

**2019 Seminar Abstracts: The King's Men and Their Playwrights**  
**Meghan C. Andrews, Lycoming College**  
**James J. Marino, Cleveland State University**

**“Astonishing Presence”:  
 Writing for a Boy Actress of the King's Men, c. 1610-1616**

**Roberta Barker, Dalhousie University**

Although scholarship has acknowledged the influence of leading actors such as Richard Burbage on the plays created for the King's Men, less attention has been paid to the ways in which the gifts and limitations of individual boy actors may have affected the company's playwrights. Thanks to the work of scholars such as David Kathman and Martin Wiggins, however, it is now more feasible than ever to identify the periods during which specific boys served their apprenticeships with the company and the plays in which they likely performed. Building on that scholarship, my paper will focus on the repertoire of Richard Robinson (c.1597-1648) during his reign as one of the King's Men's leading actors of female roles.

Surviving evidence shows that Robinson played the Lady in Middleton's *Second Maiden's Tragedy* in 1611 and that he appeared in Jonson's *Catiline* (1611) and Fletcher's *Bonduca* (c.1612-14). Using a methodology first envisioned in 1699, when one of the interlocutors in James Wright's *Historia Histrionica* dreamt of reconstructing the acting of pre-Civil War London by “gues[sing] at the action of the Men, by the Parts which we now read in the Old Plays” (3), I work from this evidence to suggest that Robinson excelled in the roles of nobly born, defiant tragic heroines: women of “astonishing presence,” as Helvetius says of the Lady in *The Second Maiden's Tragedy* (2.1.74). If we compare Robinson's known roles with other tragic women's parts created for the King's Men during the likely period of his apprenticeship (c.1610-1616), such as Aspatia in Beaumont and Fletcher's *Maid's Tragedy* (c. 1610-11) and the Duchess in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* (c. 1614), we can trace similarities of situation, tone, gesture, and even phrasing that may reflect this boy actor's influence on the playwrights who created roles for him. Young “Dick Robinson's” presence, I argue, helped to shape a series of great female parts and left an indelible mark on the repertoire of the King's Men.

**Fletcher's Rewriting of *Coriolanus* in *Bonduca***

**Meredith Beales, University of British Columbia**

Written around 1613, Fletcher's *Bonduca* is most often read as one of a series of Jacobean plays set in or around ancient Britain (where it is sometimes paired with *Cymbeline*), or as one of the rare theatrical depictions of the ancient British queen Boudica. But I would like to propose a different context: that *Boudica* is also one of a series of plays performed by the King's Men that are interested in encounters with the fringes of Roman power. Like its predecessor, *Coriolanus*, Fletcher's *Bonduca* presents a portrait of Rome diminished, outside its main sphere of influence, and confronted by enemies so powerful they threaten Rome's dominance. Though the storylines are different, both plays represent Rome as militarily and morally compromised by its actions in battle. Both plays also centre Roman military leaders, Coriolanus (in Shakespeare's play), and Caratach (in Fletcher's play), whose inflexible personal codes contribute to their political or

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military failures. In this paper, I will suggest that Fletcher's play locates the Roman/colonial conflict Shakespeare sets just outside Rome much closer to home in *Bonduca*, rendering the conflict between Rome and its conquests both more intimately but also further from the centre of power.

**The King's Men Repertory, 1604-6**

**William C. Carroll, Boston University**

Of all the non-Shakespearean plays in the King's Men's repertory, few have enjoyed such a rich and deep history of modern commentary as Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*. *Volpone* has been considered through the categories of satire, economic imperialism, disease, and theatricality, among many others, while *Revenger's* has often been read in terms of the traditions and conventions of revenge tragedy, as a response to *Hamlet* and the death of Queen Elizabeth, and as a covert anti-court drama, among many others. Yet the plays – both performed, by all available evidence, in the 1605-6 season at the Globe – have rarely been read together; although MacDonald P. Jackson described *Revenger's* as “the sanguinary counterpart of *Volpone*” (*Oxford Middleton*); his comparison did not go much beyond a general thematic and tonal resemblance. This paper considers these two plays specifically within the known boundaries of the King's Men's repertory and company and in the context of political events in the 1604-6 period.

**What A Lord Chamberlain's Men Playwright Did With Sources:  
*A Warning for Fair Women* (1599)**

**Ann Christensen, University of Houston**

Andrew Gurr observes that *A Warning's* Induction promotes the play as unique, new, and better than other company offerings, “muscling aside Shakespeare's history plays. . . . and even the old revenge tradition of *Titus Andronicus* and the *Ur-Hamlet*, replacing them with the novelty of a true story set in the audience's own London” (Gurr, “Stage” 69; also *Shakespeare Company* 131). However, novelty aside, modern critics tend either to blame the playwright for too “slavishly” following its main source, Arthur Golding's *A briefe discourse of the late murther of master George Sanders* (1573), or, conversely, to fault him for *not* following certain of *A Briefe Discourse's* seemingly juicy details closely enough. But I argue instead that *A Warning* uses Golding for thematic and dramaturgical reasons, exploiting some of the pamphlet's “facts” purposefully, and omitting or minimizing others. In this paper I explore some of the many different ways that the playwright adapts source material for performance to expose a sophisticated rationale. By comparing and contrasting the play with Golding (and other sources), I show that the suppression or compression of some matter (such as Anne Sanders' pregnancy) on one level effectively streamlines the already long juridical phase of the denouement, and, on another level, reinforces the dramatist's positive representation of Anne Sanders' motherhood elsewhere in the play.

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**“When the bad bleed, then is the tragedy good”:**  
***Hamlet, The Revenger's Tragedy, and The Duchess of Malfi***

**Ed Gieskes, University of South Carolina**

In this paper I want to put *Hamlet, The Revenger's Tragedy, and The Duchess of Malfi*—all in the King's Men repertory in the first decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century—into dialogue. I will argue that references large and small to *Hamlet* become a way for both later playwrights to explore and transform the boundaries of the tragic genre. From the obvious invocation of Shakespeare's play in Vindice's appearing on stage carrying Gloriana's skull to more subtle references that run through both Middleton's and Webster's play. The two later plays' use of patterns of imagery and language deriving from *Hamlet* explore questions about what tragedy is for and how to judge it. Webster's serious and thorough intervention in the genre complements Middleton's more parodic version, and both plays together represent a mediated response to Shakespearean iterations of tragedy.

A substantial part of my interest will be in considering how the two later plays' responses to *Hamlet* offer ways to think about changes in both ideas about tragedy and in the larger dramatic field. That all three of these plays were produced by Shakespeare's company indicates the company's ongoing interest in the genre and a willingness to experiment and question earlier examples written by its leading playwright.

**The Dramaturgy of Pyrotechnics in the King's Men's Repertoire**

**Manuel Jacquez, Ohio State University**

In this paper, I look to the various pyrotechnic effects staged by the King's Men. Instead of detailing every effect, I shine a spotlight on particular plays, which are indicative of overall trends that emerge in the type and scale of pyrotechnics devised before and after the addition of Blackfriars as well as pyrotechnics devised after the first Globe had burned down. Within this first grouping of plays written and performed before 1613, I devote especial attention to William Shakespeare's dramaturgy of '*lightning*,' which entails strategizing both the visual and olfactory aspects of this effect in performance. Extending Jonathan Gil Harris's claims in his essay on the stench of the '*lightning*' produced at the start of *Macbeth*, I point out how Shakespeare highlights both the “flashes” and “smell” of '*lightning*' in each of his plays that call for the effect to be staged. The sensory attributes of '*lightning*' as produced at the Globe became a tool for Shakespeare, which he used as an additional means of signification in that specific playing space. Following the fire caused by the firing of a cannon during a performance of Shakespeare and John Fletcher's *Henry VIII*, the King's Men did not stop staging pyrotechnics, but they did seem to favor different types of pyrotechnic effects in new plays going forward. In this second grouping of plays written after 1613, I overview some of the later pyrotechnic effects repeatedly

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called for and revisit the performance of 'lightning' in a handful of Fletcher and Philip Massinger's solo works and collaborations with one another.

**The Element of Surprise**

**Erin E. Kelly, University of Victoria**

Sometime between 1606 and 1610, the much-printed and presumably very popular *Mucedorus* was updated and expanded with new material that might have been written by Shakespeare. Whether the revisions make the play more or less effective can be debated, but it is clear that a new scene featuring Prince Mucedorus explaining his plan to disguise himself in order to woo Princess Amadine prevents the audience from thinking the curiously noble shepherd who shows up in the Aragonian court is really a shepherd. Jonathan Lamb comments on this addition, "The prince's identity now cannot surprise at the end of the play, if it ever did" (74). Lamb then argues that these changes to *Mucedorus* allowed the play to become "more valuable," and not coincidentally more Shakespearean, "by its overt refusal to surprise us" (58). By considering a much wider range of plays from the repertory of the King's Men, I demonstrate that surprise was a common feature of the company's work even as King's Men playwrights utilized different strategies to astonish audiences in the first decades of the seventeenth century. There are plays that alter known source material to create an unexpected ending (as in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale*), feature sudden conversions (as in Wilkins's *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* and Fletcher's *The Scornful Lady*), withhold information from the audience (as in Fletcher's *Philaster* and *The Loyal Subject*), or experiment with characters who develop an unexpected ability to see through the fictionality of theatrical conventions (as in Fletcher's *The Scornful Lady*). With their performances of such plays, the company carried on a tradition of surprising audiences that originated with earlier plays, including *Mucedorus*, while innovating with various ways of awakening wonder. Viewed in the context of the King's Men repertory, it becomes apparent that while the company might have seen the need to revise a play like *Mucedorus*, whose long stage life had diminished its ability to shock, it also wanted to keep offering its audiences surprises – and only by considering how responses to a play might change over the course of decades can we fully understand how the King's Men managed its (always entertaining and often surprising) repertory.

**Staging Webster's Duchess of Malfi "too much i' th' light"**

**Dr. Claire Kimball, Brave Spirits Theatre**

Critics and scholars of early modern drama regularly speculate that John Webster's injured reaction to the poor reception of his play, *The White Devil*, at the outdoor Red Bull playhouse (around 1612) prompted his swift move to the indoor Blackfriars playhouse with *The Duchess of Malfi* for the King's Men. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes the play's thematic tone as an appropriate fit for the dimly lit private hall while devoting particular attention to the staging of the dark scene with the dead man's hand. Moreover, the focus on darkened theatres has become

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entrenched in modern performances: despite evidence that *The Duchess of Malfi* was performed on both the Blackfriars and Globe stages, theatre companies have continually mounted the play within enclosed, instrument-controlled spaces for the last sixty years. This prevailing perspective on John Webster's text, however, minimizes the playwright's history as a multifaceted collaborator with his own familiarity in writing for various companies, actors, and genre styles, as well as both outdoor and indoor venues. This paper will explore John Webster's intersection with the repertory practices of companies such as the King's Men and demonstrate the ways in which his work as an adaptable playwright would have required him to develop a playscript property that could transfer from the company's Blackfriars playhouse to alternative spaces such as the rebuilt Globe. Through an examination of recent productions that have embraced recreative practices and dramaturgical lessons from the rehearsal room, this paper will assert the "playability" of *The Duchess of Malfi* in an outdoor staging space.

**The Remains in their Play:  
The Medicinal Corpses of the King's Men**

**Karen Marsalek, St. Olaf College**

In *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) Bosola addresses the living Duchess as a "salvatory of green mummy" (4.2.121), reducing her value to that of her preserved remains. Just as the part of the Duchess and the actor who portrayed her were key commodities for the King's Men, the dead flesh Bosola references was also commodified in corpse medicine, the use of human organic material for therapeutic purposes. Indeed, the two kinds of commodified bodies frequently coincide in the company's early repertory. References to corpse medicine are found in nondramatic poetry and prose throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but it is only the King's Men's repertory of 1604-14 that gives these therapies sustained *theatrical* prominence. In 1604 they feature in court performances of *Othello* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as well as in the company's revision of *The Malcontent*. In the next decade the company acquired four more plays that considered the medico-magical properties of human matter: *Volpone* and *Macbeth* (1606), *The Alchemist* (1609) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614). My focus in this essay is the interplay between the three 1604 performances. These interventions in the cultural portrayal of corpse medicine emphasize its human cost, reveal a company intensely aware of their *own* bodies as living commodities, and offer clues about those bodies' deployment across the repertory.

**Fail Better**

**Richard Preiss, University of Utah**

This essay resists the straightforwardness of our seminar title by considering *The History of the Two Maids of Moreclacke* (pr. 1609), a play neither by a King's Men's playwright nor a King's Men's play, yet under a broader interpretation of those terms, emphatically both. Written by Robert Armin, the company's principal clown through the first decade of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, its

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quarto refers to a performance by the Children of the King's Revels (in which Armin claims he was to act), but also suggests this had been a revival; whether it was originally staged by the King's Men – and thus a rare case of crossover from adult to boy company repertoires – or whether it represents something rarer still, the sole specimen we have of a play the King's Men *rejected* (uncomfortably, perhaps, since it came from one of their members), we do not know. Their reasons are not far to seek: it is a hot mess. The writing is mannered, the verse uneven, and the plot absurdly convoluted; it includes no less than nine disguisings, few of which serve any purpose; it cannot even keep straight how its climactic murder is to unfold. (Parts of it seem to trace to the late 1590s, before Armin joined the Chamberlain's Men, so it may have spent a long time in development...maybe too long.) Had the King's Men declined it, however, its transfer becomes even more unusual, because it appears company-specific: its plot is a take-off on *Hamlet* – reduced to domestic melodrama, verging on farce – and strewn with allusions to *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. It is, in a sense, a King's Men homage, inhabiting an uncanny valley between plagiarism and parody. Did a play have to be a King's Men's play to be a King's Men play? Was this downmarket Shakespeare? Upmarket Shakespeare? Aftermarket Shakespeare? All three? What does it reveal about the relation between adult and boy companies, and about the topography of the early modern theatrical landscape more generally? Whatever the cause and course of its institutional peregrinations, whose reconstruction remains speculative, *The Two Maids of Moreclacke* abounds with theater-historical interest, and the goal of my paper will be to explore the rather remarkable set of professional exceptions this virtually unread play comprehends.

**“As Likely a Fellow as Any Is in the Company”:  
 Cross-dressing, Widow-hunting, and Metatheatric Collaboration**

**Gregory M. Schnitzspahn, Fisher College**

Composed for the King's Men sometime around 1615, Thomas Middleton's most radical crossdressing comedy, *The Widow*, works hard to undermine seemingly stable categories of gendered and generic identity. Indeed, the play's climax suddenly flips the identity of an ostensibly male character named Ansaldo when “he” is recognized in women's clothes as “My daughter Marcia!” (5.1.411). But some of *The Widow*'s best jokes also depend upon the audience recognizing the identity of the comedy's young, male actors who had recently played women's parts in other productions. In a heated discussion on how to woo a widow, for instance, a young man named Francisco tells his friend that “I'll play the woman; that I'm used to” (1.2.111).

Some scholars even suspect that Francisco may have been first played by Richard Robinson, whose transition from female to male roles figures prominently in Ben Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass*, another King's Men production. In any case, what survives of the company's repertoire often reveals that the King's Men expected its audiences to be intimately familiar with the actors on stage, as when Hamlet jokes about Brutus playing a “brute part” in killing Polonius's Julius Caesar (3.2.111). This paper therefore looks to read *The Widow* in order to expand upon recent assertions, like Andrew Gurr's, that such familiarity meant performances by the King's Men

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“were a community experience, a game of the mind free from the subjection to cinematic realism that blinkers modern eyes” (16). And while this paper aims to venture somewhat into the murky shadows of theatre history’s unknowable details, it ultimately considers how audience and theatre collaborate in a mutually constitutive “shaping fantasy.”

**‘Balladmongers and the King’s Men’**

**Tiffany Stern, Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham**

This is a section of an essay I am writing on ballads in plays, and ‘play ballads’ – printed ballads that tell the entire stories of plays. It considers the relationship between ballads and plays for the King’s Men, and also for companies more broadly. Though it does focus on Shakespeare, it also doesn’t (he may or may not have written any of the texts discussed here: which is why I hope you’ll allow the paper for the seminar!) Asking questions about the nascent early modern advertising and souvenir trade, the chapter explores explains where ballads were sold in the playhouse, and investigates whether the King’s Men, and/or its playwrights ever specifically marketed ballads to market plays.