

## **Seminar 25: Performing Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare: Theory and Praxis abstracts**

Stephen Cohen. Emma Waller's Iago: Gender and Race in a Forgotten 19th-Century *Othello*

For over twenty years in the middle of the nineteenth century, British-born American actress Emma Waller starred as Iago in productions of *Othello*, often opposite her second-billed husband in the title role. While popular in her day, Waller has largely been forgotten, and because she did not play the role in major theatrical centers like New York or London, there exist few detailed records of or reactions to her performance. While recent scholarship on gender and performance has opened up new interpretations of—and performative possibilities for—old texts by bringing to bear contemporary theories of sexuality and gender on early examples of cross-gendered performance, this paper instead draws on nineteenth century theatrical theory and practice to attempt to reconstruct what audiences might have seen, felt, and thought while watching the Wallers' *Othello*. Drawing not only on the period's much-studied (though not in relation to Waller or *Othello*) engagement with cross-dressing in Shakespeare's tragedies but on its fascination with performing families as well as its Civil War-era racial politics, I propose not a new reading of *Othello* but how an older understanding of its gender and racial politics might have shaped the way the Wallers' audiences responded, and how that response might shed light on how we read and perform the play today.

Liesl Jensen. Performing the Empty Secret: Asexual and Aromantic Dramaturgies for Shakespeare

Asexuality, the experience of little-to-no sexual attraction or desire, and aromanticism, a parallel but not contiguous experience of little-to-no romantic attraction or desire, are defined by lacunae - by absences, resistance to representation, and (particularly in historic texts) by an inability to be articulated. While this poses a challenge for any reading methodology, performance and dramaturgy seem to be particularly opposed to absence, making asexuality and aromanticism challenging to perform in early modern plays. In this essay, I propose three methods for performing asexuality and aromanticism in Shakespeare, all of which are underpinned by an understanding that asexuality and aromanticism make the familiar strange. I argue that drawing on Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, asexual and aromantic dramaturgies can work against paranoid readings of absence, and through techniques of refusal of innuendo, stasis, and exposure of the marriage plot, perform asexuality and aromanticism on their own terms.

Alexandra LaGrand. The Queen and the Cardinal: Charlotte Cushman, Genderfluidity, and Henry VIII (1847-73)

Nineteenth-century actress Charlotte Cushman (1816-76) has the reputation of being America's first celebrity actress, reaching a level of international fame that, up until that point, few had done. She achieved this status through her portrayals of both female and male Shakespearean roles at theatres in America and in England. Cushman was most famous for playing powerful women like Lady Macbeth, but also for playing in genderfluid breeches roles like that of Romeo. While both of these roles have received considerable scholarly attention, I will focus instead on two of her other, rarely studied, roles, that of Queen Katharine and Cardinal Wolsey from Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*.

Using prompt books, playbills, costumes, letters, and theatrical reviews, this paper will examine Cushman's alternating portrayals of Queen Katherine and Cardinal Wolsey from Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, beginning in 1847 and lasting through 1873, and consider how Cushman constructed her gender in performance and subsequently embodied genderfluidity in her theatrical engagements. I argue that, in these performances, she used performances of Katharine to facilitate and authorize her performances of Wolsey and, by alternating nights performing each role, she not only performed both feminine and masculine genders and genderfluidity nightly, but also characterized her career through a metatheatrical genderfluidity by alternating between feminine and masculine presentation throughout her engagements.

Breeches roles were often sexualized, but by alternating the Queen and the Cardinal—the latter not usually a breeches part—Cushman subverted audience expectation. In doing so, she desexualized, and therefore legitimized, her presence onstage, and ultimately expanded the breeches repertoire for women in nineteenth-century British and American theatre.

Paige Martin Reynolds. The Long and Short of It: Gender, Height, and Casting in Shakespeare.

When near the beginning of *As You Like It*, Orlando learns that he must flee following his victory over Charles the wrestler, he pauses to ask Le Beau: "Which of the two was daughter of the Duke / that was here at the wrestling?" Referring to Celia, Le Beau specifies that "the taller is his daughter" (1.2.258-59; 261). In the next scene, however, Rosalind will argue that she should play man while her cousin performs "poor" maiden specifically because of her height (or, at least, her tall energy): "Were it not better, / Because I am more than common tall, / That I did suit me all points like a

man?" (1.3.112-13). Although "tall" has multiple meanings, not all of them referring to physical height, the apparent ambiguity about the stature of Celia and Rosalind provides an opportunity to consider what happens when characters' attributes conform to, contradict, or otherwise collide with actors' bodies. If "onstage, the bodies work as signifiers, involving the creation of extratextual meanings" and "illuminating social and political attitudes towards gender," as Marjorie Rubright et al. explain, casting practices suggest that being tall on the page and being tall on the stage seem to signify different things. 1 While the women of *As You Like It* would have been played by boy actors in Shakespeare's day (all presumably shorter than their fully grown colleagues), in modern performance, an actor's height may register as a stand-in for the measure of other things—from gender to type to age.

#### Kate Moncrief. *Into the Wood: A Queer Adaptation of A Midsummer Night's Dream*

This paper examines a 2026 adaptation and production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare staged at the Hanover Theatre Repertory in Worcester (Jan. 28-Feb. 14, 2026), for which I was both adaptor and director. The adaptation offers a queer reinterpretation of Shakespeare's lovers and reimagines the play's forest as a downtown nightclub, *The Wood*, where the mechanicals appear as workers and the fairies as music-scene celebrities. By reimagining Lysander as Lysandra, the production foregrounds a queer relationship at the center of the dramatic conflict and explores desire, identity, and belonging through the aesthetics and social history of queer nightlife in the 1980s. Through a scholar-practitioner approach that integrates critical inquiry with theatrical practice, the paper argues that adaptation functions not simply as modernization but as interpretation; staging, design, and dramaturgical revision render gender as enacted and relational while situating transformation within community and chosen family. Positioned within a world marked by crisis and conflict, this queer *Midsummer* demonstrates how performance can activate possibilities already present in Shakespeare's text, using theatre to engage contemporary debates about sexuality, power, and representation while affirming art as a site of imaginative resistance and collective possibility.

#### W. Reginald Rampone, Jr. *Private Romeo in Real Time and Theatrical Time*

This essay examines Alan Brown's 2011 film adaptation, *Private Romeo*, in relation to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in terms of desire, masculinity, and eroticism. Secondly, this paper attempts to determine how the power dynamics differ between the same-sex male couple and the differently sexed couple of Shakespeare's play.