

SAA Seminar 25: Representing Women and Politics in Jacobean England

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Seminar Abstracts

Mary Adams, “The trope of Illegitimacy in some entertainments of 1613”

My paper will examine the notions of (un)chastity and illegitimacy in several works composed in 1613, chiefly among them Middleton’s *Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *All is True* (Henry VIII). My purpose will be to show that these plays, which have little else in common, both problematize legitimacy as part of a quarrel with succession and alliance as instruments of power and abuse of power. I will look at other works composed by these authors around the same time, particularly Middleton’s mayor’s show *The Triumph of Truth* and his show commemorating the New Rivers project. I’ll also discuss how contemporary events—particularly the Howard/Carr nullity scandal, Prince Henry’s death and Princess Elizabeth’s marriage, middle class unrest, and King James I’s expansion of absolute power and corresponding devaluation of aristocratic titles—helped trigger this concern with legitimacy.

Several authors have already looked at the association of female sexual promiscuity with economic chaos and debased currency in a *Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, a play in which sex and economics are intertwined. However, though all children of this play are illegitimate, legitimacy itself has gone largely unexamined. In his 1613 Lord Mayor’s Show, Middleton suggests that because London is the mother of the mayor, he owes her the filial duty of resisting economic temptation (in the form of the promiscuous Envy), especially bribery from aristocrats at the expense of the guild craftsmen. In this way, Middleton shows that a true son of London is one who resists corruption. In a *Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, a play of the same year, Middleton links genetic chaos with economic collusion of the classes.

In the same year, Shakespeare’s *All is True* dramatizes the choice, hinging on the rightfulness of Henry VIII’s marriages to Katherine and Anne Boleyn, that led to the disenfranchisement of the Catholics in favor of Elizabeth Tudor and her Stuart heirs. At a time when the future of the royal family, like that of the Shakespeare family’s own male line, was once again in doubt, Shakespeare forces us to question legitimacy’s central role in inheritance if it can be negotiated by law and revised by history.

Cristina León Alfar, “Resisting Domestic and State Authority: Katherine in Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *King Henry VIII*”

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the narrative and dramatic arc of William Shakespeare’s and John Fletcher’s *King Henry VIII* (*All is True*) is that it ought really to have been called *Wolsey and Katherine*, or, more anachronistically, *Wolsey versus Katherine*. So much of the play is dedicated to their confrontations, all dominated by Katherine, with the rest of the plot as either merely anticipatory of more important business between these two antagonists or as a kind of bookend. Katherine’s reply to the accusations brought against her by Henry along with her response to the prospect of

losing her place as Queen show her entirely undaunted by her husband, his allies, and legal proceedings. But the play also makes Katherine's participation in her husband's business particularly powerful, so that her influence becomes a threat that Wolsey fights as ruthlessly as he might that of any other male adversary. Katherine's testimony offers an important historical and dramatic moment in which a woman both rebels against and reaffirms her subjection to masculinist power. Unafraid of Wolsey's power or of the anger of her husband and King, Katherine resists the rhetoric of the case against the legitimacy of her marriage, rejects the court's authority over her, and while she cannot stop the process, she refuses to assist or submit to it. Consequently, she calls attention to the political nature of the trial and passes over its putative religious context, resisting the power of the men in the room and shifting the dramatic force of Shakespeare's play (not to mention the historical record of Henry's reign); at the same time, she uses the opportunity to reassert her role as virtuous and honorable wife to the king. In addition, Katherine's influence over her husband in this play, specifically in regard to his misplaced (in her view) trust in Cardinal Wolsey, resembles efforts (successful I might note) of Anne of Denmark, King James' Queen. I will suggest, in line with others—most notably Susan Frye—that the play appears to be in a kind of dialogue with Jacobean politics and Queen Anne's ability to have an effect on James' council appointments. The play's structure—which stages the descent of both Wolsey and Katherine in consecutive scenes as well as Katherine's death as a kind of exalted alternative to Wolsey's own—can be read as in dialogue with Queen Anne's victorious ascent after the defeat of Rochester, whose own death came after his descent into obscurity. In contrast to Frye, however, I see the conflict between Katherine and Wolsey as central to the play's political spectacle.

Valerie Billing, “Gender, Size, and Politics in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*”

Volumnia, one of two maternal figures in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, inspires violence, revulsion, and submission in the other characters and receives credit for both the joy and tragedy of the ending when she persuades Coriolanus not to attack his home city Rome, a decision that saves many lives but results in Coriolanus's assassination. Her name invokes associations with voluminous size that invite us to picture her as being of Amazonian stature; indeed, her violent speech and her relentless pursuit of her son's and Rome's glory show that she, at the very least, talks a big talk. This paper will argue that Volumnia intervenes in Roman politics by asserting her large size over her physically and politically powerful son. She reminds Coriolanus of her authority when she performs largeness with her rhetoric and by positioning herself beside his small son, and she uses this authority to assert her political will and to gain a form of martial glory to which she, as a woman, would not normally have access.

Yan Brailowsky, “Resenting and representing female kingship in the early years of Jacobean England” (provisional title)

In Elizabethan England, challenging gynocracy was fraught with danger, as shown by the manner in which the Queen reacted after John Knox's ill-timed pamphlet against female rule, *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstruous Regiment of Women*, published in 1558. After the Virgin Queen's death in 1603, however, the situation changed radically, unshackling the imagination of poets and playwrights. They could

now more openly portray murderous female monarchs, notably those taken from British history. Shakespeare, for instance, revisited national history by staging evil queens in succession. This paper will explore the manner in which these and other early Jacobean plays explored the differences between gynocracy and patriarchy. This paper will also underline the differences between these plays with murderous queens and (fawning) court masques written for Anne of Denmark.

Jessica Dell, “Exiting Stage Left: Female Agency in William Rowley’s *The Birth of Merlin*”

Authored by William Rowley (possibly in collaboration with William Shakespeare), *The Birth of Merlin, or, the Child Hath Found His Father* (1622) explores the violence male rulers are capable of inflicting on their female counterparts. In each of the play’s three main plotlines male characters band together in order to aggressively (and permanently) segregate and/or imprison the play’s four female characters for no other reason than that they have the audacity to pursue their own beliefs and convictions, rather than meekly submit to male governance. Although at first glance the play appears to be no more than a patriotic piece that attempts to venerate British myths and promote nation building, on closer inspection (I’d like to argue) it simultaneously offers audiences a cynical commentary on England’s political and religious anxieties concerning women and power in the early 1620s. While Rowley brutally punishes the supposed sins of his female characters he deliberately highlights the blatant insincerity of the men, leaving their transgressions an unresolved problem. In doing so he ironically comments on the political hypocrisy that too frequently casts strong female figureheads as scapegoats for larger more universal crimes. While the men succeed in isolating the women in the play, each of the women in turn embrace and redefine their banishment so that they (rather than their opponents) control how audiences interpret their final exit from the stage. In this pseudo-history, therefore, even as the annals of history attempt to remove these women from the events being chronicled, their absences instead become sites for further resistance and protest.

Yvonne Hann, “‘This Insubstantial Pageant’: The Subversion of Marriage in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*”

Arguably, one of most meta-theatrical moments in William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is the betrothal masque (4.1) that Prospero creates for Miranda and Ferdinand. It is at the end of this masque when Prospero makes his famous speech about himself as “creator” of the circumstances of the play, linking his own manipulation of those on the island with the larger stage of the outside world. While highlighting Prospero’s status as “playwright,” the betrothal masque can also be seen as an important element in reading how women and marriage, specifically the politically motivated alliance marriage, are presented in the text. I will argue that the betrothal masque, often critically noted as the piece that sets in motion the play’s ending of reconciliation and recovery, contains within it a subversion of the view of women as political pawns as well as the ideology of marriage itself. This subversion can be found with a closer look at the representative duality of the classical goddesses. While Juno and Ceres are both identified with the

positive aspects of women, marriage, and fertility, their own mythology also encompasses the more negative side of the position of women in marriage including adultery and rape. This duality is echoed through other seeming discordant elements in the play including the marriage of Claribel, the references to Dido, the character of Sycorax, and the antimasque where Ariel appears as a harpy. Like Gonzalo's construction of a utopian "commonwealth" (2.1), the betrothal masque can be seen to undercut the very ideology of women and marriage it purports to celebrate.

Megan M. Inbody, "Gossips in *Swetnam the Women-Hater*"

Gossip communities were one of the primary methods of women's social identification in early modern England. The perception of the gossips in late medieval and early modern England was one fraught with competing notions of gossip communities as crucial for successful childbirth and as sites that fomented female rebelliousness. Generally, depictions of gossips during these eras are negative – they are lazy, combative, drunken women who gather in alehouses to denigrate their husbands. Up until the early seventeenth century, gossips were totally focused on the private functions of the domestic.

This essay explores public roles not traditionally associated with the gossip community and tracks a change in the representation of gossip communities beginning in the second decade of the seventeenth century as groups less invested in private function and more devoted to presenting a public intellectual presence in society. The essay examines the anonymous 1620 *Swetnam the Woman-hater, Arraigned by Women*. The comedy's subplot stages Joseph Swetnam being brought to trial by a group of women for his slanderous offences against the female gender. The gossip community finds him guilty and he is made to recant. The play serves as a useful bridge between the emphasis on female physicality that is such a part of the earlier representation of gossip communities and the later move towards larger issues of social justice. The women in *Swetnam Arraigned* advocate for gender equality with a high degree of articulation and sophistication, but the punishment they devise for Swetnam is to stab him offstage with needles until he recants, an apparent return to the low physical comedic representation of gossips. The play stages the dramatic tension between women's physicality and their increasing demand for an intellectual public role, one of the major arguments in the *querelle des femmes*, or "the woman question," a genre of writing (usually pamphlet) in which the superiority of one sex or the other is debated. Gossips, with their ability to function both inside and outside patriarchy, and their concomitant representations as the embodiments of physical excess and the preservers of domestic order, are uniquely suited to explore this tension.

Devori Kimbro, "Weaker Vessels': Recusancy and the Allegory of England's Seduction in Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess* (1624) and John Gee's *A Foot out of the Snare* (1624)"

Royal marriage negotiations between James I of England and Spain in the 1620s caused an uproar amongst the island nation's Protestant citizenry. Nearly a century of anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish angst exploded in England's presses, resulting in tracts like John Gee's *A Foot out of the Snare* (1624). Like so many Protestant polemicists, Gee attempts to lay open for his audience the scheming ways of Catholics, particularly Jesuit priests, by describing the ways in which they attempt to find unwary converts and thus subvert England's spiritual and political strength. Tracts describing the recusancy of the English public rarely demonstrated the wider political implications of recusancy, but spent much of their time implicating women as the most likely subjects to re-convert to Catholicism. Thomas Middleton's popular allegorical play, *A Game at Chess*, premiered on the London stage the same year as Gee's tract was published. Clearly depicting the English-Spanish marriage negotiations through its chess game structure, Middleton's White Queen's Pawn, a representation of the Protestant English nation, suffers her own conversion temptations at the hands of treacherous Jesuits. In staging his recusancy plots around such an important allegorical figure, Middleton highlights popular thinking about the conflation of gender, politics, and religion in Jacobean England. In short – England's religio-political future would dangerously be mitigated through the bodies of its “weakest” citizens – women.

Allison Machlis Meyer, “the spirit of a man and malice of a woman’: Margaret of Burgundy in Francis Bacon’s *The History of King Henry the Seventh*”

This paper will investigate Francis Bacon's depiction of Margaret of Burgundy—the sister of Edward IV and Richard III and the aunt of Henry VII's wife Elizabeth York—in his 1622 *The History of King Henry the Seventh*. Critical accounts of Margaret in *The History* have previously understood her influence as ineffectual and her representation as a parody of witchcraft. However, Margaret is repeatedly represented in *The History* as an influential member of Henry's royal family who drives many of the crucial events of Henry's reign, including his conflicts with two pretenders to the Yorkist throne, Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck. Bacon's own descriptions of Margaret position her as a worthy and somewhat similar political opponent to Henry, critique Henry's responses to her as examples of his inadequate diplomacy, and subtly refute tropes that seek to downplay her political influence in favor of a familiar monstrous mother narrative. Previously treated as incidental or as indicative evidence of Henry's characterization, Margaret's role in *The History* in fact reveals Henry's relationships with his female kin to be a central political concern for Bacon's Henry VII. Bacon's *History*, written to impress and instruct King James I, thus substantially explores the impact of historical royal women's political engagements on the monarchy.

Gloria Olchow, “Belly Politics in *Coriolanus*”

The paper “Belly Politics in *Coriolanus*” provides a historically specific analysis of the “belly” stories with which Shakespeare's play *Coriolanus* begins. The paper starts with a succinct review of the great variety of criticism on the play, which examines *Coriolanus* in terms of political, economic, psychoanalytic, familial, and theatrical issues. It then brings other historical materials to bear on the understanding of the play—that is,

specifically on the “belly” stories in the play—and, in doing so, engages and begins to extend all of the major critical readings of the play. These historical materials concern the versions of motherhood in contention at the time the play was written and performed: the expansive “incarnational” and “calculative” forms of motherhood inherited from the medieval period and the enclosed form of the “new motherhood” promoted by the reformers. Considering the multiple constructions of the body politic in *Coriolanus*—all of which focus on the belly, the site of both the womb and the stomach—in relation to the clash of the radically different paradigms for the very meaning of motherhood and the matters of material need versus superfluity helps to illuminate the political and economic ramifications of the variable treatments of words, food, body, son, mother, and the gods in the “belly” stories, as well as within and between the characters and the countries in the rest of this Shakespearean play.

Thongrob Ruenbanthoeng, “I say she’s dead- I will swear’t”’: Paulina’s Rhetorical Triumph in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*”

This paper explores the representation of female speech in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. It can be seen that Hermione’s courtly speech is entirely appropriate but it is shown in the play to be singularly unsuccessful. She fails to convince Leontes of her innocence in the trial scene. The paper argues that by presenting the failure of the gracious and courteous language of female characters in the play, *The Winter’s Tale* tries to challenge the Renaissance rhetorical culture which encourages a woman to keep silence or use only courteous, civil language. In contrast is Paulina’s language which has unexpected medicinal properties in healing Leontes’ psychological infection. Paulina is the only female character in the play whose voice is listened to even though her speech is far from courteous and gracious. I will examine her language including the rhetorical figures and tropes: rhetorical questions and sarcasm in order to explain why her speeches contain therapeutic properties. Paulina successfully uses her blatantly hostile and mocking language and Shakespeare again questions the rhetorical tradition of female speech which is based on the Renaissance patriarchal assumption. The representation of female speech in this play, I would argue, reflects the Renaissance rhetorical culture which is an unstable and highly contested site.

Amy Scott-Douglass, “Patron of Malfi Still: The Rival Woman Sovereign in Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Webster”

Queen Isabella, Titania, and the Duchess of Malfi engage against men in battles for sovereignty by stressing their double ability to create—both as *mothers*, by giving birth to children, and as *patrons*, by creating courtiers. In *Edward II*, Queen Isabella identifies her husband’s misplaced patronage as the chief cause of the wars and the country’s decline and as evidence of his inability to govern, and she herself begins to act as sovereign by claiming the right to patronize her subjects and by keeping her child, the heir to the throne, close to her side. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Titania and Oberon’s battle over the changeling boy is not simply a lover’s quarrel but, rather, a war for sovereignty between two rival patrons, and, fittingly, Titania’s arguments are filled with images of pregnancy and conception that celebrate the maternal power to create. In *The Duchess of*

Malfi, the title character purposefully sets herself up as superior model of sovereignty to her brothers based primarily upon her choice to bestow patronage as a reward for merit rather than flattery. She then attempts to create her ideal court by taking advantage of her ability to give life, not only as a patron but also as a mother. Marlowe and Shakespeare depict a woman sovereign whose sudden wantonness renders her unable to choose judiciously as a patron, and both playwrights end by reinstating patronage as the rightful domain of men. For an explanation as to why Webster is so remarkably different from his contemporaries and his sources, I consider the playwright's discussion of sovereignty and patronage in his funeral elegy to Prince Henry (1613) and his dedication to George Berkeley (1623).

Jayne M. Yeo, "Mightie Monarch both of heav'n and earth": Aemilia Lanyer's Theory of Sovereignty

Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* has been read as a critique of masculinist power in Jacobean England that espouses a female-centered theology. And yet, Lanyer's vision of power also converses directly with theories of sovereignty that Stuart politics had inherited from Tudor England. This essay contextualizes Lanyer's religious poem against the backdrop of radical Protestant resistance to Jacobean divine right by examining how her work both draws on and challenges sixteenth-century "resistance theory," represented by authors such as John Knox, Christopher Goodman, and George Buchanan. Their work provides a lens for re-reading Lanyer's sometimes problematic understandings of female power and aristocratic privilege as shaped within controversies over kingship that spread through sixteenth and early-seventeenth century England.

While Lanyer's work implicitly relies on common arguments in favor of resistance, including the necessity of a just government and the viability of popular rebellion, at the same time, it also rejects key features of particular theorists, such as Knox's anti-feminism or Buchanan's popular sovereignty. Lanyer's refusal to conform to any one particular theory ultimately opens the door to an alternative vision of sovereignty—one that takes literally Christ's role as "King of Heaven, and Monarch of the Earth." This theocratic vision provides religious justification for populist female rebellion authorized by God, while it also creates the enabling conditions for the centralization and class privilege that have been criticized in Lanyer's work. Lanyer's vision might best be read, therefore, not as an anticipation of modern ethical liberalism so much as a critique of early modern governance. Her work finally exposes the systemic inadequacies of early modern sovereignty by demonstrating that monarchy can only be successfully administered in its most idealized—and impossible—political-theological form.

Georgianna Ziegler, "Favors, Gifts, and Jewels: the Liberality of a Stuart Princess"

In her book *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France*, Natalie Zemon Davis describes the origins of early modern giving in both the spiritual sense of blessings from God, and the secular sense of reciprocity, along with obligation and liberality. Following from my previous work on Elizabeth Stuart, daughter of James I, I examine in this paper the concept of reciprocity in her early life, focusing on both familial and what I'll call

professional relationships. By professional I mean relationships with members of her household, her servants, and outsiders who enter her sphere. My paper considers how she, as a female child, learned about her obligations to render largesse and in turn to sue for favor, since women were very much a part of this system, both as patrons and clients. Much of what she learned came through personal experience, dealing with family, courtiers, and citizens who paid her homage, and here I use evidence from historical records, letters, and accounts. In addition, I explore how the concept of gift-giving figures in court masques where Elizabeth would have participated. I end by looking closely at *Othello*, one of six Shakespearean plays performed at her wedding to Frederick, Elector Palatine, in 1613, and at an exchange with her father after the marriage involving her gift of jewels.