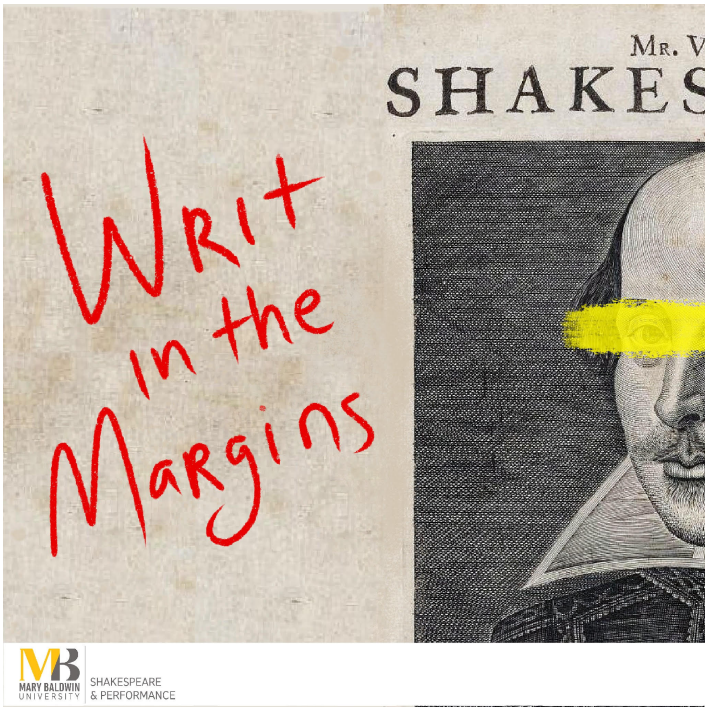

Writ in the Margins Podcast

Created by the students in REN670: Dramaturgy in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University
Produced by Prof. Molly E. Seremet (she/her/hers)

Episode Guide

Season 2, Episode 5
***The Antipodes*: Let Me Play the Director Too!**

Hosts: Morgan Ford and Ronan Melomo

NOTE: This resource was created for *Writ in the Margins* by students in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University as a final project for graduate students in Prof. Molly E. Seremet's REN670: Dramaturgy class. All recordings and accompanying materials are available for use for educational and entertainment purposes. Please do not duplicate or distribute these materials without permission, however. All opinions stated in episodes are those of the hosts and special guests and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the institutions presenters represent.

Bonus Material

The editor that refers to Brome as "poor" was Alexander Brome (no relation). Alexander Brome edited and introduced a collection of Richard Brome's called "Five New Playes". It was published in London in 1659. See:

Alexander Brome, *Five New Playes*. London, 1659

For more on Richard Brome's publication of *The Antipodes*, including a court case surrounding his disputed payment for it, see Ann Haaker's work:

Haaker, Ann. "The Plague, the Theater, and the Poet." *Renaissance Drama* 1 (1968): 283 - 306.

For more on the outbreak of 1636, quarantine practice, and public health, see Kira L. S. Newman's work:

Newman, Kira L. S. "Shutt Up: Bubonic Plague and Quarantine in Early Modern England." *Journal of Social History*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2012, pp. 809–34. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41678910.

For more on "potentiality" see José Muñoz:

Muñoz José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: 10th Anniversary Edition: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, 2019.

For Samuel Pepys' Diary entries, see:

On *The Antipodes* (August 26, 1661): https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1661/08/26/
On *Hamlet* (August 24, 1661): https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1661/08/24/

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Episode Transcript

Morgan (00:02): Hey everyone. Welcome back to another episode of Writ In the Margins.

Ronan (00:07): This episode is hosted by me, Ronan Melomo,

Morgan (00:10): And me Morgan Ford.

Ronan (00:11): Hey, Morgan.

Morgan (00:13): Yeah, Ronan, what's up?

Ronan (00:14): Could you maybe try that again one more time?

Morgan (00:17): My intro? Um, yeah, totally.

Ronan (00:19): And this time, could you like really up the stakes of it?

Morgan (00:26): Hey everyone, welcome back to another episode of Writ in the Margins.

Ronan (00:32): Great, great. Yeah, yeah. We'll keep working on that.

Morgan (00:34): Ronan, did you just direct me?

Ronan (00:36): You know, Morgan? I think I did.

Morgan (00:40): But I thought in podcasts there were no directors.

Ronan (00:44): Well, I'm not so sure about podcasts, but maybe you're thinking of the Early Modern English stage.

Morgan (00:51): Oh, that's what I'm thinking of. There definitely weren't directors there, right? Ronan, you're giving me a look like you know something I don't know. I know that face. That's your face when you have a secret. Now, as an actor and a scholar, I thought if I could count on one thing, I could count on there being no directors on the early modern stage, just actors working in a collaborative model.

Ronan (01:18): Well, I thought so too. I really did. But then I, um, well, how about we just look at, how about we just look at it?

Morgan (01:30): Oh. Is this, um, like a scene from a play?

Ronan (01:32): Let's just read it once for sense and I'll tell you this much. You're gonna read for Quailpipe an actor who's about to put on a show, and I'll be reading for Letoy. Who? Well, let's just see what word might be a good fit to describe him.

Morgan (01:54): My Lord.

Ronan (01:55): Why are not you ready yet?

Morgan (01:57): I am not to put on my shape before I have spoke the prologue. And for that, my Lord, I yet want something

Ronan (02:05): What I pray with your grave formality?

Morgan (02:07): I want my beaver shoes and leather cap to speak the prologue in which were appointed by your Lordship's own direction.

Ronan (02:18): Well, sir, well, there they be for you. I must look to all.

Morgan (02:22): My Lord, it is a most apt conceit, the comedy being the world turned upside down, that the presenter wear the capital beaver upon his feet and on his head Shoe leather

Ronan (02:39): Trouble not you, your head with my conceit, but mind your part. Let me not see you act now in your scholastic way you brought to town with ye with seesaw sacka down like a Sawyer, nor in a comic sense play Hercules Furies tearing your throat to split the audience ears. And you, sir, you had got a trick of late, of holding out your bum in a set speech. Your fingers fibullating on your breast as if your buttons or your band strings were helps to your memories. Let me see you int no more I charge you. No, nor you, sir in that overaction of your legs I told you of. Your singles and your doubles -- Look, you thus, like one of the dancing masters of the Bear Garden. And when you have spoke at the end of every speech, not minding the reply, you turn you round as tumblers do. When betwixt, every feat they gather wind by firking up their breaches. I'll none of these absurdities in my house, but words and actions married so together that shall strike harmony in the ears and eyes of the severest. If judicious critics.

Morgan (03:54): Yeesh, that really took me back to like being in rehearsal.

Ronan (03:58): Now, what do you mean by that, Morgan?

Morgan (04:00): I just mean I or my character felt directed by your character. And wait a minute, <laugh>, I definitely know this Play <laugh>. This is

Together (04:13): The Antipodes by Richard Brome, a Classic Early Modern play

Ronan (04:21): Exactly Morgan! The Antipodes is a play about a lot of things, but largely it's a play about theater. A young man Peregrin is so obsessed with the idea of travel that he has been unable to consummate his marriage for three years.

Morgan (04:39): Yikes.

Ronan (04:40): Yes and searching for help his father hears about a doctor who has been known to cure such ailments. The doctor tells Peregrin that he's gonna take him to the Antipodes, a place on the other side of the world

that is a sort of anti-London, where all the social structures and culture is completely opposite to London itself. In reality, the doctor drugs Peregrin and takes him to the estate of a wealthy eccentric Latoy, who I just read, who has his servants, one of which you just read, serve as a troupe of actors that stage this anti-London. This strange world totally envelopes Peregrin, and after lots of high jinks and blistering 17th century social commentary, he's finally cured. This play was performed in 1638, just 22 years after Shakespeare's death. And only 15 years after the publication of Shakespeare's first folio. Richard Brome, the playwright was the Apprentice to Ben Johnson, who was Shakespeare's contemporary and famous Frenemy of the Bard.

Ronan (05:46): Brome was steeped in the traditions of what we know to be early modern theater, which as received ideas tell us, had no directors. And yet, if you look at the language of Letoy and the scene scene we read, the act of directing is present throughout the scene. And this is one of the more prominent and obvious examples with Quailpipe talking about Letoy's direction. Both of them discussing Letoy's conceit or concept and Letoy even giving acting notes out to his hired troupe. But the idea of direction is woven throughout Letoy's dialogue. He serves as a puppeteer throughout the entire play, having strong opinions about what should and should not be happening in his staged anti-London. And even getting into spats with his star actor Byplay, when Byplay refuses to follow what they rehearsed. Now, while Letoy is never explicitly called the Director, Quailpipe, in the scene we read, refers directly to his direction. And what does a director do other than direct?

Morgan (06:44): Well, Ronan, I mean this is really interesting, but it's probably just like a one off kind of thing. This just means Richard Brome was thinking way ahead of his time. Right?

Ronan (06:54): You might think that, yeah, but you wouldn't think that if you've read a few little plays called, uh, Hamlet and a Midsummer Night's Dream, two of the most famous early modern playwrights, most famous plays contain a character serving as a director, Morgan. Now in Hamlet, it's the man himself choosing pieces for the players to perform. Even writing the mouse trap and preempting any bad actor habits they may have with notes before they even start performing. And while that might, you know, fill the role more of a producer and is definitely not a director that I'd be interested in working with, Hamlet certainly has vision. However, if you look at Midsummer Night's Dream, we've got Peter Quince. And as much as Bottom likes to think he's in charge of the rude Mechanicals and their play, he's much more akin to a star actor having a bit of a turn as a diva than anything else.

Ronan (07:54): Peter Quince is in the foreground and background of each of their scenes, assigning parts, organizing rehearsals, managing actor anxieties and egos, and even giving notes. In the middle of a rehearsal that he's called, he has to correct Bottoms pronunciation of Ninus' tomb. Quince makes decisions on everything from allowing Snug to act the lion's part without a script, to adding a prologue to the play to help explain it. He's the first to bring up staging problems like the need for moonshine or the fear that a lion may induce in the audience if it's not clear that they're an actor. Quince handles many of the problems and challenges faced by a modern day director. And the one thing we don't actually hear from Quince is the word director. But just because there wasn't a word for it doesn't mean that directorial practice didn't exist. Looking at what scholar Jose Munoz describes as the concept of potentiality, he explains it to to be "a certain mode of non-being that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense."

Ronan (09:05): Now, the potential of a director is present in these texts, even if the label isn't. People are directing, even if they don't have those big scarves and the fancy chairs with the director written across. Yeah, with the microphones, oh gosh. Everything that we see, they're still acting as directors. Now, when you turn to contemporary

classical theaters, primarily in the United States, they lean on this idea of original practice as a frame in which to stage their works. Some might call it other things, and all of them do it slightly differently. But one of the major ideas of this model is the idea of staging a play without a director. The American Shakespeare Center here in Staunton, Virginia structures what it calls its renaissance style shows to adhere to this director-less and actor led model. These are based around the idea of actors having agency in every aspect of a production, just like how it was supposedly done in early modern theater.

Ronan (10:03): And yet, when we look at some of the texts like Quince, like Hamlet, like Letoy, we see theatrical figures, inserts for people within the early modern theater making, making decisions for actors, directing them, if you will. So original practice really is paradoxically a modern construction.

Morgan (10:25): Whoa.

Ronan (10:25): Yeah. But you know, as, as shocking as this is, I'm not trying to discount the value of actor led productions. The model of actor led productions is refreshing and unique in a way that brings out collaborative power in the theater and helps to sustain the creativity of actors who I, I find can be often stymied in favor of a director's vision. But the idea of calling this model original or renaissance is the joint of this phrase that I want to put pressure on. Is the authorizing force of this being the way it was done originally the thing that allows such a strong shift from the rest of the practices of contemporary American theater? Do we need to call on the past to facilitate our modern ideas? Perhaps there is another original practice that involves a director exploring how members of early modern troops served in the role of director, and where that crosses over with actor, writer, producer, or even another role could be the next big shift in original practice theater in America.

Morgan (11:34): Ronan, that was really illuminating. I'm, I'm like rethinking so much of my received ideas about early modern English theater culture. You could even say that my whole world has been turned upside down.

Ronan (11:51): <laugh>.

Morgan (11:53): You know, speaking of upside down, oh man, if, if there were directors in early modern London, they must have been stressed out all the time. You know why? Stuff like, oh, playhouses burning down royal censorship and uh, the plague. Oh, you know the plague?

Ronan (12:14): Wait, you're talking about the bubonic plague?

Morgan (12:16): Oh yeah. Now, okay. When we think about the bubonic plague, we usually think of medieval Europe, right? But I think we sometimes forget that outbreaks of plague were an ongoing global occurrence for hundreds of years. So by the time Richard Brome got around to writing the Anti-London in the 1630s, massive epidemics of plague were still a very real threat. And when the plague struck city life would stop in its tracks. For example, about 10 years before Broome started writing the Antipodes, London suffered a major epidemic in that year, 1625. Those with enough money to leave town did.

Morgan (13:01): But Richard Brome was not one of these wealthy elites who could afford to flee to the countryside. "Poor he came into the world and poor he went out," wrote an editor of Brome's work.

Ronan (13:14): Ooh...

Morgan (13:15): I know. So our playwright stayed in London through the worst of the plague outbreaks in his lifetime. After the outbreak of 1625, London suffered another severe plague year in, yeah, you guessed it. 1636. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. That's the year Richard Brome wrote the Antipodes.

Ronan (13:38): Wow.

Morgan (13:39): So that year, all the theaters in London closed, as they always did during bad plague outbreaks. In addition, sick people were quarantined in their homes along with all their family members for 40 day intervals. Now it's worth noting that public health officials didn't have quite the same education that we have today. So while theaters were deemed super spreader sites that justified closure, churches were left operating.

Ronan (14:07): Of course.

Morgan (14:07): Additional health and safety measures included lighting bonfires in the street to cleanse the air of disease. But back to Brome. So while the early modern equivalent of the CDC is lighting bonfires in the streets of London, Brome is not getting paid. The theater stayed closed for a year and a half, and they didn't open again until October, 1637. Now the Antipode's main character Peregrin expresses his acute angst about his inability to travel. He's then quarantined in a country estate to be cured. This mirrors Brome's own contemporary anxieties about quarantine and plague induced travel restrictions throughout the outbreak, the authorities claimed that quarantine was a beneficial public health measure. However, the people felt that quarantine and isolation were more like personal punishments than prudent policy. In this particular plague year parishes implemented, especially strict quarantine measures. So a story about a character who languishes over his inability to travel and then winds up locked in a house that would've had particularly resonance.

Morgan (15:26): All this to say the Antipodes, was written in a particularly severe plague year. Brome knew that it would be performed as soon as the theaters reopened. So it's no coincidence that the play's main theme is the curative power of the theater.

Ronan (15:43): Oh yeah?

Morgan (15:44): Oh yeah. This is a play that was specifically designed to be played for audiences who had just suffered through 19 months of shuttered, playhouses, quarantine, and the looming threats of infectious disease. It was meant to be restorative, although in a contemporary review, it was found wanting in other aspects. After seeing a remount of the Antipodes on August 26th, 1661 Playgoer and famous Chronicler Samuel Pepys wrote in his diary that, "there is much mirth, but no great matter else."

Ronan (16:27): <laugh>. Ouch.

Morgan (16:28): Yeah, it's a little harsh, especially because two days before this Pepys saw Hamlet and thought it was done very well and that the actor who played Hamlet was beyond imagination.

Morgan (16:41): But you know, to be fair, Pepys saw the Antipodes on a Monday.

Ronan (16:44): Monday crowd; probably explains it.

Morgan (16:46): Yeah. But you know, perhaps it was the mirth that was the point all along in Brome's story. A doctor literally espouses the curative properties of a good play and then goes on to use a play to cure the main character Peregrin of his mysterious malady. Is it a far cry to assume that Brome's intention was to do the same for his audience? He wrote the play while shuttered at home, unable to work at the theater. It was performed when the theaters reopened. I think it's likely that Brome's original audience was the intended patient for the play as well as its main character, Peregrin. This isn't a far reach either, because the structure of the play supports this idea. There are characters within the world of the play that watch the play within a play, the anti London, and they're cured from the outside watching while Peregrin is cured from the inside.

Morgan (17:47): Participating. Brome is suggesting that it isn't just paragrin's participation in anti London that can cure. The characters who watch this mischief unfold are also cured, even though they know they're watching actors perform play. So if we take this one step further, the audience is the third patient. The same curative powers that are available to the various characters are available to the audience as well. As the adage goes, laughter is the best medicine. And perhaps it was the mirth Samuel Pepy's writes of that Brome was after in a real life. London turned upside down by death disease and quarantine, laughing at and reckoning with the absurdity of the Antipodes, both play and place was probably just the catharsis that the doctor ordered for these early modern audience members. Now there has been no shortage of critical as well as popular interest in revisiting this era's plague history.

Morgan (18:56): In the wake of the Covid 19 pandemic social historians, scientists, and bloggers alike have drawn connections between our current plague moment and its historical precedence. For example, VOXEU of the Center for Economic Policy Research published a co-authored paper in April, 2020, titled Coronavirus from the Perspective of the 17th Century Plague. A peer-reviewed public policy journal published by the University of Maine, included in their issue on the impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic, an essay comparing the United States experience of Covid to London's experience of the Great Plague of 1665. In 2020, the Washington Post, the Guardian, the Independent, and BBC News, all published stories comparing this 17th century public health crisis with our own, with a particular focus on how communities managed pandemic, both then and now. Clearly there is popular interest in thinking about the social repercussions of the Coronavirus through the lens of the Bubonic plague. While this play is funny, no matter what, I think it's particularly resonant for theater makers today. You know, Ronan, we talk a lot in the theater about how like early modern playwrights, William Shakespeare, for example, speak to universal themes and life experiences.

Ronan (20:26): Yeah.

Morgan (20:26): Well, in this case, Richard Brome is writing for an audience who suffered through conditions that were actually really similar to what modern audiences have experienced. You know, with the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Ronan (20:39): Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, no if, if anything I, I'm thinking that there's interesting marketing opportunities there and as we've seen, the public seems pretty excited about comparing these two historical moments, the public health crisis of the mid 16 hundreds and our own today. So I really think you could sell some tickets to the Antipodes based on that connection alone. And who knows, maybe Brome's curative magic would work on us as well. If anything, the play is funny as we've seen and it has all kinds of great social commentary about gender, sexuality, and class. I think it would play very well today.

Morgan (21:13): Ronan, are you ready for me to blow your mind with one more historical anecdote?

Ronan (21:17): Bring it on.

Morgan (21:20): Okay, Ronan. So remember Samuel Pepys, the man who saw the Antipodes Remounted about like 25 years after debut and wrote that it was all mirth and little else.

Ronan (21:31): Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Morgan (21:31): So he saw that play in 1661.

Ronan (21:35): Yeah.

Morgan (21:36): Now the English Civil War had started back in 1642. Are you familiar with this period of English history?

Ronan (21:44): Yeah, Charles the first was Beheaded and Parliament took over the government.

Morgan (21:48): Yeah, exactly. So while Parliament was in power in the 1640s and 1650s, all the theaters were closed. Guess when they reopened?

Ronan (21:59): No.

Morgan (22:01): Oh yeah. 1660. And in 1661, Samuel Pepys sees a production of the Antipodess <laugh>. That means there's literally a historical precedent for staging this play after a prolonged period of theater closure.

Ronan (22:21): You know, the Globe did this play in 2000, and other than that, there isn't any contemporary production history. Maybe that's cuz the occasion hasn't been, right?

Morgan (22:31): Yeah, I mean, the play was literally written for a post lockdown audience and then it was remounted several years later for a post-war community that had endured more chaos and more closed theaters. I think the writings on the wall with this one. The Antipodes is begging to be performed right now.

Ronan (22:50): Okay. So it sounds like whether or not your theater has a director, the Antipodes might be a great choice for a late Covid era season.

Morgan (22:58): But don't take it from us listener. Take it from Richard Brome. In the opening of the Antipodes, the character Blaze greets his guests and we argue, all of us, take it away, Ronan,

Ronan (23:12): To me and to the city, sir, you are welcome and so are all about you. We have long suffered in want of such fair company, but now that time's calamity has given way (thanks to high Providence) to your kinder visits, we are (like half pinned retches that have lain long on the planks of sorrows strictly tied to a forced abstinence from the sight of friends) The sweetly are filled with joy.