

2017 SAA Seminar: Regulating Early Modern Women's Bodies Abstracts
Seminar Leaders: Jessica C. Murphy, University of Texas, Dallas
and Elisa Oh, Howard University 1

Cristina Leon Alfar, CUNY Hunter College

**“Feminist Ethics and Isabella's
(Un)Regulation of the Female Body in *Measure for Measure*”**

I am interested in Duke Vincentio's regulation of women's bodies in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* through juridical enforcement of the Christian marital hierarchy, which he undertakes in response to a perceived sexual licentiousness of his subjects. While I might be tempted to argue that it is the men, and their false promises to women, that the Duke regulates, his final act is to propose marriage to a young novice, Isabella, who, by turning to a convent, has made her own lack of interest in marriage abundantly clear. In fact, I will argue, Isabella's retreat to the sisterhood of St. Clare is a political act that releases her from Vienna's culture of female exploitation (a system she critiques throughout the play through what I will argue is a form of parrēsia, defined by Michele Foucault as a rhetorical expression of the truth, a right of all to speak that truth, to enjoy the freedom to speak truth to power [299-300]). Because the Duke ends his punishments of the men with this act, I cannot read them as anything but a regulation of the female body. I will trace the play back from this ending to argue that the proposal to Isabella is his primary regulatory move, one that removes her body from her control, attempts to place it in the safe management of Christian marriage, and reveals his other acts to be in the service of a masculinist juridical state even while he appears to make men into state defined sex offenders. He is frustrated, however, by Isabella's silence, which I read as a refusal to lie, a refusal to speak unless what she speaks is truth. Her silence constitutes a withdrawal of consent to his power and a revolutionary form dissent (Butler, “Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity” 791). *Measure for Measure*, then, offers Isabella “a new mode of being” (Butler 795) that rejects the sovereign's desire for “bad parrēsia” (or what Foucault describes as a sycophantic form of flattery), installs a politicized form of silence, and removes her body from his regulatory control (302).

Lilly Berberyan, University of North Carolina, Greensboro

“Subjectivity Through Over-Regulation: Communal Power and Female Agency in *Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Westward Ho*”

My paper examines the contributions of early modern city comedies to our understanding of how middling sort women's bodies and behaviors are regulated during the early modern period. Using the examples of Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* and Dekker and Webster's *Westward Ho*, I note that the over-regulation of the female characters in the plays creates an opportunity for the female subject to engage in demonstrative obedience. The female subject's fulfillment of her duties as a wife

becomes a source of power for the middling sort female subject. Thus, in *Merry Wives of Windsor*, the wives use Falstaff's advances to prove their competence to manage the family home and in the process gain the power to punish Falstaff in a public setting. In *Westward Ho*, the citizen wives are caught in the midst of an ideological strife because of the cultural expectations enforced on them: as wives, they are supposed to be faithful to their husbands and the household; as women that participate in the marketplace, they are expected to seem sexually available to the gallants that visit their shops. The women's ability to gain geographical freedom by pitting these contradictory expectations against each other exposes the possible pitfalls of over-regulation. The citizen wives' engagement with matters of power as a group encourages scholarly consideration of collective agency: by noting the women's public performances of compliance or their negotiations for agency as a group, we are able to discover pathways to power that the middling sort female subject might not be able to obtain on an individual basis.

Dianne Berg, Tufts University

“Come this morning but along my door, and as a stranger but salute me there”: Space, Surveillance, and Female Power in *Arden of Faversham* and *A Warning for Fair Women*”

This paper examines the role of public and semi-public spaces in petty treason narratives, where the quotidian surveillance endemic to early modern communities functions as an apparatus of social, moral, and state control. Liminal zones such as marketplaces, streets, doorways, thresholds, and windows, existing at the intersection of public and private, expose female characters—proverbially weaker vessels—to the gaze of ordinary passers-by and what Alice Arden terms "narrow-prying neighbors." More insidiously, the dangerous permeability of these spaces provides opportunities for contamination and/or penetration by outside forces (illicit lovers, co-conspirators) that undermine modes of enclosure meant to ensure female chastity.

Annelise Duerden, Washing University

“Silent Semblance: The Clifford Circle and (Re)Writing the Mirror Image of Women's Conduct in Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*”

In the most popular conductbook for women from 1529-1592, Vives' tract on women's education, Vives describes his *Instruction of a Christian Woman* as a portrait in which its virtuous reader can see her own virtues mirrored through her chaste, silent reception. His portrait/mirror trope becomes a standard, prescriptive, portrayal of female readership in the period. This paper looks at both the use and reception of this hyper-visual trope, as reflected by later female readership in the Clifford circle. Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, patronized by Clifford, adopts these terms of good-

girl readership, subtly rewriting Vives' portrait of women's moral literacy as she invites her reader "in my glass ... her self to see."

Gayle Gaskill, St. Catherine University

"*Twelfth Night*: Cross-Dressing as a Cautionary Tale"

A glance at Shakespeare's narrative and dramatic sources quickly reveals that Viola, the spunky, loving, resourceful, and possibly orphaned cross-dresser who escapes her gender's social regulation in an exotic world virtually devoid of patriarchal authority, descends from two generations of immensely popular literary damsels in male disguise. Source comparison, however, reveals the moral complexity and signal restraints of the playwright's appropriations. Whether for coarse sexual jokes or earnest warnings, sources highlight the genuine dangers the ingénue escapes only through a desperately welcomed, last-minute patriarchal restoration that supplies her the control of brother, husband, and male monarch.

Loreen L. Giese, Ohio University

"Regulating Regulations: Complicating a Husband's Right to Correct His Wife in Early Modern London"

Historians examining marital abuse in England often turn to court cases to assess where correction ended and cruelty began. Their practice of defining marital cruelty as the behaviors that exceed correction indicates that husbands had the right to regulate their wives through correction. An examination of the differences in the letters of English canon law and common law in regard to marital abuse and of the use of the word *correction* itself in depositions from marital cruelty cases in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century London challenges the distinction between correction and cruelty and the legal right of husbands to correct their wives through physical violence in early modern London.

Sara D. Luttfriing, Pennsylvania State University Erie, Behrend

"Regulation and Childbearing During the British Civil Wars"

My paper will examine two very different texts from the mid-seventeenth century: *The Ranter's Monster* (1652) and William Herbert's *Herberts Child-bearing Woman* (1648). The first is a monstrous birth pamphlet in which a sectarian woman shocks her community by claiming to be pregnant with the true Messiah and subsequently gives birth to a monstrous child whose deformity disproves her sinful claims. The second is a prayer book that focuses on women's experience of maternity from conception to

weaning. I will argue that these texts complicate the notion of a female body regulated by the exterior forces of male authority, since in both cases (but in very different ways), the regulation in question comes from within the pregnant women themselves.

Kris McAbee, University of Arkansas, Little Rock

“The Indeterminate Economics of Early Modern Whores”

My essay interrogates the figure of the prostitute as a body which is “a site of exchange” (Salkeld 7). I consider how the early modern sex trade is at once disruptive to regulatory bodies and yet actually works in concert with the proto-capitalist state. I read Dekker and Middleton’s *The Honest Whore* against a manuscript scrap of verse, “Epitaph on a Whore Named Nott.” While the play models rehabilitation for the eponymous character, it does so through the threat of the regulatory state. Meanwhile, the manuscript poem takes pains to memorialize the eponymous whore, yet simultaneously erases and re-embodies this woman whose name means both nothing and “no thing.”

Rebecca Olson, Oregon State University

“Spectacular Reintroductions: *The Winter’s Tale* and the Churching of Anna of Denmark”

This essay exposes *The Winter’s Tale*’s deep engagement with contemporary attitudes about and practices surrounding royal childbirth. Specifically, it reveals how the play, which was performed at court in 1611/12 and 1612/13, would have evoked Anna of Denmark’s lying-in and churching ceremony after the birth of Princess Mary in 1605. This historical context helps us to appreciate the extent to which *The Winter’s Tale*’s dramatization of maternal recovery complicates standard accounts of the political environment in which Shakespeare participated; at the same time, it reveals new ways to think about the regulation of women’s bodies in his late romances.

James A. Rizzi, Tufts University

“Lucrece’s Body Embodied: Implications of Formal Shifts in Heywood’s *The Rape of Lucrece*”

Thomas Heywood’s 1608 stage adaptation of the popular Lucrece myth foregrounds the heroine’s physicality, shifting formally from the reader’s imagination to a dynamic, living body. While some scholars have focused on narrative components of Heywood’s writing in order to contextualize it within its long poetic genealogy, this

paper will attempt to read the implications of the narrative's performance. Staging the scenes of interaction between Tarquin and Lucrece necessarily creates a meta-layer of voyeurism in the form of audience spectatorship. Newly added visual scrutiny may reveal or emphasize certain double-binds in early seventeenth century English sociolegal conceptualizations of rape and consent.

Elizabeth Steinway, Ohio State University

“Thy words condemn thy brat and thee”: Pleading the Belly in *1 Henry VI*”

This paper will explore what it means when women on trial turn to the status of pregnancy in order to request leniency. Figures such as Joan la Pucelle in *1 Henry IV*, for example, “plead the belly” to defer execution. Although women on trial were expected to give their own accounts of particular bodily experiences, their words were verified or disproved through physical search. This impulse to successfully recognize the pregnant body onstage speaks to a larger desire to regulate the female body, a need that is echoed in medical and legal discourses of early modern England and today.

Heather Wicks, Purdue University

**“I shall kill thee, and love thee after”:
Regulating the Female Body Through Erotic Death”**

My paper examines the ways that characters in early modern tragedies attempt to use a woman's death as the absolute way to regulate her body, and the complicated ways this project fails. By looking at specific moments in *Othello* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*, I posit that these plays interrogate a cultural fantasy that seeks to stabilize both death's meaning and women's bodies through erotic death. Male characters continue to create narratives from dead female bodies and bring them back into erotic circulation. Thus, regulation through death is often revealed as a powerful but not all-powerful patriarchal fantasy of control.

Amanda Zoch, Indiana University

“Escape from the Narrative: *Pericles* and Thaisa's Ruptured Lying-In”

Early modern poets Hester Pulter and Katherine Philips both express desires to escape their post-partum lyings-in, deliberate dissociations that call attention to the ritual's prescriptive revelry and the potential failure of its carnivalesque celebrations. Although not every woman yearned to escape her lying-in, the staged example in Shakespeare's *Pericles* parallels these poets' attitudes. I argue that Thaisa's narratively

and aquatically displaced lying-in offers a fantastical rendition of the female desire to dissociate from the patriarchal ritual. Shakespeare's dramatic appropriation, however, fails to maintain the agency of women's poetic escapes, and instead further constrains Thaisa by framing her absence as a passive occurrence of fate.
