SAA 2023
Comic Epistemologies
PART TWO ABSTRACTS

Caralyn Bialo

“Affecting the Understanding”:
The Problem of the Humors in Jonson’s *Every Man in His Humor*

In this paper, I read *Every Man in His Humor* alongside medical, moral philosophical, and educational discourses to argue that Jonson stages the humors as a social epistemological problem open to the processes of meaning-making that characterized Elizabethan comedy. Although the humors were ubiquitous in Renaissance thinking about the human, they presented an epistemological problem because, as invisible substances, they were essentially unknowable. Whereas medical and conduct manuals sidestep this problem with the rhetoric of the author’s expertise, Jonson’s play stages this problem as the theatrical device of characters ruled by their humors observing and evaluating other characters ruled by their humors. In Jonson’s play, the humors serve as an invitation to read and interpret--to formulate knowledge of—others.

Beatrice Bradley

“Make you merry”:
Forced Laughter and Other Epilogic Failures in *Henry IV, Part 2*

This paper examines the second epilogue of *Henry IV, Part 2* and its threat of a merriment that never comes. I ask (and provide no answers to) the impossible question as to where failure is located in the stretch between the play’s closing speech and Falstaff’s absence in *Henry V*. Does the audience insufficiently respond with applause—reiterative failure night after night—to summon Falstaff to the stage? Is it the actor’s own body, say, the unsuccessful or distasteful performance of a jig? Or is the whiff of failure attached to the play or “humble author” himself, a self-generated rebuke (*Henry IV, Part 2,* Epilogue 2, 27)?

In doing so, I think of the play’s epilogue as a morally encumbered space between speaker and spectator, where the generic form of the address—the promised quid pro quo for audience applause and the suggestion of audience knowledge imbued within that promise—is fractured, as any spectator after the first performance of *Henry V* can observe. The audience is predictably implicated in the closure of *Henry IV* but also in its beloved character’s survival. Across the epilogue, I analyze a comic structure that repeatedly embraces humorlessness: in its professed resistance to political satire; in Falstaff’s death, threatened here as a counterfactual comic statement only to in fact occur, offstage and disembodied, in *Henry V*; and in the uncertain duration of the danced performance that extends until the speaker reaches physical exhaustion. In all, this paper considers how the demand for a choreographed audience response—the spectators’ supposed dismissal of “hard opinions” with applause and indeterminate noises of vocalized praise (*2H4,* Epilogue 2, 31)—enacts a refusal to repair, the play instead ending with a glitching jig performed into some abstract futurity that leads only to the accumulation of more weariness.

Casey Caldwell

The Diversion of Money in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*

Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607) is famously one of the most metadramatic plays of the early modern period. Much of its metadrama is composed of comic mistakes that two fictional audience members make regarding various functions and mechanisms of theatergoing and theater practice. These two characters, George and Nell, have invaded the action of the play—setting themselves up on the onstage audience stools at the Blackfriars, they insist the actors add their apprentice to the cast, they often redirect the actors to incorporate plots elements they prefer, and they frequently confuse fiction for reality. Given the social status of George, as both a citizen and grocer (influential urban civic and socio-economic categories), and the way he throws his money around throughout the play, scholars often see some blend of satire and good-natured humor in the portrayal of these epistemically-challenged theatergoers. While scholars often read the considerable metadramatic energies of *Burning Pestle* more broadly as invested in satirizing the commercial business of early modern theater, the most important payment in the play is not, in fact, commercial—nor is it exactly a "payment."

In my paper, I am interested in how the play treats payment as a form of knowing—or at the very least, I'm interested in how the play may demonstrate that forms of audience payment condition an audience's epistemic relationship with the drama they've paid to see. I will focus on a moment in Act 3, at the Bell Inn, when George steps in to resolve an argument in the play by handing money directly to a character. This moment sutures together several layers of fiction at play in *Burning Pestle* and creates a diversion for the audience—diversion in the theatrical sense but also in the sense that anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai, uses it to refer to how objects can be rerouted or "diverted" from circulation amongst commodities to circulation amongst gifts, and vice versa. I will explore how *Burning Pestle* is utilizing this comic diversion to probe the relationship between drama, money, and knowledge and may suggest to the audience that the way they pay affects the way they play.

Yunah Kae

How to Know the Witch:
Trivial Domestication, Comedy, and Race in *The Witch of Edmonton*

In this paper, I read Middleton, Dekker, and Rowley's 1621 tragicomedy as a text that engages with the legal and forensic procedures of truth that underscored early modern witch-trials. The source of the play, Henry Goodcole's witch-pamphlet *The wonderfull discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer, a Witch* (1621), showcases conflicting understandings of truth and different processes of its discovery which were being negotiated in the period. I argue that the play reflects and reproduces this discourse of witch-discovery, but ultimately uses a comic structure embedded within its overall tragic trajectory in order to stage a *theatrical* method of discerning truth. The town's witch, Elizabeth Sawyer, is trivialized (or domesticated) via the comic action of the village "clown" Cuddy Banks, thus formally branding a superstitious backwardness as a bodily indicator of the "real" witch. The play also draws from the culture's racialized discourses of reproduction and milk to mark out Sawyer's immutable ignorance. These intertwined strategies of racialization, I suggest, work in *Edmonton* to produce a notion of knowledgeable skepticism as one's ability of discernment within the playhouse to correctly identify the comic

figures of superstition and folklore—even as the playwrights lean on precisely the theatrical gimmicks of "magic" and rustic ritual to stage their play. *Edmonton*'s uncanny—and unsettling—mixture of the tragic and comic, then, finally mirrors these epistemological ambiguities.

Jonathan P. Lamb

Love's Labour's Lost and Entertainment Value
Or, Did You Have Fun in Navarre?
Or, I told jokes in a hospital for a calendar year and all I got was this t-shirt.

This paper looks to *Love's Labour's Lost* as a turning point in the history of FUN. The play's 1598 title page hints of its audience's experience: "A PLEASANT Conceited Comedie […] presented before her Highnes this last Christmas." Sounds like fun. In the play, some characters ask for "recreation," "sport," and "mirth." Others seek to create those things. And still others produce them unintentionally. Moreover, the play, which famously refuses its characters and audiences a conventional comic ending (concluding instead with a death, suspended wooing, and an unexpected pregnancy), nevertheless offers a nearly nonstop variety of fun: a masque, a dance, a fight, and a pageant. We also hear pedagogy jokes, Latin jokes, theatrical jokes, poetry jokes, bawdy jokes, and even racist jokes. The play features fulsome wordplay, insult comedy, flirty banter, angsty banter, and incomprehensible banter. The play is also genuinely funny, which is different than fun, but also the same. This paper will explore the ways *Love's Labour's Lost* constantly invokes and therefore queries (and therefore subjects to critique) its own capacity to entertain—that is, to produce in its viewers and readers a certain kind of experience. Drawing on cultural histories of the entertainment industry, theories of embodied audience experience, and a willfully playful formalism, I will argue that *Love's Labour's Lost* marks a key moment in the emerging category of entertainment value.

Nathaniel Likert

Tragicomic Character and the Cruelty of Optimism

Renaissance tragicomedy has always had a vexed relationship to literary character. The "moral choice represented in action" Aristotle finds in tragic character, and the panoply of social types found in Roman and then Renaissance comedy, are both explicable as different kinds of realism. The tragicomic character, however, often loses coherence under the weight of that genre's fantastic endings, swift reversals, and the vast reaches of time and space its plots command. While recent scholars have moved beyond the canard that the genre offered an escape into artificial fantasy for Royalists during the War years, and have argued convincingly that tragicomedy carries its own forms of realism – whether capturing the distributed causality of global networks of trade, or figuring a wider variety of human experience – there remains the stubborn problem of character, conceded even by those critics to strain belief.

This essay considers two tragicomic works whose main characters emphatically do *not* change, Fletcher's *Island Princess* and Milton's *Ludlow Mask* (on which we know Fletcher's earlier tragicomedy *The Faithful Shepherdess* was a direct influence). Both feature protagonists whose chaste endurance of suffering in the face of possible erotic and physical submission to a

tempter (racialized in both cases) snatches a comic ending from a tragic compromise. Yet both achieve consistency precisely by abandoning the features that make them characters at all; their inhumanly strict asceticism sullies the comic payoff of the endings, as both become associated with realms other than those they end up occupying. Fletcher's Armusia has the Christian Stoicism of the colonizer, and Milton's Lady imagines her virtue literally subliming her body away. In posing the opposite extreme to tragicomedy's usual stock characters, the miraculously converted, these two works raise the question of what "realistic" character means in a world in which one's desires are either not achievable or, if so, are morally compromised. That antinomy of character, I suggest, is tragicomedy's prime form of "realism," one suited to our own era of attenuated professional and civic options that require either unethical or harmful consistencies, or painful changes or conversions to survive.

Jessica McCall

Can a Happy Ending Challenge Us?

Sparked in no small part by the most recent version of *She-Ra: Princess of Power*, the current debate around happy endings and their role in shaping the connections between text, perspective, and lived experience has argued for an understanding of some happiness as subversive. Specifically, in response to the "kill your gays" and the "fridged woman" trope, telling stories about marginalized people whose representation in mass media has historically served a white, heterosexual, male protagonist has seen an increasing focus on comedies—romantic, ironic, domestic—with happy endings. Pulling from Jonathon Dollimore's ideas about the subversion and containment of texts in *Radical Tragedy* I plan to investigate *Taming of the Shrew* and *The Merchant of Venice* focusing specifically on two cinematic adaptations: the 1967 Taylor/Burton version of *Shrew* and the 2004 Al Pacino adaptation of *Merchant*. I have chosen these two adaptations because I believe one (*Shrew*: 1967) presents a "happy ending" that is meant to satisfy and entertain the audience while the other (*Merchant*: 2004) offers a more complicated tragic framing of Shylock amidst the revelries. My goal with this work is to explore what specific circumstances—textual, performative, and historical—allow an audience to inspired rather than placated, empowered rather than contained while seeking the closure and satisfaction of a "happy" ending.

Maria Devlin McNair

Comedy Asks, What Works?

I propose that comedy adopts a pragmatic epistemology. Realist epistemology holds that our beliefs are true if they represent the world as it really is. For pragmatists, what makes a belief worth endorsing isn't how it copies the word, it's how it helps us succeed in the world: "[A]ll our thoughts are instrumental and mental modes of *adaptation* to reality" (William James); knowledge is "an instrument or organ of *successful action*" (John Dewey). In early modern satiric comedies, particularly those focused on sexuality and marriage, the possibility of success is often directly related to the partners' willingness to endorse certain beliefs that are false, ungrounded, or positive illusions, *if* they are also adaptive.

In Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, belief in a partner's fidelity generates the most successful possible outcome; in Chapman's *The Widow's Tears*, rejection of this belief generates the crisis. In these plays, belief in fidelity is useful — and its utility holds regardless of its correspondence to reality. *The Taming of the Shrew*, on one reading at least, presents Katherine's choice in similar terms. The decision to endorse the belief "I can make this marriage work for me" helps her unlock certain positive affordances within the marriage. The endorsement has to happen without decisive evidence to ground it; nevertheless, the play recommends it because of its adaptive potential.

More generally, I propose this pragmatic framework, with its Darwinian emphasis on adaptation, as a generative way of analyzing comedy. The field of literary Darwinism joins literary analysis and evolutionary biology, proposing that our artistic creations must be understood in light of our evolutionary origins. Pragmatic epistemology reflects real-world research about how humans form beliefs adaptively; reading comedy through this framework can alert us to the pragmatic frameworks we already (consciously or unconsciously) employ and help us determine which of them are worth keeping.

Benedict Robinson

The argument from fiction and the argument of *Measure for Measure*

Handbooks of rhetoric and manuals of legal reasoning from late antiquity to the early modern period describe an argumentative strategy called the argument from fiction: an argument premised on a hypothetical or counterfactual supposition. The book *On Invention* ascribed in the early modern period to Hermogenes calls this a "*plaston*," which means "molded" or "shaped" and is cognate with *plasma*, a Hellenistic term for probable fiction. The meanings of "*plaston*" overlap with those of fiction, whose Latin root also means a made thing, and which in the medieval and early modern periods was especially associated with that particular made thing that is a *thought*: a fiction of the mind. Poetry is fictional, J.C. Scaliger, Philip Sidney, and William Scott argue, in part because it is *cognitive*: a mental artefact. In rhetoric, arguments from fiction were particularly used for inferences about character: knowing what we know about someone, we hypothesize how they would act under particular circumstances, or we project ourselves into other possible worlds, imagining what we might do or feel in some imagined conjunction of events. From Plautus to Shakespeare, comedies are filled with moments where one character uses an argument from fiction to think about the actions of another and thereby models the interpretive work the audience engages in with respect to all the characters. In the argument from fiction, fiction enters the very tissue of forensic reasoning and forensic reasoning structures fictional action. By way of its proximity to rhetoric, forensic argumentation, and the logic of probability, comedy really is tied to ways of knowing, and has real epistemological force in the specific terrain of the knowledge of persons. But the comic tradition has a double relationship to the argument from fiction, staging moments where characters deploy such arguments against each other, and showing how often those arguments *fail*. Comedy seems both dependent on, and skeptical about, the probable knowledge that can be generated by arguments from fiction. I will use Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* as an example, because it is an encyclopedia of arguments from fiction, nearly every one of which fails to produce real knowledge, or fails to persuade, or is simply pretense, because the person using it knows exactly what has been done and thus needs neither inference nor argument. What generates knowledge about others in this

play is not probable reasoning but theatrical deception: the tricks, substitutions, and disguises that are the material of its plot. I think we can understand this in part as a sophisticated exploration of the difference between the conditions of knowledge within a fiction and those outside of it. Thinking seriously about the legal argument from fiction might suggest that all our knowledge of others is finally a knowledge about fictions: in the act of drawing inferences about others, we in effect construct fictional models of them and reason about *those*. Shakespeare draws a corollary: we can know fictional people in a way we can never know real ones, because fictional worlds have been designed with such knowledge in mind. Recent work in cognitive cultural studies emphasizes the continuity between the inferences we draw about fictional characters and those we draw about real people, arguing that the "mentalizing" we engage in with respect to literary characters exercises a skill critical for social life. In Shakespeare's investigation of the argument from fiction, we should see a reminder that fictionality matters.

David Carroll Simon

Skepticism as Derision: Marie de Gournay's Art of Antipathy

This essay develops a new account of the relationship between Michel de Montaigne's skepticism and Marie de Gournay's arguments against misogyny. For Gournay, I argue, skepticism is derisive; confronted by the persistent disrespect of the literary culture in which she participates, she develops a distinctive version of the skeptic's suspension of judgment (or *epoché*), aligning the "breaking off" of thought with the "breaking off" of engagement with a social domain pervaded by misogyny, among other forms of ethico-intellectual failure. Her version of the skeptic's tranquility (or *ataraxia*) is not the default peace of intellectual independence (Montaigne's vision) but a scene of struggle in which comedy permits an experience of imperfect but not therefore illusory self-extrication from a hostile environment. I focus on Gournay's "Préface" to the posthumous 1595 edition of Montaigne's *Essais*, which invites a comparison between Montaigne's conspicuous easygoingness and Gournay's comic antipathy.