

SAA Seminar 2026: Community and the Scapegoat

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“Much Worse Than Beasts”: Species Property, Propriety, and Exile in Golding and Bryskett

This essay takes up the scapegoat's thematics of exile, reciprocal substitution of animal for human, and the classificatory confusion resulting from the struggle to distinguish moral animals from immoral humans. I center my analysis on the surprisingly expansive archive of traits identified by early modern logicians and their readers as human “properties,” abilities and behaviors posited as unique to and omnipresent among human beings. The set of proposed human properties ran from familiar anthropocentric boasts (the only species to possess reason, to speak, to possess moral orientation) to more troubling unique capabilities (the only species to laugh at others' failings, to experience shame) to the staking of more neutral ground (the only species to enjoy aesthetic experience, to theorize secular justice).

While any trait possessed only by humans and by all humans neatly defined the species, some of the most desirable and familiar properties raised questions about humans who visibly fell short, not hewing to moral behavior or the dictates of reason. Such defaulters troubled writers including Arthur Golding and Lodowick Bryskett, who tend both to assimilate irrational or immoral humans to animals, exiling them from human membership entirely, and to read them as inferior to animals that, if they couldn't exercise some forms of virtue, also avoided indulgence in vice. These exiled human scapegoats underscore the superiority of humans who conform to the signal traits of humankind, even as they likewise reveal often widespread human failures and an ever-present possibility that even those who physically resemble humans and “beare the name of men” (in Golding's words) might not be human, but only animals shoring up a human definitional ideal.

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Richard III and the performance of disability on the modern European stage

This paper explores the representation of disability in *Richard III*'s performance history. Starting with a discussion of historicist readings that, since Tillyard, have presented the play as an iconic example of political scapegoating — one in which Richard's body serves as surrogate of the end of Catholicism and of its moral deformity — I then move on to re-examine the play under the light of its late performance history. Here I will look at how recent European productions have translated Elizabethan corporeal and moral deformity to modern audiences — turning the son of York into a sex offender, a fascist dictator, a school shooter, a gay pedophile rapist and a Donald Trump — and how they have struggled to sacrifice Richard — the crooked, the usurper, the tyrant, the child murderer — in a world that frowns upon the stigmatization of disability. Then I finally move on to discuss Marco Paiva's *Ricardo III* (2024) — performed by five Spanish and Portuguese deaf actors and one hearing actor in a gender-balanced ensemble of three male and three female performers — to examine how this sign language production realigns the play's social and political hierarchies and reframes the question of scapegoating by re-gendering, queering and silencing Shakespeare's text

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“Please none and please all.” Malvolio's scapegoating and the theatrical community in
Twelfth Night.

As a spoilsport, Malvolio stands in opposition to a community of festive characters in *Twelfth Night*. Confined to a dark house as a madman as a result of Maria's plot against him, he is a memorable, and sometimes sympathetic, scapegoat, excluded from the marriage celebrations of the play's ending. Critics have debated the significance of the vicious mistreatment of Malvolio and the extent to which the play instigates audiences to deride or empathize with the steward. In this paper I interpret Malvolio's scapegoating in relation to his role within the themes of social mobility and theatricality in the play. As a steward, Malvolio is tantalized with the prospect of promotion but is exposed to the criticism of the aristocrats above him and the household servants below him. His position, I argue, makes him a scapegoat who embodies the threat of the professional class to traditional aristocratic order, and, at the same time, the rigidity of the early modern household hierarchy. Malvolio's aspiration for social advancement through his marriage to Olivia prompts him into a theatrical performance. As such, I find a revealing contrast between Malvolio and Maria, since both seek social advancement through marriage and performances akin to theatrical acts to please the aristocrats of the play. Crucially, Maria builds a community around the theatrical entertainments she creates, while Malvolio's

performance pits him against that same community, ultimately isolating him from society altogether. I contend that the contrast between these two parallel paths to promotion makes the steward both a scapegoat and a sympathetic figure. As I intend to show, this contradictory response to Malvolio gives audiences a glimpse into his vulnerability within the social order.

Joanna Huh
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Risk and Ruin: Reimagining Community in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

This paper examines the bond-of-flesh forged between Antonio and Shylock, arguing that it is at once destructive, violent, and hostile while also being intimate, vulnerable, and desirable. I argue that through the bond's terms, *The Merchant of Venice* mobilizes an imaginative possibility that cannot offer us the comforts of the idyllic, but rather suggests that the mutually willed infliction of wounds can constitute a viable link between individuals that forms a community. Antonio's melancholia solicits penetrative violence against his integral being, and the correlative consumptive desire on Shylock's end answers such a call. Their destructive bond unexpectedly becomes an operable possibility through Venetian law, which sees flesh and money as comparable forms of property where an unsatisfied creditor could take action against the debtor's person. Nevertheless, the contract is aggressively foreclosed by Portia who converts civil law into statutory criminal law, exposing Venetian law as a hollow sham motivated by the urgent need to keep male Christian citizens from injuring themselves and their state. And though we may be prompted to dismiss the bond-of-flesh as the play scapegoats Shylock, the final scene actually continues the newly capacious understanding of interpersonal bonds as mobilized by the bond-of-flesh. In fact, the final ring episode shows how violence and vulnerability have migrated to become explicit modes of contract. In seeing the circulation of sacrificial logic and language within the last act's visions of marriage and citizenship, the play ends with a scene in which the bond between Antonio and Shylock may become a new organizing principle of interrelation.

Willnide Lindor
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Freudian Exceptionalism in William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*

This paper examines scapegoating in William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1594) to challenge conventional readings of Padua's homosocial order, revealing that masculine dominance in the domestic sphere rests on far more unstable foundations than traditionally assumed. Through an exploration of Petruchio's role as tamer and master, the play invites audiences to witness the collapse of normative masculine self-possession and regulation expected in the taming process. As an outsider from Verona, Petruchio's violent, excessive disciplinary tactics and psychological manipulation of Katherine—ostensibly to control her shrewish temper—alongside his verbal and physical abuse of servants, paradoxically reveal his own shrewish nature. His insistence on molding Katherine into the feminine ideal while dominating servants like Grumio exposes his fundamental inability to embody normative masculine Paduan respectability politics. Drawing on Freud's "exception principle"—the idea that individuals who perceive themselves as disadvantaged may claim exemption from communal behavioral norms—this paper reveals how scapegoats in *The Taming of the Shrew* expose Petruchio's neurotic compulsions and denegations, which ultimately prevent him from achieving the masculine ideal.

Sandra Logan
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"The Lucky Goat Who Gets to Stay"

In modern definitions, a 'scapegoat' is understood as a person or group unjustly held responsible for some kind of social ill or negative event, blamed through misunderstanding, misrepresentation by others, or other means. Originally, the 'scapegoat' had significantly different connotations. Within an ancient purification ritual, usually involving two goats or other animals, one goat – the 'scapegoat' – is exiled and bears the sins of the community out into the wilderness, while the other remains behind, to be consecrated and sacrificed to whichever god was being appeased. In this paper I begin by considering the symbolic implications of this ritual, including those relating to the sacrificial goat, the ideas of community purification and social responsibility, and the relationship between the ritual and more modern perceptions of scapegoating. I then consider how communities are theorized as heterogeneous or homogeneous, and how those theories relate to ideas of unity, commonality, the purposes of communal sociality, and the role of scapegoating. Ultimately, I argue, community can be understood as inherently and inevitably heterogeneous, although it may cultivate strategic, 'mythic' homogeneity as the basis of social cohesion. Finally, I turn to Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

to think through the role of scapegoats in that play, and their relationship to heterogeneous communality. The play, I argue, does not fit neatly into overarching arguments about Shakespeare's depictions of scapegoats as representing the necessary exclusion of difference in the process of securing community homogeneity. It thereby raises questions about other plays perceived as asserting scapegoating as the basis of community formation.

J. Asia Rowe
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“The Polack Never Will Never Defend It”: Scapegoating the Polish-Lithuanian Polity in
Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Although Claudius is *Hamlet's* “scapegoating king,” the Girardian scapegoating mechanism is complicated by Hamlet both serving as his uncle's scapegoat and projecting the revenge he intends for Claudius onto multiple sacrificed innocents, including Polonius, Guildenstern, and Rosencrantz, whose deaths are dismissed as trivial. My paper begins by considering these scapegoating dynamics in terms of the corrective reordering within the “rotten state” of Denmark before moving to an exploration of political order, alliances, and imperial expansion on the broader European stage. Key historical contexts include the unique position of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569 – 1795) and the Warsaw Confederation Act (1573) that made Poland a “state without stakes.” In light of the principles of republicanism and religious toleration characteristic of the Commonwealth during the sixteenth century, my paper explores the implications of Hamlet's literal and symbolic representations of Poland. Focusing on Polonius's murder and Fortinbras's conquests, I argue that Poland—together with the political precepts and principles that defined it—is portrayed as too weak and idealistic to be defended and sustained. In Shakespeare's Denmark, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth is ultimately scapegoated and sacrificed for the restoration of order attempted by the play's governing imperial powers.

Jonathan Shelley
St. John Fisher University

“In terms of friendship with thine enemies”: Social Making and Breaking in *Julius Caesar*

This paper examines the multiple cycles of community formation and rupture—specifically around the professed bonds of friendship—in *Julius Caesar*. Read as compounding processes of mimetic desire, the friendships between noted conspirators like Brutus and Cassius, and even those between the ruler Marc Antony and citizens (“friends, Romans, countrymen”), reach levels of mimetic intensity that, according to René Girard, lead to a crisis of Degree that can only erupt into rivalrous violence. The seeming scapegoats of this violence—e.g. Caesar, the oft-noted “Cinna the poet” who is mistaken for one of the conspirators—do little to resolve these tensions as the various factions continue to excise members from their ranks and the entire nation goes to war. *Julius Caesar* thus dramatizes a central paradox of friendship: the same ethic that constitutes its bond (i.e. likeness) inevitably lead to its dissolution. Furthermore, the play suggests that sustainable communities require a careful negotiation of strife and articulations of difference.

Lucas Simpson
University of Toronto

Tyrant and Scapegoat in *Richard III*

Since the 1930s, stage and film productions of *Richard III* have consistently compared Richard’s reign to the Nazi tyranny. This comparison, however, tends to obscure the ironies and ambivalences in Shakespeare’s presentation of Richard. As a reading like Jan Kott’s suggests, Shakespeare presents Richard as a staged tyrant, whose figuration as unambiguously wicked helps legitimize Tudor power and give the audience the satisfaction of being on the providential side of history. Richard’s theatrically self-conscious tyranny slyly unmasks the fact that the more wickedly he performs, the more he affirms Tudor legitimacy. Rather than the providential ascendance of good over evil, Shakespeare’s play at its most theatrically self-conscious presents York and Tudor power as symmetrical rivals turning on history’s wheel of conquest. Shakespeare’s play is ultimately ambiguous about the narrative of the providential ascendance of Tudor power over the demonic tyranny of Richard, who serves as the Tudor regime’s legitimizing scapegoat. Because these ambiguities do not hold up in a historical comparison of Nazi Germany to the Allied powers that defeated it, the recurring comparisons of Richard to Hitler in performance and critical reception have tended to obscure this crucial aspect of the play’s presentation of the dynamics of power and authority in the writing and staging of history. Beginning with E.M.W. Tillyard’s influential and patriotic wartime reading of the play, this paper will look at the way *Richard III* provokes in wartime writers the anxiety that the unambiguous distinctions demanded by powers at war might conceal an underlying symmetry. I will situate this reading within the broader debate about the legacy of the British Empire vis-à-vis the crimes perpetrated by its 20th-century German imperial rival.

