

# Vigilance and Epistemological Uncertainty in Early Modern Drama (Seminar)

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## Seminar Abstracts

### Environmental Conjecture — Epistemological Uncertainty in Shakespeare's and Lyly's Green Worlds

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In John Lyly's *Galatea* (1588), a dynamic environment challenges conventional notions of pastoral timelessness. Situated near a coastal plain estuary plagued by frequent flooding, the protean landscape is linked to human activity and past sacrilege, creating an environment marked by uncertainty. My paper argues that this ambiguity is not limited to the physical landscape but extends to the community's responsibility for the precarious circumstances they face. The inhabitants attribute the transformations of the Humber environs to a history of human sacrilege, yet the extent of their agency remains uncertain – it is a matter of "conjecture" (1.1.61). I contend that *Galatea* dramatizes just such conjecture as a productive response to the uncertain relationship between humans and the nonhuman world.

Lyly's work prefigures conjectural environments later expressed in Jacques' ecological lament in *As You Like It* (1599), which likewise traces the emergence of environments without nature. The forest is a place of competing forms of vigilance tied to ownership, common use, environmental debt, and commodification, none of which can claim to be natural. My paper contends that once 'nature' relinquishes its claim to normative force, the staged environments of Early Modern comedy become open to renegotiation. Instead of prescribing a singular environmental practice, pastoral-comedic modes amplify human-nonhuman obligations enabled by the absence of an interpersonally valid concept of nature. Both *Galatea* and *As You Like It* underscore the clash of competing rights within unstable environments. In response, this strand of early modern comedy experiments with an ungrounded practice of conjecture as a means of negotiating incompatible versions of the green world.

### 'Framing' the Self in Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*: Feigned Certainty and Emergent Conformity

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In Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*, the titular character is repeatedly advised to adapt her behavior to shifting political circumstances. This paper explores ideas of what it

means to “frame” oneself when living under tyrannical conditions that call for one’s conformity to ever shifting, uncertain behavioral expectations. Explicit injunctions to frame oneself in the early modern period often arise from a need to subjugate the individual to a changing ideal, the parameters and advantages of which are largely prescribed by those in power. The paper explores Mariam’s uncertainty as well as her eventual decisive resistance to this pressure to conform through an interrogation of divergent meanings of the word “frame” at the turn of the seventeenth century. I argue that Mariam’s problem (what is often described as how to both *be* and *seem*) coincides with shifting beliefs about the relationship between internal and external presentations of the self and the power of language to create as well as denote emergent states of being.

### Chance Encounters and Vigilance in *Macbeth*

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Uncertainty and the unknown are constitutive for the early modern theatre on many levels. The early modern playhouse can be seen as a realm, which structures processes of acting, watching and being watched, and it also directs attention and watchfulness to the ways in which it functions as a medium itself. In constructing imaginary objects, the theatre, at the same time, exhibits on its own, at times precarious, epistemological status and reflects on political, cultural and religious discourses. Uncertainty also provides an epistemic setting that prompts vigilance and configures the relation between characters and between the audience and the stage. This paper looks at chance encounters as a characteristic constellation of asymmetrical knowledge that sparks vigilance and at the ways in which the play configure themselves as a chance encounter with the audience.

### “Looking Before and After”—Vigilance, Uncertainty, Liminality in *Elsinore* and Elsewhere

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As I thought about how to approach this seminar’s focus, *Hamlet* appeared to offer the most inviting and provocative, and thus altogether predictable laboratory for exploring expressions of “Vigilance and Epistemological Uncertainty in Early Modern Drama.” It was for exactly those reasons that I wanted to *avoid* looking at *Hamlet* for this paper. And for exactly those reasons, I failed. Shakespeare is often concerned with matters of surveillance, vigilance, observation, spying, listening in, hiding in shrubbery or behind arras or doors or in travelers’ chests or even just behind facial masks—but *why*? Why this obsession with sneaking around, hiding, masking, pretense, and spying on all of that by governmental or familial or even domestic agencies? It is tempting to assign this focus to a particular moment in Shakespeare’s writing career, and then to “find” that it follows some specific political or social event in these decades—e.g., those immediately before or immediately after Elizabeth’s death and James’s accession. But again, attempts to assign to these plays the function of *roman à clef* may be fun for tabloid fans but ultimately pointless. The key—or the “point”—lies in a recognition that despite the

human compulsion for “knowing” connected to every intellectual movement of the times, the urge to know is the ongoing subject and driving engine of his theater.

## Reading Shakespeare in Jewish Theological Frameworks: Caliban in the Rock

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This article defines Caliban of *The Tempest* through his own personal potential, from inside his being, rather than from the perspectives of the characters and critics who hate or heroically defend him. The framework I am using is Jewish theology though many philosophies and faiths can also illuminate Caliban. I argue that Jewish theological frameworks, specifically commentary from the 13<sup>th</sup> century Iberian rabbi Nachmanides, can help us to understand Caliban and demonstrate his path as a vigilant protector of his island. In the end, Prospero the colonizer announces his departure. While the “bigger light” can guide Caliban, he does not know which light, the light of the curse or the light of the blessing, will determine his path. He is left with the opportunity to promote blessings on his land and to watch over it as well as the beings on it. Everyone on the island must soon depend on the vigilance of Caliban who says, “I’ll be wise thereafter” (5.1. 295).

## Guarding Knowledge, Owning the Self

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The starting premise of this seminar is that vigilance is necessarily a response to inaccessible knowledge. This paper will reflect on the vexatious uncertainty generated by unknowability, and the devices to alleviate it, beginning with a dramatic ‘scene’ in Thomas Wright’s non-dramatic physiognomic manual which entwines watchfulness with credulity, tuning into the inherent theatre of vigilance. But it will intervene by offering a counterpoint with an alternative model: withholding knowledge to retain mastery over the self, but with consequences that can range from the chilling (as with the young man of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 94 or his Hal) to the ironic and pathetic (as with Shakespeare’s Cressida or Anne Sanders in the anonymous providentialist play, *A Warning for Fair Women*). In the process, it will explore categories of knowledge that elude existing paradigms – such as knowingness, unknowing and asymmetrical knowledge. From Emilia’s implicit knowledges and complicit unknowing in *Othello* and Malcolm’s false trial of Macduff in *Macbeth*, it will move to Edgar’s ‘trying’ of his freshly blinded and grief-crazed father by pushing him to leap off the edge of ‘Dover Cliff’ to examine the way in which epistemic asymmetry plays across dramatic fiction and theatrical practice. The audience of *King Lear* are on the side of the unknowing and thus, caught unawares. But this scene’s lesson in wariness serves them ill at the ending of the play: Cordelia does not get up and walk, she really is dead as earth. The ontology of the non-naturalistic theatre is emplotted into a theatre of knowledge where knowingness, unknowing and ignorance dance around each other. Edgar, especially in the Folio, is the most ‘knowing’ character - he knows all. But when he formulates his reasoned certitude, it feels more

obscene than mistrust: witness his theodicy as he condemns his brother. The paper will place these dramatic examples in a cross-generic and inter-discursive engagement with vigilance: from the poetics of wariness captured by Holbein's courtly faces to the doublespeak in Wyatt's poems and the tongue's duplicities in Jacobean court-plays; from the spiritual discipline of adherence as vigilance in Hooker and Augustine Baker to the knowingness of Herbert's play with his God; from the mercantile virtue of 'taciturnitas' to its polar opposites in three dramatic characters: Jonson's figure of incorrigible credulity, Bartholomew Cokes, his risk-taking deep-player Volpone who defies calculus, and Shakespeare's reckless merchant Antonio who hazards all. Ultimately, the paper will interrogate the affective, generic and ethical possibilities that vigilance as an epistemic condition makes available. It is not ready to prove a thesis; instead it will open up to an epistemic position that is fugitive even to its own subject, but which offers dramatists material for forging subjecthood in unexpected ways, often 'acutest at its vanishing' (to use Wallace Stevens's phrase).

### Unknown Things in The Merchant of Venice

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This paper re-examines The Merchant of Venice's engagement with changes in law in early modern England from the perspective of mathematics, particularly in relation to the emergence of a fully symbolic algebra. It seeks to coordinate the representation of unknowns in algebraic equations with the changing ways in which English legal discourse established both unknown intentions and the ostensible facts in a case.

### Uncertainty, providence and risk in Vondel's *Noah* (1667)

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My paper will examine the tragedy *Noah* (1667), one of the last works of Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679), the greatest tragic poet of the seventeenth century Dutch Republic, and sometimes viewed, by those taking a biographical approach to his dramatic work, as his swan song. Both the *Noah*, and Vondel's tragedy about the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644, *Zungchin*, published in the same year, are conceived as dramas that open up questions about the global; about the connection of the local and singular to the universal, and about the troubling relationship between world history as human history, and history as the unfolding of god's providential plan. While *Zungchin* ponders the meaning of the fall of a world empire against the backdrop of Jesuit missionary effort in China, *Noah* is situated in the mid-seventeenth century debates about the nature of the Flood. Against La Peyrère's attempt to re-interpret the event of the Flood described in Genesis as a local catastrophe, that had no influence outside the world of the Ancient Middle East and the Mediterranean, Vondel's play dramatizes the flood as a universal catastrophe; a climactic point in geological terms and in salvation history. At the same time, the play raises questions about the interpretation of natural signs, and the fundamental (un)knowability of nature which bring to the fore the conflict between an older, Mosaic science, and a new, mechanistic and Spinozistic philosophy of nature. Traversing these contexts, I will examine the tragedy's proliferating nautical imagery, that involve a complex of ideas about labour, craft, salvation, peril and risk, that connect back to Vondel's early poems in praise of navigation, in which he had championed the cause

of the East Indies Company during the height of Amsterdam's imperial ambitions, as well as more traditional devotional and typological readings of the Genesis story. Bringing to the fore the different perspectives on the Ark as either synergistic work of human labour and divine grace, utopian political community or instrument of divine surveillance and penitential discipline, voiced at different times by Noah, his children and his opponents, the play adumbrates, I contend, some of the fault lines of late-seventeenth century thinking about providence, risk and uncertainty.

## Speech Prefixes/Character/Bodies/Knowledge

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Speech prefixes are a central aspect of dramatic literature, defining the borders of specific characters and dividing dialogue into individual speeches. However, too often, they are examined only for bibliographical information but not for their powerful semantic positions. In this essay, I explore the potentiality within speech prefixes for their ability to craft and create character, especially when they are embodied by an actor in performance. This connection of identity to embodiment becomes a vector that can be explored through recent epistemological and phenomenological work in the field of trans\* studies. I specify this examination through the text of Fletcher and Massinger's *Beggars Bush*. This rarely explored early modern text exists in two key early versions that approach these issues differently. As this play emphasizes disguise and essentialized identity, it offers a fruitful example in considering what a reader/audience member does know, does not know, or should know. This exploration hopes to uncover the various ways that conflicting speech prefixes influence the reception of character identity within a dramatic text.

## A Dog and a Clown Walk into a Bar: Towards an Animal Comedy

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For much of *The Two Gentleman of Verona's* critical reception, Crab the dog has served as a byword for the play's perceived formal defects. In recent decades, as the play has undergone a transvaluation from a failed comedy to a comedy *about failure*, Crab has shifted from the bad marks of a novice playwright to a stroke of Shakespeare's metatheatrical genius. Critics now argue that he is out of place, yes, but that is the point. Bert States and Bruce Bohrer observe that Crab is a "real dog among pretend people," an animal "conspicuously not identical with their characte[r]" onstage beside human actors performing *as characters*. Launce sets up the joke, calling attention to his pet's complete lack of pretense, and Crab serves as the punchline by simply existing.

In this essay, I argue such a metatheatrical reading of the onstage dog is undergirded by an anthropocentric grammar of performance. This reading not only impedes our imagination of what humans and animals, especially domesticated animals, can accomplish together. Moreover, I worry that the metatheatrical warrant for Crab's inclusion in the play misapprehends what makes his and Launce's scenes funny in the first place. There is an aesthetic pleasure to watching animal performance that is

not exhausted by cynical accounts of rapt credulity, followed by the sober “realization” that the dog is “just a dog.” Other comedic possibilities exist, possibilities that are no less theoretically rich. Apropos the keynotes of this seminar, I query what kinds of vigilance are demanded of audiences when they are called to focus on a dog who trots onstage and ostensibly does nothing. How might Launce and Crab’s schtick yield greater attention to the onstage dog as *someone*, rather than merely *something*? What I am offering is the occasion to take a step back and reimagine drama—“this most anthropocentric of the arts,” to quote Una Chaudhuri—in terms that accommodate animals, rather than categorically exclude them.