

**SAA 2026 Ethical Pluralities  
Collected Seminar Abstracts**

**John Higgins (University of Nevada – Reno)  
Cynicism and Racial Ideology in *Othello***

Critics of *Othello* have long discussed Iago's skills as a liar and linked his villainous actions to the play's depiction of early modern racism. Ian Smith, for example, has argued that the play depicts a, "Race war' initiated by the play's resident racist, Iago," (161) while Ania Loomba has said that Iago's motivations, "Can be regarded as 'motiveless' only if we ignore his racial and class envy of Othello, the black outsider who has risen to the top of Venetian society" (78). The goal of this essay is not to challenge these arguments, but rather to complicate them by arguing that in addition to being a racist and a liar, Iago is also a cynic.

Slavoj Žižek has described ideological cynicism as a relationship to ideology that enacts ideological work without believing – or even professing to believe – the claims of the ideology itself. Unlike the more traditional "false consciousness" model of ideology, in which true believers are motivated by, "A lie experienced as truth, a lie which pretends to be taken seriously," cynical ideology, "No longer has this pretension. It is no longer meant, even by its authors, to be taken seriously... its rule is secured not by its truth-value but by simple extra-ideological violence" (Žižek 27). This idea clearly does not apply to the many lies that Iago tells throughout the play, since these are clearly meant to be believed by Othello and the other characters. Cynicism does, however, help make sense out of many statements that Iago says to himself, and to his relationship with the audience. Iago admits of his suspicions about Othello and Emilia, "I know not if't be true, / But I for mere suspicion in that kind / Will do as if for surety" (1.3.387-89), marking a clear distinction between what he believes and what he does. Approaching Iago as a cynic, I will argue, profoundly shapes our understanding of the racial dynamics of the play by suggesting that characters engage in a kind of ethical multiplicity since they do not necessarily have to believe in claims of Othello's inferiority and wickedness in order to enact them. In truth, the play presents cynical indifference to the truth as more malignant than genuine ideological belief, not only because it carries out the same actions, but also because cynics prove adept at manipulating the beliefs and actions of others.

**James Kearney (University of California, Santa Barbara)  
Ethical Reason and Unknowability: Some Notes on Pythagorean Metempsychosis,  
Bounded Rationality, and Necessary Cats**

In the space of about a hundred lines in *The Merchant of Venice's* trial scene, we get two of the more surprising speeches in Shakespeare. The first is Shylock's response to the Duke's questioning of the motivation for this "strange apparent cruelty." Shylock's fascinating reply performs his disinclination to answer the Duke on his terms: "You'll ask me why I rather choose to have / A weight of carrion flesh than to receive / Three thousand ducats. I'll not answer that, / But, say, it is my humour. Is it answered?" Shylock then offers examples of peculiar humors governing affect and action: "Some men there are love not a gaping pig, / Some that are mad if they behold a cat, / And others when the bagpipe sings i'th'nose / Cannot contain their urine . . . Are you answered?" This strange non-answer produces Shylock – and, indeed, everyone – as unknowable. Who can presume to know why some love not a gaping pig or a necessary cat, why the sound of a bagpipe makes some incontinent? In the same scene and not long after this exchange, Gratiano avers that Shylock's actions "almost"

make him waver in his faith as he is tempted to “hold opinion with Pythagoras” that metempsychosis is real and that the “souls of animals infuse themselves / Into the trunks of men.” Both of these moments speak to the epistemological problem of other minds (or souls), and both speak to the complexities of ethical reason and moral agency. In this paper, my hope is that I can read the two speeches in relation to each other in order to reflect on some of the ways that the trial scene prods and pokes at our ethical intuitions. In the spirit of the seminar, I’ll begin with Pythagorean metempsychosis and why it might be useful to think with in the early modern world and on the early modern stage.

**Jonathan Sircy (Southern Wesleyan University)**  
**William Elton’s *King Lear and the Gods at Sixty***

For sixty years, critics have treated William Elton’s *King Lear and the Gods* as settling a question: is the play ultimately Christian or pagan? Yet this framing obscures what made Elton’s 1966 study valuable. His recovery of Renaissance skepticism, Stoic philosophy, and “atheistic” naturalism demonstrated that Shakespeare engaged multiple, competing frameworks for understanding divine justice, not that he endorsed one over the others.

Subsequent critics have refined Elton’s character taxonomy, asking whether characters embody theological positions or enact their human equivalents. But character remains the primary interpretive focus. This paper proposes a redirection: rather than asking which character’s theology the play validates, we should attend to what the play does to audiences confronting its theological cacophony. Elton’s own analysis of the play’s “sequential ironies,” the relentless undercutting of every gesture toward divine justice, points toward this reframing. The four attitudes he identifies matter less as positions to be ranked than as symptoms of a world where all such positions prove inadequate.

The play thus dramatizes ethical and religious plurality as an irreducible condition. In Act 4 alone, six characters articulate six incompatible visions of the divine-human relationship, each rendered with equal poetic force, each equally insufficient. Kent’s rebuke that Lear “swear’st thy gods in vain” extends to critics who ask which character speaks for Shakespeare rather than attending to the visceral confusion the play creates.

**Richard Strier (University of Chicago)**  
**The Henry IV plays and Ethical Pluralism**

My argument is that the *Henry 4* plays are in fact *about* ethical pluralism. *H4* Part 1 makes this especially clear. It presents three realms, each of which is seen as having potential ethical value, and -- this is, I think, the key point -- it asks us to recognize the ethical value of each. Shakespeare signals this to us in the construction of *1H4*. There is no other play in the canon that has three different characters with parts over 500 lines long. Falstaff, Hotspur, and Hal have parts of almost equal length. Each must be seen as representing a particular realm of value -- not, as in the most widespread reading of the play, two of them (Hotspur and Falstaff) representing realms of disvalue. The reading of the play that would arrange the three on a single scale -- that of courage -- misses the richness of the play’s ethical thinking, and reduces that thinking to the most ordinary commonplace about the desirability of moderation or a “middle” position (a view wrongly taken to correspond to Aristotle’s conception of the mean). Rather, I will argue that Hotspur represents the

world of medieval and classical heroic value, a world in which the adventures of Lancelot (or Hector) resonate. Falstaff is seen as representing the world of what the Elizabethans would have called "good fellowship" -- a community constituted by shared affection and pleasure. I will present Hal, in Part 1, as a kind of ethical connoisseur, one who can see the value of both other worlds, but whose relation to them is governed by a general pragmatism that does not have an ethical core. *2H4* will be seen as a play in which one of the realms of value presented in Part 1 is missing, that of the heroic. This means that if the pragmatist is not going to embrace the world of festivity he has nothing but his pragmatism to embrace. What also follows is that the audience is left in a much more uncomfortable position than in relation to Part 1. Suddenly instead of being allowed happy appreciation, the reader is forced to confront the incompatibility of the remaining ethical values, a recognition that Part 1 postpones.