

# Shakespeare Seminar

*William Shakespeare*



Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft

Ausgabe 22 (2025)

Shakespeare and Popular Cultures

*Shakespeare Seminar 22 (2025)*

EDITORS

The *Shakespeare Seminar* is published under the auspices of the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft, Weimar, and edited by:

Marlene Dirschauer, Universität Hamburg, Fakultät für Geisteswissenschaften, DFG-Forschungsgruppe 5138 "Geistliche Intermedialität in der Frühen Neuzeit", Sedanstraße 19, D-20146 Hamburg (marlene.dirschauer@uni-hamburg.de)

Jonas Kellermann, Universität Konstanz, Fachbereich Literatur-, Kunst-, und Medienwissenschaften, Fach 161, D-78457 Konstanz (jonas.kellermann@uni-konstanz.de)

PUBLICATIONS FREQUENCY

*Shakespeare Seminar* is a free annual online journal. It documents papers presented at the Shakespeare Seminar panel of the spring conferences of the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft. It is intended as a publication platform especially for the younger generation of scholars. For the current Call for Papers, please see our website: [www.shakespeare-gesellschaft.de](http://www.shakespeare-gesellschaft.de)

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER

ISSN1612-8362

# CONTENTS

Introduction Marlene Dirschauer and Jonas Kellermann .....	1
A Different Kind of Popular History: Shakespeare and the Tudor Monarch Plays Allison Lemley .....	3
From Tragedy to Tourism: Shakespeare’s Verona and the Interplay of Literary Heritage and Cultural Commodification Lara Stich .....	16
“All the World’s a Stage”, still. Abigail Thorn’s <i>The Prince</i> (2022) Marie Menzel .....	31
“You were Romeo, I was a Scarlet Letter”: Taylor Swift, Shakespeare, and the Control of Female Sexuality Lorraine Rumson .....	43
Call for Statements Shakespeare Seminar der Shakespeare-Tage 2026 .....	54

# INTRODUCTION

MARLENE DIRSCHAUER AND JONAS KELLERMANN

## Shakespeare and Popular Cultures

If you find Hamlet difficult, ask him to tea. He is a highbrow. Ask Ophelia to meet him. She is a lowbrow. Talk to them, as you talk to me, and you will know more about Shakespeare than all the middlebrows in the world can teach you.

Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays II* (201)

Like Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare “hath songs for man or woman, of all sizes. No milliner can so fit his customers with gloves” (4.4.190–191). This quality to cater to the diverse audience demographics of early modern England – from ‘highbrow’ nobility to ‘lowbrow’ groundlings – may have been one of the reasons why the Bard proved so popular already during his lifetime. As suggested by Woolf, Shakespeare’s ability to speak to multiple audiences all at once might also explain why his works continue to resonate with contemporary popular cultures across various media: Shakespearean references are ingrained in popular idiom; iconic plots like *Romeo and Juliet* and characters like Lady Macbeth, Richard III or Hamlet have provided templates to countless films and shows; and while there are Harvard classes given on Taylor Swift and Shakespeare, there are also numerous podcasts designed to make Shakespeare’s works more accessible to contemporary listeners, readers, and spectators. In light of Shakespeare’s enduring presence in 20th- and 21st-century popular cultures, substantial research has emerged in the past two decades on what Douglas Lanier has called “Shakespop” (5) – that is, Shakespeare’s role across a range of popular mass media.

This issue of *SSO* is devoted to “Popular Shakespeare” and explores why Shakespeare seems to “never go out of style”, to borrow Taylor Swift’s phrase from her eponymous song. Mindful of Paul Prescott’s assessment that “There is a two-way relationship between popular culture and Shakespeare: popular culture shaped Shakespeare’s art, but Shakespeare’s art continues to shape popular culture” (271) this issue gathers four papers that explore this reciprocal dynamic from intriguingly varied angles.

Allison Lemley opens this issue of *Shakespeare Seminar Online (SSO)* with a reassessment of popularity in Shakespeare’s own lifetime. More specifically, her article challenges the widespread idea that history plays declined after Elizabeth I, arguing that *When You See Me, You Know Me* and *King Henry VIII* demonstrate their continued popularity in the Jacobean era. Through a comparative analysis of selected scenes, Lemley contends that these plays respond to a changing political landscape by employing episodic structures and hybrid genres while activating audiences’ memories of the recent past; the enduring, near-contemporary recollection of the Tudor era among Jacobean spectators, rooted in lived or inherited experience, emerges as a crucial yet often overlooked source of their appeal.

Moving from early modern England to quasi-early modern Italy, Lara Stich discusses how *Romeo and Juliet* has transformed Verona into a “Shakespearean” tourist space where fiction reshapes urban identity. She traces the many ways in which the play’s imaginative power has inscribed itself on the city, effectively recasting it, both locally and globally, as a symbol of love, passion, and tragic youth. Through sites, media, and visitor practices, Shakespeare’s narrative becomes participatory, with tourists helping to reproduce and sustain the myth. At the same time, Stich remains attentive to the ethical implications of this popularity, showing how commercialisation often reduces the play’s complex dimensions to a simplified, marketable romance.

Marie Menzel’s essay returns us to Shakespeare’s histories by reading Abigail Thorn’s *The Prince*, a queer-feminist reworking of *Henry IV, Part 1*, and asking how the adaptation engages with its source material in light of its origins as a LeftTube product. Menzel argues that *Henry IV, Part 1* offer a productive lens for Thorn to examine modern concerns in ethics and queer feminism, such as self-determination. Through close analysis of *The Prince*’s language, particularly its Shakespearean pastiche, Menzel presents Thorn’s adaptation as an example of a popular Shakespeare: a work emerging from an alternative, independent creative sphere that allows considerable artistic freedom while also reaching a broad, diverse, and culturally significant audience.

Closing this issue of *SSO* with the most commercially popular singer on the planet right now, Lorraine Rumson’s essay, “‘You were Romeo, I was a scarlet letter’ Taylor Swift, Shakespeare and the Control of Female Sexuality”, examines the recent tendency in popular criticism to compare Taylor Swift with Shakespeare, moving beyond claims of artistic equivalence to explore thematic resonances between their works. Focusing on Swift’s songs “Love Story” and “But Daddy I Love Him,” the article charts their intertextual engagement with *Romeo and Juliet*, showing how these references not only amplify romantic expression but also foreground issues of patriarchal control over young women’s sexuality and the challenges of resisting it.

By exploring both the configurations of the popular in Shakespeare’s own time and the ways in which Shakespeare is mobilised within contemporary popular culture, the four papers contribute to lively critical debates of his reception and lasting impact.

## Works Cited

- Lanier, Douglas. *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Prescott, Paul. “Shakespeare and popular culture.” *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*. Ed. Margreta De Grazia and Stanley Wells. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 269–284.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. London / New York: W. W. Norton, 2008.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Collected Essays*. Vols. I–IV. London: Hogarth, 1967