

“Women Playmakers” Abstracts  
Seminar Leader: Elizabeth Kolkovich  
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**Re-writing Shakespeare for Women: Gender Equity and the 50/50 Shakespeare Project**  
Jennifer Birkett

It is no secret that William Shakespeare’s plays are men’s plays; they were written for male actors with the majority of lines going to male characters, who account for eighty-four percent of the characters staged. But what would have happened if Shakespeare wrote plays with female actresses in mind? In an effort to make theatrical workplaces more equitable, many modern theatre companies re-gender characters, incorporate cross-gender casting, or avoid producing Shakespeare altogether. However, this paper offers a new solution to the old problem of gender disparity in Shakespeare’s plays by approaching the structural imbalance embedded in the texts as a product of Shakespeare’s business model, not necessarily his misogyny. Specifically, this paper will highlight a new writing initiative, Vanessa Morosco and Peter Simon Hilton’s 50/50 Shakespeare Project, which adapts Shakespeare’s plays to give 50% of the lines to its female characters and 50% to male, while still retaining the spirit of Shakespeare and his world.

**“I am not what I am”: The Lost Iago of Emma Waller**  
Stephen Cohen

From roughly 1857 to 1876, the British-born American actress Emma Waller starred as Iago in productions of *Othello* in the American east, south, and midwest, often supported by her husband D.W. Waller in the play’s title role. The period of Waller’s theatrical activity was marked by its acceptance—though by no means universal—of women in male Shakespearean roles, though by far the most common were the “feminine” roles of Romeo and Hamlet; Iago was a rarity, and Waller was its most enduring female interpreter. Though admired in her day, Waller has largely been forgotten, and little is known about her Iago. By contextualizing the little evidence we have within the histories of women in male Shakespearean roles, performing families in the nineteenth-century theater, and the evolving performance conventions of *Othello* in the period, this paper will recover the significance of Emma Waller’s moment in theatrical history.

**Reimagining the Lusty Widow in Restoration Drama**  
Anna Graham

My paper analyses developments in the lusty widow trope in early modern drama. The trope involved the marriage of an older wealthy woman to a younger man for her money. The lusty widow peaked in popularity during on the Jacobean period, but the Restoration saw a revival, with female dramatists reclaiming and subverting the widow trope. This paper examines two female authored Restoration plays that respond to and reinterpret the lusty widow trope. In *The Younger Brother* (1696), Aphra Behn emphasises the bodily reality of the aged widow. *Marcellia, or the Treacherous Friend* (1670) by Frances Boothby, on the other hand, employs irony to satirise the widow as allegory for money by framing the ‘widow’ as a physical pile of money. These plays reimagine the lusty widow trope in different ways, but both with the motivation to confront an unsatisfactory plot device.

## **Aphra Behn and The English Booby**

Eve Houghton

The word booby from the early seventeenth century meant a “childish, foolish, inept, or blundering person” (*OED* 1a). Commentators increasingly saw boobyishness as a distinctly English trait; by the mid-eighteenth century, Lord Chesterfield mocked the recognizable type of “an English booby, who...blushes, stammers, and can hardly get out what he would say[.]” But what seemed to Chesterfield like a naturalized aspect of English masculine character has a longer history, related to the upheavals of the Civil War. This paper centers on two plays by Aphra Behn: *The Rover* (1677), which depicts the blunders and mishaps of English Royalist gentlemen in Spanish Naples, and *The Widow Ranter* (1689), a tragicomedy of incompetent colonial government. The English booby clings to a code of masculine conduct that has become merely ceremonial, maladroit, or simply beside the point. In these plays, Behn depicts the illegibility—indeed, the functional uselessness—of English nobility in exile.

## **Cross-dressing and Parallel Narratives in the Plays of Elizabeth Polwhele and Margaret Cavendish**

Jordan Ivie

This paper investigates how Elizabeth Polwhele and Margaret Cavendish re-purposed stage cross-dressing, a familiar convention in male-authored plays, to explore potential narratives of female homosociality. Polwhele’s *The Faithfull Virgins* and Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure* each feature an ostensibly unassailable female space that is ultimately invaded by a desiring male figure who dissolves female bonds and re-establishes conventional relations between the sexes. However, female cross-dressing in these plays also provides an alternative narrative of secure female community, which exists *in potentia* throughout the action; even when the play veers in favor of heteronormativity, the audience remains aware of the alternative homosocial narrative running invisibly alongside the conventional narrative. Polwhele and Cavendish therefore mimic the familiar device of cross-dressing in order to grant their female characters agency and freedom, even if that freedom remains potential rather than actual.

## **Finding Jud(a)ea, Finding Ourselves: Adapting *The Tragedy of Mariam* for an Apocalyptic Future**

Grace Kimball

In 2022, I adapted *The Tragedy of Mariam* to explore my interest in drama and faith in early modern England. In manifesting my vision for the story, I rewrote the play’s language, shaping a new apocalyptic world with the brutal realities of climate change, gender, and power. At the same time, I sought to maintain narrative elements from the original, navigating a fine line between intentional adaptation and unnecessary deletion. My paper plans to explore the exercise of adapting Elizabeth Cary’s play with a contemporary lens while reflecting on its eventual production in a found theater space in the winter of 2023. This contemplative piece considers the responsibility of adaptation work and how a focus on a more embodied sense of gender and power can help to navigate timeless complexity.

### **Mary Carleton: Play/Maker**

Katharine Landers

This paper examines the career of notorious Restoration writer, con-woman, and short-lived stage actor Mary Carleton, also known as the “German Princess.” Focusing on the garment, dress, and textile relationships between Carleton’s public “performances” and the texts written about Carleton, in particular Mary Carleton’s own *The Case of Madam Mary Carleton* and the 1663 play *A witty combat; Or, the female victor*, by “T. P., Gent,” I argue that Carleton crafts a status as a play/maker, one who links her own self-dramatizations on London’s various public “stages” with strategic attention to material practices of self-creation via apparel. I argue that Carleton’s and T. P.’s texts reveal the power of Carleton’s material savvy to shape narratives about her own transgressive self-fashioning, even in texts she herself did not author, and to play upon material political anxieties of the mid-1660’s.

### **‘This is not Shakespeare, I want my money back’: Fiona Shaw’s *The Hamlet Project***

Emer McHugh

My paper looks at a stage invasion—that is, the disruption of Fiona Shaw’s *The Hamlet Project* by a schoolteacher in County Cork in 1993, and uses it as a case study to illustrate the uneasy cultural exchange that is Shakespeare and Ireland. Using Shaw and *The Hamlet Project* as a case study, I show how this cultural exchange translated into Shaw’s strategies and approaches to performing and adapting Shakespeare. This exchange is also the story of the many ways in which—to paraphrase Shaw, and as *The Hamlet Project* demonstrates—the polite relationship to Shakespeare has been, and can be, exploded (specifically in an Irish context). It also prompts us to ask—what is considered ‘Shakespeare’ and ‘not Shakespeare’, and also by who?

### **Pens, Patrons, and Power: Female Theatrics in Early Modern England**

Ann Pleiss Morris

For this session, I will be submitting my introduction to my monograph *Pens, Patrons, and Power: Female Theatrics in Early Modern England* (manuscript due March 2024). This study attempts to draw back the curtain further on an English feminine theatre by arguing that women’s playwriting, often considered little more than private, exploratory exercises, did indeed influence the English theatre in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Using the plays themselves, paratextual elements of printed plays, portraits, correspondence, and other historical evidence, this monograph re-envision the English theatrical narrative, making space for women’s financial and artistic influence on the English public theatre from the late 1590’s to the Restoration.

### **The Three Widows of *Dido, Queene of Carthage*: Printer, Queen, Nurse**

Katie O’Hare

The word ‘widow’ appears on the title page of Marlowe’s *Dido, Queene of Carthage*, in relation to the play’s printer, Joan Orwin. *Dido* is a play interested in gender dynamics created by powerful widows, who populate the play. Despite the word widow being attached to Orwin’s name, it can function coincidentally, to connect readers of the playbook with the theme of

widowhood. Literary readings of *Dido and her Nurse*, along with a consideration of what this material object both displays and effaces for readers, present the play as a rich case study of accidental collisions. The playbook encourages us to consider the multifarious significations of widowhood and loss in early modern culture and to question what it means that some of these consolidate in and on the playbook Joan Orwin printed.

### **Female Playmakers, Paratextuality, and the Material Book in London, Paris, and Amsterdam**

Martine van Elk

My essay explores playbooks by three female authors writing for the professional stage in seventeenth-century London, Paris, and Amsterdam. In this essay, I look closely at how women playwrights presented the act of playmaking in the playbook. Focusing in particular on paratextual materials by Aphra Behn, Marie-Catherine Desjardins, and Katharina Lescaijle, I uncover rhetorical strategies for acquiring authority for their status as playwrights, which range from playful commentary on the genre of the dedicatory letter to defiant responses to accusations of plagiarism. Female authorship of plays was only beginning to gain public currency in each country. In these early examples of plays written by women for the public stage, we see a mixture of playfulness, elevated praise, and allusions to playmaking as work that make for a complex, ambivalent model of public femininity.

### **“With purest body will I press my tomb”: Martyrdom and Constancy in *Antonius* and *The Tragedy of Mariam***

Valerie Voight

This paper will explore the politics of martyrdom and constancy in two early modern women’s closet plays, Mary Sidney Herbert’s translation of *Antonius* (1590, printed 1592) and Elizabeth Cary’s *Tragedy of Mariam, Fair Queen of Jewery* (printed 1613). I explore the ways in which female constancy, whether Cleopatra’s implied suicide, figured by Sidney Herbert as a kind of self-sacrifice for love, or Mariam’s death, later treated as a kind of martyrdom are racially inflected in both plays. I trace the intersecting discourses of constancy and martyrdom in order to examine how constancy is constructed in early modern closet drama.