

SAA Seminar 20: Imperial Shakespeare
Collected Abstracts

Margie Burns

Before and after *The Tempest*: James I, Shakespeare, and Geopolitics

Much has been written about Shakespeare's awareness of King James I and Jacobean policy and politics; a premise of this paper is that the king was also sharply aware of Shakespeare. James is not on record as saying, "Know you not that I am Prospero?" But his royal charters in effect over the still-vexed Bermoothes indicate that *The Tempest* in particular influenced royal policy. After the play was staged in 1611, James' charters and grants for exploration and settlement of Virginia changed. Either Shakespeare's play or its sources, or both, apparently alerted the king to safeguard his American dominions in ways he had not done before.

James is not the whole story; *Tempest* also had a wider audience. Whatever influence the play had in James' time, it did not deter the evolution of enslavement and the slave trade as Britain began to colonize the new world. Clearly, however, the spectacle of Prospero's treatment of Caliban caused discomfort long after James' reign. In 1667, John Dryden adapted *Tempest* in a version that famously softened its deep-cutting edges ("Miranda, where's your sister?") including the situation of Caliban. In different versions, Dryden's anomalous play dominated the stage throughout the centuries when Britain participated in the Atlantic slave trade. Shakespeare's original play was staged in Britain only in 1838, the year that Britain finally made emancipation for all legal. I believe that the timelines of the play's theatrical history and the history of abolition in Britain are concomitant.

Rocío Corral Garcia

"To Unpathed Waters, Undreamed Shores": Imperial Vision and Queenly Rule

This paper foregrounds female sovereignty in *Henry VIII* and *The Winter's Tale* as a prism for examining England's imperial ambitions in the post-Reformation era. The 1532 Act of Restraint in *Appeals*, proclaiming England "itself an empire," severed ties with Rome and established a foundation for expanding royal authority. In this context, Shakespeare's queenly figures expose uneasy intersections of gender, power, and community. Catherine of Aragon's forceful challenges to Henry VIII's legal and ecclesiastical maneuvering highlight the rhetorical fragility of imperial claims, while Hermione's near-trial illuminates tensions between sovereign prerogative and a proto public sphere where audiences judge royal dictates.

Sambhavi Ghosh

Shakespeare's new Empires: Subverting the "imperial" in *In Othello*

In this paper, I will explore Roysten Abel's 2003 film *In Othello*, a *kathakali* adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, to investigate the (neo)imperial pitfalls in postcolonial India as reflected in/by this adaptation. By casting an Assamese actor in the role of Othello, *In Othello* negotiates with another centre-margin relationship as may be enacted *within* the postcolonial nation-state.

This film, I argue, engages with the “imperial” on two levels. On the one hand, it indigenizes imperial Shakespeare through the use of indigenous conventions from popular Hindi cinema as well as its localization in multicultural, multilingual India, parodying the imperial dominance of the Bard. On the other hand, it critiques the elitism of the English educated Indian urban elite towards people from the Northeast region of the country (in this case, Assam) through the use (or misuse) of *kathakali* conventions. The “imperial” centre(s) for Shakespeare, therefore, is located both in Britain and India, with Assam existing as a new margin to the postcolonial nation.

Eric J. Griffin

***The Winter's Tale* as Imperial Romance**

Shakespeare's two late romances, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* were among the many internationally-themed plays performed during theatrical season of 1612-13 in celebration of the engagement and wedding of Princess Elizabeth Stuart and Frederick V, the Elector Palatine. Patronized as the King's Men were by James I himself, the outward turn of these dramas may well reflect the outward turn of Jacobean policy as reflected by the dynastic unions the Anglo-Scottish king sought for his two eldest children, Elizabeth and her brother Prince Henry. In line with their father's imagined plan to "reunite Christendom" by joining one child with an important Protestant house and the other with a major Catholic dynasty, it had been hoped that the celebrations that winter would celebrate a double international wedding.

With Prince Henry's untimely passing, the Jacobean attempt at a Spanish or French Match would be set aside until his younger son Charles's maturity. But in Princess Elizabeth Stuart's marriage to Frederick V half of her father's plan had been attained. For Frederick was an Elector of the Holy Roman Empire; potentially, his marriage to Elizabeth would strengthen Britain's hand in the imperial electoral college. This paper will explore the relationship of *The Winter's Tale*—set in Sicily and Bohemia, states with deep imperial roots—to Jacobean aspirations to dynasty-building as a means of religiopolitical reconciliation.

Amir Khan

Hamlet as Colonizer

I will discuss *Hamlet* as a play now in its twilight. Though I discuss only this specific text, the claims I make could perhaps be rather loosely extended to the study of Shakespeare and even English literature more broadly. My claim is that *Hamlet* cannot circumvent the interpretive imaginative polarities it is trapped in. These poles straddle two sides of literary criticism, with an ahistorical, formalist approach on the one side (encompassing something like “universal truth”) and an historically embedded approach (either in the New Historicist past of Renaissance England or the contemporary world of woke politics) on the other. Yet in both scenarios, the text only means because of some supplement applied to it in retrospect. If the text reveals timeless ahistorical truths, for instance, this says something about Hamlet as a type of “everyman,” revealing to the reader something thought to transcend any specific time and place. What that “something” is links Shakespeare up, say, to the structuralist “world poem” noted by Northrop Frye. On the other hand, if Shakespeare means only because of some historical approach (whether Deconstructivist, Materialist, anthropological, Freudian, Marxian) tied to it in

retrospect, the question of whether Shakespeare means because he footnotes Marx (or whomever) or vice versa remains.

Even “global” Shakespeare, however well-meaning and accommodating it believes itself to be, cannot resolve this tension between text and context. Either Shakespeare means because he speaks to or for other cultures, or other cultures are of value only because something in Shakespeare illuminates or speaks to them. But which is it? I take the somewhat controversial stance that both cases are twin acts of imaginative colonization and imperialism.

Victoria M. Muñoz

Rarer Action: England, Spain, and the Subverted Tragedy of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*

First published in the 1623 folio of his collected *Workes*, William Shakespeare’s staged romance, *The Tempest*, earned pride of place as the first and foremost among Shakespeare’s comedies. Yet, as previous scholarship has amply demonstrated, Shakespeare’s drama flows freely between tragedy and comedy. This paper argues that the play weaves both the tragic and comedic elements into one moral framework that dictates its exterior political investments in reference to Anglo-Spanish imperial relations and the proposed Spanish Match, both allegorically figured. By probing Shakespeare’s tragic (non)commitments, I further uncover the play’s relationship with its sixteenth-century forebears in English revenge tragedy, particularly as inspired by the works of Hispano-Roman philosopher and playwright, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, who serves as interlocutor to the play’s moral-generic frameworks. My approach is inspired by earlier readings of *The Tempest* as self-consciously subversive of the tragic method, but I furthermore suggest that it is ironically through Seneca that the argument becomes neither “too heavy” nor too light.

J. Asia Rowe

As the most recent phase of Russia’s war on Ukraine approaches its third anniversary, my paper calls attention to some of the ways Ukrainian productions of Shakespeare have been instrumental in asserting the legitimacy of Ukrainian culture, independence, and sovereignty. Specifically, my paper examines significant parallels between two wartime productions of Shakespeare’s tragedies separated by a century: Oleksandr Kurbas’s *Macbeth* (1920) and Viacheslav Yehorov’s *King Lear*, performed throughout Ukraine and staged at the Royal Shakespeare Company (2022-2023). I begin by focusing on the political and artistic work of Yehorov’s *Lear*, whose cast consists of refugee, non-professional actors outside the age range of mandated military service. I then turn to an analysis of how the localized *Lear* is “exported” to an English and ultimately global, English-speaking stage: at the RSC and through Dmytro Hreshko’s 2023 documentary: *King Lear: How we Looked for Love During the War* (Король лір: як ми шукали любов під час війни). In light of historical bans on Ukrainian-language translations and productions of Shakespeare, I consider how Yehorov’s *Lear*—with its casting, cuts, stage design, and insistence on Ukrainian language (without subtitles)—draws on and reasserts the legacy of Ukrainian artistic resistance to Russian imperialism and attempts at erasure.

Kurt Schreyer

“The Tale of the Red Dragon: Race, Class, and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Naval Dramas”

Most Shakespeare scholars are familiar with the supposed performance of *Hamlet* off of the coast of Africa in 1607, the records of which are now generally believed to be the work of the prolific master forger John Payne Collier (1789-1883). But what interests me and which no one seems to have asked is: what gave Collier the idea of having Shakespeare performed at sea in the first place, let alone off the coast of western Africa? After all, if he was going to choose the year 1607, why not have the plays performed ashore in the newly founded colony of Jamestown, Virginia or Plymouth, Massachusetts? Why make up records of a *naval* performance? I want to suggest that Collier’s extraordinary forgeries are entirely predictable from the standpoint of Royal Navy theatrical culture in the nineteenth century. As part of a book project that explores this culture, my paper examines non-European interactions with and influences on maritime, and indeed popular British, drama. I further argue that the Afro-Caribbean entertainers who performed at Jamaican popular carnivals and street festivities may have discovered and developed their knack for Shakespeare from Royal Navy sailors who had been stationed on the island since the middle of the seventeenth century.