

SAA 2025 Seminar: Violent Women in Early Modern Drama

Saturday, 22 March 2025, 4:30–6:30 pm

Room: **Fairfax A, Sheraton 3F**

Seminar Abstracts

Familial Sin and Maternal Violence in *A Warning for Fair Women*

Andreley Bjelland, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

“Familial Sin and Maternal Violence in *A Warning for Fair Women*” traces the concept of “staining” a child with maternal sin in the play and its accompanying pamphlet, suggesting that these cultural documents operate as a warning to parents, and especially mothers, about the importance of modeling Christian behavior. I demonstrate the stains that are presumed to haunt the children of adulterous and criminal mothers, exploring how *A Warning for Fair Women*, in particular, portrays the child of Anne and George Sanders as uniquely in danger of being stained due to early modern understandings of how a child was taught to absorb and imitate the world around them. While Anne Sanders attempts to change her children’s path at the close of the play, I argue the boy’s fate has been left intentionally ambiguous to serve violent mothers with a warning of the potentially lasting societal stains of their own sin.

Female Rage and Cursing in *Richard III*

Anne Enderwitz, Humboldt University, Berlin

The paper explores the rational and irrational aspects of Margaret’s cursing in *Richard III* through the lens of gender. Associated with witchcraft and fueled by passion, a force that is at odds with reason, the curse is also a rational, strategic act: an act of precise reckoning, an effective prediction and a well-timed political intervention that enables Margaret to claim agency. Poised between frenzied rage and political prognostication, her curse works within but also bends gender expectations for maximum impact.

Violent Mothers, Warrior Sons, and the Contradiction of Maternity on Shakespeare’s Stage

Jordan Ivie, Vanderbilt University

This paper argues that maternity in Shakespeare’s tragedies and histories is a fraught and contradictory identity. Women were expected to prioritize their children’s physical and moral health above all else, and mothers like *Coriolanus*’s Volumnia and *Titus Andronicus*’s Tamora attempt to fulfill this duty by channeling their own violent impulses through their sons for the purposes of honor, revenge, or glory. Violence in these women, however, creates overly violent

sons whose aggression leads to defeat and death. Volumnia's Coriolanus proves unable to temper his passion and dies for it, while Tamora's Chiron and Demetrius rape an innocent woman and are baked into pies for their mother to consume, thus losing their masculine identity altogether as they are subsumed back into the maternal body. Of course, other women who choose other paths to seek goodness or honor, like *Macbeth's* Lady Macduff or *Henry VI's* Queen Margaret, still lose their children in violent ways, but through the machinations of other villains. Shakespeare reserves a particular blame and unnatural horror for women whose own violence kills their sons, thus revealing the precarious balance required of women who must care for and defend their children without leading those children into fatal violence.

Anger and the Grammar of Violence in *The Tragedy of Mariam*

Anna Hegland, Carthage College

This paper explores anger as a type of violence leveraged by women in the early modern theater. Using Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*, it investigates the modes of violent expression afforded to women, and the role that language and (more specifically) grammar play in constructing embodied emotions like violent anger in performance. Through a discussion of a practice-based reading of this closet drama, I examine the language Cary uses to evoke her characters' strength of feeling and their attempts to harness linguistic power to enact real harm. By considering grammar as a measure of the potential for violent action, I argue that Cary works to illustrate the frustration of women's efforts to enact violence themselves.

"One good woman would beat away two or three": Violence as Sex on the Early Modern Stage

Bernadette Kelly, Wayne State University

My seminar paper explores how early modern dramatists associated violence committed by women with their sexual promiscuity and how genre changes the type of violence and the woman's level of sexual experience by examining Meretrix's comical interlude in *Cambises* and Beatrice-Joanna's tragedy in *The Changeling*. In both cases, Meretrix and Beatrice-Joanna's violence represents their sexual promiscuity, but the shift in genre and women's class statuses highlight what kinds of female violence an early modern audience would condone.

Profiling Alice: Arden of Faversham and the Psychology of a Female Murderer

Jennifer Kraemer, Texas Christian University

True crime is one of the most popular genres of podcasts, documentaries, and non-fiction books today, with new titles published daily, but true crime was also popular in the mass media of the Early Modern era. The first true crime play was *Arden of Faversham* (published in 1592), a work based on the 1551 murder of Thomas Arden, a former mayor of Faversham, by his wife, her lover, and several other conspirators. Before the crime was dramatized for the stage, various chronicles covered the event in their reportage of other events in the 1550s, and Holinshed's

Chronicles has the most detailed account and served as a major source for the play. However, compared to the report in Holinshed, the play shows a much deeper interest in understanding the criminal psychology of Arden's wife, Alice. In contrast to the *Chronicles*' portrayal of Alice as a hard-hearted "strumpet," *Arden of Faversham* creates a criminal profile for a character who, while longing for autonomy, instead finds herself completely controlled by romantic love.

The Amazons of *Las mujeres sin hombres* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Abby Klug, University of Massachusetts Amherst

This paper explores the contrasting portrayals of Amazonian women in Lope de Vega's *Las mujeres sin hombres* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Both playwrights manipulate Amazonian mythology to suit their dramatic needs, but while Lope's Amazons retain a degree of agency and challenge contemporary gender norms, Shakespeare's Hippolyta is subdued, absorbed into the patriarchal order. This paper investigates how these portrayals reflect the cultural and ideological contexts of Golden Age Spain and Elizabethan England, as well as broader themes of gender and power. Through textual analysis and historical context, the paper argues that Lope's Amazons, though eventually tamed by love, are portrayed with greater complexity and proto-feminist nuance, while Shakespeare's Hippolyta is relegated to a passive role that reinforces male dominance.

The Steep Path to Repentance: The Negative and Positive Example of the Husband-Murderer in Early Modern English Texts

Jennifer Lillian Lodine-Chaffey, Montana State University Billings

Early modern English publications frequently featured women who killed their husbands. While authors of these works sought to attract readers with violent and sensational narratives, they also used husband-murderers as negative exemplars. Directed at women, such publications warned female readers of the dangers of unchecked sins and the temptations of the devil. However, many of these same works highlighted the godly conversion of husband-murderers, revealing the multifaceted purpose of these texts.

Salome's Revenge: Storytelling as Violence in Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*

Heather Murray, University of North Georgia

Revenge drives the plot of Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*. Salome, the title character's sister-in-law, achieves retribution against Mariam through manipulative and considered acts of storytelling. The stories told by Salome are intended to be witnessed by others, and she strives to shape the response of these onlookers. Specifically, Salome takes revenge upon her sister-in-law Mariam by manipulating how others perceive her brother Herod as a husband, thus negatively affecting his authority as king. By doing so, Salome, alters in profound ways the

outcome of the play, ultimately causing Mariam's death. Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* therefore leads to a reconsideration of the successful early modern revenger as the character who tells the most persuasive story about the past, thereby fixing meaning on his or her acts and influencing the future through violent words.

“Would it were mortal poison”: Women Spitting on Men in Early Modern Drama

David Nicol, Dalhousie University

Sometimes, women in early modern plays spit on men. This paper examines why, when, how often, and according to what conventions they do so. It concludes that onstage spitting onto another person is relatively rare (occurring in less than ten plays), and that it is always performed by female characters upon male characters (with one exception that proves the rule). This is surprising because early modern dramatists had no problem with *imagining* or *describing* men who spit on men, or men who spit on women; however, such moments are absent from the *physical* stage. Onstage scenes of women spitting upon men are almost always about women repelling tyrannical and/or sexually threatening men, and the action of spitting is usually perceived by the recipient as a form of violence. This paper presents the data and invites discussion in the seminar as to what the reasons might be.

The Violent Potential of “Faithful” Shakespeare Adaptations: Margaret of Anjou in *The Hollow Crown*

Melissa Pullara, Mount Royal University

In her article “‘I am content’: Race, Seduction, and Performances of Consent in *The Hollow Crown*”, Kirsten N. Mendoza makes the astute observation that “Shakespearean adaptations have an opportunity to challenge audiences to confront the privileges that enable violence and oppression. Adaptations, furthermore, have the potential to present the ways in which these privileges derive from power dynamics founded upon the vulnerability and dispossession of particular raced and gendered bodies in Shakespeare’s time and in ours.” (617) The problem, however, is that many modern adaptations fall short of this potential in the name of remaining “faithful” to the source material. The BBC’s *Hollow Crown* Series Two (2016) is an unfortunate example of this, particularly when it comes to the character of Margaret of Anjou, played by Nigerian actress Sophie Okonedo. Following observations made by Mendoza, Eleanor Rycroft, and L. Monique Pittman, I investigate how the BBC’s production choices result in a more violent, less sympathetic version of Margaret than even Shakespeare writes. This characterization both disenfranchises the actress and misses an opportunity for positive critical adaptation, reiterating harmful racial and misogynistic stereotypes, rather than giving voice and validation to the motivations that drive women to fight back against their oppressors.

Early Modern Maternal Infanticides: The Case of *2Tamburlaine* and Christopher Marlowe's Anomalous Dematerialisation of Filial Bonds

Irene Vilquin, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris

In spite of the growing vernacularisation of infanticide stories in literary and musical productions demonizing the figure of the mother and prompting a “cultural fascination” for the act (Heckmann 12), Tudor and early Elizabethan playwrights are still inspired by more sympathetic Classical representations of infanticide, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to Seneca's *Medea*. Such Latin sources show infanticidal crimes through the lens of the corporeal bond between the parent and the child, and operate a particularly significant association between the womb and the wound, an association that early modern playwrights will make their own.

Christopher Marlowe, however, contravenes to this dramatic convention by modifying the relationship between murderous parents and child and surprisingly staging a dematerialised filial bond. Looking at the hypotexts that shaped his oeuvre, this paper reinvestigates the playwright's relation to female-conducted violence, notably through maternal infanticide in *Tamburlaine the Great, Part 2* (1587?). While occurrences of intra-familial murder in Marlowe's plays have been considered in the past as a form of proto-Malthusianism (Borlik), I argue that they partake in a more general dynamic of identity fashioning based on self-destruction, not uncommon in early modern England (Marshall 2). Olympia's infanticide in *2Tamburlaine*, like many a declination of violence in Marlowe's plays, is part of an aesthetic of self-directed violence that, I defend, is essential to Marlowe's *ars poetica*.

Profile of the Early Modern Murderess

Savannah Xaver, Western Michigan University

“Whore” and synonymous terms are all-encompassing markers of any kind of feminine misstep on the early modern stage. Female characters who betray men, or who are perceived as deceitful, may earn the label of “whore,” which, particularly in tragic plays, becomes the starting point of exponential violence. Tragic wives earn sexualized insults, guilty or not, and those insults send husbands spiraling into a madness leading to the destruction of the woman. For the early modern woman who facilitates violence or disobedience against patriarchal forces, “whore” becomes an umbrella term. Feminine independence threatens and enrages men, but violent labels for female “criminals” create a complex lexicon on the early modern stage. Abusive language and violence appear on stage, but these phenomena are not always condoned by the playwrights. Off the stage, the profile of the early modern murderess is a repeated pattern: adulteress turned murderess. However, on stage, female characters sometimes fulfill the worst stereotypes of the sexualized murderess found in crude murder pamphlets of the period, but often, their behavior transcends and complicates those stereotypes, demonstrating how feminine desire conflicts with social expectations of feminine “purity,” or how libelous invective may spur a woman to become “that name” of whore.