

Shakespeare and Goethe. Anthropological Juxtapositions within European Modernity.

A Conference held at the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation in Munich, Germany

on **March 16 and 17 2026**

hosted by Prof. Dr. David Wellbery and Prof. Dr. Claudia Olk

Why Shakespeare and Goethe? We consider it uncontroversial that Shakespeare and Goethe are universally considered among the canonical authors of the post-medieval (“modern”) Anglo-European world. Indeed, there is broad consensus that they together constitute the supreme subset within this group. Rank alone, however, did not motivate their selection as the twin foci of this project. What interests us is the transnational reach of their influence. In the young United States, they were early on canonized by authorities such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Torrey Harris, but their works are likewise revered across continents. Societies for the study and dissemination of their respective works exist in several Asian and South American countries. In China, for example, scholars have recently completed a Chinese translation of the 143-volume Weimar edition (*Sophienausgabe*) of Goethe’s works (including diaries, correspondence, and scientific writings). It is well known that Shakespeare is performed (and transformed) practically wherever theatre has an institutional anchorage and cultural significance. This quite unique combination of a) unquestioned canonical status within the European and Anglo-American cultural spheres and b) nearly worldwide resonance makes Shakespeare and Goethe ideal objects for the development and testing of a mode of inquiry keyed to transnational and trans-epochal comparisons.

This two-day will bring together German, British, and North American scholars whose research includes substantial work on Shakespeare and Goethe (or both). The conference seeks to develop a comparative study of Shakespeare and Goethe with a view to the anthropological significance of their work. We note in passing that this comparative study will be the first of its kind and as such can stand alone as a contribution to literary scholarship. Although individual papers will often focus on single works by just one of the authors, we will pair the presentations in such a way as to generate discussions that highlight comparisons. We anticipate that formal and generic differences between the two writers’ *oeuvres* will likewise work to our advantage. For example, when viewed with regard to dramatic conventions, *Hamlet* and *Faust* appear as incommensurate, but each play has unquestionably limned a paradigmatic figuration of human possibility. Equally paradigmatic, but in this case bridging the deep difference between narrative and drama, are the articulations of “tragic love” in *Romeo and Juliet*, on the one hand, and *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, on the other. Sociological differences between the worlds evoked by the two authors (e.g., stratificational differentiation in Shakespeare vs. emergent functional differentiation in Goethe) will be noted, but our primary task will be to consider the different horizons of meaning constituted within those social forms. Special emphasis will be placed on the cross-cultural and cross-national borrowings of each author, e.g., their very different relations to Greek and Roman antiquity, their engagements with popular (often oral) strata of cultural circulation, their interest in non-European worlds (as in Goethe’s engagement with the Muslim world in *West-östlicher Divan*). We invite 40-minute papers from this immense range of possible topics, relating to interpretations of self (subjecthood, agency, and world to ensure thematic continuity.