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Dr. Maggie Vinter: The Early Modern, Now

Interview by Mariana Parilli-Castillo



Credit: Mariana Parilli-Castillo

BIOGRAPHY: Dr. Maggie Vinter has been the specialist in Early Modern (pre-1800) literature and Shakespeare at Case Western Reserve University’s English Department for the last eleven years. Prior to that, she received her doctorate degree at Johns Hopkins University in 2013. In 2019, she published *Last Acts: The Art of Dying on the Early Modern Stage* (Fordham University Press), where she explored not only the theatricality and farcicality of death in the theater of the 15th and 16th centuries, but in the act of death as a whole. In particular, this research is based upon the existence of “death books,” which detailed the correct ways to both prepare and practice for death. Some of her current research is based on earworms (or fragments of words and songs stuck in a character’s head) as a sign of interiority and conscience within Early Modern characters. Some of the classes she currently teaches at Case include the “Renaissance Literature” series – which includes such topics as “Gender and Sexuality” and “Magic and Science” – “Shakespeare and Film,” and survey courses on Shakespearean literature.

Q: Could you start with an introduction for our readers?

A: My name is Maggie Vinter. I’m currently on the tenure track at Case Western Reserve University and I teach Early Modern literature—Early Modern being mostly 16th and 17th-Century British literature. I teach everything by delving into my research. I tend to focus mostly on drama, so Shakespeare and his contemporaries: Shakespeare and friends, if you’d like.

Q: What sparked your interest in Early Modern literature?

A: That’s a hard question. When I was an undergrad and at the beginning of graduate school, I liked reading widely. So, in terms of what I read for pleasure or to educate myself, it included anything medieval or 19th-century onwards. But I always felt that with Early Modern literature, I had more to say. I find it really hard to talk about contemporary literature because I feel too close to it. It’s hard for me to tell what’s important or what’s interesting because it’s too close to how I live. Early Modern literature is unfamiliar enough that it’s easier to get some distance on it and have a sense of the questions that people are asking. It is easier for me to see how they fit into cultural shifts or the political undertones they might have. Also with Shakespeare—the other dramatists too, but particularly with Shakespeare because he’s performed

so much—people are constantly finding ways to pull things out of Shakespeare that are still relevant to contemporary problems. And I don’t think that’s because Shakespeare was this massively prescient person who anticipated everything that came after him, but I think history and older literature can be really helpful for giving you an unexpected angle on the contemporary. In some ways, the same problems just come around. Yet, in other ways, things that are obvious to them are not obvious to us and vice versa, so it’s usefully estranging. For example, both people in the period and now are very interested in female sexuality, what it is, and how you define it. However, the stereotypes about female sexuality are completely different from the Renaissance compared to today. Today it’s generally assumed that—in an oversimplifying manner—men are more interested in sex and women are the less promiscuous gender. You go back to the Renaissance, it’s the opposite. I don’t think it’s a matter of “they were right and we are wrong,” or the other way around, it just makes you appreciate how things you think of as kind of fixed about how the world works are contingent on a particular historical moment and a particular set of beliefs.

Q: What is your favorite piece of Early Modern literature and why?

A: Oh, that’s so hard. Because it depends on my mood. It is

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Shakespeare, and it's very hard to choose between two plays. *King Lear* is the one play that just makes me cry. My interest in *King Lear* is separate from my research interests in that I find *King Lear* so moving and so beautiful that it's very difficult for me to say anything intelligent about it. I just want to sit and marvel at it. I've never written on *King Lear* and I probably never will because it's the one thing I don't want to break by trying to pull it apart.

The other one I love—which I have written about—is a history play called *Richard II*. I love it because of the poetry. It's a weird play because nothing much happens in it. Richard II, in the play, is somewhat of a bad king. He alienates the nobles, and one of the nobles is exiled and comes back to overthrow him. It's a bit of an embarrassing rebellion. There are no battles. There are no big, climactic action scenes in the play. It's just Richard II being really sad that he's lost the throne. But the poetry is just stunning. Just some of those lines that I come back to repeatedly as an expression of grief and just how intricate the imagery can be.

“Earworms are this really weird form of memory, because they're involuntary, like, you don't choose to remember any of them, it just gets in there. And it repeats itself perfectly in the way you're remembering it in your head.”

Q: Building upon that: Oftentimes, when talking about Early Modern literature, other authors are pushed to the side in favor of Shakespeare. In your opinion, what are some Early Modern plays not by Shakespeare that more people should know about?

A: One of them is *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster, which is a really macabre tragedy. Once again, it has really crazy imagery. Some of the poetry is some of the nastiest comparisons yet done in such a beautiful manner. It also contains some weird, absurd details including a werewolf, people doing weird things with body parts, and somebody poisoning somebody else by getting them to kiss a poisoned bible. So it's over-the-top, and gothic, and fun in that way—but at the same time, the language is so good. And it's interesting too because it's about a young widow who's told not to marry again by her brothers—whom she ignores—and marries a social inferior. And she seems happy in her second marriage until her brothers destroy it. So it's a nice image of a

woman trying to assert herself in the face of forces trying to control her.

And then a fun one I like is a Ben Johnson play called *Volpone*. And it is really, actually, genuinely funny. *Volpone* is an old, rich guy with no children who just spends all his time pretending to be deathly sick and people come over and give him presents because they're hoping that he'll leave them money in his will. But he's not actually dying, he's just keeping the presents. So, it's a comedy about dying, which shouldn't be possible in common literary conventions. Johnson is also great at the business of theater. He's skilled at scenes where somebody is hiding in a closet and another comes in at the wrong moment and suddenly they're in a situation where you think, “There's no way he's getting out of this,” and somehow he does.

Q: Building upon your point on dying, I saw that your 2019 book, “Last Acts: The Art of Dying on the Early Modern Stage,” is built on the fact that in Early Modern society, death is not a passive happening, but rather an active statement of performance, and Early Modern plays then reflect that. Could you elaborate on some of your research for the readers?

A: I got really interested in this genre of devotional self-help manuals called *The Arts of Dying*. They're basically how-to-die guides. This is a very odd idea if you're thinking about death in the way most of us in the modern era think about it, which is that death is something that just happens to you, not something you really have any control over. The people in the Early Modern era did not deny death; they knew that you could not choose when you die or how you die, on a certain level, but they still thought it was something you could practice. They still thought you could think about how you're going to approach your death. While you may not succeed, you can try and manage how to die. They're reading these texts and thinking about death in a religious sense, but I also think that it has implications for how they would think about death and action more generally.

Death is what we often think of as the ultimate experience of passivity. Imagining these ways a person can assert themselves when they're dying, is a form of agency in the Early Modern era. Additionally, it's also useful when thinking about the theater. Because theater is a space where nothing actually happens in reality. You think about a tragedy: the whole point of a tragedy is somebody dies at the end. And yet, in reality, nobody dies at the end. If somebody dies at the end, something's gone wrong. And when you're acting out dying, you're just lying on the stage doing nothing. But you're still

acting because being alive is in itself an act. My argument in the book was that people in the era used these ways of performing death to think about other sorts of actions they may or may not take. How can you act in a religious world where there doesn't seem to be a lot of room for free will and most actions are predetermined by God, or how can you act in various political situations where you really don't have any sort of political power? And how can you act in these emerging proto-capitalist economies which seem to give all the power to institutions and not leave much for individuals? That was the theory I was building on and then I ended with some stuff trying to connect that to how we think about dying today and the ways in which people do or don't imagine death is something you can have an effect over.

Q: There have been various debates, specifically in Early Modern scholarship, between historicism and presentism. Could you give your insight into the conversation?

A: I'm going to be annoyingly even-handed, right? I think there's all sorts of things about early modern texts, which you can only understand if you pay attention to the history. There's a play by Thomas Middleton called *The Game of Chess*, which is the biggest hit of the Jacobean Theatre. It's about a chess game where all the characters are different chess pieces. What it's really about is the effort of James's son to secure a marriage with a Spanish Princess. So all the chess pieces are standing in for real people in the period. It was disguised as a chess game to get past the censors. Like I said, it was enormously popular because nobody ever did topical political satire. But, eventually, after the authorities take way too long to figure out what it's actually about, they shut it down. And the guy who wrote it, Thomas Middleton, was never allowed to write anything for performances again. So you don't understand that at all unless you dig into the history. So there's a certain base level of needing the history to understand certain things.

At the same time, if the only reason something is interesting is because of its history, why bother reading it? If people want to, or people are just interested in costumes in a particular acting company and in the 1620s, they're gonna read all sorts of bad plays because they're revealing about the costuming. More power to them, if they're interested in that. But I'm only really interested in stuff if the questions it's raising feel relevant to me. I think, like a lot of us, it's hard to get excited about something if you don't feel a connection to it. And it doesn't have to be a literal connection. It doesn't have to be like a political connection or a topical connection, but you've got to care about something for some reason. So there are critical responses to plays that are explicitly situated next to

contemporary politics. People that are writing about Julius Caesar and Trump or something similar. And they're all people who were kind of more obliquely like, it's in the wake of George Floyd like there's been a real outpouring of very good work on race in the Renaissance. Like how Shakespeare and other playwrights are depicting race. And it's not directly responding to the current situation. But it's like it's a question people only become interested in because they're aware of its importance in their lives. So yeah, I think you have to kind of keep one foot in the present and keep it relevant and one for the history, or you're just going to misunderstand some things would be my take.

Q: Are there any key misconceptions about either Early Modern literature or Early Modern society as a whole, especially when it pertains to your research or interests?

A: So here's the one I would say. And I think this is not just about modern conceptions of early modern history. This is about any earlier period. There's always a tendency to oversimplify, and we're all guilty. I'm guilty of this sometimes, too. You know, if you think about an audience at Shakespeare's theater, you can fit a couple of 1000 people into one of those theaters, you can pack them up really tight, right? And there's going to be a whole range of opinions in that space. It's not like everybody in Elizabethan England thinks the same way about anything. You're gonna have a range of opinions. And you know, what's going to be the most common default opinion is going to be very different to what it will be after. And if you assembled a similar number of people in an oval auditorium, there's always going to be a range of opinions. So I think just being aware that these audiences were mixed is important.

And then the other thing is that people weren't stupid, right? It's always tempting to think so. And I do this to write about a kind of caricature people and think, "Yeah, they thought about this, they thought that the sun goes around the earth, and the body is full of four humors. And, if you hang out too many times, under the wrong type of stars, you get bad influences, and then you get influenza." And then the subtext is like, "Weren't they idiots?" But they're thinking in really sophisticated ways about other stuff. They're making really fine distinctions, often in theology, which most of us don't have the vocabulary for anymore. Even science, when it's from our perspective, is objectively wrong. They're doing their best to reconcile the evidence they have about how the world around them works and trying to form a reasonable hypothesis. So, I want to try and show them respect. Even when their ideas are wrong, or when they seem apparent to me, I want to hold them out to say, well, let's try and think

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about why people thought like this. Let's try and think about this: is there anything useful in this way of thinking, even if the conclusions are wrong? Or, if nothing else, is there a cautionary lesson to us about how you can be so certain that something is the case when in fact, the opposite is the case?

Q: Especially when it comes to students interested in following the path of a literary researcher, yeah. How do you find what you want to focus on in your next research? Do you actively search the works that you've read or do you read for new types of interpretations? Or is it a more naturalistic way in which you just find that pattern somehow?

A: You get a certain reputation for doing a certain type of scholarship and every so often, somebody will write to you and say, "Can you write something about 'x'?" And then you have to go away and do a bit of research, make strategic decisions about, "Okay, what text haven't I talked about yet, which might talk about this matter? How can I think of something new to say about this?" And I do that. But I don't think that's where my best ideas or my best writing comes from. Yet I notice a pattern that bugs me. Quite often, I'll think I'm writing about one thing. And I just have to explain this bit first, then I can write about the thing I care about. But then you end up going off on a tangent and down the rabbit hole. There was an essay I had published at the beginning of this year that took me a couple of years to write because I'm a slow writer. And when I first started writing, I thought I was writing about people quoting Shakespeare. So, I first was going to write about people imitating Shakespeare or quoting him in later works. But then I needed to write about Shakespeare quoting people first. I was arriving to know I needed to do that. And then somehow it morphed into a project about earworms. I just got really, really interested in earworms. So now I have all of this stuff about Early Modern earworms in *Hamlet*. Such as how people were thinking about songs or fragments of speech getting stuck in somebody's head and moving between people and how they were conceptualizing that. It was a very kind of circuitous process. But what I thought I was writing and what I actually wrote turned out to be different texts with different subjects and different conclusions.

"But you're still acting because being alive is in itself an act."

Q: The earworm paper is particularly interesting. Could you elaborate on that?

A: If you think about most sorts of memory, like remembering a person or if you remember a novel or a play, it's a composite

memory. You're pulling together a lot of memories from different moments from when you've known that person or that place, or that novel, you're synthesizing stuff, which happens all over it. Earworms are this really weird form of memory, because they're involuntary, like, you don't choose to remember any of them, it just gets in there. And it repeats itself perfectly in the way you're remembering it in your head. Musicologists have done studies on this: As long as it's more or less the same pitch, the same speed, the same instruments. It's just replaying itself. And people haven't really talked a lot about earworms before recorded music. Most of the study of the study of them has been about recorded music. Later they see this and there does seem to be some sort of affinity between songs you can listen to repeatedly and how easy it is to get them stuck in your head. Then, somebody's singing a song, maybe they're singing it a slightly different way every time. But, you can find a few instances where people are talking about earworms. In Early Modern plays, the most famous example is *Othello* with Desdemona. She complained about getting a song stuck in her head, and then she started singing it. I was interested in thinking about what they are and what they do because they seem to have this interesting double function. One of these is connecting some of the stuff we're talking about in class today. One of the things they do is they suggest interiority. If somebody's getting something stuck in their head, they certainly have a head to get things stuck in. And often there's this temptation to read them symptomatically like, "Oh, you've got this song stuck in your head, because it's related to this thing you're worrying about". But, then there are also ways in which they seem purely mechanical if somebody's playing it over and over themselves. You've kind of turned into a recording device like the music has kind of hijacked you and made you empty. So, I was interested in how snippets of words and music are passed between different characters. When some characters get earworms stuck in their head, it's evidence that these characters are kind of deep. For other characters, when they get earworms stuck in their head, it is evidence that they're mad or stupid. Sometimes, even the same piece of music will pass between two people and one of them is a deep character and one of them is stupid. So, I was basically trying to think about earworms and characters.

Q: Thinking about the class you taught last semester, *Gender and Sexuality in Renaissance Literature*, how would you describe the interplay of gender in the plays—or general literature—at the time for our readers?

A: I mean, it's complicated and this is only scratching the surface. I think there's something there. This gets to the presentism I was talking about earlier, too. In the last 20 to 30

years, there's been a cultural shift in how we talk about gender. People are moving away from essentialist models of gender. That gender is kind of innate and tied to your body. They're more interested in non-binary genders, and they're interested in the ways in which gender can be performed and kind of fluid. People who talk about this often position themselves against the past where gender was seen as very essentialist. They're basically talking about the Victorians because they did have quite an essentialist vision of gender. They're like men and women in an innately different way. I think Early Modern gender is really interesting to go back to because people did seem to think of it as quite fluid. But it didn't enable the sorts of political liberation that we're seeing that people are saying that the contemporary kind of gender fluidity promises. People sort of say, "We can kind of escape these sexist binaries." People can express masculinity or femininity or be a gender in whatever way they want. This frees us from certain patriarchal structures. To massively oversimplify fluidity, in the Early Modern era, it's largely supported by examples such as structures. Gender is fluid, and anybody can kind of be a man or anybody could be a woman. Therefore, you have

"I got really interested in this genre of devotional self-help manuals called *The Arts of Dying*. They're basically how-to-die guides."

to really double down on rigid gender roles or everything's going to fall apart. That's not monolithic. That's the dominant cultural take on it. But then, there are all sorts of interesting opportunities for gender play. What's interesting to me is that we've taken this as politically liberatory, though they manifest in other forms when they're sometimes oppressive.

Q: When it comes to your research, is it important to focus on both, literary works, and historical and religious texts? How would you represent the interplay that takes part in your research?

A: I always feel like my primary commitment is to write about texts that are good. I want to write about stuff that moves me in some way and is always beautiful. Oh, you know, every so often I'll read a piece of theology where—I'm not a religious person, but sometimes I'll read it and I'll say, "Wow, that's kind of profound and fascinating." For me, it's always bringing in history and bringing in theology or philosophy or whatever it is to help me understand the literature better. The payoff is if it helps me see something a little bit surer that articulates something in the literature.

Q: Oftentimes, contemporary readers find themselves lost when approaching early modern literature and thus avoid it. How would you recommend new readers approach this genre given the daunting language and writing style?

A: It's tough. I really try to be sympathetic, because it's a person. It takes a lot of practice. I have a lot of practice so I can read this genre more quickly. But I think don't be too scared. I mean, this is easy for me to say. Just the more you read, the easier it gets. The worst that can happen is you're going to misunderstand something. It's not like you're doing neurosurgery and you're going to kill someone, the worst that's going to happen is you might slightly misinterpret *Othello*. You probably won't. You'll probably understand what's going on. I think watching it if you have access to live theater or to recorded theater can be a really helpful avenue because performances are really good at kind of giving emphasis to certain words or using body language, or stage business to kind of clarify the meaning. This is a nice thing about the internet: there are so many film versions of plays available. If poetry is one of the hardest things for you, such as Early Modern lyric poetry which is very dense, the only thing I can suggest is to treat it like a puzzle. If you're somebody who likes crosswords or video games or something very dense like that. I remember when I was first learning to read John Donne, which was the one who stood out to me, sitting down with a poem for 45 minutes and just reading it and reading it and reading it and I was trying to comprehend it. Eventually, it all just kind of clicks into shape. It's so satisfying when it does it. So make it fun for yourself in the way that a logic puzzle is fun.

Q: Additionally, from the lectures that I've heard in your class, something that I've noticed is your interest in early modern adaptation of the early modern world. First, I would like to ask you: What role do you think adaptations of early modern works played both within themselves and in the popular consciousness? On top of that, I would like to ask you about your favorite adaptation.

A: I'm actually teaching a course on Shakespeare and its adaptation at the moment, which has been fun. I think adaptation has always been part of early modern theatre. For most of Shakespeare, and certainly for a lot of other playwrights, there are a lot of the plots are stolen from somewhere else. A lot of the plays themselves are adaptations. It's a literary culture that doesn't put as much value on originality as ours does. So it's like writing a really good translation of something or reworking a Greek myth or something similar that was seen as better to do than to come up with an original plot because those ideas are

tried and tested. “Who are you to come up with a new plot, you’re probably no good at it” is one of the dominant ways of thinking about this in that period. People have been adapting Shakespeare since the 1660s. It’s always been part of what Shakespeare is. Everybody’s remaking it for their own moment. With the concept of a 21st-century idea, we should be relatively true to Shakespeare’s original texts. Those are actually the historical documents. That’s a strange way of thinking. I like adaptations. There are very few straight adaptations of Shakespeare that I enjoy. But, the more creative ones, which take it into new kinds of cultural spaces, show me new things about the place. Theorist Doug Lanier talks about this often. There’s a traditional way of thinking about adaptation in terms of fidelity, where you think about how *Hamlet* is the tree, and all the adaptations are the branches, and we can assess an adaptation by how close or how similar it is to *Hamlet*. But in *Hamlet*, it is always the dominant texts and all the adaptations that are lesser echoes. He’s like, “Why we can’t think of all of the adaptations and handbooks listed together in a kind of web where everything is equally important?” One could say an adaptation is more or less similar to *Hamlet*, but one could also say this adaptation makes me think about *Hamlet* in a new way or adds another possibility to *Hamlet*. I was teaching a short story by Margaret Atwood titled “Gertrude Talks Back” and it is about Gertrude in the closet scene from *Hamlet*, but it’s solely her talking and it ends with her saying, “Oh, yes, I killed Claudius,” which obviously isn’t canonical. That’s not what happens in Shakespeare. But, the fact that that now exists creates new possibilities for the story. I think that’s always productive. In terms of my favorite Shakespeare adaptation, or Early Modern literature—actually, well, most adaptations are Shakespeare because everybody else gets shafted. It’s hard to adapt if people don’t know the original. It all depends on my mood. But, there’s a Japanese film, “Ran”, which is an adaptation of *King Lear* as a samurai movie, which I love.

“Somebody poisoning somebody else by getting them to kiss a poisoned bible.”

Q: Finally, do you have any advice for any students interested in either more Early Modern literature or literary research as a whole?

A: Yeah, just read a lot. I know that’s boring. Just read as much as you can, and read widely. People make the mistake of trying to specialize too quickly. If you read Dickens and Dickens’s criticism, it’s not going to be directly relevant, but the people who were writing about Dickens are going to have a slightly different approach to the people who are writing

about Shakespeare. And you could employ that approach and benefit from knowing more. But yeah, we read a lot. That’s really basically what you have to do. If you’re at Case Western Reserve University, read books and go look at the Special Collections. They’re so cool. I don’t study a lot of history of books, but being able to actually touch texts from the period, is not necessarily giving you any textual information you can’t get anywhere else, yet it feels like a certain form of connection, and he would encourage you to look at text you wouldn’t think of picking up before because that’s what’s available.

Q: Yeah. Again, we don’t have any first folios. Yeah, well, I think that’s about it. Thanks so much. This was fun.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity with Dr. Vinter’s consent.

A Selection of Dr. Vinter’s Work

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