

2019 Seminar Abstracts: Invisible Presences: Detecting the Unseen in Renaissance Drama
Andrew Sofer, Boston College
Jonathan Walker, Portland State University

Seminar Respondents

Heidi Brayman, University of California, Riverside
Erika T. Lin, The City University of New York
William B. Worthen, Barnard College

**“Reading the Exterior:
 Imagining Impropriety and Performing Conformity in Early Modern Drama.”**

Clara Biesel
University of Minnesota

In the recent hearings for Judge Kavanaugh, our national attention focused on reading the bodies of these individuals thrust onto a national stage. Not only was Dr. Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony scrutinized, but her body as well, with those looking on interpreting her gestures, her stance, her tone of voice, the flush or whiteness of her face, and her present or absent tears. Although the ideal of the judicial system is one where justice is administered without deference or presupposition, we saw a powerful example of many viewers looking to read a body, but with a conclusion already settled in their minds. The plots of many early modern plays center around an accusation of impropriety. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, rather than listening to the words Hero speaks in her own defense, Claudio and those with him interpret her exterior. They read her expressions and actions, such as blushes or tears, and take those exterior signs as confirmation of their presuppositions. The accusers call on the audience as well to confirm their reading of Hero’s body, so the audience in its silence becomes complicit in their judgment. In Middleton and Rowley’s *The Changeling*, the relationship between accused and accuser changes, as Beatrice Joanna anticipates such a physical scrutiny of her body and behavior, and uses the knowledge available to pretend conformity to cultural expectations of chastity. Although the situations in these two plays differ immensely, both plays tear apart the idea that one can know another’s interior life or verify the truth of their speech by observing their bodies. The interior life of the character remains illegible to those seeking to parse it out.

“The Utterance of Flesh in *The Merchant of Venice*.”

William Casey Caldwell
Northwestern University

Henry Smith’s 1591 version of *A Preparative to Marriage* is a complex document containing a husbandry manual, anti-usury treatise, and two sermons on the Eucharist. The sermons rehearse the period’s perhaps most vitriolic debate about the nature of presence—by way of the Protestant/Catholic contention over whether Christ’s flesh materialized through the ritual of the sacrament. Scholars working on *The Merchant of Venice* have at times referenced Smith’s anti-usury treatise, in part for how both Smith and Shylock invoke Aristotle’s critique of usury as making money sexually reproduce. Alternatively, there has been some work on Protestant husbandry discourse and the Eucharist in relation to *Merchant*, though Smith’s texts on marriage

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and the sacrament have not been read in this context. In my larger project, I argue that all three of Smith's texts should be read together, in relation to *Merchant*, for the complex web of associations the document creates between household management, usury's "monstrous birth," and the semiotics of the flesh. Within the scope of this paper, I focus on dynamics of presence and flesh that Shylock and Antonio's pound of flesh bond appropriates from Smith's text. Building on Andrew Sofer's work on "dark matter" as something "materially unrepresented on stage but un-ignorable" and Eric Santner's reading of the pound of flesh as the ectoplasmic remains of the king's virtual body, I argue that the pound of flesh is an *impending* (yet impossible) presence, *nearly* a monstrous birth between men of money in the flesh.¹ Neither a diffuse virtual presence structuring the play of meaning from a distance, nor a physically present object, the pound of flesh achieves its significance for the audience instead through its movement from structural towards objectual presence.

**"If all the world could have seen't":
 Imagination and the Unseen in *The Winter's Tale*."**

Darryl Chalk
University of Southern Queensland

For a play with some of the most famous of all theatrical images, *The Winter's Tale* contains a significant number of unseen happenings only reported onstage: the strange death of Mamillius and the devouring of Antigonus are offstage events that punctuate a lengthy sequence in which Hermione is imprisoned, gives birth, and then 'dies', all out of the audience's sight. In Act 5 scene 2, the emotional reunions of Leontes with his daughter and Polixenes are merely described by three unnamed 'gentlemen'. At such moments, playgoers are forced to envision the unseen with their 'mind's eye'. Later, Paulina moves to draw a curtain around Hermione's statue, to hide it from both the onstage onlookers and the audience, warning: "No longer shall you gaze on't, lest your fancy/ May think anon it moves." She is stopped, of course, but why does this play seem to so carefully choose to stage some actions and not others?

Early modern models of psychology held that the imagination, one of the mind's key faculties, was responsible for processing images received by the senses. But the imagination was also thought capable of generating its own mental forms or 'phantasms'. In this process, vision, paradoxically understood as the most reliable and easily deceived sense, and the imagination's 'inner eye' were subject to dangerous distortions. The "fancy" that so concerns Paulina in the statue scene could lead to misperception: 'phantasm' becoming 'phantasie'. *The Winter's Tale* is acutely, and quite self-consciously, concerned with what is at stake with visual perception and ocular proof. The first half of the play presents the dangers of an infected imagination: Leontes's raging jealousy, built around a conviction of what he thinks he sees, coins deranged mental phantasms generating tragic carnage, including his son's death from "mere conceit". The statue

¹ Andrew Sofer, *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theater, and Performance* (University of Michigan Press, 2013), 4.

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scene provides a potential act of visual healing to this rupture between the senses and the imagination.

This paper considers such ideas in relation to events deliberately left invisible in *The Winter's Tale*. Given the play's peculiar anxieties over the veracity of sight and the distorted imagination, how do such moments position its spectators? My approach will situate the depiction of the seen and unseen in this play within a historicized understanding of optics and cognition in early modern science and medicine.

“Race and the Non-Visible in Nineteenth-Century Narratives of *Othello*.”

Lauren Eriks Cline
University of Michigan

Cultural historians often point to the nineteenth century as the period when scientific racism not only solidified but also spectacularized. Systems of racial classification emerged as visible traits – in characteristics like skull shape, skin color, and body proportions – and through visual culture – in performances like imperial exhibitions, slave auctions, and freak shows. We might expect that spectator accounts from the period would engage the optics of race on stage in similarly explicit ways; but while such descriptive catalogues of difference certainly exist in nineteenth-century theatre reviews, memoirs, and essays of dramatic criticism, many audience accounts also construct the significance of race through more oblique means. In this essay, I examine how spectator narratives about *Othello* in the nineteenth century constructed the meaning of blackness, Orientalism, and miscegenation through recursive or alternative vectors of visibility: the memory of Edmund Kean's voice and a moment of interracial hair-dragging that may or may not have been actually staged.

As I trace how actors and spectators like George Henry Lewes, Madge Kendal, and Theodore Martin leverage the non-visible to shape the significance of Othello's race, I also reflect on the methodological and historiographical challenge that non-visible spectator narratives pose for Shakespeare performance studies. What new methods of analysis might be needed in order to analyze accounts that don't reflect racial ideologies in any clear or visual way, but rather use invisibility, opacity, and unrealizability as techniques to mark racial meanings?

**“Visualising Unseen Temporal Pressure:
The Significance of Quickening in John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*.”**

Jennifer Hardy
King's College London

The conclusion of Act 3 scene 2 in John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's A Whore* offers the audience a rare spectacle, as Annabella, newly pregnant with her brother's child, faints onstage having felt her womb quicken. Acting as the central catalyst for the direction of narrative development in the play's second half - prompting Annabella's hasty marriage to Soranzo, his discovery of her

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sexual indiscretions and Giovanni's murderous revenge - the brief moment of Annabella's quickening demands close scrutiny. Modern perceptions of early modern pregnancy often assume that theatrical depictions of gestation were manifestly visual but early pregnancy was often categorised, medically and theatrically, as visually ambiguous. Marking a milestone in both the confirmation and physical development of pregnancy, quickening was understood in early modern gynaecological thinking as a watershed juncture between the unseen, personal experience of the mother and the beginning of the publicly observable period of advanced gestation. The depiction of Annabella's illicit pregnancy offers significant engagement with the visual and temporal liminality of quickening on stage, as her condition forces a sense of temporal pressure upon the lover's narrative. In this moment, Annabella's body unwittingly begins to introduce visual evidence of the siblings' offstage sexual relationship into the romantic plot and the instance of her quickening commences a gestational countdown which threatens to publicly undo them. In this transitory moment, the unseen force of time begins to manifest itself through Annabella's pregnant body and her quickening marks a critical shift in not only the play's central romantic relationship, but also a substantial alteration in the overall temporal landscape of the play. This paper addresses the temporal and visual implications of Annabella's quickened body in *'Tis Pity*, in relation to early modern understandings of quickening's medical significance and its narrative possibility. This analysis highlights the importance of sensitively reading the unseen elements of theatrical pregnancy by looking at the implications of Annabella's quickening upon the play's wider engagement with issues of concealment, exposure and claustrophobia. By examining the ambiguity of quickening in relation to visual and temporal pressure, I suggest the interpretative profitability of reading reproductive narratives along a visual and temporal axis.

“The Ontology of Elsewhere”

Wendy Beth Hyman
Oberlin College

The most important element of Shakespearean romance takes place, with one crucial exception, entirely offstage: namely Time. Other signal events of these late plays, too, are not displayed: deaths of major characters, reunions among beloved family members, visits to the Oracle, casting of spells, reported rapes, remote travels, famines, incest, pirates, shipwrecks, marriages... all of these events and more are relegated to hearsay, memory, rumor, and report. It is as if the plays themselves are the photographic negative of other, absent plays, shaped mysteriously by these happenings as much as by those that they do choose to display. These absences, I will argue, are part of how these plays theorize the relationship of literary fiction to metaphysics, confusing the ontological relationship between the seen and unseen, the visible and invisible, the written and unwritten, and even the living and the dead. As Tom Stoppard puts it in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, “we keep to our usual stuff, more or less, only inside out. We do on the stage things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look at every exit as an entrance somewhere else.” In this paper I will consider the integrity of the “somewhere else” in Shakespearean romance. I am particularly interested in how characters like Posthumous or Father Time invite the possibility that it is, in fact, *we* who are “somewhere else,” the metaphysical dream world to dramatic fiction's “reality.”

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“Never see her more’: The Dead On/Off Stage.”

Peter Kirwan
University of Nottingham

ANTONIO: I mark’d not one repetition of the echo
 But that; and on the sudden a clear light
 Presented me a face folded in sorrow.
 DELIO: Your fancy merely.

The Echo of the Duchess in John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* renders doubtful ‘the boundary between living and dead’ and ‘refuses to sit within categorisations of animate or inanimate’.² Antonio’s vision of the ‘face folded in sorrow’ evokes a visualisation of an offstage presence even as both he and Echo confirm that he will ‘never see her more’. The animation of the inanimate – the visualisation of the unseen – is a fundamental paradox of the idea of the Echo as outlined by Susan Anderson, but also speaks to the uncanny and influential presence of the dead.

Contemporary stage production of early modern drama, especially in a period dominated by the figure of the director and the prioritisation of the visual, returns repeatedly to the physical embodiment of the offstage dead, far above and beyond the literal supernatural appearance of ghosts. Taking two productions as case studies – Cheek by Jowl’s 1995 *The Duchess of Malfi* and the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2018 *Tamburlaine* – this paper explores the way in which the physical resurrection of the dead reshapes the playing space around empathic targets, disrupting linear time to clarify emotional stakes and the work of memory. In doing so, this paper shows some of the ways in which contemporary theatrical re-embodiments of the departed shed light on the role played by the unseen dead of early modern drama in the aftermath of their passing.

**“Foul objects that offend mine eyes’:
 Relations Between Offstage Objects and a Prayerbook Onstage in *Arden of Faversham*.”**

Bernice Mittertreiner Neal
Independent Scholar

The text of *Arden of Faversham* calls potentially for the staging of shockingly iconoclastic action in its eighth scene: an adulterous woman, Alice, attempts to keep her lover, Mosby, from leaving her by proposing to burn her prayerbook. Contemporary scholarship on the play makes two related and generally agreed upon assumptions about that prayerbook. One, that the book enters the scene with Alice in order that she may refer to it while she says what she will do to it in lines 116 and 118. Two, that Alice, entering the scene with the book, intends to use the book strategically (and has been using it offstage strategically) for some purpose. These readings privilege a semiotic reading of the prop on the part of character and spectator/scholar alike; and

² Susan L. Anderson, *Echo and Meaning on Early Modern English Stages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), p.112.

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they privilege the prayerbook as a prop that is seen onstage from the very start of scene 8. This paper questions those assumptions in order to make an argument about a play that privileges a phenomenological attitude to its unseen objects, an attitude which potentially alters a spectator's relationship with Alice Arden, whom the play's very title page condemns. I consider Alice's prayerbook and her actions with it in the context of the compelling presence of the play's unseen objects. Alice's attitude to off- and onstage objects makes a Protestant reformer's case for the danger of even invisible theatrical spectacle. But at the same time, Alice's blasphemous activity with her prayerbook invites her spectator's kinesthetic affinity, rendering her an “empathic target” (Stanton B. Garner, *Kinesthetic Spectatorship* 225) and so undermining the aims of a Protestant theatre that privileges spectators who think about rather than feel for what and whom they watch. This paper also raises a larger question about determining from an early modern playtext what *is* seen and not seen onstage.

“Consenting as an Ethical Act”

Robert B. Pierce
Oberlin College

One of the favorite elements of drama is portraying what we call mental events and processes, which by their nature are not immediately visible on the stage. We can only infer when exactly in his mind Brutus makes the decision to kill Julius Caesar. In a way much of drama creates unseen inner states and processes in the way that a mime creates a wind by enacting his or her bodily response to an unseen wind that we project from what we see in the actions of the mime's body.

Decisions are an example of those unseen presences at the heart of drama, especially ethical decisions, and indeed Shakespeare helps us to think about the nature of decision and perhaps even to make our own decisions more thoughtfully and better by vividly portraying his characters' decisions in his plays. For example, he is much interested in the mental process of consent that various characters go through. Caesar consents to Calpurnia's persuasion to stay home from the Forum, and then changes his mind. One might think of consent as an external event, what J.L. Austin calls a performative act: one says yes to accept a suitor, and one overtly utters the vows to perform a marriage, giving symbolic outward fulfillment to the consent. But surely the word “yes” and the repetition after the priest of “I take you to be my lawful wedded...” are external signs of something invisible, that is, a mental operation of consenting to give oneself in marriage. When we in the audience understand what has just happened onstage, we are performing what modern theorists call “mind-reading” in that we infer some inner action from what we see and hear externally. The purpose of this essay is to look at the ethical act of consenting as Shakespeare portrays it in *Romeo and Juliet*. How do outward acts--dancing, a kiss, exchanging promises and then marriage vows, sexual consummation—express and reveal the young couple's inward act of consenting? And does this portrayal reveal anything about consent as we struggle with its meaning today?

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“Perverse Sights: Dissecting the Incestuous Body in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore.*”

Sarah Sands Rice
University of California, Berkeley

Early modern drama is not shy about staging the opening or dismemberment of the body in the context of torture, murder, horrific execution, vengeful mutilation, and the general wanton violence expected from any revenge tragedy worth its name. George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar*, to take a rather extreme example, involves the onstage disembowelment of no fewer than three characters. Giovanni's appearance onstage with his sister Annabella's heart impaled on a dagger in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* looks rather tame by comparison. After all, the dissective dismemberment itself has occurred offstage. The interplay between spectacle and opacity in Giovanni's dissective display of Annabella's heart is characteristic of the treatment of dissection in early modern English drama more generally. Dissection is persistently displaced on the early modern stage: confined to the realm of fantasy and unrealized threats, transposed onto onstage torture, or represented as having occurred offstage with only its gruesome results displayed to the audience. In early modern drama, dissection is hyper-visible but always at core unseen.

This paper situates the scintillating (in)visibility of dissection in early modern drama in relation to the opening of the body in the early modern anatomy theater. Taking *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* as my central text, I argue that Giovanni's offstage dissection of Annabella's womb and his excision of her heart call attention to the raw violence of incising the body and cast dissection as a form of incestuous intimacy. Dissection reveals something too biologically familiar to be seen without perversity. Giovanni's claim that the dagger bearing Annabella's heart upon it “ploughed up / Her fruitful womb, and left to me the fame / Of a most glorious executioner” positions Annabella's impaled and displayed heart as a stand-in for the fetus that Giovanni has uncovered in her womb (V.vi.32-34). The ‘unseen’, as experienced by the audience, comes to encompass not only the offstage dissection but also the bodily interior, particularly the sexualized interior of the procreative female body. The fertile womb becomes an emblem of dissection that hovers in a sort of double vision over the Petrarchan emblem of the heart upon the dagger, signaling an anxiety that the opening of the bodily interior is a prurient intrusion, a potentially disastrous trespass of bodily, societal, and natural boundaries.

**“‘Palpable to thinking’:
Othello and Unseen Conceits.”**

Katherine Walker
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

For a play so focused on unseen passions and questionable ocular proofs, *Othello*'s language is nonetheless laden with the metaphors of weight, mass, or bodily materiality. Language in the early modern theater is, to various critics, accessory to embodiment, the author's contribution set against the spectacle afforded by the likes of Inigo Jones, or an occult influence able to move the passions of spectators. What all of these scholars recognize is the historical gap in our

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contemporary understanding of communication and early modern theorizations of language's weight, or its affects and the real consequences attending imprecations, ceremonial oaths, and political or theological pronouncements. In a sense difficult to grasp today, early modern language carried weight. And yet the stage continually ran up against the problem that language was still representational, an approximate but not exact vehicle for conveying intention or desire.

The language characters in *Othello* deploy to convey their invisible passions often reaches for analogies of materiality, as in Brabantio's escalating accusations: "Judge me the world if 'tis not gross in sense / That thou hast practised on her with foul charms, / [...] / 'Tis probable and palpable to thinking" (1.2.72-76). This essay aims to consider the unseen yet felt paradoxes of language in *Othello* through tracing the idea of "gross" conceits. Gross, in this instance, does not mean disgusting or unpalatable, but rather suggests "carrying weight, possessing mass." I read this weighty grossness of language and its simultaneous inability to be seen on the stage, particularly when characters acknowledge that to render something gross to the imagination is an act of epistemic violence; Iago, for example, manipulatively refuses to respond to Othello's demand that he "Show me thy thought" (3.3.119). Instead, he cleverly desires that Othello not "strain my speech / To grosser issues" (3.3.222-223), or that the General withstand the full imaginative and thus passionate affects that such "gross" images might conjure. This paper thus explores the unseen through the idea of language as invisible but paradoxically still material, retaining a sense of weight and influence even when characters express disaffection with the ineffability of words to convey true meaning.

"Invisible Writing: The Ethics of Stage Letters in *King Lear*."

Travis D. Williams
University of Rhode Island

In the vast and unfinished edifice of my current book project, I find myself needing to write intelligently about what I will call, out of ignorance and lack of better terms, the ethics of stage letters. My particular concern is the many letters and messages that are written, delivered, read, and interpreted during the action of *King Lear*, but other examples also rush in: poems hung on trees in a forest; anonymous notes thrown in at several windows; a seeming confession of love dropped for a servant to find and interpret; the analysis of a royal genealogy that licenses a foreign war; any number of cunningly written confessions and judicial sentences; writs, conveyances, wills, and contracts with blank spaces for names. Does the stage property that functions as a letter have to contain the text it is purported to contain, especially if the theatre audience will never be close enough to verify the fact? (Some tangential questions: Does the actor read from a letter, or does s/he "pretend" to read while actually speaking the lines from memory? Would different schools of acting answer this question differently? Does any of it matter?) Depending on how the first question is answered, how do we correlate the answer with the truth or falsehood of the message conveyed by the letter? For example, does the verisimilar status of the physical letter which presents Edgar as a future patricide matter to our assessment of Edmund's ethics as forger and liar, or of Gloucester's ethics as a bad interpreter? My concern, as far as I am able to articulate it at this stage, is with the truth status of

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text (both message and medium) at a tricky interface between the “facts” of a dramatic enterprise that tells us what we *must* think, and the voluntary extension of those facts through and in our imagination to build out a full dramatic world. Another way to put all of this is that I am trying to draw the boundary between the space of dramatic fiction and the space of the audience’s “reality” in a dimension that is not premised on the shared physical space of a theatre. And so a third formulation arises: If audience ethics is determined through the interaction of stage fiction with audience reality, how is (is?) this relationship premised on the fidelity of the stage fiction to itself, particularly when that fiction represents varieties of bad ethics and falsehood? This is exploratory work, and my hope is that the paper I produce for the seminar will have answered a few more questions than it poses.

“Invisible Pregnancies in *A Woman Killed With Kindness* and *Titus Andronicus*.”

Amanda Zoch
Colorado State University

In the early modern period, an enlarged belly offered what seemed to be certain proof of pregnancy, and midwives supplemented their diagnoses with attention to more subtle physical and behavioral symptoms—including dark circles under the eyes, nausea, excessive yawning, and stretching—in order to offer a comprehensive interpretation of the potentially gestating woman’s body. Although conception occurs on the unseen, cellular level, the efforts to diagnose it rely on observable phenomena (with varying degrees of accuracy) and, consequently, pregnancy is most frequently identified with phrases that references a woman’s expanding body, such as “great-bellied” and “big-bellied.” Such size-related expressions, therefore, establish pregnancy as a visual phenomenon. As Pamela Allen Brown notes, “the swelling body intrudes uninvited into discourse,” and this becomes particularly evident on the early modern stage where pregnancy’s visibility often presents a problem or provokes anxiety.

Despite pregnancy’s persistent, often intrusive, presence on stage, this paper investigates the notably invisible pregnancies of Anne in Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness* and Tamora in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*. No scene or dialogue in either text requires a pregnant body on stage. In fact, the plays’ plots resist the necessary timelines of Anne and Tamora’s pregnancies, yet both plays also include the sudden appearance of their children. I argue, therefore, that by preventing audiences from witnessing Anne and Tamora’s pregnancies, Heywood and Shakespeare preemptively punish the women and deny them the redemption offered by motherhood.