

## SEM1. Shakespeare and the re-invention of the human

13 September h. 8:30-11:00, PN 16

### Convenors

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### Abstract

In his provocative *Shakespeare and the invention of the human*, Harold Bloom controversially posits that Shakespeare is the true inventor of the human. More radically, we ask: Is the concept of 'the human' still a valid category in Shakespeare studies? Can the idea of the human—along with its various denials, approximations, extensions, and inversions—be re-invented by considering the dual meanings of 'inventing', both as creating anew and as discovering? How does the human intersect with vaguer, more indistinct concepts, and how is this (re)discovery portrayed in Shakespeare's works? We encourage contributions that examine how Shakespeare's texts challenge or reinforce early modern notions of humanity, explore the relationships between humans, nature, and other beings—such as monsters and aberrations—and investigate how his writings shape the conception of the human. Additionally, we welcome discussions on the contemporary relevance of Shakespeare's portrayal of humanity, considering how these early modern perspectives can inform modern debates about identity, agency, and the environment.

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## SEM1. Papers

13 September h. 8:30-11:00, PN 16

- *Stuck in between: Paradox as Shakespearean expression of liminal humanity* (Beatrice Righetti, Università di Verona)
- *Human troubles: Rethinking social conflict and monstrosity in Shakespeare's Plays* (Carmen Gallo, Sapienza Università di Roma)
- *"I have suffered with those that I saw suffer". Compassion and the early modern discourse of vision in The Tempest* (Alessandra Squeo, Università degli Studi di Bari)
- *Shakespeare as Pananthropos: Serbian perspectives on playwright's humanity (1864/1916)* (Petra Bjelica, Università di Verona)

## SEM1. Abstracts

### Shakespeare as *Pananthropos*: Serbian perspectives on playwright's humanity (1864/1916)

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This proposal deals with two Serbian interventions in global celebrations of Shakespeare which declare the playwright an epitome of perfect humanity. The Romantic poet, playwright and first translator of Shakespeare to Serbian, Laza Kostić, in his ode *On Shakespeare's Tercentenary* (1864), framed Shakespeare as God's creation of a perfect human that "in one being, in one life ... unite[s] all the beauty of all beings" (Bečanović-Nikolić, 2018: 179). During the First World War,



Saint Nikolay Velimirović, an Orthodox Bishop who was the first ever Orthodox priest to preach at St. Paul's Cathedral, elevated Shakespeare to *Pananthropos* in his contribution to *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare* (1916).

While these claims do not seem to add particularly original thoughts on Shakespeare's humanity and resonate greatly with Romantic Bardolatry, their significance may lie in their historical, cultural and possibly theological specificities. As Bečanović-Nikolić convincingly demonstrates, through an imaginary dialogue with Shakespeare, Kostić articulates the 'subaltern' position of Serbian identity, between Anglophone and German cultures, inviting "him to become one of the Serbs (ll.136–138)" (Bečanović-Nikolić, 2018: 144). Bishop Nikolai Velimirović's perspective places the playwright's humanity within Orthodox anthropology and patristic theology.

This proposal interrogates whether a local (Serbian/Orthodox) understanding of 'human' may contest or reinforce concepts of humanity in Shakespeare's works? By situating these interventions within broader discourses about Shakespearean concept of 'human', the analysis aims to illuminate whether the interplay between a specific Serbian subalternity and Orthodox ideals on personhood offers new insights.

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## Human troubles: Rethinking social conflict and monstrosity in Shakespeare's plays

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This paper explores the rhetorical construction of monstrosity in Shakespeare's plays as a means of interrogating the dynamics of social conflict. In early modern culture, monstrosity often serves to stigmatize those who deviate from prevailing norms—whether gendered, racial, or social. Shakespeare's dramatic corpus abounds with characters who threaten the foundations of societal order—such as Romeo, Othello, Desdemona, and Caliban—figures frequently described in animalistic or hybrid terms, through a grotesque lexicon that renders them simultaneously threatening and other.

The paper argues that Shakespeare does not simply reproduce these cultural scripts but critically stages them, exposing the ideological mechanisms by which monstrosity is constructed and deployed to regulate difference. Particular attention is paid to representations of gender and class transgression, as well as corporeal ambiguity—forms of deviation often framed as monstrous in ways that reveal broader anxieties about the instability of social hierarchies. Through close textual analysis, the study examines how monstrosity functions as a strategy of containment, delegitimizing dissent while paradoxically foregrounding the constructedness of the human.

Ultimately, the paper contends that Shakespeare's plays articulate a vision of humanity frequently at odds with normative ideals. By foregrounding the theatrical and metaphorical operations of monstrosity, Shakespeare exposes the fragility of the boundaries that define the human subject and the violence entailed in efforts to enforce them. In doing so, his work contributes to a broader understanding of literature's capacity to both reflect and critique the social imaginary of its time

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## Stuck in between: Paradox as Shakespearean expression of liminal humanity

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In *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Robert Burton identifies jealousy as more than a destabilising emotion: it is emblematic of human folly and a metonym for the human condition. Building on this premise and in dialogue with Harold Bloom's assertion that Shakespeare "invented" the human, this paper explores how Shakespeare dramatises jealousy as a force that unsettles fixed notions of identity and humanity. Rather than merely disrupting emotional balance, jealousy triggers an ontological rupture that casts both lover and beloved into a liminal space—neither fully human nor inhuman. The beloved becomes at once familiar and alien, idealised and reviled ("most foul, most fair," *Much Ado*, 4.1.100). Simultaneously, the jealous subject undergoes a process of self-estrangement, sometimes through the eyes of others ("my lord is not my lord," *Othello*, 3.4.125), and at other times through their own disoriented self-perception ("that's he that was Othello? here I am," *Othello*, 5.2.280).

This state of in-betweenness is expressed in Shakespeare's plays through paradox—a rhetorical strategy that reflects the ontological contradictions inherent in jealous perception. By staging logical impasses, paradox opens up a transitional space in which the very definition of "the human" is thrown into crisis ("most foul, most fair," *Much Ado*, 4.1.100). This paper examines how such liminal identities are constructed differently across gender lines by focusing on two character clusters: Hermia (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), Cleopatra (*Antony and Cleopatra*), and Adriana (*The Comedy of Errors*); and Claudio (*Much Ado About Nothing*), Othello and Iago (*Othello*), and Leontes (*The Winter's Tale*). Drawing on early modern medical theory and gender studies, it argues that jealousy, as imagined by Shakespeare, becomes a site of ontological experimentation—offering not only a psychological portrait of emotional extremity, but also a philosophical inquiry into the limits and contradictions of what it means to be human.

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## "I have suffered with those that I saw suffer". Compassion and the early modern discourse of vision in *The Tempest*.

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*The Tempest* is imbued with the language of compassion, reflecting early modern thought in which, shaped by both classical and Christian ethical frameworks, emotions were regarded as "positive forces within the soul, that provided stimulus to virtuous action, as long as they were channelled, restrained, and controlled" (Whittington 2014: 98-9). Miranda's empathetic response to the shipwreck in the opening lines exemplifies the Aristotelian notion of catharsis, with a 'mirroring' of emotion conveyed through the parallelism in her phrasing "I have suffered"/ "I saw suffer" (Cavell 1976; James 2001; Whittington 2014).

Even more significantly, Miranda's response introduces, from the very beginning, a crucial link between compassion and vision, connecting emotional responsiveness to the act of seeing – a central motif throughout *The Tempest*, culminating in Prospero's final gesture of forgiveness when, prompted by Ariel's appeal, he is moved to *see* and feel the suffering of his enemies with unexpected tenderness. "If you now *beheld* them, your affection would become tender," Ariel gently urges, "Mine would, sir, were I human". This decisive shift metaphorically leads Prospero away from the omniscient, 'absolute' vision of the magician – *ab-solutus* literally meaning detached from relational ties and the contingencies of embodied identity – and toward a 'human' gaze: one imbued with the limitations and inherent imperfection of situated perspectives. It is this gaze that renders him 'humane': grounded in a renewed mode of vision that recognizes vulnerability, invites ethical response, and reflects a redemptive form of insight.

Focusing on these issues, this paper explores the intersection of compassion and early modern discourses on vision in *The Tempest*, a play that interrogates the status of the visible and the complexities of human perception by staging a



multiplication of perspectives – both thematically and structurally – within a multifaceted cultural context, in which the reliability of human vision was increasingly questioned, due to new developments in medicine, optics, philosophy, and technology (Hakewill 1608; Peirce 1986; Clark 2007; Massey 2007; Hendrix 2012; Del Sapio 2016). As the concluding section of this paper will argue, early modern perspectives on vision continue to inform contemporary debates on the re-invention of the human in significant ways. In particular, they gain renewed relevance within the field of the Positive Humanities (Pawelski 2022; Tay-Pawelski 2022) and, more specifically, within the Health and Medical Humanities, where the act of seeing – understood as a relational, interpretive, and compassionate engagement – is increasingly regarded as central to the practice of care (Scardicchio 2019; Bleakley 2020). The paper will illustrate these intersections by presenting preliminary findings from an ongoing research project at the University of Bari, which employs *The Tempest* as both a pedagogical and interpretive tool for exploring how emotions are expressed, perceived, and understood within healthcare settings.

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