

**2018 SAA Seminar: Publicity and the Early Modern Stage 1**  
**Leader: Allison Deutermann, Baruch College, CUNY**

**James P. Bednarz, Long Island University**

**Jonson's Ridicule of Shakespeare in 'To the Reader' of *The Alchemist* (1612)**

William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson engaged in an ongoing debate on the so-called "rules of art" that Jonson advocated as a critical technology to reform the imaginative excesses of popular drama. Neglecting this early modern publicity campaign blinds contemporary interpretation to their remarkable metatheatrical dialogue which defined the terms through which their drama would be interpreted for the next four hundred years. Yet the observation that Shakespeare and Jonson responded significantly to each other's work by publicizing their opposing attitudes towards commercial theater contradicts the still widely accepted theory, proposed by S. Schoenbaum at the end of the twentieth century, that Jonson said nothing publicly about Shakespeare while the latter was active in the theater and that Shakespeare therefore had no reason to engage him. Richard Dutton, for example, has recently written that "Jonson kept his peace (at least in public) about the older man until he had retired to Stratford, and then in effect put himself forward to fill the gap which that retirement had created." In this paper, however, I argue that Jonson became his own publicity agent in deliberately formulating his address "To the Reader" of *The Alchemist* in 1612 as a fierce coded criticism of *The Winter's Tale*, which the King's Men probably acted in 1611, in the wake of their productions of *The Alchemist* and *Catiline* in 1610. The reason Jonson reacted so vehemently to *The Winter's Tale* was, I assume, because he interpreted it, with some justification, as offering witty mockery of the artistic principles he endorsed.

**Piers Brown, Kenyon College**

**Coriolanus in the Marketplace**

Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* offers a useful text to consider the difference between fame and public persona on the early modern stage. It is a play much concerned with the relationship between honour, renown, and public display. While Coriolanus begins the play famous for his martial feats, he is not well loved by the Roman multitude. After his defeat of the Volscians, Coriolanus' appointment as consul turns on his willingness to appear before the people not as a mob, but in "particular," pleading with each and showing his wounds, an act he compares to "harlotry."

We can read Coriolanus' patrician disdain for the public both negatively (as contempt) and positively (as a honest in comparison to the flattery of the tribunes), but most valuably the play alerts us to the ways that fame and publicity can run contrary to each other as well as together. Fame can act like rumour, running ahead of the individual or event, and thus acting separately from presence in public--at least until the public demand for that presence becomes overwhelming. Given the regal and noble impulses to control public access to their persons, this distinction and the importance of the act of condescension to bridge that gap becomes more apparent. This problem is particularly pressing on the Jacobean stage, which presents intimately the acts and counsels of the

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nobility before a public audience, albeit in this case in the form of Roman history. The play's analysis also poses an important problem for the open space of the public, drawing our attention to the problem rank poses for free discourse: without condescension on the part of those of higher rank (and without agreement about who outranks whom), the free exchange of ideas is impeded.

**Sheila Coursey, University of Michigan**

**Assembling the True Crime Corpus of Domestic Tragedy:  
*Two Lamentable Tragedies* and Crowdsourced Justice**

The early modern domestic tragedy *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (c. 1601) dramatizes the 1594 murder of Robert Beech by his neighbor Thomas Merry, a murder that Merry tried to conceal by cutting up Beech's body and hiding various parts across London. Because of this distributed urban crime scene, the heroes of *Two Lamentable Tragedies* are not members of law enforcement, but rather ordinary citizens: both Beech's neighbors that assembled together as an amateur detective group, and random Londoners who stumbled over evidence. In this paper, I track the onstage narrative of putting Beech's body back together as a commentary on the process of creating and marketing *Two Lamentable Tragedies* itself; in both, a London public takes disparate fragments of a corpus and creates a final product that involves a measure of ethical entanglement for all involved. Like most early modern domestic tragedies, *Two Lamentable Tragedies* is constructed from the legal documents, broadsides and ballads chronicling the 'actual' crime, here the murder of Beech by Thomas Merry, and Merry and his sister Rachel's subsequent trial and public execution. These initial documents were created, distributed, and consumed within a body of London citizens that would become the local 'true crime public' of Merry's case. In performance, *Two Lamentable Tragedies* dramatizes the labor of suturing together the corpus of this narrative through a large cast of minor London citizens; these citizens, who find and return the fragments of Beech's corpse strewn across London, demonstrate both a fluency in criminal narratives, and a sense of responsibility and stewardship that characterizes their real-life counterparts in the audience. In performance, *Two Lamentable Tragedies* hails that audience as a kind of living archive. I argue that in acknowledging that labor, this play also makes explicit structures of audience complicity that are often left invisible in domestic tragedy.

**Musa Gurnis, Washington University in Saint Louis**

**Local Characters Onstage and Off**

A theater "scene" developed around early modern commercial playing; a dense social space of traffic in styles of personhood between the stage and its urban fan base. Dramatic representations of recognizable, living individuals were not limited to satire of political elites; plays also traded in the public visibility of ordinary people. The theater capitalized on and helped produce the notoriety of local celebrities whose own performances of selfhood crossed between the stage and city. The familiar case of Moll Frith is only one example of a far broader exchange between urban and dramatic

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characters. The infamous necromancer Doctor Lambe—subject of a lost play and name checked in several extant ones—was spotted at the Fortune and beaten to death in the street by his fellow playgoers. Figures at the fringes of commercial playing promoted their own creative acts through their connections to the stage. John Taylor's work not only as a ferryman carrying playgoers across the Thames to Southwark, but also as an artist developed in a symbiotic relationship with commercial theater. By publicizing his friendship with Jonson and feuds with others in the theater scene, by writing in genres such as jest books that drew from and influenced the drama, and by orchestrating multi-media performances across London's streets and stages and pages (such as his much advertised amateur competition in dramatic impersonation with William Fennor at the Hope theater, which turned into an exchange of personal insults in print when Fennor failed to turn up); Taylor fashioned a professional and creative persona at the edges of commercial theater. Such exchanges between stage characterization and local characters generated a rich vocabulary of urban selfhood, and made ordinary Londoners visible as public figures.

**Jennifer Holl, Rhode Island College**

**Richard Tarlton, Social Media, and the Early Modern Theatrical Celebrity**

In their 2006 volume on the history of theatrical celebrity, Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody argue that “celebrity is above all a media production” and that “only in the eighteenth century does an extensive apparatus for disseminating fame emerge.” This paper attempts to expand the putative historical boundaries of theatrical celebrity and push back against the widely held notion that celebrity can only operate through mass-media dissemination, as it argues that our current culture of online and social media celebrity circulation invites us to revisit celebrity studies' insistence on organized mass-media as a requisite for a celebrity culture. As our 2.0 proliferation of celebrity online demonstrates, the phenomenon is quite capable of operating through disparate medial environments, and in this paper, I explore how the early modern theater may have facilitated a celebrity culture through means much more similar to our current modes of collaborative construction and dissemination online than to the conventional forms of broadcast media generally tied to the concept of celebrity. Taking Richard Tarlton as a particularly apt case study in early modern theatrical celebrity, I explore the pathways of Tarlton's fame through both the theater and the market of theatrically inspired print to demonstrate the ways that his remarkable renown might rightly be considered celebrity.

**András Kiséry, City College, CUNY**

**Learning to Talk**

Scholars have studied notes taken from plays as well as the typography of playbooks to reconstruct how early modern readers were using their play texts. Inevitably, such scholarship has been interested in the tendency to treat plays as literary documents, and it sought to recognize the forms of literary attention, the compositional practices of the audience that such evidence made visible. In my paper, I will question this literary

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emphasis. Dramatic dialog in the period was as closely associated with spoken as with written discourse, and among oral modes, with conversation rather than with formal oratory. I will suggest that most early-17th c. notes from plays – whether from printed playbooks or from the stage – are residual documents not of theatrical performance, nor of a literary culture, but rather, of a culture of oral, conversational performance.

**Victor Lenthe, Bilkent University, Ankara**

**Shakespeare's *Ill Will* and the Style of Consensus**

My paper examines *Twelfth Night* as a work of political theory and makes it speak to contemporary theoretical debates about the public sphere. Although the play contains relatively little overt political commentary, scholars including James Bednarz identify it as part of a series of plays in which Shakespeare learned to resist the consensus-oriented endings traditionally promised by the romantic comedy genre. While building on such arguments about *Twelfth Night's* artistic originality, I show that this nuanced commentary on the value of consensus also implies insights relevant to contemporary political theorists debating what the concept of the public sphere can offer in our current political moment.

I envision three main sections. First, reviewing recent scholarship by political theorists, I show that for them the terms public, public sphere, and public opinion hinge on a notion of consensus that often remains overlooked in historical scholarship about the early modern public sphere. Second, I show that *Twelfth Night* questions the political value of consensus by emphasizing that the happy ending enjoyed by most of the characters is founded on the cruel exclusion of the character Malvolio. Third, I examine the alternatives to consensus envisioned by *Twelfth Night*. I show that Shakespeare differs from modern critics of consensus politics, such as Chantal Mouffe, by directing his critique less at the ideal of consensus than at the style of its performance.

**Karen Raber, University of Mississippi**

**Celebrity No-Show: John Taylor's *The Great Eater of Kent***

This paper moves away from Shakespeare's stage, to the temporal and geographical environs of London's theaters in order to focus on one specific version of celebrity: the spectacle of the "great eater" Nicholas Wood of Kent, whose extreme gluttony John Taylor unsuccessfully attempted to turn into a public show at the Bear Garden in 1630. When Wood declined, citing first his fear that he might be hanged for failing to earn his keep, and second his worry that because he was "grown in years," "his stomach should fail him publicly and lay his reputation in the mire." Taylor instead wrote and published an account of Wood's "teeth and stomachs exploits." That account—the very fact that it exists, but also its form, and its various literary references and devices—raises a number of questions germane to this seminar, questions about notoriety, authorship, and theatricality. How does the text, for example, supply the spectacle (or fail to do so) in place of the theatrical no-show? How is Kent's prior local fame distinct from the wider

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celebrity Taylor wants to generate for him? What kind of “publics” might be imagined to consume the pamphlet vs. the Bear-garden performance, and with what consequences in terms of imagined communal identity? How does Wood’s insatiable “maw” anchor Taylor’s literary-historical account of spectacular gluttony? And how is Wood’s bestial embodiment leveraged to secure the fame of “The Water Poet” himself—how does a poet triumph in a contest of wills where the celebrity opponent withdraws from public life? To answer these questions I mobilize current accounts of the social and physical dimensions of competitive eating, historical food studies, and current critical perspectives on generating theatrical “publics” to argue that Taylor stages Wood’s gluttonous anti-commensality as a form of anti-theatricality.

**Lauren Robertson, Columbia University**

**‘Methinks I see the brave Hieronimo!’:**

**Dramatic Convention and Audience Experience in the London Commercial Theater**

Among other roles, actor Edward Alleyn was famous for playing *The Spanish Tragedy*’s grief-stricken and vengeful Hieronimo, perhaps the most famous character of early modern English drama. In the years following the play’s 1592 performances, Hieronimo seemed to burst beyond the bounds of *The Spanish Tragedy* itself. In *The English Gentleman* (1630), Richard Braithwaite gives an account of a woman who cried out on her death bed, “Oh Hieronimo, Hieronimo, methinks I see the brave Hieronimo!” (195). Braithwaite notes that the woman “fixed her eyes attentively, as if she had seene Hieronimo acted” (195), sighed deeply, and died. Though Braithwaite assigns the woman the role of spectator in this story, watching *The Spanish Tragedy* in her mind’s eye, what he records is her own performance: her cries, her fixed looks, her deep sighs. The dying woman, in apparently recalling a performance of *The Spanish Tragedy* she had once seen, took on the role of its famous character for herself.

What might Hieronimo’s fame, established over several decades, tell us about how theatergoers accumulated dramatic knowledge as they watched new plays, and upon leaving the theater, recalled them? As a way into answering this question, I will consider *The Spanish Tragedy* in relation to Phillip Massinger’s *The Roman Actor*, first published a year before Braithwaite’s *English Gentleman*. I will argue that Massinger used Hieronimo’s—and *The Spanish Tragedy*’s—fame to invite spectators to take an active role in the process of meaning-making in the theater. Building, in particular, on William West’s recent work on intertheatricality, I will suggest that Hieronimo’s fame allowed Massinger both to draw on and exploit the dramatic conventions on which theatergoers relied to make sense of the worlds displayed to them on the stage. For the theatergoer familiar with *The Spanish Tragedy*, in other words, watching *The Roman Actor* for the first time would have been an experience at once clearly recognizable and strangely new.

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**Melissa Rohrer, University of Connecticut**

**Court Scandal and Theater as Negative Publicity Machine**

Few in our current social climate can now deny the power of scandal to reshape cultural, political, and ideological landscapes. Many of the components necessary to create public scandal out of private transgression—the popular press, increased literacy, and widespread communication networks—were developing in the early modern era, and the citizens of seventeenth-century London were no strangers to the powerful public forces that perpetuated scandals and made transgressors infamous for their misdeeds. Though I am interested in depictions of scandal and notoriety on the early modern stage more generally, this essay focuses on scandals of court corruption and the ways in which they were represented in the professional theater.

Despite the risk of offending powerful aristocrats, dramatists often incorporated details or narrative elements of elite scandal into their plays, allowing audiences and playbook readers the opportunity to participate in the politics of scandal as members of an outraged and emotionally-energized public. I argue that the theater had a unique ability to engage with aristocrats and their scandals, not only because of the public nature of performance, but also because dramatic traditions made critique of elite transgressions more permissible. The genres of aristocratic tragedy and satiric comedy, in particular, commonly depicted the downfall of corrupt courtiers, the moral failings of social superiors, and violations of social norms. As such, drama was well suited to respond critically to and cultivate outrage regarding the circumstances of court scandal. Plays written in the wake of political and court scandals also enhanced the notoriety of aristocratic norm-breakers who were implicated in scandalous activity. Through allusion or dramatization of these notorious figures, playwrights contributed to the negative publicity that shaped and forever altered how these public figures were "known" by audiences.

**Chantelle Thauvette, Sienna College**

**Fame's Exit: Promotion and Obscurity and Social Accountability in Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London***

In Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* (1584), Fame appears briefly in the first scene never to be heard from again. At the outset of the play, Fame optimistically reassures the virtuous Love and Conscience that "you no doubt shall see/ [Lucre and her henchmen] plagued with painful punishment for such their cruelty" if they can resist Lucre (1.22-3). Fame promises a fair moral universe, but her exit as a character signals the not-entirely-unpredictable betrayal of *fama* as an unreliable mechanism of social accountability. Publicity and self-promotion, no matter how distasteful, prove central to Lucre's success as an allegorical celebrity near and dear to the hearts of Londoners, while obscurity leaves Love and Conscience pure but defenceless against the predations of Lucre. By following Fame's advice, Love and Conscience do not win a triple crown but instead find their faces marked and deformed under Lucre's service until they are barely

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recognizable. Fame, in Wilson's play, which claims to compels people to behave ethically or face social recrimination, gives way as capitalist incentives reward self-promotion and neutralize shame for all but a handful of powerful women brought to bear a Judge's arbitrarily similar punishments for crimes of different scale. Fame's swift exit, I argue, is part of the broader social breakdown Robert Wilson stages in the play.

**Paul Yachnin, McGill University**

**Dreaming in Public**

In his 1658 study, *The Mystery of Dreams, Historically Discoursed*, Philip Goodwin commented that "all men . . . while awake, are together in one common world, but when they sleep, each man goes into a single world by himself."<sup>1</sup> According to Shakespeare's contemporary, Thomas Nashe, "how many sorts there be [of dreams] no man can rightly set down, since it scarce hath been heard, there were ever two men that dreamed alike."<sup>2</sup> On this account, waking is the proper condition for people who seek a public life with others; sleep and dream are appropriate only for people who wish to remain idiosyncratic individuals. "Idiosyncratic," as Michael Bristol reminds us, is etymologically related to "idiot," referring, he says, "to a private person, someone who is unsociable, lives a cloistered life, and takes no interest in the concerns of the polis."<sup>3</sup> A play that is about dreams and dream-like experiences, that invites its spectators to imagine themselves as dreamers, and that advertises its investment in dreams in its very title would seem a very poor place to seek a critical representation of public life or an argument about the possibilities of being public. In my paper, however, I want to argue precisely that—that *Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play that challenges Goodwin's and Nashe's view of dreams. The play, I think, puts in question the claim that waking people "are together in one common world" and, indeed, it attacks Goodwin's key assumption that there is "one common world." The play's sharp-eyed analysis of early modern society shows how distinct communities inhabit altogether different worlds; in the face of the incommensurability of these social worlds, the play offers dreaming as the authentic but unthinkable site of public life, and it suggests that the work of making a public is dream work.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Goodwin, *The Mystery of Dreams, Historically Discoursed* (1658), 292, quoted in Carole Levin, *Dreaming the English Renaissance: Politics and Desire in Court and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Nashe, *The terrors of the night. Or, A Discourse of apparitions* (1594), C3v, quoted in Levin, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Bristol, Shakespeare's Sonnets and the Publication of Melancholy, in *Making Publics in Early Modern Europe: People, Things, Forms of Knowledge*, ed. Bronwen Wilson and Paul Yachnin (New York: Routledge, 2010), 193.

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