

## SAA Abstracts- Writerly Identity: Race and Women's Writing

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#### Restoring the "Imperial Race" in Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World*

This paper investigates the representation of the "imperial race" in Margaret Cavendish's *Blazing World*, which according to the plot serve as a class of priests and governors who undergo castration and receive access to a medicinal gum that allows them to regenerate their bodies back to the age of twenty. In the *Blazing World*, I argue that the "imperial race" functions amid the paradigms of race-as-class and race-as-phenotype, wherein imperial blood is not marked explicitly through skin tone per se, but through the observable bodily characteristic of youthfulness that expresses their class privilege. Such privilege is based upon access to a medicinal gum that induces bodily regeneration—a social practice that is necessitated through their bodily demarcation and sexual capacity as eunuchs. Their bodily difference is curated through the social practices of castration and curative regeneration, but it allows for a somatic exceptionalism that is nonetheless essentialized and authorized by their blood. Cavendish's representation of racial embodiment is co-constitutive with the representation of trans\* embodiment. Attempting to understand this relationality further, I analyze the wider referential context around the imperial race's scene of regeneration and the representation of non-binary sex/gender in Cavendish's theory of nature. Ultimately, I map the precarious intersection between race and transness in Cavendish's imagination in order to understand how Cavendish's representation of the "imperial race" conveys a white racial fantasy that naturalizes the capacity of the white body to transform itself and make itself anew.

### Elisa Oh

SAA Abstract and Bio for Boston 2025

Working Title: " '[Y]'ave learnt the Art to move': tangled choreographies of race and gender in Aphra Behn's *Abdelazer*

In her 1994 essay on Aphra Behn in *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, Margo Hendricks challenged us "theoretically and historically to map the discursive and social practices that prompted seventeenth-century Englishmen and women to define themselves not only in terms of nationalism but also, increasingly, in terms of color"(226). In the same volume, Margaret W. Ferguson pushes us to see how in Behn's *Oroonoko* the categories of gender, race, and class "sometimes supplement, sometimes fracture each other"(224). Building on these provocative invitations to consider late seventeenth-century literary texts with a close attention to constructions of race and gender that compete *and* collaborate, this essay will attend to Aphra Behn's only revenge tragedy, *Abdelazer* (1676). I unpack characters' use of physical patterns of

movement, which I term “choreographies,” to seize military power or sway the emotional influence of royal politics. Every main character engages in these coded choreographies that are generally familiar to early modern theatergoers: stage directions and verbal references signal the social “dances” of seduction, threatened rape, supplication, subordination, martial aggression or surrender (both individually in a duel and collectively on a battlefield), and privilege proven by access to an inner sanctum of bedchamber or proximity to the king. However, characters leverage these specific kinetic scripts to achieve different ends depending on the raced and gendered stereotypes they choose to activate with them. For example, how is it kinetically parallel yet symbolically different when a white woman forces her way into the private chamber of her black male lover and when a white king forces his way into the private chamber of a married white woman after he has sent her black husband away to battle? How does the language of “tamelessness”—or physical passivity of motion—align with white masculine cowardly failure at revenge, black masculine subordination to a white queen mother, or desirable white feminine docility? The characters’ unapologetically machiavellian shifts between manipulative choreographies unsettle the epistemological fiction that any of these kinetic codes is a reliable marker of true intention or essential positionality in society.

### **Elizabeth Hodgson**

Who’s Sorry Now, or White Feminism in Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam*

“White Feminism” assumes that gender inequities can be solved via neoliberal values: individual achievement, personal rights, and competitive success. White Feminism is therefore (often deliberately) blind to the racialized, class-based, ableist and sexuality-fixing effects of this individualist approach, and it similarly assumes that personal success, personal fulfillment, and personal freedoms are equivalent to collective social restructuring. Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam, Fair Queen of Jewry* is prone to this same political misdirection. Cary deploys the structural inheritances of whiteness, and white womanhood, in order to stabilize certain modes of patriarchal power. The play also fixates on the personal conduct, personal ethics, and personal purity of its women characters as key tools through which they are both individually valued and individually culpable—thus masking the real operations of racialized, gendered hierarchies. Cary usefully exemplifies the ways in which whiteness bases itself in bloodlines and inherited status, while she also selectively chooses to rewrite that inevitable membership by arbitrarily assigning Europeanized “fairness” to some characters through equally toxic purity tests. Being “fair” in this play, being white, is a chimaera, and this constant code-switching confirms that in the early-modern period, “race is the child of racism, not the father” (Coates 6). For Cary’s women characters, individual virtue-signalling and virtue-monitoring also become tools masking the operations of institutional power. Cary’s interest in Mariam being sorry ultimately aids the same misdirections of White Feminism itself.

## **Rebecca Quoss-Moore**

### Rejecting Italy: English White Nationalism and Significations of Queenship in Tudor Royal Women's Writing

This paper develops part of a larger project considering whether/how Henry VIII's uniquely misogynist court influenced a re-signification for "queen." The iconic figures of British regnant queenship—Elizabeth I, Victoria, and Elizabeth II—headed the nation at moments of significant imperialist politics. While often considered anomalies in the history of British monarchy, I am interested in the fact that these queens seem, fundamentally, not anomalistic to the larger arc of white British patriarchy. Work by Patricia Akhimie, Mary Rambaran-Olm, and Urvashi Chakravarty contextualizes the interwoven histories of British empire, white supremacist nationalism, and monarchy; Mira 'Assaf Kafantaris, Yasmine Hachimi, and Zainab Cheema have been advancing important work on "racing" queens. My project, then, is to discover whether (and how) these visions of queenship draw on themes, embodiments, and performances incorporated into British queenship in the Henrician period, when Henry VIII's revolving door of wives may have both emptied the signifier "queen" of its feminized or feminizing power and made it available as a space for signification for patriarchal power. The ways queens thought about their position, and the ways people thought about queens, enabled those performances of British national identity that informed imperialist expansion, the concretization of patriarchal power structures, and the rise of white supremacist (il)logics. This specific piece of the project interrogates how images of "foreignness," darkness, and Italy collide in works by (at least) two Tudor royal women, Margaret Douglas and Katherine Parr, as one demonstration of the imagined interrelationship of national identity, gender, and racialization.

## **Kathy Acheson**

### *Marginalia and Early Modern White Womanhood*

In this essay I want to connect the early modern White women's sense of their Whiteness with book-based marginalia, especially those that illustrate the importance of reading and writing as skills exemplifying class and racial identity, that express women's ownership of material goods, and that allude to women's roles in governing genealogy and directing inheritance. As Cheryl Harris (following W. E. B. DuBois) tells us, Whiteness in the era of racial capitalism is a kind of property and as such can be invested in, borrowed against, and improved upon; as Melissa E. Sanchez argues, we should not imagine that early modern White women were "innocent of knowledge of or involvement in these systems" (63). As property, Whiteness served White women as an asset that could be parlayed into social authority and financial security; as property, Whiteness was more valuable, more salient, and less easily alienable than almost all other forms of property women could possess. We see traces of their investments in Whiteness by women of the later seventeenth century acted out in domestic practices and pastimes, and ingrained in biographical texts such as letters, diaries, autobiographies, and funeral sermons. Pieces of marginalia that show White women valuing their Whiteness and understanding how it works in the world in which they live are fragmentary, quiet, slight, and ephemeral signs of this history,

but tied as they are to the embodied and lived experience of women of the time – and the shared library of knowledge of the world that printed books represent – they are distinctly valuable.

### Corinne Zeman

#### Fair Words: Epistolary Constructions of White Womanhood in Dunton's Periodicals

**Abstract:** This article examines women's self-construction in John Dunton's late-Stuart periodicals, focusing especially on his question-and-answer vehicle *The Athenian Mercury* (1691–97) and its little-studied offshoot *The Challenge... Or, the Female War* (1697). The latter text collates letters published in earlier editions of Dunton's crowd-sourced advice rags, arranging them as a late entry in the *querelle des femmes* tradition. Authored by both named and anonymous women, the compiled letters leverage racialized logics to articulate the virtues and desirability of white womanhood in opposition to a denigrated Blackness. Sparring with male antagonists (likely Dunton in several pseudonymous guises), the female querists debate whether Blackness constitutes a cosmetic alteration to an ordinary whiteness and whether the “despis'd Mooress is really a greater Beauty then all your Finieal chalky-fac'd European Ladies.” Throughout their epistolary exchanges with Dunton's avatars, the correspondents contemplate their public exposure as participants in periodical forums, often incorporating metadiscursive commentary about the rules of decorous engagement. They attempt to iron out norms for a “fair way of arguing”—how precisely to “fight fairer” and “lay [] Baits so fair,” how to adjudicate “deviations from fair,” and whether “'tis not fair to insult.” Implicitly, the querists deploy the concept of “fairness” to establish the racialized, pedestaled fragility of English womanhood—an “unhappy Race” deserving of “fairer usage,” meaning their privileged exemption from the figurative stigma of “foul ink.” Though pitched to readers as a battle between gendered antagonists, the letters unmistakably target a sully Blackness as the covert adversary of the so-called “Female War.” Ultimately, the letters reconcile English women to white patriarchal auspices by entrenching in readers the shared belief that Blackness is the perpetual “smutch” from which white purity must be shielded.