

Shakespeare Association of America Annual Meeting, April 17, 2020 (via Zoom)
Seminar: Early Modern Women Challenge Political Frameworks
Organizers: Joanne Wright and Mihoko Suzuki
Respondents: Katharine Gillespie and Megan Matchinske

Group 1: Discussion led by Megan Matchinske

Susan Frye

The “She Said” That Unlocks #MeToo: Elizabeth I of England and Mary Queen of Scots, Judgments and Sovereignty

When Katie Rogers wrote in a review of Lisa Taddeo’s *Three Women* that it is time to “explore the ways” in which women’s “sexual lives have been shaped, and to interrogate why sexual agency, strength, trauma, victimhood or liberation end up ripe for judgment” (*NYT Book Review* Sept. 8, 2019), I thought about how both Queen Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots endured many incidents that invited and continue to invite the judgment and fantasies of their contemporaries and their subsequent historians and biographers. I think it is time to listen to what “she said,” in the sense of listening to how Elizabeth and Mary themselves described just one of the moments in their lives when their sexual agency / strength / trauma / victimhood and liberation were judged and their female sovereignty – even as laid down in law and custom – questioned. Accordingly, I discuss the accusations of the Lady Elizabeth’s sexual looseness with Thomas Seymour and her response in the context of English attempts to define female sovereignty. I also examine the accusations made against Mary Stuart that used her sexuality to argue against her fitness to rule. Rather than paying full attention to Mary’s own explanations for decisions made based on her understanding of her sovereignty, even the best-meaning biographers and historians have preferred to listen to each other and the “he said” voices of her sixteenth-century accusers, participating in a kind of infinity loop of false accusation stretching across the centuries. Clearly, it is time to consider what these royal women actually said, even as we wonder what they might have said to one another, had they ever met.

Jennifer Lodine-Chaffey

Women’s Scaffold Speeches and the Modesty Topos in Early Modern England

Women writers during the English Renaissance often attempted to counteract criticism of their writing by referring to themselves as “weak women” and by using expressions of modesty. Elizabeth Tebeaux and Mary M. Lay, in their study of the rhetorical strategies employed by female writers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, observe that women often: expressed awareness and even acceptance of the prejudice against them as authors; used self-deprecation; employed writing that reflected virtues commonly associated with women’s traditional roles, including humility and chastity; and attempted to affirm the value of the female perspective.¹ While often mediated by male writers and printers, accounts of women’s “last dying” speeches exhibit many of these same strategies. Laudatory accounts of women’s executions, through their use of what I term a modesty topos, positioned female rhetors as subjects with the right to comment on societal problems, offer guidance to witnesses, and refashion themselves as godly women. In this paper, I explore the rhetoric of modesty and the use of self-deprecation women employed at their executions. While hagiographers interpreted the perceived innate weakness of women at the scaffold as evidence of a spiritual strength prompting

¹ Elizabeth Tebeaux and Mary M. Lay, “The Emergence of the Feminine voice, 1526-1640: The Earliest Published Books by English Renaissance Women,” *JAC* 15, no. 1 (1995): 53-55.

reliance on the divine, accounts of defiant women equated unrepentant and deviant behavior with an essential weakness of character. Women themselves seem to have frequently employed expressions of modesty and self-deprecation, and to have framed themselves as humble at the scaffold. These strategies allowed women to speak from a position of authority and to fashion themselves as models of exemplary scaffold behavior and may have also allowed their complaints and social critiques to gain a wider audience. Indeed, women's ability not only to speak from the scaffold, but also to inspire writers and audiences to accept their final speeches, relied upon their performance of modesty. Although men at the scaffold needed to position themselves as subject to the monarch and God, women needed to evidence submission to male authorities as well as governmental and spiritual lords. As execution accounts in pamphlets, broadsides, hagiographies, and official government documents show, by presenting themselves as meek, repentant, subject to male governance, and aware of their weaknesses, women paradoxically became subjects capable of providing guidance to their audiences. The speeches of women deemed properly penitent and obedient at the scaffold, therefore, received approval from writers and presumably audiences because they upheld women's traditional roles in society and performed gender in a culturally acceptable fashion. Additionally, these women, due to their adherence to the ritual and their assumption of proper feminine qualities, were reframed in the narratives, not as reprobates, but as godly women whose final words mattered and whose reputations were restored.

Katharine Landers

“Such ill clothes”: The Resistant Politics of Garments in the Writings of Lady Anne Clifford”

This paper considers how noted seventeenth-century diarist Lady Anne Clifford articulates fashioned resistance and resistance *to* fashion, both as ways of engaging with garments-as-political rhetoric. I examine Clifford's diary alongside archival materials, particularly her estate account book from the 1670's, considering Clifford's roles both at the Jacobean court and in her later life, during which she consolidated her local authority as Baroness de Clifford. I argue that Clifford represents herself as intentionally anti-fashionable even as she bestows gifts of accessories and textiles to solidify political support during her legal battles to secure what she saw as her rightful inheritance—the Clifford family lands. Clifford describes how she was “found fault with all for wearing such ill clothes,” setting this under-dressing in contrast with the fashionable excess of her first husband, Richard Sackville, 3rd Earl of Dorset. I suggest that Clifford's “ill clothes” represent politically-charged resistance to her husband's fashionable favor-courting with James I, and by extension Dorset's support of the King's desire that Clifford relinquish her inheritance. Alongside this garmented resistance, Clifford uses articles of clothing, such as skirts and gloves, as sites of political resistance and alliance-making, showing her attention to fashionable norms and her readiness to subvert them. Clifford continued such an approach to sartorial alliance-making later in life as Baroness de Clifford, engaging in extensive textile circulation, as recorded in her account book. Clifford's resistant garment-politics is part of a broader landscape of political garment-thinking in seventeenth-century (Royalist) English women's writing, one that often shows Royalist women writers destabilizing their own allegiances to the crown, or critiquing Stuart hegemony in favor of other sites of authority.

Despite the central role attire played in self-presentation, seventeenth-century attitudes toward dress often suggested that excessive attention to garments was frivolous and potentially sinful. In spite of this spirited invective, ideas about dress influenced political debates, providing an analogical language that, though subtle, was powerful. For Clifford, these oblique capacities are compounded by her own complex political position—sometimes excluded from authority over the lands she considered rightfully hers, but also a figure of significant local power, particularly later in her life. Thus, Clifford inhabits a hybrid space, powerful yet constrained in a manner reminiscent of the rhetorical status of garments themselves.

Anne Clifford has often appeared in discussions of court dress, and scholars like Edith Snook have considered how Clifford intentionally disrupts norms of female beauty in the period, but little scholarship connects Clifford's use of attire—both her own and that of her household—to her political negotiations at the court of James I and later as Baroness de Clifford.² Clifford, this paper argues, uses representations of garments to explore alternative avenues of political authority outside of Stuart hegemony, capitalizing on the external yet oblique nature of dress. The political language of apparel allows her to theorize about limitations of Royalist and Stuart politics, and to respond with alternate sites of political power — in Clifford's case, local aristocratic authority.

Group 2: Discussion led by Katharine Gillespie

Kathleen Lynch

The Betweenness of Sarah Wight

More than a hundred people's names are recorded as witnesses or those who signed prefatory testimonies to *Exceeding Riches of Grace* (1647). That is the publication of Henry Jessey's report on the fasting, oracular experiences of a young woman, Sarah Wight. This paper foregrounds the methodologies of quantitative network analysis to ask what new insights can be brought to bear on things we think we already know about Jessey's motivation for recording so many witnesses? It also positions this methodology to ask how, where, and when the challenge of "voluntary association," so fundamental to the nonconformist cause, translates—or does not translate—to political change. Most importantly, quantitative network analysis gives us a way to understand and articulate the dynamics of this particular network. Sarah Wight has a high level of "betweenness" in this network. I aim to test a hunch that Jessey was trying to achieve "triadic closure." If he could bring together the aristocratic ladies, the eminent physicians, the dissenting ministers, the army associates, and almost incidentally the neighborhood women—then he had established a new stronger, interconnected network of certitude and commitment to a vision of a godly commonwealth.

But what roles in this network do Wight and Jessey have vis-à-vis each other and with the larger community? Do new methodologies give us new insight into the fraught questions of agency with much women's writing in the period? *Exceeding Riches of Grace* also represents Jessey's first appearance in print—with the notable exception of having begun to edit a Hebraic-inflected almanac two years earlier. What is the impact of women appearing in print on the very large network Jessey was intimately connected with, as the leader of the seminal semi-separatist congregation in London, starting in the 1630s? Jessey is celebrated as someone who holds dissenting communities together. When women associated with his church appear in print, do they hold communities together or break them apart? I will build out the data set from the Wight example to reach towards the examples of Sarah Jones and Katherine Chidley, both associated with Jessey, and both also appearing in print in contentious moments in the history of English dissent. Some of the recent scholarship I draw on in these case studies includes that by Rachel Adcock and Polly Ha.

² Edith Snook. *Women, Beauty and Power in Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

Kristen McCants Forbes

Anger and Women's Political Agency in Hester Pulter's *The Unfortunate Florinda*

Hester Pulter's 17th-century prose romance *The Unfortunate Florinda* opens with a coup in Spain, as the usurper Roderigo drives his nephew, the infant king, and the baby's mother out of the country and into exile. The text as we have it ends with another coup planned, this one against Roderigo and plotted by his aide Count Julian after the usurper king rapes the Count's daughter Florinda. In between these framing events, Pulter narrates the story of Fidelia, a Barbary noblewoman in love with a slave who, as it is later revealed, is the heir to the throne of Naples. Fidelia's story, which she narrates herself at the Spanish court, details her escape from the unwanted advances of the new Barbarian viceregent, aided by her brother and her lover, and the adventures of her travels around the world. Both narratives—Fidelia's and Florinda's—use the conventions of romance to explore the potential political ramifications of women's anger.

My essay will examine Pulter's *Unfortunate Florinda* as a nexus for understanding the unique role women's anger might play in early modern governance. I argue that the link between personal emotion and political action, explored throughout Pulter's poetry, is extended to its logical conclusion through the wish-fulfillment genre of romance in *The Unfortunate Florinda*. Fidelia and Florinda, both the victims of unwanted male lust, channel their sadness and anger at their victimization into personal vengeance, which is simultaneously a political action that topples regimes. While the narrator of Pulter's poetry is relegated to the countryside during the Interregnum, and thus damned to inactivity in the political realm, the heroines of Pulter's prose romance are granted the agency to act upon their anger, thereby catalyzing political change. Ultimately, Pulter uses her romance as a space to explore the political ramifications of female emotional responses. Whereas Pulter's own anger (at her fate, at the fate of her country, at her lot in life) is not something that can be acted upon—nothing Hester Pulter does will have a great effect on who is ruling England, unlike her Biblical namesake Esther—in her romance, she imagines a space where such anger *could be* politically relevant. In the world of *The Unfortunate Florinda*, one ignores the anger of women at one's own peril, because such rage can topple regimes.

Stephen Spencer

Conceiving Joy: The Scriptural Politics of Reproduction in Lucy Hutchinson's *Order and Disorder*

Critics have noticed something of a paradox in *Order and Disorder* (1679), Lucy Hutchinson's biblical epic. While it generally advocates for a traditional gender hierarchy that subordinates women, it also makes Eve the first character in the epic to possess an individualized voice beyond the biblical source material. While the long procession of Old Testament childbirths depicted in the epic would seem to lock women into the traditional gender role of mothers, Hutchinson poeticizes this procession to illustrate one of the primary tenets of her religious politics: the short-term joy of monarchical tyranny leads to damnation, while the long-term joy of companionate marriage—expressed by the birth of the Israelite Patriarchs—leads to salvation. In this essay, which is part of a larger project investigating the religious politics of rejoicing in the English Revolution, I treat childbirth as an expression of joy linked to the poem's status as an "exercise" in "spiritual mirth." The epic's depiction of biblical childbirth, I will argue, is a religious politics of joy grounded in companionate marriage beyond reproductive futurity per se.

For Hutchinson, childbirth certainly fulfills providential, typological design, but it does not do so in a straight, neat, or teleological manner. This is evinced in Cantos 6–20, which make up but a portion of an imagined scriptural epic, assumed to culminate with Christ's Nativity. If reproduction produces divine truth and Christian knowledge, it is not shown to be a stabilizing

effect in the world. The “joy” that these biblical women (and men) bring into the postlapsarian world intermixes with sorrow and other negative affects.

My reading of *Order and Disorder* will begin with the Preface, where Hutchinson attempts to justify her rendering of Scripture into verse. The Preface opens up a reading of the epic as an “exercise” of “spiritual mirth”: not itself a psalm, hymn, or song, but certainly containing psalmic, hymnal, and songful moments. I will then turn to the first five cantos, which were the only cantos printed in Hutchinson’s lifetime. More specifically, I will focus on Canto 3, which depicts the birth of Eve and Adam’s response. Through Adam, Hutchinson establishes the notion that prelapsarian joy multiplies itself through communication with a partner of the same kind, using the Song of Songs to allegorize Adam and Eve’s marriage as Christ’s marriage to the Gospel Church. Though Dissenters often utilized Canticles to make sense of their suffering, I will turn to John Owen’s *The True Nature of a Gospel Church* for a position more closely allied to Hutchinson’s. To conclude the essay, I will look at the unpublished Canto 19 of *Order and Disorder*, which poeticizes Jacob’s marriages to the sisters Rachel and Leah. Hutchinson attempts to reconcile the story’s depiction of plural marriage, I will argue, by making Jacob’s joy for Rachel, his preferred wife, inherently effeminate.

Group 3: Discussion led by Joanne Wright and Mihoko Suzuki

Alexandra Carter

The New Science and a New Frontier for Romance: A Study of Margaret Cavendish’s *Blazing World* and *Observations on Experimental Philosophy*

In 1666, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, published a volume containing two companion works: a scientific tract called *Observations on Experimental Philosophy* and a romance called *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*. Cavendish notes in the “Preface to the Reader” of *The Blazing World* that she “added the Piece of Fancy to [her] Philosophical Observations” because philosophizing is “laborious and difficult, and requires sometimes the help of Fancy, to recreate the Mind.”

Despite Cavendish’s pointed insistence on the interdependence of these texts, scholarship has yet to fully appreciate their networks of connection, though each text has received much attention in the field it appears to belong to. Literary scholars have devoted significant energy to the “romancical” *Blazing World*, reading it in terms of generic experimentation, proto-feminism and female subjectivity, nascent imperialism and political upheaval, and its kinship with later works of science fiction. Scholars of the history of science and philosophy have tended to focus greater energy on *Observations*, along with Cavendish’s other more conventionally scientific works, as a touchstone in the development of empiricism, the New Science, and materialist thought. Perhaps the greatest indicator of the critical severing of *The Blazing World* and *Observations* is the lack of a scholarly edition of the texts together. Rather than view Cavendish’s investment in romance and her investment in natural philosophy as distinct, I read them as working in concert. I argue for romance as the key unifying force between two seemingly antagonistic cognitive pursuits: fantasy and the New Science. Ultimately, I suggest that mining the complexity of the works’ relationship with romance will provide access to the designs of thought that make Cavendish’s natural philosophy possible.

In this essay, I bring the tension between romance and enlightenment to bear on Cavendish’s work in *Observations* and *The Blazing World*. Just as scientific inquiry and empiricism are becoming systematized and institutionalized, Cavendish produces a romance that quests toward total knowledge and understanding of the natural world while simultaneously (and persistently) affirming that such knowledge can never be fully realized because of the inevitability of human ignorance. In so doing, she not only critiques the so-called progress of scientific discourse, but also raises the stakes for the political possibilities of the romance genre.

Indeed, reading the romance in Cavendish's natural philosophy not only takes seriously her clear choice to write "romantically," but also demonstrates how the logic of romance allows Cavendish to develop her theory of everything. In transferring the tropes and thought-designs of romance to the New Science, Cavendish charts a new frontier for the politics of romance, one that moves away from contesting the terrestrial borders of nations and empires and instead begins a new imperial project: contesting the intellectual borders of knowledge.

Kristina Krasny

**"But let me live the life that nature gave, And not to please my subjects, dig my grave":
Thinking Politics through Ecology with Margaret Cavendish**

Margaret Cavendish's utopian *The Blazing World* (1666) provides sharp political and social commentary on the state of England and the English Civil War as it builds an unnatural world around natural elements. The role of the natural world in this text is foundational and praised for the ways it reflects Cavendish's deep interest in science and nature. Cavendish's poetry is similarly full of natural language and political metaphor. In selections from *Poems and Fancies* (1664) Cavendish engages in an early modern ecoconsciousness while she simultaneously ruminates on the social and political upheaval of the English Civil War.

Poems like "A Dialogue betwixt Man and Nature," "A Dialogue between an Oak and a Man Cutting Him Down," and "The Hunting of the Hare" directly address the human effect on the environment while also commenting on human destructiveness more broadly. Using the natural world as her medium, Cavendish engages in questions of legacy, utility, will, and mercy—all ideas also poignant to discussions of civil war. Nature acts as a constant entity, the disruption of which causes the subjects of these poems to pause and reflect on their motivations. The constant throughout all of these poems is that the poems' characters and/or narrator(s) repeatedly link violence in nature to politics. It is here that Cavendish's royalist sentiments come through as she personifies nature as king and condemns the ambition of man. Cavendish, therefore, uses this ecocritical language as a way of circumventing more traditional political and literary frameworks to provide her own commentary on the politics of war, as it was influenced by her gender, political position, and ties to the war.

Reading Cavendish this way allows us to rethink the ways we interpret how women's writing played with the political frameworks of the early modern period. This argument comes out of a larger project which argues that facing our destructive relationship to nature can help make sense of our own human destructiveness to one another. I argue that poets like Cavendish used our relationship with nature as the subject of their lyric to make sense of human violence against each other and to explore the ways this is exponentially compounded by war and a divided nation. In this way, this paper builds off of current ecocritical conversations surrounding the environmental concerns of the early modern period and feminist conversations which seek to go beyond just recuperating women writers by instead asking what we can learn about early modern politics from their unique subject positions.

Danielle Rosvally

Taking the Reins: The American Reading Career of Mrs. Fanny Kemble

It was October of 1848 when Mrs. Fanny Butler (née Fanny Kemble) ran out of options. She had spent two years estranged from Pierce Butler, her American husband, and their children due to Butler's infidelity, his stark treatment of Kemble and their home life, and Butler's outspoken propensity for slave ownership. In England, Kemble enjoyed the privilege of her family name and lucrative stage career, a career she had hoped to forsake after marrying the wealthy American in a whirlwind romance. Kemble notoriously hated show business: "How I do

loathe the stage!” she wrote, “What a mass of wretched mumming mimicry acting is!” Yet now, as Butler served her with divorce papers on the grounds of desertion, she had few avenues of financial recourse.

When Kemble returned to America, she returned with a vengeance. She began a reading series of Shakespeare’s works, first in Boston then in New York, which became an overnight sensation. Through these readings, Kemble was able to carefully craft her own stage image, select and edit her own material, and control her performance in an unprecedented way. Kemble not only had complete creative control of these readings, but also economic control: she set her own schedule, prices, and touring locations.

As the sole performer onstage, Kemble read every character in a piece, thus releasing herself from the confines of theatrical women’s roles and liberating herself to play any (and every) part in Shakespeare’s canon. The readings occurred at the precise time of Kemble’s divorce; an audience might read courtroom opinions and gory details about Kemble’s married life in the morning (most of which from her own published account of the marriage and subsequent divorce complaint), then settle in to hear her read *The Tempest* in the evening. With strategic use of the press, Kemble was able to harness the sensational journalism surrounding her divorce and turn a hefty profit from it without sustaining lasting character injury.

The readings were viewed by audiences as wholesome entertainment, in keeping with moral and ethical standards of an elite nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. By creating a domestic setting for these readings (Kemble read while seated at a table from a large book which she annotated herself), Kemble simultaneously subverted and affirmed traditional nineteenth-century values, particularly those linked to issues of femininity. She purposefully side-stepped issues surrounding the morality of theatre, and engaged with literary tradition as an economic tool to increase both her audience and her prestige.

Kemble’s American readings are a case study in how a nineteenth-century woman was able to use Shakespeare as legitimizing cultural capital to subvert gendered social expectations, even amidst a very public exposure of her personal life. In this paper, I will examine the mechanisms which Kemble used to do so, how they enacted her ideas about the stage and lasting cultural significance, and why this was effective for a nineteenth-century American audience.