

**“Criminal Shakespeares”**  
**SAA Seminar**  
**Thursday | April 11 | 10:AM – Noon**  
**Leaders: John S. Garrison, Kyle A. Pivetti, & Vanessa L. Rapatz**

**Meredith Beales**  
**University of British Columbia**

**The “Perfect Criminal:”**  
**Iago, Naïve Reading, and Agatha Christie’s *Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case***

“I saw that I had come across at last, at the end of my career, the perfect criminal” (Christie 169) states Hercule Poirot in his description of the murderer in Agatha Christie’s novel *Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case*. To communicate the perfection of that criminal, Poirot turns to Shakespeare: “Iago is the perfect murderer” (Christie 169), and X, the criminal he pursues in this book, is Iago come to life. In this last lauded Poirot book, published 55 years after the first one, Christie employs Shakespeare allusions to illustrate the mendacity of this ultimate, perfect criminal: Iago’s ability to play on the weaknesses of those around him makes him the ideal criminal, and one especially challenging for Poirot to catch. In this book Christie imagines the kind of hypothetical personification of a Shakespeare character which might animate a student’s question such as “What if Iago were alive today?” or even a criminologist’s question like “What drives men to murder?” In this paper I examine the power of what might be called “naïve reading,” the search for real-world parallels and psychological truth in Shakespeare, and its popularity among students, psychologists, criminologists, and even detective novelists working centuries after Shakespeare conceived of Iago’s persuasive force.

**Frederick Bengtsson**  
**University of Kentucky**

**The femme fatales of early modern domestic tragedy**

It’s become commonplace to note the affinities between early modern revenge tragedy and film noir: moral ambiguity, conflicted protagonists, ethical dilemmas, and narrative twists are central to both genres, and it isn’t surprising that Kurosawa would re-envision Hamlet as a noir crime mystery, or that Linda Charnes would describe Hamlet as “the first noir detective.” This paper, however, will consider the affinities between film noir and another early modern subgenre, the domestic tragedy—focusing in particular on the troubling women that inhabit both genres, and reading infamous female characters such as Alice Arden (*Arden of Faversham*) and Anne Sanders (*A Warning for Fair Women*) as archetypes of the femme fatale. In the first part of the paper, I will explore how both of these genres work to construct “bad” women who embody a troubling femininity—and how critical considerations of the femmes fatales of film noir might

shed light on their early modern forebears. The second part of the paper will move to the women of Othello, the most “domestically tragic” of Shakespeare’s tragedies, in which we can observe the construction of a “bad” woman, as Iago seeks to transform Desdemona into a femme fatale in the eyes of her husband.

**Liz Fox**  
**University of Massachusetts Amherst**

### **What’s Criminal about Shakespeare in Prison?**

Although performed nearly seventeen years apart, Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* (1592) and *The Winter’s Tale* (1609) show continuities of imagery and theme, particularly their depiction of violence against women through the language of deficiency, discipline, and incarceration. Essential to understanding these linguistic and theatrical entanglements between Shakespeare and prison is the plays’ portrayals of the criminal, centering on the word “faulty,” a term that is conspicuously present in early modern dictionary definitions of “criminal” indicating defects, imperfections, or failures. Shakespeare deploys this carceral language to describe both Katherine and Hermione as defective. But how is this notion of women as deficient received when this play is taught inside a women’s prison? This essay toggles between the early modern period and our own, to trace damaging ideologies of language and interrogate the faults of Shakespeare-focused prison education programs. While both *Taming* and *Winter’s Tale* reinforce misogynistic notions of femininity and portray tactics for subduing women, how might they also offer women inside the opportunity to critique such notions, tactics, and experiences? And what is their potential for perpetuating such misogynistic harms through our own pedagogical imperfections?

**Adrian Howe**

### **Criminal Othello**

Othello was a criminal. But what kind of criminal? He killed his wife. So: was he a murderer? Would he be convicted of murder if tried in a court today? Or would his belief in Desdemona’s infidelity form the basis of a successful plea of provocation, thereby reducing his conviction to manslaughter? My Theatre in Education play, *Othello on Trial*, puts this question to audiences acting as juries. It is set in England where the defence of ‘provocation by infidelity’ has been abolished. This has made it difficult for English juries to clear wife-killers of murder. But some still find a way, such is the purchase of the received view that so-called ‘crimes of passion’ are a lesser form of homicide. Tragically, the culturally ingrained belief still holds that a man falling into a ‘red mist’ rage over an adulterous or allegedly adulterous wife is understandable and so at least partly excusable. This Shakespearean-inflected theatre project tests the convention, still followed in most anglophone jurisdictions, that wife-killing is not murder. These killers are not *that* criminal. Informed by feminist, critical race, postcolonial, Foucauldian and Marxist strains of Shakespeare scholarship, the project reads *Othello* as problematising impassioned homicide. More broadly, it reads *Titus Andronicus* as querying the notion of a moral warrant for murder, a warrant

justified by hallowed precedent, indicatively precedents defending male honour. In short, I explore how Shakespeare's work offers fruitful soil for contesting excuses and justifications for violence against women and, indeed, violent criminality on a global scale.

**Bernadette Kelly**  
Wayne State University

### **Criminal Shakespeares**

My seminar paper aims to explore how the criminalization of prostitution assuaged early modern social anxieties about monetizing intimate labor. Many scholarly inquiries into early modern prostitution have focused on its conflation with vagrancy and rogue literature as well as archival records from London's Bridewell. Sex workers were framed as thieves, they broke sumptuary laws which produced class anxieties, and they were viewed as drains on society because they (and any illegitimate offspring) were supposedly provided for by charity systems rather than a husband. In addition to the plethora of reasons already listed, I suggest that sex work was criminalized to punish women who monetized the intimate labors expected of them on the marriage market and in marriage. This monetization not only reveals the potentially unauthentic performative nature of intimate labor, but also suggests that wives could be paid for the labor they perform which threatens the patriarchal order of the household. Sex workers further disrupt the gendered social order as they provide for themselves. Shakespeare generates depictions of sex workers who perform intimate labor and who transgress against systems of respectability which highlights how they are criminally profiled as sex workers. One example is Bianca from Shakespeare's *Othello* who performs the emotional labor of caring for Cassio but is accused of being a sex worker through several stereotypes the characters conflate with prostitution. The play as a whole is an extreme example of how even the suggestion of unauthentic intimate labor created social anxieties.

**Dr. Jennifer Lodine-Chaffey**

### **“How Easily Murder is Discovered”: Shakespeare and Early Modern Detection**

While the puzzle at the center of a classical mystery—determining the identity of the murderer—is missing from most of Shakespeare's works, many of his plays feature the discovery of a corpse and highlight the attempts of individuals to determine the cause of death and identity of the murderer. These scenes of detection in Shakespeare, which include analyses of dead bodies, references to God's ability to bring murderers to justice, and supernatural signs as harbingers of guilt, reflect forensic practices and popular understandings of how to assess guilt that are frequently found in early modern murder pamphlets. Although scholars frequently note Shakespeare's reliance on historical chronicles, his likely knowledge of and inspiration from these pamphlets are reflected in a number of plays, including *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Hamlet*. Elements regularly included in murder pamphlets such as cruentation, divine intervention, ghostly hauntings, physical examinations of dead bodies, and attempted concealments of killings, I argue, are likewise common in Shakespeare's tragedies and fulfill similar roles in the imagination of early modern audiences. Marketed to a wide range of individuals, both murder pamphlets and Shakespeare's dramatic works functioned simultaneously

as entertainment and moral commentary. However, while most murder pamphlets presented readers with a world where murder is discovered, culprits are punished, and God gets revenge, Shakespeare's plays frequently offer audiences less morally clear endings, thereby questioning divine providence and positioning human beings as vital to the discovery and punishment of murderers.

**David Summers**

**Capital University**

**“Hamlet, Detective / Hamlet, Murderer: The Case of *Columbo*'s “Short Fuse”**

According to Ernst Jones, the important connection between *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* is located in the Danish Prince's mother fixation. This essay explores what I take to be the more interesting connection between Oedipus and Hamlet as Detectives. There has been surprisingly little written about the ways in which these two seminal dramas participate in narrative conventions that define ‘detective fiction’—Page Dubois's “Oedipus as Detective: Sophocles, Simenon, Robbe-Grillet” (*Yale French Studies*, 2005) and Richard Madelaine's “Hamlet as Proto-detective” (*AUMLA*, 2011) are among this small body of work. When viewed as detective stories themselves, the fact that *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* have so frequently provided narrative structures and character relationships to be plundered by writers of contemporary detective fiction and film. One instance of this is found in the 1972 episode of the *Columbo* series “Short Fuse,” with a screenplay written by Jackson Gillis, who had honed his craft as a stable writer for *Perry Mason* in the 1950s. *Columbo* was perhaps the most notable television series to adopt the “inverted mystery” structure in which the question is not “whodunnit” but rather, how will the murderer be caught. Given this, it may come as no surprise that Gillis is attracted to *Hamlet*, with its crucial Mousetrap plot point used to discover “grounds more relative” than the word of a Ghost to determine who the murderer is. But Gillis adds a second inversion to this episode: obviously the role of detective is taken by Peter Falk's *Columbo*, so in “Short Fuse” Hamlet is recast as the murderer himself. This brings us back to *Oedipus Rex*, where the Sophocles' not only gives us what is perhaps the earliest western detective story, but also one of the greatest twist in the history of the genre—the Detective, as it turns out, discovers he is also the Murderer.

**Jonathan Shelley**

**St. John Fisher University**

**Criminal Shakespeares**

Studies of *Measure for Measure* have long noted the ways in which Shakespeare's play interrogates issues of criminal justice relevant to the early modern period and our own time. These issues include the experience of incarceration, unequal justice under the law, capital punishment, and, remarkably, even the contemporary “broken windows” theory of policing. Yet it is questionable whether or not Shakespeare's application in such spaces of criminal justice—namely the rise of teaching and performing Shakespeare in prison, often referred to as Prison Shakespeare—successfully communicates such criticism. Contributions from Rob Pensalfini,

Romana Wray, Sophie Ward, Roy Connely and others have noted and critiqued the ways in which Prison Shakespeare has predominantly utilized a drama- or biblio-therapy approach that posits his works as a force for individual, neoliberal change in its readers and practitioners. This essay will focus on *Measure for Measure* in order to assess the capacity of Shakespeare—both the work itself and its manifestation as performance—to question the need and existence of institutions of criminal justice such as law enforcement and prison. What, we might ask, is the point of teaching Shakespeare in prison if it fails to offer critical perspectives on the very institutions in which it is implemented?

**William Floyd Wolfgang**  
**Stevenson University**

**“I am a free man again:” Deploying Shakespeare as an Act of Public Redemption,  
1880-1925**

Multiple accounts from the turn of the twentieth century indicate that Shakespeare’s texts were the most-read literature in prisons and penitentiaries. For those familiar with the period, this is, perhaps, unsurprising. Shakespeare’s texts served as educational bedrock for innumerable localized clubs and constant fodder for amateur and professional theatrical entertainment. For better or for worse, these plays held a peerless position next to the Bible, and engagement with them indicated a desire to conform to a widespread understanding of their inherent value and the potentiality for “civilizing” and restorative effects. Prison wardens opened schools where Shakespeare was studied, and countless others took up the mantle of intensive independent study—some even established performances within the prison walls, indicating Shakespeare was indeed performed in prisons much earlier than the prison theatre movement of the 1980s. However, studying or performing the text was just the beginning for many of these “Criminal Shakespeareans;” deploying Shakespeare served multiple purposes, from the planning and execution of a crime to redemption during imprisonment and finally to the pardon process. Engagement with the text or its associations publicly distinguished the conspirator, criminal, or convict from the rest of the population and turned their focus toward various forms of freedom. This essay explores how individuals convicted of crimes from 1880-1925 leveraged the work of Shakespeare to redeem their image in the press and criminal justice system while others sought to find forgiveness within themselves.