

SAA 2026 Seminar 42
Shakespeare and the Forms of Religion
Abstracts

Sean Benson

“No more wit than a Christian”: Shakespeare’s Holy Folly

This essay contends that Shakespeare fashions a lineage of Erasmian fools whose “holy folly” subverts worldly wisdom and intimates a counterworld of grace. Drawing on Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*, it distinguishes these figures from mere jesters, aligning them with the Pauline paradox of being “fools for Christ.” Through Costard, Elbow, Bottom, and Dogberry, Shakespeare moves from sketch to consummate type: Costard’s proverbial wit and reflexive piety anticipate Elbow’s constabulary simplicity, Bottom’s ecstatic dream refracts Folly’s radiance, and Dogberry’s comic ineptitude becomes biblically legible as the confounding of the wise. In their malapropisms, proverbs, and actions, these fools shadow “that other life,” revealing folly perfected as wisdom.

James Berg

Burying Selves in Parts, or, ‘Character’ as Character in *Romeo and Juliet*

This article finds in *Romeo and Juliet*, and in the acting practices that this play represents, an ethos resembling the Zen aspiration of “no-mind.” This is an attitude, I am suggesting, to which Elizabethan actors aspired in cultivating oneness with their parts. It was to be achieved by becoming so deeply read(y) in one’s part as to *be* it, purging oneself *through* reading of reading mind—the mind that seeks to comprehend the whole of a text. Juliet and Romeo’s reciprocal love may be understood as a metaphor for such an aspiration to become reading material, or character in the literal sense of the term. Crucial to my argument is the play’s meditation on parts and partiality, as well as its evocation of Neo-Platonic idea of all of Creation as an inscrutable Providential text, only partially known to its participants.

Paul A. Fried

Expanding and Refining Methods and Taxonomy to Consider Biblical and Religious Allusions in *Hamlet*

Hamlet scholars have long catalogued explicit biblical and religious references, often seeking words of the Word, biblical names or (nearly) direct quotes. More subtle allusions, clusters, or plot echoes require more careful scrutiny of biblical plots and themes.

Shakespeare revises allusions, as when doubting-Thomas Horatio implies ghost as Christ-victim, changed at cock’s crow to Peter denying Christ. He layers them: The nunnery scene’s Ophelia reading is Mary at Annunciation, but spied upon like Suzannah by corrupt elders. Allusions hide

behind diversions: the mousetrap changes Eleanor Gonzaga to Baptista to distract from a fitting John the Baptist allusion.

Inflexible attachment to religious or scholarly assumptions can obscure narrative-allusive echoes; reducing them to ciphers for static ideas can quickly diminish their scope and significance. However, familiarity with an allusion's backstory (biblical and exegetical) can open doorways to an allusive multiverse and to mysteries not easily plucked.

Joseph Navitsky

Polemical Forms and the "Modest Limits of Order" in *Twelfth Night*

Although scholarship on the topic of religion in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1601-02) has been dominated by a single word, "Puritan," the play exhibits a surprisingly wide, though indistinctly apportioned, range of religious allusions. However, it's this very feature of the play that invites further investigation. Beyond the question of Malvolio and the epithets ascribed to him, in this essay I'd like to survey the scholarly history that has struggled to make sense of Shakespeare's interest in the polemical resources of the day. Ultimately, I wish to argue that the vocabulary of religious controversy is diffused throughout *Twelfth Night* because this vocabulary allows Shakespeare to engage with a question vital to his livelihood and to the theater more generally: who gets to speak and what are the "limits" of that speech?