

SAA 2014: Queer Heterosexualities

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Title: Queering Venus: Desire for the Diminutive in *Venus and Adonis*

This paper examines Venus's desire for Adonis in Shakespeare's poem, arguing that the goddess's passion for the diminutive male is driven by scale: she desires him not for his seemingly feminine traits, but because he is so much smaller than she. Venus's narrative of her relationship with Mars suggests that while she was once wooed by a large, strong god, she prefers to pursue the small mortal she can easily tuck under her arm. Scholars have tended to ignore Venus when discussing the queer erotics of the poem, focusing instead on Adonis and the boar, but I contend that Venus's desire for the diminutive Adonis invokes a queer heteroerotics in which desire is driven primarily by the size, rather than the gender, of the object of choice. Venus's desire for a smaller male challenges the emerging ideology of heterosexuality and offers an alternative to the expectations of companionate marriage by privileging female desire and authority. The poem, by deferring heterosexual consummation, fails to live up to modern notions about the goals and presumed naturalness of heterosexuality. Although Adonis rejects Venus and his role as a diminutive love-object, the poem's lengthy descriptions of Venus's enormous physicality potentially elicit desire for the large woman from its readership. Scholars from C. S. Lewis forward have often received Venus's largeness with disgust, but readers, early modern or modern, might instead connect erotically with Venus, fantasizing themselves in Adonis's place as the diminutive object, or desiring to emulate the enormous goddess who is frank about her desires and flaunts her largeness as she pursues them.

Morwenna Carr, University of Reading ([qh008940@reading.ac.uk](mailto:qh008940@reading.ac.uk))

Title: Daring to Bare: Breasts and Theatrical Sex

All but ignored by the critical gaze, performances of breasts on the public early modern stage have been rendered invisible by the "truth" that the all-male performers simply did not have breasts with which to perform. Instances of breasts in drama are therefore perceived either as a kind of bawdy metatheatre or as evidence of the audience's total suspension of disbelief. Breasts are, however, a problematic identifier of sex; contemporary sources record instances of breast tissue and lactation in males including a 'pale, fat and scarcely bearded' Italian and a Syrian Count, whilst gynaecomastia (the benign engorgement of male breast tissue) is now recognised as medically commonplace, particularly in pubescent males. They are also present in a range of extant Renaissance play texts – from the 'mole cinque-spotted: like crimson drops □ I' th' bottom of a cowslip' left breast of Imogen in *Cymbeline* (Shakespeare), to the 'sister-swelling breasts [...] brave promontory [...] [and]groves' of Frances Fitzdottell (Ben Jonson, *The Devil is an Ass*), and the breasts of the widow Crostill, between which she safeguards letters of courtship in Richard Brome's *A Mad Couple Well Match'd*. Building on current work on the materials and prosthetics of gender, this paper will speculate on how those breasts referenced in texts could have been performed on stage by the boy actors. This performance of breasts problematises the notion of bodily sexual difference and the binary of Male / Female which is supported by that difference. Instead, it supports a more fluid, less constrained model of sex on the public stage. Rather than Male or Female (and ultimately male on an all-male stage), this paper will

argue for a reading of the theatrical body which is somewhat hermaphroditical rather than one which oscillates between Male and Female. Ultimately, it seeks to queer the normative model of sex and to demonstrate that a performance-based analysis of the boy actor and breasts does not automatically support the Male / Female binary within which they have been studied.

Annalisa Castaldo, Widener University (acastaldo@mail.widener.edu)

Title: The romance of male parts or parts of men

Come, gentle night, come, loving, black-brow'd night,  
Give me my Romeo; and, when he shall die,  
Take him and cut him out in little stars

*Romeo and Juliet* 3.2

We are used to women being objectified and verbally dismembered—from Petrarchan sonnets to modern advertising, female sexuality, beauty and even romantic worth is often demonstrated in parts. But we rarely encounter the opposite, and certainly the romanticizing of literally dismembered men is entirely unexpected. But Shakespeare presents several situations where women are romantically and erotically engaged with parts of men. Sometimes the reference is passing and metaphorical, as with the quote above, or Viola's claim to be sick for lack of a beard. But Queen Margaret and Inogen actually romance dismembered body parts and Titania falls in love with another sort of man without a head.

I will be exploring the ways in which dismembering, literal and figurative, often enhances female erotic agency in Shakespeare, giving absolute control over romantic and sexual decision to the female characters. Does this trope of women adoring parts of men link to the many beheadings ordered by a female monarch? Does it seek to turn the Petrarchan practice of itemizing a lover's body parts on its head (as Shakespeare did more famously in Sonnet 130)? Do the linguistic and visual dismembering pun on the fact that the women are not men, but "unmanned" boys pretending not to have that part that most identifies a man? If nothing else, the visual shock of these tableau would certainly disrupt the audience's sense that that these relationships represent normative heterosexuality.

Will Fisher, Lehman College and the CUNY Graduate Center (william.fisher@lehman.cuny.edu)

Title: Early Modern "Cougars"

My paper will examine early modern English representations of women who are attracted to significantly younger men. Surprisingly, "cougars" appear in a wide range of sources from the period, including poetry, drama, satire and pornography. Shakespeare's *Venus* is the most obvious example. I will begin by exploring the similarities between the early modern representations of "cougars" and their contemporary counterparts, arguing that in both periods, the discourses about these figures are shot through with ageism and sexism. Indeed, in both periods, the women are satirized for their "predatory" sexuality (and in both instances, the patriarchal anxieties about their sexual agency seem to be linked to anxieties about their economic agency). But I also want to ask whether it makes sense to talk about these figures as "queer". One of the interesting things to note in this regard is that in early modern sources, the "cougar's" younger male partners are often referred to as "ganymedes", "catamites," and "ingles." These were, of course, terms that were usually used to

describe the younger partner in a male homoerotic relationship. How are we to understand the use of these terms in this context? What does this tell us about the way these relationships -- and the women that engaged in them -- were viewed?

Judith Haber, Tufts University ([judith.haber@tufts.edu](mailto:judith.haber@tufts.edu))  
Title: Marlowe's Queer Jew

In earlier work, I investigated Marlowe's (and Marlowe's characters') involvement in what I termed "pointless play," an aestheticism that is (as far as possible, which is never entirely) pure, lacking any point, sexual, intellectual, or textual. One of the prime examples this is of course, *Edward II*; the play that bears his name relies on traditional (and anti-theatrical) definitions of sodomy as the principle of indefiniteness itself, as a metaphor, in effect, for metaphoricity. In this paper, I argue that Marlowe's presentation of Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* operates similarly on many levels. It depends, in part, on the common perception in Protestant England that Judaism (and by extension Catholicism) invests itself in the "letter" rather than the "spirit," in surface rather than depth. That investment is shared by Marlowe's texts, which evidence an extreme distrust of inwardness and depth, a distrust that is succinctly expressed in ironic praise of Catholicism in the Baines libel: "That if there be any god or any good Religion, then it is in the papistes because the service of god is performed with more Cerimonies, as Elevation of the mass, organs, singing men, Shaven Crowns, & cta. That all protestantes are Hypocriticall asses." This famous passage itself seems to echo one of the central statements in *The Jew*—"A counterfeit profession is better / Than unseen hypocrisy"--a statement that manages to suggest, beyond its first meaning, that any claim to "unseen" substance is itself hypocritical; all that exists is counterfeit show.

While developing work by Greenblatt and Deats and Starks work to demonstrate Barabas's--and the play's--investment in the letter rather than the spirit, I take this idea further by considering how both are involved in other, interconnected forms of pointless play. The word "spirit" is itself punned upon to associate Christians not only (hypocritically) with the unseen spirit, but also with semen--and the pun is not, I would assert, merely incidental. Barabas' distance from one type of spirit is paralleled by (is identical to) his distance from the other: despite the presence of his daughter, he is systematically removed from the processes of biological reproduction. His manic search for and destruction of "heirs" throughout the play both call up and undermine what has come to be known as "reproductive futurity." Here, I draw upon Lee Edelman's important work in *No Future*, as well as my own ongoing exploration of the motif of the adopted son in Renaissance texts. I consider Barabas's relation to Abigail (who in contrast to Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* seems to have materialized through paternal parthenogenesis, and who, despite being trumpeted as Barabas's "heir," is cut off from reproductive possibilities and repeatedly associated with images of sacrificial death), as well as to Ithamore, who replaces her as "heir," to Ferneze, and ultimately to himself. Together, these self-consuming relations form a creative/destructive process that Jonson understood well when he had his title character in *Volpone* (a play that recalls this one in so many respects) declare: "I have no [family]. . . / To give my substance to; but whom I make/ Must be mine heir." And they help to define Barabas (and *The Jew* in general) as intensely queer.

Bradley J. Irish, Arizona State University ([bradley.irish@asu.edu](mailto:bradley.irish@asu.edu))  
Title: Dynastically Queer? The Tudor Monarchs and Reproductive Futurism

In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Lee Edelman powerfully (and controversially) confronted the notion of *reproductive futurism*, a term for the universal logic that organizes communal and political relations, most fundamentally, on behalf of future subjects. This heteronormative "Ponzi scheme," Edelman argues, is built upon the symbolic Child whose interests we are compelled to protect; as the "perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, [and] the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention," the Child "has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust." For Edelman, the "image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought"—and thus, he argues most forcefully, the queer refusal to assent to the heteronormative compulsion of futurity "dispossesses the social order of the ground on which it rests."

In the royal palaces of Tudor England, there was also quite a bit of worry about the Child, both literal and symbolic, and quite a bit of worry about the social and political order that depended so crucially upon it. This paper charts the troubled career of reproductive futurism in sixteenth-century monarchal politics, by considering the generative difficulties (a term I use flexibly) that famously plagued the Tudor kings and queens. In light of Edelman's work, I argue that the era's rampant anxieties surrounding succession—triggered by the inability to produce, let alone protect, the Child upon which the future depended—invites us to consider the extent to which the Tudor monarchy, quite in spite of its own designs, might be identified as dynastically queer. The result of an accidental, unwilling failure of heteronormative futurity—rather than the affirmative rejection of it—this queerness differs significantly in kind from the model Edelman proposes, and is perhaps one possible (and, perhaps, troubling) instance of what could fall under the umbrella of "queer heterosexuality."

Emily Griffiths Jones, MIT (emilyg@bu.edu)

Title: Queer Heterosexuality, Discipline, and Domesticity in the Letters of Mary Hatton Helsby

This paper considers a letter from the Folger Shakespeare Library's manuscript archive that shows us how heteronormative marriage and upper-middle-class domesticity intersect with queer performance and erotic play in the lives of a real seventeenth-century couple. The lively and affectionate correspondence that survives between Mary Hatton Helsby and Randolph Helsby mainly spans the couple's engagement between 1653 and 1655. However, one final letter (ms. X.d.493 [7]), dated 1668, reveals a brief glimpse of their relationship as husband and wife many years later, along with a son named Jack and a houseful of naughty servants. Mary's letter to Randolph (who is transacting business in London) primarily recounts her orderly but strict corporal punishment of their young maid Doll and two other servants. On one hand, Mary's account of her didactic domestic management, and her comparison of her own "arte and controul" to the inferior administration of her female neighbors, indicate that she wishes to represent herself to Randolph as a skilled and virtuous housewife. On the other hand, her many titillating details about Doll's nubile beauty, her sexual availability, and her theatrical pleas for mercy suggest that she hopes to excite her husband in his absence with a vivid scene of homoerotic domination and submission—especially once Mary adds that Randolph might bestow "the same punishment" upon her, his wife, when they are reunited. Mary Helsby's multiple fluid identities—both heterosexual spouse and lesbian or bisexual mistress, both a submissive wife to her husband and a dominatrix to her servants, both a

competent domestic steward and a provocative lover—remind us that in the Renaissance (as now), ostensibly heterosexual public relationships might resist easy categorization when seen in a private domestic environment, and that normative gendered social practices might mix smoothly with non-normative fantasy and play.

Shannon Elizabeth Kelley, Fairfield University ([skelley@fairfield.edu](mailto:skelley@fairfield.edu))  
Title: Appetite for the Unbeautiful

Early modern texts frequently pathologize female sexual appetite for base, disfigured, or so-called foul men through metaphors of food and diet. Boccaccio compares young women who are “moved by perverse appetite” to accept elderly lovers with women who prefer to eat the leek’s coarse leaves over its delicate bulb, which is “pleasing to the palate.” In Shakespeare, Desdemona’s desire for Othello is said to evidence a “will most rank,” while Hamlet wonders how his mother could leave a “fair mountain” to “feed and batten on this moor,” Claudius, a “mildewed ear.” For women to choose this diet confounds principles of likeness and sympathy of years, beauty, or manners.

My essay explores this phenomenon in *The Changeling*, a play that proposes the title of “odd-feeders” for women who prefer “slovenly dishes” rather than delicate meat. Mary Floyd-Wilson describes this feeding pattern as the attraction of “tragic antipathies,” a destructive collision that threatens social order and often leads to tragic consequences. Although Beatrice Johanna’s relationship with Deflores is not a same sex pairing, it is doubly queer: Deflores is of base descent and disfigured, while Beatrice Johanna is an heiress. Their sex is neither procreative nor tender. On the contrary, it involves lust and power, and many critics believe that she is raped. The play’s insistence that this relationship is wrong from its abject beginning to its *eros*-driven conclusion ironically exists in tension with a number of pointed speeches that defend or normalize perverse taste. I argue that this tension unfolds over a number of key scenes of female agency often minimized by critics who either pity or criticize Beatrice Johanna. She hires someone to murder her fiancé, but as a consequence creates a space to explore sex that is devoid of heteronormative pressure.

Ultimately, though, I contend that taste is not arbitrary for women in *The Changeling*: one woman’s meat is *not* another woman’s poison. Patriarchy crushes odd-feeders, an example of queer heterosexuality too far from “good and healthy sex” (Melissa Sanchez) and the possibility of heteromartial resolution to acknowledge.

Madhavi Menon, American University ([menon@american.edu](mailto:menon@american.edu))  
Title: The Nether Lands of Chouboli’s *Dastan*

The paper takes as its point of departure the provocation offered by Jonathan Goldberg’s work to see how Shakespeare’s travels around the world can result in queer texts and performances. Taking seriously the queer possibilities afforded by Shakespearean texts – the Sonnets, *Twelfth Night* – and engaging theoretically with the very form of drama, this paper will examine the politics and poetics of a *dastangoi* (Persian oral tradition of storytelling) performance titled *Chouboli*. Ostensibly a story about a triangle among one man and two women (hence the parallel with *Twelfth Night*), *Chouboli* offers us a way to think about heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality. It lays bare the queer universe of desire by allowing us to theorise queerness itself as universal.

Brian Pietras , Rutgers University (pietrasb@gmail.com)

Title: Effeminate Possibilities in The Metamorphosis of Pigmaliions Image

*The Metamorphosis of Pigmaliions Image* (1598) is John Marston's first extant work, and perhaps his least admired. As a mid-twentieth century editor of his poetry observed, "Nobody has found much to praise in it; and it is generally agreed that it is one of the poorest of the Ovidian, mythological, erotic poems of the late Elizabethan period." More recently, critics have decried the text as an especially misogynistic form of pornography: Ian Moulton finds in the poem "a blatant objectification of the female," while Sarah Carter deems the work "a masculine fantasy of control over sexual access to a woman." The outlines of the poem's narrative, derived from Ovidian myth, would seem to support this argument: Marston describes how a young male sculptor, Pygmalion, falls in love with his beautiful female statue, and finally consummates his desire after Venus transforms the sculpture into a living, breathing woman.

But critics have ignored that poem stages not one, but *two* metamorphoses. Through a series of unusual analogies, Marston suggests that Pygmalion is transformed into a woman through his desire for his beautiful statue, a figurative metamorphosis that allows him access to the pleasures of the female subject position. This metamorphosis takes on special importance when we recognize that Pygmalion, who throughout the poem savors the visual delights of his own artistic creation, also serves as a figure for the writer and reader of erotic verse. Early modern moralists often portrayed male authors and readers of erotic writing as degradingly effeminized by their surrender to the feminine pleasures of the text, a trope that reaches back to antiquity. But instead of refuting such charges, Marston's poem recuperates them, depicting Pygmalion's female transformation as a liberating experience, one that untethers him from a single body and a fixed masculine identity. In so doing, Marston ultimately suggests that male writers and readers should not fear but enjoy the disruptive and effeminizing effects of erotic literature—a position that can help us to rethink the traditional links made between textual pleasures, effeminacy, and shame in early modern England.

Christine Varnado, SUNY-Buffalo ([cmvarnad@buffalo.edu](mailto:cmvarnad@buffalo.edu))

Title: How Many Children?: Queer Generation and the Problem of the Human in *Macbeth*

L.C. Knights was mocking certain character-based reading practices when he snarkily titled a 1933 talk (presented before the Shakespeare Association), "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" In the cosmology of *Macbeth*, however, I find this to be a real question opened up by the play. I propose a paper analyzing how reproduction of various kinds – sexual and asexual – works in *Macbeth*, and the questions which follow from that: What constitutes the category of the human? What qualifies as human life (does Macduff, not "of woman born," qualify)? How is life manifest in other kinds of animate being: animal, plant (walking woods), stone, apparitional, witch-y? And how do these different, queer forms of generation affect our reading of the play? This investigation plumbs the queer, unnatural, and uncanny dimensions of generation and birth as they're represented in the material and figural universes of early modern drama, questioning whether the category of life has a direct or necessary connection to heterosexual congress, or to "natural" human bodies.

My paper will approach *Macbeth* in light of current queer and materialist theory interested in these questions (Kathryn Bond Stockton, Heather Love, Jane Bennett); but it will also put the play into conversation with older adaptations such as Orson Welles' 1948 film and Roman Polanski's 1971 film (and in one case *much* older: Francis Talfourd's 1850 *Macbeth Travestie, A Burlesque in Two Acts* -- a phantasmagorical mash-up of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Ben Jonson's *Masque of Queens*), and with canonical mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Shakespeare criticism, which can help to illuminate the history of reading

practices around reproduction and sexuality, hetero- and otherwise, in the play. I read *Macbeth* as queering both birth and death, by contravening the suppositions that conception, birth, or breast-feeding entails motherhood; that heterosexual sex is the means of generation; that children are born from mothers and fathers; or that something recognizable as human life hews to a linear and unidirectional timeline.

Jordan Windholz, Fordham University (windholz@fordham.edu)

Title: Queering the Renaissance Man: Chaste Bachelors and Rhetorics of Reproduction

This essay considers Shakespeare's representation of chaste bachelorhood as a queer alternative to procreative sexuality. Chaste bachelorhood has been largely overlooked by queer theorists, who have nonetheless usefully demonstrated how the early modern category of sodomy constitutes a range of non-procreative sexual practices. Yet while early modern moralists abhorred sodomitical relations of various types, they often insisted that it was not the bachelor's sexual activity but his inactivity that was a central concern. Closely aligned with catholic celibacy though not reducible to it, chaste bachelorhood functions as the primary rhetorical ballast anchoring Protestant veneration of marriage. Though less polemical than Protestant reformers, Shakespeare similarly probes the contours of chaste bachelorhood in numerous works, including *Venus and Adonis*, his *Sonnets*, and the notoriously problematic *All's Well That Ends Well*. In each, the bachelor's chastity is figured as a riddle to be resolved. Following Shakespeare's lead, Shakespeareans usually seek to resolve chaste bachelorhood by reading it as a cipher encoding forms of sexual activity, whether hetero- or homoerotic, sodomitical or straight. I propose we take Shakespeare's chaste bachelors at their word. If we instead read the occlusive surface of chaste bachelorhood for what it purports to be—a masquerade that revels in its denial of impersonation—I argue a queerly historicized picture of male sexuality emerges, one in which adherence to the prescriptive norms of early modern testicular manhood inscribes a queer mode of sexuality predicated on an indifference to desire.