

## Atrocity and Early Modern Drama

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### Seminar Abstracts

#### **‘Let’s get as far away from these people as possible’: *Coriolanus* and Cultural Trauma in *Happy New Year*, Colin Burstead**

Ben Broadribb

Ben Wheatley describes his 2018 film *Happy New Year, Colin Burstead* as ‘an adaptation [of *Coriolanus*] set in modern times and reduced right down . . . into a tight family drama’.<sup>1</sup> Rather than Shakespeare’s tragedy, however, critics identified the influence of the current British political climate: one described how ‘the spectre of Brexit looms large’<sup>2</sup> over the film, whilst another asked ‘Has Ben Wheatley made the first great Brexit film?’<sup>3</sup>

The film’s multicultural, multigenerational characters, simmering with resentment and emotional strain, provide a cultural mirror to Brexit-era Britain. Wheatley uses *Coriolanus* to construct an impressionistically bleak and affectively raw contemporary British microcosm: reflecting a nation increasingly divided by political, cultural, generational, and class boundaries, whilst also traversing these boundaries through experiencing the shared trauma of what is arguably a sociocultural atrocity committed by those in positions of power.

I will explore how Wheatley appropriates and updates *Coriolanus* through *Colin Burstead* to create a cultural artefact of contemporary Britain, capturing his perception of British national identity since 2016. I will also more widely consider twenty-first century adaptations of *Coriolanus* which have addressed atrocity in different ways. These include Ralph Fiennes’ post-9/11-influenced 2010 film; and Josie Rourke’s 2013-14 Donmar Warehouse production, which inspired Wheatley to adapt the play for the screen.

#### **Atrocity, Antiblackness, and Biopolitics in Marston’s *Sophonisba***

Patricia Cahill

My paper considers how atrocity is racialized in early modern drama by focusing on the near-rape of the titular heroine in John Marston’s *The Wonder of Women, or The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606). Dramatizing episodes from Appian’s *History of the Punic wars*, Marston’s play features main characters who, despite their Carthaginian status, are not

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<sup>1</sup> Jamie Graham, ‘Ben Wheatley’s *Happy New Year, Colin Burstead* is *Coriolanus* meets *Abigail’s Party*’, *The Sunday Times*, 30 Dec. 2018 <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ben-wheatleys-happy-new-year-colin-burstead-is-coriolanus-meets-abigails-party-qscwrpqds>> [accessed 25 November 2019].

<sup>2</sup> Lou Thomas, ‘Ben Wheatley says British cinema is guilty of being “totally apolitical”’, *Little White Lies*, 12 Dec. 2018 <<https://lwlies.com/articles/ben-wheatley-happy-new-year-colin-burstead-british-cinema-politics/>> [accessed 25 November 2019]

<sup>3</sup> A.D., ‘Has Ben Wheatley made the first great Brexit film?’, *The Economist*, 18 Dec. 2018 <<https://www.economist.com/prospero/2018/12/18/has-ben-wheatley-made-the-first-great-brexite-film>> [accessed 25 November 2019]

figured as black. Rather, as Joyce Green MacDonald has noted, *Sophonisba* participates in a Renaissance tradition that, in retelling stories about celebrated women of color (e.g., Sophonisba, Dido, and Cleopatra) either omits mention of their skin color or whitens them. Indeed, as MacDonald further observes, Marston's play makes Sophonisba's whiteness hypervisible by juxtaposing her vulnerable body with that of two servants whom the would-be rapist describes as "two black knaves" who can be suborned to assist him in his assault.

While Marston's play thus foregrounds the whiteness of the sexually imperiled woman who is central to so many early modern atrocity narratives, I aim to demonstrate that Marston's play goes further than that. Above all, I contend it puts pressure on this racialized narrative, even inviting audiences to ponder its unraveling. It does this through two remarkable scenes in which racially marked characters serve as sexual substitutes for Sophonisba. Insofar as these acts safeguard the heroine's virginity at the expense of others, she emerges paradoxically as both a paragon of virtue and as complicit in acts of brutality. Why, I ask, do critics typically regard these scenes of coercion not as atrocity but rather as instances of an innocuous "bed trick" convention? How might these stagings of "mistaken" bed partners complicate our reading of Sophonisba's racialization and early modern rape culture? How might whiteness itself delimit which acts can count as brutality?

### **"Where Two Raging Fires Meet Together": Atrocity and Forced Commitment in *The Taming of the Shrew* (ca. 1590-1592)**

Christina M. Carlson

This paper examines forms of atrocity that, in cultures such as the early modern one, and even our own 21<sup>st</sup> century social world, get re-written as "non-violent" or "non-injurious," because they (mistakenly) locate the damage to self in the effect on social, legal, or communal standing and not in the emotional, individualized, subjective response of the person experiencing the ordeal.<sup>4</sup> Sexual assault and rape are an example of this type of injury that has changed, over time, in the public imagination, from an emphasis on the social body or the disordered female one to one grounded in sexual identity and psychosocial accounts of traumatic harm.<sup>5</sup> Forced commitment to a mental institution, without legal recourse, is an unfortunate counter-example, in which the needs of the "social" and "personal identity" continue to be at odds.<sup>6</sup> This paper compares Katherine's experience in *The Taming of the Shrew* (ca. 1590-1592) to that of forced commitment to mental asylums in 2019. It argues that what both of these wrongs to human beings have in common is an inability to distinguish between the positive social "ordering" of unruly, unmanageable, and thereby "non-normative" human beings and their individual rights as consenting subjects. What Katherine's taming has in common with the experience of 21<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Joanna Bourke, "Sexual Violence, Bodily Pain, and Trauma: A History," *Theory Cult Soc* May 2012, 1: 29 (3), 25-31.

<sup>5</sup> Bourke, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder."

<sup>6</sup> For my account of forced commitment in the U.S. in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I have relied on: Dinah Miller and Annette Hanson, *Committed: The Battle Over Involuntary Psychiatric Care* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

century forced commitment is precisely the removal of individual rights under the argument that society's "interest" and the "safety" of the patient who is being committed trump individual agency, consent, or constitutional protections. This paper explores this "illogic" in *Taming of the Shrew* and the politics and traumatic ruptures instituted through forced commitment in 2019 U.S. mental health policy. It uses the relationship between the two in order to describe the depths of disorder and harm that characterizes *The Taming of the Shrew* and to argue against its "comedic" status or "positive" resolved ending.

### **Atrocity and Revenge in *The Bloody Banquet***

Matthew Carter

In Middleton and Dekker's *The Bloody Banquet, A Tragedy*, we see an act of atrocity committed by Armatrites, the tyrannical king of Cillica, who conquers Lydia and deposes its royal household. Discovering evidence of a love affair between his young queen and Tymethes, the deposed prince, Armatrites has Tymethes drawn and quartered, and then decrees that his wife may not eat or drink anything until she has cannibalized Tymethes' dismembered body. This text is unique among early modern depictions of atrocity in part because it shows Armatrites attempting to normalize his tyrannical behavior, while the old king is brought in (possibly for the audience's benefit) to react with disgust to the display. The young queen is forced to sit at a dinner table and sup the prince's blood out of his skull, while other banqueters are encouraged to ignore the gory display. When they find themselves unable to do so, the tyrant explains, matter-of-factly, that there is a "reasonable" cause for his actions - infidelity. In this paper, I shall discuss how the play wrestles with the notion that those in power attempt to normalize atrocity through desensitization. By hanging the pieces of the corpse up in his main hall and making the residuum of the body part of the feast, Armatrites practices "distancing" in order to lessen the impact of his atrocity. Using sources such as Katherine Rowe's examination of dismemberment in *Titus* and Louise Noble's examination of cannibalism in early modern culture, I shall examine Middleton and Dekker's commentary on the relationship between tyranny and atrocity.

### **Fantasies of Martial Violence in the Elizabethan Tournament**

Catherine Clifford

At the end of a short account of a tournament at Whitehall which occurred in January 1581, Raphael Holinshed takes time in his *Chronicles* to relate a gruesome detail about the event: "through the great concourse of people thither repairing, manie of the beholders, as well men as women, were sore hurt, some maimed, and some killed by falling of the scaffolds overcharged" (1586: p. 1315). The victims of the accident he refers to here were part of the estimated ten thousand or so Londoners who flocked to Whitehall for tournaments, often several times per year at the pleasure of the Queen.

Holinshed's inclusion of the event in *Chronicles* is noteworthy, as is his framing of it. Earlier in the sentence, he describes the tournament as having been executed "courageously" with many lances "valiantly broken" by the knights at arms. Unsettlingly, a tragedy in which "many" spectators were maimed and killed does not seem to have overshadowed the success of the tournament: the ritual violence remained unchecked by actual loss of life.

This paper is interested in the ways late Tudor tournaments performed martial violence and, in cases like the one Holinshed relates, how they intersected with actual physical violence that occurred both within and in close proximity to the tiltyard barriers. Given the nationalistic underpinnings of Accession Day celebrations in general and Elizabeth I's campaign to legitimize herself as a capable military commander, the public relations value of military spectacles featuring ritualized and performative violence has, I argue, been under-analyzed. Underpinning my analysis is the assertion that Elizabethan tournaments, replete with chivalric devices, pageants, and role-playing, were dramatic performances. The theatrical fantasy is what gave these tournaments their particular power, and everyone involved in a tournament, from Queen to knight to paying spectator, complied with its fictions.

### **"The manner of your death": The Problematic of Atrocity Depicted in *The Duchess of Malfi***

Paramita Dutta

This paper proposes to look at the atrocities depicted in *The Duchess of Malfi*, especially those suffered by its boldly transgressive heroine, and portray how they are problematically gendered. When directed towards the Duchess, the focus of the violence (as intended by Ferdinand) is observably on breaking her spirit and forcing her to despair more than to physically torture her. To that end, he himself offers her the hand of a dead man, ostensibly, in reconciliation. The malcontent Bosola too, whom Ferdinand hires to spy on his sister and later persecute and murder her, orchestrates the display of the wax figures of Antonio and her children as if they were dead followed soon by the appalling dance of the eight mad men. On the other hand, the men in this play, be it the wrongdoers or the guiltless, suffer fairly straightforward deaths, however violent.

Bosola, who carries out most of the brutality on the Duchess, aestheticizes the violence in all its excessiveness and flamboyant spectacle. Yet, in spite of being the agent who murders her, he is as helpless in the power equation with her two evil brothers as she was. On being thwarted financially, he redirects his violence towards the brothers and ironically in an act that is totally unintended, first kills the innocent Antonio.

I would like to explore the root cause behind all the atrocities in the play (the hypogamous marriage of the Duchess with Antonio) in all its implications and argue that the play not only uses violence as spectacle for the purposes of heightened theatricality, character delineation, and patriarchal domination, but also through the misdirected violence of Bosola, and his transformation from murderer to avenger, reflects on the futility of violence per se in a moral universe.

## **Atrocity, Affect, and Audience in *The Tragedy of Nero***

Robin Hizme

Events and figures from classical Rome loomed large in the cultural imaginary of Stuart Britain. The notoriety of Nero is the foundation of an anonymous 1624 play *The Tragedy of Nero*, which stages Nero's obsession with performance as intimately connected with his cruel atrocities. The central scene of violence in the play features Nero's appeal to the forces of the night for a show of terrors and torments: he sets Rome afire to appease his tyrannical desires and then revels in the spectacle of lamentation and sorrow he witnesses while mothers lament their dead babes and men mourn dead fathers (3.4). While juxtaposing Rome against late Jacobean England, the tension between perceiving Rome as a classical civilization or Rome as ancient (and contemporary) pagan society offers various sites of affective ambivalence for the contemporary English audience: debates about tyranny and absolutism, civilization and its disintegration, are played out in the scenes of massacre.

My analysis will focus primarily on the scenes of communal violence in this play, exploring both the variety of emotional responses embedded and modelled in the text as well as the possible synaesthetic and somatic affects on the spectating audience; Nero is a type of Herod, both comic and evil, and the performance possibilities are rife with alternate affective possibilities such as amusement at the violence, admiration for the villain, a sense of derision or moral righteousness. Through studying mass atrocity in performance, I aim to better understand how witnessing violence translates into identification with or alienation from victims. This is particularly relevant to my interest in how collective identities are forged through visceral affect and emotive appeal.

## **“The Secrets of Shadows”: Light, Dark, and Western Influences in Yamanote Jijosha's *Titus Andronicus***

Gary Lindeburg

Atrocity is used on stage to convey many things through the usage of violence, and *Titus Andronicus* uses an extreme sort of brutality as an integral part of its dramaturgy. The bodily harm portrayed touches on numerous elements of human relationships and how they become part of larger cultural machinations in the Roman court. In Yamanote Jijosha's production, the violence is maintained but becomes an encoded examination of the clash not between Roman and Goth, but between modern and traditional Japanese aesthetics.

The clash is visually represented in the dress of the various characters using eastern and western styles as part of the differentiation between the two aspects of Japanese identity in question. The Romans are all in traditional Japanese kimono and the

Goths are in western suits and dresses, creating a clear shorthand for the tension examined. The connection goes deeper, as blood and bodily fluids are represented by artifacts of the character's cultural leanings.

The stage looks like a black-box take on a modern Japanese apartment. Three tatami mats form the central areas of action split into a triptych across the stage with modern appliances in the shadows. Reinforcing the modern/traditional tension is the addition of Titus' wife as the narrator, an elderly woman that remains on stage throughout. Forgotten and ignored, she wears kimono and is the only one to interact with the various appliances, ultimately being the answer to the conflict that no one heeds.

The ultimate point I am going to make is that the violence and atrocity of *Titus Andronicus* is used as a commentary on Japan's cultural identity struggle between traditional and modern, as the dueling urge to keep up with global trends and styles comes against a desire to honor and maintain tradition.

### ***Henry V* and the Contemporary War Crime: Killing the Prisoners on the Twenty-First Century Stage and Screen**

Ramona Wray

The television adaptations of Shakespeare's histories – assembled as part of the series, *The Hollow Crown* – have, since their first screenings, attracted widespread comment. In contradistinction to readings that contextualise the series in terms of its moment of production (such as the Olympics or premonitions of Brexit), this essay unpacks *The Hollow Crown* in relation to changing technologies of television programming aimed at global audiences and recent understandings of the 'Renaissance'. The *OED* defines 'atrocious' as 'an extremely wicked or cruel act, typically one involving physical violence or injury', and, accordingly, in *The Hollow Crown*, set-pieces of atrocity (such as the treatment accorded Richard II, the Battle of Shrewsbury scenes, Henry V's order to kill the prisoners, the burning at the stake of Joan la Pucelle and the murder of Clarence) are staged with a cinematic brio, an edgy prioritisation of violence and an ambitious technical versatility. The formal registration of such acts – as reflected in point of view shots, widescreen shots of devastation and mood-heavy scores – underscore the complexity (the murky world of political necessity and moral responsibility) of atrocity's impulses, motivations and expressions. At the same time, the stress in the series on bodies, whether as bodies that are queered, aging, spectated on, or placed in situations of pain and extremity, points up the ways in which contemporary television approaches Shakespeare via scenarios of physical extremity and a darker, purposefully anti-heritage, imagery of the 'Renaissance'. In this way, the series occupies a significant place in the performance history of atrocity, sensitising us to the interpretive categories through which atrocity is read and offering a 'Shakespeare' attuned to, and taking on board, cross-fertilising influences from other media screen forms.