

SHAKESPEARE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

2026 ANNUAL MEETING

Seminar: **MANUSCRIPT CULTURES/THEATRICAL CULTURES**

Alan Stewart (Columbia University)

ags2105@columbia.edu

Bianca F.-C. Calabresi (Columbia University)

bc16@columbia.edu

Faustus' "Bloody Writ" and cures for bleeding

"Consummatum Est"-- scholars consider Doctor Faustus's declaration as he finishes his deed of gift written in his own blood as the ultimate blasphemy of his Mephistophelean pact. But what if we read that phrase from John 19:30 in the context of the many instructions for the control of bleeding found in early modern manuscripts, including in Philip Henslowe's diary? This essay explores a number of such manuscript remedies in order to better position *Doctor Faustus* at a nexus of habitual bleeding practices that would be recognizable to contemporary audiences. By doing so, it recasts Faustus' bloody writ as more mundane than heretical, with implications for how we view the play and its possible receptions.

J. Colley (University of Cambridge)

jwsc5@cam.ac.uk

"Of Whom Only Mention Is Made"? Defining "Mutes" and Penetrating the Unscene in Early Modern Drama

I start with a variant between the character lists of the pastoral *Sicelides*, first performed at King's College, Cambridge, in 1615. Although the 1631 *editio princeps* and one manuscript describe two characters as "mute," a second manuscript groups those same characters under the header "Sequentium est mentio tantum," despite these characters' onstage presence. This ambiguity between "mute" and "mentio tantum" is not an isolated glitch. To explain, I look first to conventions in Renaissance editions of ancient drama. I then link this ambiguity between mute and "mentio" characters to a broader Renaissance fascination with the boundary between mimesis and diegesis. Manuscripts prove crucial because textual variation is significantly more

common when at least one witness was handwritten. Attending chiefly to variants between character lists and stage directions, I show how some Renaissance playwrights and/or their scribes evinced an anxiety about offstage space, and sometimes also a desire to penetrate it.

Alan B. Farmer (Ohio State University)

farmer.109@osu.edu

Buying and Selling Manuscript Plays: Professional Plays in the Stationers' Registers

This essay will explore entries in the Stationers' Registers of plays performed in the professional theaters of early modern London. Most plays that were entered were published shortly thereafter by the bookseller or printer who entered them, which explains why entries are usually looked at from the point of view of printing and the economics of the book trade. But not all plays followed this typical path. Some plays were recorded as being sold to another stationer before they were published; some were published by a different stationer without any record of their having been sold; some were printed but have subsequently become lost because none of their printed copies survives; still others may never have been printed at all. As I will argue, those plays that did not follow a smooth path from entrance to publication or were never printed provide invaluable evidence about the trade in manuscript plays. This shift in focus to the manuscript plays that preceded entrance offers a revealing glimpse into the buying and selling of theatrical manuscripts and opens up new ways of understanding the relationship of the book trade to the manuscript and theatrical cultures of early modern England.

Kara Northway (Kansas State University)

northway@ksu.edu

"Because the idle mind is an ocean of thoughts": The Shared Scribblings of Early English Actors Offstage

In *Hamlet*, Ophelia asks the audience to imagine the offstage action of the actor playing Hamlet who "falls to such perusal of my face / As a would draw it." My paper will explore the actual manuscript evidence from the Henslowe-Alleyn Archive of actors' offstage creative endeavors, such as drawings and other informal artistic renderings in word and line, made for actors themselves or others. I will argue these circulated scribbles reveal actors' fluency among various media. Actors used artistic ideas encountered from not only the stage, but also drawing guides, architecture, sculpture, woodblock images, painting, religious pamphlets, book marginalia, and letters in order to visualize, dramatize, and evaluate problems and ideas actors were thinking about. These drawings are worth studying for insights both into how new theatrical ideas developed and into what we would call today actors' "creative" ethos.

Vimala C. Pasupathi (Hofstra University)

vcpasupathi@gmail.com

The Militia At Home: Musters in Manuscripts & 1640s Manuscript Drama

My paper will discuss the two primary ways that the study of manuscripts have enriched my book project, “The Militia Theatre, 1558-1662: Stages of Obligation in English Drama and British History.” It is basically a cultural history of the English militia, an important, but critically neglected domestic institution and instrument of governance, constructed in part through dramatic texts composed, performed, and printed over the course of an entire century. In it, I draw on various kinds of records related to the militia’s administration, including contemporary legislation and letters and instructions from the privy council to those commissioned to hold musters in the counties. The first half of my SAA paper shares what I have learned from muster rolls, the documents produced at those assemblies. In the second half, I offer brief accounts of the plays I discuss that are themselves evidence of manuscript culture. They include Mildmay Fane’s *Candy Restaurata* (1641), and a work on unknown authorship about the first English civil war, composed in or shortly after 1643. Together, they provide evidence of the significance of both the militia and drama within the aristocratic household and the latter’s particular utility for engaging subjects in contemporary debates over the former.

Eilís Smyth (University of Notre Dame)

esmyth@nd.edu

The Smock Alley Promptbooks: An Irish *Julius Caesar*

Dublin’s Smock Alley theatre was once home to a copy of Shakespeare’s Third Folio which contained the company’s promptbooks in the late seventeenth century. What survives from this Folio comprises the largest extant collection of Restoration-era Shakespeare promptbooks. Though the promptbook for *Julius Caesar* was lost in a nineteenth-century fire at the Birmingham Shakespeare Library, one amended couplet from the play survives on the first page of the *Macbeth* promptbook. This paper traces the passage of this MS couplet from the Smock Alley promptbook to the 1719 printed edition of the play; and makes a new case for the transmission and survival of an Irish *Julius Caesar* on the London stage. Ultimately, the paper uses the surviving scrap of the *Julius Caesar* promptbook to argue that the circulation of actors, play texts, and influence between the London and Dublin stages was bi-directional, and that the promptbooks offer strong evidence that the evolution of Shakespeare’s plays were shaped, too, by the Dublin theatre.

Rachel Spencer (University of Texas, Austin)

rlspencer@utexas.edu

Understanding Narratives of Source and Composition in Mary Pix's *Queen Catharine*

In the dedication and prologue to her 1698 she-tragedy, playwright Mary Pix situates the text as one following upon the earlier history play tradition, aligning the work with “Shakespeare, [Holinshed], and Stow” and Shakespeare’s English “worthies.” Despite this, *Queen Catharine* is rarely read as an offshoot of the history play. This paper, therefore, seeks to evaluate these narratives of source and composition put forward by Pix. It will consider the circulation and status of English historiography, particularly the historiographies of Stow and Holinshed, at the end of the 17th century, as well as other Pix paratexts, to put forth a portrait of Pix in the act of composition—one that will, I hope, make sense of her claims of inheritance and the possible inspirations for *Queen Catharine*.

Lanier Walker (University of North Carolina)

klanierw@live.unc.edu

Malicious Readers in George Chapman's *The Gentleman Usher*

This essay reads George Chapman's *The Gentleman Usher* (1605) as a precursor to *A Free and Offenceless Justification of Andromeda Liberata* (1614), a prose text in which Chapman defends himself from the attacks of “enuious [and] vnskilfull Reader[s].” While scholarship on *Usher* has largely overlooked the significance of characters’ various interactions with letters in the play, I argue that these scenes offer an early example of Chapman’s attempts to become “master of [his] own meaning.” Throughout his career, Chapman expressed frustration with what he perceived to be a “violent hoobub” of willfully bad readers, but in *The Gentleman Usher*, no such frustration is immediately evident. I demonstrate in this essay, however, that when the letter scenes in *Usher* are read in the context of Chapman’s own encounters with the law, as well as that of one of his friends, they become critiques of readers who “cast meaning vpon” texts that their authors did not intend. Ultimately, through a series of relatively obscure allusions, Chapman highlights the vulnerability of writers while also protecting himself from malicious readers.

Daniel Yabut (CNRS/Université de Montpellier Paul-Valéry)

daniel.yabut@univ-montp3.fr

‘He fights as you sing prick song’: musical notation in manuscript playbooks?

Early modern lute tablatures and polyphonic musical settings often include signs, such as ‘graces’ or decorative notes, that may represent the personal preference of a particular musician

or scribe. As such, modern transcriptions often remove these ‘ornamental’ signs. This may be useful for concert performance and recordings, but this practice arguably places restrictions on creativity and spontaneity, such as when the lute accompanies actor-singers. Moreover, the inconsistent notes and rests in different settings of the same song, such as ‘Get You Hence’ from *The Winter’s Tale*, suggest that early music performance was flexible and even encouraged embellishment. This paper will examine signs in musical settings in comparison to the various marks found in manuscript playbooks, such as *The Captives* and *The Book of Sir Thomas Moore*, in order to investigate whether playwrights and scribes may have been engaging in a similar practice as the composers and scribes of musical settings.