

Shakespeare-Seminar 2026

“Truth is Truth to the end of Reck’ning’?: Shakespeare and Truth”

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Post-Human Truths in Digital In-Game Shakespeare Performances

Marked as adaptations and appropriations within the ever-expanding Shakespearean rhizome, Shakespeare (video) games have recently gained traction within and beyond adaptation studies. Whereas most of such games allow the player to navigate an avatar modelled after a Shakespearean character or archetype, other titles afford opportunities to stage, enact, and witness a Shakespearean script on a digital stage. This paper is interested in the latter and its potential to render its actors into post-human entities who perform a Shakespeare play within the media-specific opportunities and confines of the digital game space. The player is in this constellation doubly alternated: they merge into a post-human entity as the in-game avatar in the act of play, and a second time as they do not navigate a human-like avatar but instead digital characters whose designs are recognisably post-human. The paper will therefore inquire after the potentials of reciting Shakespearean scripts, which question human flaws and values – in other words, the viable truths of the human condition (Foucault 1995) – as post-human entities under the equally post-human conditions of digital gameplay.

The paper will compare two case studies, the “Romeos and Juliets” performance in *NieR: Automata* (2017) and the “Richard the Ghoul” staging by the in-game theatre group *The Wasteland Theatre Company* of *Fallout 76* (2024). Both game titles are not conceptualised as Shakespeare games, yet they allow for theatrical performances in post-apocalyptic settings populated by androgynous robots, post-nuclear zombies, and cyborgs who ponder the validity of a life still true to human principles. With either pre-coded characters or players taking on digital skins and reciting the Shakespearean script, their performances present post-human adaptations of narratives about human fallibility. The paper will thus showcase how notions of ‘truth’ in the staging of the human condition are effectively troubled and parodied by digital Shakespeare stagings.

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literature. She was recently funded by the MEiN Konstanz Program for a mentorship and month-long visit to Prof. Elaine Hobby at Loughborough University and the University of Kent. Her research interests include women's travel writing, feminist and postcolonial geography, and (queer) digital phenomenology.

Ann-Cathrine Döderlein, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

Spectral Approaches to the Haunting Truths of Shakespeare's Queens: Hermione and Margaret of Anjou Revisited

The Winter's Tale is perhaps Shakespeare's most sustained exploration of contested truths. Credibility, infidelity, judicial justice and competing truths place questions of truth at its core. These conflicts are outwardly resolved in the final act, where the family is reunited and released from the consequences of earlier conflicts of truth. At the center of this absolution stands Hermione's rehabilitation and the statue. However, the play never resolves Hermione's ontological status after her disappearance from the stage. The dream, the bear, the statue, and Hermione's subsequent reappearance present conflicting arguments for various ontological possibilities. Truth may therefore be approached deconstructively when off-stage circumstances become plot points.

To engage with a deconstructive approach to truth, this paper suggests reading Hermione as a "spectre" in the wake of Derrida's *Spectres de Marx*. Unlike reading Hermione as a ghost, the spectre offers an approach to her dream vision, fulfilled prophecy, and the statue, while residing in a liminal space free from the constrictions of presence/absence, life/death, corporality/non-corporality and further categories. The spectre occupies a liminal space and thereby transgresses restrictive claims of truth, focusing instead on a metaphorical reading. Further, this paper seeks to construct a pattern through which Shakespearean queens who have lost their heirs can be read as spectral. Another example of this pattern is Margaret of Anjou, who, after the death of her son and her defeat at Tewkesbury, appears anachronistically in *Richard III*. The freedom of movement that she alone is granted in the play, descriptions of her appearance, and other ominous circumstances suggest that the root of her liberties extends beyond her vicious political reputation. Margaret, just like Hermione, appears as a spectre to defend their truths.

Overall, these spectral readings illuminate into more than the curious circumstances surrounding the women's (in)visibility in their respective plays. They create a space where truths can be renegotiated for the benefit of women's agency. As this paper suggests, truth

can occupy a liminal space and transgress categories of life/death, history/fiction and agency/helplessness.

Ann-Cathrine Döderlein has studied at the universities of Munich, Birmingham and Edinburgh. She holds a Staatsexamen and a Masters of Arts in Medieval and Renaissance Studies from the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, specializing in Shakespeare Studies. Her research interests are interdisciplinary, psychoanalytical and postcolonial approaches to Shakespeare. She is looking to pursue a PhD in 2026, in which she seeks to further explore spectral readings.

James Dowthwaite, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

Soothsaying and the Contingency of Truth in *Julius Caesar*

It would be easy to conclude that the Soothsayer in *Julius Caesar* prophesied accurately. He warned Caesar of the Ides of March and on the Ides of March he was assassinated. The supernatural truth of this prophecy is seemingly supported by strange events: the storm, the monsters, the flaming servants of the night the conspirators make their plans; as well as by Caesar's reappearance in ghostly form later. Yet Shakespeare gives us cause to doubt (if not dismiss) the supernatural elements of the play: Cicero seems sceptical, implying that people see what they will (III.3.33), Cassius interprets the events differently, and, later, what we really see is Brutus's perception of a ghost; its reality is open. Even the Soothsayer himself admits to Portia that 'None that I know will be, much that I fear may chance' (II.4.36), which is to say that he sees his prophesies in terms of the vagueness of portends, omens, likelihoods, connections between emotional states and will – not in terms of deterministic causes and effects.

My argument is not that Shakespeare uses the figure of the Soothsayer to demonstrate that truth is relative, but rather something with more wide-ranging ontological implications: that it is contingent. Rhodri Lewis, in *Shakespeare's Tragic Art* (2024), has recently stressed that Shakespeare uses tragic form to explore the fictions and illusions we live by in a universe of chaos, chance and, indeed, contingency. Shakespeare's tragedies are filled with mistakes, messages going awry, and misinterpretations; things are chaotic and up for debate. In this state of affairs, Lewis claims, Shakespeare shows we turn to fictions. The prophetic truth of the Soothsayer, I suggest, depends on events coming to pass, and those events are contingent on the wills – philosophical, political – of people carrying them out. Even the truth of prophecy is contingent.

James Dowthwaite is Junior Professor of English Literature and Culture at the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz. His books include *Ezra Pound and 20th Century Theories of Language: Faith with the Word* (Routledge, 2019) and *Aesthetic Criticism: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2026). He has edited special issues on aesthetics, decadence, and poetry and populism, and will be editing a new edition of the books of the Rhymers' Club in 2027. He is co-convenor of the Modernism, Aestheticism, and Decadence Studies network, and has published poetry in numerous British, Irish, German and American journals, most recently in *Literary Imagination*, *PN Review*, and *Volupté*.

Annegret Schäffler, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

In Plain Style: Performing Truth and Epistemic Uncertainties in William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*

In early modern England, the appearance of truth becomes increasingly questionable amid intense religious, political and dramatic changes and debates. As former representational fashions and rhetorical styles move to the centre of discussion, variations and new forms arise in response and raise uncertainty about the one truth. In contrast to more ornate styles, the plain style emerges in rhetoric to convey a natural and truthful appearance. Early modern drama reflects this truthful impression in characters' plain, simple, or humble apparel. Since both rhetoric and costume are part of an individual's presentation, the lines between authenticity and acting blur, as truth itself assumes a performative nature. As plain representation, these appearances of truth carry the potential of becoming just another dissimulation. Thus, plain performances can become questionable and create uncertainty. This paper examines how appearances of truth, coded in costume and rhetorical presentation, become potentially ambiguous to both characters onstage and the audience. As part of this, the uses of costume and the epistemic responses it generates will be analysed in relation to their historical and rhetorical background. The paper will concentrate on William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, and it will discuss its staging of 'truthful styles' as dissimulation and its epistemic apprehension alongside other contemporary dramatic portrayals of plain styles. The dressing in the 'vesture of humility' (2.1.222) and displaying his wounds to the people as one part of persuasion in the run for consulship, and Coriolanus' questioning of it, is exemplary in this regard. In analysing *Coriolanus*, this paper will examine presentations of plain style and revelation in relation to performance, disguise and uncertainty on stage, as well as in figurative expressions, elaborating on the dynamic between modes of visibility and public reactions that result from dressed presentations.

Annegret Schäffler is a doctoral candidate and research associate in the Collaborative Research Centre (CRC) 1369 “Cultures of Vigilance” at LMU Munich. After completing her studies in German and English philology in Munich and London, with a thesis on deception in Chaucer and medieval European narratives, her doctoral dissertation explores the interplay between sartorial dissimulation and states of unknowingness on the early modern English stage. Amongst others, her research interests include medieval and early modern literature. In the spring semester of 2026, Annegret will be an academic visitor at the Centre of Renaissance and Early Modern Studies (CREMS) at the University of York.

Ben Scherer, Ruhr Universität Bochum

Practices of “True Rule” in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*

When George Orwell's Winston Smith recalls the party slogan of “Who controls the past [...] controls the future: who controls the present controls the past,” (1984, 37) one is certainly reminded of the significance history has in the creation of political truths. While Shakespeare’s history plays have again and again been appropriated by nationalist movements like the ‘Vote Leave’ campaign in producing ‘alternative truths’, this paper argues that Shakespeare’s historical plays were crucial in the negotiation of ‘true’, i.e. legitimate rule in late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England. For example, when Queen Isabel refers to herself as the “true king’s queen” (R2 5.1.6), or Falstaff calls Prince Hal the “true prince” (1HIV 2.4.263), these descriptors refer to political legitimacy.

Although all of Shakespeare’s history plays stage ruler figures who participate in the construction of true rule, in my paper I wish to focus on the play *Richard II* exclusively. By employing the praxeological approaches of Theodore Schatzki, Marian Füssel, Andreas Reckwitz, Dagmar Freist and Davide Nicolini I intend to analyse the social practices of rule that the play’s two monarchs, Richard II and his cousin Henry Bolingbroke, engage in. In doing so, I will show the extent to which Shakespeare juxtaposes different political truths by focusing on two decisive moments: Richard’s self-dramatisation as Christ during his descent from Flint Castle (3.3) and Bolingbroke’s reaction to Richard’s death at the end of the play (5.6). I will argue that Richard and Bolingbroke employ different practices in producing and enforcing claims to true rule. In juxtaposing these different practices and claims, the play (and Shakespeare’s theatre) can be understood as an experiment, an investigation, exploration and negotiation of the notion true rule in particular, and of political truth in general.

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Ben Scherer received his Bachelor and Master degrees from Ruhr-Universität Bochum, where his studies focused on early English literature and culture, specifically Shakespeare. At RUB, he's currently lecturer for English at the University Language Centre (ZFA) as well as project supervisor for the workshop “Shakespeare or Shakesfear” at the Alfried Krupp-Schülerlabor.

Nadine Schmidt, Universität Siegen

The Rogue as News Merchant: Trustworthiness and Transactional Truth in *The Winter's Tale*

“[T]his is the time that the unjust man doth thrive,” Autolycus muses in his second scene in *The Winter's Tale* (4.4.677–78). As a wandering thief, he profits from his dishonesty: he lies, he steals, he dupes the Bohemian rustics by putting on airs and donning various disguises. In this, Autolycus embodies the stereotype of the cheating vagabond perpetuated by works of early modern “rogue literature” (Woodbridge 2) in which authors like Thomas Harman or John Awdeley linked vagrancy to disguise and deceit. Autolycus, nevertheless, cuts a more ambiguous figure. He is a masterless man unattached to any community, an unknown factor and, thus, potentially untrustworthy. At the same time, however, he is a peddler of ballads, a “cultural merchant” (Mentz 80) whose wares are taken to be true by virtue of being printed (4.4.260–1) and who is thought to be “of great authority” by the undiscerning clown (4.4.805).

In my contribution, I would like to explore this interplay between truth and trustworthiness and its link to early modern print and news culture. As Karen Jones notes, “trust is an attitude of optimism that the goodwill and competence of another will extend to cover the domain of our interaction with [them]” (4). Accordingly, both truth and trust are affectively charged epistemic categories. It is thus no accident that Autolycus sells sensationalist ballads instead of more reputable news publications. I suggest that Autolycus functions as a harbinger of a new, proto-capitalist truth: a truth increasingly conceived of as transactional, commercial, and

pandering to the masses, no longer tied to moral-affective categories like honesty and trust. In this sense, I read Autolycus as symptomatic of a post-truth society in which invention and spectacle ultimately trump all. *The Winter's Tale* opens up a critical perspective here, as in the end, Autolycus' peddling of 'truths' is curbed: the masterless man is given "good masters" (5.2.172) to keep him in check.

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Nadine Schmidt is a doctoral student and research associate at the University of Siegen. Having studied English and German literature at the University of Bremen, her research focuses on early modern English literature, poetry, and contemporary Brexit fiction, with a particular interest in the nexus between economic and ecological thought. She is currently working on a dissertation project concerning utopian representations of poverty and beggary in early modern English poetry.