SAA Annual Meeting 2023
Seminar 14: Forsaken Plays: PART ONE

Seminar Organizer: Erin E. Kelly, University of Victoria, ekelly@uvic.ca
Invited respondent: Jeremy Lopez, Montclair State University, lopezjer@montclair.edu

Seminar abstract:
This seminar invites participants to introduce to a captive audience the overlooked, neglected, or weird play they think deserves more scholarly attention. (Advocacy for a play that lacks a modern edition is especially welcome.) How would our understanding of literary history, early modern English drama, or Shakespeare be transformed if we focused on such plays? Along the way, expect to wrestle with questions about what qualities might lead a play to have been treated as insignificant or bad.

Seminar proposal:
I have learned the best way to start a conversation at SAA is to ask, "What's a play you find fascinating that it seems almost no one else has read?" Every scholar who works on 16th- and 17th-century drama seems able to argue why a particular play deserves more attention. This seminar will formalize those conversations.

The past few decades have witnessed efforts to rethink the canon of early modern English drama and to make more plays readily accessible. Work discussing lost and manuscript plays has enabled us to recontextualize familiar works by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Such research has transformed our understanding of plays and performance history.

Yet there are still numerous plays that remain overlooked – even with no modern edition. Some plays included in collected works editions still receive little critical attention. This seminar focuses on the question: What would happen if we centred these forsaken texts?

Practically speaking, this seminar will invite participants to introduce for consideration a play they think others should read. Rather than starting with abstracts, members will be asked to share a short description of their play along with questions it raises. The seminar meeting will facilitate discussion of papers that present a short, focused critical reading of an overlooked text while inviting responses that suggest a range of other critical issues.

This seminar encourages critical thinking about the examples around which we construct literary and theatre histories – from the centre (with well-known and typical plays) or from the margins (with odd one-offs and exceptions). It will also foster a meta-critical conversation about how even changing canons calcify as well as questions about how we decide which plays merit our attention. Along the way, we will explore what qualities might lead to a play being considered bad or insignificant.

Meredith Beales
University of British Columbia
m.beales@ubc.ca

Why Read "Gibberish" like *The Valiant Welshman* (1615)?

Despite the small but growing body of scholarship on *The Valiant Welshman* and Welshness or Britishness on the early modern stage, criticism on other aspects of the play remains undeveloped: the play's brief invocations of the King's Men's plays suggest both a deep familiarity with the rival company's work and a willingness to call attention to that work through frequent references and revistations. But this play has more to offer than its revisions of Roman history: even the most absurd elements of the staging deserve greater examination—what did the Serpent look like, for example? Perhaps by taking seriously the most "gibberish" aspects of the play (to use Bradbrook's term), we will encourage new horizons in theatre history, which may very well encourage us to spent more time with this and other lesser-known plays, such that in the end the "forsaken" plays will find allow us to expand our understanding of just what varied or even absurd representations the theatre could embrace.

Darryl Chalk
University of South Queensland
darryl.chalk@usq.edu.au

Conjuring at Play in Barnabe Barnes's *The Devil's Charter*

How seriously should we take the conjuring scenes in *The Devil's Charter*? Barely at all, if we believe most of the critical work on this play. Barnabe Barnes' rancorously anti-Catholic tragedy, performed at court on Candlemas night in early 1607, features several scenes depicting the summoning of demons. Scholars have been largely dismissive of their authenticity, labelling the play's conjurations mere playful, innocuous approximations of the real thing. This paper will argue that, quite to the contrary, Barnes' representation of ritual demonic magic has been significantly underestimated. Drawing on medieval grimoires and early modern conjuring manuals, I will suggest that *The Devil's Charter* conforms quite closely to actual magical practice even as it trades, for terrifying effect, on Protestant fears of Catholicism's demonic capacities. The lengthy summoning of Act 4 Scene 1, in particular, provides an example of this play's representation of the embodiment of magic in actions, rather than only in words, stopping just short of what might be necessary to transcend the merely performative and, as Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* once purportedly did, bring 'real' devils to the stage.

Heidi Craig
Texas A & M University
hcraig@tamu.edu

The Worst: Thomas Meriton and *The Wandering Lover*

Spare a thought for Thomas Meriton (b. 1637), deemed to be the "dullest," "meanest," "stupidest," and "worst" English playwright by at least two influential late-seventeenth century drama critics, Francis Kirkman and Gerard Langbaine. In *An Account of the English Dramatic Poets* (1691), Langbaine does not attempt to comprehend or analyze Meriton's plays: "I pretend not to that Quickness of Apprehension, as to understand either of his Plays [viz. *The Wandering Lover* and *Love and War*], and therefore the Reader will not expect that I should give any further Account of them." This paper does what Langbaine can't bear to, namely, offer a reading of *The Wandering Lover* (1658), noting the mismatch between its paratexts' apologies for the play's "plain" language and the overly florid text of the play itself. Although I attempted to keep an open mind while reading, ultimately, I argue that *The Wandering Lover* is not "so bad it's good" (while discussing what this means), but simply boring and nonsensical. If not for aesthetic reasons, however, Meriton is still worthy of our attention, for his historical position as "the worst" early modern English dramatist.

Laura Dodds
Mississippi State University
ldodds@english.msstate.edu

Margaret Cavendish's *The Unnatural Tragedy*
and the Nature of Tragedy

In my paper I will be drawing upon arguments made by Michelle Dowd and myself in two articles on feminist formalism: "Happy Accidents: Critical Belatedness, Feminist Formalism, and Early Modern Women's Writing" (*Criticism* 2020, 62.2, pp. 169-93) and "The Case for a Feminist Return to Form" (*Early Modern Women* 2018, 13.1, pp. 82-91). In these articles we explore two aspects of the intersection of formalism and feminism: 1) the importance of integrating gender and form as central categories of analysis and 2) historical accounts of forms that exclude the writing of women are necessarily incomplete. Here these insights provide the foundation for my analysis of Cavendish's revisions of tragic form in her dramatic criticism and *The Unnatural Tragedy*.

Jennifer Forsyth
Kutztown University
forsyth@kutztown.edu

Stripped-Down Humor: The "Theft of Clothing" Trope Cluster
in *The Little French Lawyer* and *The Night Walker*

One of the fascinations for me in working with forsaken plays is the pleasure of discovering tropes and patterns that do not appear at all, occur less conspicuously, or manifest in different forms in the more popular plays because those less-recognized variations can reveal surprising insights about the early modern period and its drama. For instance, the comic trope of characters who are tricked into taking their clothes off and then having them stolen, leaving them essentially undressed although not usually entirely naked, recurs frequently enough and in a consistent enough pattern of other tropes to invite investigation. In this paper, I argue that one of the central causes for the disparate responses to stolen clothing relates to humoralism, in conjunction with the theory that comedy serves to enforce social norms by exposing deviant behavior to ridicule. In the two examples that are the subject of this study, *The Little French*

Lawyer and *The Night-Walker; or, The Little Thief*, the characters whose clothing is stolen show clear signs of excessive warmth in their humors, which is a state subject to policing by family members and friends.

James D. Mardock
University of Nevada
jmardock@unr.edu

"In rugged verse vile matters to contain":
The Devil's Charter as Antipasquinade

I would like to re-examine the assumption that this play is simply anti-Catholic propaganda. Roderigo Borgia was of course a notorious figure, but the depiction of him in *The Devil's Charter* as a murderous, incestuous, devil-worshipping sodomite goes so far as to seem intentionally cartoonish. The pope and his children, all of whom die ahistorically by poison, serve as scapegoats and figures of the audience's horrified glee; the fact that they are surrounded by more-or-less virtuous Catholics equally horrified by their various crimes and blasphemies renders ambiguous the reading of the play as simple propaganda, ironically uniting its onstage Catholic and offstage Protestant audiences. If you want anti-Catholic propaganda, *The Devil's Charter* certainly gives it to you. If you want to hold all polemical rhetoric up to scrutiny, Barnes encourages you to do so.

Jeanne H. McCarthy
Georgia Gwinnett College
jmccarth@ggc.edu

Respublica and the Forsaking of Allegory and Political Morality

This essay focused on *Respublica* (1553, maybe by Nicholas Udall) touches on the complex ways allegory, reimagined as non-static and allowing for a blurring of distinctions between abstractions and the particular, interacts with historical specificity and political and economic life. The morality play raises questions about the relationship of presentation and representation to dramatic performance and, in turn, to reality or history. All of these possibilities suggest that if one can avoid imposing a simple correspondence between what is known and the symbolism of the play, the morality play's multiplying meanings make it worth reclaiming from its forsakenness.

Angeline Morris
University of Alabama
Ammorris11@Crimson.ua.edu

"Meethinkes the Crown […] Is turned now into a fatall wreathe": Tyranny, Treason, and Sympathy in *The True Tragedie of Richard the Third*

This paper comes from the second chapter of my dissertation, which investigates how kingship and masculinity are depicted in early modern drama. The first chapter examines the traditional expectations of kingship, beginning in the medieval period and moving into the early modern, and the ways that kingship and masculinity are heavily intertwined, both in advice literature (such as the *speculum principis* tradition) but also, eventually, in early modern drama. The next chapter on Richard III (from which this paper comes), centers around both Shakespeare's play and *True Tragedie*, examining the ways in which both plays provide moments of pathos for Richard and whether these moments, in turn, affect the way we understand Richard's traditionally assigned role as a tyrant.

Kirk Quinsland
Fordham University
kquinsland@fordham.edu

Satire, Playgoing, and John Day's *The Isle of Gulls*

The Ile of Guls is perhaps more "inside baseball" than most other plays of the era. Starting with an induction scene with three gentlemen arguing about what kind of play they would like to see, the audience is invited into a play that is so thick with satire and inside jokes that make it somewhat impenetrable to modern audiences, other than scholars who have spent a lot of time with plays from the private theaters. But, I want to argue, the play's relentless metatheatricality has a lot to teach us about the culture of early modern playgoing in which it participates. Day is regularly concerned with the distinction between true and false knowledge, and traffics in the idea that true knowledge can be smuggled in disguised as the false. The play itself smuggles in its satire and its queerness under the guise of respectability, and even though the veneer is so tissue thin that Day and others landed in prison, the play's engagement with the culture of early modern playgoing demonstrates that there was a real desire for the kind of critique and content that it provided. I plan to take a two-pronged approach in the essay's argument: the play's incendiary court satire functions as a mechanism for testing the tolerance of the playgoing public and the authorities; and the play's extraordinary queer content provides a mechanism for exploring the culture's fascination/disgust with same-sex attraction.

Kayla Shearer
Louisiana State University
Kayla.Shearer@lsus.edu

Dreams, Visions, and Ghosts Onstage:
Reviving Robert Greene's *Alphonsus, King of Aragon*

The ghost character of Greene's *Alphonsus* is groundbreaking. Previous plays of the English Renaissance that featured a ghost character all followed the Senecan model and kept the ghost separated from the "living world" of the characters onstage, usually by limiting them to prologue or narrator roles. Calchas, however, is summoned directly onstage and interacts with several living characters. This is especially interesting as his presence and role is directly linked to a dream vision, which was the primary genre in which ghosts could take an interactive role during the European Middle Ages. This suggests that Greene knew enough dream visions to borrow some of their conventions and use them to help transition ghost characters from external commentators (in prologues) to active participants in the play – a vital step to move from

Seneca's isolated ghosts to the revenging, interactive ghosts popularized in the Renaissance (such as King Hamlet).

Laina Southgate
University of Toronto
laina.southgate@mail.utoronto.ca

Union, Sovereignty, and Sir William Alexander Stirling's *Darius King of Persia*

I read *The Tragedy of Darius* as a political reaction to King James I's Ascension and attempts at Union. The play's depiction the eventual downfall of a self-titled "king of kings" and the success of Alexander the Great perhaps reflects certain anxieties surrounding disparate nationalities that fall under the banner of "union." Sir William is Scottish and yet thrives at English court and goes on to colonize Nova Scotia. Despite his closeness with James, Sir William blends Scottish and English together in his writing – a bold move considering that Scottish was considered to be inferior to English. I will suggest in this paper that Sir William's complex relationship the Scottish language and his "British" nationality result in a play riddled with anxieties surrounding a King's right to rule. Further, by setting the play in the East, Sir William utilizes images of the Other to create a distance between British political matters and the content of the play.

Luke Wilson
Ohio State University
wilson.501@osu.edu

Fitly Forsaken: Samuel Sheppard's *The Jovial Crew* (1651)

As for *The Jovial Crew*, most mentions of it don't stray far from Hyder Rollins' dismissive assessment: "It is a quarto of twenty pages, written as a five-act comedy, but even its satire on the Ranters is of little interest." But Sheppard's *The Jovial Crew* (1551), which shares a title with Richard Brome's earlier play (circa 1640) invites a range of questions. What did it mean to write a play in 1651, without expectation of performance and without much attention to models of "closet drama"? What affinities are there between this neglected play and Sheppard's better-known but still not much discussed *The Committee-Man Curried*? How does Sheppard make use of his familiarity with Caroline and earlier dramatic structure in shaping this small but well-made play? What plot elements are adopted from earlier plays? In other works, Sheppard copied whole passages from earlier writers. Has he done anything similar in this play? How does dramatic form stemming from pre-closure examples function in the context of (otherwise usually prose) anti-Ranter satire?