

SAA 2025: Reimagining the Female Life Cycle in Shakespeare's Time

Abstracts

“No womanhood? Ah, beastly creature”:

queering old(er) reproductive bodies in Shakespeare (*TA*, 2.2.182)

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Early modern medical discourse, grounded in humoral and Galenic medicine, viewed biological sexual differences as essential but not necessarily “fixed or immutable” (Fisher 2006, 6). Doctors tried to establish sexual difference by looking at the three physiological functions that allowed for a definition of a woman: menstruation, parturition and lactation. Yet, even with these seemingly fixed functions, female bodies resisted enclosing within totalizing narratives and destabilized the sex/gender system. What contributed to such a destabilization was the time-bound and cyclical nature of the female reproductive capacity that changes over the course of a woman’s life. For instance, it was believed that women who ceased menstruating became more masculine, while young women who were *too* active bled less and thus could turn into viragos suspended between masculinity and femininity (Mendelson and Crawford 2000, 21). Thus, within the early modern contradictory medical consensus, seemingly immutable biological functions did not guarantee a materialization of a stable gender binary. Numerous historical and fictional examples demonstrate that the organization of female social life into sexually inactive maids, reproductive wives and old matrons past their childbearing years proves inadequate to capture a wealth of nonnormative experiences of early modern women.

As I wish to argue in this paper, relatively older, but still reproductive, women pose a challenge to the above conceptualization of the female life cycle as well as the gender binary laboriously constructed in medical texts. Tamora in *Titus Andronicus* and Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* have been read against exoticizing and racializing patriarchal narratives. Yet, there has been relatively less research devoted to the triangulation of their constructed gender expression, relatively advanced age and reproductive capacity. Both Queens have been investigated in terms of their ‘monstrous’ excess, ‘devilish’ skills in bewitchment and usurpations of male prerogatives. Simultaneously, part of their irresistible sexual allure lies in the fusion of their maturity and maternal (reproductive) promise. In my paper I wish to read Tamora and Cleopatra against early modern medical ideas regarding the female reproductive life cycle and advancing age to argue for a queer reading of the female reproductive body.

References

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Problems in Biography: Writing the Life of Mary Frith/Moll Cutpurse

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Mary Frith/Moll Cutpurse (ca. 1584–1659) is the notorious inspiration for Middleton and Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl*. In literary sources, Frith is typically depicted as a person presumed female at birth who dressed in both women’s and men’s clothing and appeared once on the all-male London public stage. Frith also appears in legal and institutional records as a pickpocket, a violator of sumptuary laws, and a resident of Bethlem Hospital. In the 20th century, literary representations of Frith became a focal point for feminist scholarship on the early modern period; Frith was a fruitful starting place for challenging assumptions about gender and sexuality, particularly in New Historicist research. While Frith was taken up as a generative subject by so many writers, Frith did not leave behind any of their own writing—so all we have are other people’s words.

In this paper, I raise questions about writing the lives of early modern women and nonbinary people as part of my larger project of writing a biography of Frith. Biography raises problems of representation, about how we re-tell familiar life stories so they can be read in new ways. I hope to re-vision the feminist social biography as a form for writing Frith’s life. Frith’s life as a gender-fluid person in 17th-century London intersects with criminal-legal systems, theater and performance cultures, poverty and urban migration, and the rise of scientific justifications for binary sexual difference—all relevant sites for ongoing conversations about trans/queer histories and life stories. The project’s goal is to reach non-specialist readers who want to access a longer history of gender-nonconforming existence and flourishing. Drawing on recent trans, queer, and feminist scholarship on life writing and temporality, this paper aims

to raise questions about names and pronouns, carceral and theatrical archives, and the legacies of 17th-century thinking about sex and gender in our 21st-century lives.

Girls' Legibility and Literacy in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Titus Andronicus*

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In the midst of the macabre scene of literacy and dismemberment in *Titus Andronicus*, in which Lavinia reveals through writing in Latin the names of her perpetrators and their crime, her father invites her into his library: "Some book there is that she desires to see./Which is it, girl...Come, and take choice of all my library" (4.1.31-34).

My paper examines scenes of girls' schools and 'schooling' to develop understanding of the place of education in the female life cycle in Tudor England. Contexts I consider include Henrician curricular reforms supporting the teaching of Greek at universities and grammar schools, humanism and girls' places and methods of tuition, and the early modern English classical reception and culture of translation. The paper deepens understanding of female literacy in the plays and complicates assumptions about girls' education and virtue in the period.

One path to Tudor girls' literacy involves access to their fathers' libraries. Records of historical girls' learning depending on access to their fathers' book collections (Jane Lumley and Mary Bassett, for instance) work alongside scenes of girls and schooling in Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Girls' access to book collections bears on developmental questions regarding the place of education in shaping early modern girlhood and preparing girls for contributions to reform movements in the period.

Exploring paths to early modern girls' literacy helps to reimagine the female life cycle through deepening understanding of the cultural significance of Tudor-period girls' education, its dangers and subversions, often through its progressive markings. Girls' tuition in Greek in particular challenges assumptions about the intersection of girls' education and virtue in the plays.

The material politics of girlhood in Mary Wroth and Margaret Cavendish

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In my essay, I investigate the literary resonances of seventeenth century English decorative objects of the dressing room, spanning from the Jacobean era through the Restoration, examining the symbolic power of embroidered cabinets and caskets in the writings of Margaret Cavendish and Mary Wroth. I argue that Wroth and Cavendish use this familiar dressing room object, which might be used to hold jewels, accessories of dress, and private (sometimes political) writings to stage questions about the intersections of girlhood and women's political identities in the period. I focus on the cabinet as a repeated trope in writings by both women, arguing that Cavendish's writings intentionally call to mind the embroidered raised work cabinets that had a brief but intense period of popularity in the mid-seventeenth century. These material objects were not only fashionable containers for dressing room objects but were themselves a form of political craft for girls and young women in the period. As Anne Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass have shown, these objects allowed girls to both demonstrate their proficiency in textile arts and represent a variety of political subjects including especially Royalist monarchs, engaging with the period's fraught questions of political authority. I argue that Cavendish's plays, autobiographical writings, and paratexts use the political resonance of these objects to harken back to her own "political girlhood," and to put forth her an aristocracy-centered Royalist politic as a way of responding to the political traumas of her youth. Further, I show how Cavendish builds upon earlier writers such as Wroth, who underscored the power of the cabinet as a political object and literary cipher that operated across women's life cycles. Both writers, I argue, capitalize on the ways in which these objects are implicated in interwoven practices of dress and their status as representatives of women and girls' textile work.

"Age cannot wither her" (*A&C* 2.2.234-235)

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In Jaques's infamous summation in the Seven Ages of Man speech (*AYLI* 2.7.139-166), aside from his manifest bitterness about *all* seven ages –from puking infancy to blind, ageusic,^[1] toothless decrepitude, it's interesting to note its exclusive focus on "masculine" positions, and to wonder why we don't find a parallel catalog, a "hers" to balance the "his" of this set, anywhere in the plays (corrections and suggestions welcome). Instead, we have long panoramic "histories" tracing, e.g., the career of Margaret of Anjou from 15-year-old "prize" to cursing crone, across the whole First Tetralogy., or Cleopatra's revisited girlishness in recalling how she swapped outfits with Antony and played soldier, while simultaneously reflecting on her own perceived aging. In contrast, while noting with some grace that the "players" are men *and* women, Jaques contracts "one man's" acts into to a mere two dozen lines. We do

see old women portrayed in detailed personalities in many of the plays, but for the most part they come into and leave their plays freeze-framed at one or another particular age, without the time-lapsed “arc” that the men get in Jaques’ speech, and also without their doddering decrepitude. In this paper I will focus on the final two of those “acts” as embodied in several of Shakespeare’s female characters: Nell Quickly, Margaret of Anjou, the Pharoah Cleopatra, all of whom get the bulk of Shakespeare’s atten(ua)tion near the ends of their represented lives, whose status as elders is often overlooked in studies of these plays, and yet whose impact on the plays’ outcomes is significant and indeed consequential.

^[1] *Ageusia* is the complete inability to taste as defined by the National Institutes of Health: (<https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/Documents/health/smelltaste/NIDCD-Taste-Disorders.pdf>.) Significantly, neither old age nor the aging process is cited among its possible causes.

**“Life by Sevens”: Margaret Russell Clifford’s Autobiographical Epistle
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In June 1591 Margaret Clifford (née Russell), countess of Cumberland addressed an overwhelmingly sad, yet fascinating autobiographical memoir in letter form to the cleric Dr. Layfield. It is an account occasioned by a terrible tragedy, though one not uncommon in the lives of early modern noblewomen: the deaths in quick succession of her two young sons, the Clifford heirs. Brief though the account is, it stands apart for its vivid articulation of an elite woman’s subjective experience, strongly marked both by her immediate grief and by her persistent apprehension of dislocation, of being unhomed in the world. It bears recognizable marks of autobiography in that it represents a self-consciously crafted effort to structure and interpret the overall pattern of life events that Margaret casts as full of “alteration” and quick change, of “contrary hopes” and outcomes, of actions at once agreed to and unwilling. Margaret calls to attention her explicit borrowing from masculine self-representations to divide her life’s stages into “sevens”: “Men commonly divide their life by sevens, observing therein their great observations, so mean I, to divide mine well known most of them to thee[.]” Overfamiliarity with Jaques’ speech in *As You Like It* has led previous commentators to misrecognize the structural paradigm Margaret adapts as the Seven Ages of

Man. But she is parsing her life not into these seven generic ages characteristically imagined to encompass the trajectory of a man's growth and decline but instead into septenaries or seven-year phases, each a new start seemingly promising renewed peril or possibility. The paper explores how she deploys the lens of the septenary in conjunction with exploratory structural metaphors (especially the dance of grief) to search for pattern and purpose in her unfolding life.

Persistent Motherhood and Second Childishness: Gendered Aging in Recipes and Onstage

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“Is it not very strange,” the surgeon Ambroise Paré asks, “that there have been women, who troubled with a fit of the Mother, have lien three whole daies without motion, without breathing, or pulse that were any way apparent, and so have been carried out for dead?”^[1] He offers no further observations on these near death experiences, but his wonderment suggests that he suspects others have witnessed women in this liminal state. Instead, he leaves these women, linked to their childbearing years by their “fit[s] of the Mother,” lingering on a list of medical curiosities. This proves a remarkable contrast to another medical scene invoked in recipes for Dr. Stevens’s Water, a cure included in dozens of manuscripts and print recipe books, which contained instructions for creating medical cures as well as culinary dishes. Recipes for Dr. Stevens's Water make grand promises not just for restoring health but preserving it into advanced age – for male patients, at any rate. The water’s claims not only underscore how rarely the ages of older women are explicitly mentioned in recipe books; they also highlight the connection between ideas of female usefulness and reproductive potential, as well as the perceived link

between women's fertility and age. The manuscripts thus reinscribe for their users a sense of proper, gendered aging, one that can be traced to Shakespeare's later comedies.

[1] Ambrose Paré, *The workes of that famous chirurgion Ambrose Parey translated out of Latin and compared with the French.* by Tho: Johnson (London, 1665), 668.

“Peevish Chastity”: Virginité in the Early Modern Female Life Cycle
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The maid stage of a woman's life in the early modern female life cycle was defined by her virginal status. To transition into the next stage of wife, the loss of their chastity is necessary upon marriage. But what of the girl characters in early modern English literature, such as Marina in Shakespeare's *Pericles*, who demonstrate little interest in marriage or romance? Do they—and other female characters who choose to be celibate throughout their lives—remain in the liminal state of girlhood due to their chaste status, or do they disrupt the tripartite female life cycle?

This paper focuses on the depiction of resistant virginité in Shakespeare's *Pericles*. I contend that through her resistant virginité, Marina simultaneously embodies and resists the constraints of her age and gender category. My argument is shaped by scholarship on early modern girlhood, medieval virgin martyrs, and the disease of virgins, otherwise known as greensickness, as all these subjects influenced early modern understanding of virginité. I am also influenced by Theodora Jankowski's influential work on queer virginité, however, I plan to add to her central argument that girls who choose to prolong their virginal status do so in a queer way that resists the early modern sex/gender system, by focusing on how it problematizes the female life cycle of maid, wife, and widow. This paper is a starting point for my dissertation chapter on resistant virginité and queer girlhood.

Shakespeare's badass old moms on film: Prospera and Volumnia

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This paper examines the aged mother in Julie Taymor's *The Tempest* (2010) and Ralph Fiennes' *Coriolanus* (2012). In the first film, one of Shakespeare's most famous patriarchs is gender-swapped to Prospera, played by Helen Mirren. In the androcentric and militaristic *Coriolanus*, Vanessa Redgrave plays the central female role of Volumnia. Although the films differ in many ways, from genre and setting to target audience, Prospera and Volumnia are alike. Both women are of elite status and are desexualised as aged widows (though only Prospera's husband is seen and mentioned in a 'blink and you'd miss it' flashback). Prospera and Volumnia's main similarity is that they are coded as modern female archetypes: single working-moms and postmenopausal materfamilias. The implied strength, authority, and resilience of these single old moms is compounded by the fact that both characters are played by senior doyennes of stage and screen, Oscar-winners, and Dames. (Indeed, in recent years, the screen and media appearances of Redgrave, and of Mirren especially, have helped increase the culturally visible of older women). For all the points of connection between these characters though, Prospera and Volumnia have contrary narrative arcs. In this paper I argue that, for Prospera, being an older mother denies her the possibility of a happy ending. Her retirement does not promise a second chance or rebirth, only obsolescence and imminent death. I argue that Volumnia, in contrast, has a narrative of anti-decline. While her middle-aged soldier son deteriorates, in her old age Volumnia emerges as wise, vital, adaptable, and capable. Both films show senior matriarchs as holding considerable power and authority, then, but offer different takes on contemporary perceptions of maternity and female aging.