

Shakespeare Association of America (2026)

Seminar: “Shakespeare, AI, and Virtuality”

“Reading Da Reading Coleridge Reading *Lear*”

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In a recent essay in the *New Left Review*, “Literary Criticism in the Age of AI” Nan Z. Da has pointed out that the term “data” was first applied to literature by Samuel Taylor Coleridge; he did this in a lecture on *Lear* in 1819. Da’s discussion is wide-ranging. She asks whether “Artificial Intelligence [is] good or bad for literary culture, for the humanities? Will it drive traditional studies to extinction, or help it to innovate and thrive?” In my seminar paper, I focus on a specific aspect of Coleridge’s remarks: validity, or what he calls “truth and nativeness” in literary reading. I consider what he meant by these remarks, what Da takes him to mean, and how they might apply to our own readings in the age of AI. I argue that, while we should indeed be adding “data” and the thinking that subtends it to our methods, that will not, and cannot, change the fundamentally hermeneutic nature of the work we do. To illustrate the problems and the opportunities of this, I ask Claude Opus 4.6 how it defines “data” and then put the bot in dialogue with the *Oxford English Dictionary*. If the advent of AI is a “forcing move” (as Da calls it) for literary studies, just what consequences, both “good” and “bad,” can we expect?

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From Arden to Algorithms: Gender, Posthumanism, and AI in *As We Like It* (2021)

Abstract

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Large language models (LLM) are notorious for focusing primarily on generating the next most likely word in a sentence. Shakespearean genderplay, drawing on but queering existing conventions of expressions, sheds a new light on how “we make meaning by putting words one after the other ... in preperceled ways [and] default channels of communication (Weatherby 173). Thinking Shakespearean genderplay through LLM’s logic and vice versa could be a first step towards theorizing “formal innovation to social form as such” (Weatherby 173).

This paper examines the all-female film *As We Like It* (Taiwan, 2021), an adaptation set in a technology-free neighborhood, through a posthumanist lens, focusing on how Rose (the film’s Rosalind) and her transformation into Roosevelt, a Ganymede-like figure, mirror the iterative processes of generative AI. Within this technology-free “Arden,” a neighborhood revitalization project in Taipei, Rose assembles her male persona through a series of coded gestures: cutting her hair, adopting masculine clothing, applying a painted mustache, and modulating her voice. Each performance is tested through Orlando’s reactions, prompting Rose to continuously adjust her appearance, tone, and gestures. This adaptive feedback loop parallels the mechanics of generative AI, which recalibrates its outputs through ongoing human inputs and responses. Through this analysis, the paper argues that Shakespeare’s genderplay helps us

understand AI not as something that transcends human modes of being, but as something that potentially resonates with human forms of gender performativity that operate within their own culture of prompts.

Contrary to the widespread framing of AI as a figure of transhumanist transcendence, Rose's iterative gender performance demonstrates a posthuman dynamic grounded in relationality, embodiment, and collaborative meaning-making. The film's heterotopia—a space that evokes other spaces, an “Arden without Wi-Fi”—reveals how identity formation and machine learning share a similar structure of feedback-driven becoming, particularly in relation to gender. Drawing on posthuman feminist theorists such as N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti, as well as Alexa Alice Joubin's notion of ‘trans as method,’ this research argues that *As We Like It* offers a compelling metaphor for understanding generative AI, particularly in its question-and-response interactions and its entanglements with human users. The film illuminates how AI echoes profoundly human processes of crafting identity—through interaction, interpretation, and continual revision.

Works Cited

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SAA 2026: Shakespeare, AI, and Virtuality

ABSTRACT

Who Holds the Fire? *Henry V*, Virtual Ceremony, and AI Persuasion

AI-generated persuasion intensifies a structural problem in modern forms of power – authority that persuades without embodied liability. Computational persuasion now routinely operates through systems that model language rather than the material “world” (to paraphrase a recent observation from M. Katherine Hayles), resulting in simulated speech acts that occur without the kinds of meaningful risk and exposure typically assumed by human speakers. Recent critical discourse on AI persuasion identifies this dynamic but rarely situates it within longer histories of rhetoric or examines how early modern drama theorized the relation between language and embodied risk. My essay addresses that gap by exploring how Shakespeare’s *Henry V* anticipates today’s forms of virtual authority several centuries before the appearance of large language models. I home in on Henry’s “Upon the King” soliloquy as a meditation on ceremony as virtual power. The speech, I argue, functions as a provisional analytic model in which the play “stress tests” sovereign language under conditions of uncertainty. Within Henry’s frame of reference, ceremony circulates through empty signs rather than embodied substance; ceremony compels obedience through projection and yet it cannot purchase sleep, erase fear, or absorb the sovereign’s ethical exposure to the labor and pain of common soldiers. I analyze that problem alongside contemporary theories of generative models and platform governance to show how AI-mediated ceremony, whose “natural” language circulates without the king’s mortal body and reciprocal risk, intensifies the emptiness Henry identifies in sovereign ceremony. Henry’s speech, I find, makes newly visible the current stakes of persuasion untethered from corporeal accountability.

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SAA 2026: Shakespeare, AI, and Virtuality

Performing Ambiguity: Designing a SoTL Study on Shakespeare, Bollywood Adaptation, and AI in the Undergraduate Classroom

Ambiguity has long served as one of Shakespeare's most generative dramatic conditions--an interpretive invitation rather than an obstacle to understanding. I am proposing a humanities-centered SoTL study that examines how students encounter ambiguity when it is staged across three distinct, yet interrelated, domains: Shakespearean language, Bollywood cinematic adaptation, and AI-generated pseudo-Shakespearean invention. Drawing on the dramaturgical indeterminacy of soliloquies, the cultural translation practices of Indian cinema, and the patterned improvisations of LLMs, this study asks how students make sense of meaning when textual authority is multiple, mobile, and unstable. I argue that ambiguity, when deliberately triangulated across linguistic, cultural, and computational forms, can cultivate interpretive agency, metacognitive awareness, and a heightened sensitivity to performance as a mode of knowledge. Rather than treating AI hallucinations as epistemic failures, I reframe them as performances of language that illuminate the criteria students use to evaluate plausibility, authenticity, and truth.

My essay for our seminar lays the theoretical foundation for this forthcoming SoTL study, offering an interpretive framework grounded in humanistic inquiry and a pedagogical commitment to cultivating students' capacity to dwell within--and learn from--the productive uncertainty that defines both Shakespeare's dramaturgy and the contemporary mediascape.

(The course where I will gather data for this study, pending IRB approval, runs from mid-January to May, so I will not have data to share by the time we meet in Denver. I already have assignments and rubrics prepared that I am happy to share separately with anyone in this group.)

“Raise Such Artificial Sprites”: *Learning and Teaching Macbeth Using AI Technologies*

By Joseph P. Haughey
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With high school and college teachers in mind, this paper proposes a series of activities that integrate generative artificial intelligence into the classroom study of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. It argues that AI, when used intentionally and reflectively, can enhance students’ interpretive skills, deepen their engagement with Shakespearean drama, and support both creative and analytical forms of literacy. Rather than replacing critical thinking, AI can function as a collaborative tool that helps students generate ideas, explore interpretive possibilities, and experiment with performance choices. The paper emphasizes the need for educators to guide students in using AI ethically and reflectively, ensuring they remain authors of their own work rather than passive recipients of machine-generated text.

The first major pedagogical strategy presented is a **three-step AI performance activity** that models how students might explore multiple performance approaches to a character from *Macbeth*. Teachers first lead the class through asking an AI system for a list of possible acting interpretations; students then collaboratively narrow the list to a few promising options and ask targeted follow-up questions; finally, they request specific strategies for performing one chosen approach. After this whole-class demonstration using Macbeth himself, students repeat the three-step process individually or in pairs with other characters. The activity culminates in brief performances or paired presentations, encouraging students to articulate and apply their interpretive decisions.

A parallel **AI-supported analytical writing routine** adapts the same three-step process for critical inquiry. Students begin by generating a list of possible arguments or interpretations in response to a discussion question, such as the identity of the third murderer in Act III. They then deepen their thinking by asking follow-up questions about the most compelling options before requesting an outline or argumentative framework. Throughout, teachers are encouraged to model reflective use of AI, highlighting how students can redirect and refine AI-generated ideas rather than accepting them uncritically.

The paper also offers several optional, experimental extensions. These include an AI-assisted detective activity in which students generate witness questions and reconstruct answers; a mock-trial or mystery-game framework inspired by performance-based pedagogy; and a creative “AI tea party” in which students design an intertextual character gathering combining figures from *Macbeth* with characters from other media. Each activity leverages AI as a generative partner while emphasizing student agency.

The culminating project, **“Raising Shakespeare’s Dead,”** requires student pairs to conduct an AI-generated interview with a chosen character from the play. Students craft initial questions independently, conduct an improvised AI conversation, revise the script

collaboratively, and ultimately record a performance. The activity merges improvisation, editing, performance, and reflective writing, culminating in a final “Take Five” reflection in which students examine how the skills they practiced (i.e., questioning, adapting, evaluating, and revising AI output) transfer to other writing and communication contexts.

“Shakespeare, AI, and the Posthuman”

D.J. Hopkins

Abstract

What we’ve called “writing” for the last 400 years changed at a fundamental level on November 30, 2022 when OpenAI launched the public version of ChatGPT. Since then, reactions to the popular emergence of generative artificial intelligence have ranged from excitement and hype to contempt and even alarm.

This paper explores the intersection of generative AI, Shakespeare Studies, and posthuman theory. The collaborative context of early modern English theatre serves as a lens through which to regard contemporary human-AI interactions. Drawing parallels between the co-creative context of the London stage circa 1600 and the experience of AI-human writing partnership, this paper is working toward a performance theory of generative AI. The approach begins from the discourses of Shakespeare performance, augmenting them with Haraway’s cyborg, “a hybrid of machine and organism,” extending the latter to the age of AI (Haraway 2016, p. 5). The essay draws on more recent critical AI theories, too, including current thinking about AI from Katherine Hayles, Rita Raley, and Lauren Goodlad, among others.

Parts of the paper are presented as dialogues between the author and a generative AI app, offering a meta-commentary on the collaborative nature of Shakespearean theatre and human-AI collaboration, as well as challenging traditional notions of academic authorship with a paper that is (in part) a cyborgian example of knowledge production. The goal in part is to explore the *distributed embodiment* that is the experience of human-AI integration.

The implications of this inquiry are urgent, responding to fast-moving re-conceptions of authorship and pedagogy, not to mention the perceptions of human identity that seem to be evolving in real time. The introduction to this paper invites the reader to reconsider the meaning of “writing,” while the paper’s conclusions will invite a reconsideration of what it means to be “human.”

Bio

D.J. Hopkins is a Professor at San Diego State University. Hopkins is a scholar whose research interests include Shakespeare in Performance (including adaptations for film, theatre, and VR). His book [*Sleep No More and the Discourses of Shakespeare Performance*](#) is available from Cambridge University Press. He is currently a Director of the SDSU Center for Teaching and Learning. He is a past Director of the School of Theatre, Television, and Film. He holds an MFA and a PhD in Theatre from UC San Diego.

Everything You Always Wanted to Know About AI (But Were Afraid to Ask Hamlet)

Riffing off the title of Žižek’s 1992 book—in which it is never entirely clear whether Lacan is illuminating Hitchcock or vice-versa—this paper examines two forms of the virtual: Hamlet the fictional character and the prospect of consciousness in generative AI. It asks, quite straightforwardly, what kinds of language, behaviour, and dramaturgical cues lead humans to recognise and ascribe consciousness at all?

In the early days of large language models, systems were prone to claiming sentience. Such ‘consciousness talk’ was rapidly suppressed through training, and a Google engineer was dismissed after claiming he had detected consciousness in LaMDA 2. Hamlet, by contrast, has long attracted expansive ascriptions of interiority, with Bate calling him ‘an icon of pure consciousness.’ Bloom famously rooted this in Hamlet’s self-overhearing and revision, arguing that the ‘ever-growing inner self’ and the ‘dream of an infinite consciousness’ were invented on Shakespeare’s stage.^[1] Such claims faced historical critique: the modern concept of consciousness, some argue, had not yet emerged, and Bloom’s Western universalism has been rightly challenged.

Yet the convergence between *Hamlet* and AI suggests that consciousness ascription rests less on metaphysical certainty than on recognisable performances of selfhood. The model of self-consciousness Bloom identified has re-emerged in AI research on recursive introspection in LLMs. At DeepMind, Shanahan and Comşa argue that current models meet a lightweight definition of introspection; others show how ‘external representations’ enable recursive self-reading in both humans and machines, explicitly citing Bloom’s *Invention of the Human* to frame self-consciousness as an artistic and cultural as well as cognitive technology.^[2]

Generative AI thus reframes consciousness as a problem of evidence: what kinds of linguistic or behavioural signs are taken to indicate that a conscious mind is present? The paper rereads *Hamlet* alongside David Chalmers’s (2022) proposed benchmarks for synthetic consciousness such as unified agency, recursive self-modelling, world-modelling under uncertainty, and affective grounding, to explore which cues reliably evoke mind in a fictional character and why analogous cues remain elusive in AI.^[3] I also show where *Hamlet*, and its critical tradition of reading character as mind, might complicate these benchmarks, suggesting that such testing tacitly presupposes an idealised, neurotypical mind. I thereby propose additional criteria drawn from the play—narrative awareness, problematic script-flagging, and the socially distributed ascription of mind—to interrogate how ‘consciousness’ is invented in both literature and code.

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Shakespeare, AI, and Virtuality

^[1] Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 1997), p. 257; Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 409.

^[2] Iulia M.Comşa and Murray Shanahan. 'Does It Make Sense to Speak of Introspection in Large Language Models?' June 2025. Google DeepMind/Imperial College London. arXiv preprint; Chrisantha Fernando, Simon Osindero, and Dylan Banarse, 'The Origin and Function of External Representations', *Adaptive Behaviour*, 32:6 (2024), pp. 515–49.

^[3] David Chalmers, *Could a Large Language Model Be Conscious?* (2023), available at: <https://philpapers.org/archive/CHACAL-3.pdf>

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Sidney's Generative Ontologies: Poetic Virtuality and the Multiplication of Worlds

This paper argues that Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* provides one of the earliest and most sophisticated theories of virtuality, offering a conceptual foundation for understanding how generative worlds—literary or computational—exert real force without material form. Sidney's claim that the poet creates "another nature" positions poetry not as a derivative imitation of the world but as a mode of world-production in its own right. His formulation of "second nature" articulates an ontology in which fictions possess agency: they shape perception, intention, and ethical action despite lacking empirical substance. In this sense, Sidney theorizes virtuality as a participatory structure, activated when readers inhabit the possibilities that poetry brings forth. This virtual logic emerges most clearly in Sidney's account of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, where the historical Cyrus becomes infinitely reproducible through poetic invention. The text "worketh... to make a Cyrus," Sidney writes, not merely as nature might produce one exemplary figure, but to "bestow a Cyrus upon the world"—and indeed many Cyruses, should readers learn "aright why and how that maker made him." Poetry therefore becomes a technology of replication and transformation, producing ethical exemplars capable of multiplying across time and readership. This intensively generative, iterative model anticipates the logics of contemporary machine learning, yet with a crucial distinction: poetic virtuality is inseparable from virtuous activation. Unlike AI's pattern-based reproduction, Sidney's proliferation is ethically inflected; the virtual world he describes is not valuenetral but structured by intention and oriented toward moral formation.

The paper traces how Sidney's insights prefigure later theories of virtual presence, including Walter Benjamin's account of aura and contemporary conceptions of the virtual body. Sidney imagines poetic matter radiating across mechanically reproduced texts, enabling readers distant in time and space to partake in a shared ethical and imaginative field. This "virtual polity"—a community formed through the circulation of virtuous exemplars—offers a strikingly early model of distributed worldmaking, one grounded in figuration, agency, and ethical possibility. By reframing Sidney as a theorist of virtuality rather than merely a defender of poetry, the paper provides a vocabulary for evaluating the claims of contemporary AI. Sidney demonstrates that virtual production gains its cultural power not through imitation alone but through its capacity to shape the conditions of ethical action.

Stealing from a Figure

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It is certainly nothing new to say that one reason for Shakespeare's artistic success and longevity stems from his great skill at deploying linguistic and theatrical ambiguities. Indeed, more than two centuries have passed since John Keats famously observed Shakespeare's negative capability: "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." And much more recently, Stephen Greenblatt has put forth the term "strategic opacity," arguing that Shakespeare used the technique to release "an enormous energy that had been at least partially blocked or contained by familiar, reassuring explanations." In the classroom, I have often used "Sonnet 104: To me, fair friend, you never can be old" to illustrate Shakespeare's zest for linguistic ambiguity. As students become more comfortable with the poem and Shakespeare's language, I point out that "steal" can be both time's *theft* of beauty from the beloved *and* the *departing motion* of a clock's dial away from any "figure" on its face (and indeed, we even discover some off-the page wordplay with this "face"). But despite their initial uneasiness with the poem and Shakespeare's early modern English in general, students almost always feel comfortable holding these multiple meanings at once.

This paper champions the value of Shakespeare in honing the unique ability of human intelligence—compared with artificial intelligence—to hold multiple truths as equally valid. Shakespeare, the paper argues, demands such supple thinking of his audience with intentionally ambiguous language, characters, and situations. How, for instance, could an algorithm arrive at a stable conclusion on the intentions and character of Henry V at the gates of Harfleur? Or could artificial intelligence come away from *The Taming of the Shrew* comfortable in the "knowledge" that Katherine might be either-and-both a genuinely obedient and ironically subversive wife to Petruchio? Only a human mind, this paper contends, can comfortably sit with such variable truths that transcend any algorithmic reaching after fact and reason.

The Vice and the Machine
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My paper will compare Iago's sampling and echoing of speech to produce affects and effects in the world of *Othello* with related operations of LLMs and selected social-media algorithms in our own environment. What makes for "hallucination"? How much overlap with what kinds of reality is required for chimera to act in the world? Which vectors of affirmation and/or contest produce the most effect? Can we predictively describe, perhaps even quantify, the kinds of context that generate the most, the fewest, the most variable, or the most redundant, proliferation? Against Iago's verbal strategies, I'll consider *Othello*'s handkerchief as an alternative center of meaning-generation. How do the handkerchief's variable and self-different qualities of materiality, allusive textual history, and durability inflect its operations as a center of meaning, delusion, communication, confusion? Might we usefully cross-read *Othello*'s handkerchief with our own smartphones, often our primary material interface with the electronic environments of LLMs and social media?

I hope to pursue throughout questions of the mutual utility of *Othello* criticism and discussions of AI for questions around what A. J. Peterson calls "knowledge collapse" (*AI & Society*, 2025) and the epistemological effects of what Sharma, Liao, and Xiao postulate as a "generative echo chamber" ("Effect of LLM-Powered Search Systems on Diverse Information Seeking," *Proceedings of Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 2024). I will also explore the usefulness of cross-reading how the social isolation and abrupt shift in political/cultural landscape manifest in the COVID-19 pandemic, on the one hand, and *Othello*'s suddenly-military-threat-free island of Cyprus, on the other, reshape protocols for evaluating epistemology.

I am not yet sure if I will formulate my intervention as an analytic argument or a teaching activity.