

The Act of Reading in Shakespeare

At important moments in Shakespeare's plays – most famously in *Hamlet* – an actor enters “reading a book”. It is a gesture also commonly found in other plays of the period – especially tragedies, and most especially revenge tragedies. Why might this be? While this year we celebrate “Shakespeare's Libraries” in terms of the First Folio edition of his plays, this lecture turns attention to the place of the book *inside* Shakespeare's plays. The act of reading is one of the most significant acts or gestures in the human repertoire. It is frequently depicted in artworks, especially in the Renaissance period. I will be asking what the act of reading means, for questions of subjectivity, personhood, and drama, and for the relationship between actor and spectator.