

SAA 2022: SEMINAR 10—EARLY MODERN CITY COMEDIES

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City Comedy Lite at the Outdoor Theatres

Alfred Harbage suggested that there was a radical difference in the morality of the plays performed at the “public” and “private” theatres. While only relatively few of the extant city comedies were done at the outdoor theatres, a comparison of them with those done by the boys’ companies is an interesting test of Harbage’s hypothesis. *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon* and *The Roaring Girl* have plot improbabilities that suggest there were taboos on portraying some themes that were commonplace in the indoor theatres, notably the acceptability of men having mistresses or using prostitutes and of unmarried women who were not “honest.” *I The Honest Whore* and *Greene’s Tu Quoque* contain fierce denunciations of whores and bawds, who are often treated more sympathetically at the private theatres; *Greene’s Tu Quoque* depicts a reversal of a motif in Lording Barry’s *Ram Alley*, in effect critiquing the portrayal of a highly sexualized encounter in that play. It does seem that there was a body of unwritten rules at the Globe, Fortune and Red Bull theatres that limited how sexual themes could be treated; it could be compared to the “Breen code,” the protocol devised by the film industry to govern the portrayal of sexuality in Hollywood films. *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* has been cited as evidence against Harbage’s contention, but it seems likely that the company that produced it, the Lady Elizabeth’s Men, was to some degree a continuation of the defunct boys’ companies and may have appealed to a similar audience.

Jennifer Thorup Birkett
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Satirizing Sweetness in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*

As compared to other Tudor and Stuart dramatic genres, including all of Shakespeare’s works, the city comedies from the turn of the sixteenth century boast the most affectionate vocatives per capita, with Francis Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* being the most prolific. In considering the endearments exchanged between Beaumont’s Citizen and Citizen’s wife alongside their depicted mutual relationship, this paper argues for affectionate language as a city comedy generic convention and questions the implications of turning to endearments for purposes of satire. By looking to *which* “endearments” the characters use, and *when* they use them, this paper shows how terms of affection function, not only in typifying the artisan on stage, but in commenting on the growing social mobility of London’s mercantile class and its effects on perspectives of class and marriage relations.

William Casey Caldwell
Roosevelt University

The Price of Toleration in Haughton's *Englishmen for My Money*

William Haughton's *Englishmen for My Money*, oft-cited as the first extant city comedy, is well known for its complex, at times problematic, treatment of English-immigrant relations. The play also contains a seemingly outsized section set in the Royal Exchange—a scene that is a veritable play unto itself and one that is often difficult for scholars to square with the rest of the drama's focus on its romantic plot. In my paper, I will argue that a now-obscure form of toleration offers a way of seeing a unity between the Royal Exchange scene, featuring the Portuguese denizen, Pisaro, and the romantic plot focusing on three English gentry pursuing his daughters. Proto-economic tracts in the period discussed and critiqued a form of monetary toleration, wherein foreign coins were overvalued in order to draw them into the domestic money supply, that was relevant to the use of bills of exchange—a sophisticated financial document, used for international trade, that *Englishmen* deploys in the Royal Exchange scene. I argue that *Englishmen* suggests a parallel between this monetary toleration and the English suitors' toleration of Pisaro's daughters, whereby they hyper-value the immigrant's daughters to increase the English cultural "supply." This critique of toleration does not fit with assumptions, both positive and negative, about its basic elements in most modern criticism. For this smaller paper, I take work by Rainer Forst and Slavoj Žižek as my interlocutors (though Wendy Brown will be most central to my future work), in order to demonstrate *Englishmen's* place in this lost history of toleration.

Amanda Di Ponio
Huron University College

Seeking Virginia in Ben Jonson, George Chapman, and John Marston's
Eastward Ho!

In Allan H. Gilbert's 1918 note "Virginia in *Eastward Ho!*" in *Modern Language Notes* volume 33, he illuminates that it has "not been pointed out that in Seagull's extravagant description of Virginia in *Eastward Ho* the authors made use of travelers' accounts of Virginia, found in Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1589; 1598-1600)" (183). While the resemblances in the play to Hakluyt's descriptions of "the temperate climate of Virginia, her abundant viands, the free life, as in the golden age, and ease of advancement there, and the southern route to the colony... are not definite enough to justify quotation" in Gilbert's view, he nonetheless reminds "how much writers of travel have aided dramatists and poets" (1918). This reminder is predicated on the late-sixteenth-century view of the New World as abundant and longing to share her maidenhead (*Eastward Ho!* 3.3.15-16) dominating Walter Raleigh's *Briefve and True Relation of the Discoverie of the North Part of Virginia* (1602), proselytizing the metaphoric "marri[age] with the Indians" (*Eastward Ho!* 3.3.19), and prior to Christopher Brooke's "A Poem on the Late Massacre in Virginia" (1622) denoting the attack of Powhatan peoples on the English settlements of the Virginia Company at Jamestown (established two years after the play's 1605 debut), and of John Smith's captivity narrative *A General Historie of Virginia* (1624) and Philip Massinger's

counterfeit Satanic Indigenous Americans of *The City Madam* (1632). This paper is concerned with examining the influence of narratives boasting navigational prowess and New World promise in *Eastward Ho!*, and, to borrow Jean E. Howard's phrase in her chapter "Bettrice's Monkey: Staging Exotica in Early Modern London Comedy", the play's reciprocal role in "cultural expropriation" as a means of debunking the propaganda associated with colonial expansion and trade (337).

Ed Gieskes
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Jonson, Satire, and Form

DEMETRIUS: Alas, sir, HORACE! hee is a meere sponge; nothing but humours and observation; he goes vp and downe sucking from euery society, and when hee comes home squeezes himself dry. I know him, I.

Ben Jonson, *Poetaster* (4.3.104-7)

The poetaster Demetrius (Jonson's personation of Dekker) uses language that refers specifically to the plays that made Jonson's name as a playwright—the "humours" refer to *Every Man In His Humour* and *Every Man Out of His Humour*, the first of which was one of Jonson's earliest major successes. Jonson clearly associates himself with Horace, as many scholars have noted, and this essay argues that Horace's work provided a structuring principle to his dramatic work. When Demetrius calls Horace a sponge who goes about Rome "sucking from every society" he alludes to a particular notion of satire as reportage that has been a commonplace of criticism at least since Hight's "I am a camera" formulation in the early 20th century. In the revised version of *Every Man In* that appears in his 1616 Folio, Jonson claims that comedy ought to provide an image of real people in the language that "men do use." Jonson's ideal of plain language and the avoidance of artificial theatrical devices derives from the *sermo merus* of Horatian satire. The comical satires constitute an intervention in the generic system of early modern drama, an intervention structured by Jonson's careful reading of the satire of Horace, Persius, and Juvenal.

Laura Kolb
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Ephestian Quomodo's materialist poetics

In the longest speech by far in Thomas Middleton's *Michaelmas Term*, the draper Ephestian Quomodo imagines riding to the Essex estate of Richard Easy, which he plans to make his own through a fraudulent credit arrangement. Rapturously describing a procession of triumphant

citizens and their wives, he stops to marvel at the fertility of his own imagination: “To see how the very thought of green fields puts a man into sweet inventions.” At the heart of his dream—a dream of land, but also of the kinds of esteem that attend on gentry status—is a burst of color: the “peach-colour taffeta jacket” he imagines his son Sim wearing. Sim’s bright jacket betrays Quomodo’s professional interests as a draper. But it also serves as a reminder that cloth equals credit in the play’s London, in more ways than one: the false gentleman, Andrew Lethe, dresses in costly fabrics provided by Quomodo, presenting a rich surface to the world, while the commodity trick Quomodo plays on the trusting Easy depends on the movements of a bolt of cloth. Transforming cloth into credit and (almost, anyway) into land, Quomodo exercises what I call “materialist poetics”: imaginative flights inspired by material goods, which in turn re-fashion material and social relations in the world. Using Quomodo’s “sweet inventions” as a starting point, this paper considers the role of materialist poetics in the specific, urban corner of credit culture this play presents: the arena of credit relations arising among country gentlemen, city gallants, and the tradesmen who supply their clothing, cash, and loans.

Alicia Meyer
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Strangers Among Us

In this essay, I reexamine the representation of Bridewell Hospital in Dekker and Middleton’s *Honest Whore* plays. I suggest that, rather than reflecting the historical reality of Bridewell Hospital, this citation of the city prison and workhouse draws on a satirical tradition where “Bridewell” acts as a synecdoche for the political desire to transform “strange women” into obedient subjects. When *The Honest Whore Part 2* stages Bridewell and centers its older history as a palace and place of transnational contact. As the Duke, citizens, and the Master of Bridewell roam the stage observing Bellafront’s imprisonment, they discuss Bridewell royal past, detailing how the property had been a home of Henry VIII and the site that hosted Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, during his visit to London in 1522 and aesthetically wrote national and imperial desire into the landscape of the city. Like their counterparts in popular print, Dekker’s “Bridewell” illuminates the nascent ideologies of race, ethnicity, and national belonging within the social order and “Bridewell” marks the political dispossession of the “strange woman,” transforming her into a low-status member of the social hierarchy.

John Wilson Milam
University of Texas San Antonio

Platonic Contemplation and Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*

Platonic ideas were a central facet of early modern English humanism. While there is a rich history of scholastic engagement with the influence of Platonic thought on the poetry and academic prose of the English Renaissance, we have very few sustained examinations of Platonism in the theater. A significant aspect of the problem has been finding a workable way to engage dramatic Platonisms together, an issue which recent work of Plato and drama has recontextualized usefully. I contend that theorizing drama, and especially metatheater, through modes of Platonic contemplation (or *theoria*) provides one useful way of engaging English Renaissance dramatic Platonism, and I apply this to Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* in this paper. Specifically, I examine how various agents in the play inform others on what they are seeing and thereby *should* believe. This dramatic irony creates a tension between the audience and the stage and destabilizes the means for ascertaining virtue and truth. The play brings into sharp relief metatheatrically how virtue determinations formed from appearances or misinformation and discombobulated by greed or lust undermine the virtuous and render it unseeable. In terms of Platonic contemplation, then, Jonson produces a spectacle that ironically and self-consciously reflects a field of appearances, "a *deceptio visus*" (V.1.62), for the audience to gaze upon, and this contemplation reveals the unseemliness of city life and the need to contemplate more ethical ways of coexisting. This suggests that Jonson sees the theater as a space to reveal complicated issues of appearances while still seeing drama as a form of art that, much like Sidney argues, illuminates wisdom.

Nova Myhill
New College of Florida

Materializing Allegory: Clothing, Disguise, and Interpretation
in *The Roaring Girl*

A quick survey of medieval and early modern English theater shows the development of a style of drama that shifts its focus from the spiritual questions of morality plays such as *Everyman* and *Mankind* to increasingly secular subjects, perhaps reaching its logical conclusion in the Jacobean city comedies that represent contemporary London, with all of its extremely time and place specific characters and modes of behavior. However, the allegorical model of the morality play never disappears, and the "pseudo-allegorical" mode that Alan Dessen identifies in city comedy offers a model not only for understanding the increasingly secular function of early modern drama, but also its significance as a part of a system for allowing its audience to see the mores of contemporary London in the context of allegorical demonstrations of divine truth. Thus, while the use of allegorical models of presentation in secular contexts has generally been understood as a secularization of the theater, it might equally be understood as an assertion of a specifically theatrical ability to reveal the underlying truths that deceptive outward appearances might

conceal. This paper examines the way that *The Roaring Girl* undermines theatrical conventions of disguise and costume to train the audience to look with their own eyes, not those of “the world,” providing an alternative to the social conventions that contemporary discourse on costume prioritizes.

Bradley D. Ryner
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The Ambivalent Nostalgia of Richard Brome’s *The City Wit*

As its title signals, Richard Brome’s *The City Wit* (c. 1630) is a self-reflexive reworking of city comedy conventions. Brome mixes together character types and plot elements drawn primarily from the plays of Ben Jonson, for whom Brome had previously worked as a servant. Within the framework of city comedy, Brome invokes a different theatrical tradition: the humanist pedagogical play. *The City Wit* is framed by a prologue and an epilogue spoken by the pedant Sarpego, who, in the concluding scene, attempts -- unsuccessfully -- to stage a didactic allegory. I argue that this juxtaposition serves as a heuristic for thinking through competing ways of conceptualizing socio-economic changes. On one hand, the mechanics of humanist stagecraft function as a foil for the more entertaining dramaturgy of city comedy, which offers the vicarious thrill of seeing wit turned into economic profit. On the other hand, the play links the market-driven ethos of city comedy with social disruption, and its ending celebrates a return to social order grounded in constrained gender roles consistent with the humanist pedagogical project. In this way, the play cultivates an ambivalent nostalgia. The play’s ending is anchored in a the fantasy of a bygone era of stability that is, nonetheless, associated with what the play casts as inferior and outmoded theatre, distinguished from the offerings of commercial playhouses, such as *The City Wit* itself, that attracted audience members with fantasies of economic profit and provided Brome with the real profit that allowed him to go from servant to professional playwright.

Edel Semple
University College Cork, Ireland

Whoredom and marriage in Dekker’s *The Honest Whore*, Part 2

At the finale of *Measure for Measure* (1604), the Duke forces the wastrel Lucio to wed a woman he has deflowered and labelled a whore; just such a couple are the focus of Thomas Dekker’s *The Patient Man and the Honest Whore*, Part II (1605). At the centre of play is the reformed whore Bellafront, living in abject poverty at the mercy of her profligate husband Matteo, and Count Hippolito, who converted Bellafront in *Part I*, now lusts after her, while his wife Infelice feigns whoredom in an effort to reform him. Drawing on the popular genre of conduct and household manuals, I aim to explore the intertwining identities of whore, wife, and husband in

this city comedy to determine how Dekker engages with prevailing ideologies of marriage. Marriage in *The Honest Whore, Part II* is a fraught institution where the wife's body is a contested space and husbands are corrupt rulers of the "little commonwealth" (Bellafront's father is even prompted to ask the audience: "What makes a wife turne whore, but such a slave?"). Against the backdrop of an urban economy where everything is exchangeable, the play lays bare faultlines in marital ideologies, but, I argue, finding no workable solutions to difficult social problems, it falls back on the convention of the disguised duke to restore order. At the finale, powerful paternal figures mend the two marriages, through personal and financial aid, and thus minimise the dangers that marriage poses for women and eclipse men's culpability for familial disruption.

Christi Spain-Savage
Siena College

"Wiser than her Neighbours?": Cunning Reputation in
The Wise Woman of Hogsdon

This essay will address the interconnections of cunning women, reputation, and neighborhood in Thomas Heywood's *The Wise-Woman of Hogsdon*. I argue that Heywood's city comedy firmly roots the eponymous Wise-woman within her neighborhood of Hogsdon (now called Hoxton), a London suburb and famous resort north of Shoreditch, and thus associates liminal, hybrid, and illicit women's work with a London place. Rather than maligning the cunning occupation as threatening as per other dramatic depictions, however, the play exalts it as a neighborhood feature and asset. Heywood's play indulges in some of the stereotypes of cunning women, yet in its resolution depicts the Wise-woman's trade as a positive asset for Hogsdon and a boon to her own reputation.

Rob Wakeman
Mount Saint Mary College

In one of Ben Jonson's *Every Man In His Humor*'s secondary-plots, Oliver Cob, a water-drawer whose surname signifies a young herring, marches through Coleman Street Ward, from the Old Jewry to Moorgate, ranting to anyone who cares to listen about the ever-present stench wafting through the air. He enumerates three causes for the widespread ire for which he serves as unlikely (and, indeed, parodic) spokesperson:

First, they [fasting days] are of a *Flemmish* breed, I am sure on't, for they rauen [ravine] up more butter, then all the dayes of the weeke beside; next, they stinke of fish and leeke-porridge miserably: thirdly, they'll keep a man devoutly hungrie, all day, and at night send him supperlesse to bed. (3.4.42-46)

The stink signals differences in terms of nationality and class and raises suspicions about the contours of London's economy. Although satire of the food economy is far less central to the

plot of *Every Man In His Humor* than it is to that of *Bartholomew Fair*, here, too, aromas, cued by the calendars of feast days and fast days in religious almanacs, structure daily life in London. By restricting animal consumption to fish on Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Lent, a mix of diet, religion, economics, and national politics are responsible for the unappetizing smell of stockfish that lingers in the air on nearly half the days of the year.

In this paper, I discuss how city comedy represents the olfactory afterlife of food as it persists and continues to circulate through the bodies of others. Building on the work of Holly Dugan, Bruce Boehrer, Jonathan Gil Harris, and others, I will explore Jonsonian foodstuffs as they recycle through loops of continuous circulation and transformation and return to haunt their consumers. Jane Bennett argues that the denial of waste stems from a depersonalized and fractured food system, a move that seeks to separate filth from appetite. This desire for cleanliness has the accidental consequence of veiling the vitality of the food we consume, but Jonson shows that the smell of waste cannot be ignored.