

**2019 Workshop Abstracts:
Writing about Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama for a Broader Public
Daniel Swift, New College of the Humanities, London.**

**Hero, Desdemona, Imogen . . . and Brett Kavanaugh?:
Reading a Supreme Court hearing through a Shakespearean Lens.**

Mara Amster, Randolph College

This past fall, as with every fall semester since I began working at the college, I taught my Introduction to Shakespeare course. We read, among other plays, Much Ado about Nothing, Othello, and Cymbeline, a trio of works that allows us to consider how a similar plot takes different forms when issues of genre enter the picture. This fall, however, something else entered the picture: the confirmation hearings for Justice Brett Kavanaugh. As we discussed what Cassio means when he laments the loss of his “reputation, reputation . . . that immortal part of myself” (2.3.240-41), I listened as Kavanaugh echoed these sentiments, claiming that his name had been “totally and permanently destroyed” (The National Review 27 Sept 2018). As we considered how it was that ocular proof could be both tangible — a sighting of Hero at the window, a fallen handkerchief, a mole on Imogen’s body — yet not confirmation for what it was intended to prove, I watched as a 36-year-old calendar became evidence of a man’s innocence and a woman’s flawed memory. As we discussed the gendered dynamics that were repeated in each of the plays — a woman accused of failing to adhere to the social norms surrounding female sexuality was punished — I saw a country normalizing a set of sexual mores wherein accusations of sexual assault were re-established as just “drunk teenagers playing” (as a Fox news columnist tweeted).

A necessary caveat: the analogy that I am constructing here is far from perfect. Justice Kavanaugh is not accused of infidelity or adultery; he is not the modern equivalent of Hero or Desdemona or Imogen. The words of Dr. Blasey Ford — unlike those of Claudio and Don Pedro, Iago, and Iachimo — might have swayed public opinion but they are not enough to win the day (and what “win” might mean in both the plays and the hearings is up for discussion). Creating a direct comparison between the dramatic paths in three plays and the events we witnessed during the Fall 2018 Supreme Court confirmation hearings — and, more specifically, in the narratives that developed around those hearings — is not the purpose of this exploration. Rather, situating the Kavanaugh/Blasey Ford hearings within a Shakespearean backdrop is intended to illuminate concerns raised about gender, power, reputation, privacy and publicity. Placing the hearings into conversations with the plays might allow us to move away from the heated rhetoric that emerged this fall and consider the implications of relying on formulas that so tightly connect reputation to sexualized and gendered assumptions.

Sonnet 130.

Michael J Collins, Georgetown University

This essay is imagined as one in a series on Shakespeare’s sonnets for general readers. The essays are meant to suggest, with too much technical language, how the sonnets work and what they might say to us about our lives and the world in which we live them.

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The Saturnalian Pattern.

Jason Crawford, Union University

I'm in the early stages of writing a book that asks why we need comedy, at this moment, in our individual and collective lives. The book will have a lot to say about what comedy has to do with festivity, and about how festive discourses can matter in the context of violence, injustice, and pain. In it, I will try to talk to an audience well beyond my colleagues in early modern studies, and I will be interested in comic performance, in a broadly western context, from Aristophanes down to the current resurgence of standup comedy. I still haven't worked out a fully developed sense of who the book's ideal readers are, nor have I figured out exactly how the book will reach those readers. Those questions will be on my mind as we converse and read together in this seminar. Certainly I hope to raise questions in this book, and to engage with texts, that can be of broad interest to literate people with an interest in the arts as a public good.

For our seminar, I'll submit a piece of this book's introduction, in an experimental draft. In this introduction, I'll make a first attempt at defining the characteristic forms, possibilities, and problems of comedy. The chapter will begin with the ritual slaughter of a Babylonian mock-king and will end with the utopian revels of the Roman Saturnalia, and it will begin to raise questions about how comedy navigates a perilous territory between truth-telling and injury, between the atrocities of history and the longing for Eden, and between the violence of purgation and the grace of reconciliation.

“Admit me Chorus to this history”: Shakespeare on Reddit

Erin Kelly, Rutgers University

I have become intrigued by a particular corner of the internet that has become an immensely popular venue for popular humanistic inquiry since its introduction around 2006: Reddit's "[AskHistorians](#)" forum. On Reddit in general, users can anonymously pose and respond to prompts on any conceivable subject, and popular responses will receive "upvotes" that make them more visible. The site is organized into "subreddits" on particular topics, which may be governed by a particular set of rules set by its moderators. AskHistorians is a particularly popular subreddit, thanks to the efforts of its team of moderators, many of them professional academics, who impose strict requirements about posts being thoughtful and in-depth responses backed up by scholarly and/or primary sources. Because of its system of anonymous participation, I believe AskHistorians offers a particularly innovative and informative model of "public humanities." When asked, for instance, to explain why they put so much time into managing the site, one moderator responded, "[I love the mission - it's the most direct method of public history out there.](#)"

For this paper, then, I want to consider both what the forum offers generally in terms of ways of generating dialogue between scholars and the public, and specifically what it can teach us about public interest in English Renaissance drama from its history of posts. Shakespeare and the English Renaissance is a popular subject of questions posed on the forum. But the questions posed also fit into particular patterns, such as asking about the resemblance between Shakespeare's fictions and contemporary ideology: "[Were people really afraid of](#)

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[witches like in *Macbeth*?](#)” [“How much was the nationalism of *Henry IV* reflective of reality?”](#) There are also some shared formal qualities in the posts that are very revealing, such as the popularity of posts about social history written from a second person perspective. And of course, the informal nature of the posts, many of which explicitly reference their incompleteness, serves as an invitation to further participation from users, who often ask follow-up questions or offer alternative perspectives and additional sources. In other words, if Reddit is one of the primary venues from which the public learns about our work as scholars, I want to examine what image(s) of Renaissance English drama emerge from these conversations.

“Who will believe thee?” What Shakespeare Shows Us about Sexual Misconduct.

Cynthia Lewis, Davidson College

Measure for Measure dramatizes a classic instance of *quid pro quo* sexual harassment, and its clear parallels with cases in our own time raise questions about the persistence of sexual misconduct 400 years later. Such parallels include the nearly all-male respondents to charges of sexual harassment and assault, as well as the difficulty victims face in simply being believed. Having reviewed Isabella’s experience and some of the writer’s experiences with sexual harassment and assault, the essay analyzes the obstacles survivors face in being believed and being supported, obstacles that include other people’s (even women’s) minimizing of violations and interpreting charges of sexual misconduct as hysteria. In exploring the enduring causes of sexual perversion in current American culture, the essay returns near the end to *Measure*’s puritanical Angelo.

Shakespeare’s Actor: Richard Burbage as Celebrity, Muse, and Co-Author.

Tanya Pollard, Brooklyn College, CUNY

Unlike William Shakespeare, his star actor Richard Burbage is not a household name. We do not commemorate anniversaries of his birth or death; he was not named Britain’s Man of the Millennium; theaters, libraries, and college courses do not bear his name. Burbage’s legacy does not compete with Shakespeare’s, but in their lifetimes, the actor’s fame eclipsed the playwright’s. When Burbage died in 1619, England erupted in mourning, creating a scandal when the outpouring of grief drowned out attention to the queen’s death the same month. Shakespeare’s death, three years earlier, attracted almost no notice. I propose to explore the story of Burbage’s life and relationship with Shakespeare to ask a larger question: who makes a play, and who owns its legacy? Is it the author who writes the words, the actor who brings them to life, the producers whose funds sponsor it, and/or the audiences whose ticket purchases shape demands? In the modern entertainment industry, we might identify a film primarily with its lead actor (a Brad Pitt film, a Tom Cruise film), or director (a Steven Spielberg film). We might also identify it with the author of its original story (a Jane Austen film). Screenwriters are rarely recognized. But in the theater, we almost always attribute a play to its writer, even when that writer has adapted it from someone else’s plot, and created its central character based on the actor whose fame sold tickets and encouraged a play’s success. Because we identify theater as an elite art form, in contrast to the popular realms of film, television, and digital media, we rarely recognize its collaborative roots, especially in an earlier historical moment with a different understanding of creative authorship. I suggest that

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Burbage, as actor, muse, and financial investor, had a crucial role in making the plays that we call Shakespeare's, and that understanding this role gives us new insights not only into the nature of Shakespeare's creativity, but into the development of the commercial entertainment industry.

Burbage's life is a compelling story on its own terms: the story of a handsome, charismatic actor who became one of the first major stage celebrities when England's mass-market commercial entertainment world was just starting to develop. Popular, affordable, and shaped by success at sales, the new commercial theaters laid the foundation for the entertainment industry that shapes our own modern world. But Burbage's relationship with Shakespeare makes him more than an early matinee idol. By inspiring and co-creating literary icons like Hamlet, he also actively shaped plays that are still at the heart of our cultural canon. Understanding Shakespeare's story requires knowing Burbage's story.

Podcasting Shakespeare.

Jonathan Shelley, Georgia Institute of Technology

Over the past decade, podcasts have become an increasingly popular and mainstream medium for the transmission of news, information, and entertainment. Podcasts devoted to culture, politics, history, and comedy have all received notable attention and acclaim. Furthermore, institutions of higher learning have made serious efforts to incorporate podcasts in the classroom and larger course curriculum. So where does Shakespeare—academia's ever-popular titan of page, stage, and screen who has long been a reliable source for conversation on culture, politics, history, and comedy—fit into this new medium? This paper will explore Shakespeare's current presence in podcasts but will also seek to examine the effect that podcasting might have on Shakespeare and Shakespeare studies. Building off of recent critical work that has identified podcasts as an "intimate bridging medium," I hope to review how high-profile podcasts like Isaac Butler's *Lend Me Your Ears* (Slate), scholastically minded podcasts like the Folger Shakespeare Library's *Unlimited Shakespeare*, and even one-off episodes such as "Act V" for *This American Life* have (or have not) represented, reinterpreted, and reinvigorated Shakespeare for a new medium and audience. But I am also curious about the ways in which Shakespeare, both explicitly and subtly, may have resonance with the development of podcasting. Do theories and notions of theatrical performance inform the way in which we now expect and enjoy audio content to be delivered? Do podcasts have the potential to reinvigorate technical considerations behind production, a topic that is often signaled in Shakespeare's works? (To make a podcast, one must know how to *record* a podcast.) Ultimately, I want to contribute to what Jonah Weiner has described as a "critical theory of podcasting" by thinking about the Bard's entrée into this vibrant digital medium.

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The First Day's Entertainment: How Two Ex-Convicts Resurrected Shakespeare and Invented an Industry.

Andrew McConnell Stott, University of Southern California

My paper begins at Rutland House, a large building on Aldersgate Street close to Charterhouse Square and the sheep pens of Smithfield. Here, in a narrow back salon ill-suited to crowds, sat an audience of one hundred and fifty well-heeled men and women who had each parted with five shillings for the privilege of spending two hours on hard benches before a gold and purple curtain. While already cramped, the crowd was only a third of the size that Sir William Davenant, the organizer of the evening's event, had hoped to attract. He had debts, and believed that offering entertainments to a war-weary audience starved of diversions would be a way to raise cash – never mind the fact that this was illegal.

Davenant's guests were there to see a performance entitled *The First Day's Entertainment*, a dialogue set to music that carefully skirted the proscriptions around theatre that existed in 1656. It used neither scenery or costume, and ensured that the actors remained seated throughout. But even as they were careful not to invoke official censure through what passed on stage, the performance itself constituted an argument in favor of public entertainments.

The evening at Rutland House serves as the point of departure for a discussion of the re-constitution of British theatrical culture in the wake of the Civil War. Taking the form of a dual biography of Sir William Davenant (1606-1668) and the king's favorite wit, Thomas Killigrew (1612-1683), it will explore the ways in which these former Cavaliers drew on their experiences of revolution, imprisonment, exile, and the theatrical past to found the dominant cultural institutions of the Restoration, and in so doing create the most vibrant entertainment industry in Europe. Naturally, Shakespeare features extensively – as cultural authority, as back-stop author filling a hole, and as the well from which dramatic inspiration might be drawn. Davenant liked to tease that he was the poet's illegitimate son (his father had been a friend), while Killigrew chose to open his new theatre at the converted Gibbon's tennis court in Vere Street with a performance of *Henry IV, pt 1*. Through Shakespeare, both found a theatrical voice, but also through the license they took with him and their attitudes towards the text, a sense of the many possibilities that a new theatre might embrace.

I suppose the larger point I'd like to make somehow is that by starting from an austere and creatively-meager moment, theatre practitioners were forced to invent and innovate. Much of what transpired appears opportunistic and haphazard on first look, colored by money and favor and interpersonal alliances and feuds. Yet in effect, these pioneers created a template for the entertainment industry that still abides to this day.

Sexual Justice.

Paul Yachnin, McGill University

This paper considers how Shakespeare might help us think more creatively about sexual justice by bringing his writing, especially the play, *All's Well the Ends Well*, into conversation with the #MeToo movement. This has nothing to do with what we call, under the established law, “due process.” “Due process,” as we have seen in the Jian Ghomeshi

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case [<https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/jian-ghomeshi-how-he-got-away-with-it/>], has not served the cause of justice very well. In contrast, the #MeToo law—a law outside the established law—has worked well in that it has seemed able to bring wrong-doers before the seat of justice on the strength of individual or group testimony, virtual witnessing, and collective judgment enabled by social and mainstream media. The new law, however, has developed no forms of punishment and reform for those found guilty and no procedures for ensuring the well-being of those who put their careers and social lives in jeopardy by uncovering wrong-doing in the first place. This paper suggests that three principles represented in Shakespeare’s problem comedy—initiative, community, and authority—can help advance the cause of sexual justice.