, particularly in our current American political climate.

To un-write an object narrative that disenfranchises the more vulnerable objects in a field, the first critical step is to consider that, as Shaw and Meehan note, “. . . objects are force-full—brimming with affect, productive of difference and generative of power.” In an object-oriented feminism, embracing an object position involves a recognition of the affective power of the object to enact change and to be seen. While OOO offers to raze the topography of the object landscape, OOF first elevates objects lying under the map’s surface before standardizing the levels. Behar quantifies this distinction, noting that:

Object-oriented feminism turns the position of philosophy inside-out to study objects while being an object oneself. Such self-implication allows OOF to develop three important aspects of feminist thinking in the philosophy of things: politics, in which OOF engages with histories of treating certain humans (women, people of color, and the poor) as objects; erotics, in which OOF employs humor to foment unseemly entanglements between things; and ethics, in which OOF refuses to make grand philosophical truth claims, instead staking a modest ethical position that arrives at being “in the right” even if it means being “wrong.”

Here, the human intentionally inhabits the object position in order to bridge the ontological divide between subject and object and through this purposeful act, the object position becomes a perspective of empowerment and not one of further disenfranchisement in a semiotic sense. As Kayla Anderson urges, “reinvoking a sense of wonder toward the nonhuman, though it might be mined in anthropomorphism, nevertheless instigates a heightened sense of attentiveness between people and things” that enacts more sustainable power dynamics that support rather than denigrate more vulnerable objects.

Much as Troilus and Cressida’s events circumvent the climactic introduction of the Trojan Horse, my work on #5bodytroilus actively avoids the easy introduction of a stand-in surrogate object for the play’s titular woman and instead focuses on strategies of object interaction that amplify Cressida’s agential shifts in Shakespeare’s text. This approach draws on an imaginative and even fanciful perspective on objects but in so doing, offers an invitation for both identification and elevation of the object in performance. A possible trajectory for un-writing objects begins in this act of equalizing, in embracing the potential of a feminist lens on object orientation to contextualize and humanize specifically the objectified woman inside the space of the theatre and in larger context, within the frame of the world at large.
Inside of Shakespeare’s play, the men of this martial world ask us often to see Cressida in discrete fragments rather than as a unified whole. Troilus conjures her first for the audience, lamenting that her uncle Pandarus baits him by dangling her individual attributes, torturing him with visions of “her eyes, her hair, her cheek, her gait, her voice” (1.1.51). To Troilus, she is a catalogue of tantalizing parts, each more tempting than the last and too slippery to take in hand at once. Troilus cannot grasp Cressida entirely but can snare her as an object: “her bed is India; there she lies, a pearl” (1.1.96). Thus, Troilus clutches Cressida’s pearl for himself, a greedy action afforded to him through his skillful manipulation of her person into separate parts before the audience has met her in the flesh. In this way, Shakespeare permits Troilus to emblazon Cressida but mobilizes this Petrarchan-style elucidation of an adored woman’s discrete parts to break her down for easy digestion rather than to magnify her holistic perfection. In performance, the easy choice is to take Troilus’s reckoning as Cressida’s truth and to offer up a women who is simply there for the taking. In the bright light of our contemporary moment, however, might we instead add a further layer of nacre to Cressida and render her a little less schuckable?

In remediating Cressida’s disenfranchisement within her own narrative, we must first consider precisely what kind of object relations the text allows and further, create a taxonomy that can support her status in a performative context. Here, precision in language is tantamount; after all, in cultivating an object-oriented perspective, we inevitably unearth a myriad of terms that all aim to encapsulate a facet of human-object relation. In developing a performative approach to vibrant matter, terms like artifact, souvenir, relic, token, memento mori, and totem each imply distinct responsibilities for practical application. Consider, for example, the varied contexts in which an object becomes a token. Curiously, this word simultaneously conjures images of a nominal impersonal gift, the singular representative of a group as a whole, and a physical voucher that can be exchanged for a good or service. To consider this from an OOF perspective is to not only acknowledge this multiplicity of meanings but to allow the iteration of language and human perception to saturate the work entirely.

To unpack this, consider what happens if we name Cressida as token within the narrative of Troilus and Cressida; in point of fact, this label amplifies her power within the text because it obscures her vanishing point. If Cressida is a token, she cannot simply be a whore because the specificity of a tokenized object interaction requires her to be both obviously insignificant and of a perceptibly appreciable value that she can vouch for an object or service in exchange. In the alternative, naming Cressida as relic allows her to become bodily metonymic through the performance of her own history, gaining larger significance because of her surrogacy within the oyster-shell of her own story. These distinctions (or perhaps, slips) in language are subtle but by no means pedantic because they encapsulate the trouble humans have in approaching and quantifying relations with the object world, where the uncanny nature of the object holds the human at bay even as the human controls or operates the object in question. Rather than dodging this unease with the human’s position in relation to the object, an OOF-driven perspective harnesses it to make the best of the shifts and rifts in language...
to amplify the capacity of objects to hold multiple meanings simultaneously in performance.

**The Taxonomy of Objects in OOF**

Through OOF-tinted lenses then, the place of the object within feminist performance praxis touches the world of the token, the totem, the artifact, and even the significant relic that stands in for or activates a revered space of memory or distilled emotion inside of performance. Holding objects up in the context of each of these specific human-led paradigms imbues the object's object position with power rather than impotence, lending a perceptible subjectivity to the object in question. In a sense, OOF asks the audience to creatively and imaginatively elevate the onstage object to the human plane of subjectivity and to begin to understand that the inverse paradigm is also possible, effective, and force-full. As cultural anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis explains, “the artifact, as the bearer of sensory multiplicity is a catchment zone of perceptions, a lens through which the senses can be exported from their other side: matter as both the terminus of human actions and the carrier of surplus meaning of those actions. Thus it is an unrecognized double of the human body.”

Elevating an object from OOO's sealevel to OOF's peak, then, invites the viewer (or, in a theatrical context, the audience) to do the work of interpreting the performance's multiple meanings, invoking the object as double of the human. To clarify this paradigm shift, consider Behar’s onomatopoeic assessment that:

As its awestruck acronym might imply, OOO's tone often appears somewhat too elated by discovering a universe composed of objects. What is more, OOO seems to relish, in the idea that humans too are objects, a sense of liberation from the shackles of subjectivity especially from the “unreal” illusions of correlationism. Finding neither of these positions tenable, OOF therefore positions itself as a friendly if pointed rejoinder, reminding this flourishing philosophical discussion first, that object-oriented approaches to the world are practiced in disciplines outside philosophy, and second, that all too many humans are well aware of being objects without finding cause to celebrate in that reality. Thus, by swapping OOO's gasp for a gutsier grunt, OOF aims to inject feminism into this discourse, but without dismissing these notions that, in fact, are essential for contemporary activism.

In contrast to the passive gawking encouraged by the coo of OOO, the gut-punch of OOF then jostles the audience into inserting themselves into the frame of the object to peer out and survey the terrain of the world outside. This work perhaps approaches Peggy Phelan’s assertion that “representation reproduces the Other as the Same” in a generative sense in which a search for the _same_ is not a push for...
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hegemony but rather an invitation to intersectionality, a concept critical to both feminism at large and the potential of OOF in performance practice. In a sense, this work promotes the creation of the intersectional artifact, a focal point for an audience that preserves the autonomy and individual subject position of each audience member within the object.

This individuality of both experience and perception is a critical tenant of OOF as differentiated from OOO; while OOO aims to set the table with a collection of interesting and equally relevant objects, OOF aims to stage the table as sufficient in and of itself as a sensorial encapsulation of every dinner, every argument, every letter penned on the table’s surface for every individual spectator (or perhaps spect-actor). Embracing OOF signals a turn towards valuing the trace of the human within the object, and illuminating the object’s role in shaping the larger (human) narratives it figures in, a metaphorical parallel to the forensic remnants of the human held in fingerprints and biometric samples. In his research on ventriloquism, theorist Stephen Conner pushes this paradigm further to also argue for the unique and individual inner life of the object in this thought experiment. As Conner explains:

One might call such a conception of the body’s relationship to its various environments a conception of “implicated space.” In such a conception, the insides and outsides of things are not so powerfully distinguished as they are in later conceptions; insides and outsides change places, and produce each other reciprocally.13

Thus, to return to the table example, OOF asks that we prize the rich interiority of the table itself on equal footing with the human because the table is engaged in the process of becoming human as the human audience imagines becoming object in solidarity with it. Boundaries here are mutable and the meniscus between the object and the human teeters and spills over with performative potential. This paradigm of the breached or potentially breachable boundary dogs both OOO and OOF, but an object-oriented feminism allows us to see the possibility in this disconnect if the object itself is a catchment zone for memory, of both the small and large varieties. Curiously, this object-oriented process mirrors the manner in which humans hold and process memory inside the human brain; as Seremetakis explains, “the memory of one sense is stored in another: that of tactility in sound, of hearing in taste, of sight in sound. Sensory memory is a form of storage. Storage is always the embodiment and conservation of experiences, persons and matter in vessels of alterity.”14 In the context of OOF, the alterity of the marginalized subject position parallels the otherness inherent in a practice of inhabiting the object position to approach a dialogue with the thing itself.

To initiate this type of dialogue, it is important to question, however, precisely what function an object serves in a memorial context. As noted previously, objects embody a physical disposition towards containing memory. Consider, for example, the function of the souvenir to become a touchstone for a destination or a fragment of human lived experience. To draw on a personal example, my husband proposed to me on the Wonder Wheel because Coney
Island is the place I love the most and we spent the rest of that day collecting souvenirs to commemorate the place of our engagement: pink and green plastic frogs won from the arcade, broken shells, a stack of Zoltar’s fortunes, and a “Burlesque at the Beach” pin. While my garnet engagement ring stands in for the act of our engagement to the world at large, my collection of amusement park tatt serves as a more effective vector to reliving the experience of being engaged, conjuring memories of that particular day superimposed over everything I hold dear about the place itself. For this reason, these objects sit in prominent places in my home and I encounter them (and the memories they hold) everyday as I move through my current temporality. I offer this sentimental example to demonstrate the uncanniness of the object’s double life, existing as both a mnemonic device and memory itself in the same breath.

The field of object-oriented ontology frames this duality through a taxonomic distinction which divides the object field into two sides: the real object and the sensual object, in which real objects are those which are understood to be assemblages of identifiable components (a piston engine, a mailbox, a wristwatch) while sensual objects are those which layer an experience over the object’s component parts (the tidal pull of the ocean, the drag of a high-powered automobile). Theorist Graham Harman pushes this distinction further by inserting the human into the taxonomic quantification, suggesting that, “although we never touch real objects, we always touch sensual objects. Sensual objects would not even exist if they did not exist for me, or for some other agent that expends its energy in taking them seriously”. To return to my Coney Island example, the trinkets I brought home on my engagement day are sensual objects in a way that my engagement ring is not because the souvenirs I gathered are haptic touchstones for the experience of a special and deeply personal day while my ring is the real token that performs my coupled status to the external world.

As OOO suggests, objects with sensual qualities can be said to be both relational and relative in memorial terms. In grappling with this tension, Harman concludes that, “objects are units that both display and conceal a multitude of traits.” While the Coney Island example I shared illustrates this duality nicely, I grow increasingly troubled by Harman’s aggressive language in framing object potentiality. His recognition of object agency strays into metaphors of exploitation, using the duality of concealment and revelation as evidence of an object’s promiscuity or ability to tease the human. This move towards shaming the object in order to crack its veneer smacks of manipulation in deeply disturbing ways as it promotes the harvesting of an object’s desired sensual qualities at the expense of the object itself in a parallel of human gender-based violence and privation. As a corrective, we might harmonize with the resounding #meToo chorus reverberating in our present moment to shift the tenor of our interactions with objects to an object-oriented feminist tune that is more inclusive and thoughtful in terms of the object’s consent.

An OOF-based approach might instead begin by examining the ethics and perhaps the “rights” of the sensual object in theatrical practice. This ethical emphasis is necessary to make reparations for a human perspective of exploitation towards an object’s sensual potential, in which we ask what an object can (and
will) do for us. Adopting an OOF approach might look and feel more like obtaining an object’s informed consent to relations with the human in order to ensure the mutuality of the coupled encounter. I recognize that my language here is loaded in a sociopolitical context with regard to rape culture, bodily autonomy, and the policing of the female body and in fact, this gendered linguistic turn is critical to an OOF approach. An object ethic in performance must begin with recognition and acknowledgment of the privilege that offers elevation to some subjects at the expense of the rest of the object field. In embracing OOF as a corrective lens on top of OOO, then, we might approach the object on even footing. A shift to OOF offers the radical potential to step away from exploitation of the object to serve human ends and instead, through constructive empathy with the object, raze the artificial divide through mutual respect for the sensual qualities of all objects in performance.

**Memory-realizing Cressida**

If we allow that OOF provides a useful vocabulary through which to understand the interconnectedness of the thing and the human from inside of the object position, how do we stage this paradigm effectively and ethically in 2018? And why collide the creation of the intersectional artifact/token/souvenir with Shakespeare, the ultimate dramatic thing in our collective consciousness? After all, Shakespeare certainly cannot escape censure in #metoo terms for fetishizing women through a persistently masculine lens and offering respite from the perils of being female primarily through the adoption of masculine things including male dress, male-coded behaviors, and male husbands. Inside of *Troilus and Cressida*, however, Shakespeare creates in Cressida a female character who lacks respite specifically because of her contact with men (and their things, presumably). As Tina Packer notes, “She [Cressida] knows it is men's sexual desire that makes women ‘angels’ before they have been able to possess them; once possessed, women are ‘things.’” Passed from hand to hand, Cressida loses currency in each exchange, debased by every man who touches her. How then do we address this creation of Shakespeare’s from an object-oriented feminist perspective?

We might begin by considering Lehmann’s position that, “theatre that rejects the dramatic model can retrieve the possibility of returning to things their value and to the human actors the experience of ‘thing-ness’ that has become alien to them.” In the space of the theatre, we have the opportunity to experiment with approaching the object on its own terms to frame the encounter through a push for parity with the whole object rather than an easy exploitation of the object’s sensual qualities. It is worth pausing here to note, however, that the strategies of approaching objects I have discussed from both OOO and OOF directions employ language and metaphors of sight, privileging the role of the visual encounter with the object rather than a haptic or experiential approach. To counter this implicit privilege, object performances might create a paradigm in which the object invites the human to experience it through a multiplicity of sense-based encounters. Drawing on the principals of object-oriented feminism might
offer productive ground rules to frame the haptic encounter in ethically sound terms, respecting the agency of the objects with which we perform.

While objects may withdraw into themselves by nature, the human inclination to draw closer to the object invites the layering of a feminist perspective in order to not so much understand a thing but to observe and touch the thingness of the thing in real time. If employed in a way that elevates the object rather than stripping it for its component parts, this can be a resonant paradigm in performative practice as demonstrated by Compass Shakespeare Ensemble’s engagement with Troilus and Cressida. After all, Shakespeare’s Cressida is neither immigrant nor refugee but rather prisoner and spoil of war, leaving her perpetually stranded in the middle ground of belonging, passed from hand to hand as martial currency. Thus, keeping Cressida constantly onstage in both human and object form used interchangeably and also in combination with each other keeps her from performing the disappearance that Shakespeare scripts for her. Instead, Cressida becomes force-full in both the world of the play and the consciousness of the audience. Applying an object-oriented feminist approach to approximate this experience fractures the text by unseating the primacy of the subject to give way to a non-hegemonic landscape of fellow objects, ripe with theatrical potential.

To place this into perspective, let us circle back to Bogost’s queries on the place of wonder within object-oriented practice. We might echo his way of seeing that, “the world is simply full of interesting, curious things, all living their own alien lives” without also immediately demanding that the object interiority we discover be put into service to fulfill our human desires. In this way, an actor, a piece of weaponry, and an audience member can meet on the performative plane without risk to anyone’s life and without sacrificing the excitement of the performative encounter. From a personal perspective, the tremors of this analogy did not truly rock me until I tried to process my own unease with the results of the 2016 presidential election. Prior to that historical moment, I felt far less conflicted about Bogost’s invitation to fancy with regard to objects than I do now, perhaps because my relative privilege insulated me enough to agree that objects are indeed wonder-full. In 2018, however, I feel more as though I am looking up at the object rather than reaching down for it from a height. As a result, I am approaching objects with far more wariness and respect these days, perhaps because I am all too aware that I have more in common with the object in the eye of this political storm than I am comfortable admitting. In the past few months, I feel as though I have undergone a becoming Cressida and OOF offers a productive lens through which to harness the inertia of that transformation for productive and ethically responsible change in my function as scholar, teacher, and theatre-maker. As Troilus’s thoroughly impersonal language reminds us, “this is and is not Cressida” (5.2.153) and Cressida’s only agency to exert change and to protect herself on the precipice of becoming object within her narrative rests on the force-full power of that and.
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Notes

1. Here, I refer to my M. Litt thesis work on the Shakespeare and Performance program at Mary Baldwin University, culminating in a practice as research project titled “The Prosthetic Hamlet: Cyborgs and Reciprocal Performing Objects in Q1 Hamlet.” This thesis leverages affordance theory, thing-power, and thingification to flesh out the cyborg’s low-tech cousin: the reciprocal performing object. In so doing, this thesis argues that the human has surpassed its organic origin and is now a topography and thus, we, like Hamlet, are already cyborg. Through this multimodal research approach paired with the creation of an original devised piece focused on these concerns (Quietus: A Variation on Q1), I propose that low-tech performing objects do not so much represent human characters onstage as supplant the figure of the human in performance and in doing so, become more than human. My current work on Troilus and Cressida began as a companion to this cyber-Hamlet but, as this paper will demonstrate, has been hoisted by its own object-oriented petard.


8. Behar, Object-Oriented Feminism, 3.


11. Behar, Object-Oriented Feminism, 5.


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