

**2017 SAA Seminar: Shakespearean Distortions of Early Modern Drama Abstracts**  
**Leaders: Marissa Nicosia, Pennsylvania State University, Abington**  
**and Curtis Perry, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign 1**

**Alan B. Farmer, Ohio State University**

**“Oddball Shakespeare”**

This paper argues that the texts of Shakespeare’s plays are weird, and yet he is still widely considered a consummate professional playwright from the early modern theater, an idea that confers an exemplarity on his plays and overlooks their highly atypical histories. What I want to suggest instead is that we think of Shakespeare’s plays in a way similar to how we do Ben Jonson’s: as idiosyncratic dramas by an idiosyncratic author, as plays that differ from the typical productions of early modern playing companies and that were written by an author with a sizable “bibliographic ego” who was unusually concerned about the printing of his plays in accurate texts. In making these claims, I do not aim to put forward new, hitherto unknown evidence about Shakespeare’s plays or his authorship. Rather, I want to consider the larger meta-narratives we use to think about, write about, and teach Shakespeare. These narratives turn an eccentric body of work by an unconventional author into prototypical dramas written by the archetypal early modern playwright. In so doing, they distort our understanding of Shakespeare and therefore also the early modern theater.

**Brent Griffin, University of North Georgia**

**“Original Practices” and the Real First Folio**

Over the past twenty years or so, performance-based efforts to recreate the staging conditions and production modes of Elizabethan/Jacobean playhouses through “original practices” have developed at a considerable rate. One has only to note the popular appeal of theatre companies working from early modern architectural replicas (like London’s Bankside Globe or Virginia’s Blackfriars) to recognize the pervasive influence of the “reconstructive Shakespeare” movement on our understanding and interpretation of Renaissance drama. Yet, as the name would suggest, the movement is too often grounded in a performance aesthetic predicated solely on Shakespeare’s playtexts (indeed, for many, the 1623 Folio is followed with a near religious fervor). But truth be told, other playwright/practitioners of the era have far more to say on the matter than Shakespeare, and made a point of publishing their thoughts directly through prefatory material, commendatory verses, pamphlets, etc. Fletcher and Heywood immediately come to mind, but my paper will focus on the most prolific critic of the period, Ben Jonson. Not to be overshadowed by commemorations of Shakespeare’s death, 2016 also marks the 400th anniversary of the publication of Jonson’s monumental First Folio, and his *Workes* will provide ample occasion to challenge more than a few of the “original practices” championed by bardocentric theatre companies and their educational auxiliaries.

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**Heejin Kim, Florida State University**

**Shakespeare's Collaborative Dramaturgy in His Mid-Career**

Since the 1623 folio's textual finalization of Shakespeare's plays, our understanding of his oeuvre is predominantly based on its generic categorization and its demarcation of authorship. The distinctive generic formation of tragedy, comedy, and history in the folio has established the standard of Shakespeare's artistic development. The dramaturgy Shakespeare mastered in his solo-authored plays from 1594 to 1606 features structurally integrated plots, individuated and consistent characters with psychological depth, poetic eloquence, and generic homogeneity. In contrast, his collaborative plays with a relatively episodic structure, a "medley" of genres, and inconsistent characterizations have been criticized due to their lack of aesthetic unity. Hence, his collaborative authorship has been explained by his "pre-capitalist cooperative mentalité" or by his limited artistic freedom in his early and "late" career. However, recent scholarship's attribution of the Sir Thomas More Addition II to Shakespeare in 1603-4 and The Spanish Tragedy addition IV to Shakespeare around 1599 questions our sense of his relationship with the acting companies and his craftsmanship. His contributions to these plays as a sharer and the "attached" playwright reveal not only his artistic assumption about the common dramaturgy based on generic hybridity but also his unique dramaturgical innovation in his solo-authored plays.

**Andrew Miller, Princeton University**

**"Two emulous Philomels": Style and self-similarity in *Two Noble Kinsmen***

The title page of the 1634 printing of *Two Noble Kinsmen* names its co-authors, Shakespeare and Fletcher, as "the memorable Worthies of their time," but some worthies are more memorable than others. Predictably, Shakespeare has dominated the play's contested attribution history, even in his alleged absence. So Steevens, noting that *Kinsmen*'s language and images "coincide perpetually with those in the dramas of Shakspeare," argues against "so pitiful an ambition" on the greater playwrights's part of "setting his seal" on his contributions by attempting to resemble himself— the play must therefore be Fletcher's Shakespearean imitation. I survey *Kinsmen*'s critical history of stylistic discriminations, both impressionistic and stylometric, in terms of the matter of self-similarity which pervades the play itself. I argue that the tradition's Shakespearean distortions, even (or especially) when they have confused the play's attribution, emphasize questions of genuine interest: how does style persist diachronically? what are the means by which authors resemble each other, and themselves? Recent work on *Kinsmen* has usefully shown how the play's Chaucerian affiliations resist our usual periodizing narratives; building on this, I press on the temporal instabilities suppressed by the title page's fiction of two coequal (and coeval) "Worthies of their time."

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**Nomie N'Diaye, Columbia University**

**“Race Without Shakespeare”**

For historical and political reasons which this paper investigates, the field of early modern race studies has been affected particularly strongly by Shakespeare-centrism, and I argue that, after thirty years of intense developments, the field has now reached a stage of maturity in which early modern race scholars can emancipate themselves from Shakespeare-centrism. By focusing our attention almost exclusively on Shakespeare, we risk (and we have been) missing out on some of the fascinating innovations in cross-racial performance that developed in late Jacobean, Caroline, and Restoration theatre. I give an example from my dissertation: black dances, or black “anticks,” a performance trope first used by Spaniards and Afro-Spaniards to negotiate interracial power relations in the context of domestic slavery. This transnational performance trope increasingly gained traction in English theatrical culture as English colonialism deepened, starting in the late Jacobean period: I provide a close reading of Massinger’s use of that trope in *The Bondman* (1624).

**Richard O’Brien, university of Birmingham**

**‘Traditional Elizabethan Verse’: Dispatches from Inside the Black Hole**

As Gary Taylor writes in *Reinventing Shakespeare*, ‘If Shakespeare has a singularity, it is because he has become a black hole’, not least in the way he is engaged with by critics and reviewers. Rarely is this more clear than in the persistent and egregious assumption that the techniques of versified dramaturgy, associated for English-speaking audiences primarily with the early modern period, are themselves intrinsically ‘Shakespearean’ - that Shakespeare, and no other author, is the reference point to which the composition and performance of any subsequent drama in verse ought to be compared. Thus we find the reviewer Terri Paddock, for *WhatsOnStage*, writing in 1999 that Peter Oswald’s *Augustine’s Oak* is both the ‘first new play for Shakespeare’s Globe since, um, Shakespeare’ and composed ‘in traditional Elizabethan verse’. Paddock seems unaware of the very fact that dramatists other than Shakespeare wrote for the Globe both during and after his period of prominence, and describes a play in modern diction, albeit set in the first millennium, as ‘Elizabethan’ - the clear assumption is that metre itself has an expiry date.

Another British critic, Charles Spencer, grudgingly admits that Shakespeare wrote ‘unrhymed iambic pentameters’ (so they can’t be all bad!) in the middle of a screed against verse drama in general which concludes the best theatrical poetry eschews ‘rigid rhythm’ and (in a turn of inspired poetic non-literality) ‘moves beyond mere language’. Spencer’s attitude, in attempting to exempt Shakespeare while castigating the form in which he worked, is part of a widespread cultural attitude, whereby, as *The Guardian’s* Lyn Gardner puts it, ‘one poet in the national drama is, it seems, quite enough.’ Meanwhile, the contemporary verse dramatist Glyn Maxwell, himself commissioned to

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produce new work for the Globe, declares a power of inspiration unique to Shakespeare: 'If a child who loves football watches film of Pele in action, does he say, "what the hell, forget it, I'll get a job at McDonald's", or does he say, "oh I want to be him, I want to do that"?'

What these responses have in common is a deep-rooted failure to engage with what is distinctive in our culture, but explicitly not unique in his own, about Shakespeare: his use of a shared, inherited form. Shakespeare comes to stand not only as the high-water-mark, but as the sole exemplar, of successful dramatic verse in English. This, in its turn, has an impact on how non-Shakespearean verse plays from the early modern period onward are performed, directed and reviewed in the present day, particularly in the light of decreasing cultural familiarity with the work of Shakespeare's contemporaries and a rarity of high-profile performances of post-1642 verse drama. In my paper I will assess this impact on the reception of a range of early modern non-Shakespearean verse plays in recent reviewing culture, including those critiques where there is a total absence of comment on verse and verse-speaking.

**Aaron Pratt, Trinity University**  
**"Playbooks before the playhouses"**

The printed playbook in England predates London's theater industry as well as its most recognizable playwright, and my paper aims to serve as a reminder of this fact: for almost as long as there were people reading vernacular literature in print, there were people reading plays. And, yet, I argue, our emphasis on the industry that produced Shakespeare has led to us to miss, or at least understate, the importance of this early history. While the commercial playing companies and their dedicated venues may have been something new, printed playbooks were not, and the first editions to emerge from the young performance industry depended on publishers who understood that a market among readers—and a set of print conventions—already existed. My paper will explore some of the implications of truly telling the history of literary drama from its beginning and not in the rearview mirror. What would it mean to put Shakespeare in the fifth act of the play and not in the first or second?

**Richard Preiss, University of Utah**

***Epicene and the Water Cycle***

Shakespeare's plays are never set in contemporary London, and only obliquely refer to it; consequently – beyond their own commercial success – they provide little evidence of the shaping conditions of early modern theater through which they themselves would have been experienced. Their monopoly on scholarship, moreover, and the fundamental mediation of such critical engagement through their textual form, has led us to persist in approaching early modern theater in anachronistic ways – in particular, to conceive of plays essentially *as* texts, as self-contained works of art whose meanings and effects transpire over the course of a single enactment, as experiential objects with

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clearly-defined beginnings and endings. The basic facts of the repertory system, however, in which repeat audiences often saw the same play over and over scant days apart, contradict this assumption: not only were plays never fully separable from those that preceded and followed them in a given company's schedule, but they were never fully separable from themselves, always preceded or followed by their own previous or subsequent iterations. A "play" was not a discrete, self-identical, unitary whole, coterminous with its individual performance. This flattened dimensionality of early modern theater is best recovered through the work of Ben Jonson, who (at the same time as promoting the very textualization of drama beneath which my project tries to delve) perhaps more than anyone crafted his plays to anticipate, thematize, and exploit it. I will focus mainly on *Epicene* (1609), which begins by analogizing itself to a feast whose consumption carries on long past the moment of its performance, and which concludes in a climax whose manifest contrivance may represent not dramaturgical miscalculation so much as a deliberate violation of its own narrative integrity, the retroactive inception of its plot long *before* its performance. At the core of Jonsonian city comedy, I suggest, is an attempt to develop a theatrical form adequate to the complexity of London life, and *Epicene* in particular (though this equation steadily amplifies and compounds in *The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew Fair*, *The Devil is an Ass*) seizes on the structural permeability of theatrical experience as a phenomenological template for the description of early modern social and economic relations: as themselves radically fluid and recombinative, interlaced and untraceable, lacking origin or end, source or destination, like – as in the play's dominant, ultimately self-reflexive image – the ceaseless, cyclical course of water through its conduits, sewers, and the bodies of its citizens.

**Melissa Rohrer, University of Connecticut**

**"This Naked Tragedy":  
True Crime, Shakespeare, and the Lord Chamberlain's Men**

In this paper, I examine how Shakespeare's dominance in the study of early modern drama has likewise dominated perceptions of dramatic genre in the period, often overshadowing dramas and dramatic subgenres that do not fit easily into the First Folio's categories of "tragedies," "comedies," and histories." One such subgenre is the murder play, in which true crime narratives from ballads, pamphlets, and chronicles were adapted into tragedies for the stage. Murder plays were most prevalent in the 1590s, and many of those that survive were written for and performed by Shakespeare's acting company. But despite this prevalence, murder plays and domestic drama are often studied in isolation; or, as plays like *Arden of Faversham* (c. 1592) and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (c. 1605) were removed from consideration as Shakespeare apocrypha, significant critical engagement with true crime tragedies has largely diminished. But the diminished attention given to this dramatic subgenre obscures our understanding of the popularity of murder plays, their place in the repertoire of Shakespeare's company, and the ways in which his own plays—such as *Richard III*—draw on the tropes of true crime tragedy and influenced subsequent murder plays in turn. By surveying extant murder plays such as *Arden* and *A*

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*Warning for Fair Women* (c. 1596), I hope to bring the importance of the murder play to Shakespeare and his company to greater attention.

**Maria Shmygol, Université de Genève**

**Shakespearean Distortions / Distortions of Shakespeare:**  
**The German *Tito Andronico* (1620)**

In 1620 there was published at Leipzig a collection of plays performed in Germany by the English travelling players, which contained a play entitled *Eine sehr klägliche Tragaedia von Tito Andronico und der hoffertigen Käyserin, darinnen denckwürdige actiones zubefinden*. The play has variously been hailed as an adaptation/translation of Shakespeare's *Titus* on the one hand and as that of the lost play, *Titus and Vespasian*, on the other. To that end, my paper will begin by thinking more broadly about the fortunes of *Tito Andronico*'s reception in early modern studies, from the initial translation in Albert Cohn's nineteenth-century volume *Shakespeare in Germany* to the more recent scholarly interest that the play has received. The paper will then discuss some of the crucial differences between the plays, since the process of adaptation necessitated a number of changes to make the play appropriate for the German wanderbühne. I will focus particular attention on addressing the significance and complexity of one such difference: the fact that the enemies of the Romans in the German play are Ethiopians rather than Shakespeare's Goths. This change has interesting and profound implications for Morian (Aaron's equivalent in the German play) which have gone hitherto unexplored.

**Sarah Wall-Randell, Wellesley College**

**Romance's Distorting Glass: Discovering the Book in *Cymbeline* and *Don Quixote***

Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* deploys certain traditional tropes of romance narrative, such as disguise, coincidence, improbable reunion, supernatural intervention, and (not least) the deployment of a serendipitously-discovered book, that seem to link the play's plot to an earlier literary period, to sixteenth-century romance in its "high" forms like Sidney's pastoral *Arcadia* or in "middlebrow," oft-retold and reprinted tales like those of *Guy of Warwick* or *Bevis of Hampton*, and to well-worn, even shopworn modes of fiction-making. For this reason, it is easy to forget that *Cymbeline* (1610-11?) actually post-dates Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605), often thought to mark the endpoint of romance (and the advent of the "realistic" novel) by decisively skewering outmoded chivalric topoi. Can reflecting on the contemporaneity of Cervantean irony help us "undistort" our reading of the complicated tone of Shakespeare's romance, especially the famously strange scene in which his long-errant hero Posthumous discovers a manuscript that supplies him with the script for the denouement of the play? At the same time, can the Quixote's references to the discovered book point us toward a longer tradition of self-

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consciousness around books in romance texts? Does romance itself distort our attempts to find a progress narrative in literary history?