

Shakespeare Association of America 2020 – Denver, Colorado

Seminar Abstracts: “Conspiracy”

Lisa M. Barksdale-Shaw, Facilitator

Respondents: Virginia Mason Vaughan and Karen Cunningham

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Loren Cressler

Seattle University

SAA 2020: Conspiracy

Title: William Parry and Affective Understandings of Conspiracy

Abstract: In 1584, shortly after being elected to serve as an MP, Dr. William Parry was held in custody by the House of Commons’ serjeant-at-arms for interrupting proceedings *ex abrupto* and immodestly professing direct access to Queen Elizabeth. Approximately a year later, Parry was executed for conspiracy and treason and made the subject of sensational publications about his espionage and alleged Catholic allegiances. His behavior throughout assumed unmediated closeness to the Privy Council, the Queen, and papal authorities. Parry’s treason conviction hinged on the testimony of Edmund Neville, a thwarted claimant to a disputed barony. Neville’s testimony speculates throughout on Parry’s affective state, characterizing him as “growing in discontent” during an evening of drinking, and later documents about Parry echo Neville’s language.

In this essay, I will use the case of William Parry to consider the ways in which conspiracy convictions depend upon such testimonies as Neville’s, which characterize the affective states of the accused as evidence of criminal intent. Broadly, my research aims to recuperate the forceful and dangerous connotations carried by words like “discontented,” often understood to refer merely to emotional or passionate states. I argue here that Parry’s case demonstrates precisely how accusations of discontent were tied to suspicions of disloyalty and even treason and further, that the tendency to understand “discontented” and “seditious” as synonymous pervades the 1587 *Holinshed’s Chronicles*. When dramatists in the subsequent decades wrote of malcontent characters, they did so with such 1580s contexts informing their use of the term.

Adam H. Kitzes

University of North Dakota

“True Reports of Sundry Horrible Conspiracies”: Professional Writing and Configurations of Conspiracy as a Recurring Emergency in Elizabethan England

In a brief review of select documents, including the anonymous *Treatise of Treasons* (1570), Anthony Munday’s *Watch-woord to England to Beware Traytors* (1584), and certain parliamentary statutes (taken primarily from the 1590s), I intend to sketch out a survey of early modern surveys of conspiracies. Although individual conspiracies remained unnervingly difficult

to determine – after all, what were the factors that distinguished ordinary associations of individuals from illegal combinations – many writers grew increasingly confident that they could represent conspiracies serially, almost as though they could be understood as a recurring pattern of emergencies, which could in turn be dealt with by some sort of systematic approach. Importantly, these assumptions were shared by a range of publications, which extended from polemical treatises and pamphlets to official proclamations from various parts of government. Although the repeated appearance of similar arguments suggests that rough notions of what might be called a culture of conspiracies had begun to take shape during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, I argue here that the range of documents also suggests that early modern notions of conspiracies depended as much on rhetorical factors, as on legal definitions or even ideological circumstances. In doing so, I also hope to sketch out some of the ways in which a discourse of conspiracy culture provided an avenue for certain individuals who aspired to forge out careers as professional writers.

Rebecca Lemon

University of Southern California

SAA 2020: Conspiracy

Conspiracy and isolation in *Richard III*

Abstract:

This draft explores the paradox between conspiracy and isolation in Shakespeare's *Richard III*. The term "conspiracy" suggests political actors colluding together, and *Richard III* is filled with such conspiracy, as the Duke plots his rise with the aid of allies. Yet Richard nevertheless manages conspiracies that result in his own isolation. He recruits a host of witting and unwitting conspirators, including Buckingham, Catesby, the Lord Mayor, the Scrivener, various murderers and us – but such links and communities only draw attention to his political isolation, fear, and tyranny, ending in the rise of a rival political community.

N. Amos Rothschild

St. Thomas Aquinas College

nrothsch@stac.edu

SAA 2020: Conspiracy

Title:

“that humorous-carnall-tempting and divellish profession”: Intelligencers, Conspiracy, and the Craft(ing) of the Early Modern Ambassador

Abstract:

In the early modern cultural lexicon, “intelligencer” is often something close to a curse word. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term as “A person who is employed to obtain confidential information; an informer, a spy, a secret agent” and the more anodyne “A bringer of news or information; a messenger; an informant,” yet these two definitions do not fully capture the pejorative valence that so often attended the term in the period. In George Chapman’s *Two wise men and all the rest fooles* (1619), Furioso the soldier lambasts his companion Corraso the intelligencer as “one of the basest and most unnecessary fruitspillers that ever made themselves mercenarie,” concluding, “An Intelligencer, a spie, an Evesdropper is hated, and shunned of all the world.” John Donne terms both Jesuits and “the Devill himselfe” intelligencers in his sermons. However, it is unsurprisingly Thomas Nash who provides what may be the period’s most vicious and complex sketch, labelling the intelligencer “a curre, that flatters & famns upon everie one, ... An ingrateful slave, ... a hang-man, that dispatcheth all that comes under his hands; a drunken serjeant or sumner,” and, despite all of that, “a necessarie member in a State to bee usde, to cut off unnecessary members.”

My paper will contend that the vexed figure of the intelligencer is essential to the concept and the history of conspiracy. Invectives like those cited above hinge on assumptions about unreliability and false service; they imply that the falsehoods intelligencers spin, and the allegiances they make and break to discover and dispatch hidden knowledge of conspiracies to their employers, render all of their loyalties—even their service to those employers—suspect. Intelligencers thus face a predicament: the service they provide makes them “necessarie member[s] in a State,” yet they are not preferred, but rather loathed and feared, for the methods they employ in the performance of that service. Moreover, within the early modern discourses of diplomacy, the intelligencer serves as the demonic other of loftier diplomatic officials. Ambassadors and their retinues were all expected to perform the work of intelligence-gathering, yet such discourse often constructs the official members of diplomatic retinues as honorable by juxtaposition with the troubling figure of the intelligencer.

Alan Stewart
Columbia University
ags2105@columbia.edu
SAA 2020
CONSPIRACY seminar
Paper title and abstract

“The conspirator’s part in Francis Bacon’s *A letter written out of England*”

In early 1599, Francis Bacon wrote a pamphlet, published anonymously as *A Letter written out of England to an English Gentleman remaining at Padua*, that claimed to contain “a true Report

of a *strange Conspiracie, contriued betweene Edward Squire*, lately executed for the same treason as Actor, and *Richard Wallpoole a Iesuite*, as Deuiser and Suborner against the person of the Queenes Maiestie.” The alleged plot – almost entirely fabricated during a series of interrogations -- was that, at Walpole’s behest, Squire had attempted to kill Elizabeth (by poisoning the pommel of her saddle) and her favorite Robert Devereux, earl of Essex (by poisoning the arms of his favorite chair). My immediate interest in this paper is in how this “conspiracie” is depicted as having come about. The prosecution case (and then Bacon as pamphlet-author) depicted conspiracy between the Jesuit Richard Walpole and Squire -- not merely through the details of the plot, but also through a highly stylized and notably physical account of their interactions: kneeling, lifting, hugging, mumbling, swearing, speaking in Latin and English. Bacon’s description of this betrays its theatricality: he describes Squire as having “all the Conspirators part plaied to the vttermost line and title.” Why is this embodied and emotional – and determinedly theatrical -- detail so necessary to evoke conspiracy? What does it add to the more material accounts of acquiring, testing, and using poison?

Andrew Tumminia

Spring Hill College

“Marked ye his words?”: Mark Antony, New Conspiracism, and What’s “True Enough”

“True enough” arguments convince despite their lack of heft; they fall short of rigorous demonstration and carefully set out evidence. Traditionally, scholars studying conspiracy theories view susceptibility to conspiratorial ideation as a breakdown in critical thinking. In other words, conspiracy theories run into all sorts of problems when scrutinized. Mark Antony’s funeral oration in Julius Caesar suffers under careful examination, as well, and to understand its thinness and sketchy relation to truth, this paper links political scientists Kenneth Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum’s idea of “true enough” with a related concept prevalent in research into the psychology of conspiracy theorists, “bullshit receptivity.” Drawing on philosopher Harry Frankfurt’s influential distinction between bullshitting and lying, I will explore both Antony’s willingness to wrap lies about his own intentions within bullshit about Caesar and his audience’s unquestioning reception of both. “True enough” arguments, which I see overlapping substantially with bullshit arguments, work because they appeal to a reflexive brand of thinking. Antony’s auditors react to his words without reflecting on them. An intuitional, visceral politics characterizes the moment. A contemporary Julius Caesar can be about more than the assassination of a divisive leader or a conflict over political ideologies. To do so, it doesn’t even need to look far from its center. Antony provides an example of the characteristic modes of thinking that render leaders divisive in the first place.

Kimberly R. West
Cumberland School of Law
Final Abstract

**“Though it be Dished for Me to Try How”: The Arraignments of Hermione of Sicilia
and Sir Nicholas Throckmorton**

The seeming appearance of events can be used to construct a narrative, a trial, a charge of conspiracy, and a play. I am interested in Hermione’s arraignment in *The Winter’s Tale* and the contours of the conspiracy alleged against her, Polixenes, and Camillo. Legal transcripts and dramatic scripts are related texts. Comparing the dramatic text of *The Winter’s Tale* with the legal text of the conspiracy trial of Sir Nicholas Throckmorton provides insights into the limits on unbounded accusation. The Throckmorton transcript is found in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, a source used by Shakespeare, and his knowledge of that proceeding is, I argue, reflected in *The Winter’s Tale*. Interpretations of circumstantial evidence is “rigor, and not law,” if it reflects a world where a conversation or the appearance of flight, without more, results in a finding of guilt. The common law of conspiracy is bounded by the arraignment procedure, resulting in the acquittal of Throckmorton and Hermione.