

2019 Seminar Abstracts: Signs of the Sexed Body in Early Modern Drama
Kimberly A. Coles, University of Maryland

Lilly Berberyan
UNC Greensboro

Sex and Power: Sexuality and Chastity in Early Modern City Plays

This seminar paper will examine the relationship between gender and power and the role that sexuality or perceived sexuality can play in it. Particularly, I will examine the impact of signs of sexuality on women of the middling sort as captured on the London stage by city comedies. Many of these plays turn to the fairly typical plots of cuckolding and marital faithfulness; however, in contrast with their counterparts of higher social status, whose chastity is frequently assumed, the opposite is frequently the assumption about middle class women. Plays like *Northward Ho*, *Westward Ho*, and *Merry Wives of Windsor* begin with the assumption of female infidelity and the female characters have to spend the remainder of the play proving their marital faithfulness to not only their husbands, but the community surrounding the household. In a context where marital chastity becomes synonymous with good housekeeping and skillful execution of wifely duties, chastity (or the lack thereof) becomes a commodity that the middling sort wife continually (and seemingly endlessly) pursues.

Julie Crawford
Columbia University

Unpin me here

The most famous invitation to unpin in early modern drama is Desdemona's, when she commands Emilia to "unpin" her as she prepares for bed - one of *Othello*'s many invitations to think about the status of Desdemona's sexed and sexualized body. The term refers to the work of removing a pin or pins from an item of clothing, or, more figuratively, to undo the dress of a woman by the removal of pins. While unpinning was certainly often a pre-sexual act - in Heywood's *Gynaikeion: or, Nine bookes of various history concerninge women*, for example, a gallant asks a woman to "vnpinne her maske, with purpose to kisse her" - it was also frequently an epistemological invitation: what, exactly, is it that unpinning reveals? In Robert Chamberlain's *The Swaggering Damsel* (1640), a woman crossdressed as a man attempts to seduce a man crossdressed as a woman whose reluctance to "unpin" is characterized as reluctance "to lie with a man," but is, of course, actually an invitation to think about the epistemological status of sexual difference. By reading these two scenes together, we are invited to consider not just how bodies and bodices are held together, but how unpinning undoes as much as it reveals.

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Claire Dawkins, PhD
Stanford Online High School

**Pedagogy as Political Resistance: Teaching Early Modern Literature in an
 Interdisciplinary Sex Ed Classroom during the Age of Trump**

In *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (2016), Valerie Traub notes that the biblical euphemism for sex—“to know”—has had the effect of linking epistemology to sex and the sexed body. Her argument is that the biblical analogy between sex and knowledge conceals an ironic reversal; the *limits* of our ability to transmit knowledge about sex are significant objects of study because there is something about sex that seems to be inherently incommunicable. The productive impasses to knowledge transmission about sex should be traced diachronically across history. I read Traub’s book in 2016, and she inspired me to develop an interdisciplinary sex education course that I co-teach with the biology teacher at my institution. We investigate key terms like “the sexed body” from both a science and a humanities-centered approach. In the following paper, I will outline our approach to teaching the sexed body, focusing specifically on my contributions to this unit: teaching Thomas Laqueur’s *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, the Salmachis and Hermaphroditus myth from Arthur Golding’s 1567 translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, selections from Helkiah Crooke’s *Microcosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man*, Michel de Montaigne’s essay “On the Power of the Imagination,” and selections from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*. Whereas my co-teacher focuses on the limits of modern science’s ability to “know” what constitutes the sex of the body in our current era, I focus on how early modern people had a different set of impasses that blocked their ability to know what really made a person a man or a woman.

This course has already been immensely valuable, but the urgency for it seems to have increased. This paper picks up on Traub’s discussion about the productive and unproductive limits of our knowledge about sex to consider how we can counteract the inaccurate claim that “science” tells us what a person’s true sex is. The literature of our time period combats the erasure of intersex people that the Trump administration is attempting to marshal into political oppression of transgender people.

Tom Fish
Oglethorpe University

That Shakespearean Drag: Embodying Idleness in The Hive’s *Midsummer*

The Hive’s cross-gender cast production of *Midsummer* (2013) brought the sexed body and queer sexual desire to the forefront through—among other things—erotic shadow puppetry, S&M inspired costuming, and overtly sexual escapades of the fairies. All this was set in a world that director Matt Gregory describes as an “urban wasteland.” Around the edge of the stage, levels of scaffolding piled with junk inspired one reviewer to call the production “gritty, industrial Shakespeare” (Vitolo). Gritty, yes, yet there was little “industry” in this Athenian forest. An ensemble of scantily clad fairies loitered about and dangled from metal railings.

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Meanwhile, “love-in-idleness” inspired queer sexual couplings that frenetically circulated the stage—everywhere but “straight” ahead (2.1.166).

Cross-gender contemporary performances of Shakespeare have been the popular site of queer reading since the early 90s when the field was first consolidating, often uncovering moments of queer erotic *frisson* or feminist critique (Soloman, Thomas, Bulman, ed.). The Hive’s production seems to offer a queer *temporal* critique as well, a challenge to bourgeois reproduction, longevity, and linear progress manifested through the “palpable gross” body (5.1.360). Borrowing from queer theory’s “temporal turn” (Sedgwick, Duggan, Freeman, Stockton), the paper will provide a close reading of the performance of idleness in *Midsummer* and in The Hive’s production and its connection to the sexed body. How might Shakespearean idleness chart pleasures—desirous, affective, and imaginative—outside the bounds of “straight time” (Muñoz)?

Ultimately, I hope to spur interest in Shakespeare’s idle bodies—the marginalized, phlegmatic, “gross”—and how they embody their own paradoxical, even *queer* vibrancy; as Cleopatra aptly describes, “’Tis sweating labour/To bear such idleness so near the heart” (1.3.86-7).

Professor Judith Haber
Tufts University

**The Problem With Progeny:
 Margaret Cavendish, Ben Jonson, and the Fantasy of the Adopted Son**

I am currently engaged in a book project exploring inheritance and the fantasy of the adopted son in early modern English literature. My interest in this idea began with an examination of Margaret Cavendish’s two-part play, *Love’s Adventures*. The heroine of this play spends some time disguised as a page in the service of a nobleman whom she loves, Lord Singularity; she has therefore often been compared to Viola in *Twelfth Night*, and Cavendish’s text has often been seen as a rather typical exploration of gender roles. But the Lord’s persistent fear of fathering a child not his own and his subsequent adoption of the page (a procedure that many of his friends wish to imitate), as well as Cavendish’s clear knowledge of *’Tis Pity She’s A Whore*, seem to point in another direction. In *’Tis Pity*, I have argued elsewhere, incest is seen as a means of answering male anxieties about paternity by keeping procreation “all in the family.” Here, Cavendish appears to be deliberately (and critically) taking this idea one step further: the father’s line is kept pure not by the son’s marrying his own sister, but by the father’s first choosing his own son and then (eventually) marrying him. In the Lord’s fantasy relationship, at least, a closed circuit of male reproduction is created, effectively excising the woman and the problem of uncertainly she represents. Simultaneously (and paradoxically), Cavendish seems to present the disguised page’s dilemma (she is at one point, betrothed unto herself), as an emblem of her own “singularity,” her individual independence from conventional structures, both familial and literary.

I intend to develop these ideas further here, using recent work by Lara Dodds and others. I will also explore Cavendish’s equally paradoxical relation to Ben Jonson--that celebrated adopter of literary “Sons”--whom she sees simultaneously as her masculine antitype, her forefather, and the

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rival poet she seeks to surpass. Finally, I hope to consider the problematic topics of inheritance and “sonship” in Jonson’s own plays. (Note: In writing this paper, I realized I had neither the space nor the time to pursue an analysis of Jonson’s plays here).

Ms. Jess Hamlet
University of Alabama

“My wife is nothing”: Suppression of the Female in *Pandosto* and *The Winter’s Tale*

Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* is typical of his late romances in that its focus is on familial reunion and forgiveness of wrongs, no matter how egregious. *The Winter’s Tale* takes time to interrogate the cause of the familial breakdown, to address issues of blame, and to mete out poetic justice to the play’s wrongdoers. In doing so, the play hinges on the issues of female bodily agency and the precariousness of being female-bodied in a world where one’s safety is inherently linked to one’s (perceived) chastity. Shakespeare’s source, Robert Greene’s prose romance *Pandosto*, traffics in the same issues of familial breakdown and reunion, female trial and punishment, and poetic justice. The differences between the texts, however, are key, and lead us to ask questions about the two men’s representations of the female identity, especially in moments of judicial *extremis*. My interrogation of gender in these two texts begins with the family at the center of each: Greene’s *Pandosto*, *Bellaria*, and *Fawnia*; and Shakespeare’s *Leontes*, *Hermione*, and *Perdita*. These families are each defined by three pivotal moments in their texts: the suspicion, imprisonment, and trial of the mother; the loss and recovery of the daughter; and the poetic justice delivered to the father at the play’s/story’s end. In these two texts, though each story is driven by interest in the female, the female body is never permitted to matter outside its relation to men, female agency is suppressed at every turn, and each text uses both the trial scenes and the recovery of the lost daughters to reinforce a woman’s “natural” place in a patriarchal society. My interrogation of gender in these two texts begins with the family at the center of each: Greene’s *Pandosto*, *Bellaria*, and *Fawnia*; and Shakespeare’s *Leontes*, *Hermione*, and *Perdita*. These families are each defined by three pivotal moments in their texts: the suspicion, imprisonment, and trial of the mother; the loss and recovery of the daughter; and the poetic justice delivered to the father at the play’s/story’s end.

Paul J. Hecht
Purdue University Northwest

“O Phoebe, Phoebe”

The territory in which I plan to explore the questions of the seminar will be Thomas Lodge’s *Rosalynde: Euphues’ Golden Legacy* (1590) and Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* (c. 1600), with an eye also on John Lyly’s *Galatea* (c. 1584). This is, to be sure, well-trodden ground. I am particularly interested in the “big reveal” moments in these texts, when erotic tension fueled, maybe, by cross-dressing, is released, also maybe. The criticism I cite below grabs three moments leading up to and just before our present moment.

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What is it that we think we understand about Rosalind's aggressive and sarcastic attitude toward the shepherdess who falls in love with "her" in the guise of "Ganymede"? How much of the distortion—which I argue is also epistemological—that radiates from this ridiculous amour is prepared or anticipated by Shakespeare's "source" in Lodge's pastoral romance, and before that in Lyly's prose drama? For it seems as though what is just a joke in Lodge is not a joke at all in Shakespeare, that Rosalind's inability to impose her will on Phoebe exposes or turns inside out the political-religious project of Lodge, which is in fact several degrees more ambitious than Shakespeare's, at least in this particular Arden, with these particular "dukes."

Marina Leslie
Northeastern University

Anima/Animas/Animal: Bestial Gender in *The Witch of Edmonton*

The forensic evidence of the witch's teat was understood to be the irrefutable sign of sin and guilt that allowed the law to lay claim to and destroy the witch's body. But this inevitably supplemental sign of the (over)sexed criminal female body seems to be featured in *The Witch of Edmonton* less as a stable marker of demonic deviance than as a site of exchange between the gendered and animal body. I am less convinced than some readers of the play of Rowley, Dekker, and Ford's sympathies for Mother Sawyer, even though they take pains to show her abuse at the hands of her neighbors; however, it also seems clear that they strangely postpone and prolong her transformation into the witch she was already taken to be. The fact that after she contracts with the devilish Dog she seems much as she was before, a bent and hooped old woman, spent with poverty and rage need not be taken only or alternatively as confirmation of her sin or her victimhood. The difference is not in her, but in her congress with Dog, a relationship which troubles the line between companionate domesticity and unlawful bestiality, between human and animal moral agency and desire. Animal studies can bring a useful vocabulary and set of analytic paradigms to bear, but what is often elided in such work is a consideration of the difference gender makes. Examining Mother Sawyer's representation alongside Cuddy's impervious engagement with Dog on the one hand and Old Bank's amorous hankerings to kiss his dun cow on the other will suggest some of the differences that gender makes to the illocutionary, legal, and theatrical construction of the human/animal body in the play.

Ellen MacKay
The University of Chicago

Gros et Impudiques: Citing the Sight of Women in Henry V

This essay examines how women's 'presentational exclusion' from (but citational vitality on) the professional stage means for the construction of a theatre culture built for "amorous gazers" (Jean Howard, Stephen Gosson). My aim is to consider the degree to which early modern spectatorship can be said to chime with Laura Mulvey's powerful (if dated) account of cinema's "visual pleasure"; my hunch is that the English stage cites something like this scopophile economy even as it stages its absence. I put this speculation to the test via the language lesson in

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King Henry V, in which the figure of the foreign, non-speaking woman acts as a placeholder for the sight of the sexed female body. I argue that the (ostensibly) inadvertent impudence (“*sens impudique*”) that accrues to Katherine’s French anatomy ventriloquizes the Continental condemnation of women actors, mocking the scandal made of woman flesh while simultaneously raising the question of what modes of gendered looking the English stage takes as proper and foundational.

Julia Mix Barrington
Boston University

Seeming Mermaids: Gendering Shakespeare’s Language of the Sea

Scholars of early modern literature have observed that imagery of the sea often accompanies a fluid representation of gender. Sea-soaked plays like *Twelfth Night* and *Antony and Cleopatra* contain cross-dressing and gender play, while hybrid figures like the mermaid provide a way for the ocean’s fluidity to come ashore. However, when it comes to sexuality and reproduction, the sea and its literary inhabitants split down more-or-less expected lines of gender stereotypes. When the sea is productive, fecund, and tempting, it is feminine; when the sea is rapacious, invasive, and aggressive, it is male.

This essay argues that the sea provides a productive and under-studied discursive space for early modern writers to explore the construction of gender on the page and stage. In it, I identify a contradiction between how the language of the sea in *Twelfth Night* and *Antony and Cleopatra* marks moments of gender fluidity or performance and how mentions of the creatures who inhabit the sea—in particular, mermaids—are persistently coded in traditional masculine/feminine, active/passive binaries. Both plays feature watery metaphors that convey the performative quality of gender; however, the vehicle of those metaphors—the sea—does not share that gender flexibility. Attending to this essentialist representation of the sea’s masculinity and femininity enriches and complicates the critical conversation about how early modern people conceived of gender both on and off stage.

Jess R. Pfeffer, PhD
Boston, MA

“Maids All Around: Signifying Difference in *The Maid’s Tragedy*”

In his introduction to Beaumont and Fletcher’s *The Maid’s Tragedy*, T. W. Craik off-handedly comments that “It has long been argued that the title *The Maid’s Tragedy* does not accurately reflect the main character’s interest” (10). This critical consensus agrees on two things: that Aspatia is undoubtedly the maid in question and that she is not central to the plot of the play. Yet, I would argue that this reading of the play misses the point. Maids are, in fact, quite crucial to the play and its resolution. And, perhaps more importantly, the seeming insignificance of Aspatia points to the play’s larger concern: the fact that “maid” is itself a point of contention within the play.

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This centrality of “maid” relies on the term’s slippery signification: “maid” simultaneously refers to a young woman and a virginal man and, throughout the play, the embodied positions of these two roles become blurred and overlap in fascinating ways. For Amintor, his status as virginal man whose marriage bed has been denied him leads to his ultimate death at the hands of his lost betrothed turned cross-dressed dueling partner, Aspatia. And for Aspatia, her status as virginal woman becomes complicated once she dedicates herself to being a man killed by the hand of her former lover, Amintor. “Maid” simultaneously relies on a specifically sexed position (young, virginal woman OR man lacking sexual experience) and undermines that sexual differentiation through its fungibility. In other words, *The Maid’s Tragedy* works because of the indeterminacy of the play’s title: who exactly is the maid and, resultantly, whose tragedy is it? In this paper, I will attend to the various ways in which *The Maid’s Tragedy* relies on linguistic indeterminacy to uphold and undo the structures of sexual differentiation.

Jan Stirm
University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire

Early Modern Horticultural Knowledge and *The Winter’s Tale*

In Act 4 of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, Perdita and Polixenes have a famous discussion about flower culture. In this discussion, Perdita explains that she doesn’t grow “carnations and streak’d gillyvors,” calling them “nature’s bastards” and refusing “to get slips of them” (4.4.83-86). In contrast, Polixenes argues that she should grow these plants and also use grafting techniques. Critics have long discussed this passage in terms of the attitudes reflected towards horticultural arts and human reproduction; looking at early modern horticultural knowledge and practices, particularly those involving doubled flowers such as carnations, I argue here that Perdita’s rejection of these plants reflects distrust of non-sexual plant production practices, and contributes to the critical uncertainty about Paulina’s artistic practices in bringing to life the statue of Hermione in Act 5.

Dr. Erin Weinberg
Queen’s University

**“The fraud of men was ever so”:
The im/perfect victim and the balcony scene in *Much Ado About Nothing***

My paper seeks to answer the seminar’s question of “how does early modern drama reinforce or reproduce political power upon the sexed body?” I will discuss *Much Ado About Nothing*, with particular emphasis on the uncompromised state of Hero’s maidenhead compared to the fragility of her reputation as virtuous. Hero’s social value is ostensibly contained in an intact maidenhead, but more so, it is in what men say it is. Hero’s reputation is susceptible to the male voices that speak louder politically than her own embodied truth.

This paper will focus specifically on the fact that the balcony scene is not staged in Shakespeare’s text, only foretold and then discussed in retrospect. The playwright reproduces patriarchal power on the female body through the fact that the balcony scene *need not be staged*

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for the male characters to agree that Hero participated. The scene's accepted occurrence signifies the reality in both early modern England and to many extents today, that embodied truth need not exist, only the power and control men have over the discourse. I will situate the fragility of this well-born virgin's reputation in contrast to the way men of all classes, from the County Claudio to the villain Don John to his henchman Borachio, are welcome to a significant reserve of benefit of the doubt. The female Hero is blamed but not protected, suspected but not believed. In exploring these issues in *Much Ado*, my paper looks to catalyse discussions regarding today's politicized gender struggles, including demands for "civility" and the "perfect victim" narrative.