

**2019 Seminar Abstracts: Performing Women/Performing Gender in the  
Age of Shakespeare and Beyond  
Melinda Gough, McMaster University**

**Respondent:**

**Peter Parolin, University of Wyoming**

**“Playing Gender: Toward a Quantitative Comparison of Female Roles in  
Shakespeare and Lope de Vega”**

**David Amelang, Freie Universität Berlin**

One of the major differences between the otherwise very similar commercial theatrical cultures of Renaissance Spain and England was that, whereas in England the female roles were performed by young cross-dressed boys, in Spain female performers were prominent figures in their industry. Indeed, actresses in Golden Age Spain played an active role in the creative process of theater-making, and could rise to lead their own acting companies and even write their own plays. With this distinctive factor in mind, this article comparatively explores from a quantitative standpoint how Lope de Vega and Shakespeare, two leading dramatists in their respective countries, depicted female characters in their plays. The number of lines pronounced by female characters as opposed to male ones in the dramatic works of these two playwrights indicates a significant disparity between the two, which in turn might suggest that the presence and absence of actresses in one and another theatrical culture directly affected the amount of speech, protagonism and agency allocated to female characters in their plays.

**“Queen Elinor’s Voice: Considering Ballads as Female Performance”**

**Hailey Bachrach, King’s College London**

One form of women’s performance the average early modern English person likely encountered with some frequency was the singing of ballads. As Bruce R. Smith writes, ballad performance blurred gender roles by offering the opportunity for first-person identification with and performance of a variety of subject positions with a single song (Smith 2005: 301). Like Smith, Clare McManus draws upon Desdemona’s willow song in *Othello* to consider the relationship between feminized ballad and boy actor, arguing that the onstage performance of ballads by female characters like Desdemona may have served not only to supplant, but to intentionally out-do any theoretical female performer of the same song, be they Italian actresses or English street-singers (2015: 114). But how might the ballad’s feminine associations have transferred to theatrical characters who do not themselves sing onstage, but are depictions of characters who also appear in ballads? How is a boy’s performance of a female role transformed by the knowledge that audiences may also have experienced (or themselves performed) the same character in a woman’s voice? This paper will take popular ballad subject Elinor of Aquitaine and Shakespeare’s *King John* as a case study to explore how this facet of the relationship between stage and song might have been used to generate a kind of female presence through reminders of its absence on the early modern professional stage.

**“Unsex Me Here:”  
Gender-Swapping in Adirondack Shakespeare Company’s 2017 *Macbeth*”**

**Tara Bradway, St. John’s University/Adirondack Shakespeare Company**

This paper addresses the question of how theatrical practitioners approach the plays of Shakespeare in contemporary stagings, specifically a 2017 production of *Macbeth* by Adirondack Shakespeare Company in which a cisgender woman (Simone Stadler) played the title role and a cisgender man (Sean Lounsbury) played the role of Lady Macbeth. The text of the play was not altered to accommodate the gender of the actors; rather the actors were tasked with playing the gender of the characters as written. I begin the essay by examining the play’s fascination with and anxiety about gender and by describing my reasons for gender-swapping in the casting process. I consider the ways in which the text itself invites this cross-gender casting (Lady Macbeth’s “undaunted mettle,” the continual shaking of Macbeth’s “single state of man”), as well as the ways in which cross-gender casting complicates the play’s presentation of masculinity and femininity and perhaps even antagonizes readings of the manly woman and the effeminate man. As I prepare to cast a 2019 production of *Macbeth*, I invite consideration about swapping the roles of Macbeth and the Lady in alternating performances. More broadly, I question how contemporary productions of early modern plays featuring cross-gender casting can support a continued dialogue about gender identity and fluidity and what responsibility professional theatre companies have to foster opportunities for performing women as well as other marginalized communities.

**“Desdemona’s Impossible Performance: Abject Testimony in *Othello*”**

**Katelyn McCarthy, University of Minnesota**

Desdemona’s final words take up the question of women’s testimony as failed performance. *Othello* includes depictions of brutal violence against Desdemona as well as the moments when her testimony fails to save her. One way to parse her fate is to insist that she is a lesson about how the patriarchy ultimately convinces women of their own complicity. I argue instead that Desdemona’s fate is the result of a more complex story, one that shares the contours of the experiences of early modern women who attempted to testify to—to perform—their experiences of domestic and sexual violence. I turn to Garthine Walker’s crucial study of the adjudication of rape in early modern England, which articulates the ways in which women who testified to their violations risked suggesting consent; however, if they foregrounded their struggle against their abusers, they risked marking themselves as unruly women. Thus, women tended to elide details of their experiences because in performing their stories of violence—in *testifying*—women often implicated themselves. Further, I turn to Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection in order to argue that Othello’s belief in Desdemona’s impure body marks her as abject and unassimilable, thereby preventing her from testifying to her faithfulness. Finally, I argue that Desdemona *recognizes* that her performed testimony will always implicate her, first refusing to testify (“Nobody”), then reiterating the logic of the system (“I myself”).

**“The Profanely Erotic Bridegroom Passages in  
Aemilia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*”**

**Susan O’Hara, Georgian Court University**

My research focuses on moments in static poetry where the author is overly dramatic thus setting up a performance, a performance which usually signals some type of satire or parody of an important issue at hand. Arguing against many critics like Barbara Lewalski and Wendy Wall who posit that Aemilia Lanyer was a devout, pious Protestant, I focus on the biblical *Song of Songs* derived Bridegroom passages of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* and the yet unexplored intrusion of the narrator who confesses her profanity at the eroticization of the risen Christ, satirizing and parodying the practice of affective piety and the sacrament of confession. Reading Lanyer’s clever, titillating, sexualized poetry as a cynical performance in light of the extravagant conventions of affective piety, a piety still current in the literary and religious cultures of her day, it may be possible to assess more fully early modern women’s daring attempts at writing, a writing which, for Lanyer, parodies, satirizes, and critiques a society bound by religious and social mores, a decorum stifling in its intensity, potentially dangerous to its dissenters.

**“Catalina de Erauso: Drama, Autobiography, and Translation”**

**Natalia Pérez, University of Southern California**

The figure of Catalina de Erauso, or La Monja Alférez, has fascinated readers and critiques since the mid seventeenth century. The difficulty of pinning down Erauso’s gender or sexual preference, along with the threat this ambiguity poses to both early modern and contemporary identity categories, has been at the heart of the Nun Lieutenant’s multiple cultural recreations and large body of scholarship. In this paper I will, instead, approach Erauso as a figure of immigration and proto-nation building. Starting with *Historia de la monja alférez escrita por ella misma* I read Erauso’s military/criminal travels through Spain and the Americas as a form of cartography, one that simultaneously contains and names the recently “discovered” continent. The condition of possibility for this mapping is thus an ambiguously gendered and potentially criminal body. I then extend this reading to Juan Pérez de Montalbán’s 1625 play, *Comedia famosa de la Monja Alérez*. What changes and transformations are necessary in the shift from page to stage, or from *crónica* to drama? What is Erauso mapping on stage? How do the ambiguities of gender and its performance transform or resist the conceit of theater and dramatic performance?

**“Relocating Alice Egerton”**

**Sarah C.E. Ross, Victoria University of Wellington**

In 1634, at the marriageable age of 15, Lady Alice Egerton performed the role of the Lady in Milton’s masque, *Comus*. Here, in the words of Stephen Orgel, “Egerton’s story ends”; but her afterlife is long and intriguing, its traces dispersed across the fragmentary

and ephemeral records of several households. This paper traces Egerton from Ludlow to Ashridge, to the musical soirees of Henry Lawes in London, and to her marital home of Golden Grove in Wales. It considers the relationship between her role in Milton's masque and her subsequent musical career, and it explores the documentary evidence of her skills and standing as a singer, speaker, wife, and literary and musical dedicatee. This paper seeks to trace a singular and extended example of girls' and women's aristocratic household performance, and to consider its implications for our understanding of aristocratic women's performance careers. It pays particular attention to Egerton's intersections with other women and girls, including her sister-in-law Elizabeth Egerton (nee Cavendish), Elizabeth's sister Jane Cavendish, and Katherine Philips, considering girls' and women's occupation of elite places and spaces of dramatic, musical, and poetic production.

**'Thy mother was a piece of virtue':  
Prospero/Prospera and Female Chastity in *The Tempest*'**

**Jessica Swain, McMaster University**

Drawing on Julie Taymor's film version and Stratford Festival's 2018 production of *The Tempest*, this paper investigates what happens with Prospero's fixation on female chastity when a woman plays Prospero/Prospera. In the play text Prospero, rhetorically envisioning himself as a mother giving birth to island life, erases Miranda's and Caliban's actual mothers (Orgel, "Prospero's Wife"). When Prospero's 'birthings' come from a contemporary cisgender female actor, however, these missing women in the play arguably become more discernable through the gender identity they share with not only Miranda but also Prospero/Prospera, played by Martha Henry and Helen Mirren respectively. How might this increased visibility of this maternal influence, achieved through casting, impact the political and cultural stakes surrounding female chastity in the play? If, as Bonnie Lander Johnson argues, all of Shakespeare's late plays "investigate the means by which women might defend their chastity against threats of sexual violence or wrongful accusations of adultery and fornication" (1), in what ways might the chasteness of a female Prospero/Prospera promote or undercut the presentation of Miranda's virtue?

**"The Intersection of Gender and Race in Two Contemporary Performances of  
*Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Duchess of Malfi*"**

**Dorothy Vanderford, University of Nevada Las Vegas**

Race issues intersect significantly with gender issues in two contemporary performances of Jacobean tragedies in which the protagonists express female subjectivity by defying patriarchal rules. Iqbal Khan directed the 2017 performance of *Antony and Cleopatra* at the RSC, and Maria Aberg directed the 2018 performance of *The Duchess of Malfi*, also at the RSC. Both British productions employ a black female actor for the protagonist's role, thereby complicating the question of how Cleopatra and the Duchess perform gender to make meaning. These characters are embodied by female actors of color, unlike

early modern public stage performance. Darkness represented a literary and performative foil for whiteness that suggested an embodiment of the female as exotic, sexual, and material, even paradoxically as whiteness could indicate both goodness and sinfulness. This paper explores the effect produced by Josette Simon as Cleopatra and Joan Iyiola as the Duchess, as their antagonists and lovers are white males. Both plays illustrate a masculine violence and a feminine strength and perseverance, but they also point up the physicality of the female by referring to their sexual desire and, in the case of *The Duchess*, by drenching her in copious blood, a materiality easily correlated with the female.

**“Girl Actors in the Archives”**

**Deanne Williams, York University**

This paper explores how the absence of girl performers on the Shakespearean stage shaped scholarly presuppositions about girl performers in earlier historical periods. It will examine how scholarly accounts of the medieval stage overlooked and/or downplayed evidence about girl performers and mobilized tropes of cross-dressing and narratives of female absence that were drawn from the Shakespearean stage.