

Seminar Abstracts for 'Drama and the Public Sphere'
SAA 2024
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Worthy Voices: Aesthetic Elitism and Shakespeare's Publics

How did early modern theater imagine—and help construct—the relationship between aesthetic judgement and political participation? From dismissals that certain plays might have been “caviar to the general,” to concerns that audiences will “censure by contagion,” to an awareness that each audience member “brings a play in’s head with him,” playwrights like Shakespeare, Jonson, and Middleton and Decker recognized the variety of critical judgments audiences might apply to their work. They also could not escape suggesting an alignment between critical capacity and political or social positionality. Before the supposedly concurrent development of the public sphere with published literary criticism in the late seventeenth century, the early modern theater reflected upon itself as a nexus of political and aesthetic debate. Unpacking the sneering view of the Roman public’s aesthetic tastes offered in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* by situating this view against the broadening range of aesthetic criteria available to early modern theatergoers, this paper argues that Shakespeare’s stage anticipates how privileged modes of aesthetic discernment grow aligned with political elitism. Moreover, it argues that Shakespeare’s tragic accounts of Rome recognize the importance of earnestly engaging with varied forms of aesthetic judgment—in part by studying how such forms of judgment and learned—are a prerequisite to honest political deliberation.

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Challenging “Private” Spectatorship: Building a Public Space

“We go to the theatre today as an essentially private, observational act. Elizabethans went as a public, social act”¹. The actor and founder of the Back Room Shakespeare Project in Chicago, Samuel McClure Taylor, clearly articulates the core difference in the way spectatorship was considered in the early modern era and today. Yet, many 21st-century companies try to bridge this gap on the contemporary stage through their performances of Shakespeare’s texts. Through specific architecture or staging techniques, they have challenged their audience’s passivity and broken the fourth wall, laying emphasis on the relationships between audiences and actors. This is the case for well-known theaters such as Shakespeare’s Globe in London, but also for more modest companies in France (the “théâtre du Sycomore”, and the “Shakespeare Nights festival” in the château d’Hardelot among other examples), in Germany (Globe Neuss) or in the USA (Baltimore Shakespeare Factory), which I have studied through fieldwork. Thanks to surveys and interviews, I have been able to get acquainted with a variety of companies, who work on turning theater into a public act. How do these companies challenge their audiences’ habits, using Shakespeare to transform private viewers into participating playgoers? First, I shall analyze how these companies use innovative architectures to imagine a new relationship with their audiences. Then I will study how they manage to transform their silent audience into an active crowd. Lastly, I will investigate how they try to reach a broader community, by breaking usual theatrical boundaries, creating an inclusive spectator experience.

¹ McClure Taylor, Samuel. *My Life with the Shakespeare Cult*. Chicago, 2015, p. 1.

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Staging Sovereignty:
Dramatic Representation of Female Rule
and the Emergence of the Proto-Public Sphere in Elizabethan England

Drawing on insights from historians Peter Lake and Steve Pincus, who identify discerning public audiences in post-Reformation England, my paper investigates the impact of female sovereignty on the nascent proto-public sphere in late Tudor England. With a focus on the dynamic representation of female sovereigns on the stage, I depart from the conventional narrative attributing the post-Revolutionary public sphere to the events in 1688–89, and argue that the reign of two consecutive queens regnant, Mary and Elizabeth Tudor, marked a pivotal moment in history in which female sovereignty emerges as a more secular and ostensibly “modern” form of authority. Thus, the “anomaly” of female rule not only exposes a fundamental contradiction within divine right monarchy, it also acts both as a symptom and an agent of social transformation. The way I see it, this shift operates through the mechanism of the law and moves towards attributing sovereign power to the people.

Gertrude's characterization as the “imperial jointress” encapsulates the essence of this exploration, as it highlights the unique nature of female rule in the political and familial context. I will build on the legal and political ramifications of the transformation resulting from marital unions, to then consider how fiction dramatizes and imagines its ways in and out the political historical reality. Ultimately, I consider these dramatic depictions as catalysts, not only actively conceptualizing the discourse on power and legitimacy, but also shaping the emerging public sphere.

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“’tis stale; it has been had before at the Red Bull”: Intertextuality and Theatre Publics

When the Prologue Boy in Beaumont’s *Knight of the Burning Pestle* chides George about the staleness of his request that Rafe travel to Persia, Beaumont invokes an image of what I want to argue are a series of theatrical publics. As often noted in the scholarship, the first of those publics is comprised of the imagined audiences represented by George and Nell and the voiceless gentlemen the Prologue Boy repeatedly asks for pardon. I will be interested in considering another set of publics in this essay. References like the Prologue Boy’s run through the whole of *Knight of the Burning Pestle* but also feature in many other plays. Taken together, these references to older plays, theatrical practices, theatres, etc may index a public of theatre professionals who interest in and enjoyment of these plays may be distinct from that of, say, George, Nell, and Rafe (or the gentlemen). This essay will offer a provisional discussion of this professional public, deploying intertextual references and drawing on the resources of Bourdieu’s work on the field of cultural production. I will likely discuss some of Shakespeare’s work, Jonson’s plays, Middleton’s *Revengers Tragedy*, along with Beaumont’s play.

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Rumor and the Public Sphere in *1 & 2 Henry IV*

The concept of the public sphere has often been associated with discussion and debate, particularly of news and current events. Habermas, for example, describes the 18th century ideal of a bourgeois public sphere as a discussion, “On whose basis alone the authority of the better argument could assert itself against social hierarchy and in the end carry the day” (36). These theorizations of the public discussion often rest upon an assumed, shared understanding of facts, whether this takes the form of a shared public realm or the circulation of news and information about current events. In many historical circumstances, though, this shared understanding of facts and situations does not exist, as different interest groups, localities and even individuals hold to their own understandings of events and materials. Early modern England, though it had an emergent print public sphere, certainly came closer to the latter condition than the former. Most news was circulated orally or in private correspondence, and many social historians have noted that the spread of oral news – particularly rumors about the court – often reflected the local interests and beliefs of the communities who spread the news. What are we to make, then, of public discussions that do not rely on a shared understanding of facts, and in truth show evidence of people’s desires and political commitments shaping their beliefs in events?

My paper will explore this question, looking not only at theory and social history, but also *1 & 2 Henry IV*. News and rumor play central roles in the unfolding of events in Shakespeare’s two-part history. Rumor begins the second play, boasting of his false circulation of Hotspur’s triumph and King Henry IV’s death, describing this rumor as, “Smooth comforts false, worse than true wrongs” (Induction 40). While the image initially seems to denounce rumor and news, throughout the rest of the history news – both accurate and inaccurate – abounds on both sides of the conflict, though it rarely seems associated with the “authority of the better argument.” My essay will argue the plays associate the circulation of news and rumor with a struggle to achieve hegemony and fix, not only the interpretation of facts, but also the nature of facts themselves. While hegemony gets fashioned less through rank and hierarchy than through force, cunning and skilled political performance, the two plays clearly show a skepticism towards the importance of reason and argument in state affairs.

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Ben Jonson and Public-Making, in Poetry, Comedy, and Tragedy

Ben Jonson describes the community-building quality of poetry in his translation of Horace's *The Art of Poetry*. Jonson's overall goal of "feigning a commonwealth" in his work is theorized in this description of the constructive powers of poetry:

Orpheus, a priest, and speaker for the gods,
First frightened men, that wildly lived at odds,
From slaughters and foul life; and for the same
Was tigers said, and lions fierce, to tame.
Amphion too, that built the Theban towers,
Was said to move the stones by his lute's powers,
And lead them with soft songs where that he would.
This was the wisdom, that they had of old,
Things sacred from profane to separate;
The public from the private; to abate
Wild ranging lusts; prescribe the marriage good;
Build towns and carve the laws in leaves of wood.

For my contribution to our seminar "Drama and the Public Sphere," I will be considering some of Jonson's various formulations of such a power. I'll slow down and talk about the translation above, and then see how the theory plays out in a few key scenes from two plays: *Poetaster* and *Sejanus*. The tigers and lions were not always tamed; both plays provide a space for anger, and both plays are involved with failures to form a successful harmonious public space. With *Sejanus*, that failure extended into the realm of early modern London, in a kind of reverberating public *un*-making.

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Theater and the Court

For my SAA paper, I hope to share a draft of an essay I have somewhat foolishly committed to writing, an overview of the relationship between the public theaters and the court—a problem I will approach as a phenomenon of the emerging public sphere. The theater was the most visible of the genres and forms of entertainment that promised paying audiences a peek inside the world of the court. For now, I imagine the argument about its functions as a crudely Habermasian and possibly Marxist one about an emergent urban middle class seeking political recognition through imaginative inclusion in the world of the court. As my phrasing indicates—the vague talk about a ‘world’ is obviously an evasion here—I have not yet thought this through conceptually. I will be taking this seminar as an opportunity to re-consider the political functions of such imaginative or imaginary access, as a way (a) to bring pressure on various state actors through manipulating public opinion, (b) to provide outlets for public opinion, (c) to disseminate (or rather, market) the prestige of courtly forms of representation and consumption, and (d) to create actual public knowledge about the corridors of power, affairs of state, that is, what Howard Erskine-Hill (!) termed the realm of politics (here I will be revisiting earlier, myopic work I had done on this). In other words, rather than presenting new findings or even new readings, I will be rehearsing various, often conflicting arguments made over the past several decades by a wide range of scholars, and framing this survey of a range of phenomena in the Habermasian terms of a transition from ‘representative’ to ‘bourgeois’ publicness. What should be organizing this rather pedestrian affair of a paper is an exploration of the theater, and of the affordances of early modern English dramatic writing, as a uniquely powerful medium for such public-making work.

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Shylock and the Cosmopolitics of Tragedy

The rise of early modern London as a "world city" depended on the constant influx of migrants, which was needed for the city to sustain its population, let alone undergo rapid demographic growth as it did. Migration, in this sense, was less an external phenomenon happening at the margins of an otherwise stable society, than a constitutive factor in the (re)formation of society itself. Specifically, it constituted the condition of possibility for London's theaters (a substantial portion of Londoners were non-natives who, like Shakespeare, moved to the city at some point in their lives), a site of "focused gathering" (to borrow Erving Goffman's term) where natives and strangers, citizens and non-citizens, would come together to participate in competing notions of the public, as individuals and together.

Drawing on recent scholarship on the early modern (or post-Reformation) public sphere, my paper will explore the cosmopolitical possibilities afforded by early modern aesthetics. It will focus on the strange presence of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, a tragic figure who pursues a very public vengeance by appealing to the Venetian legal system: specifically, the "course of the law" designed to protect "the commodity of the strangers" and which, if it be denied, "Will much impeach the justice of the state, / Since that the trade and profit of the city / Consisteth of all nations." (3.3.26-27; 29-31). The tragedy of Shylock thus hinges on the interpretation of a cluster of ideas (and emotions) pertaining to citizenship, commerce, and international law in pre-Westphalian Europe. My paper will examine how the London theater participated in this foundational debate of political modernity—a modernity conceived less as a drama of a nation than as a theater of the city.

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Spectres of *Hamlet*: Political Theology and Shakespeare's Longue Durée Public Sphere

The 'public sphere' of Shakespeare's works extends in time and space across centuries and sociopolitical contexts. His plays continue to be invoked, performed, and analyzed at moments of crisis, framed and presented such that the problems and issues he put forward as pertinent in his historical moment strike a chord with audiences caught up in the crises of their own time. As a sign of this extension, three theorists, linked by their defining conceptions of political theology, chose *Hamlet* as a touchstone in their consideration of the crises of the modern/postmodern political world: Walter Benjamin in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928); Carl Schmitt in *Hamlet oder Hekuba: Der Einbruch der Zeit in das Spiel* (1956); and Jacques Derrida in *Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (1993). Each examines, in significantly differing ways, not simply the question of topicality as a strategic thematic aspect of the play, or how the play represents debates or perspectives on particular political questions, but how the play engages with a critical moment in history – the emergence of the modern concept of sovereignty and the implications of the shift toward a secularization of decisionist rule. Each in their way explores how the play's concerns lay bare the threads of a fraying social, economic, and political formation that would come to define modernity in the western world and, to a great extent, globally. In this paper I trace the implications of each of these readings of *Hamlet*, as they radically challenge entrenched ways of thinking about language, history, and the roots of modern politics.

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Transparency and Theatricality: Glass Windows in Early Seventeenth-Century London

During the early seventeenth century, affluent London merchants adorned their homes with expansive glass windows, offering both a sweeping view of the street and a tantalizing glimpse into the opulence within. This paper asserts that the development of transparent glass windows marked a pivotal moment in the reciprocal gaze passed between the street and the home, particularly highlighting the theatrical significance of these windows during London's renowned annual event: the Lord Mayor's Show.

The transparency of glass windows plays a central role in Thomas Middleton's *The Triumphs of Integrity* (1623). Within this spectacle, Integrity, the central character personifying virtue, beckons the audience to, "Here on my Temple throw your greedy eyes," inviting them to peer not only at her but also through the glass walls of her "Temple" to see her dwelling within. The term "greedy eyes" implies an expectation of receiving something valuable in return for their attention. Integrity's declaration, "See me, and learne to know me, then y' are wise," suggests that observers can gain wisdom by witnessing her within the temple. Consequently, the transparent glass walls of the pageant structure, described as a "crystal sanctuary" by Middleton, function as a stage frame that showcases Integrity to the urban audience.

Emerging from a society where transparent glass was a luxury, predominantly accessible to the affluent, Middleton's *The Triumphs of Integrity* introduces the notion that the privileged merchant class, with their expansive glass windows, offered an opportunity for bystanders to glean insights from the displays presented on the other side of these panes. This chapter delves into the dynamics of observation and being observed, while also contemplating the theatrical role played by glass, windows, and domestic architecture. Through an exploration of the evolving window glass industry, the rise of "crystal sanctuaries," and the interplay between technological innovations, architectural advancements, and the performative aspects of civic entertainment, this paper illuminates how glass, windows, and the concept of transparency contributed to a fascination with domestic theatricality in early seventeenth-century London.

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“I am the mouth of ’hem all”: Crowd Watching in *Bartholomew Fair*

“Were Democritus still on earth, he would laugh” begins the Latin motto on the title page of Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), “he would gaze more intently on the people than on the play itself, as giving him more by far worth looking at.” Indeed, *Bartholomew Fair* is a play all about looking at people: Overdo patrols the grounds in disguise to keep an eye on the fairgoers, Busy watches the crowd to condemn their sins; and poor Bartholomew Cokes is observed by nearly every character at one point or another for a laugh. When Cokes settles in for the puppet show—a downmarket version of Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*—not only is he being watched by the cast of characters, but he is also watching a series of watchers. That is to say, the puppet show is not just a dramatization of Marlowe’s poem, but rather a survey of its afterlife considering the various ways that other poets have received the unfinished work. My paper asks: what is at stake in Jonson’s dramatic representation of crowds, spectatorship, and reception in this play? By considering the *mise en abyme* made by the audience watching a crowd of characters watching Bartholomew Cokes watching the crowded reception of Marlowe’s poem, I suggest that Jonson blurs the lines between a fraught literary history and an unpredictable public reception. If *Bartholomew Fair* holds a mirror up to the theatergoing public—I want to examine how the play constructs both the theatre and the public.

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Drama, What Drama? Public Sphere, What Public Sphere?

In June, the Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles suspended its 2022-2023 season and “paused” its 2023-2024 season at the Mark Taper Forum, one of the largest regional theaters in the United States. CTG’s economic woes are mirrored across the country, from Ashland to Dallas to New York City. Much fretting and many accusations followed, but one fact sticks out with respect to the concerns of this seminar. As reported:

A new survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Census Bureau found that 10.3 percent of American adults attended a musical last year, down from 16.5 percent in 2017; just 4.5 percent attended a play, down from 9.4 percent.

One might wonder how much of that 4.5 percent attended a play by Shakespeare. One percent? By a play by Jonson or Middleton? One thousandth of one percent?

Given these facts (cf. John Guillory), it’s arguably moot to discuss early modern drama and the public sphere(s). But I will, suggesting that the concept does so much work for the left in its struggles for justice that “without this discursive weapon, we seem to enter such struggles inadequately armed” (Bruce Robbins). Without it, there’s no cover for a deep fear that Habermas is right, which leads to questions about the viability of the concept in what Nancy Fraser calls “actually existing democracy . . . in late-capitalist societies,” much less in theaters in Stratford-upon-Avon, London, or New York. Are public spheres “pipe dreams” (Wendy Brown)? Are publics (potentially? mainly?) a neoliberal marketing tool? And how do we pursue justice without them?

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“New Opinions and Armes, as we shall thinke fitting”: Drama and the Pre-Republic Public Sphere

If “the emergence of a theatrical industry in early modern London opened up a new sort of discursive space where a broad, heterogeneous cross-section of the city’s population could gather to “see and be seen” (in the words of Ben Jonson),” as the seminar description posits, how do we understand drama and the public sphere when that industry was prohibited from operating? My paper builds on work by Susan Wiseman, Janet Clare, Marissa Nicosia, and Rachel Willie to examine pamphlet plays that circulated in print during the civil wars in England, texts that force us to think expansively about dramatic genres. As a sort of case study, I will discuss three play- pamphlets in particular: *A Discourse or Dialogue Between the two now potent Enemies: Lord Generall Militia and his Illegal Opposite, Commission of Array* (1642), *Three speeches, being such speeches as the like were never spoken in the city* (1642), and *Mrs. PARLAMENT, her Invitation of Mrs. LONDON, to a Thanksgiving Dinner* (1648). Each work re-presents contemporary thinking about Parliament’s Militia Ordinance of 1642 by creating characters who either articulate available positions within the heated debate or give personhood to the involved institutions through allegorical names.

Casting the political debate as a kind of theatrical performance with a discernable impact on a fictional public, these works afford insight into drama’s absent presence and the (perhaps paradoxically) heightened topicality of metatheatrical discourse in the early and late 1640s.

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Shifting Social Landscapes and Affective Laughter in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

This paper examines how *The Merry Wives of Windsor* captures the intricate class and gender dynamics and shifting social structures of early modern England, focusing on the genre of comedy and laughter within the play itself and the theater space. By employing the lens of Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, this paper first juxtaposes the period's discourse of household management and the role of housewives with the self-governance and domestic ideologies of the merry wives in the play. This paper argues that the play's portrayal of the wives' household management serves as a reflection of early modern political economy, specifically the Elizabethan government's "conduct of conduct." After discussing the play's biopolitical elements, this paper turns to the theater space, investigating how changes in the power dynamics between the middle class and the aristocracy could have nuanced the laughter of early modern audiences. This analysis also considers conflicting patriarchal ideals and the portrayal of female wits, which, I aim to show, likely stirred potential dissonance among the audience in the early modern period. With a particular focus on comic scenes involving Falstaff, the Latin lesson, and Ford's jealousy, this paper examines how each comic scene seems deliberately designed to cater to the interests of certain class or gender groups. The aim is to explore the incoherent responses of audiences influenced by their different perceptions of merriment. These responses, shaped by the characters with whom each audience group identifies based on their class or gender, have the potential to productively generate meaningful yet complex affective social practices within the theater space.

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‘Openly publish in the pulpit’: Spital Sermons and Insurrection in *Sir Thomas More*

In the co-authored *Sir Thomas More*, a play that depicts the rise and fall of the Catholic martyr Sir Thomas More and features violence against foreign workers in the notorious May Day insurrection of 1517, the broker John Lincoln draws up a bill of wrongs perpetrated against London merchants by “strangers.” Lincoln hopes that it will be read by preachers during the Easter Spital Sermons, sermons preached at St. Mary Spital, the London hospital for the indigent (operational during the time of the play’s setting but not during the construction of the original text, around 1600). Indeed, in a later scene, one Doctor Beal, a canon in St. Mary Hospital, “publish[es] / The bill of wrongs in public at the Spital,” thus inciting the riot and endangering even the Lord Mayor. In my paper for our seminar, I plan to analyze this dramatic reference to a Spital sermon, a public event in the incipient public sphere tied to its civic and charitable functions. My paper will examine this allusion to Spital sermons with respect to early modern charity and treatment of the immigrant population in the play. I also want to explore not only the role this sermon plays in the insurrection but also the significance of the overlapping of publics implied by this allusion, as one type of public space is referenced within another, the theater.

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“Here was my Sister, Father, Brother, Son”: Terms of Association in *The Maid’s Tragedy*

Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher’s *The Maid’s Tragedy* (1611) cycles through traditional terms of association—friendship, marriage, kinship, service, and kingship—revealing the inadequacy of each to bind its characters in the face of individual ambitions, desires, and senses of honor. At the same time, the play famously stages the exposure of private, exclusive spaces—a court masque and the king’s bedroom—to a public, commercial audience. In an article published in 1971, Philip J. Finkelpearl suggested that Beaumont, a member of the Inner Temple, works in the tradition of Inns-affiliated tragedy to offer advice to magistrates through examples of individuals’ improper conduct. Finkelpearl focuses on the play’s adulterous king and naive courtier to interpret the work as a “public tragedy” on the state of James’s court. And yet the spectacular failure of all social relationships in the play, epitomized in the soldier Melantius’s curt dismissal of his sister’s death uttered in terms of hyperbolic grief at his inability to prevent his friend’s suicide, renders the play’s critique in terms much wider than the court. In presenting characters with extreme commitments to family, friends, and other traditional sources of communal identity as objects of pity and, arguably, dark humor, what does the play accomplish for its audience? Might the play also offer counsel to an emerging public navigating its own shifting terms of association?