

**Lisa M. Barksdale-Shaw**

**Arizona State University**

[barksdaleshaw@gmail.com](mailto:barksdaleshaw@gmail.com)

**Shylock's Bond: Representation, Material Culture, and the Law of Proofs in Shakespeare's  
*The Merchant of Venice***

This essay examines the representation of documents, specifically, Shylock's bond, through its material, political, juridical, and performative manifestations across Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. How does the representation of legal documents function in this early modern drama? For instance, Mark Fisher, in *The Guardian*, wrote of the 2025 Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh performance, starring John Douglas Thompson: "What comes across is a play about value, the relative worth of a ship and a friendship, an inheritance and a marriage, a Jew and a Christian, a ring and an oath. The cost of investing in the material, the production seems to say, is the humanity that binds us together." What is the value of Shylock's bond and what is the cost to Venice? Is the value legal, cultural, economic, or political? While focusing upon written evidence, invoking contract law, I also demonstrate how the dramatic and material life of Shylock's bond evolves as only part of this stage prop's life history, contemplating its different stages at the point of negotiation, breach, and litigation within the courts. In addition, I compare Shylock's bond with other English bonds during this era. This paper is part of a larger project considering stage properties as written evidence in early modern drama.

material culture; evidence; contracts

“I note in heavenly providence”: History as Morality Play in Chapman’s *The Wars of Caesar and Pompey*

Posterity has not been kind to Chapman’s *The Wars of Caesar and Pompey*, when it cares to consider it at all. The play resists the critical categories of tragedy and history while dividing its focus among three pseudo-heroic figures that it treats with transparently distinct levels of sympathy. The opening argument reveals a strong authorial prejudice against Julius Caesar, an impression that is reinforced by the play’s admiring portraits of the stoic leaders who opposed him, Pompey and Cato. As Richard Ide points out, *Caesar and Pompey* functions separately from the plays of Shakespeare and much of the rest of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama; therefore to judge it deficient on account of these oddities is a failure of will to discern their proper causes and ends. This paper suggests that Chapman employs features of the morality play to make sense of a distant past that the poet struggles to reconcile with a Christian or more broadly providential view of history. I will build from a reading of the appearance of the demon Ophioneus in 2.1 as an intrusion of Vice into history that illuminates the didactic quality of otherwise disconnected events determined by the caprice of amoral Fortune.

Emma Cohen

SAA 2026

Seminar 34: "Representation, Politics, Performance"

Sick Sovereignty: Powers of Impotency in *Richard II*

In his political tract *On the Governance of England*, medieval jurist Sir John Fortescue insisted that maladies were beyond the scope of a sovereign's capacities. "It is no power...to be able to be sick, or to grow old, or for a man to be able to hurt himself," he reasons, "for all these powers come of impotency. And therefore they may properly be called non-powers." Contrary to Fortescue's rejection of sovereign impotency, I argue that it is precisely non-powers, and the possibility that they could in fact be productive (or at least instructive), that are frequently objects of fascination throughout Shakespeare's plays. Joining the growing ranks of early modern scholars invested in unpacking the history of "impotency," and informed by a disability studies framework that recognizes capacity as a site of bodily management, I turn to Shakespeare's *Richard II* to unpack what renegotiations of sovereign capacity were prompted by impotency. In particular, I trace illness and mortality in the play in order to argue that the limitations of the sovereign's body natural may be productively supplemented across a network of other figures, and that the play stages (if ambivalently) the productive possibilities of a sovereign's supposed "non-powers."

“I would not have him miscarry”:  
Fraudulent Institutionalization and Care in *Twelfth Night*  
Delanie Harrington Dummit

*Twelfth Night*'s Malvolio is the unwitting victim of a carceral scheme that I consider “fraudulent institutionalization.” However, to justify his institutionalization, *Twelfth Night* must construct disability (as madness) around Malvolio. His disabling exhibits that disability is not only performed by and experienced in one bodymind but especially perceived by others. I center fraudulent institutionalization to reconsider the conditions under which we tend to understand incarceration as “wrongful” for some and appropriate for others. Although Malvolio is detained and only abstractly threatened with institutionalization, the process of his disabling is carceral. Probing at the boundaries of socially acceptable behavior, speech, affect, and other means of signaling normality, *Twelfth Night* inadvertently demonstrates the subjectivity of such diagnostic processes. Tracing the shifting dynamics of power, authority, and manipulation in the diagnostic process, I suggest that Malvolio's fraudulent detainment contradicts Lady Olivia's intended conception of care as a community practice. Theatre, being premised on performance and the unknowability of identity, cannot stabilize problematic diagnostic processes of disability recognition, and staging fraudulent institutionalization makes this all the more evident.

Joseph Mansky  
SAA 2026  
Seminar: "Representation, Politics, and Performance"

### **The Sound of Representation in *2 Henry VI***

This paper examines the relationship between theater and political representation in *2 Henry VI*. I suggest that the play's acts of representation turn on one rhetorical figure above all: metonymy. From Suffolk's royal embassy to Cade's parliamentary mouth, Shakespeare makes metonymy the engine of political representation. In the process, he shows why a rhetorician like George Puttenham should have called the figure "the Misnamer," "where ye take the name of the author for the thing itself, or ... as it were, wrong name the person or the thing." Assorted peers repeatedly claim to speak for the people, yielding a series of partial or distorted or outright mistaken representations of the commons' interests. But this does not mean that Shakespeare rejected representation altogether. Precisely at the moment that the commons enter the play en masse, they also rely on a representational technology of their own: noise. The people's cries and clamor convey their own threat of collective violence as clearly as any articulate speech. Their noise is itself a metonym for the mass of bodies seething just offstage. What the play reveals is that political representation is an irreducibly theatrical technology available to any resourceful actor, even the people themselves.

Tracey Miller-Tomlinson

SAA 2026: Representation, Politics, Performance

*Revised abstract*

### Representing the Dead in *Hamlet* and *Henry V*

In the spirit of collapsing Hanna Pitkin's distinction between theatrical and political representation, this paper explores how *Hamlet* and *Henry V* experiment with ways of conceptualizing representation of both kinds, with particular interest in their shared dialectic of presence and absence. Picking up on Pitkin's critique of Hobbesian authorization via her example of the stage actor "personating" Hamlet, I consider how *Hamlet* entangles problems of theatrical and political representation, particularly in acting and speaking for the dead. Not least among these are the multiple absences that trouble the play's formulations of being and knowing and interrupt acts of political authorization. *Henry V* explores linked problems of theatrical and political authorization specifically in the context of the theater's rewriting of "national" history in ways that confer agency on the common dead marginalized from print narratives. How to represent an absence is a sustained concern of the play, from the prologue that analogizes theatrical mimesis to financial accounting as a process of bringing an abstraction before the mind's eye (*OED*, "represent," v. II.i.8.b.) to the creative naming of the three soldiers who debate the representational limits of subjection around their campfire with the disguised king. The paper asks how we might read Williams' apocalyptic vision of the Judgment, in which dead soldiers' body parts appeal to God for restitution against the king, and his rejection of the glove of coins offered by Henry, as deploying theatrical mimesis in the service of a more accountable model for political and historical representation.

Emily Parise

SAA 2026

"Representation, Politics, Performance"

“Examine me upon the particulars of my life”: Bad Props and Cracked Things in Shakespeare’s  
*Henriad*

My paper argues for a reading of Shakespeare’s second tetralogy that centers the function of props in the four plays. My paper studies moments where stage objects produce disruptions, misuses, violations, and failures of imitation. Central to these disruptive imitations is the crown, the key symbol of the tetralogy, which thrice moves to round the mortal temples of a king. Shakespeare regularly calls attention to these objects and their role in imitation; when an imitation fails, the objects’ role in that failure is commented on, making the offending object culpable in the failure, and pulling audience attention to its damaging presence. By focusing on stage objects in these moments of disruption and calling attention to the objects that allow for or cause such disruption, Shakespeare produces cracks in the dramatic illusions. As such, I propose that a careful examination of Shakespeare’s stage objects across these four plays can produce a new object-oriented dramaturgy of Shakespeare’s second tetralogy that is capable of exposing political and theatrical discourses that emerge out of the cracks in our proverbial mirror.

Artemis Preeshl  
SAA 2026

"Representation, Politics, Performance"

"From Demure to Daring: Love, Class, and Liberation in *Love's Labours Lost*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *As You Like It*"

Social relationships changed in the Early Modern Age due to the rise of the middle-class influence on marriage choices in Shakespeare's day. In *Love's Labours Lost*, satire consumes love. Noblewomen obey the Princess and lose suitors. Jaquenetta retains her lover and wins Armado's support for herself and her unborn child. Leverage liberates the underclass. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the bourgeois housewives outwit Falstaff, preserving fidelity and calling out their husbands. Mistress Quickly misinforms Anne's suitors, helping the eligible woman trick her parents and marry her beloved. In *As You Like It*, noblewomen rewrite rules of engagement, but the shepherdess and goatherdess lack informed consent to choose love wisely. Assertive Phoebe fares better than demure Audrey. Class influences love and life from the forest to the fortress.

Rebecca Adusei, King's College London

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Representation, Politics and Performance Seminar

**Making the Ethiop Black: The Formation of Ethnographic Ideas of Blackness in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries**

Language is a fundamental part of the human story, and the bedrock of all civilizations. Language serves as a means of communication, but also as a medium from which ideas and representations flourish. Abstract and moral ideas of blackness have permeated the European psyche for hundreds of years. So much so, that the negative connotations that the word 'black' carries can be traced back to the Ancient Greeks. However, at the dawn of the European early modern period, I argue that these abstract, moral ideas of blackness begin to be racialised. The negative and antipathetic ideas of abstract blackness begin to be read upon the skin of Sub-Saharan Africans and their Blackness is demonised. This paper will argue that the influx of Sub-Saharan Africans being trafficked to Europe in the early stages of the sixteenth century acts as a catalyst in this creation of Blackness as a racial category. William Dunbar's 'Of Ane-Blak Moir' will be consulted to show how Blackness was represented in the poetic form. As the paper progresses, we will turn our attention to the seventeenth century where John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612) and Richard Brome's *The English Moor* (1637) will be analysed, and we will observe the transformation in the ideas of Blackness and its representation on the early modern stage.

### Ecopolitical Ground-Work in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*

The land and vegetation of Rome has a presence in *Julius Caesar* that underscores that Rome asks its citizens to move through its borders in unique ways and that geography is freedom *for some*. Romans and their heirs are entitled to the “common pleasures” of land and leisure in the city center (3.2.248). The underbelly of this move is that Rome and its inhabitants reject the presence of physical toil in the city center and embrace moving the means of production to the fringe of society. Thus, a Roman garden stands not just for the celebration of recreation and relaxation for those deemed worthy, but also the dismissal of energy production and its producers from the center of civic life. The community garden constructed in Caesar's will reorients—spatially and conceptually—the hierarchies of life and labor in antiquity. The garden obfuscates all labor save sociopolitical contemplation. That is, species of vegetation and walking paths write what it means to be Roman in Rome; the natural world becomes a tool for racialized economics. The garden and its illusion of humanity's mastery and containment of the natural world *is* the heart of Rome resting between Tiber and the Forum. Guided by a garden, Romans see themselves as the people who celebrate cerebral acts and cherish communal peace; guided by a garden, Romans come to expect that they are owed the peace of mind and body that is promised to them in Caesar's will. In this light, vegetation and orderly walking paths mark the *pax Romana* a Roman right. Thus, Caesar's garden is a collective of immobile life forms and minerals that participate in an act of imperial Rome's “slow violence,” as defined by Rob Nixon (2). The public garden pushes from the center of Western thought certain types of activities that are not deemed permissible in a garden, as well as those who are not Romans and who do not have the privilege of exercising only their minds in their sociopolitical lives. The garden guides social conventions that are rooted in antiquity and that perpetuate a violence against nature and human life that “occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2). Caesar's will begins such a cascade of harm as it promises money and freedom from mental taxation to the deserving.

### Bibliography

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Simone Waller  
SAA 2026  
Representation, Politics, Performance Seminar  
Abstract

John Rastell's *Nature of the Four Elements*: Theatrical and Political Representation in Early Tudor Allegorical Drama

John Rastell's *Nature of the Four Elements* employs representation in a manner that blends aesthetic and political concerns. Tudor moral dramas such as Henry Medwall's *Nature*, the play on which Rastell's was based, used allegorical representation to explore political problems and to define ethical behavior for subjects and sovereigns alike. Frequently, these moral dramas' action hinged on their protagonists' discernment between opposed sets of good and bad counsellors and authorities. By incorporating scientific models and experiments into its staged action, Rastell's play adapts the dramaturgy of moral drama to present empirical approaches to geography and cosmology. When Rastell's play is considered in dialogue with the expectations set by its genre, its privileging of empirical knowledge over counsel evinces a shift toward valuing direct participation and personal experience as key to political decision-making processes.