

Final Abstracts, “A Theatre of Others” SAA, 2026 (Denver, CO)

Sheila Coursey (Saint Louis University): *Counting Sheep(le) in the Affective Economy of Early Modern Theatre*

At the beginning of John Day’s *The Isle of Gulls* (1606), the Prologue-speaker goes rogue, accusing a series of onstage Gentlemen (actors posing as members of the audience) of sabotaging their production through their heckling and threats to exit the performance in protest. One of these Gentlemen denies that their early exit might spur a mass exodus: “Why, does thy audience like a flock of sheep, that one cannot leap over a hedge, but all the rest will follow? They have more reason in them than so” (A3r). Despite the Gentleman’s defence of his fellow play-goers, the figure of the sheep haunts early modern discussions of playgoing as a shorthand for audience members who are easily influenced or troublingly porous. Shylock’s description of Laban’s sheep as “woolly breeders” (1.3.77) ophthalmologically influenced into generative profit even echoes Stephen Gosson’s concerns that theatrical spectacle might gain “privy entries” into the audience’s bodies and minds. In contemporary parlance, “sheeple” is still used as a derogatory phrase for swaths of the public who lack particular modes of (often conspiratorial) analysis. This paper explores the odd and sometimes paradoxical figurations of theatre audiences as sheep in the affective economy of early modern commercial theatre. The sheep serves as a nexus for various competing early modern paradigms of the audience-stage relationship, including pastoral care/dominion, collaborative generation, and predation.

Claire Eager (The College of Wooster): “*I have a motion much imports your good*” (MfM 5.1.535): *Audience Engagements in Shakespearean Silences? (Or, “Please clap.”)*

This essay starts with the premise that *Measure for Measure* is a comedy (!) and sets out to articulate theatrical practices that make it so (e.g. Watson 2020, 49ff; c.f. *ibid.*, 1–6), with special attention to audience engagements then and now. This is not to say that Shakespearean comedies may not be found objectionable—viz., *The Merchant of Venice*, along with practically every other entry in the Folio genre—or made more so by valid production choices. However, overwhelming attention paid to Isabella’s silence(s) at the Duke’s proposal(s), including her range of possible gestural responses along with the stage business of the play’s concluding moments, while significant for individual productions and arguments, omits a wide range of possible historical, textual, and experiential evidence. My study endeavors to make the play’s silences visible (and tangible) before and beyond its endings as I triangulate among early modern audience conditions as considered in recent and foundational studies (Stern 2004, Purcell 2013, Publicover 2017, Smith 2017, Rodgers 2018, *intermulta alia*); analogous intertheatrical situations; and observations of my own and my students’ audience experiences, variable over time—in order to postulate missing stage business and other paratextual lacunae that these collectively suggest: dramatic practices that the comic genre affords and perhaps requires, the assay of which may offer methods for future study.

Jennifer A. Low (Florida Atlantic University): **“Practices of the London Playgoer”**

This paper examines the experience of the playgoer, taking a theoretical as well as a historical tack. I analyze the nuances of spectatorial engagement, comparing early modern playgoers with early television watchers and spectators at twentieth-century American circuses to see how these models, which contrast with our knowledge and experience of playgoing today, might provide insight into early modern English playgoer experience. I view engagement with theatrical performance as a continuum, with playgoers’ eating, peacocking, and scrutinizing other playgoers on one end of the continuum and showing signs of being moved or brought out of themselves (as in ecstatic experience) on the other. We should recognize that playgoers from both ends of this spectrum are potentially performers, and that the auditorium (or a less formal audience space) may potentially serve as a secondary performance space. I will focus on playgoers attending private theater, specifically Blackfriars, and, more specifically, on what can be learned from the prologue in Day’s *The Isle of Gulls* and the depiction of the Citizen and the Citizen’s Wife in Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*.

These works reward consideration of audience engagement, alienation, and the opportunities for involvement implied by placing “plants” among the audience. How do “audience” performances alter how space in the theater functions?

The “lords room,” (the space for spectators over and behind the stage in public theaters), complicates the division between stage and auditorium; does the same thing occur with spectators seated onstage in the private playhouses?

This work draws from three fields—the study of contemporary popular culture, social and spatial theater studies, and early modern theater history. I draw on Bourdieu by way of John Fiske’s analysis of popular culture; I also make extensive use of one of Fiske’s sources for a chapter in his book *Understanding Popular Culture*—Patricia Palmer Gillard’s *The Lively Audience: A Study of Children around the TV Set*. Palmer Gillard, who served as head of the communications department at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in the nineties and more recently taught communications at the University of Newcastle, conducted Australia’s first large-scale ethnographic study of children and television from a constructivist approach, which she wrote up in *The Lively Audience*. I also draw on theoretical materials like Keir Elam’s semiotics of the stage and Gay McAuley’s work on the spectator in the space. I; in its historical aspect, this paper is deeply indebted to Lucy Munro’s *Children of the Queen’s Revels* (2005) and Michael Shapiro’s *Children of the Revels* (1977), as well as to the concept of the “understander” propounded in Will West’s recent *Common Understandings, Poetic Confusion*.

Lynsey McCullough (Royal Shakespeare Company): **“Will you not dance?” Player-Playgoer Synchrony in the Early Modern Theatre”**

This paper evaluates levels of dance literacy in early modern theatrical audiences and the extent to which dance and other types of stage movement may have provoked embodied responses from playgoers. Drawing upon broader examples of viewer response that suggest a somatic and/or

kinetic component, it explores how dance was recognised and received by spectators but also the ways in which it was reperformed by them. In the sermon he preached at Paul's Cross in 1598, Stephen Gosson describes an embodied response to stage spectacle: 'in publike Theaters, when any notable shew passeth over this stage, the people arise in their seates, & stand upright with delight and eagernesse to view it well'.¹ But, in addition to such common physical indications of spectator engagement, are there examples from the period of bodily synchrony between player and playgoer? In other words, could onstage dancing trigger synchronous movement in an audience? In Act V of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, the onstage audience for the unveiling of Hermione's statue share with the sculptural object a marble immobility: 'Does not the stone rebuke me / For being more stone than it?' (5.3.37-8) If stillness can be reciprocal, so too can movement and even dance. Drawing upon Shakespearean inset performance, early modern cultural commentators, and research into theatrical audiences, I make the case for dance as an element of stage spectacle that was experienced by players and playgoers relationally and as a bodily expression of shared experience.

Lucy Munro (Kings College): **“The Country Custom’: Playgoing, Gender and Religious Conformity”**

This paper examines a new archival trace of playgoing in early modern England: a lawsuit in the Court of Star Chamber, dating from 1620, in which Sir Robert Monson is said to have declared that 'there was more good to be learned at a playe than at a Sermon'. This line is a familiar trope in anti-theatrical writing, stretching back to at least the 1570s, and it was also used against individuals such as the theatre impresario Philip Rosseter, who was brought before the Consistory Court of London in 1610 and alleged to have made the same claim. The Star Chamber suit, however, situates the accusation within a larger narrative and names the play concerned as 'the COUNTRYE Custome' – that is, Fletcher and Massinger's *The Custom of the Country*. The allusion not only helps to us to date early performances of the play to February-November 1619, but also offers a new framework for thinking about the relationship between playgoing, gender and religious identity. Monson claims that he mentioned the play in conversation with Margaret Clayton (wife of John Clayton, who brought the lawsuit against him), offering to accompany her to see it, and telling her that 'it was an admirable playe to confirme her vertue [...] you maye mak vse of this playe as a Sermon vnto you'. Clayton and his legal team link Monson's supposed preference for plays over sermons with accusations that he is a recusant Catholic; at the same time, they defend Margaret Clayton from accusations of puritanism by asking her the leading question 'doe yow not thinke that the said Mounson in his deposition to the second Interrogatory [(w)herein he saith, yow said, god forbid yow should committ such a sinn as goe to a play) doth indeavour to lay an aspersion of puritanizme vpon yow to excuse his owne propane papistical or atheisticall speeches'? Drawing on the work of Amy Rodgers on spectatorship, Charles Whitney on documented playgoers, and Musa Gurnis on religious identity and pluralism, my paper considers the relationship between 'discursive' and 'material' spectatorship in the Star Chamber suit, and the ways in which playgoing or a refusing to go to a play

might both be linked with religious identity.

Nancy Selleck (University of Massachusetts, Lowell): **“Shakespeare’s Meta-Audiences: Personation and power in the early modern playhouse”**

This paper takes up the forms and meanings of audience behavior within Shakespearean metatheatre as assertions of the playgoer’s determinant role in the process of playing. Consistent with the commentaries and representations of other early modern playwrights (e.g., Nashe, Beaumont, Heywood), Shakespeare figures the active audience member as a key component of “lively” personation. I’m interested here not only in how these representations of active audiences help flesh out the limited traces of early modern playgoers’ actual behavior, but also in the politics of their deployment vis-à-vis those spectators. The metatheatrical scenes of *Hamlet*, *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* stage exaggerated versions of the various types of direct stage-audience intercourse afforded by early modern playing conditions and central to much of the dramaturgy of the period. Shakespeare’s meta-audiences engage frankly and extensively with the inner plays’ players and characters – often disruptively but also collaboratively – and their vocal and improvisational roles expressly highlight the political potency and consequence of theatre. My analysis aims to tease out the various implicit meanings and effects of such staged stage-audience encounters, registering the meta-dramaturgy on offer here and considering the possible impacts of such scenes for their real audiences. In Shakespeare’s choice nearly always to stage the noble audiences of household theatre for his commercial playhouse audiences, I see a connection with the frequent gentling of playgoers in his plays’ prologues and epilogues, and suggest that these scenes work to associate the playhouse audience with the powerful position of the audiences of great-hall theatre. Such metatheatrical representations of court audiences as bold interlocutors and improvisers who become integral to the stage action may have had not the “distancing” effect that scholars commonly attribute to metatheatre, but one of imaginative empowerment, whereby stage and audience become, as Mark Rylance suggests, “one group of imaginers somehow” – co-creators of the play’s meanings.

Stephen Wisker (Wesleyan College): **“Grumblings, Brickbats, and Interlopers: Noisy Exceptions to the Silence of Early Modern Audiences. Or CSI Norwich: ‘It was like that when I got there your honor!’”**

As the theater developed radically in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, so too did the experience and the expectations of its audiences. In the early years of the theater’s professionalisation and through the 1580’s, those audience expectations and experiences were shaped by the figure of the clown. Then, in the wake of Marlowe’s explosive influence, early playwrights, ambassadors of a new culture of literacy, clashed with the theater’s practices rooted in an older culture of orality epitomised by the clown. By the turn of the century, developing notions of authorship began to dominate the theater, usurping the clown’s on-stage and improvisational influence and privileging the text, thus fundamentally changing the relationship between the actors and the audience. As my work explores, in the period’s ongoing encounter between the authoritative text and the unscripted realities of theater practice, the clown’s

disruptive presence was increasingly marginalised by the emergent playwrights wishing to maintain control of the audience's experience. This paper will consider certain playwrights' anxiety not only about clowns but also the theater, its audiences and their tastes, as well as exploring some of the few representations of audience members in surviving early modern plays and documents. Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* is but the most obvious place to start being the closest we have to a contemporary essay on audience expectations. However, equally rich in sociological and anthropological delights is the oft referenced legal document "Contemporary depositions respecting an affray at Norwich in 1583 in which Queen Elizabeth's Company of players, then acting at the Red Lion Inn, were involved." A tantalising archival trace of early modern playgoing, it consists of witness statements concerning the swiftly escalating skirmish after "one of her majesties servants was abused at the [theater] gate," and several players—including the legendary clown Dick Tarlton—armed with prop weapons ran from the stage to help their colleague. Of course the details are maddeningly performance adjacent, but the witnesses are cut from the same cloth as Beaumont and Fletcher's disgruntled grocer, and their testimonies reflect back tiny fractured shards of a living audience, theatrical experience, and history. The affray and the play loosely bookend the period of radical change under discussion and together may help us glimpse something of the shifting experiences and expectations of the theater's audiences in the period.