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“Playing with *Romeo and Juliet*” considers the role of the commercial audience in the valorization of theatrical character. Using the period’s anti-playgoing ordinances as a framework, which sought to control the leisure time of, especially, playgoing youth, this paper argues that *Romeo and Juliet* actively gives its audience a “part” in its drama. The play ropes them into its fictional world by paradoxically stirring them to leave the theater and begin the extra-dramatic work of promoting news about its characters. At once promising that idle activity can be productive and that productive activity can be pleurably frivolous, *Romeo and Juliet* teaches its audience how to consume and produce the “value” of Shakespearean character, a mandate that persists to this day.

Anders Crow

SAA 2026 Abstract

Abstract: *Austerity Measures* explores the profound relationship between food insecurity and poetics in early modern writing. Severe hunger crises destabilized the early modern Anglophone world, as rising food prices and erratic weather destroyed harvests; the privatization of public land and the shift to wage labor fomented insecurity; and colonization in North America and the Caribbean created new forms of food-structural violence. I bring to light a body of authors--Anne Bradstreet, George Herbert, Robert Herrick, and more--who used poetry to try to understand and improve these conditions. In the process, I make a case for the importance of recognizing the role material needs like hunger played in shaping literary experimentation: a shift in focus that allows us to recapture a sense of literature's power as a driver of social change.

Natalya Din-Kariuki

SAA 2026 Abstract

Edward Terry, India, and Early Modern “Improvement”

Scholars of legal and economic history including Brenna Bhandar, Paul Slack, and Craig Muldrew have demonstrated the extent to which improvement – a concept which emerged in the seventeenth century, initially in the context of agricultural labor – shaped the structures of colonialism and capitalism and their attendant racial logics. This paper focusses on a specific episode in the history of that idea. It does so in reference to Edward Terry (1589/90-1660), a chaplain attached to one of the most significant embassies of the early modern period, that of Thomas Roe at the Mughal court of Jahangir in 1616-19. Terry wrote an account about Roe’s embassy and his experiences of travel, *A Voyage to East-India* (1655), as well as a sermon, *The Merchants and Mariners Preservation and Thanksgiving* (1649), dedicated to the merchants of the East India Company. By examining Terry’s digressive and ekphrastic travel writing and preaching, which repeatedly asks English readers and listeners to “improve” what he has written, the paper considers the relationship between Terry’s clerical and literary labors, as well as the connections between economic, spiritual, and rhetorical notions of profit. In addition to reconstructing the key role played by trade company chaplains like Terry in early modern England’s global expansion and drawing attention to a previously underexamined subset of sermons written about or in the context of travel, the paper aims to draw out the implications of Terry’s writings for early modern discourses of labor and profit more generally.

Joel M. Dodson
Southern CT State University
SAA 2025 – Labor and Early Modern Literature

The Water Poet Goes to School: John Taylor in Oxford

The aim of my contribution for our seminar is to draft a section of the final chapter of my current book project, “The Poverty of Aesthetics in Early Modern England.” In 1625 and again in 1643, John Taylor, the self-proclaimed “Water Poet,” sojourned in Oxford, first as a waterman in the retinue of Henrietta Maria during the plague, and second as an exile from London for the Royalist cause. Taylor’s output from Oxford offers a unique perspective on the “sculler-scholar,” as Rebecca Fall dubs him, and of the porous lines between literary and applied labor. By the 1640s, Taylor’s publications consisted largely of nonsense pamphleteering, of an increasingly conservative bent. Formally, however, these works show the working-class writer’s close proximity and engagement with humanist literary culture. Taylor’s *Causes of the Diseases and Distempers of this Kingdom* (1645, Bod MS Add. C. 209) featured editorial glosses by the learned Sir John Birkenhead, while contemporary copies of his tracts published by the university press were gathered alongside those of Robert Stapleton and others. Set against the verse ephemera of Oxford student commonplace books in the 1630s and 40s – which routinely feature (mock) encomia to butchers, butlers, and working-class members of the university community – the Water Poet at Oxford, I suggest, affords an early instance of what Rancière termed the “mixed scene” of the worker-poet in *Proletarian Nights* (1981), with complex political lessons for the often-confusing solidarity of the academy and labor today.

Roze Hentschell
Labor and Early Modern Literature
SAA 2026

Labor, Longevity, and Legitimacy

This essay will explore the labor of literary criticism as it intersects with questions of legitimacy and academic longevity, particularly from the vantage point of a professor whose transition into academic leadership has displaced traditional scholarly production. I will reflect on the institutional and cultural forces that marginalize literary scholarship once it no longer is a metric of professional evaluation at the same time that they rely on the cultural capital of scholarly output. This will not be a wayward English professor's lament or apology, however. I hope to position early modern literary criticism, and humanistic scholarly inquiry in general, as a necessary part of an ecosystem of modern university labor. Ultimately, I will advocate for a reimagining of academic longevity that honors the shifting nature of our positions over a career, supports our relevance as scholars, and resists the expectation of, to quote Falstaff, the "double labor" of paying back.

Lindsey Jones

SAA 2026: Labor and Early Modern Literature

The third folio of Shakespeare's plays is unusual in that it has two very distinct states, the first (1663) containing seven fewer plays than the second (1664). F3 is the only Shakespearean folio to have been produced with such a high degree of variation, and the work of its producers deserves more attention than it has heretofore received. My paper will look at the printer's ornaments of F3, specifically the ornament used at the beginning of all seven of the new plays in the second impression and of 23 of the 36 plays in the first impression. This ornament is highly reminiscent of the ornament used on the title page of the first quarto of *Pericles* (1609), a play found only in F3's second impression. Douglas Bruster has argued that printer's ornaments are indicative of deliberate choices made by printers: "design was not left to the whim of a compositor reaching into an all-purpose tray for just any 'prety knotte,' but was instead something planned out in advance and presumably on the basis of this printer's deep professional experience." Using Bruster's defense of such readings, I will analyze the use of this woodcut and what connection it has to the one found on *Pericles* Q1's title page. This assessment will also consider the process and thought behind the selection of printer's ornaments for early modern drama, ultimately contending that these decorative elements served to unify large works like F3 and tie in them in to previously published works as well.

Juan Lamata

SAA 2026

Abstract

“Evening mist at the laborer’s heel’: *Paradise Lost* and Masterlessness Redeemed”

My aim in this essay is to show how *Paradise Lost*, written in the exact historical moment in which for the first time a majority of the English masterless population was being successfully integrated into capitalist manufacturing and agricultural production, works to redefine feudal masterlessness as liberal freedom, a freedom defined by choice, formal equality among individuals, and the principle of self-ownership. That is, what begins the poem and (and my manuscript in progress) as a cultural nonstarter, as a heretical threat incompatible with the good and natural order of society, concludes both transformed into a now-hegemonic universal ideal, the idea that we all share and aspire to exercise a condition of freedom rooted in our ability to choose, our equality before the law, and our right to self-ownership.

As I hope to demonstrate, Milton damns Satan’s feudal masterlessness to redeem it as Adam’s liberal freedom. But this act of redemption, as all acts of redemption, comes with a price. In order for masterlessness to be redeemed as freedom, the concept of masterlessness must shed its explicit class character. It must no longer signal either to a breakdown of the social order or to the role played in production by the dispossessed person with nothing to sell but their own labor. Above all, masterlessness redefined as freedom must envelop class difference within a homogenizing “even-ing mist” of false equality, one that makes equals of both the person forced to sell their labor, and the person choosing to buy it. In other words, to damn masterlessness and forge freedom, Milton must occlude the class difference and exploitation from which this supposed freedom springs and which it sustains.

Actors at Work – SAA Abstract
Tanya Pollard

What do actors do when they go to work? Of the many kinds of labor that go into producing plays, acting might be both the most visible and the hardest to define. We can see and measure the labor of designing sets and costumes, managing laundry, and staffing the box office, but the less tangible work of acting is sometimes hard to distinguish from speaking, or even simply being, onstage. Early modern actors had to shoulder many tasks: even beyond the essential labors of reading, memorizing, and giving life to multiple scripts in repertory, shareholding members of adult playing companies also had to manage companies, playhouses, and the training of apprentices. Newly available as a professionally viable career in early modern England, acting emerges as a matter of sustained fascination in the period's plays, especially those in which metatheatrical scenes dramatize the work of playing companies in action. In early modern plays show sustained interest into the question of what actors do. This essay will reflect on the representation of actors' labor in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the context of the playing company that produced it.

Labors of Signification in Queens' Writings, Queens' Bodies

I hope to develop, here, an analysis of Tudor queens' writing from an intersection of three conversations: that around the work of writing and literary collaboration (as in White, 2022 & 2023); that around the use of writing as performance, for monarchs (as in Herman, 2010); and that around the work of early modern gender (as in Gordon, 2024). I want to use this space to explore the specific functions of queens' labor of writing and translation as it relates to their labor of using the body to mean—to explore their signifying work in their texts and in their persons. Acknowledging that a focus on queens could reify the kind of writing-as-elite presumption that this seminar wishes to resist and revise, I hope to approach that revision and resistance from the other end, as it were. Not least, I am interested in the ways that queens' writing emphasizes their labor as collaborative; this aligns, I argue, with visible collaborative labor as normative in the period. Tudor kings resist this visible collaborative element, though, tipping one domino in the chain towards an end point where collaborative labor becomes not-masculine, not-elite, not-art. Extending some of Gordon's recent arguments on gendering as women's work, we can think about the work of celebrity, the work of rule, and the work of writing in conceptualizing how shifts in labor and in gender intertwine and are distilled in the shifting definition of queenship, created partly through queens' writing, in the Tudor period.

Charlotte Thurston
Labor and Early Modern Literature
SAA 2026

Wit, Entertainment, and Theatrical Labor in *The Puritan*

I would like to explore wit as a form of labor in Thomas Middleton's *The Puritan* (or *The Widow of Watling Street*), a play which highlights the job insecurity of several of its characters. The play aligns characters of different vocations who have skills and knowledge but no socially appropriate place to channel them: soldiers who are discarded after they are no longer useful in wars abroad; a scholar who has education but no place to be employed for it. The play emphasizes the risks of poverty, crime, and debtors' prison for these undervalued and underemployed characters, but also emphasizes wit as its own work: the characters "employ" themselves in devices to both make money and avoid prison, creating labor conditions that allow them to exploit rather than be exploited.

Notably, Pieboard, the scholar, relies for his success—or survival—on his ability to *entertain*. In one scene, Pieboard's ability to escape a Counter arrest rests on the appeal of his cleverness to a moneyed Gentleman, who pretends he is buying a masque device (plot, as in story structure) from Pieboard simply because he finds it a good *device* (plot, as in scheme). Middleton, like Pieboard, attended but did not graduate from Oxford, and had a family and personal debt history; as a scholar turned freelancing writer, he had to muster a flexible wit to support himself across multiple genres and venues, entertaining a range of audiences. In this light, the con Pieboard and his friend (posing as fortuneteller and conjurer) nearly pull off on their well-off Puritan neighbors' comments on the transient and potentially insubstantial work of acting and performance, which itself demands payment (and requires financial resources to create). Following this, I would like to consider not just how wit as labor functions in the play's narrative but also reflects on the laboring wit of those involved in playmaking.

**A Servant of Two Masters (or Mistresses):
Female Servants and Apprenticeships in the Book Trade**

Molly G. Yarn
Independent Scholar

In this paper, I explore some of the evidence I have collected about the presence and labor of women other than wives and daughters in book trade households. Although I consider their role in the making and selling of books, I am also interested in the other activities taking place in the same space as bookwork, and how the presence of female servants affects our understanding of the social and professional networks of London stationers. Rather than offer answers, this paper will demonstrate a range of archival possibilities and provoke new questions about what it meant to work in the early modern book trade.