

ABSTRACTS

SEMINAR 05: Class and Identity in Shakespeare

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Social class, affect, and resistance

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This paper examines affect as a class-related phenomenon, arguing that the inescapable class system of early modern England forced the majority of the population to, at various times, adopt postures of supplication to their social betters and make displays of their own inferiority. Those potentially humiliating affects were signifiers of social class as surely as the restrictions imposed by the sumptuary codes. Social status delimited affective postures; affect postures reified social divisions. What often goes unremarked, however, is how social inferiors could subtly subvert those affective postures. Drawing on the work of anthropologists such as James C. Scott, I would like to examine how, first, minute acts of passive resistance, as portrayed in early modern drama, complicate the disjunction between emotion and affect in class-charged encounters. Second, I will take the example of “logic chopping” as an act of class resistance to further parse the complex emotion/affect dialectic. Finally, I will speculate on how this strategy of resistance (and others) engendered a chronic disjunction of emotion and affect in the lower classes and necessarily complicated the early modern audience’s reaction to the scenes in which it was depicted.

Erotic Possessions: Class, Race, and Land in Richard Brome’s *A Jovial Crew* (1641)

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First staged in 1641 at the Cockpit theater on the eve of the closure of London’s theaters, *A Jovial Crew* concentrates on the politics of class and land. For instance, one part of the plot concentrates on the landowner Oldrents’ daughters and their decision to become beggars, joining the jovial crew that arrives on their estate, while another part of the plot attends to Amy’s decision to impersonate “poor folks,” so she can evade an arranged marriage (3.1.571). However, Oldrents’ steward, Springlove, offers a twist on this pattern: Oldrents helps Springlove to better himself socially, making him the steward of his lands. Nevertheless, Oldrents detests a habit of Springlove’s: each spring, he joins a community of vagabonds, spending his time wandering, begging, and reveling, only to return later and resume his work. Springlove too laments his unbending desire to shift “place and air,” his seeking to leave Oldrents’ well-tamed and regulated gardens for the openness of “the highways and commons” (1.1.216 and 196). Still, Oldrents grasps that Springlove’s desire to temporarily be a beggar is intractable, so he no longer strives “to wash this Moor,” as he puts it, through argumentation (1.1.227). Imagining Springlove as a Moor, Oldrents racializes Springlove’s desire to join the underclass, indicating that Springlove’s commitment to join the vagabonds compromises his whiteness. My paper will examine this comedy’s depiction of the complex and reciprocal relations between class and race, ultimately

contending that this play works, via heteroerotic desire, to connect a racialized whiteness to the landowning class, making this form of whiteness appear a distinctive property of this class. This erotic possession, I contend, provides a rationale that can determine who has freedom—those who can claim this class-based form of whiteness—and those who do not and are thus subject to conditions of unfreedom.

**“Baser Kind” Meets “Nobler Race”:
Marriage and Class Transformation in Early Modern English Drama**

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The social system of early modern England produced a tension deriving from the uneasy coexistence of a titled aristocracy identified through bloodlines and inheritance with new modes of economic class mobility for commoners through the accumulation of wealth via labor and capitalist investment. This tension invites examination of the intersection of economic and hierarchical status with the transformational discourse of marriage, a traditional vector of familial alliance and inheritance as well as, through savvy negotiation, a means of economic class mobility.

This paper will examine the specific situation of a wealthy or aristocratic woman being united with a man of lower economic or hierarchical standing, asking whether women, from their circumscribed position within the patriarchal structure, could effectively be channels or instruments of class transformation for the men they marry. Marriage, after all, is a union of man and woman into “one flesh”—and one legal identity under the law of coverture. Shakespeare’s plays provide numerous examples of men raising women through marriage to new class positions, such as the Duke and Isabella in *Measure for Measure*. But can brides effect the same change for their grooms, seeing as women, according to Gayle Rubin, are the gift exchanged through the structure of marriage rather than the agents of the marriage themselves? Through a comparison of plays, this paper will examine the systemic and generic factors that may enable women to be a means of class transformation for men in early modern drama, as well as the dynamics that frequently limit this possibility. Shakespeare’s comic portrayals of marriage in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* serve as optimistic perspectives for social mobility in contrast to the tragically conservative class ideology, rooted in blood and family identity, voiced by Ferdinand and the Cardinal in Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*.

**Wench, Witch, Wife, Widow:
Classifying Characters in *The Witch of Edmonton***

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The opening of *The Witch of Edmonton*—“Come, wench!”—is the first of many moments in which one character uses a term of address that classifies another in terms of gender, class, or social position relative to the speaker’s own. This paper explores acts of classifying naming and the identities such naming confers. *The Witch of Edmonton* is rich in misogynist vocabulary—“hag,” “she-hell-cat,” “whore,” “slut”—but naming in the play’s world is not always derogatory, and men as well as women are subject to social labeling and mislabeling, both negative and positive. From the first, the play is interested in how persons classify each other, and in how such classifications reinforce social identity and shape sense of self. Tracking characters’ reactions to being named (and thereby “placed”) reveals two radically divergent perspectives on the fit between social identity and selfhood: Elizabeth Sawyer’s insistence that names for social categories are false constructs, and that *place* does not equal *person*, in the witch plot; and the general consensus that names stabilize places, and places stabilize persons, in the domestic tragedy plot.

“Lieutenant Cutpurse: ‘a very dangerous type and problematic for good government’”

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This essay considers the literary and historical “lives” of two infamous early modern cross-dressing masterless women: Mary Frith (c. 1584—1659) aka ‘Moll Cutpurse’ and Catalina/Antonio Erauso (1585 or 1592—1650), who passed most of her life as a man in Spain’s American colonies, and who became known in print and on stage as ‘*la monja alférez*,’ or, ‘the lieutenant nun.’ Contemporaries, Frith and Erauso share the distinction of being the first living people represented onstage in their respective home “nations” of England and Spain. Both figures have separately received ample critical attention, and yet have never been discussed in tandem. I begin with what appears an unexamined historical coincidence: why, at precisely the same moment in the early modern English and Spanish-speaking empires, two worlds which economic and social historians tell us were marching along different trajectories in the development of “modern” market or capitalist society, did these two figures—both women, both “criminal,” both bombastic in their masterlessness, and both staunch supporters of their respective monarchs—become such objects of cultural fascination? I suggest there is something about the complicated and imaginatively stirring idea of these women as socio-political actors that invited early moderns to scrutinize the transformations of their era and test the limits of long-established political structures and cultural forms. Above all, I argue for “Moll Cutpurse” and “The Lieutenant Nun”—that is, the popular figurations of Frith and Erauso rather than the historical figures themselves—as contested sites of ideological struggle. The formulation of these figures within the different generic and discursive frameworks in which “Moll Cutpurse” and “The Lieutenant Nun” manifested and circulated—plays, legal documents, autobiographies—allowed early moderns to grasp and dispute contradictions in the shifting ways land, labor, and

all forms of property were being constituted, allocated and accumulated across the seventeenth century.

The Racist Identity of Black Hyper-sexuality in Shakespeare

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Although white characters relegate Caliban, Aaron, and Othello to otherness as punishment for either attempting rape, masterminding rape, or enacting rape, their actual crime seems to encompass the manner in which their racial identities stereotypically link him to rape. As they are branded with the term *devil* with more prejudicial frequency than any other Shakespearean character (a term which, according to many facets of historical Christianity, including some Crusade propaganda, is synonymous with *black*), Caliban, Aaron, and Othello are expected to possess stereotypical attributes indicative of aggressive hyper-sexuality. As these attributes are commonly applied to black and brown people throughout early modern English history, their punishment is thus stereotypically inevitable.

This study contends that Shakespeare is fully aware of this, and appears to attach these stereotypes to three characters of color as a consequence of colonial control—not a result of some innate racial biology. Shakespeare seems to blame colonization for Caliban and Othello's display of aggressive hyper-sexuality and Aaron's instigation of violent hypersexuality, as if these stereotypical traits are both the imagination of the colonizer and a symptom of colonization. As Caliban's enslavement, Othello's assimilation, and Aaron's devotion to Tamora thoroughly contributes to their otherness and mental instability, we understand that their current persona differs from their persona before white oppression. We are shown sick characters, ill monsters, infected only by the subjugation of white men and white women. More specifically, when each character of color endures a series of tormenting mental breakdowns, both in the form of verbal rants and desires to violate white characters, their dialogue points to colonization as the culprit, not an implied biological schism.

“As of Moors, so of chimney sweepers”:

Class and Blackness in George Chapman's *May Day*

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George Chapman's Jacobean comedy *May Day* features Lorenzo, a foolish old man who disguises himself as a chimney sweep in order to (unsuccessfully) sleep with a married woman. This play, performed by the Children of the Chapel at Blackfriars around 1604, features the spectacle of a child actor in blackface; Lorenzo paints his face to emulate Snail's sooty countenance and go unrecognized as he walks the street. The repertory of the Blackfriars Children has very few representations of non-European characters, and almost no characters described as “black” or “Moors,” as opposed to the plays across the river performed by the adult companies who specialized in these representations. While blackening the face onstage has many connotations, the blackness of Lorenzo-as-Snail's skin, here in the form of soot, shows what Patricia Akhimie calls

a “racialization of class difference” through a visible bodily marker. That the boy actor uses the same materials to impersonate Snail that were used to impersonate Moors on the early modern stage immediately puts the two performances of class and race in dialogue with each other. By examining the social position of the Jacobean chimney sweep, linked consistently in language with that of Black individuals, I argue that the representation of class in this play is intertwined with performances of and early modern ideas about racial difference.

Subjection and dispossession in rural England and *Timon of Athens*

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Building on the work of social historians, this paper argues that to be poor in early modern rural England normally meant being part of social networks and intimately connected to the natural world, and I consider how such relationships would have helped to define rural people as subjects. This suggests to me that we might reconsider the psychic life of poor and vagrant English—and take a fresh look at Shakespeare’s representation of aristocratic vagrants such as Lear, Gloucester, Edgar, and Timon, who embody forms of experience normally endured by the era’s homeless. I claim that these characters are one means through which Shakespeare and his co-authors explore causes and effects of rural dispossession, and here I look specifically at ways in which Shakespeare and Middleton’s deploy Timon to critique their society’s response to homelessness and poverty, and I draw attention to the tragic character’s peculiar forms of alienation from nature.

Seeming the Saint: On Demonic Whiteness in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*

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How might white, male, Machiavellian villains use their sense of entitlement and the privileges of their complexion to further their schemes? This paper will address the intersection of class, whiteness, and disability in William Shakespeare’s *Richard III* and *Othello* by thinking about how the white, male, Machiavellian villains Richard and Iago exist as racial crossdressers. In his discussion of Iago, Ian Smith argues that Iago has many of the emotional and moral characteristics typically associated with Blackness in the early modern period, like treachery, violence, jealousy, and deceitfulness, and he uses his whiteness like a mask that hides his moral blackness from the other characters in the play.¹ In contrast, as Kim F. Hall notes, whiteness and Blackness are the original binary in European thought and they existed as part of “the good/evil” dichotomy where whiteness becomes attached to Christian virtues like “purity, virginity, and

¹ See Ian Smith’s “White Skin, Black Masks: Racial Cross-Dressing on the Early Modern Stage.” *Renaissance Drama, New Series*, vol 32 (2003), 34-37 and “Othello and Blackface” for the podcast *Shakespeare Unlimited* 50, an interview with Ian Smith and Ayanna Thompson with Barbra Bogave, June 2016, <https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/othello-blackface>.

innocence” while blackness is associated with “baseness, evil, sin, and danger.”² In thinking about whiteness in Shakespeare’s plays, this paper is building on the recommendations of premodern critical race scholars like Kim F. Hall, Peter Erickson, Arthur Little, Jr. to deconstruct the role of whiteness in early modern criticism and early modern plays.³ Ian Smith argues that “The failure among critics to routinely remark whiteness ... enables the normative invisibility of whiteness, which is a sign of its hegemony”.⁴ When we make Richard’s and Iago’s whiteness visible, what we see is that they use their like a kind of clothing or costuming which allows him to maintain the appearance of piety while hiding his amorality from suspicion. As Richard puts it, he can hide his “naked villainy” in the appearance of godliness so that he can “seem a saint when most [he] play[s] the devil” (1.3.358). Seeming a saint while playing the devil, this paper will argue, was a privilege for white Machiavellian villains.

Gendering the Shop: Intersections of Gender, Class, and Geography in *The Fair Maid of the Exchange* and *The French Garden*

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My paper concerns shop women, the female producers and consumers associated with the upper level arcade of London’s Royal Exchange called the Upper Pawn. Critics have noted that male customers in literary depictions often resort to sexual assays, viewing female shop workers as mere commodities to be purchased and treating female customers as greedy wives who take advantage of their husbands sexually and financially. However, reading with an eye towards women’s financial exchanges reveals a more complex story. As test cases, I analyze the intersections of gender, class, and geography in the unattributed play, *The Fair Maid of the Exchange* (1601-2), and Peter Erondell’s French-English language manual, *The French Garden* (1605). In these texts, women of different classes make investments, trade with one another, and jockey for economic advantage, negotiating deals that benefit and sometimes contest the interests of the parties involved. Their interactions offer a nuanced portrayal of women’s shop labor in early modern London by demonstrating the complexity and multiplicity of their gendered exchanges.

² Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 8-12.

³ Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 264-268; Peter Erickson, “The Moment of Race in Renaissance Studies,” *Shakespeare Studies* 26 (1998), 31-32; Arthur L. Little, Jr., *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 8.

⁴ Ian Smith, ‘We Are Othello: Speaking of Race in Early Modern Studies,’ *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67.1 (2016), 107. [doi:10.1353/shq.2016.0000](https://doi.org/10.1353/shq.2016.0000).

Crossing the Social Divide: The Fool's Support of Lear

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Although God is distinctly absent from Shakespeare's magnum opus, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, the titular character's need for intellectual and emotional support transcends social parameters. His daughters, Goneril and Regan, have little interest in caring for him and deride his mental capabilities. Regan bluntly states that a man of his age "should be ruled and led/ By some discretion that discerns your state/ Better than you yourself" (2.2.337-9). The lack of familial love weakens him, but the void created by their callous disrespect creates an opportunity for someone else to embolden his sense of self. The Fool, a man who occupies the lowest rung of the court hierarchy, has no reason to accompany him as he leaves his daughters behind, but the choice to remain at his side displays a heartfelt concern that recasts the notion of empathy from a strictly emotional reaction to a conscious realignment of thoughts and feelings. His attentiveness to Lear's state of mind discloses a faith that surpasses political duty and privileges the human spirit, flourishing in a realm where dignity and compassion reign. Despite the class separation, he bridges the social divide to establish an empathetic bond designed to restore Lear's belief in himself.

Class, Race, and Gender in Novelizations of *The Merchant of Venice*

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In her 1992 article, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? Colonization and Miscegenation in *The Merchant of Venice*", Kim Hall was the first to stress the importance of the presence of the Moorish servant woman at Belmont, a character, both silent and invisible, who nonetheless embodies the disquieting implication that Portia, the wealthy, white heroine of the play, is a slaveowner. In doing so, Hall opens up the discourse on the intersectional tensions in the play into new areas, bringing race to the forefront in a debate dominated, up to that point, by gender and religion. In the world of hereditary wealth that Belmont exemplifies, the influence of class is always present and the ways that race and gender interact with its manifestation are personified, in particular, through the characters of Portia, Morocco, Lancelot, and the Moorish servant. Of the nine novelizations of *Merchant* published since Hall's article, only one – Grace Tiffany's, *The Turquoise Ring* (2006) – has engaged with this four-person character set, while only one other – Caryl Phillips', *The Nature of Blood* (1997) – adapts the Moorish servant, the remainder focussing almost entirely on Shylock and Jessica.

This paper explores these two novels and argues that their amplification of the frictions between class, race, and gender in *Merchant*, foregrounds aspects of the play that are often obscured in performance. It proposes that this discourse has been marginalized because of Portia's relative neglect in recent critical and creative arenas but that, in their incarnations of the Moorish servant, Tiffany and Phillips create a character who exemplifies how the influence of racial division often supplants the beneficial possibilities of class unity.

“Impossible Matter”: Humanity, Agency, and Timing in *The Tempest*

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The seminar paper begins by exploring some of the theoretical possibilities and political limitations of the “new materialism” for our practice in literary studies. Understanding humanity, not as a species apart, but rather as penetrated by and entangled with non-human “vital matter” is surely part of a needed critique of anthropocentrism, but how far should we go in deemphasizing and decentering human agency? After addressing this question, the paper goes on to offer a brief set of comments on Shakespeare’s late comedy *The Tempest* (1611), a play that offers an intensive exploration of nature/culture boundaries and hierarchies on an enchanted island where magic mediates between spirit and matter. As such, it is a fitting text for assessing the ethical and political efficacy of the “new materialist” approach, and for testing the strengths and limits of that critical turn. The paper concludes by arguing for a renewed acknowledgement of a class-based human agency as a force that must reckoned with in a presentist mode of reading that connects early modern texts like *The Tempest* to our own moment of planetary emergency.

Counsel, Class, and Just Cause in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*

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A number of scholars have constructed parallels between Shakespeare’s play, *Henry V*, and early modern theories of just war in order to determine the nature of King Henry’s character. Rather than searching for whether we should consider Shakespeare’s Henry V as either a virtuous Christian ruler or a dubious politician, this essay explores the interrelation between the play and the concepts of counsel and just war that were prevalent in early modern political conversations. Just war theorists advocated that monarchs should seek advice and thoroughly weigh issues before deciding to embark on military engagement. In *Henry V*, Shakespeare directly places on stage this paradigm of counsel, dramatizing Henry seeking the advice of his lords on his potential pursuit for the French Crown. The play’s illustration of the practice of counsel shows how it was dependent on the politics of intimacy, where Henry’s inner circle of aristocrats advise him to pursue his desire and “raise his bloody flag” to seek England’s glory. References to blood are ubiquitous in *Henry V*, and the counsel scene depicts how Henry’s vision of a great war is only appropriate to members of his same class based on mutual ideals of ancestry, wealth, and reputation. The repetition of images of blood throughout the play also captures the socio-political dynamics of class, particularly its consciousness of a specific class of men, the returned veteran soldier who has shed his blood in war. These representations of conscripted soldiers produce a sustained account of the interconnected issues of just war and class, which explores the dynamics of solidarity and class difference that defined early modern English society. While the play’s focus remains on dramatizing Henry as a warrior king, Shakespeare also confronts larger cultural issues of the moral and political conditions of subjectivity and its interconnection to monarchical virtue.

A King and No King: Incestuous Polities

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Critics typically gloss the profusion of incest plots in the early modern period as indicative of a desire to be exempt from society's mandate of exogamy. Yet incest isn't simply the perfection of endogamy, it is the natural conclusion of the aristocracy's *already* endogamous practices and the logics that support their hegemony, namely a biological doctrine whereby blood prescribes affinity. Incest may not be a perversion so much as an extension of consanguineous ties according to this logic. For if kin love one another on account of shared blood, and a similarity in blood/nature was presumed to be the foundation of erotic love matches, then what (other than a taboo of course) could prevent the conclusion of incest?

Incest plots then often expose the folly of the elite's intense desire to maintain a closed system. Beaumont and Fletcher's *A King and No King* is, on the surface, a play about the proper transferral of power to the appropriate bodies, one wherein endogamy, if not consanguineous incest, provides the tragicomic conclusion. However, the play empties blood of its value as the supposed arbiter of noble status, and instead features the bloody cost for the general population of the elite's claims to station and power.