

SAA Abstracts: Shakespeare and Early Modern Misogyny

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“*Hamlet* and the Politics of Misogyny”

Critics have typically interpreted Hamlet’s infamous misogyny in psychoanalytic and/or feminist terms. In this paper, I consider an alternative interpretation of Hamlet’s misogyny: concern about powerful women, especially queens, as a locus of power and potential conduit determining terms of succession, even with the potential for enabling criminal conspiracies to “steal” the throne. Two key sources of *Hamlet* contain notable misogynistic commentary about queens who are unable to maintain fidelity to their murdered husbands. But more importantly, scholars have found topical links for the play in Scottish politics, especially the purported murder of Mary Stuart’s second husband Lord Darnley by her lover Bothwell, whom she married three months later, as a narrative that parallels the Gertrude/King Hamlet/Claudius plot. Connecting these strands and building on Margreta de Grazia’s argument in *Hamlet without Hamlet* that critics have traditionally downplayed Hamlet’s concern about dispossession, I argue that Gertrude, and coincidentally Ophelia, become targets for Hamlet’s misogyny because of the political stakes in the ability of powerful women to alter royal lineage, dispossess purportedly rightful heirs, and even corrupt the lineage by acceding to tyrannical ambitions.

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‘What’s in a name?’: Shakespeare’s Speech Prefixes and Misogyny

Although she is known as “Lady Capulet” or “Capulet’s Wife” in many modern editions of *Romeo and Juliet*, the character’s speech prefixes—the shortened names of characters that appear before they speak—vary between “Wife” and “Moth[er]” throughout the first quarto of the play. These speech prefixes emphasize her social relations in the family but deny her any sort of individuality or identity outside of her family unit. My paper will explore speech prefixes given to female characters in some of Shakespeare’s quartos to argue that misogyny is often enmeshed with the printed dramatic form as many minor female characters like Lady Capulet are reduced to a social role rather than an individual identity before they ever speak a word. This is a strictly textual phenomenon as speech prefixes do not exist in performance; therefore, the printed play adds layers of misogyny for readers that play-goers would not experience.

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“‘Not where he eats, but where he is eaten’: Women, Servants, and the Appetite for Rebellion in Shakespeare’s Late Plays and Greene’s *Euphues his Censure*”

This paper will explore Shakespeare’s engagement with a gendered socio-political theology through the trope of consumption in the late plays. It will illuminate (very briefly) the influence of Robert Greene and Thomas Lodge in tying feminine (dis)obedience to political service in the Elizabethan era and the persistent representation of class resistance as sexualized and gendered in the Jacobean. In this way, the essay will shed light on Shakespeare’s simultaneously misogynistic and pro-feminine use of gender in the representation of Cordelia, Marina, Isabella, and Paulina and their conflation with (dis)obedient male political subjects in service to authority (e.g., Angelo, Kent, Camillo, Boult, etc.). Finally, the essay will elucidate the often-parallel vilification and glorification of female characters and the fluid use of gender in the context of political reform, exposing the centrality of feminine sexuality as “bare life” in an emergent discourse of political liberty and the way in which this is tied to surveillance (a Jacobean state of exception) for the gendered and sexualized early modern subject.

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“Maintaining Liminal Intimacy”

My seminar paper will argue that patriarchal control of female sexuality divides women based on class, race, and religion as society internalizes misogynistic measurements of respectability currency. The more privileged cultural capital a woman has, whether that be innate or material, the less they are depicted as sexually available. I will analyze Marina in William Shakespeare’s *Pericles: Prince of Tyre* to show how Marina’s escape from the Mytilene brothel is aided by her privilege rather than her innate virtuosity as implied by the play. To further complicate matters, while Marina does not perform sex work, she does perform intimate labors which teaches the audience to condemn women who do choose to perform sex work. These dramatic representations not only perpetuate divisive myths that target disadvantaged women, but also form cultural narratives around what kinds of female sexuality are normalized and which are criminalized.

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“Virtuous Attention and Misogynistic Abuse in *Much Ado about Nothing*”

This paper explores Shakespeare’s investment in the virtue of *attention* – what Simone Weil refers to as opening the mind and “waiting for truth” – in *Much Ado about Nothing*. Relying on work by Weil and other Platonic theorists, I investigate *Much Ado*’s portrayal of attention as a crucial method for combatting misogynistic abuse within and outside romantic relationships. Particularly in the scene of Hero’s public humiliation, the play draws a sharp contrast between characters who attend well, acting out of desire to arrive at truthful judgments, and those who, seeking to preserve their own status, instead practice “tactful inattention,” a subconscious strategy of overlooking details that could expose fellow group members and risk the group’s

reputation, as sociologist Ernest Goffman theorizes. In distinguishing self-preservation from the willingness to attend, *Much Ado* associates attention with the humility and integrity needed to challenge abusive social structures, and produce a marriage grounded in trust.

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“Redressing Misogyny, Fixing Shakespeare: A Tale of *Two Gents*”

In a recent article, Nora J. Williams, citing Manne, argues that, because the misogyny of Shakespeare’s plays exists at the structural level--reflecting the structural misogyny of patriarchal culture--no revision of them for the contemporary stage can hope to succeed unless taking place at the structural level.¹ This thesis--which all but implies that Shakespeare’s plays must be rewritten and made to tell different stories--is highly arguable, but I want to take it seriously enough to apply it to my own production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Few plays in Shakespeare’s corpus illustrate “structural misogyny” so well as *Two Gents*, whose happy ending seems to require forgiving a rapist. Wrestling with the question of how to deal with it as a contemporary performance piece will, I hope, prove useful and pertinent. My production ended with the women rejecting the men, forming a bond meant to undo the oedipal/misogynist narrative at the heart of the play. And yet . . .

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“Death, Deprivation Misogyny, and Catherine of Aragon’s ‘Last Letter’”

This paper focuses on male writers who imagine Catherine of Aragon’s last words—Polydore Vergil (1555), Nicholas Sander (1585), the authors of Holinshed’s *Chronicles* (1587), and Shakespeare and Fletcher (1613). All of them rewrite this historically complex consort into a positive stereotype of passivity and benevolence. While this representation avoids the kinds of misogynistic insults that Kate Manne focuses on, it nonetheless reflects Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s (1979) point that patriarchal cultures preserve their hegemony just as much via positive as via negative stereotypes; in both cases women are emptied of their humanity to be viewed as either devil or angel. By imagining Catherine as the angel of the house of Tudor, Fletcher, Shakespeare, and others participate in the “deprivation” misogyny of erasing her intersectional identity as a Roman Catholic and as a defiant spouse to re-shape her into a male cultural fantasy of passivity that can be safely remembered for her last words of love for her husband.

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“Nasty Sties and Strong-Thighed Bargemen”

Shakespeare’s Hamlet and *The Duchess of Malfi*’s Ferdinand are particularly notable and similar examples of male obsession with female sexual desire. In both cases a widowed female member of their immediate family makes an unconventional remarriage choice: Hamlet’s mother Gertrude marries her brother-in-law (and husband’s murderer) with unseemly haste after her husband’s death, while the Duchess (Ferdinand’s sister) marries her steward. In both cases, this

¹ Williams, Nora J. “Incomplete Dramaturgies,” *Shakespeare Bulletin*, Volume 40, Number 1, 2022, pp. 1-22.

marriage corrodes the male character's sanity and evokes misogynistic diatribes about each woman's sexual appetites. Although Hamlet and Ferdinand appear disgusted by these sexual proclivities, the gratuitous vividness with which they fantasize about them has been read by critics as suggesting Hamlet and Ferdinand's own repressed incestuous desires. How did these episodes help early modern audiences think about their own culture's misogyny? How is the effect altered in *The Duchess of Malfi* by giving us more direct access to the Duchess's feelings than we have to Gertrude's?

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“Antithetical Words and Rape in *The Rape of Lucrece*”

The Rape of Lucrece (1594) has proved to be a political battleground for psychoanalytic critics and their feminist opponents over the question of who or what is the agent of rape. My paper deconstructs an important and influential antifeminist “logic” (epitomized in an article by Joel Fineman) which posits an ambiguous language that turns every resistance to rape into a permission, even an incitement, for the man to violate the woman.² In opposition to this intersection of Lacanian psychoanalysis, of misogyny, and of what Freud calls the antithetical meaning of primal words, the ekphrastic tapestry that depicts the fall of Troy provides warnings against men's deceptive speech and suggests models for heroic resistance, including Stoic suicide. Although these pictured models of resistance are ambiguous and paradoxical, they are legible and do not collapse into antithetical aporias and the misogyny that these antitheses seem to license for many psychoanalytic critics.

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“Misogyny and Militarism in *Antony and Cleopatra*”

Misogyny undermines opportunities for full humanhood of women, and subsequently, all other humans. Like war, misogyny is socially acceptable, despite its being immoral. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the intertwining of militarism with misogyny shows not just the mindless brutality of chronic warring on other humans, but also the mindlessness of scorning half of humankind. Neither practice promotes happiness, a life-condition humans are believed to prefer. Shakespeare's play mimics the circularity of social practices that lead to joyless outcomes, practices fed by the pointless, negative emotions in which misogyny is rooted. Kate Manne writes “many of the nastiest things that people do to each other . . . [are] plausibly *triggered* by . . . others' manifestations of their shared or common humanity” (“Humanism: A Critique” 401).³ The Romans demonize Egypt and Cleopatra to valorize their imperialism. They also demonize each other. War and misogyny, then, may be no more than a response to fear of being human.

² Joel Fineman, “Shakespeare's *Will*: The Temporality of Rape,” in *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition: Essays Toward the Release of Shakespeare's Will* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 165-221.

³ Manne, Kate. “Humanism: A Critique.” *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2016, pp. 389-415.