

Seminar 49: The Soft Power of the Shakespearean Cameo: National Identities and Political Utility
SAA 2025
Abstracts

Megan E. Fox (megan.e.fox@wisc.edu)
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Modern Library Classification and the Power of Shakespeare's Name

Wandering the shelves of an (American) library, one could easily find *Vortigern and Rowena*—William Henry Ireland's notorious "rediscovered" Shakespeare play from the late eighteenth century—and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* next to each other. In the Library of Congress Classification System (LoC), which most libraries in the United States now use, they have sequential call numbers: PR2870 for *Kinsmen*, PR2871 for *Vortigern*. "PR28XX" in LoC denotes "Shakespeare"; "Doubtful, spurious works. 'Shakespeare apocrypha.'" In other words, these two works—from different periods, with different authors and genres and subjects and settings and performance histories and textual histories and, not negligibly, differing levels of literary quality—are brought together on the shelf through the presumption that each work's affiliation with Shakespeare is the primary point through which any user would learn of and thereby need to access it.

This paper asks how Shakespeare's name has come to cast such influence over the modern history of library classification, and the political implications of this influence. The question of utility governs the development of classification schema: the goal of any such system is, necessarily, accessibility. How do we help someone find the book they need? Shakespeare's name, to this end, is a point of entry into the development of a cohesive Anglo-American national literature, as evinced by these structures. Classification, moreover, may prove an interesting contrast to more recent digital algorithms; they are both often invisible forms of mediation that serve to facilitate access to books (or shows, or songs), where Shakespeare's name or image is often a point of access. How do the questions of utility bridge the use of Shakespeare's name in libraries and his image in popular media?

Helen Alexandra Hopkins (helen.hopkins2@bcu.ac.uk)
Birmingham City University

The Wintour's Tale: Shakespeare and Vogue World, London 2023

An advert for Vogue magazine's second annual fashion week launch extravaganza, which in 2023 took place in London, centres on Sir Ian McKellan's first audition 'since 1965'. Apparently auditioning, for no immediately obvious reason, to a small group of fashion models, McKellan fumbles the 'Sceptred Isle' speech, crucially forgetting what England is 'dear for'. The models prompt him: it is 'for Shakespeare', 'for the weather', and, confusingly, 'for the girls'. Cue montage: a red double decker bus, a 'greasy spoon' café, the Natural History Museum, Big Ben, Rambert Dance Studios, and the Savoy Theatre's stage.

The Vogue World event aimed to celebrate – and raise funds for – London's performing arts scene through a live-streamed repertoire of opera, ballet, music, and drama (as Shakespeare) accompanied

by a continuous flow of fashion models catwalking across the stage and through the stalls of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. For ‘Vogue overlord’ Anna Wintour, it was about showing that fashion week is part of the artistic tradition of London.

This paper will explore the uses of Shakespeare in the show and the advertising reel that preceded it. It will ask what kind of identities were created through the cultural mishmash that included couture fashion, Stormzy, Harriet Walters as a stage door keeper, lingering shots of fry-ups, and excerpts from *2 Henry IV* and *Romeo & Juliet*. Simultaneously reverent and irreverent, with no mention of the concurrent Folio anniversary, Vogue World 2023 created a variety of identities for London, for England, for fashion and culture, and for *Vogue*. This paper will query the specific form and utility of Shakespearean soft power that underpins them all.

Emily G. Jones (egjones@usf.edu)
University of South Florida

“The Frontier of the Rebellion is Everywhere”: *Andor*, Antifascism, and the Soft Power of the Shakespeare Vibe

Because the *Star Wars* universe exists a long time ago and in a galaxy far, far away, nobody there has ever heard of Shakespeare. The diverse texts within George Lucas’ franchise refer neither to his name nor to his plays, the way that other science fiction media set in our own universe often do. Yet Shakespeare’s unreality in this particular science-fantasy setting has not stopped fans from finding their own ways to interpolate him into the *Star Wars* multiverse. For many fans, a direct line of transmission between Shakespeare and *Star Wars* is not important. What matters instead is whether the characters and story *feel* like Shakespeare and, further, whether the language of that story evokes a Shakespearean gravitas and grandeur. Recently, a new entry into the *Star Wars* franchise has drawn attention from fans and critics by virtue of its own original linguistic heft. *Andor* (2022), created by Tony Gilroy for Disney’s streaming service Disney+, is a prequel to the original *Star Wars* trilogy that tells the story of how an unambitious thief named Cassian Andor becomes radicalized into a rebel agent against the Galactic Empire. National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered* celebrated the show as “the most complex, mature story in ‘Star Wars’ lore,” and many fans on Reddit have enthusiastically dropped the S-bomb: “Shakespeare himself couldnt have written much better”; “straight up Shakespearean type of writing”; “Someone finally remembered that Star Wars is a space OPERA and began writing Shakespeare level dialogue.” One Twitter/X user just wrote an anticipatory note about *Andor*’s season 2 air date of April 23: “Andor S2 dropping on Shakespeare birthday and death day because it’s peak writing yep yep.”

These fans are detecting a sympathetic resonance—a Shakespeare “vibe”—between Gilroy’s series and the plays as they exist in our cultural imagination, and their intuitive response mostly derives from concrete creative decisions made by Gilroy and his writing team (brother Dan Gilroy and Beau Willimon). While much of *Andor* is written in a snappy patter similar enough to Lucas’ original trilogy, in several crucial narrative moments the writers turn to a feature rare in *Star Wars* scripts (and in most TV narrative) but central to Shakespeare and his contemporaries: the monologue. Moreover, every one of these several moments of heightened pathos and dramatic energy is delivered by actors who have carried the rhetorical weight of leading Shakespearean roles. Finally, each monologue is inextricably bound up with *Andor*’s strident theme of radical resistance to the

Empire's fascist regime, and therefore each one engages with Shakespearean themes of war, power, and revenge. I want to suggest two things here: first, that a large part of *Andor*'s popularity with its fans derives from its monologic moments that “vibe” as Shakespearean for a range of reasons; second and more nascently, that *Andor*'s politically charged “Shakespeare level” monologues contribute to a niche fan culture of resistance to fascism—a culture seemingly at odds with Disney's mainstream marketing of both the show and the *Star Wars* franchise at large.

Maya Mathur (mmathur@umw.edu)
University of Mary Washington

The Taming of the Toffs: *Saltburn* does *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Emerald Fennell's *Saltburn* (2023) belongs to a long tradition of English country house films that explore the tension between aristocrats and the poor relations and retainers who depend on them. The film examines one such nexus of dependence between two students at Oxford, the “scholarship boy” Oliver Quick (Barry Keoghan) and the privileged Felix Catton (Jacob Elordi), who invites Oliver to Saltburn, his family's estate, for the summer. The film examines the parasitic relationship that Oliver develops with the Cattons as he seduces Felix's sister, Venetia (Alison Oliver), charms his mother, Elsbeth (Rosamund Pike), and displaces his cousin, Farleigh (Archie Madekwe) as the family favorite.

The country house is, of course, an ideal setting for a Shakespearean cameo and Fennell's film does not disappoint in this regard. Shakespeare makes multiple appearances in *Saltburn*, from Felix's reference to the “first folios” nested among portraits of “dead rellies” to a debate between Venetia and Felix over their preference for the Richards over the Henrys. The Cattons position Shakespeare as a form of elite white property that establishes their aristocratic *bona fides* and distinguishes them from the interlopers in their midst. The family's strategic deployment of Shakespeare collapses, however, at a *Midsummer Night's Dream*-themed costume party they host for Oliver's birthday, which concludes with Felix's death and Oliver's gradual accession to his place within the family.

This paper argues that the Shakespeare cameo plays an important role both in establishing Saltburn as a space reserved for elite whiteness and in deconstructing this image as Oliver eventually inherits the estate and celebrates his victory in the film's anarchic closing scene. Broadly, I suggest that *Saltburn* writes back to the country house film by framing its paternalism – and investment in Shakespeare – as the emblems of a nation past its prime and ripe for a hostile takeover from below.

Marianne Montgomery (montgomerym@ecu.edu)
East Carolina University

“Nothing bad ever happened in a castle in Scotland”: Treacherous Theatricality on *The Traitors* (U.S.)

My contribution to our seminar will explore the Shakespearean cameo in the U.S. version of reality television competition *The Traitors* (2023-). *The Traitors U.S.* is one among an international roster of Traitors productions, all based on a Dutch original. In the show, Shakespeare is frequently quoted by the show's host, Alan Cumming (himself noted for his Shakespearean roles, such as his 2012 one-

man *Macbeth* set in a psychiatric ward), as part of his campy in-show persona as the lord of a castle in Scotland. On a basic level, these frequent quotations help to define the show's Scottish setting for its American contestants and viewers. Cumming's quotations from Shakespeare also do considerable work to underline the show's Machiavellian premise and establish its tone: the contestants are secretly separated into "Faithfuls" and "Traitors," and the Faithfuls must identify and vote out the Traitors, lest one remain at the show's end to claim the prize money. In the world of *The Traitors*, Shakespeare connotes treachery, secrecy, violence, and paranoia, with Cumming as the playwright/god orchestrating scenarios and arranging the players in the castle-as-panopticon for the surveillance of the show's audience. Shakespeare's cameos coexist in *The Traitors*, though, with another kind of cameo: many of the contestants are stars of other American reality television shows. Shakespeare citations on *The Traitors* associate American reality TV veterans with ordinariness and, associate Scotland and the show's host, Scottish actor Alan Cumming, with theatricality and treachery. Shakespeare is not exactly coded as foreign, but he is deployed as part of a heightened and exaggerated Scottish setting removed from the everyday, even if in this case the "everyday" is actually the heightened and exaggerated universes of other American reality TV shows. *The Traitors* (U.S.) in part builds its tension between Traitors and Faithfuls (the core of the gameplay) on tensions between America and Scotland, between television and theater, and between ordinariness and performance.

Anandi Rao (ar75@soas.ac.uk)
SOAS, University of London

The Ghost of Hamlet and British South Asian Masculinity

This paper looks at the role that Hamlet – the play and the character – plays in the 2024 play *Statues* by Azan Ahmed. When I saw the performance in November 2024, I was both surprised and unsurprised at the pivotal cameo that Hamlet plays in the play that deals with grief and British South Asian Muslim identity. Yusuf, the lead character, is an English teacher, who is packing up his father's flat after his father's death. He discovers through cassette tapes that his father used to rap. In his professional life Yusuf has just been appointed Head of English in the high school that he attended. In his first day he ends up, no surprises here, reading Hamlet with his Year 13 class. What is surprising though is the impact of the reference to Hamlet. One of the students, Khalil, calls Hamlet "radical" and says that he has been "radicalised" by the spirit of Hamlet's father. This makes Yusuf so uncomfortable that he sends him to the principal who ends up reporting Khalil to "Prevent". Per the UK government website, Prevent, seeks to "stop people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism" and "The objectives of Prevent are to: tackle the ideological causes of terrorism, intervene early to support people susceptible to radicalisation, enable people who have already engaged in terrorism to disengage and rehabilitate". I am interested in thinking with critical works like *White People* in Shakespeare to think through the ghost of Hamlet being akin to the white state moulding British South Asian Masculinity, particularly, Muslim masculinity, into the shape of a "terrorist".