

## **Protest and Resistance in the (Early) Modern Era**

Shakespeare Association of America Seminar, Portland, OR 2024

Seminar Leaders: Dyani Taff and Scott Oldenburg

Respondent: Steven Swarbrick

### **Abstracts:**

#### **“To Show a Noble Grace”: Protests in *Coriolanus***

Tracy Cummings (San Diego State University)

Shakespeare’s play *Coriolanus* seethes with seemingly unrelenting hostility. It opens with a mass protest that fails, and its hostility continues even after the titular character is persuaded by his mother, Volumnia, to not attack Rome. Both these protests align with historical events, not because the play dramatizes a particular food riot, as many scholars have argued. Protests are a common feature of life. For a protest to be successful, it usually needs to be nonviolent. Gene Sharp, a scholar of resistance theory, compiled a list of 198 examples of historical acts of peaceful resistance. Many of these resemble plot points in Shakespeare’s work, from fleeing, as seen in *As You Like It*, to funeral marches, which are depicted in *The Rape of Lucrece*. Scholars in resistance studies have identified qualities that characterize successful protests: They have a moral cause, appeal to different groups of people, draw in members of the regime, use a variety of tactics, and exercise discipline and resilience in the face of repression. Most importantly, they neither enact nor threaten violence. Isolated examples of such protests have been identified on every continent and in every century, but as scholars in the field admit, the history of nonviolent resistance has not been written. Fortunately, John Walter, a historian of early modern England, has documented successful and failed food protests. His account is reminiscent of the protests in *Coriolanus*. Analyzing two of the dramatized encounters reveals how Walter’s work supports the theorizing and historical work accomplished by resistance scholars and an irony regarding Coriolanus’s sedition. With Walter’s account, it becomes possible to situate literary depictions of protest in *Coriolanus* alongside theoretical and historical analyses of nonviolent resistance and to support the claim that nonviolence is a traditional, if surprising, form of protest.

#### **“Bloody hands were washed”: Resistance to Providence in *Cymbeline***

Peter Cibula (University of California, Irvine)

In Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, a prophetic providence appears to drive the play’s dissolution of resistance into imperial peace. *Cymbeline*’s Britain’s rebellion against Rome to assert its rights is providentially reintegrated into the “Roman eagle,” papering over the war that was just fought with “such a peace.” Meanwhile, Innogen’s resistance to *Cymbeline*’s intent to marry her to Cloten becomes doubly mooted by the play’s end – Cloten is killed and her lost

brothers become the heirs. This providential masking of conflict might appear to be capable of disarming all resistance, since the domestic strife between Posthumous and Innogen is apparently resolved with the same ease as the international politics. With an outpouring of forgiveness, the machinery of imperial and heterosexual reproduction Continue.

Yet, while the play's denouement apparently reconciles all parties, the purgation of the body politic that Maurice Hunt argues the play requires (killing Cloten and the Queen) also speaks to the repressed cost of resistance and reconciliation. Thus, even as the play might appear to show the potential for reconciliation and redemption as the soothsayer Philharmonus interprets Jupiter's prophecy, the fashioning of this peace is still written in blood. The human costs of this piece of historical fabrication bring us to the work of Hannah Arendt, who argues that human fashioning and fabrication is "always paid for"; Cymbeline shows the human price of the ideological work of the play's providential reconciliation. Only in forgetting the costs (and this is true of both Shakespeare's late plays more generally and in the co-option of resistance by capital) can we arrive at the cozy peace where "Pardon's the word to all."

### **Revenge Realness**

Samantha Dressel (Chapman University)

The concept of realness arises from queer theory, particularly BIPOC ballroom culture. Within that context, it refers to the skillful performance of gender and sexual conformity that allows a queer person to pass in white supremacist, heteropatriarchal society. Realness is a resistant performance that must be immaculate, as safety can only be found through emulation of hegemonic norms, norms which are destabilized through that very emulation. I intend to explore a backwards echo of realness in the context of English Renaissance revenge tragedy. I argue that reading stage violence through the lens of realness allows a more nuanced way to understand the power negotiations between the disempowered revenger and their hegemonic oppressors, and to understand the the collapse of performance, performativity, and reality in the final bloodbath of a revenge tragedy. Rather than protecting the performer from violence as in its modern usage, realness instead allows the disempowered to create violence.

Ultimately, realness is a way of inscribing what is expected and recognizable while simultaneously undermining it across the genre. For example, realness is apparent in *The Spanish Tragedy* when the King does not recognize the actual deaths of the actors in the final playlet. Realness also gives us a new way to understand the strangeness of Gloriana's skull in *The Revenger's Tragedy* apparently passing well enough as a real woman for the Duke to kiss it deeply and ingest poison. Revengers perform realness with such skill that their persecutors never think to question them. Ultimately, I propose that the vocabulary of realness gives us a powerful new way to understand the distortions of reality in revenge violence as it unites the mimetic and metatheatrical threads of revenge violence with the powerful subversion of extralegal justice.

## **“Lucrece’ sov’reignty”: Women, Kings, and Political Embodiment in Shakespeare’s *Lucrece***

Kathryn Schubert (University of California, Irvine)

As Lucrece’s kinsmen jockey for power over her body in the final lines of Shakespeare’s *Lucrece*, her father laments her death using the image of the mirror: “Poor broken glass,” he cries, “I often did behold / In thy sweet semblance my old age new born, / But now that fair fresh mirror dim and old / Shows me a bare-boned death by time outworn” (1758-61). This language takes up a central concern of premodern Lucrece tales: the political potential inherent in the reading and manipulation of women’s bodies. Lucrece’s body—when pure, whole, and carefully governed—reflects masculine power and thus helps to construct it. This process of mirroring, however, is not limited to women: Lucrece reminds Tarquin that “princes are the glass . . . Where subjects’ eyes do learn, do read, do look” (602-16). Although they are positioned at opposite ends of the political spectrum, women and kings share key features of embodied being: exposure to constant reading, self-government that is not agentic self-control, and a bodily purity deeply vulnerable to corruption.

I argue that this mirrored embodiment allows Shakespeare to explore both the vulnerability at the heart of monarchy, and a radical relationship to sovereignty for political subjects whose bodies are most violently marked by power. Lucrece’s manipulation of her violated body aligns it closely with Tarquin’s, demonstrating that kingly and feminine bodies are equally corruptible. Her willing embrace of death takes this connection even further: a refusal to cohere that combines agency and surrender, it both destroys the feminine material upon which power is built and shatters the facade of royal invulnerability attached to the body of the king.

## **Embodied Levelling: Richard Overton’s Scenes**

John M. Archer (New York University)

The Levellers—a loose but highly-coordinated group of mid-seventeenth century anti-monarchists—drafted the first attempt at a written constitution in Britain and developed a sophisticated print-media mechanism for its propagation and ratification. In a range of colorful pamphlets, one of the movement’s leading figures, Richard Overton, formulated a “Defensive principle of resistance” based on self-preservation, which he casts as both a natural and a “humane” right. Juxtaposed with the “Politicke Bodie of this Commonwealth,” a supine and suffering body “fallen amongst a crew of thieves,” Overton frequently features his own beaten body. Describing recurrent arrests by various police powers on behalf of parliament, well to the right of the Levellers by the mid-1640s, Overton recalls the para-theatrical pamphleteering of Thomas Nashe and the drama of previous generations itself, despite the closing of the playhouses. Contorting body and language like a stage clown, he makes street scenes visible through print circulation, exposing the violent domination that parliament inherited from the Stuarts through what seems like passive resistance. I plan to relate Overton’s active passivity to the bodily materialism of his theological tract *Mans Mortalitie*. Going beyond classic Marxist criticism by Margot Heinemann and Christopher Hill that recovered Leveller theatricality within a lost radical tradition, I principally note the Levellers’ troubling connection to natural law

defenses of private property and of an implicitly white, male, and able self. Rather than idealizing the Levellers as the source of a redemptive human-rights discourse, then, I am concerned with how the novel phrase “humane right” originally echoed over a violent landscape, before an exposed and passive figure, at once a social and a natural body.

### **Exploring Early Modern Environmental Resistance: The Baconian Philosophy of Interpreting Nature**

Jahidul Alam (University of Louisiana, Lafayette)

The debate among scholars regarding Bacon’s naturalistic philosophy is the main subject of this paper. While Francis Bacon asks people to use scientific knowledge to know the secrets of nature, scholars including Carolyn Merchant, Peter Pesic, Alan Soble, Richard Serjeantson, and others argue both sides of this—some objecting against Bacon’s asking for torturing nature by establishing human mastery over nature and some denying this in Bacon’s statement. Thus, this matter deserves further exploration as this debate exerts a significant milestone in early modern English naturalistic philosophy.

Bacon was dissatisfied with the classical/ancient philosophy of Aristotle and others because of their lack of evidence in their statements, and exaggerated reliance on the abstractness of things and matters. Thus, he establishes his philosophy of knowing nature by directly interacting with it in his *Novum Organum* while he goes for manifesting his philosophy in his *New Atlantis* including in some of his other writings. As I mentioned, some scholars have a very adverse evaluation of Bacon’s call for dominating nature. But I will argue that Bacon starts a form of environmental and intellectual resistance against the shallow reading of nature. Going against the surface relation between humans and nature, Bacon asks for a more complex, engaging, harmonious, and accurate relationship between them. This point can be established by exploring his naturalistic philosophy as established in the *Novum Organum* and the practical application of this in his unfinished *New Atlantis*.

### **On Students, *Stoner*, and Early Modern English Literature as a Specialized Field in English**

Adam H. Kitzes (University of North Dakota)

Broadly speaking, my project is concerned with moments in which the study of Shakespeare (and early modern literature) operates as a mode of resistance. I approach this topic by means of *Stoner*, the 1965 novel by John Williams, which traces the life of its title character in his career as a professor of English at the University of Missouri. Stoner’s character is shaped by several episodes, which involve encounters between professor and student. These range from the moment the title character discovers, through a recitation of Sonnet 73, the “love” that drives him to become a student and then professor of English, until his retirement from a career marked by several professional disappointments. In reading these passages, I draw attention to the ways that literary texts are used as defenses against the “outside world,” from combat (World War I) to

select students that end up marginalized in direct response to Stoner's expectations about what constitutes his practice. In drawing attention to these defensive aspects that define what Stoner acknowledges, not only as literature but as material for his study as a professor, I use Williams' novel to intervene into contemporary pedagogical practices, which aim to establish students as collaborators in the creation of the areas of specialization that collectively make up our discipline. Accordingly, offer a series of assignments, which seek to combine close textual analysis with research into the development of English as a discipline of higher education.

### **Protest and Possibility in *Pawâkan Macbeth: A Cree Takeover***

Nic Helms (Plymouth State University)

Failures of care in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* disable both people and land, and Renelitta Arluk's *Pawâkan Macbeth* connects this dynamic to both pre-colonial and contemporary Indigenous protest and storytelling. Building on Justin Shaw's work with disrupted care networks in Shakespeare's *Othello* (*Early Theatre* 2019), this concept of care is deeply rooted in the disability justice movement (which is always first racial justice). In *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes, "What does it mean to shift our ideas of access and care (whether it's disability, childcare, economic access, or many more) from an individual chore, an unfortunate cost of having an unfortunate body, to a collective responsibility that's maybe even deeply joyful?" (33). We are all dependent to differing extents and differing circumstances, and building our lives in that community of care lets us all lead better lives. Both early modern and contemporary protest meet *Macbeth*'s disabling failures of care head on in *Pawâkan Macbeth* by Renelitta Arluk, a contemporary "Cree Takeover" of Shakespeare's play set pre-colonization. Scotland is rewritten as the lands of the Plains Cree, today found in the Treaty Six territory of Saskatchewan. In her work, Arluk infuses the possibilities for protest in *Macbeth* into the ongoing Indigenous fight for environmental justice. As such, *Pawâkan Macbeth* displays the deconstructive possibilities of protesting against Shakespeare's colonial legacy through Shakespeare.

### **Queer Outlaws in *The London Prodigal***

Derrick Higginbotham (University of Hawai'i, Manoa)

The city comedy *The London Prodigal* (c. 1605) relies upon the prodigal son narrative for its main plot: Matthew Flowerdale squanders wealth, alienating himself from his father, Old Flowerdale, yet by the play's end, Matthew seemingly find his way back into father's favor via marriage to Luce, the daughter of a gentleman. Throughout the play, Matthew refuses to curb his spending on consumables, wasting wealth on temporary pleasures. No social institutions—neither the law nor marriage—can fully contain his impulse to consume, making Matthew appear a queer outlaw. In part, I will argue that Matthew's disregard for law and marriage expresses his protest against a certain type of masculinity suitable for early capitalism, one that insists upon a twinned logic of economic austerity and self-restraint.

Paradoxically, this comedy dramatizes a related protest via Luce's sister, Delia, who acts as a counterpoint to Matthew. During the play, she repeatedly counsels fiscal restraint to others, including Matthew. A seemingly minor character, Delia surprises everyone—characters and audiences alike—in the finale by announcing that she will never marry, so that her economic restraint parallels her spiritualized commitment to virginity, a rejection of the socially legitimate route to sexual activity. Delia's queer virginity indicates her refusal to be subject to anyone else, even as it echoes the restraint expected of Matthew. Delia and Matthew are both ultimately committed to extravagant actions as different types of queer outlaws: he overindulges, and she abstains. My paper will try to answer two broad questions: Why does *The London Prodigal* insist upon queer forms of economic and sexual austerity as a solution to consumerism, even as it suggests that such a solution is socio-culturally impossible via Delia's virginity? And what is the quality of this type of protest/resistance?

**Gan E. Mede: The Shakespearean Drag Heroine in *As You Like It***  
Hilary Gross (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)

Using Sawyer Kemp's work with "Transgender Rhetoric, Representation, and Shakespeare" as a jumping off point, I will start with the fact that Shakespeare's "very bad advice for passing" (Kemp 123) is actually very good advice for drag kinging. The camp performance of "waggish masculinity" makes a particular kind of sense in the context of drag performance, while both resisting and conforming to gender norms. Moving away from identifying characters themselves as genderqueer, non-binary, or trans, as the controversial "Shakespeare's They/Thems" education workshop recently attempted in 2023, this paper will rather consider the characters like Rosalind/Ganymede as an opportunity for virtuoso drag performance. Drag is a plastic term, expansively defined as inter-gender performance for the explicit purposes of entertainment, necessarily resistant to the binary even while depending on it. Rosalind/Ganymede is a diegetic frame for the early modern precedent to drag king personas and represent important steps in the development of the tradition of the western drag king. Drag performance, gender non-conformity, and trans identity are often co-constitutive, but there are also significant tensions between drag traditions and trans identities. Shakespeare's Rosalind helped establish logics which have committed great harm against trans populations, but the character and its performance also cultivated the exploration of, and admiration for, gender non-conformity. Premodern drag performance is both resistant and corrective; its legacy cannot fully be one without the other either.

**Luis Vélez de Guevara: Palace Dramatist and Political Critic**  
Alexander Samson (University College London)

Fantasies of flying, of occupying the bird's eye view, were associated with magical thinking and the imaginary surrounding witchcraft in the early modern period. Velez de Guevara's strange prose text *El diablo cojuelo* [*The Limping Devil*] departs from this device, overflying contemporary Madrid with satirical purpose. In previous work on the dramatist '¿Rebeldes or

liberadores? *Los amotinados de Flandes* [Rebels or Freedom Fighters: The Flanders Mutineers], I suggested that his social background and position at court made his dramatic work more overtly politically engaged than that of many of his contemporaries. Here I want to explore the political elements of his oeuvre, analyzing the relationship between satire, comedy, religion and contemporary politics, ending with a brief analysis of the CNTC's 2022 adaptation of *El diablo cojuelo* at the Almagro festival. Velez de Guevara is at once at the heart of the Habsburg court's cultural production, but at the same time one of its most trenchant critics. This paper will also consider how useful his play *La serrana de la Vera* might be in questioning normative models of gender and function as a test case for trans studies approaches to early modern dramatic texts.