

**Bodies of the Boy Actresses:
Two Case Studies from the Emotional History of the King's Men**
(Roberta Barker, Dalhousie University)

The body of the early modern English boy actress has often been discussed and debated by scholars as though it were a uniform entity tasked with depicting another uniform entity. In this formulation, “boys” played “women” on the early modern English stage; the questions posed are, “Why did the English stage take boys for women?” (Orgel) or “Why did the English stage take boys for actresses?” (Brown). Recent work in early modern trans studies has countered such binary constructions, for instance by inviting consideration of the “queer residue” that accrued around the adult bodies of onetime boy actors (Chess) or by stressing the importance of the lived experience of trans folks to considerations of gender identity in Shakespeare (Kemp). My paper will apply (or re-apply) some of the questions raised by this vital work to the bodies of two longtime members of the King’s Men, Nicholas Wilkinson *alias* Tooley (c. 1581 – 1623) and Richard Robinson (c.1592 – 1648).

Tooley and Robinson knew one another well, as Tooley’s 1623 will attests. They were almost certainly apprenticed to the same Master, Richard Burbage. They likely played many of the same female-identified roles during their respective periods as apprentices. Moreover, their bodies are among the best-attested in the early modern theatrical archive, thanks to the two entries about Tooley in the astrologer Simon Forman’s Casebook for 1599 and the laudatory speech about Robinson in Ben Jonson’s 1616 play *The Devil is an Ass*. These sources both depict their subjects as young actors around the period when they played female-identified roles, yet they construct two radically different bodies and relationships to gender. Foreman’s annotation of the symptoms of “Nicholas Tooley of 17 yeares,” who is racked by humoral fluctuations, suggests painful dysphoria; Jonson’s portrayal of “*Dicke Robinson*, a very pretty fellow,” who confidently presents as a woman amongst a party of lawyers’ wives, evokes a far more playful relationship to the gender spectrum. By placing these two sources into dialogue with emotional history, as well as with *Much Ado About Nothing* (a comedy in which both Tooley and Robinson almost certainly played women’s roles), I aim to shed light on the diverse corporeal experiences of early modern English boy actresses—and of the characters they portrayed.

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Lewis: Feats of masculine activity: Herculean tumbling leaps and comic face-pulling

This paper explores the gendered implications of feats of activity performed by early modern touring companies and players. Scholarship has previously considered how the performance of bodily skill – such as tumbling, vaulting, and rope-dancing – requires training to develop kinesic intelligence in athleticism, dexterity, and nimbleness to entertain an audience (Butterworth; Tribble), with more recent work examining the intersections of material embodiment of rope-dancing femininities with race-making and stage technology (McManus). However, more can be said about how these physical activities can further inform our understanding of an early modern masculinity that is communicable to a culturally and linguistically diverse audience. This paper will address this gap by drawing on archival accounts of touring performance to highlight two types of skilled performance rooted in the manipulation and conditioning of the body that indicates the breadth of embodied manhood available to itinerant players.

First, I examine the historical records describing the *Forces of Hercules*, a lost entertainment performed by Lord Leicester’s Men on 23 April 1586, one of the first English performances recorded abroad. In recognising Hercules as a ‘patron of manly virtue’ (Galinsky), the acrobatic formations described in archival accounts offer a masculine display of agility, poise, and strength. I argue that the *Forces of Hercules*, alongside other associated acrobatic performances depicting Hercules, demonstrate a highly skilled yet equally universally recognisable spectacle of optimum manhood across the Continent. I then turn to the comic yet subversive embodied acts such as face-pulling associated with stage clowns such as Pickelhering. I argue that the distortion of facial features, among other embodied acts, for comic effect bathetically undermines masculine prestige through embodied skill. In reappraising records capturing aspects of these performances, I explore how the body is both a catalyst and a conduit for embodying a malleable manhood for mobile performance.

Staging Management in *Julius Caesar*

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Scholars tend to read the Plebeians through the lens of Shakespeare's general attitude towards the vulgar, echoing a habit of interpretation best expressed by Horace Howard Furness Jr:

Shakespeare ... has no tenderness for the people; he depicts with great complacency their exigencies, their credulity, their ignorance, their fits of irresistible but transient ferocity, their contradictions, their violent exaggerations, everything, in fact, that history has ever reproached them with ...

But though critics have tended to view Shakespeare's crowds as being of a piece with each other, my proposed paper will provide evidence that in *Julius Caesar* the Plebeian crowd is simply behaving in line with the behaviors taken by the play's named heroes, and as such there may be less a distinction to be made between great individuals and the common masses than we have previously been led to believe. In exploring how the bodies of Shakespeare's crowds are incited and controlled, my paper is split into two parts. The first portion, "The comma of embodiment", highlights moments in *Julius Caesar* where a scholarly editor makes decisions about crowds in the printed text of Shakespeare's play that have significant repercussions for performance, because even seemingly minor decisions in spelling or punctuation can enable or foreclose a play's dramatic potential. The second half of the paper, "Dramaturgies of intention: staging management", considers characters' incitement of others' action in *Julius Caesar* more generally, showing how the dramatic potential of crowds signals Shakespeare's metatheatrical meditation on the possibilities of political stagecraft.

"Blood Enough to Blush": Erotic Starvation and Performative Suicide in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*

Abstract

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Anne's death by starvation in Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* has been the subject of divisive scholarly scrutiny. The religious connotations of her self-martyrdom, the character restraint of denying herself food as a metaphor for reigning in delinquent sexuality, and the class politics of a gentry woman electing to commit suicide through food withdrawal have all been offered as possible interpretations of Heywood's depiction of female suicide. For this paper, I'm interested in interrogating Anne's starvation as a performative act, influenced by both the cultural phenomenon of female nobility self-starvation in the early modern period and the literary convention of love-suicide, or erotic suicide, as it appears in early modern drama. By focusing on the physicality of the starving body and the literary and cultural precedent of suicide as a devotional act, I argue that Anne's suicide, rather than representing sexual abstinence or spiritual purification, is indicative of an extremist sexual performance, defined by both self-restraint and the desire to be observed.

Anne's sexuality operates mysteriously in *Woman Killed with Kindness*'s narrative— she is simultaneously sexually submissive and transgressive in her approach to marriage and adultery alike. Her decision to starve herself as penance for the sin of an extramarital affair has been read as purposefully sexual self-restriction; by preventing herself from indulging in any form of 'taking' or consumption, Anne takes control of an errant sexuality by defining herself entirely through abstinence. My reading of Anne's starvation shares this interpretation of Anne's suicide being informed by her sexuality, but differs from some scholarly interpretations that Anne's starvation is a religiously redemptive act, one that necessitates a rejection of the sexual self. Instead, I argue that Anne's starvation is written as a deliberately erotic act, one that is still based in her self-restraint and directed towards Frankford, but is intended as a performance of her physical endurance and of her dedication to her husband. By examining Anne's suicide and *A Woman Killed with Kindness* through this lens, I hope to discover and reveal more about the early modern audience's affective response to the starved female body, and the subversive eroticism inherent to dramatic love-suicide, even in Anne's transgressive, somewhat grotesque execution of the act.

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"Unvalu'd persons": Human Remains beyond the Shakespearean Stage

This essay tells the story of a human skull owned by the nineteenth-century Shakespearean editor

Horace Howard Furness. It uses this material object to explore dynamics of embodiment, consent,

and personhood at play in the circulation of props beyond the Shakespearean stage.

When it came down to it, Furness reached for a skull. Furness was acting as director of the Seybert

Commission, a group of University of Pennsylvania academics tasked with investigating prominent

spiritualists operating in the US in the 1880s. As he began corresponding with mediums across the

country, Furness needed an object about which he could interrogate denizens of the spirit realm. He

chose a skull, mounted on black marble, that sat on his desk. Furness knew this skull had been used

by notable Shakespearean actors in performances of Hamlet at Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theater,

but beyond this his "mind was blank." The fact that Furness did not know the "name, age, sex, color

or condition in life" of the skull's original owner made it a useful investigative tool.

This essay analyzes the responses Furness received to his inquiries about the skull, showing how

disagreements among spiritualists about the skull's origin can illuminate the complex and sometimes

troubling meanings accrued to Shakespearean stage props as they circulate beyond the stage.

For

example, strong disagreement among mediums over the racial identity of the person to whom the skull originally belonged brings this skull into contact with racist and pseudoscientific practices such as phrenology as well as Philadelphia's long history of medical grave robbery—a form of cultural violence that disproportionately victimized the city's Black communities. Archival research gives further shape to these reflections; available evidence indicates that this skull was used in medical settings before it came into Furness's possession and also during its tenure in stagings of *Hamlet*. Ultimately, the peculiar story of human remains chronicled in the Seybert Commission's 1887 report gives us a new vantage from which to assess how key theoretical categories such as dis/embodiment, consent, presence, and repatriation manifest in the material objects—the “properties”—of Shakespearean theater history.

Chelsea Lee, PhD Candidate at the University of California, Irvine
SAA Seminar: Performing Bodies in Early Modern Drama

ABSTRACT:

Measure for Measure and False Death's Capacity to Fulfill the Demands of Justice

In this paper I examine how using the convenient death and head of Ragozine as a false replacement for Claudio's in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* illuminates how false and performative deaths still fulfill the demands of justice and penance on the Early Modern stage. In

Measure for Measure, Ragozine's proxy death is used to subvert Claudio's actual execution—in part supported by the bodily verisimilitude between the two characters. By looking at execution

practices in the Early Modern period, while paying close attention to those instances where individuals survived their methods of execution, I argue that the false death in this play acts as a

sufficient proxy for the execution. Using the terms outlined by Elizabeth T. Hurren's work on the

status of the criminal corpse, this false death can be an adequate proxy by working within the cracks between the “social death” of imprisonment, the “legal death” of the execution, and the “medical death” of the body. Claudio's time in prison allows him access to a certain kind of death—the “social death” as used by Hurren, and the warrant for his execution gestures towards

his “legal death.” However, his “medical death” is subsumed by the corpse of Ragozine.

Claudio's death preparation through the language of the *ars moriendi* is not undermined by his death's final subversion. In contrast, the counterfeit death of Claudio becomes the culmination of

the death preparation he starts in prison, even though his physical death is absorbed into the proxy of Ragozine. My argument hinges on the idea that a performatively false death can still function (and read to audiences) as a method of penance. This is accomplished by interrogating how the mental contemplations of Claudio can be absorbed into the corpse of Ragozine—

specifically through the presentation and performativity involved in the switching and revealing of their bodies on the stage.

Chelsea Phillips

Playing Dead: Staging *The Spanish Tragedy*'s Undead Afterlives

When characters on stage die, I find myself watching to see if I can catch the actors breathing. Does the impulse stem from concern? Anxiety? Is it a 'gotcha' to the enterprise of living actor bodies playing at death? Or is it to check that fictional death has not, somehow, slipped its bounds and become reality?

The Spanish Tragedy famously ends with a snuff play: a play in which actors everyone assumes to be playing dead are revealed to have "actually" died. Hieronimo's long and bloody epilogue raises the spectre of stage death only to deny it: these actors will not "revive to please tomorrow's audience." They are dead, he declares, really, truly dead: Lorenzo and Balthazar murdered to avenge Horatio's death; Bel-imperia because she mistook a stage direction for a command (or opportunity). Partway through the speech, Hieronimo reveals Horatio's (presumably rotting) corpse behind a curtain, prefiguring the condition these newer bodies will soon inhabit. All this is watched by the Ghost of Andrea, the "eternal substance" of a soul we are explicitly told is unbound from its imprisoning "wanton flesh." So many varieties of death; all embodied by living, breathing performers.

In Spring 2024, Alice Dailey and I staged *The Spanish Tragedy*, the culmination of several years of planning and a full year of study with participating students. In developing our production version of the script and engaging the play through rehearsals and performances, we had the opportunity to explore and exploit the many affordances of the play's relationship with dead bodies: corporeal, incorporeal, walking, talking, rotting, and reviving.

For this seminar paper, I discuss how the metaphoricals of the play on the page meet the material realities of performance, as well as how our production thought through the science and technology of the living dead. After sketching the play's relationship to the performance of death overall, I focus on the ending as a particularly rich site for analysis of what Dailey terms the play and performers' "undead afterlives" which simultaneously present us with an apparently static form (a script, a fictional dead body) that nonetheless "hosts an other that is dynamic, participatory, and charged with the potential to initiate change" (a script, a living actor).¹

Gina Walter

'He wants his upper weed, / He wants his life, and body': 'naked' ghosts, disembodiment, and disempowerment

How can the early modern theatre represent a character that has no body? Stage ghosts are often seen as ironically material figures, sometimes accompanied by heavy costumes and jewellery (as in Middleton's *The Lady's Tragedy*, 1611). But other revenants are described in dialogue as being naked or otherwise unclothed. The title of this paper is taken from Chapman's tragedy *Bussy D'Ambois* (1604), in which D'Ambois comments that the ghost of Friar Comolet is missing his

¹ Alice Dailey, *How to Do Things with Dead People: History, Technology, and Temporality from Shakespeare to Warhol* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), 1.

‘upper weed’ (his outer clothing). Somehow, whatever the friar is wearing encodes his *lack of a body*. I suggest that Comolet is one of the many early modern ghosts that are depicted, both inside and outside of the theatre, as wearing their winding sheet and/or the plain undergarments commonly placed underneath. Wrapping the body in an indistinct white sheet was a standard part of burial practice, applied as a minimum requirement to all dead bodies regardless of class status. Although themselves material coverings, graveclothes participate in the anonymisation and dematerialisation of corpses: as a precursor to a given body’s dissolution to an unrecognisable skeleton and eventually dust, the process of winding covers the person’s features and replaces socially significant items of clothing. In some accounts, white sheets are so associated with the negation of materially mediated identity that they confer a kind of conceptual nakedness: as the barrister George Strode wrote in 1618, ‘Death [...] sendeth us out as we came into the world, naked, poore, and beggerly, onely with our winding-sheete about us’.

Through this and other examples, I argue that winding sheets and associated undergarments can function, paradoxically, as a signifier of unstageable nudity and immateriality in early modern drama. These representations define disembodiment *not* as the lack of a corporeal form, but as a state of exclusion from systems of dress which confer social and hierarchical identities. As such, unclothed ghosts can illuminate much about the social and material contingencies of early modern embodiment. For instance, In *Julia Agrippina* (1628) the ghost of Caligula asks ‘What can a naked Ghost performe?’ and recalls when he was ‘Obey’d by all the Romane power, and wore / That wicked body which I had before’. Here ghostly disembodiment is disabling, and precipitates and metaphorizes a state of political disempowerment. Because this disempowerment is inextricable from a loss and/or change of clothing, Caligula’s ghost articulates anxieties surrounding class difference and the contingencies of elite identity.

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Performing Nobody in Early Modern Drama

The play *Nobody and Somebody* (Q1 1606) offers an extreme case for how bodies might be represented on stage through its title characters. Scholars interested in this play have attended to Nobody in part because the costume that presents this figure as a head and neck from which arms and legs appear to emerge – with his lack of a torso signalling no body – diverges from what seems to have been an existing tradition in early modern visual art and in Robert Wilson’s *Three Ladies of London* and *The Three Lords and Three Ladies of London*. In my essay for this

seminar, I am more broadly interested in how the figures of Nobody and Somebody, characters brought onstage by players wearing costumes that deform their physical shapes, call attention to a range of early modern ideas about the human body as signifier both in the play and in the first years of the seventeenth century. That focus, if nothing else, helps explain why the allegorical Nobody and Somebody are included in play otherwise concerned with a legendary bit of English history. Both the title characters and the fact that one character becomes king of England three times in *Nobody and Somebody* render absurd the concept of the king's two bodies. More unusually, the play is also concerned with queens and repeatedly depicts how the same body can go from being a queen to the subject of another queen (and perhaps links the play to the entertainment written by Ben Jonson for the new queen in 1603, in which a character named Nobody costumed like the one in this play might have appeared). Additionally, this play – like the earlier Robert Wilson plays featuring “nobody” characters named Nemo – literalizes its resolution of social and political order by deforming previously unmarked bodies (in *Three Ladies*, by spotting and splitting faces; in *Three Lords*, by branding a face; and in *Nobody and Somebody* by dismembering wrongdoers). Nobody and Somebody, like any other allegorical characters, represent both collective bodies and individual figures in the context of the play in which they appear – but their presence in this particular play in the early seventeenth century seems also to call attention to a moment of anxiety around how bodies signify and which bodies in particular are connected to absolute power. My essay thus suggests *Nobody and Somebody* is evidence of London's theatre professionals experimenting with strategies for making visible gaps between a body and what it might be held up as meaning.

Mukherji:

This paper will focus on the staging of the evidentiary body in the early modern theatre. Rather than taking bodily self-evidence as granted, early modern drama stages the contesting deployments of the performative body by institutions and society on the one hand, and responsive or manipulative actors and agents on the other. Drawing on contemporary legal, physiognomic and possibly theological ideas, it will probe the ways in which the theatre taps into an interdiscursive nexus to craft the distance between the natural body and the constructed one. Honing in on faces and tears as *puncta*, it shows how generic investments slant the semiotic valency as well as the affective scope of embodied presence, which focuses both hermeneutic desire and frustration. Ultimately it will intimate the potential of gendered or racialised bodies – whether authentic or performed – for being (mis)read according to the specificities of the context of reception. The bodies addressed are likely to range from the defiantly performative body of Vittoria Corombona in the fictional law-court of Webster's *The White Devil*, the obdurately expressive body of Anne Sanders in the providentialist world of *A Warning for Fair Women*, the recalcitrant and spiritually disabled body of Faustus in Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, the mediated body-in-grief in *Arden of Feversham* and Shakespeare's *O Lear*, and the possibly over-read body of an African migrant-turned-warrior in a hyper-civic Venice in Shakespeare's *Othello*.

Myhill:

“A most Clear and Eminent Fame”: Forms of Embodiment in *Monuments of Honour*

Civic pageants such as Lord Mayor's Shows ask their viewers to determine the significance of the body of the actor visually rather than verbally, as prop rather than character; the actors who present historical or allegorical figures provide the means of displaying a set of costumes and props that establish their emblematic identity rather than using speech to create a specific individual. John Webster's *Monuments of Honour* (1624), with its mixture of allegorical, mythical, and historical figures—some from the relatively recent past--offers a representative sample of the various ways in which bodies create meaning in civic pageantry, and the ways in which these semiotic systems transform the entire city into a stage on which both mercantile and moral virtue might be displayed. The mingling of the abstract and the historical creates a system in which the significance of the historical figure is entirely subsumed into a larger allegorical meaning. What does this imply for the spectators and the Lord Mayor himself, who is similarly cast as a type rather than an individual? The final segment of the show--the "Monument of Gratitude"-- offers a particularly complex spectacle in its presentation of the dead Prince Henry (d. 1612) surrounded by allegorical representations of his virtues, narrated by an actor representing Amade le Grande. This combination of inanimate, allegorical, and speaking human bodies suggests ways in which the embodied presence of figures otherwise inaccessible to their spectators might reframe their own present and possible futures.