

Review of Dr. Chris Swift's "Dreams of a Shadow: The Elusive History of Medieval Puppetry" resented in on April 28, 2026

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Professor Christopher Swift presented his book project *Dreams of a Shadow: The Elusive History of Medieval Puppetry* at the Humanities Department Works in the Works on April 28, 2026. While finalizing set up and inviting virtual viewers into the program, Swift offered up a question to his audience: Presented with an image, he asked "How do you think this machine works?". This simple question opened the matter of his topic as the audience conjectured about the different mechanisms in the ancient item. He pointed to parts of the image and explained how the mechanism likely functioned through connectors, springs, and pullies, much of which is not visible in the photo. In opening this question and image, Swift built into the topic of his work by providing some cursory background into the technology of toys, automatons, and other mechanisms and tools for entertainment running through Islamic libraries and histories. When thinking about medieval history, Swift argues, there must be a concerted effort to expand geography beyond medieval Europe and into the Mediterranean world, Africa, and further East. This project is part of a larger push to move away from Eurocentrism in theater history.

As Swift moved into the bulk of his presentation, he began with an overview of the difficulty of analyzing theater history in medieval history, especially outside of European empires. Showing an image of an ancient puppet, he explained that there is only visual evidence of puppetry in this period with scattered references of performance in texts. However, there are no visuals of these puppets and mechanisms in action, but rather only as ancient artifacts themselves. In order to analyze these objects in the history of theater during this period, he argued, we must expand our understanding of what a puppet is as an object, and into a figure that moves and "performs" in this period. This definition, therefore, expands beyond the stereotypical sock puppet or marionet an incorporates ritual objects that tell a story. In order to demonstrate this concept, Swift provided images of two artifacts: 1) an opening Virgin Mary and 2) Christ of Burgos. The Virgin Mary opens to reveal the story of Christ's life told inside of her body providing the story and articulating the performance for the audience or owner. The Christ of Burgos is a Christ figure on a crucifix that can be removed from the cross as part of a celebration for holy week. This artifact was used by people playing other characters from the Bible as they were theatrically carried Christ and buried him in the tomb. Both of these objects provide a basis for the performance of Christian narrative to on-lookers and demonstrate broader trends in theatrical puppetry and performance entertainment of the Renaissance.

From there, Swift continued on to explain his efforts to expand medieval period studies outside of Europe by looking at the exchange that was occurring throughout the then Iberian Peninsula. During the 13th and 14th centuries in the mediterranean basin, Islamic and Christian empires engaged in cultural exchange, as many cities were home to Jewish, Islamic, and Christian communities, regardless of the then ruler of the area. These communities lived together, in "Convivencia" through the conflict, violence, oppression, and persecution each religious group faced at various times and locations. Swift's book plays with the revisionist idea of this interaction between cultures and explores the conflictual nature of these cultural forces in Seville through the analysis of puppets and mechanical performance artifacts.

In this analysis, Swift identified Le Virgen de los Reyes, a mechanical doll of the Virgin Mary that has a mechanism that allows it to operate its head automatically. This doll now sits in

the cathedral Seville with its moving parts nailed down. Swift explained that the mechanisms in this doll are reflective of Arabic technology used both during and prior to the period of this doll. The doll was part of the court of Alfonso the 10th who was interested in massive translation projects spanning Latin to Castilian, Hebrew to Castilian, Arabic to Castilian, etc., and Alfonso as a rule was known for his investment in projects of knowledge construction that required an exchange of technology as well as language.

From here Swift moved his audience toward the Abbasid empire, describing a strong empire flourishing under a more tolerant Islamic administration. By looking at relationships between 3 ancient manuscripts from this era, he demonstrates the links of puppetry and mechanical performance across *Maqamat of Al-Hariri*, *The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical devices* by Al-Jazari, and Three Shadow plays of Ibn Daniyal (or the *Ibn Daniyal Trilogy*). From these texts, Swift demonstrated the significance of shadows and light in Islam and how these concepts are represented through Shadow puppetry, or Khayal al-zill (shadow of a shadow). Showing images of leather shadow puppets from a collection of Arabic texts and images collected in the early 20th century by Paul Kahle, Swift described how this leather puppet shares defining feature wo other images of ships in the manuscripts listed above.

In his analysis of the three historical texts, Swift identifies different repeated patterns in both imagery and narrative stylings of the performative works. Daniyal's shadow-playwrighting focuses on bawdy and low-status characters that provide evidence of these shadow plays as a popular entertainment tradition that likely crossed into court settings. The episodic nature of Daniyal's plays allows meaning and narrative to emerge as audience connect a series of discrete scenes, rather than the performances themselves following a single continuous plotline. Swift provided the audience with an image of another shadow puppet in the form of a boat that fits within the broader tradition of shadow puppetry associated with Daniyal. The episodic story telling is likewise emblematic of the *Maqamat of Al-Hariri* as it follows the character of Abu Zayd through a sequence of encounters as Zayd plays the figure of trickster attempting to swindle listeners out of money by adopting different roles. Pointing to an image illustrated in the text, Swift argued that the blank background and strict profile views evoke figures presented like puppets in from of the screen. The stick-figure style and the illustrations' exaggerated forward-leaning postures serve as visual cues that suggest puppet-like movement rather than naturalistic gestures. These same images are often depicted in circular movements and shared directions of the illustrated figures as they were likely used in a spinning devise that allowed the characters to appear and disappear through sequential revelation. Furthermore, *Maqamat* offers a similar boat motif to the shadow puppets of Daniyal. The shadow puppets of Daniyal and the images from the *Maqamat* include similar markers including a high-status passenger under a covered pavilion, a driver or captain and, often times, a figure bailing water from the boat. Swift posited that these boats may have circulated between puppet theater and oral narrative, pointing to overlapping story traditions and performance practices including in outdoor public marketplaces. Lastly bringing his analysis to *The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devises*, Swift highlighted another boat mechanism, this time as a water-powered automaton. Although few physical objects survive, Swift explained that Al-Jaziri's descriptions are detailed enough that they imply that these puppetry machines were built and used in storytelling performances, similar to the boat images and puppets presented in the prior works. Bringing all of these texts together, Swift returned to the court of Alfonso, referencing an Alfonsine manuscript that discusses astronomy and clock mechanisms before mechanical clocks were widely built. This connection of the theory of mechanical devises and clock constructions suggest that Alfonso

drew on Islamic knowledge to develop clock-like mechanisms and machines for courtly entertainment. Through these examples and images, Swift draws the links across these objects to construct a broader history of medieval puppetry and mechanical performance.

Lastly, Swift brought these concepts into action through “research by performance” in order to try and see how they would work. Swift described how in prior semesters he worked with students to build some of these puppets and subsequently construct performances. Playing a clip from one of his class’s shadow puppet performance “Monster and the River”, Swift and his students brought to life the images and puppets of Islamic history.
