

## SAA 2025 Seminar 29: Personation

Convenors: Emily MacLeod and Bailey Sincox

Respondents: Sawyer Kemp and Katherine Schaap Williams

### Participants

J.K. Barret: “The Worser Sole”: Failures of Imagination in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*

Early on in William Shakespeare’s *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia disguises herself as a male page named Sebastian in order to follow her beloved, Proteus. She shortly discovers that Proteus has cast her aside in favor of his best friend Valentine’s love interest, Silvia. When Proteus employs Sebastian (the disguised Julia) to woo Silvia on his behalf, Silvia seeks information about Julia, concerned to learn more about Proteus’s character and motives by learning about his former beloved. In response, Sebastian invents a theatrical memory—one in which Julia wept at Sebastian’s performance—to answer Silvia’s query. In this paper, I show how Sebastian’s words open for the play a framework for impersonation and imaginative experience that seeks to blur the lines between characters. The effect is particularly notable in a play in which a central pair of friends, Proteus and Valentine, stray from the ideals and commonplaces (especially likeness and indistinguishability) familiar in the period from Cicero and Aristotle’s influential theories of friendship. In considering the slippages and boundaries that complicate (and sometimes define) relationships throughout the play, I will attend to how Shakespeare uses pairs of mutually involved characters to investigate how personation records imaginative failure.

Emma Bradford: ‘Read it for Restoratives’: Personation as Physic in *Pericles*

In *Pericles*, speech functions as a tool of deception and restoration that shapes the play’s evolving landscapes of loss and renewal. This paper explores how speech is equated with medicine throughout the play. By attending to the effect that healing northern winds have on Marina’s birth, I argue that Marina’s speeches provide not only social but also *physical* remedies for her listeners. The heroine’s innate health and its contrast to her antagonists’ ailments are best understood through the lens of Marina’s atmospheric inoculation, which shields her from the corrupting southern winds that linger behind the spread of disease across *Pericles*’ Mediterranean.

The paper also suggests that the contrast between Marina’s words and those of her antagonists represents the difference between “impersonation” and “personation.” The play continually contrasts false and true acting. While the incestuous royals of Antioch and the secretly murderous Queen Dionyza perform honor to mask their inner corruption, Marina acts solely in ways that reveal her inner virtue, using the expression of her purity to combat the vile. *Pericles* suggests that personation—that is, the performance of one’s true qualities—serves as a powerful and trustworthy form of medicine in the play, particularly as a remedy for those who dissimulate honor. Future editions of this project will expand the analysis of personation in *Pericles* to include a comparison with the Lady’s performance in Milton’s *Masque at Ludlow Castle*, where a young aristocratic woman takes on the rare speaking lead in a court performance.

This comparison will explore how personation can be utilized to protect women's bodies and heal their corrupted environments.

Emily Coyle: Theatrical Investments

In the literature that both praises and condemns professional acting in the Renaissance, "personation" frequently describes a superb act of artifice, or a phenomenal sleight-of-hand. The audience knows that what they are witnessing is a fiction, and yet personation, when done well, eclipses this perceptual knowledge. There is perhaps no better quotation that exemplifies personation's dazzling misrepresentations than the one supplied by John Webster in Overbury's Characters. In the entry for "An excellent Actor," Webster writes: "what we see him personate, we think truly done before us." Terms other than personation could readily describe the bewildering and phenomenal process that Webster puts into words: imitation, mimesis, and mimicry are just some. This paper proposes another term for personation's confounding phenomenal effects: mystification, a term that is closely allied to Marx's concept of commodity fetishism. Mystification permanently fixes personation to the production and circulation of value in London's ever-expanding leisure and entertainment economies. To read personation as not just an effect of acting but one that permanently links theatrical labor to the creation of value, means to uncover the way that Shakespearean drama transforms personhood into an attractive, bewildering, and insidious commodity.

Allison Deutermann: The Persons of the Play: *Antony and Cleopatra*

This paper will examine the relationship between iterability, fame, and personation on the early modern stage. By the early seventeenth-century, the title characters of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* had become not quite caricatures, but heavily "characterized"--a word that could mean engraved and imprinted, on the one hand, or represented or portrayed on the other. Already widely available as cultural referents, whose stories were recounted in a range of classical and contemporary texts, Antony and Cleopatra were popularized even further by the commercial stage: embodied forth in multiple plays put on by different companies, and performed within a system that prized repetition. It is against this theater-historical backdrop that I take up *Antony and Cleopatra's* investigation of the wearying effects of fame, and of the destructive impact various forms of attention could have on their subjects. My paper will argue, first, that Cleopatra becomes a crucible for thinking through the stage's publicization of its "persons" (what we now call dramatic characters). Second: as a female character played by a boy actor, Cleopatra makes visible the very real risks associated with a specific kind of iterability in performance--that of the apprenticed boy player who acts a number of women's parts until he can do so no longer, aging out of the "type" he plays (and, possibly, out of his role within the company).

Jonathan Holmes: Personation Using Minimal Disguise

I am very interested in the elements and material conditions of early modern theater that in some ways seem to undermine a sense of characters on stage resembling real persons. My paper will focus on an element of disguise common in early modern drama that I think of as minimal disguise. Simple disguises that involved only a change of a cloak or a false beard could be donned quickly, and because disguises had to be simultaneously transparent to the audience and

impenetrable to other characters, their impenetrability was conventional rather than realistic. There was no need for a disguise to be capable of actually fooling anyone, and the need for disguises to be transparent to the audience created an incentive for them to be minimal. For example, in Marston's *The Malcontent*, immediately after Altofronto reveals himself to the audience in a soliloquy at the end of 1.3, Celso enters and appears to recognize the former duke despite his disguise. Also in 1.4, when Bilioso enters and interrupts Celso's conversation with Altofronto, Altofronto reestablishes his disguise with the simple stage direction, "*Malevole shifteth his speech*" (1.4.43). There is no apparent change in his appearance, only a change in his voice.

Chris Klippenstein: "Rude am I": Politeness, Personae, and Rough Speakers

Rather than exploring personation as an overlap between an actor and a character, this short paper experiments with thinking about the performance within the performance: instances when a character self-consciously portrays themselves in a particular way, without going so far as to overtly adopt a disguise. I read Shakespeare's *Othello*, with a brief nod to *Coriolanus*, to explore the role of rhetoric — and specifically, the place of politeness — in relation to a character's self-depiction (or persona) in a particular moment. How does strategic courtesy intersect with the stereotype of the rough-hewn, rough-spoken soldier to which Othello and Coriolanus both adhere? And what role does speech play in the process of personation?

Sylvia Korman: Armin's Prostheses: Props and Personae in *The History of the Two Maids of More-Clacke*

Robert Armin's play *The History of the Two Maids of More-clacke* is full of references to plays written by Shakespeare for the company with which Armin performed as clown, references that run the gamut from slightly familiar language, to parody, to open plagiarism. The artistic intent of this patchwork intertextuality is hard to discern—was Armin making his best attempt at writing what he knew, earnestly if ineffectively imitating the plays he has seen from the wings and from comic subplots? Was he sending up a theatrical canon he himself played a role in forming? Was he cynically ripping off a more successful playwright? I argue that Armin's play reflects its author's relationship to personation. Following the prosthetic relationship between a clown and his roles, *Two Maids* establishes a theatrical ethos in which all dramatic elements are like stage properties: modular, movable, and open to appropriation.

Genevieve Love: Prosthesis, Personation, Disability Performance in Richard III

I pose Richard III as a generative example for questions around personation, particularly in relation to disability performance. Richard sparks with definitions of personation from our shared seminar document like Weimann and Bruster's "playing the character as an open secret" (as in his opening soliloquy), and Baker's "onstage figures behaving as actors (rather than... actors carrying out their profession)"—a distinction that performances of Richard tend to blur, especially in performances by nondisabled actors. Turning to two performances of Richard by actors with disabilities (Katy Sullivan and Michael Patrick Thornton), I find grounding in Weigert's definition of personage: "personage points to an activity whereby an animate or inanimate figure assumes the guise of a character, while retaining its distinctive qualities and

identity.” In performances of Richard by disabled actors, this definition points at the hinge between the actor’s body, with its “distinctive qualities” of disability, and the disabled character. This joint of personage may include prosthesis; disabled performances of Richard animate the dynamic personating possibilities of prosthesis. I suggest that one way of distinguishing nondisabled from disabled performances of Richard III is to note that while the prosthetic journey of the nondisabled actor (the careful calculation of risk, the crafting of silicone) must all take place before the show; the prosthetic journey of the disabled actor is the journey of the character, and takes place live. The nondisabled Richard, simulating disability, has earned their curtain call before the play begins; the disabled Richard earns their curtain call in a process, a performance, that takes place with playgoers as witness.

Bradley Ryner: *Controversiae* and Character in *Titus Andronicus*

This paper will argue that *Titus Andronicus* engages deeply with the formal structure and thematic concerns of the rhetorical exercises known as *controversiae*. A staple of grammar school education, *controversiae* consist of two laws that prompt contradictory verdicts when applied to a contrived situation, giving rhetors the opportunity to argue which verdict should prevail. Examples of *controversiae*, primarily those by Seneca the Elder, circulated widely in manuscript and print. I argue that *Titus Andronicus* especially foregrounds the element of *ethopoeia* that occurs when rhetors construct the personalities and motivations of the persons involved in the case. The effect of this foregrounding is markedly different than the production of apparent interiority that is often taken as the hallmark of Shakespearean charactercraft. Rather, in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare (and maybe Peele and maybe, later, Middleton) focuses on the external rhetorical operations by which persons are constructed in ways that justify or disallow violence against them. In the figures of Aaron and Lavinia, the play makes evident that what is at stake in such *ethopoeia* is less the revelation of knowledge about an individual character than the construction of epistemologies of race, gender, and sexuality.

Nancy Selleck: The Ontology of Personation: Early Modern “Actors” and Audiences

Early modern theatre practitioners understood “personation” as a physical process that included its audiences. This is one reason Thomas Heywood’s discussion of the actor or “personator” so quickly becomes a discussion of the audience’s visceral experience of the *character* personated. It is mainly that character-audience connection I focus on here in an effort to move beyond a semiotic approach to audiences as observers of stage action from across an ontological divide, to take account of the more full-bodied cognitive experience of direct encounter between character and audience afforded by early modern playing conditions. Heywood’s analysis of the bewitching quality of “lively” action reflects an audience-based *as-if* process also captured in other early modern accounts of theatre practice, whereby the playgoer experienced a sense of being physically engaged and even in dialogue with the fictional persons on the stage. Focusing particularly on the way that, in early modern use, “actor” refers not only to the player but to the character he plays, I take that ontological overlap as a key element of the performance practice by which the early modern stage engaged playgoers as embodied witnesses of its action and collaborators in its *as-if* enterprise.

Scott Trudell: Angel Personages and Aspirational Whiteness in Henry Shirley's *The Martyred Soldier*

This paper takes up one of the most prominent forms of personation in medieval and early modern English performance culture, namely the child angel—a ubiquitous feature of visual art and civic pageantry from the fourteenth century through the seventeenth. Child angels have not received much attention in theatrical historiography, and they do not satisfy modern demands for naturalistic personalities, psychological depth, or dramatic arcs. And yet they were a regular feature of the early modern theater, surfacing in plays ranging from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1595) to Thomas Dekker and Philip Massinger's *The Virgin Martyr* (1620). My seminar paper focuses on Henry Shirley's *The Martyred Soldier* (c. 1618), a play about the Vandal persecution and martyrdom of Christians, set in fifth-century North Africa. In Shirley's play, the “bright” and “white” form of the angelic child is linked to discourses of religion, racialization, and white supremacy, participating in the cultural construction of what (influenced by scholars including Dennis Britton and David Sterling Brown) I term “aspirational whiteness.” I bring *The Martyred Soldier* to our seminar because it invites us to consider the ways in which dramatic personation on the early modern stage is sometimes not about fictive personhood at all. Instead, we see an inter-performative associational practice by which the representational conventions of civic pageantry shape how audiences understand and experience theatrical roles.

Josephine Wang: Christ's Passion, White Skins, and the Threat of Risibility

While viewing a Passion scene, Lodovico Castelvetro is struck by the risibility of the spectacle. He writes of the scene as having provoked laughter in the crowds, “producing the effect not of tragedy but of comedy.” Less a moral censure, Castelvetro arrives to a critique of the bathetic attempts at verisimilitude in performance and, ultimately, the impossibility of *Imitatio Christi*. Likewise, these details identified by Castelvetro could be argued as typifying English playing. Notably, in the English counterpart, the crucifixion of Christ was depicted by a performer in a white leather bodysuit. What kind of playing do these leather skins disclose? This paper considers the translation of this garment onto the Shakesperean stage, from the alloyed grounds of festive games, cycle drama, and plays, to the co-constitutive formation of material, genre, and identity in the theatre.