

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***The Maid's Tragedy, Epicene and As You Like It*, presented by the American Shakespeare Center at the Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton, Virginia, 3 January-5 April, 2014**

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*The Maid's Tragedy*. With Gregory Jon Phelps (Amintor), Sarah Fallon (Evadne), Abbi Hawk (Aspatia), René Thornton, Jr. (Melantius), Jonathan Holtzman (King), Josh Innerst (Lysippus), John Harrell (Calianax), Tim Sailer (Diphilus), Allison Glenzer (Diagoras, Olympias, Dula), Andrew Goldwasser (Cleon), Chris Johnston (Strato), and Tracie Thomason (Antiphila).

*Epicene*. With John Harrell (Morose), Gregory Jon Phelps (Epicene), Josh Innerst (John Daw, Page), Allison Glenzer (Madame Haughty, Mute), Andrew Goldwasser (Dauphine), Jonathan Holtzman (Clerimont), Tim Sailer (Truewit), Chris Johnston (Amorous La Foole), René Thornton, Jr. (Tom Otter), Tracie Thomason (Mistress Otter, Parson), Sarah Fallon (Madame Centaure), Abbi Hawk (Mistress Trusty, Cutbeard).

*As You Like It*. With Tracie Thomason (Rosalind), Sarah Fallon (Celia), Jonathan Holtzman (Jaques), Gregory Jon Phelps (Orlando), John Harrell (Touchstone), René Thornton, Jr. (Duke Frederick), Josh Innerst (Duke Senior, Corin), Chris Johnston (Oliver), Tim Sailer (Adam, William, Sir Oliver Martext, Hymen), Allison Glenzer (Phoebe, Dennis), Andrew Goldwasser (Silvius, Charles, Amiens), Abbi Hawk (Audrey, Le Beau).

The American Shakespeare Center may be best known for its replica of the Blackfriars Theater and for the company's commitment to a certain number of original practices. These include the provision of seats for spectators along the sides of the stage itself and their playing 'with the house lights on' so that the audience is as visible as the actors throughout the performance of a play. The resident company performs several plays each season in repertory, generally in a spirit of youthful exuberance. The actors present a deliberately informal stance to the audience, putting them at ease and encouraging an atmosphere of festivity. Most members of the company play one or more musical instruments and cover popular songs before the show and during the intermission (musical virtuosity is not the point). I mention these characteristics because they seem to be related to some of the strengths as well as the limitations of the performances I witnessed on 14-16 March.

The three performances discussed here were part of the American Shakespeare Center's annual 'Actors' Renaissance Season', a three-month addition to the regular season in which the resident company performs several plays in repertoire without directors or designers, using props and costumes from the theater's stock. This collaborative, actor-centered approach to rehearsal and performance is closer to original practices than the regular season's use of directors, designers, etc., a point emphasized in the printed programs as well as in the actors' addresses to the audience before the performances. It is also daring for the company in that they have little time to rehearse together; at a 'talk-back' following the performance of *As You Like It*, the actors reported that they had had only twenty hours of rehearsal before the opening performance. In addition to the three plays discussed here, the season included *Timon of Athens*, a staged reading of Nahum Tate's adaptation of *King Lear*, and Goldoni's *Servant of Two Masters*.

### ***The Maid's Tragedy***

The performance of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* that I witnessed on 14 March 2014 was the production's opening night. Costuming was minimal: a mix of modern dress and costumes from the company's stock. Calianax wore a uniform reminiscent of a nineteenth-century postman, Melantius appeared in camouflage fatigues, and the King usually wore a cape draped over a dark suit with a red tie. Aspatia always

appeared in black, including her male disguise in act 5, while Evadne appeared much of the time in sexy nightclothes. The men usually wore knives at their sides instead of swords, with some loss of the sense of prestige and honor which is such a characteristic concern for Beaumont and Fletcher's characters.

The play was capably acted, yet the most striking aspect of the experience was the number of times that the audience laughed at lines and situations that were surely not intended to be comic, either by Beaumont and Fletcher or by the actors. History is to blame for much of this: the courtly values and melodramatic sensibility that were Fletcher's stock-in-trade are, it seems, as grotesquely incongruous to a twenty-first century American audience as speeches from *Romeo and Juliet* were to the denizens of Huxley's *Brave New World*. The chief victim of these cultural shifts is Amintor. An idealistic, callow young nobleman, he had been betrothed to Aspatia before being persuaded by the King to marry Evadne instead. On his wedding night, he is shocked to learn that his marriage is a sham devised to provide cover for the King's sexual relationship with Evadne. Amintor's situation is presented as a painful dilemma, exacerbated by his commitment to the conventional view of kingship as demanding reverent obedience as well as by his awareness of the grief he has caused the forsaken Aspatia (the play's title character, though not its main focus). Beaumont and Fletcher employ all the rhetorical flourishes of their dramaturgy to heighten Amintor's amazement and grief as he gradually realizes the truth of his humiliating position. The audience, however, generally responded to his situation as merely absurd. Thus loud laughter attended his line 'Are these the joys of marriage?' as well as his speech wishing for death (2.1.215, 322-27).<sup>1</sup> Other lines also got laughs that Beaumont and Fletcher never intended, notably Melantius's line 'How's this?' after Aspatia's first appearance in stylized dejection, and (inevitably) the King's 'We'll not see you laid,' spoken to Evadne immediately after the ending of the masque (1.1.66; 1.2.285). Very tragical mirth. A more equivocal moment was the laughter at Evadne's 'A maidenhead, Amintor? / At my years?' (2.1.194-95), which Beaumont and Fletcher may have intended to draw laughs.

The blame for the audience's misrecognition of Amintor should not fall primarily on Jon

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<sup>1</sup> Act, scene and line references are to *The Maid's Tragedy*, ed. by T.W. Craik (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

Gregory Phelps, who played the role competently. Apart from the difficulty for modern audiences to sympathize readily with the exaggerated honor code that governs the world of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays, the company may have unwittingly undermined the audience's capacity for pity and terror by its rambunctious pursuit of amusement at the expense of subtlety. For example, the company seemed unsure of how to treat the wedding masque in Act 1, which originally would have called for elaborately spectacular effects in order to create a mood of solemnity; here it was seemingly played for laughs, with Cynthia's interlocutors, Night and Neptune (or perhaps Aeolus?), played by a couple of hirsute male actors in feminine attire. Thus the audience might have been predisposed to laugh at Amintor's dilemma in Act 2.

Other memorable features of the production include the unpinning of the bride Evadne, in which the abjection of Abbi Hawk's Aspatia was heightened by having her wash Evadne's feet. Aspatia's highly rhetorical expression of grief was delivered standing on the bed, facing the audience, using expressive gestures. Memorable too was Melantius's confrontation of his sister Evadne in Act 4, which was reminiscent of Hamlet's speaking daggers to Gertrude in her chamber. Having awakened her conscience and made an ally of her, Melantius brings Evadne to swear an oath of revenge on the King. The actors made this oath on their knees, facing the audience and holding hands, in a moment reminiscent of the ironic 'sacred vow' sworn by Othello and Iago in the third act of their play.

The killing of the King is famously sensational: it takes place onstage in a bed, with Evadne tying up the hapless King, who supposes this is a new love trick — 'a pretty new device' (5.1.47) — before she stabs him. In this production the bed was pushed onto center stage, with Jonathan Holtzman as the King apparently undressed under the sheets. Sarah Fallon as Evadne straddled the King, with her back to him, facing the audience, and repeatedly plunged her dagger into his groin, seeming to dig around until she finally produced a bloody piece of flesh — surely the most unkindest cut of all.

John Harrell's portrayal of the 'humorous' old lord Calianax indicated the theatrical vitality of a part that on the page seems merely odd. The comic tones in the duplicity and brazen effrontery of René Thornton's Melantius to Calianax in the banquet scene (4.2) were amusing, as Melantius tries in a series of asides to win Calianax to betray the fort to him,

and simultaneously discredits Calianax as a dotard when he exasperatedly attempts to tell the King what Melantius was up to. The ‘fort’ seized by Melantius in 5.2 was indicated by the upper gallery, in keeping with the early quartos’ stage direction (‘*on the walls*’). While above, he is challenged by Lysippus, Calianax and others on the main stage. The staging thus allowed Melantius to claim the high ground literally as well as figuratively, having conveniently assigned the bloody business of tyrannicide to his sister.

The final scene, following Aspatia’s suicidal challenge in male disguise to Amintor and her death on his sword, included touches reminiscent of the final moments of *King Lear*. Like Lear with Cordelia, Amintor’s focus is on the dead Aspatia, whom he holds in his arms and in whose corpse he attempts pathetically to perceive signs of life. Also reminiscent of *Lear* is Melantius’s address to his own heart, bidding it break. In the production, however, the pathos was somewhat compromised by the awkwardness of Amintor’s ‘bow[ing]’ Aspatia’s body over in an attempt to revive her, an action specified in the text but difficult to perform successfully on stage.

### ***Epicene***

The following day’s matinée performance of Ben Jonson’s *Epicene* was more satisfying. Some decisions were designed to appeal to the audience’s local sensibilities. Thus, the Ladies Collegiate were portrayed as stereotypical steel magnolias, and Morose’s reference to Dauphine’s imagined escape to Virginia in Act 2 was given special emphasis. Tom Otter’s prized drinking cups —his bull, bear, and horse —were beer glasses displaying the logos of professional sport teams (Bulls, Bears, and Broncos).

The inevitable cuts to Jonson’s long text were made judiciously. I missed the wits’ reference to the ‘comedy of affliction’ (2.6.37)<sup>2</sup> which they plot against Morose and noticed too some shortening of Morose’s sneering speech triumphing over his imagined humiliation of Dauphine at the end of 2.5, with its grotesque repetition of the phrase ‘it knighthood.’ Also cut was the reference to Clerimont’s page as his ‘ingle’, i.e., catamite (1.1.23), a line which has attracted much critical comment in recent years. This cut seemed to stem from the casting of John Innerst, a mustachioed man, as Clerimont’s page, though this casting rendered his description of his treatment at the hands of the Collegiate ladies

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<sup>2</sup> Act, scene and line references are to *Epicene, or The Silent Woman*, ed. by Richard Dutton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008)

rather inapt. Otherwise I didn't notice the loss of any memorable words or phrases.

Another casting decision deliberately at variance with the received text was Tracie Thomason as Mrs. Otter. No 'Gorgon' or 'Medusa' (3.7.21), she was as pretty in this role as she was as Rosalind the next day. That the character was not represented as physically grotesque seemed part of a strategy of downplaying some of Jonson's misogyny in the play, which is evident in the wholly unsympathetic depiction of all its women characters and its seeming endorsement of Truewit's brutal advice on wooing, including the idea that 'force' is 'an acceptable violence' (4.1.85).

Other notable staging choices include playing La Foole's line 'I have a good back' archly and suggestively, with Chris Johnston leering over his shoulder. His donning a towel to act as a waiter when bringing his feast to Morose's house (specified in the text) involved his coming onstage without breeches or hose and with only a towel wrapped around his middle parts, another towel wrapped around his head as women sometimes do. This had the effect of reinforcing the play's emphatic unmaning of the gulls or rivals to the wits, a recurrent element in the play, culminating in Morose's confession of impotence in Act 5. However, the method of kicking John Daw in Act 4, when Dauphine humiliates his rivals to impress the Ladies Collegiate, spared Innerst any danger: the disguised Dauphine made no pretense of actually kicking Daw but struck him athwart his backside with a mannequin's lower leg and foot attached to a stick.

Throughout the performance I wondered how successful would be the final surprise for the audience, i.e. the revelation that Morose's bride is not a woman but a boy (or in this case a man). 'Mistress Epicene' was played by Gregory Jon Phelps, who was obviously male and one of the taller members of the cast. During the intermission, as is the case at the Blackfriars, the actors sang a couple of songs, including Phelps, who sang the country ballad 'Stand by Your Man,' and the audience responded with laughter to the lines 'Sometimes it's hard to be a woman' and 'after all, he's just a man.' To his credit Phelps never camped up the role. Since cross-gender casting, with women playing some men's roles, is a norm at the Blackfriars, the audience evidently accepted his female impersonation and responded with evident delight and surprise when 'she' was revealed to be a 'he.'

### *As You Like It*

The next day's performance of *As You Like It* was thoroughly entertaining, the company wooing the audience 'in a holiday humor'. Tracie Thomason was a sprightly Rosalind who made no attempt to feign mannishness in the role of Ganymede. Costuming suggested the 1920s, though Duke Frederick wore a crown and a sash with various badges on it.

Touchstone wore a bowler and carried a red umbrella, and the courtiers attending the wrestling match wore top hats and tails. The cutting of lines was again skillful; the only ones I missed were from Orlando's praise of old Adam, the reference to 'the fashion of these times, / Where none will sweat but for promotion' (2.3.60-61).<sup>3</sup>

The wrestling match itself was a boisterous crowd-pleaser. The curtained-off area behind the tiring-house wall was used to effect as Charles and Orlando's grappling repeatedly carried them offstage and back while the onstage spectators, including Rosalind and Celia, peered through the windows of the tiring-house doors to ooh and aah at the hurly-burly hidden from the audience. The curtain was likewise exploited during the 'pageant truly played' in 3.5 between the lovestruck Silvius and the disdainful Phoebe, who were observed by Rosalind, Celia, and Corin, whose heads only were visible, poking through the backstage curtains behind which they stood.

Phoebe was played by Allison Glanzer with broadly comic physicality. For instance, her first scene ended with Silvius prone and stretched out on the floor and Phoebe riding him. Broadly physical comedy was likewise the hallmark of Abbi Hawk's Audrey, who appeared in a very revealing outfit consisting of bib overall short-shorts and cowboy boots. There was nothing 'foul' about her gifts of nature, though her rusticity was grotesque: during Touchstone's long speech on cuckolds' horns directed to the audience, she stared vacantly, chewing on a carrot. While eavesdropping on Touchstone, Audrey, and the hedge priest Sir Oliver Martext, Jonathan Holtzman as Jaques feigned pissing at the side of the stage; again there was no fear of farce in this production.

The Blackfriars' practice of seating a few audience members onstage was used for comic effect when the onstage spectators were drawn to dance in a circle around Jaques during his parody of the song 'Under the Greenwood Tree' in 2.5, lending humor to his definition of the refrain *duc da me*: 'a Greek invocation, to call fools into a circle.' Another notable use

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<sup>3</sup> Act, scene and line references are to *As You Like It*, ed. by Alan Brissenden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

of the stage space involved the entry of Hymen aloft on the gallery at the climax of the play—god or mortal?—a question not to be asked. The epilogue, often cut, was spoken in this production, in that appropriately liminal space characteristic of Shakespeare's epilogues, where the actor is both in and out of character, both Rosalind and Tracie Thomason speaking for the company.

In emphasizing the livelier comic moments of the play I don't want to suggest that the notes in minor keys were muffled. Jonathan Holtzman in particular was effective as Jaques, conveying the character's mysterious blend of sincerity and affectation. But the dominant note was festive, surely suitable for this famously sunny comic fantasy in which hatred and malice melt away at the touch of love, and fairy-tale villains are suddenly converted to live as simple shepherds and religious convertites, with no pretense of psychological verisimilitude.

All in all, then, this was satisfying theater from an exuberant cast, though stronger in playing for laughs than in pity and terror. The opportunity to see *Epicene* and *As You Like It* in close proximity was especially illuminating, with the blurring of gender boundaries appearing in Jonson as an index of monstrosity or degradation calling for correction or ridicule, in contrast to Shakespeare's playfully festive use of theatrical gender-bending. Though *The Maid's Tragedy* was more problematic, it was nonetheless gratifying to see a Beaumont and Fletcher play performed by good actors. I look forward to returning to Staunton and the Blackfriars.