

New World Theatricality

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Abstracts

Robin Kello (Seton Hall University)

Spectacular Losers: Marlowe's Passing Heroes, Proleptic Dispossession, and Rhetorical Collapse

If the theatrical form of tragedy bends teleologically toward the death of the hero, Marlowe's tragic dramas further spotlight the structural inevitability of loss through emphasis on the ephemerality of all gain. Viewed together as both performance and text, these plays ironize the desire for territorial or financial possession—whether the “fickle empery” Zenocrate excoriates (*Tamburlaine, 1*, 5.2.2.290) or “[i]nfinite riches in a little room” (*Jew of Malta*, 1.1.137)—to stage an unlikely scourge of national desire at the dawn of England's imperial project.

This essay takes up James Marino's suggestion that Marlowe's protagonists are “spectacular losers” by looking at the titular Tamburlaine and Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* as figures of theatrical failure at the intersection of conquest and commerce, emblems of loss as exaggerated as their language, whose movement across the London stage marks the failure of a social imagination that unceasingly seeks possession. Portrayed by the same outsize Edward Alleyn, Tamburlaine and Barabas take the violence of accumulative desire to its limits, finally collapsing both its object and its common terms. Barabas is performing when he asks the salivating friars, “But what is wealth?” (4.1.60), but his layered performances, like that of the stalking conqueror before him, interrogate the notion of value itself through the lens of assured loss and death.

Alexander Paulsson Lash (National Taiwan University)

Aphra Behn's New World Tragicomedy

Throughout her career, Aphra Behn was heavily influenced by the tragicomedies of John Fletcher and his collaborators, shaping her depictions of characters, plots, and settings in the registers that she inherited from her prewar predecessors. The mongrel genre brought together a variety of different tones, perspectives, and spatial registers, constantly experimenting with how to present theatrical characters and events in new ways. With its interests in surprising plot twists and highly passionate and changeable characters, the

genre found colonial and imperial situations especially effective for opening up a variety of points of conflict and tension. This paper argues that Behn uses this generic instability to represent the tensions of the transatlantic colonial project in her final play, *The Widow Ranter* (1689)—the earliest surviving play set in England’s North American colonies. In crafting a theatrical structure that could contain both the mercantile dynamics of colonial trading posts and the more explicit violence of imperial militarism, Behn echoes Fletcher’s earlier *Island Princess* (1621), set in the spice islands of what is today the Indonesian province of Maluku. Tracking the similarities and differences between the two plays, I think through the nature of England’s imperial entanglements across time and space, moving between the early and late seventeenth century, and between Asia and the Americas.

Tonhi Lee (Tufts University)

Utopia, Diaspora, and the Dialogic Present: Thomas More and Jean de Léry

This paper examines how two early humanist texts, Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) and Jean de Léry’s *Histoire d’un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil* (1578), articulate a cosmopolitical mode of self-fashioning grounded in dialogue and cross-cultural encounter. Both texts stage scenes in which Europeans and non-Europeans, once separated by distinct cosmologies and historical trajectories, suddenly come to inhabit the same historical present. I argue that these works construct what might be called a *dialogic present*, a shared temporal horizon in which strangers appear to one another as contemporaries for the first time.

Turning to the diasporic positions of Hythloday (a figure of the Portuguese diaspora and More’s alter-ego) and Léry (a Huguenot refugee exiled from Catholic France/Europe), the paper shows how early modern subjectivity emerges through real and imagined encounter with alternative worlds. Dialogue becomes a literary form through which a newly global modernity is imagined: a medium for negotiating plurality, contesting epistemic regimes, and conceptualizing what it means to inhabit a world in common.

Vincent Mennella (Southern Methodist University)

Shakespearean Allegories of Conquest from Egypt’s Tawny Front to the Isle of *The Tempest*

After Cleopatra declares, “I’ll set a bourn how far to be loved,” Antony replies, “Then thou must needs find out new heaven, new earth.” Antony’s cryptic reply suggests the transgression of a limit or boundary, but could his remark allude to the exploration and

conquest of what was a new world to early modern Europeans? Although critics frequently implicate *Antony and Cleopatra* in conquest and colonialism, they typically confine Antony's intent to cross the boundaries set by Cleopatra as a matter of temptation, a theme tirelessly rehearsed by poets as celebrated as Dante, Tasso, and Spenser. Rather than reduce Antony to a well-worn trope of the tempted warrior, Shakespeare uses Antony to raise a unique set of issues related to colonialism.

This study connects the "tawny front" upon which Antony sets his sights with what Antonio calls a "tawny ground" in *The Tempest*. The isle of *The Tempest* appears most like the anamorphic Bower of Bliss in Book Two of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* geographically, but it appears empty of the temptations frequently attributed to new world exploration by early modern poets. Instead of an opposition between civilization and barbarism perpetuated by new historicism, Shakespeare's allegories of conquest in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Tempest* place humanism and machiavellianism in conflict. The fate of early modern Europe's colonial ambitions appears to rest not on Antony's susceptibility to temptation but in a contest between Caesar's machiavellian pragmatism and Prospero's art that catches humanism in the crossfire.

George Perez (University of Pennsylvania)

Falling in Love with the News: *Othello*, Empire, and the News Trade

This paper revisits the first quarto publication of *Othello* (1622). Q1 *Othello* was first sold at Thomas Walkley's stall in the New Exchange, also known as Britain's Bourse, one of London's first purpose built shopping arcades designed to sell luxury goods from Europe's expanding commercial and colonial horizons. Among these luxuries were early news books and pamphlets advocating for the expansion of trade and the development of the English empire. The Virginia Company took up rooms in the New Exchange in November of 1622 (Working, 24). Allison Scott's work on the arcade demonstrates that "the New Exchange brought the experience of discovery and exotica to the less travelled" (169). This paper moves to reconsider *Othello* alongside the environs and commodities of its first publication. I elaborate the relationship between *Othello*'s publication history and the text's narration of his life through the mode of the news. *Othello* charms Desdemona's "greedy ear" with his "travels' history," allowing her to "devour" his accounts of cannibals, enslavement, and distant geographies. I argue that *Othello*'s first quarto, sold in an exchange hub for New World commodities that targeted women's consumption, exemplifies the relationship between commercial and erotic value in news writing that trades in sensational accounts of difference. In so doing, I demonstrate how *Othello*'s

publication is shaped by early seventeenth century understandings of news, luxury, and empire.

Sarah Snee (Duquesne University)

“Our Place in the Shadows”: Darkness and Performance in the New World

When the writers of the *Popol Vuh* (1554-8) refer to “our place in the shadows,” they are not only referring to “events that happened before the first true dawn, and of a time when their ancestors hid themselves.” Crucially, they are also referencing what is called “a long performance and account” which is when the *Popol Vuh* is used as both means and method for recovering the full cosmic sweep of the world. Being that the writers of the *Popol Vuh* and the Quiché people are “now amid the preaching of God, in Christendom now,” performance is integral to our comprehension of the rhetorical exigence of these mythistories. Even further, it is the motif of shadow, darkness, and light through which these performances manifest.

This paper introduces a method of ascertaining how early moderns comprehended the New World on the stage and of how burgeoning Latin American poets and playwrights made sense of their condition: through shadow, darkness, and light. Much has already been said of Prospero’s “thing of darkness,” but Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s description of “a pyramidal, doleful, mournful shadow / born of the earth” in her long poem *First I Dream* (1692) invokes a shadowy darkness that allows exploration rather than enacting obfuscation. It is this boundary I wish to explore and these motifs which provide new interpretive rubrics.

Jennie Youssef (Graduate Center, CUNY)

Dramaturgies of Temptation: Strawberries, Serpents, and Desdemona’s Handkerchief

This paper investigates how the *Fragaria chiloensis*, the coastal strawberry of Chile became a site where desire, danger, and conquest were staged. A fruit that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Iberian *crónicas* repeatedly compared to the *madroño* (arbutus), in accounts by Diego de Ocaña, José de Acosta, and Alonso González de Nájera the strawberry emerges not merely as an object of description but as a lure with performative force: its exceptional taste renders Spanish soldiers vulnerable, enabling Mapuche warriors to weaponize cultivated *frutillares* as traps. Reading these episodes as scenes of colonial theatricality reveals how the sensory appeal of the fruit produces a choreography of seduction, disarmament, and ambush. I place this colonial dramaturgy in conversation

with Shakespeare's *Othello*, where the strawberry-embroidered handkerchief operates through the same logic of alluring peril. Just as soldiers “devour” the fruit to their undoing, Desdemona “devours” Othello’s stories, and the handkerchief’s strawberry motif materializes the play’s racialized economy of desire and fatal temptation.