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Swarbrick Works, Studies Environmental Humanities

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“I had the experience of finding a particular professor who really got me to think long and hard about texts like Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Those were the experiences that really ignited something for me, and there was no going back. I became really obsessed with literature as a whole. It was much later that I came around to being a specialist in early modern literature.”

That’s the way Dr. Steven Swarbrick explains how he became interested in literature. A native of San Jose, California, he got his bachelor’s from San Francisco State University and his doctorate from Brown University, both in English. Today he is an English professor in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences.

One of Swarbrick’s latest publications is entitled “What is the Essence of Dust? Climate Tragedy or the Forgetting of Air in *Hamlet*.” But what is the meaning behind such a title? “I am interested in *Hamlet*’s obsession with representing earthly matter. Anyone who has taken a high school Shakespeare class knows that *Hamlet* in that particular play is obsessed with issues of mortality— ‘To be, or not to be?’ A lot of that language is driven by these earthly metaphors, so *Hamlet*, the speaker, is thinking about the line from *Genesis* that man is from dust and will return to dust someday. Translating that into Shakespeare’s play, the question becomes: ‘What’s the point of doing anything if man is the quintessence of dust?’ I’m trying to approach this play, which has been written about quite extensively, from the perspective of climate change analysis.”

The power of poetry resides largely in the ability to say many things with few words, and one wonders how long it takes Swarbrick to analyze verses. “In my classes, some of the most successful sessions that we have are when, as a group, we concentrate on just a single passage projected on the board, so that we’re all looking at the same thing. This is to show them that you can derive a lot from very little, and that they need to think not just about what the passage is saying in sum but also about how it’s saying it. That’s when



Photo by Amanda Becker

Dr. Swarbrick (right) being interviewed for the radio show “College Talk.”

you notice all the differences and nuances in the language. For me, now that I’ve been reading the same text for many years, the fun comes in discovering things that I overlooked the first time around.”

This also means that many people reading the same text can come up with different interpretations, and Swarbrick has seen that happen when teaching John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the seventeenth-century epic poem based on the biblical story of the Fall of Man. “In my Milton class, the pleasure and the difficulty of teaching *Paradise Lost* to a group of students who have never encountered it before is that you want to give them a foundation for understanding the material and a certain coherent sense of some of the arguments and debates surrounding the text. It creates a challenge for a teacher. I imagine this is true for everyone who teaches texts like this one, which seems to generate endless interpretation and

analyses,” says Swarbrick.

One also wonders whether his students really have a context that enables them to understand when and why those works of literature were written. “To a certain extent context can limit a student’s (or even a very seasoned scholar’s) engagement with a text, because it prevents you from being open to what is surprising, unconventional, or strange about it. That kind of goes against the context or the cultural norms that you might get from reading the text as well. I try to keep both ends in play when I’m approaching the material and also when I introduce it to students.”

Another intriguing title in Swarbrick’s scholarship is “The Animal in *Othello*.” “My goal with that paper was to navigate a topic that race scholars have brought to our attention in an important way, which is that race itself is bound up with not just physical appearance, but religion, class, geography, and even climate. In ‘*Othello*,’

you find a consistent dehumanizing language that circles around the character of *Othello* in particular, in which he is animalized or bestialized throughout the play and to an increasing degree as the tragedy kicks into high gear in that play. I was trying to think about what the relationship is within this period between blackness as it’s conceived in this play and its understanding of human-animal relations.”

So, was Shakespeare humanizing black people or animalizing human beings who happen to have a different skin color? “The argument that I try to put forth in papers is not necessarily a redemptive one. My claim, in other words, is not that Shakespeare the man was out to humanize various individuals, but that what the text itself does is force us to think about the porous relationships between what is considered to be self and other in these plays. For me, that crosses or intersects with racial otherness and human-animal differences as well.”

Some people may ask: What can we really learn by analyzing these texts? What is the practical side of it? Swarbrick has an excellent answer to this question. “That’s a question I think about quite often. I think of my own scholarship as existing within the school that is now called environmental humanities, which, as its title suggests, has an immediate practical element to it. So, for me, what does the study of early-modern literature—not just contemporary literature but these texts that are centuries old now—what do they contribute to an understanding of climate change? Or how do they contribute to questions about sustainability, about what is to be done? I think that what I try to communicate is that studying literature, especially the early-modern period, forces us to think twice and in fact multiple times about what we need, as we do when we talk about nature.”

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