

Abstracts

Seminar: Comparative Sexualities

Seminar convener: Goran Stanivukovic

Douglas Arrell

(“‘He has his Maidenhead Yet’: The Virginal Heroes of the Early Modern Public Theatres”)

Alfred Harbage pointed out that the heroes of plays performed in the large outdoor theatres like the Globe are never shown having sex outside marriage. By contrast, in the small indoor “private” theatres like Blackfriars, the hero is often shown as having a mistress. It seems that most men of the period did have sex by their mid-twenties, and that older male virgins were not admired. Shakespeare generally makes the heroes of his comedies teenagers or men in their very early twenties, thus rendering their virginity acceptable. An interesting anomaly is Fletcher’s *The Faithful Shepherdess*, which seems preoccupied with virginity in both sexes; it was performed at a private theatre and, not surprisingly, it was a failure. It seems that in the outdoor theatres there was an unwritten code regarding sex, similar to that of Hollywood in the 1940s and 50s, to which playwrights, including Shakespeare, had to conform

Katarzyna Burzyńska

(“Trans-scriptions of aging reproductive bodies in Shakespeare”)

This essay rereads Tamora in *Titus Andronicus* and Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* through the intersection of gender expression, age, and reproductive capacity, arguing that both figures disrupt early modern gender norms. While scholarship has long addressed these queens through exoticizing and racializing patriarchal frameworks, comparatively little attention has been paid to how their aging yet still reproductive bodies unsettle the female life cycle as imagined in early modern culture. Drawing on Jack Halberstam’s concept of “female masculinity,” this essay positions Tamora and Cleopatra as embodiments of gendered excess that resist narrative and corporeal containment. This literary intervention is grounded in early modern medical discourse shaped by humoral and Galenic theory, which understood sexual difference as essential but not necessarily “fixed or immutable” (Fisher 2006, 6). Physicians defined womanhood through menstruation, parturition, and lactation, yet these functions failed to stabilize gender identity. Medical texts emphasized the cyclical and time-bound nature of female reproductive capacity, producing contradictory accounts in which women who ceased menstruating became more masculine, while overly active young women risked becoming ‘viragos,’ figures suspended between masculinity and femininity (S. Mendelson and Crawford 2000, 21). Such instability reveals that biological function alone could not secure a coherent gender binary. By reading Shakespeare’s queens against this medical imaginary, the essay argues that aging female reproductive bodies operate as queer sites of resistance. Their temporal and physiological ambiguity exposes the fragility of early modern gender categories and challenges both contemporary and modern assumptions about sexual difference, reinscribing the female

life cycle as a space of indeterminacy rather than closure.

Gina Filo

(“For a Woman” / “More than Woman”: Genderqueerness and Transeroticism in Shakespeare and Behn)

Shakespeare’s Sonnet 20 (1609) famously opens with an address to “the master mistress” adored by the speaker. As the poem proceeds, the speaker’s beloved is eroticized precisely for the ways in which he is like a woman, yet not subject to the instability the speaker ascribes to female embodiment and personality – the eroticism of this poem, that is, hinges on both the genderfluidity of the beloved and the speaker’s own misogyny. Such early modern eroticization of a genderfluid object – what I call transerotic desire, desire arising from gendered indeterminacy – is by no means limited to Shakespeare. In this paper, I read Sonnet 20 alongside Aphra Behn’s “To the fair Clarinda, who made Love to me, imagin’d more than Woman” (1684). In this poem, we again see a speaker drawn to the erotic potential in the beloved’s gender play, yet one that avoids both the ambivalence and the nasty misogyny subtending Shakespeare’s sonnet. Through reading these poems in tandem, I argue, we find two complex versions of trans-affirming desire in early modern literature.

Jemma Forster

(“O, methinks how slow/This old moon wanes!/: Shakespeare, Montemayor and ‘Dianic Time’”)

This paper examines the influence of Jorge de Montemayor’s *La Diana* (1559) on Shakespeare’s depiction of the goddess Diana as a signifier of female homoeroticism, primarily in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613). Building on recent work by Mario DiGangi on Shakespearean queer temporalities (*Shakespeare & Queer Studies*, 2025), I propose that Shakespeare encounters in Montemayor’s ‘Canto de Orfeo’ a lengthy depiction of Diana, where she and her nymphs inhabit a slow and cyclical temporality that elongates and reproduces the canto’s palpable moments of frisson. After first associating Diana with a queer temporality in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1594) – a play that draws heavily on *La Diana* for its central chaîne amoureuse – Shakespeare reimagines this trope in his later Athenian play, as Emilia recalls her homoerotic relationship with her former ‘play-fellow’. Attempting to inhabit ‘Dianic time’, Emilia presses back against Theseus’s trafficking of her body along heteroreproductive lines.

José Manuel González

(“Female sexuality in the plays of Webster, Middleton and Tirso”)

Female sexuality is represented not only as moral excess but mainly as a destabilizing force that exposes the fragility of patriarchal authority in the plays of Webster, Middleton, and Tirso; while Webster frames sexual desire as autonomous and politically threatening, Middleton treats it as transactional within corrupt social economies, and Tirso situates it within an honour culture that punishes women for male sexual violence. They use female sexuality as a critique of male power: Webster legitimizes female desire only to show its brutal repression, Middleton reveals

how women's sexuality is commodified in a patriarchal exchange, and Tirso exposes the hypocrisy of honour by foregrounding the social destruction caused either by male libertinism, or female transgression. The paper, therefore, shows the contradictions of a culture in which women are simultaneously idealised as symbols of virtue and condemned as bearers of sexual shame, regardless of their agency, revealing how early modern systems of parentage, economic exchange, and social code try to control women's desire.

Caitlin Mahaffy

(“Queer Variations in Lyly and Shakespeare's Pastoral Comedies”)

As You Like It, Shakespeare's pastoral comedy, might not exist—at least not in the form we know it now—without John Lyly's *Galatea*, a pastoral comedy that depicts a pair of virgins who, due to the threat of being sacrificed to a monster in a ritual, are forced to cross-dress as men and hide in a forest until they can safely reunite with their fathers. Initially, it seems natural to compare *Galatea* and *As You Like It*. Indeed, critics such as Juliet Dusinberre, Denise Walen, Valerie Traub, and others have engaged in this comparison. More recently, literary and theater critics have begun arguing that these comedies offer an early representation of nonbinary identity. Yet, between the two plays, I actually think Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is a better place to look for an early modern representation of a truly genderqueer individual. By contrast, *Galatea* offers us an early depiction of lesbianism. While *Galatea* imagines gender variance as temporary and resolved by transformation, *As You Like It* treats gender as a performative spectrum. Rosalind's sustained performance of Ganymede—across desire, speech, authority, and self-reflection—renders her more legitimately nonbinary than Lyly's heroines, whose cross-dressing ultimately reinforces binary gender identity.

Alyssa Mulé

(“Erotics and Imitation in Titus Andronicus and The Unfortunate Traveller”)

This essay reads Shakespeare and Peele's *Titus Andronicus* alongside Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* to argue that, during the 1590s vogue for rewriting the classical rape of Lucretia narrative, sexual violence becomes a privileged site for staging the ethical dynamics of Renaissance imitation. In *Titus*, the decision to rape Lavinia (explicitly aligned with Lucretia) emerges as a pedagogical turn to classical exemplarity, articulated in the technical idiom of rhetorical invention and imitation. In Nashe's prose fiction, the rape of a similarly Lucretia-coded chaste matron, Heraclide, is likewise saturated with citation and metatextual framing, embedding the assault within a proliferating network of classical allusions. The near-verbatim recurrence of a grotesque image in both texts crystallizes this convergence. Across tragedy and satire alike, rape becomes a figure for authorship conceived as competitive, imitative, collaborative, and ethically unstable.

Johann Paccou

(“Piers Gaveston in historical drama and poetry: comparing Christopher Marlowe and Michael Drayton’s versions of the queer love story of Edward II and his favourite”)

In this short paper, I offer directions in which to start a comparison of two late Elizabethan versions of the story of Edward II, king of England from 1307 to 1327, and his famous favourite Piers Gaveston. I highlight differences and commonalities in the treatment of the story in Christopher Marlowe’s historical tragedy *Edward II* (c.1592) and Michael Drayton’s historical narrative poem *Peirs Gaueston Earle of Cornwall. His life, death, and fortune.* (c.1593). Variations, I argue, can be regarded as generic specificities pertaining to drama and narrative poetry. Salient examples can be found in the rhythm as well as in the treatment of voices in each version. I then turn to an analysis of the way Gaveston is characterized by Marlowe and Drayton, showing that what is elaborated on on the page tends to be condensed on stage. I contend that while Marlowe aims at representing the urgency of political issues, Drayton favours emotional intensity. The two works, therefore, are perfect examples of the various developments of queer erotic literature in the 1590s, the time when Shakespeare started writing his own homoerotic verse.

Patrick Soto

(“Cuckoldry and the Threat of Comedy”)

This essay proposes to read Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* by way of Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*. Focusing on how these plays deploy and react to hand-holding as a comic trope that both symbolizes marriage and raises the specter of cuckoldry, I suggest that they link adultery and illegitimacy to questions of genre and dramatic form. Leontes’ sexual jealousy, which erupts as Hermione and Polixenes touch hands in 1.2, responds not only to a perceived erotic threat but also to the threat of generic ambiguity. Leontes sees a gesture much like that with which the *Mandragola* ends, where the handclasp is used to suggest the marital ending and resolution typical of New Comedy, though it appears in a play that celebrates adultery and entrenched corruption rather than marriage. Much as this sign of comic closure makes an unexpected appearance at the end of the *Mandragola*, it also haunts the beginning of *The Winter’s Tale*.

Grace Yancy

(“The Role of Explorative Dominance in Defining the Desires of the Early Modern Woman”)

The effort to create space within early modern literature, as exemplified by the characters Rosalind and Pamphilia, occurs through explorative dominance. Challenging the cultural and societal limitation upon female sexual agency, Shakespearean works promote and praise the power women gain through accessing their right to follow their desires. The ideology represented in early modern dramatic works often portray conservative social customs that place a strong emphasis on defining femininity and the female experience as being naturally obedient, demure, and chaste. Emphasizing chastity and submission leaves little to no space for the early modern woman to define her own self, inclinations, and desires. Conscious of the social climate and culture regarding female agency and autonomy, the Shakespearean strategy for female

empowerment relies on nuance and ambiguity. Ambiguous conventions are utilized in the portrayal of the oppressive misogynistic ideology surrounding women and of the earth modern woman's claim to sexual autonomy. These strategies allow for Shakespearean women to be empowered by intricate and specific means that illustrate their control and independence without posing a threat to male dominion. The Shakespearean work, *As You Like it*, and the poetic composition of Lady Mary Wroth, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, implement the similar ambiguous method of allowing women to step into typically male roles. By allowing female characters to explore the dominant experience and step outside the confines of what culture considers to be feminine, they discover the power that exists within their submission.