

Early Mod Cons Seminar: Participants and Abstracts

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Abstracts

Devin Byker, “Barnardine’s Refusal: Consent and Object Embodiment in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*”

Measure for Measure is infamous for the problems of consent that it stages within numerous dynamics in the play. Sarah Beckwith has stated the issue most plainly when she writes that “[c]onsent is conspicuously evacuated” in the play, and the enforced final marriages only confirm this sense: as Beckwith notes, “The legitimacy in marriage [...] is threatened by the plain fact that no desire underwrites it.” Anyone who powerlessly endures Isabella’s final silence in response to the Duke’s presumptive proposal might be prepared to declare that this play purposefully lays waste to consent, exposing it as a farcical legal illusion or ethical delusion. Yet within this sweeping play of disillusionment, there is one character who does not fit within this sobering narrative and instead seems to topple it altogether. Barnardine, an intransigent prisoner who is condemned to die in Claudio’s place in order to save Claudio’s life, remains perhaps the single figure in this play whose consent is not dismissed. In this paper, I explore how Barnardine’s consent is rooted in a vulnerable yet crucial state of object embodiment.

Emily George, “Converting Before the Climax: The Possibilities of Despair in *Hamlet*”

Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* has become early modern drama’s defining depiction of religious despair, leading critics including Helen Gardner, Arieh Sachs, and John Stachniewski to focus on despairing of salvation as an inevitably tragic, damning sin. However, reformed theology offered multiple interpretations of despair: it could be a sign or cause of damnation, but it could signal the beginning of the conversion process. This essay explores the connections between repentance and despair in post-Reformation drama, with one guiding question: how do failed, despairing stage converts look different when despair is seen as a state of spiritual potential rather than a guarantee of damnation?

I argue that plays use the contradictions of despair as both a sign of damnation and a crucial step in the conversion process to create suspense, inviting audiences to experience real-time uncertainty over whether a character’s spiritual change is possible. After examining despair as the impetus for

climactic conversion scenes in plays throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, I focus on Claudius's failed attempt to convert in *Hamlet*. For Claudius, the horrified recognition of his depravity pushes him along the path toward conversion, but *Hamlet* does not examine the remaking of the soul; instead, Claudius's prayer scene scrutinizes the stalled beginnings of that process in a sincerely felt but ultimately failed attempt to turn away from sin. In doing so, it experiments with the narrative connections between despair, conversion, and time by exploring what happens when dramatic conversions prompted by the horrified recognition of sin are not part of a play's climactic end, but transient experiences within longer narratives.

Megan Herrold, "The Communal Construction of Consent in Shakespeare's Bed Tricks"

In this paper, I posit that Shakespeare's bed tricks reveal much about consent as a founding principle for commonwealth. During the night of the bed trick, the people who consent to sex may be differentiated from the bodies that consensual agreement covers. Exploiting the fact that consent to marriage at the time could be given either "by word" or "by deed" (in Aquinas' terms), Shakespeare uses the tricks to disperse the risks and consequences of heterosexual sex across bodies and personas: Isabella and Diana consent to sex with Angelo and Bertram, respectively, that Mariana and Helena, respectively, have. While our more modern notion of consent would influence us to interpret the tricks as rapes, this paper argues for a historical notion of consent grounded not in individual autonomy but rather in communal consensus. The paper ends by considering that our notion of consent—both early modern and contemporary—is shaped by the legal and political fiction of the "artificial" or "corporate person." An enabling fiction, the corporate person is legally both immortal and immaterial; it cannot be held culpable for crimes, imprisoned, or excommunicated, although it can be held responsible for fulfilling certain duties. Shakespeare's bed trick plays reveal that the vestiges of corporate personhood inhere in scenes of consent where only certain bodies are made to bear the burdens of the whole community; and while this fact typically privileges certain (powerful, male) bodies over others, Shakespeare also demonstrates that all bodies within a system are subject to injustices covered by consent.

Kimberly Huth, "'This Forcèd League': Com-passion and its Failures in *The Rape of Lucrece*"

Though the passions represented a source of anxiety in early modern discourse due to their potentially disastrous effects on an individual's agency and reason, the experience of shared affectivity presented the possibility for radical intersubjectivity and community. The vector of *com-passion*—both feelings of pity or sympathy as well as, etymologically, the experience of "suffering with" another—can enable the development of a mutual affectation with the potential for truly pro-social consequences. This paper explores both the power and the limitations of such *com-passion* through examination of compulsory empathy in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*. In this poem, the masculine, cold, agential body of Tarquin creates a "forced league" with the feminine, warm, passive body of Lucrece through the action of the rape. This event creates an enduring reciprocity between their bodies that, in later scenes, inhibits Lucrece's ability to share compassionate exchange with other, more sympathetic audiences, such as her maid and Collatine. Through its representations of enforced empathy between unlike individuals, the poem illustrates both the potentiality and the inadequacy of *com-passion* as a means of establishing sociality and contributing to communal experience in early modern discourse.

Kristine Johanson, “The Maid’s Part: Proverbial Consent in Early Modern Drama”

My starting point for this paper is an early scene in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, when Julia says:

What fool is she, that knows I am a maid
And would not force the letter to my view,
Since maids in modesty say "No" to that
Which they would have the profferer construe "Ay" (1.2.53–56).

Julia repeats the misogynistic proverb 'A woman says nay but means aye' (Dent W660), one Buckingham also uses to counsel Richard of Gloucester in his stage-managed acceptance of the crown: 'And be not easily won to our request. / Play the maid's part: still answer "nay"--and take it' (3.7.50–51). (It is also repeated in a poem in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, 'Have you not heard it said full oft / A woman's nay doth stand for nought?') I want to think about the multiple layers of consent implied in Julia's lines: first, the proverb itself concerns a woman's sexual consent--that her lack of consent in fact signifies its opposite, her interest; second, that women themselves subscribe (that is, consent) to this idea because a female character speaks it; and third, the social consent and circulation of this idea, signified by its proverbial nature. While scholars have attended to rape and consent in *TGV* at the play's end, and of course in *Lucrece*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Pericles*, and elsewhere in early modern literature, I want to think about how ideas of consent circulated through formal consent (i.e. the proverb) and through this proverb in particular, examining its use in early modern drama and in later editions of Shakespeare (for example, *The Bowdler Family Shakespeare* retains Julia's lines but cuts Buckingham's).

Alex MacConochie, “‘I will be known for more then Blurt’: Deciphering Authority in Dekker’s *Blurt, Master Constable*”

My essay will focus on *constables*. Depicted in drama as both enforcers of the law and integral members of the community they police, constables such as Elbow in *Measure for Measure* offer a worm's eye view of participatory governance and the centralization of state power in early modern England.

Melissa Rohrer, “Consensus, Counternarratives, and the Scandal of Essex in *Sejanus His Fall*”

As is true today, early modern English society loved a good scandal. But who decides what is and is not scandalous? As Johannes Ehrat argues in his book *Power of Scandal: Semiotic and Pragmatic in Mass Media*, "Scandals are what All think about someone," thus drawing attention to the important role "consensus" plays in creating and perpetuating scandals (ix). My recent project on adaptations of scandal on the early modern stage has made me attuned to the concept of consensus and the role the theater played in cultivating consensus and public consciousness in theatergoing audiences. In late-Elizabethan and Jacobean England, scandals were an increasingly prevalent part of political culture and discourse, exposing the transgressions of government ministers and aristocratic elites to public examination and judgment. Plays which referenced or appropriated details of a scandal were important in creating such exposure, serving as sites through which audiences and readers of differing social degrees could participate together in acts of critical judgment. But scandals and the public's consensus judgments about them could also be weaponized by the powerful in order to serve their own political ends. In such cases, the allusive nature of drama provided means to challenge narratives of scandal put forth by dominant authorities—and could reveal the process through which these narratives sought to influence public opinion. In this essay, I will examine how

Ben Jonson's *Sejannus His Fall* (1603) offers just such a critique of the Elizabethan regime's attempt to create consensus outrage in the aftermath of the failed 1601 coup of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex.

Nate Szymanski, “Competitors without Competition in Shakespearean England”

I will be focusing on competition as both a term and a concept in Early Modern England. In my paper, I hope to show variance with our current understanding of this agonistic term as well as provide some possible ideas regarding the larger social implications of being a "competitor."

Lauren Weindling, “Of Contagion”

This paper examines the role of contagion in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In a play that is often glossed as Hamlet's attempt to cure the body politic of the poison (both literal and figurative) caused by his uncle's usurpation of the throne, contagion's appearance here is not particularly surprising. Yet as shown by scholars like Eric Langley and Mary Floyd-Wilson, disease and contagion in the early modern period does not so much pertain to a fear of a foreign invader, but rather an anxiety about sympathy or likeness. Theories of disease held by both Paracelsus and Girolamo Fracastoro underlined that a disease found its likeness or internal cause within the body leading to infection; thus disease spread via 'natural affinity' or 'reciprocity.' This paper contends that a vocabulary of likeness and similarity plagues Hamlet's Denmark, including the ghost that is conventionally understood as the symptom of the body politic's disease. Moreover, the Hamlets' preoccupation with incest assumes a new cast in this context. Incest — being 'too much,' too alike, or having an excess of 'natural affinity' — is the disease.

Luke Wilson, “Consumption and the Self, Mostly in Shakespeare and Ovid”

In English, the prefix *con-* either functions to intensify the action it is attached to or carries the meaning of “with.” This essay attempts to trace the intimate relation between the intensive and collective branches of the *con-* family of words in English, particularly in the English words *consumation* and *consummation*, which derive, respectively, from Latin *consumere* (to eat, use up, destroy) and Latin *consummare* (to add up, bring together, or produce perfection) and possess corresponding meanings in English. This essay explores the ways a sense of “withness” intermingles with a sense of thoroughness, especially in Shakespeare and in Ovid's story of Erysichthon, the man who ate himself. Consumption, as eating, provocatively juxtaposes the anti-social annihilation-by-internalization of scarce resources with the quintessentially social act of sharing. Although Shakespeare never refers to Erysichthon by name, the paradoxes of self-consumption are visible everywhere in his plays and poems.