We are very happy to present below a guest post from Elizabeth E. Tavares (Pacific University Oregon) on genre and the Elizabethan troupe.

***

What I find most pressing about Andy Kesson’s post, “Generic excitement,” are his methodological queries: how does genre organize our scholarship? To what extent do we implicitly rely on this typology as an “interpretive precondition”? What is at risk when “we backproject onto the earlier period developments distinctive to the 1590s and beyond”? Due to the diffuse nature of the archive, it makes sense that performance studies of the sixteenth century privilege the representational elements contained in genre—especially narratology and identity politics—over dramaturgical ones. Using the Lord Admiral’s repertory as an illustrative case, I want to rethink what genre offers critics and scholars of early modern English theatre.

To do so, in this post I crunch the numbers of extant playtexts from the period and from the company in relation to the total number of plays we know were performed on Renaissance stages. I do so to think about the rhetoric of representativeness that surrounds both playwrights and companies, showing that because of the archive (rather than in spite of it), I find genre is simply no good as a contributing metric for the study of texts of the pre-1642 theatre industry. I propose five new possible principles of inclusion that seem more stable metrics for identifying what was distinctive about a playing company’s repertory in relation to their peers—about what would have set them apart when a playgoer was deciding what play to attend on a given afternoon. The Admiral’s repertory suggests my general contention: that it was the dramaturgy as much as the thematic concerns of early modern playing companies that dictated their success in the Elizabethan theatrical marketplace.
What do you do with a problem like genre?

The historiography of the Lord Admiral's players revolves around two lines of argument. First, their repertory was primarily made up of plays by Christopher Marlowe and imitators of his “mighty line.” Second, they operated in opposition to the only other licensed playing company of their day, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and their most lucrative asset, William Shakespeare. It is a strange kind of story to tell about a playing company because it distills a group of plays produced by the collective writing and performance energies of a group of people down to an antagonism between two individuals—one of which who had arguably nothing to do with the Admiral's oeuvre. Both lines of argument not only take us away from the company as such, but also assume the stability of a yet-as-undefined house style over a period of forty-nine years. While the primacy of the King's and Chamberlain's Men is implicitly assumed in the scholarship of early modern playing companies, the Admiral's career outstretched them both. To assume that house styles and their ostensible generic priorities were static is a result of mapping individual subjectivity onto collective decision-making processes—approaching companies as if they were Foucauldian author-function substitutes. As perhaps the most collective of all literary forms, it is especially problematic to do so of theatre.

What would the scholarly conversation concerning the Admiral's players look like if we took the extant archive of their theatre-making on its own terms, removing Shakespeare and Marlowe from the equation? Three major threshold moments for their repertorial output immediately come to the fore: the period up until the forced contraction of the number of playing companies allowed to operate in London, around 1594; the period between this contraction and the death of Elizabeth I in 1603; and the period from James I's ascension to the throne—taking the two remaining adult companies and one boy company all under royal patronage—until the dissolution of the company in 1625.
Dividing the company’s career in this way allows me to test to what degree the survival rate of their plays and their genres are or are not representative in relation to the other four major companies operating up until 1594: the Lord Strange’s Men, Queen’s Men, the Lord Pembroke’s Players, and the Lord Sussex’s Men. According to Matthew Steggle, between 1567 and 1642 upwards of 3,000 different plays were written and staged.\[1\] Of that 3,000, only 543 playtexts (or 18%) survive; we have titles and other identifiers of an additional 744 (or 25%) lost playtexts.\[2\] On the one hand, this means that we know absolutely nothing about nearly 60% of the theatre
entertainments available to early moderns. On the other hand, such data provides a springboard from which to reframe approaches to Renaissance drama. Jeremy Lopez contends that “given the state of the documentary evidence in the field, there is a point at which imagination must take over where evidence leaves off.”[3] Brian Walsh qualifies that “we must find a space for responsible conjecture about how the fact of the audience affected the composition and production of plays, and about how the experience of being part of an audience inflected the reception of the drama.”[4] It is my contention that by considering segments of individual company careers, rather than making claims for the whole of Renaissance drama, that we can speculate upon something like representativeness.

![Figure 2: Lord Admiral's Men playtext survival by career threshold.](image)

The first of the three major thresholds of the Admiral’s career is marked by the greatest degree of immediate competition: there were more companies operating between 1582 and 1594 than at any other time until the eighteenth century. Of the Admiral’s 35 plays from this period, two thirds (24, 68%) are lost, but nearly one third (11, 32%) survives. Compared to the other two distinctive periods of their career, this early window has the best rate at which we might begin to venture representative claims about the company’s house style, topical investments, and manner of presentation. By contrast, from the period between 1595 and the death of
Elizabeth I, the company owned or purchased a great many more plays: 172. Of these, 87% (149) are lost to us, while 12% (20) and three plots remain extant. While it would seem that the company was staging not necessarily more productions but nearly five times more individually distinct plays than in the first part of their career, the gross and percentage survival rates are markedly less.

On the opposite side of the spectrum is the Jacobean portion of their career when, over a span of twenty years, we know of only 21 plays; of those, three quarters (15, 72% vs. 6, 28%) are lost. When reorganizing the numbers in terms of monarchs (and
thus different censorship and patronage regimes), it becomes apparent that roughly 90% of their known Elizabethan plays survive in whole or in part as compared to the 9% of their Jacobean plays. So, while the company was active for 18 years of Elizabeth’s reign and 20 years of James’, of the plays that survive one can only make representative claims about the company’s house style as an Elizabethan company.[6]

What if the numbers are sliced another way? To what extent do genre markers tell us something representative about the Admiral’s company in this highly competitive marketplace? Surveying their playing from 1595–96, Roslyn Knutson finds that their main commercial features included a diversification within genres that included a category of myth, ancient history, and pseudo-historical history. She argues, “duplication of popular subject matter, the extension of that matter into sequels or serials, and the expansion of a popular figure into a spin-off” worked to cluster together “epic drama with larger-than-life heroic figures.”[7] In another study, however, Knutson finds that Admiral’s presented more tragedies than was usual up until 1594, where most of the plays being staged by other companies had predominantly historical and comic subject matter.[8] She surmises that in the principles that governed their selection of plays, Admiral’s prioritized “only those plays with a history of commercial success,” but also attempted to maintain a “seasonal quota for tragedies.”[9] This combination of preferences may have contributed to the “commercial exhaustion” of their stock of tragedies by the fall of 1596 and subsequent financial struggles when their signature for tragedy had grown stale to audiences.[10] Scholarship on the company has focused on this metrically less representative period after 1594, so it is not surprising that their conclusions do not produce substantive take-aways.
To situate the piecemeal scholarship on the Admiral’s repertory, I’d like to crunch the numbers using Alfred Harbage’s mid-twentieth century genre designations for surviving plays and his guesswork for lost plays. I have simplified the genre ascriptions (namely by removing modifiers), down to seven distinct categories: Comedy, History, Pastoral, Romance, Tragedy, Tragicomedy, and unknown. If we assume that over the course of their career, Admiral’s performed 229 distinct playtexts, they prioritized Histories (35%), Comedies (27%), and then Tragedies (16%), in that order. Romances (7%), Pastoral (3%), and Tragicomedies (3%) are in the single-digit percentile, with 9% of the plays having no known genre. If we assume that in the first third of their career, until 1594, the company performed 35 distinct playtexts, the order of priority turns out to be exactly the same: Histories first (31%), then Comedies (23%) and Tragedies (17%). Both their career as a whole and a meaningful segment of their career demonstrate a prioritizing of the same three major Aristotelian genres that also happen to turn up in the much later title of the first folio: *Mr William Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies; Published according to their True Originall Copies* (1623). In short, whether it was the entirety of early modern drama, the entirety of a single company’s oeuvre, or a meaningful segment of a company’s career, the genre priorities are the same: History, followed closely behind by Comedy and Tragedy.

Perhaps it goes without saying that genres are unstable: their very capaciousness...
for new markers and conventions make them both useful and difficult frameworks for tracing the distinctive and comparable aspects of two or more texts. As Northrop Frye was so keen to remind readers, it is the central crux of genres that they are always cross-pollinating, that they are, by virtue, promiscuous. In addition, early modern genres are especially capacious without the rigid marketing necessities and infrastructure of the post-nineteenth-century print industry wherein genre became an essential salable category. My suggestion is that perhaps this was not always so, that genre was perhaps a negligible category for cultivating audiences when it came to Renaissance theatre. What if we resisted employing genre as a principle of inclusion when organizing our study of Elizabethan plays?

Repertory and representativeness

If not genre, then what? I would like to offer a rubric of dramaturgical categories I believe are rich sites of potential but have been little explored by early modern theatre historians:

- Actors and/as celebrities, such as Edward Alleyn;
- Collaborative writing teams as opposed to single authors or biographies;
- Extratheatrical resources, such as tumblers or dancers, abutted to the play event;
- Indicative blocking priorities and tableaux;
- and specially-built or up-cycled props.

Each category represents a constituent part of the play event other than its topical or thematic commitments. The repertory of the Admiral’s players is a useful case in that it has three of these five markers of dramaturgical distinctiveness. First, they had Edward Alleyn, originator of some of the period’s most famous roles, such as Tamburlaine. Second, the company used recurring teams of playwrights, the most frequent being the combined work (typically in syndicates of four) of Henry Chettle, Thomas Dekker, Michael Drayton, Richard Hathway, Anthony Munday, and Robert Wilson. Third, they specially built and then repurposed a full-sized chariot prop, staged as a torture device to which conquered kings were hitched and
made to pull.[20] This list has the potential to serve as a metric against which to test those categories by which we can prove theatre companies made decisions based on the full complement of extant evidence, and not just the content of the plays that happen to survive.

Aside from moving the conversation forward on the Admiral’s players, my claims are twofold. First, by taking stock of the extant archive, proposing new metrics of analysis, and demonstrating their possible pay-offs, it is my contention that it was their dramaturgy as much as (dare I say, more so?) their thematic concerns that dictated the financial success of Elizabethan playing companies. Second, I hope to implore critics of the history of theatre in England to reconsider what is meant by “representative.” For example, if Shakespeare had a hand in only 0.1% of all the plays staged in early modern England, to say that *Romeo and Juliet* tells us something about early modern visions of amorous love or procreative suitability is extremely problematic. By placing the first performances of that play in the first season after a balcony was installed in the Rose theatre, and by placing it within a group of plays featuring balconies new to that season, *Romeo and Juliet* can say something representative about the visual hierarchies of gender and sexuality in early modern England.[21] In this vein, Repertory Studies and dramaturgically-sympathetic reading has the potential to productively upset the stories we tell not just about Shakespeare, his contemporaries and the theatre, but also that the cornerstone of the Elizabethan theatrical marketplace may have been anchored in its promiscuous props rather than in its generic variety.

**Elizabeth E. Tavares**

**Notes**

This post is partly excerpted from a conference paper, “The Repertory of the Lord Admiral’s Men: Promiscuous or Varietal? (Feat. Julie Andrews),” given at the Mid-America Theatre Conference for a panel on the economies of theatrical labor in March 2016. What did Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *The Sound of Music* and the Lord Admiral’s repertory have in common, you ask? Collaborative writing, a troupe of
young actors led by a celebrity star, tyrants, and goatherds. (Edelweiss not included.)


[2] Ibid.


[5] Elizabethan period denotes the 207 plays presumably performed during 1582–1603, and the Jacobean period denotes the 21 plays performed during 1604–1625.

[6] I think the titles of the two company biographies we do have, Andrew Gurr’s *Shakespeare’s Opposites: The Admiral’s Company, 1594–1625* (Cambridge UP, 2009) and Tom Rutter’s recent *Shakespeare and the Admiral’s Men: Reading across repertories on the London Stage, 1594–1600* (Cambridge UP, 2017), are telling in this regard. Both make substantive claims about the Admiral’s Men but only use evidence from the Jacobean part of their career, for which less than 1% remains extant.


[10] Ibid., 263.

[11] At the time this paper was given, better ascriptions were forthcoming from
[12] Following that are romances (14%), Tragicomedies (9%), and Pastoral (3%), with only one play of entirely unknown genre.


[14] For more on the ways in which predictive modeling of nineteenth-century genres in the novel are challenging what we consider to have been salable features and categories, see Ted Underwood’s “The Life Cycles of Genres,” *Cultural Analytics* 23 (2016): http://culturalanalytics.org/2016/05/the-life-cycles-of-genres.


[20] I demonstrate the economic implications for playing companies by tracing the upcycling of this prop in a forthcoming piece for *Shakespeare Studies*, part of a forum edited by Kesson: “Super Troupers; Or, Supplemented Playing before 1594.” *Shakespeare Studies* 45, 2017, pp. 77–86. My aim there is to illustrate a different, materially-driven curatorial logic that may have drove decisions of theatre-making.
