

Shakespeare, Sex and Space

SAA 2023

Abstracts

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“Contracted Names in Public and Private Contexts: Sex, Class, and Connotations”

Contracted names, such as “Nell,” “Kate,” and “Hal” appear throughout Shakespeare’s plays. Like terms of endearment, these minimized names claim familiarity between the addressor and the addressee, but their diminutive nature often leaves them unnoticed, or marked merely as a sign of hierarchical control. Especially in regards to female characters with shortened names, critics and editors alike have argued that names like “Nell” and “Kate” are markers of low social status and sexual promiscuity. However, in multiple cases, Shakespeare presents duchesses, princesses, and queens being called “Nell” or “Kate” affectionately by their husbands. Notably, these conversations occur in both private and public settings. While we, as critics, have been quick to read Shakespeare’s and his male characters’ patriarchal reprobation of nicknamed women, we have been less resolute in considering how contracted names enhance the female voice and pinpoint the relational dynamics between addressor and addressee. Looking specifically at the names of “Nell” and “Kate,” with an eye to the public and private contexts in which they are used, this paper looks to how intimate spaces and lexicons provide information regarding relational dynamics, as well as increased freedom for the female voice in Shakespeare’s plays.

Ann Christensen

“Another Part of the Forest”: Shakespearean Nihilism and Girl Power in *Yellowjackets*’
“Doomcoming” episode (9)

My paper argues that the episode mixes elements of sex and space from *Dream*’s fairy woods, the Windsor Forest of *Merry Wives*, and the “loathesome pit” of *Titus*. The wilderness that the *Yellowjackets* soccer team encounters after their plane crash advances the show’s nihilistic tenor and apocalyptic sense of gloom, anxiety, anger, and terror. The “Doomcoming” setting, like the Shakespearean wild, opens to possibilities for freedom and opportunity, danger and death. In particular, the episode prioritizes the same-sex desire that is often present in the plays, exploits the chaotic and menacing nature of the forest setting, uses violent ritualized revenge to expose sexist and classist hierarchies, and, as in the plays, shows women acting both cooperatively and competitively. Still, never simplistically pro-girl, “Doomcoming” pits a dawning cult of feminine nature (led by Lottie, and reminiscent of Titania and Tamora) against the normal high-school hierarchies (popularity and beauty). In this episode, the girl from the wrong side of the tracks, Natalie, is the hero who saves the sacrificial stag (Travis); her loyalty opposes the essential randomness of nature and of love shared by the series and Shakespeare. Natalie also embodies female Shakespearean characters associated with forests—from the Amazon warrior (Hippolyta) and the abandoned orphan girl (Helena) and the girls who want to choose their own mates (Anne

Page, Hermia, Lavinia), to the dowager aunt lending protection, a merry wife, and a fierce Tamora.

Lee Emrich

Sex on the Grass: Carnal Knowledge, Green Gowns, Outdoor Pleasures

In early modern England, to give a woman a “green gown” was to have sex in a particular space—the outdoors—and this euphemism often appears in pastoral ballads and treatises. My paper will explore “green women” in Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair*, which is mostly set outdoors, where an intermingled populace of fairgoers and vendors congregate in Smithfield on August 24th (St. Bartholomew’s Day) to sell and consume produce, meat, trinkets, ballads, and, potentially, each other. Smithfield, which lies just outside the city walls, was a liminal space between the city and the country, and was, at the time Jonson was writing, losing its “green-ness”—its grass and trees—to urban encroachments of paved streets and buildings. Many studies detail the connections between animality and the play’s female characters, arguing that the women in the play converge two “meat” markets at the fair: pig-eating and prostitution. As a parallel exploration to “fleshiness” in *Bartholomew Fair*, my essay looks at what happens when we attend to plants and natural ecosystems in the play. The green women of the fair keep Smithfield’s green past present in the urbanizing, commodified environment, thus resisting the rhetoric of fleshiness in the play. But, nature is also brought into the city; whereas in pastoral settings, sex and the gaining of a green gown is treated as pastime, within the outdoor, but city adjacent space of *Bartholomew Fair*, sexual knowledge is transformed into something for sale over and over, placing carnal knowledge as a form of professional knowledge that could be woven into a particular colored garment.

Gina Filo

Don John and Sexual Anxiety in Messina

For being one of Shakespeare’s most popular romantic comedies, *Much Ado about Nothing* takes a decidedly unidealized view of sex, love, and marriage. Don Pedro attempts to get everyone at the Messinan court properly wedded and pleurably bedded, and marriage and sex are on everyone’s minds and lips—and yet marriage is seen as doomed to failure, and sex is almost invariably imagined as illegitimate, extramarital, and socially disruptive. In this paper, I show how sex in Messina is understood as always already illicit, the presumption of women’s inevitable sexual infidelity serving to consolidate the homosocial ties at the heart of its political order. Examining the rampant, compulsive cuckold jokes; the function of Don John, the bastard dead-set against legitimate marriage; and the discursive production of female infidelity, I demonstrate how, in Messina, sex is both a source of pervasive anxiety and, paradoxically, a way of shoring up male power and social ties by producing and disarming female infidelity.

Christopher D. Foley

“A Breath Thou art, Servile to All the Skyey Influences”: *Measure for Measure*’s Anxieties of Airborne Syphilitic Contagion

Dominic Dromgoole's 2015 production of *Measure for Measure* at Shakespeare's Globe posited a creative solution to longstanding critical vexation over the play's silent prostitutes. Although both "Kate Keepdown" and "Bridget" are referenced in the printed Folio playtext, neither character has any extant speaking lines in the play. As a consequence, these female characters may not have appeared onstage in early modern performances of Shakespeare's play. Prior to the official start of Dromgoole's 2015 production, however, a number of raucous sex workers in Elizabethan dress solicited clients from among the groundlings in the pit. The play's "missing" prostitutes, in other words, weren't onstage but off. As Thomas Platter's oft-cited 1599 account and numerous other archival sources attest, prostitutes were almost certain to be among *Measure for Measure*'s first playgoing audiences at the Globe in 1603/4. In a material performance environment wherein the practices of playgoing and prostitution were spatially blurred, I argue that *Measure for Measure*'s repeated representation of venereal disease as an airborne, miasmatic threat would prove particularly resonant. This heightened, embodied reception is crucial to the cultural work of *Measure for Measure* in its earliest performances onstage in Shakespeare's London, especially as it informs the play's recurring associations between slander and the threat of syphilis transmission (Bentley 1989). Furthermore, as I aim to demonstrate in this seminar paper, attending to such historicized conceptions of embodied vulnerabilities in a site-specific context raises new interpretive questions concerning the play's ambivalent treatment of its two prominent female characters, Isabella and Mariana, in Act 5. In addition to providing one possible explanation for the silencing of the female prostitutes within the play, approaching *Measure for Measure* through this critical lens might also help explain the most famous concluding dramatic silence in the Shakespearean canon.

Elisa Oh

Choreographing Early Modern English Governance: Wedding Masques' Kinetic Interpellation in Shakespeare, Jonson, and Chapman

At the turn of the seventeenth century, the genre of nobles' wedding masque in English drama and Jacobean court practice often occupied the temporal and social ritual space between the marriage ceremony and the consummating marital sex. Not only were wedding masques an extravagant and nearly annual Christmas season performance at court to mark the occasion of high-ranking courtiers' marriages, but they also appear prominently in plays written for the public theater. In both manifestations, the wedding masque does multifaceted cultural work to forestall potential disruptions of power relationships that might impede the bride and groom's union at the individual level of unregulated humors, at the heterosexual family level of gender hierarchy, and at the national and international level of governing colonial subjects. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, and *The Tempest*, Jonson's *Hymenaei*, and Chapman's *The Memorable Maske* I investigate wedding masques' choreographies or *kinetic discourses*: repeated patterns of physical movement through space such as stage directions, processions and protocols of precedence, the figured masque dances, and the "revels." These intentionally crafted choreographies strive to construct order and contentment out of the risks and discomforts underlying marriage's forging of one body out of two. Further, these kinetic paradigms enticingly interpellate the community of performers and audience into embodied rituals that produce and reinforce belief in a naturalized ideology of

human difference and hierarchized order. This study shows us how early modern English kinetic vocabularies of dance, marriage, English civic obedience, and colonial control cross-pollinate one another in the genre of court masque, and how repeated social ritual movements, like casting a magic spell or performing a transformative religious rite, attempt to bring an ideal future society into being.

James Rizzi

Mess Making in *The Bloody Banquet*

Inverting the myth of Cupid and Psyche, *The Bloody Banquet*, a Jacobean tragedy attributed only to “T.D.,” uses the distinctive setting of the “further lodge” as a liminal space between cruel postlapsarian nature and the Tyrant-occupied court. Though complicated by infidelity, the sexual and gender politics of the play’s third space provide an intriguing glimpse of domesticity under female government. With an illicit male intrusion into private domestic space, *Banquet* probes the limits of Jacobean moral standards regarding sexuality and gender roles. The Young Queen perverts the underlying myth by killing her Psyche rather than fleeing upon discovery, and in turn she is subjected to grotesque punishment by her tyrant husband: she must consume a banquet made of her lover’s corpse. The cannibalism spectacle strips the Queen of her dignity, her voice, and eventually her life, but one of the more prominent losses that the play asserts is that of her ability to order the space around her. The Queen does not participate in cooking the eponymous banquet, nor can she direct her female servants the way she can in her own space. By mapping and attending to the changes that occur in the explicitly gendered spaces that constitute the play’s settings, this paper considers what women are made when they are shaped through their narrowly defined roles within a changing economy. The spectacular excesses of the piece even direct us toward a sort of parodic mode of reading the myth central to the period’s conflation of women’s chastity and women’s work.

Emily L. Sharrett

Nature and Gender-Based Violence in Shakespeare’s Roman Plays and Poems

This paper is part of a longer essay that examines the role of nature and nonhumanity in episodes of gender-based violence in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, and *Cymbeline*. My analyses build off the work of Stephanie Jed, Lisa S. Starks-Estes, and Lynn Enterline in which they articulate how Rome’s socio-political worlds rely on models of virtue and pietas that implicate sexual expression in quests to craft and sustain Rome’s empire. To this body of scholarship, I add close readings of moments in Shakespeare’s Roman plays and poems that detail how the minerals, flora, and nonhuman fauna of Rome intervene in acts of gender-based violence.