

## SAA 2025: Theatricality and the Space of Violence

### Jessica Apolloni, “Shakespeare, Violence, and Transnational Law”

This paper is a working draft section of the final chapter of my book manuscript: *Violent Ends: Shakespeare and Comparative Law*. The book demonstrates literature’s role in the circulation and interpretation of law across diverse legal systems. As common law developed in premodern England, it was often defined and understood in direct comparison to classical Roman law and its lasting inheritance in continental legal practices. At the same time, literary and legal writers’ strong interest in classical and Italian texts influenced every genre of English literature. My book builds on law-literature scholarship to uncover the impact of comparative literature on English law as well as the transnational legal concepts at the center of English literature. Violence in theatrical and legal spaces has become a central element of the book and I am utilizing the works of Shakespeare to create a cohesive frame, with each chapter focused on a different genre and set of comparative source materials. This paper for SAA is a section of my chapter on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, a play that includes Roman and Italian influences as well as colonial sources from England’s first colony at Jamestown. I aim to illustrate impactful connections between legal violence, Empire, and the genre of romance as the English common law system expanded in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### Olivia Bievenue, “‘All times fit not for revenge’: Staging and Spectating Violence in The Spanish Tragedy”

I became interested in writing about *The Spanish Tragedy* because of a personal interest that slowly seeped into my research—prestige television. Stylized violence in contemporary storytelling and performance is far from infrequent, as demonstrated by the success of many recent prestige tv dramas such as Netflix’s *Squid Game* (2021), NBC’s *Hannibal* (2013), HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011), and Showtime’s *Dexter* (2006). As I was preparing to direct *The Spanish Tragedy* last year, it became increasingly obvious that the spectacular violence throughout the early modern playtext is not inherently scandalizing on its own. Revenge, murder, mutilation, and other forms of violence are not only readily depicted in popular culture, but narratives of extreme violence are also perpetrated and sensationalized by governments, militaries, and citizens across the world.

### William Casey Caldwell, “‘A company of mutinous Citizens’: Violent Citizenship in the Space of the City in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*”

Shakespeare’s depictions of crowds, especially violent ones, are often unsympathetic. This may be surprising given they are often composed of lower classes and given his typically sympathetic treatment of various individuals occupying marginalized social positions, including socio-economic class. By comparison to other plays he solo- and co-authored, such as *2 Henry VI*, *Richard III*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Sir Thomas More*, however, Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* contains one his most nuanced depictions of a deliberative, rational crowd of citizens all the same bent on violence. In my paper, which develops a theme from my manuscript in progress, *Urban Citizenship in Early Modern Drama*:

*City, Nation, Economy*, I will ponder the relevance of the depiction of the crowd of citizens' precarity and food insecurity as they relate to both the themes of violence in the play and the play's arguably more nuanced depiction of citizenship *en mass* in an urban space. I will draw upon Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of assemblies as it relates to precarity and the spaces of assembly. In line with my book project, I am especially interested in how Shakespeare's final tragedy focuses on Rome's early phase as a city, not nation or empire, and how the play links Roman citizenship with London's institution of citizenship as an urban and occupational category.

Matt Carter, "'He's Beat From His Best Ward' – Women's Bodily Autonomy and Fencing Culture"

Early modern fencing manuals consistently use the metaphor of the fencing "ward," an invisible sphere (sometimes a wall) used to conceptualize the boundary each fighter hoped to defend against an incoming attack. The ward is the line across which Bugs Bunny dares Daffy Duck to step; it symbolized the point at which the fencer was no longer safe and, more importantly, penetrating the ward with an incoming weapon was equated in early modern conceptions of the body as penetrating the body. It was considered feminizing, in a misogynistic context that understood penetrative sex as violent, for another fighter to enter into that space, and the "conduct manual-esque" goals of many fencing manuals consistently equated the preservation of the ward's solidity with masculine comportment and self-control.

It is therefore strange, and – as I shall argue, noteworthy – that women in early modern drama frequently deploy the language and logic of fencing to describe their compliance with the purity culture of the day. While it is uncommon for the actual *word* "ward" to appear, the surrounding language and terminology of warding is frequently invoked to such an extent that, as I shall argue, we might understand women's bodily autonomy as analogous to a battlefield in the mind of early modern playwrights. I shall pay special focus to Hermione's interactions with Polixenes and Leontes as an example in this paper. Her frequent deployment of martial language (e.g.: "Say this to him, / He's beat from his best ward" I.i.41-42) inverts the typical defensive posture of most women, making her seem like the aggressor rather than the defender, a point on which Leontes hangs his jealousy.

Nora Galland, "Ecological, Physical and Rhetorical Violence in *The Island Princess* (1621)"

In John Fletcher's *Island's Princess* (1621) set in the Maluku archipelago (present-day Indonesia), the Portuguese settlers experience colonial wonder which conveys the astonishment of white settlers towards the natural environment of the archipelago. In the play, colonial greed is connected to a desire of possession and misappropriation of what is seen as an object of consumption – capitalism as economic mastery resonating with sexual mastery of the feminized indigenous environment. The natural environment is depicted as a woman, used here as a vulnerable symbol of beauty being abused by a male aggressor. The island is also trembling out of fear because of the violence of the Portuguese colonial rule. This violence is precisely depicted as an unethical, systematic exploitation of the natural resources and of the Indigenous population as well – both being at the disposal of the Portuguese colonizers. The threat of excessive physical violence concerns the bodies of the

Indigenous people, but also the urban environment of the island. Colonial looting is both literal and figurative through imperialism and colonialism which, I argue, are themselves instances of symbolic racist abuse. Claiming ownership of the islands of Ternate and Tidore by the Portuguese may have been presented through the metaphor of sexual consent, it is denounced as coercion by the Governor who speaks back to resist cultural alienation, dispossession and assimilation. The play itself is based on a racist enthymeme which refers to the unstated premise of white supremacy over the indigenous population. In the end, it is colonial consent – and not coercion – which is put forward with the King and Quisara’s desire to convert to Christianity and the marriage of Quisara and Armusia.

Loreen L. Giese, “Space and Marital Violence in Early Modern London”

A spate of criticism exists that argues both for and against the “separate spheres” paradigm with respect to gender and space in daily life in early modern England. Some of these studies examine separation suits for spousal violence as sources to explore spatial coding, especially since such coding could create and exacerbate spousal disagreements. This paper contributes to this ongoing discussion by analyzing references to spaces of spousal violence in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century London. A discrete body of marital litigation serves as the basis for this study: the surviving *Liber Examinationum*, which records the testimony of plaintiffs, defendants, and witnesses, that the active and vital London Consistory Court relied on to adjudicate marital cruelty complaints (*saevitia*) from spouses seeking a judicial separation (*et mensa et thoro*) during the years—1586-1611—when Shakespeare was most likely in London. In keeping with the focus of this seminar, this paper examines the spatiality of references to marital violence in these rich London records for this specific period.

Dalton Greene, “Shylock and Aaron in the Court of Public Opinion: Vigilantism and Racial Violence in Shakespeare”

In *Self Defense: A Philosophy of Violence*, Elsa Dorlin details the evolution of the American racial vigilante, who operates outside formal networks of judgement and policing to enforce white hegemony over racial others. Although grounded in specific temporal and geographical contexts, Dorlin’s argument is largely applicable to racial logics developing in early modern England and manifests in two of Shakespeare’s so-called “race plays.” *Titus Andronicus* and *The Merchant of Venice* stage violent punishments of their antagonists, both of whom are explicitly racialized in opposition to the plays’ white arbiters of justice. Each work’s negotiation of justice features characters seeking extrajudicial retribution in unofficial “trials”; however, neither racialized (Aaron, Shylock) nor white (Titus, Portia) characters possess any formal authority to judge or punish. Why, then, is the denial of Aaron’s and Shylock’s desires, and their public rejections from their respective societies, represented as necessary to preserve order? What fantasies are upheld by audiences’ affective participation in the extralegal punishment and expulsion of these non-white characters? This paper takes up these questions, arguing that Shakespeare relies on nascent tropes of race to contrast punishment meted out by white vigilantes on supposedly deserving others with the excessive, irrational violence advocated by raced villains to align white judgement and authority with a sense of justice. In so doing, I seek to demonstrate how these works participate in a discourse that denigrates non-

whiteness while vesting whiteness with the dangerous privilege of enacting a kind of racial vigilantism that persists—to lethal effect—into the present.

Alice Hinchliffe, “(Im)perfect Victims: Constructions of Victimhood in the Early Modern Imaginary”

This paper considers the ways in which the construction of the modern myth of the “ideal” or “perfect” victim of abuse can be traced back to the victims of sexual and gendered abuse represented in early modern literature. I will draw on legal, criminological, and sociological research to explore the figure of the “perfect” victim to frame my reading of three early modern works. First, I will be discussing the construction of two “perfect” victims of sexual violence, namely Lucrece (*The Rape of Lucrece*) and Lavinia (*Titus Andronicus*) by focusing on their reputation of innocence and goodness, as well as on their behaviour during and after their assaults. I will also consider how the identity of their attackers factors into the creation of their standing as “perfect” victims. Indeed, both Lavinia and Lucrece are attacked by individuals presented in the narrative as knowingly committing a crime, and in the case of Lavinia, as foreigners; both of which feed into related constructions of who is or is not considered a predator. I will then explore the more complex characterization of Bianca in Thomas Middleton’s *Women Beware Women*. Bianca is a victim of domestic abuse at the hands of her husband, and of rape by the Duke and is presented as such. Yet the circumstances around her marriage to Leantio, as well as her characterization following the Duke’s assault distance her from the archetype of the “perfect” victim. She is represented as a victim but is still made to carry the blame for her abuse. Thus, I argue that Middleton’s portrayal of Bianca, while more complex than those of Lavinia and Lucrece, still feeds into damaging myths of perfect victimhood haunting us to this day.

Robin Hizme, “Violence in Fletcher’s *The Island Princess* and the English Cultural Imaginary”

John Fletcher’s *The Island Princess* is oft examined for its alterations and augmentations to William Shakespeare’s seminal travel drama *The Tempest*. First performed at the Globe Theatre sometime between 1619-1621, the romantic intrigues between the central Indonesian character and her various European and native suitors proved a popular exploration of England’s positionality in the ongoing competition for global trade and imperial dominance. Blending elements from a publicity pamphlet for the English East India Company, a French novella, and imperial Spanish history, the play is replete with vicious power struggles, kidnappings, torture, and a duel situated across palace, prison, bedroom, and storehouse. The violence offers up multiple symbolic and contextual connections for its English audience, including the domestic Gunpowder Plot as well as the intra-European battle for mercantile and political hegemony. This paper will explore violence and theatricality in the travel drama, considering “space” as a constellation of diegetic, symbolic, and geographical settings.

The play continues to inform collective English identity in the aftermath of the 1623 Amboyna Massacre when ten English merchants were beheaded by the Dutch Governor of Amboyna; the event is absorbed as a foundational attack which sparks acute nationalistic reactions which might seem disproportionate to the number of victims. Although the executions postdate the initial performance of the play, this paper will consider how the associations between place, violence,

and nationality resonate throughout Fletcher's theatrical text to inform associations the English audience may have made when consuming accounts of the historical event, conveyed via ballads, et. al., to foment the critical wounding experienced by the English collective imaginary.

Allen Loomis, "Window Violence and Domestic Vulnerability in Early Modern Drama"

My paper will explore scenes of violence at or around windows in early modern drama. It seeks to answer the question: why was window violence so prevalent in Renaissance and Restoration drama? To answer this question, I analyze three window scenes: the hanging at a bay window in John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge II* (1600), Corvino's abuse of Celia in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1606), and the stabbing through a parlor window in T. P.'s *The French Conjuror* (1677). I argue that the increasing size and prevalence of windows in early modern London generated cultural anxieties about domestic permeability. These anxieties manifested on stage where windows became contested thresholds for shocking acts of violence and transgression. By situating these window scenes within their architectural and cultural context, I demonstrate how early modern dramatists used window violence to explore broader concerns about the increasing vulnerability of domestic space.

Kate Needham, "Just Skin and Bones: Bodies Re-Fleshed in Early Modern Revenge Tragedy"

Bones and body parts feature as major theatrical images in a number of early modern revenge plays: in *Hamlet*, Hamlet famously handles the skull of Yorick; in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Vindice addresses the skull of his dead beloved and puts her to work in his own violent plots; in *The Tragedy of Hoffman*, Hoffman displays the entire denuded skeleton of his dead father as his impetus for revenge. In each of these plays a speaking character complements the presentation of bare bones by verbally reconstituting them into bodies, describing what these bodies once looked like when alive and en fleshed. In one sense, we might see these descriptions as related to the verbal work performed when a character "sets the scene," describing the elements of a setting that are not physically there but become imaginatively invoked on the fluid space of the stage. Each of these moments plays on the obvious distinction between what is "there" (a skull) and what is "not there" (a person). How might we understand these moments as more than opportunities for irony or familiar *memento mori* images, but also contributing to language's unstable constitutive power on the place of the stage? To better understand this tension between body, stage prop, and verbal "reanimation" (as we might call this phenomenon), I will examine a stage moment which enacts the inverse action to re-fleshing bare bones: the final scene of *Tis Pity She's a Whore*, when Giovanni displays the heart of his murdered sister impaled upon his dagger. Unlike the revengers who speak bare bones into flesh, Giovanni has taken the living character of Isabella, previously embodied by an actor, and reduced her to an emblem, an icon, a piece of non-living flesh, and endowed it with macabre vitality through his unexpected final performance.

Dana Omirova, “‘O thou bloody prison’: Incarceration, Clandestine Killing, and the Duke of Clarence”

This paper examines the prison as a site for clandestine executions and murders, and the elision between the two. Thanks to the editorial problems posed by the textual variants of Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, a modern reader is as likely to see the duo who ends the Duke of Clarence’s life alternately titled “murderers” as well as “executioners.” This textual choice opens up a broader discussion about the justification behind state-sanctioned killing, both in the early modern and our present moment. I am particularly interested in the way setting such killings in the space of the prison obscures them and lends them the appearance of justness. On the stage, Clarence’s death can be framed as a public spectacle of violence typical of an execution; on the page, however, Clarence dies in prison in absence of a judge and jury, with the only potential witness in the Warden removing himself from the space, and the death looks much more like murder.

Benjamin Reed, “Sacrificial Lambs: The Portrayal of Violence Against Children on the Renaissance Stage”

This paper explores how violence against children is a recurring theme in early modern drama such as John Lyly’s *Gallathea* and Shakespeare’s *Richard III*. The early modern stage is a unique space because it involves young boys playing the roles of children, women, and, in the case of the all-boys’ theater companies, adults. Thus, anytime these characters have violence enacted upon them, a child’s body is simultaneously on display to the audience. Such a display, I posit, would resonate with its audience on two levels. Firstly, the abused child *character* would elicit an emotional response and enhance the plot. Secondly, it would draw attention to the child *performer* and critique the risk of child exploitation within England’s master/apprentice socioeconomic system. My core argument is that systemic violence towards children is treated as a necessary evil in the defense of other national markers of identity. While this is explicitly stated by the Populi in *Gallathea*, Shakespeare instead challenges this stance through his plays. Additionally, I am interested in how violence against children was and remains a source of public entertainment. I draw parallels between early modern systemic violence against children with modern cultural practices such as regressing child labor laws and anti-trans legislation, as well as popular media such as films like *Five Nights at Freddy’s* and *The Black Phone*. I posit these examinations help us in perceiving how the early modern period viewed childhood/children and how they remain a reflection of our own cultural beliefs.

Christi Spain-Savage, “‘Two rougher ruffians never lived in Kent’: Subversion of Spatial Violence in *Arden of Feversham*”

My paper for our seminar will explore how the theater subverts and reshapes cultural understanding of violent places. Specifically, I will analyze portrayals of Dover Road, a notorious highway for crime from London to Kent, running through the towns of Gravesend, Rochester, Sittingbourne, and Canterbury, with infamous forested areas, Shooters Hill and Gads Hill. Henry Smith references its violent reputation in his 1592 sermon, *The Poore Mans Teares*, remarking, “some beggers that boldly on Gads hill, Shooters hill, and suche places take mens horses by the heads, and bids them deliuer

their purses.” I will examine the comedic blunderings of the criminals Black Will and Shakebag in *Arden of Faversham* in relation to the Kent locations of Rainham Down, Rochester, and Gads Hill. My preliminary argument is that the play undermines common perceptions of dangerous highways by deflecting Arden’s murder and presenting violence as a fantasy, rather than a reality.

Cristine Varholy, “Taking Another Look at *The Taming of the Shrew*”

This essay considers student responses to filmed versions of Act 2, scene 1, of *The Taming of the Shrew*, the first encounter between Katherine and Petruchio. The scene is full of witty wordplay, but it also has more violent elements. Not only does Katherine slap Petruchio, leading him to threaten her if she does it again, but Petruchio also holds Katherine against her will—he lays hands upon her during their very first encounter. When teaching this scene to a class of male undergraduates at Hampden-Sydney College, I present two versions: the 2005 BBC made-for-TV *Shakespeare Re-Told* adapted version and the more traditional 1980 BBC film version. My students quickly find the situation in the updated *Shakespeare Re-Told* version disturbing or “rape-y”; however, they rarely find anything disturbing about the BBC scene. In response, I propose that the *Shakespeare Re-Told* version captures the spirit of the encounter as it is found in Shakespeare’s text, but the students disagree. They interpret the *Shakespeare Re-Told* version as something resembling a desecration of Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*. The students’ responses raise larger issues about contemporary audiences’ ability—and desire—to understand depictions of transgressive behavior presented in the language and cultural framework of the distant past. Additionally, they illustrate our ongoing struggle to define what constitutes appropriate behavior within a sexualized context.