

Seminar 55: Troubling Freedom in Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama
SAA 2025

Natalie Suzelis

First as Farce: Unfreedom and Capitalist Exchange in The Comedy of Errors

Set between the ancient and the modern world, and written alongside the emergence of the transatlantic slave trade and global capitalism, *The Comedy of Errors* (1594) maps a dizzying circuit of exchange in both people and commodities. In first comparing *Errors* with its source, *The Menaechmi*, I highlight how Shakespeare's adaptation differs in its representations of credit, witchcraft, and enslavement. In these social formations and their contradictions, I show how the play imagines social reproduction in the ancient city as a confluence of residual, dominant, and emergent notions of value and exchange that are communicated through hybrid genres of comedy. The circuits of labor and exchange in *Errors* occur against the backdrop of a developing world system that relied—and still relies—upon dynamic forms of unpaid, underpaid, and enforced labor. Mapping these social formations not only helps position *Errors* vis-a-vis the origins of capitalism, it can also help us highlight how enslaved, unpaid, and underpaid labor functioned at this system's core through mediated processes of exchange. Finally, by examining how farce and irony operate in the play as sites of contradiction, I offer a reading that uplifts the irony of Dromio "unbound" as part of an undercurrent of farcical commentary on freedom and value that speak to the contradictions at the core of these emerging social formations.

Brayden Tate

"within point-blank of our jurisdiction regal": Troubling Freedom and Free Monarchy in 2 Henry VI

This paper focuses on how, in *2 Henry VI*, Shakespeare dramatizes a decline and fall of an ideal of English monarchy limited by law, in which an aspiring *rex*, York, attempts to rule by arbitrary will and not *lex*. I argue that, by putting the defense of hereditary rule into the mouths of the play's ostensibly Machiavellian characters and by making his virtuous, law-abiding rulers violate strict adherence to the hereditary principle, Shakespeare opens the way toward an alternative conception of political legitimacy, toward a form of politics where virtuous rule under the rule of law, not blood and/or will, determines legitimacy. This paper will be part of a chapter in my dissertation, *Staging the English Republic: Shakespeare and the Conditions of Liberty*. In the chapter, I look more extensively at the play's engagement with ideas of the "ancient constitution" and how these ideas come into contact with recent debates regarding pre-Civil War "republicanism" among historians of political and legal thought, from the "Cambridge School" to the students of Leo Strauss. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the use of violent imagery by York and his proxies in relation to the English constitutionalist tradition (particularly, Fortescue) in order to show how the play critiques defenses of both Machiavellian and hereditary rule, often in one stroke. I thus read the play as representing a struggle for freedom—specifically, as one recent monograph claims for the broader Shakespearean corpus, a struggle "over what freedom *means*" (emphasis original).

Kyle Grady,

The Tempest and Indefinite Terms of Subjugation

Early on in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Ariel requests release from Prospero's service. The spirit reminds the erstwhile Duke that he "did promise / To bate [Ariel] a full year," invoking temporal

parameters Prospero subsequently violates. This deferral patently serves Prospero's ends, rendering the terms of servitude and slavery openly manipulable relative to the prerogatives of European colonial administration. It also marks subjugation as, at least in part, inhering deferral. This paper is immediately interested in how *The Tempest* stages modes of circumscribed freedom, in part by waylaying Ariel and Caliban's pursuit of sovereignty. More broadly, this paper is interested in the historiographic implications of indefinite subjugation, particularly in relation to the modes of oppression that extend from the transatlantic slave trade. As I argue, we might read *The Tempest*'s deferrals here as historically affixed to a long history of perpetually postponed liberation. The play's alignment with what Rinaldo Walcott deems in the contemporary moment "long emancipation" helps index the early modern as constitutive of not only the present but also the ongoing.

Sara Stamatiades

"Liberty betrayed": The Meaning of Property in Aphra Behn's *Emperor of the Moon*

Aphra Behn's *Emperor of the Moon* (1687) was dismissed in scholarship for years for its over-the-top spectacle and slapstick leanings. However, during the last decade, critical attention towards the play has increased, as Behn's use of visual theatrics has been reframed as a political tool. Building upon Catherine Ingrassia's scholarship on "captivity," this paper privileges a related term that reorients our focus on the performative components of the play that once made it liable to critique: "property." While property can refer to possessions, it also describes stage objects used to create compelling theatrical worlds. In this paper, I examine a few moments where these meanings interplay in evocative ways to question: can people be props? In particular, I examine how various racialized characters in *The Emperor of the Moon* are figured as "props" – and how the play's finale may resist this categorization. While I initially favor a "celebratory" reading, I argue that Behn's epilogue complicates matters, revealing how the notion of freedom collapses in on itself.