

2019 Seminar Abstracts: Shakespeare and the District
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Respondents

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‘West Wing to House of Cards: Political Shakespeare on the Small Screen’

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The notion that Shakespearean models have been used to craft stories of political intrigue for television is well accepted. Political Shakespeare is an area of performance criticism which has highlighted contexts and analogies set out in productions that support or critique the current ruling classes since the 1980s. In this paper I would like to outline how this process works differently in US and UK adaptations and inspirations, focusing particularly on the two distinct versions of *House of Cards*, with reference also to several episodes of the *West Wing*. The fundamental differences in leadership styles of these two nations, as well as the structural divergences in the power sharing mechanisms in these two nations, have resulted in misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the history plays in general and *Richard III* in particular. The reduction of these complex texts to quotations, memes and character situations results in appropriations which use the plays to justify current ideas about leadership and tyranny. While this sort of distortion in the UK is balanced by widespread awareness of the plays and the full complexity of the monarchy and government structures in the UK, these adaptations in the US have created a new vision of Shakespeare that replaces close analysis and careful criticism around these plays. So, while the 20th century saw popular presentations of Shakespeare’s work as a means of engaging audiences in the texts as they were written, 21st century extrapolations see the plays as a jumping off point to examine power sharing arrangements that are particular to these two separate governmental environments.

Lady Macbeth in the Age of Trump:
The Woman President in *House of Cards* and *Madam Secretary*

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Historically, from the time Hillary Rodham Clinton entered the national political arena in the 1990s, she was under media criticism. In particular, she withstood attacks by ultra-conservative men in talk radio, who compared her disparagingly to Lady Macbeth. It should come as no surprise, then, that, of the currently broadcast or streaming dramatic series set in Washington DC, the two series that are focused on a women president or presidential candidate contain not only both direct and oblique portraits of Hillary but also ample references to Shakespeare, especially *Macbeth*.

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This paper is about the representation of the woman president or presidential candidate in *House of Cards* and *Madam Secretary*. I look at the use of the Lady Macbeth trope as a figure of the woman president (at this point in our nation's history still an idea rather than a realization), tracing that trope from radio editorials of the 1990s to servicemen's reviews of the 2004 NEA/DoD tour of Macbeth to military bases in 2004 to the post-2016 reclamation of the Lady Macbeth trope on these two dramatic series, a trope that is newly explored, expanded, and empowered by the women who produce, executive direct, write, create, and star in these shows, including Robin Penn Wright, Lori McCreary, Barbara Hall, Tea Leoni, and Hillary herself.