

CFP SHAKESPEARE-SEMINAR 2025: 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*

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” (4.4.224-5). 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 may 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’ – that is, Shakespeare’s role across a range of popular mass media. This seminar explores why Shakespeare seems to “never go out of style”, to borrow a Swiftian phrase. 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,” we welcome papers that focus on the traces of early modern popular cultures found in Shakespeare’s works, as well as on the reception and lasting impact of Shakespeare in contemporary popular cultures. Papers may engage with, but are in no way restricted to, the following questions:

- How did Shakespeare draw on popular cultures of his time?
- How do the diverse audience demographics of early modern theatre compare to more ‘elitist’ ideas of theatre today?
- How do 20th- and 21st-century popular cultures and subcultures appropriate, commodify and refashion Shakespeare in a time of mass entertainment?
- What is the relationship between popular Shakespeare(s) and populist Shakespeare(s) in light of surging political populism?
- How much (scholarly) context is needed to appreciate the Bard? In what ways has Shakespeare become too inaccessible to be popular culture today?
- To what extent does the proliferation of home-made Shakespeares on TikTok, YouTube etc. advance Shakespeare as a global digital phenomenon?
- How does Shakespeare’s interaction with popular culture, and popular culture’s interaction with Shakespeare, challenge and diversify the ‘established’ notion of Shakespeare as a ‘highbrow’ cultural commodity?
- What was popular in Shakespeare’s time vs what is popular today? What may be *unpopular* in/about Shakespeare today?

Our seminar will address these issues with a panel of six papers during the annual conference of the German Shakespeare Association, *Shakespeare-Tage*, which will take place from **25–27 April 2025 in Weimar**, Germany. As critical input for the discussion, we invite papers of no more than 15 minutes that present concrete case studies, concise examples and strong views on the topic. Please send your proposals (abstracts of 300 words) and short bio notes by **15 December 2024** to the seminar convenors:

Dr. Marlene Dirschauer, University of Hamburg: marlene.dirschauer@uni-hamburg.de

Dr. Jonas Kellermann, University of Konstanz: jonas.kellermann@uni-konstanz.de

The Seminar provides a forum for established as well as young scholars to discuss texts and contexts. Participants of the seminar will subsequently be invited to submit extended versions of their papers for publication in *Shakespeare Seminar Online (SSO)*. While we cannot offer travel bursaries, the association will arrange for the accommodation of all participants in a hotel close to the main venues. For more information, please contact Marlene Dirschauer and Jonas Kellermann. For more information about the events and publications also see: <https://shakespeare-gesellschaft.de/>.