

Shakespeare in Law:

The Bard as a Critical Legal Scholar

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Expos 20.249: Why Shakespeare?

Professor Jeffrey R. Wilson

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In the United States of America, courts on the state and federal level have cited an English playwright by the name of William Shakespeare over eight hundred times.¹ He lived centuries before the United States was created, had no knowledge of American law, and certainly did not have the judicial branch of the United States government in mind when creating his legendary works. Yet despite this multigenerational gap, Shakespeare's works have appeared more than any other author, living or dead, within the various briefs, opinions, and documents of the American justice system. Why is Shakespeare so popular in law? What does Shakespeare provide to the legal realm that compels jurists to conjure up his name and words in the first place?

Orientation

Question/Problem

In order to answer these questions, I first explore the multidisciplinary movement that includes both Shakespeare and law: the law-and-literature movement, which identifies the common themes present in both literature and law, such as textuality, narrativity, discourse, and interpretation.² In Bradin Cormack, Martha C. Nussbaum, and Richard Strier's compendium of essays about the relationship between Shakespeare and law, *Shakespeare and the Law: A Conversation among Disciplines and Professions*, they identify four subdivisions of the movement: interdisciplinary consideration, qualitative supplementation, cultural insight, and critical legal studies. Political philosopher Daniel Brudney and economist Richard A. Posner contribute to the subcategory of interdisciplinary consideration by comparing literature's contribution to law with "influences from economics, philosophy, psychology, history, and sociology."³ Judge Diane P. Wood and ethical philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum posit that

Crit. Lit. (i.e. lit review)

¹ Robert Peterson, "The Bard and the Bench: An Opinion and Brief Writer's Guide to Shakespeare," in *Santa Clara Law Review* 39, no. 789 (Santa Clara, CA: Santa Clara Law School, 1999), 791, doi: <http://digitalcommons.law.scu.edu/facpubs/119>.

² Richard Weisberg, "Literature and Law" in *The Oxford Companion to American Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³ Bradin Cormack, Martha C. Nussbaum, and Richard Strier, *Shakespeare and the Law: A Conversation among Disciplines and Professions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 5.

First citation of this book.

literature provides a qualitative approach to legal analysis that is ordinarily dominated by quantitative measures.⁴ In the field of cultural insight, Renaissance scholar Lorna Hutson sees literature as a lens to view legal cultures of the past and examine the legal culture of today.⁵ However, by Cormack, Nussbaum, and Strier's own admission, "the critical legal studies movement... is not represented, except indirectly, in the present collection" (5). The other three subdivisions certainly outline the benefits of incorporating works of literature into legal analysis, but fail to explain why Shakespeare, above all, is most popular in legal works in the first place.

I contend that Shakespeare's works—especially comedies like *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*—represent the shortcomings of legal objectivism and formalism within judicial proceedings in the spirit of critical legal studies. The critical legal studies movement, while relatively young, is, at its core, an identification of the imperfections of the human components of the legal system, and aligns with Shakespeare's many portrayals of the flawed legal process. Those who cite Shakespeare in legal briefs, in many instances, rely on the Bard's finessed language and storylines to articulate how the flaws of the judicial system originate from the flaws of the men and women who comprise it, and are in turn exhibiting the principles of the critical legal studies movement. In this sense, Shakespeare and critical legal scholars present the dichotomy between legal idealism and legal application, which extends to the mediation between the sensibility of common law and the structure of statutory law.

I. The History and Aim of the Critical Legal Studies Movement

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⁴ Diane P. Wood, "A Lesson from Shakespeare to the Modern Judge on Law, Disobedience, Justification, and Mercy" in *Shakespeare and the Law*, 13; Martha C. Nussbaum, "Romans, Countrymen, and Lovers" in *Shakespeare and the Law*, 1.

⁵ Lorna Hutson, "Lively Evidence" in *Shakespeare and the Law*, 15.

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↑ BOOK
CHAPTERS

In order to sufficiently connect Shakespeare with the field of critical legal studies, the history and definition of critical legal studies must first be examined. The critical legal studies movement officially emerged in a University of Wisconsin-Madison conference in 1977 held by a group of legal professors and legal sociologists, many of whom were educated in law during the sixties and seventies.⁶ Their common experiences of a tumultuous time in American history allowed them to share “an abiding distrust of institutional authority (born of the Vietnam War); a rejection of orthodox forms of legal scholarship (which were viewed as intellectually sterile); and a certain countercultural sensibility (reflecting the values of the 1960s).”⁷ The future critical legal scholars were disillusioned by the past actions of the American institutions of law and government, and thus were inspired to confer and revisualize the institution of law. This goal is manifested in the maxim of the movement as outlined by the *Wex Legal Dictionary*: “Law is politics.” This pithy statement conveys that the application of law is enveloped by political factors that relate to the overarching social hierarchy that laws are ultimately responsible for upholding. In turn, branches of critical legal studies, such as feminist legal theory and critical race theory, emerged out of the original movement’s observation of modern law’s maintenance of the status quo.⁸ As such, the critical legal studies movement looks to adjust the legal system to better serve the people whose complex and diverse issues cannot be addressed by the traditional legal reasoning tarnished by a social hierarchy.

To prove the law’s inclination toward preserving social norms, the critical studies movement asserts that legal analysis fails to uphold formalism and objectivism, and is therefore subject to the political and social forces that systematize legal reasoning. Formalism, in this

⁶ “Critical Legal Theory,” in *Wex Legal Dictionary* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Law School, 1992).

⁷ Pierre Schlag, “Critical Legal Studies,” in *The Oxford International Encyclopedia of Legal History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁸ “Critical Legal Theory,” in *Wex Legal Dictionary*.

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context, refers to the apolitical and impersonal nature of legal analysis, while objectivism presumes that the legal infrastructure holds no bias towards one individual over the other. Roberto Mangabeira Unger, one of the cofounders of the critical legal studies movement, dismantles both of these assumptions through the concept of indeterminacy. Legal indeterminacy, according to Unger, is the failure “to present a single, unequivocal version of democracy and the market.”⁹ Unger proposes that because multiple conclusions, valid in their own right, can be derived from the same laws, judges who face such indeterminacy must rely on other branches of inquiry—such as moral, political, and social patterns—to reach a single, “correct” decision, thus deconstructing the ideal of formalism.

Subsequently, critical legal scholars suggest that these patterns reflect the power structure that dominates race, gender, and income disparities in the United States. This can be seen empirically in the racial statistics of the death penalty, compiled in the state of Georgia by social scientist and legal professor David C. Baldus. His statistics revealed that defendants charged with killing a White person were ten times more likely to receive the death penalty than those charged with killing a Black person, and that courts most often imposed the death penalty in cases with Black defendants and White victims (at a rate of 22%), and least likely imposed the death penalty in cases with Black defendants and victims (at a rate of 1%).¹⁰ The inherent indeterminacy involved with the death penalty—quite literally a life-or-death situation—correlates with the presence of racial bias in Georgian death penalty cases. Baldus’s study in the

⁹ Roberto M. Unger, *The Critical Legal Studies Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 8. ← BOOK
Although he was unable to attend the conference that birthed the critical legal studies movement, Unger was one of the most influential critical legal scholars and wrote the most critical legal literature, providing both insight and context to the movement through his works.

¹⁰ David C. Baldus, Charles Pulaski, and George Woodworth, “Comparative Review of Death Sentences: An Empirical Study of the Georgia Experience” in *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 74.3 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1983). Baldus, Pulaski, and Woodworth analyzed a total of 724 cases in Georgia that involved the death penalty in order to arrive to their statistical analysis of racial disparity in capital punishment.

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indeterminate area of capital punishment proves how the theory of objectivism is ideal, but unrealistic, and ultimately perpetuates the stereotypical norms of society, as Unger suggests. The critical legal studies movement heavily criticizes formalism and objectivism, and posits that these concepts pave the way to social and political manipulation.

II. Shakespeare's Criticisms of the Law

The critiques of formalism and objectivism are manifested in Shakespeare's characters of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* and Vincentio in *Measure for Measure*, respectively, and underscore the relationship between Shakespeare and the critical legal studies movement. In *Measure for Measure*, Vincentio, the Duke of Vienna, leaves a strict judge named Angelo in charge of the Viennese government while Vincentio goes on a diplomatic mission. When a man named Claudio impregnates his fiancée before marriage (committing the crime of fornication), Angelo sentences Claudio to death, leading Claudio's sister, Isabella, to plead for mercy. At first, Angelo remains resolutely objective and refuses, stating that before his rise to power, "The law hath not been dead, though it hath slept"¹¹ Angelo's solution to the legal indeterminacy defined by Unger is to mercilessly enforce the law, which is personified as a sleeping, living entity. Shakespeare's personification of the law as sleeping or awakening according to political or judicial leadership lays the foundation for his criticism of its application: the law is equally as human and corruptible as we are, connecting back to the "Law is politics" aphorism of the critical legal studies movement. Shakespeare's criticism of the law blossoms in Isabella's response to Angelo: "O, it is excellent / To have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous / To use it like a giant" (2.2.135-37). Shakespeare, like Unger and his fellow critical legal scholars, notes through Isabella that the magnitude of authority afforded to legal officials like Angelo is subject

¹¹ William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1993), 2.2.117

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to abuse, corruption, and prejudice. Even before any malfeasance has taken place, Angelo and Isabella's exchange lays the groundwork for Shakespeare's critical legal perspective in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Isabella's omen proves true once Angelo's true intentions are revealed, but it is Vincentio who assumes the role of the "tyrannous giant" in his lack of objectivism. Angelo's legal eminence is tarnished by his lust for Isabella, to whom he promises to free Claudio if she has sex with him. Shakespeare then reveals that Vincentio has been in Vienna the entire time disguised as a friar, and he performs the "bed trick," where Mariana, Angelo's ex-fiancé, takes Isabella's place and has sex with Angelo, making him also guilty of fornication and allowing Vincentio to sentence Angelo to death:

Then, Angelo, thy fault's thus manifested;

Which, though thou wouldst deny, denies thee vantage.

We do condemn thee to the very block

Where Claudio stoop'd to death, and with like haste. (5.1.469-74)

Vincentio's treatment of Angelo is satisfyingly vindictive, yet it is anything but objective. Not only does Vincentio allow Claudio to live and Angelo to die for the same crime, but Vincentio orchestrates what is dubbed by Jeff Carr as the "rape of Angelo," since Angelo never consents to sex with Mariana.¹² If Angelo is guilty of sexual misconduct, at most, and deserves death, should not Vincentio deserve worse under the same laws if he arranged rape? Vincentio's disposal of objectivism in his decision to plot the rape of Angelo and condemn him to death embodies the critical legal studies movement's critique of objectivism, and connects Shakespeare with the critical legal perspective of Unger and his colleagues.

¹² Jeff Carr, "Harassment, exploitation, and rape: Sexual offences in *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*" in *MP: An Online Feminist Journal* 3(5), 77.

Likewise, *The Merchant of Venice*, specifically in the character of Portia, exemplifies the critique of formalism put forth by the critical legal studies movement. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio, the titular Venetian merchant, owes a sum of money to the Jewish moneylender Shylock, who demands that if Antonio cannot pay back the loan, then Shylock may cut off a pound of flesh from Antonio. The case between Antonio and Shylock demonstrates the indeterminacy discussed by critical legal scholars, for although Antonio admits to owing the debt, the cruel and unusual nature of Antonio's punishment leads to Portia's address of mercy to Shylock. However, it is when Shylock refuses to be merciful that Portia returns the favor and uses Shylock's lower status as a Jew to achieve her desired outcome. Portia warns that Shylock is only allowed to collect flesh, not blood, and that if he spills "one drop of Christian blood," (4.1.323) his lands and goods would become property of the state. Portia goes even further and states that as a Jew and therefore an alien, Shylock's attempt to kill Antonio allows for both his property and his life to be seized, which Antonio uses as leverage to make Shylock convert to Christianity (4.1.396-406). The religious circumstances surrounding Portia's litigation have now devolved into a representation of the anti-Semitism present in Venetian society, evidenced by the sixty times that Shylock is referred to as a Jew, including "the villain Jew," "the dog Jew," and "this currish Jew" (2.8.4, 2.8.14, 4.1.304). Not only does Portia take advantage of this anti-Semitic sentiment, but even Antonio, the defendant, extracts power from this social hierarchy to make Shylock convert to Christianity. Portia's legal argument embraces the anti-Semitism present in her society, exemplifying the deterioration of formalism that the critical legal studies movement describes.

III. Shakespearean Legal Critique in U.S. Courts

Shakespeare's critique of the law, in step with the critical legal studies movement, is used by various court officials to substantiate their arguments against the human malfunctions of the justice system, exhibited in the errors of judges, juries, and witnesses. In the case of *Lewis v. Robertson & Sons, Inc.*, the Court of Appeals of California reversed the decision of the lower court due to the prejudicial comments of the trial judge towards the jury. Judge Robert Feinerman cited Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* to transmit a warning to judges across the country: "The court seems to have let the passion of its convictions interfere with its duty to be scrupulously fair and to not invade the province of the jury as the exclusive trier of fact. Trial judges should heed Isabella's admonition in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, when she declares: 'O it is excellent to have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous to use it like a giant.'"¹³ As of December 11, 2016, searching *LexisNexis Academic* for "It is tyrannous to use it like a giant" shows that Isabella's same words are used on thirteen other occasions, all of which criticize the misused power of judges. Shakespeare's portrayal of Vincentio's extralegal activity in *Measure for Measure* is analogous to the various critiques of judges found in these citations, and shows Shakespeare's relevance for judges in both their brief-writing and their self-evaluation. The power that a judge possesses is ultimately susceptible to bias and preconceptions, leading to the disposal of objectivism and formalism. Because of this, judges, critical legal scholars, and Shakespeare all agree that the power afforded to judges can be misused to reflect their partiality, rather than exhibit the presupposed impartiality of the legal process.

Yet citations of Shakespeare not only include criticisms of judges, but of juries as well. Just as Shakespeare points out that one judge can misuse his or her power, court officials also

¹³ *Lewis v. Bill Robertson & Sons, Inc.*, 1984 Cal. App. LEXIS 2815 (December 13, 1984).

cite Shakespeare to reflect how jurors can similarly dispense with objectivism and formalism in their actions. The case of *Ford v. Amodt* showcases how the members of the jury are equally as susceptible to their own partiality and impropriety. In response to the jury foreman's actions of tampering with the verdict and examining items not entered as evidence when the case was first tried, the Supreme Court of Wisconsin reversed the initial verdict, with Justice Myron Gordon writing in his opinion that: "For all our reverence for the jury system, we must not be blind to the fact that a jury is but 12 human beings possessed of all the foibles and flaws of mortal men. Shakespeare touched on this in *Measure for Measure*: 'The jury, passing on the prisoner's life, / May in the sworn twelve have a thief or two / Guiltier than him they try.'"¹⁴ The power accorded to juries, as with judges, is unchecked and corruptible as soon as the jurors deliberate, due to each juror's preconceived notions and inherently subjective mindsets. This sentiment is reiterated in the case of *Labat v. Bennett*, where the racial discrimination of a jury is reversed by the Louisiana Court of Appeals. Judge John Wisdom states in the court opinion:

"The law hath not been dead, though it hath slept." (*Measure for Measure* 2.2.117)

"Death" for thirteen years has kept close tab on Edgar Labat and Clifton Poret. March 23, 1953, an all-white jury in the Criminal District Court for the Parish of Orleans, Louisiana, found Labat and Poret, the two Negro petitioners in this habeas corpus proceeding, guilty of the aggravated rape of a white woman. The jury brought in no recommendation of mercy; the defendants were sentenced to death by electrocution.¹⁵

The racial bias of the jury is acutely evident in their merciless condemnation of two Black men with little evidence of rape, and connects back to the findings of the Baldus study. Even the jury selection was found to have systematically excluded Black jurors, and demonstrates how

¹⁴ *Ford Motor Credit Company v. Amodt*, 1966 Wisc. LEXIS 1116 (January 4, 1966).

¹⁵ *Labat v. Bennett*, 1966 U.S. App. LEXIS 5175 (August 15, 1966).

objectivism and formalism were thrown away even before the jury deliberated. These two Shakespeare quotations are used in eight other instances (according to a *LexisNexis Academic* search for “the law hath not been dead” or “guiltier than him they try” conducted on December 11, 2016) to reflect a similar frustration with jury misconduct, and showcase how Shakespeare’s identification of human fallibility in law resonates with court officials in multiple ways.

The Shakespearean critical legal perspective taken by various jurists across the country extends not only to a juror’s perception of race, but also religion. In the case of *Fields v. Brown*, Stevie Lamar Fields, a death row inmate, appealed his sentencing on the basis that one juror’s wife was assaulted and robbed (the same crimes of which Fields was convicted), and that the jury consulted the Bible during their deliberation¹⁶. Although the majority did not find that these actions constituted jury misconduct, Judge Ronald M. Gould, in his dissent, uses Portia’s speech of mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* to suggest that the jury’s usage of Biblical excerpts that embraced the death penalty¹⁷ leads to an uncertainty about how merciful the jury would have been without the Bible present. Specifically, Judge Gould states, “As Shakespeare reminded us: ‘The quality of mercy is not strain’d, / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven / Upon the place beneath.’ So too, in our analysis of prejudice, we must remind ourselves that the possibility of mercy, like the possibility of gentle rain, is not predictable with certainty.”¹⁸ Judge Gould notes that without the insertion of the Bible into the deliberation of the jury, which was split five to four in favor of the death penalty, even one juror may have been swayed towards the mercy of life imprisonment, thus changing the verdict. Just as Portia describes mercy, like rain, to be

¹⁶ *Fields v. Brown*, 2007 U.S. App. LEXIS 21669 (Sept. 10, 2007).

¹⁷ Genesis 9:6, Exodus 21:12, Romans 13:1-5, Deuteronomy 21:18-21. Although these specific verses were consulted by the jurors who convicted Stevie Lamar Fields, the Bible gives a variety of positions for and against the death penalty, in both Old and New Testaments. See Matthew 5:38-39, James 4:12, and Ezekiel 18:32 for biblical passages opposing the death penalty.

¹⁸ *Fields v. Brown*, 2007.

spontaneous and impromptu, Judge Gould concludes that the majority's decision that the Bible did not influence the jurors enough to change their verdict is inherently speculative. If the Bible was opened to a page promoting mercy, or not opened at all, Fields may not have been placed on death row, according to Judge Gould. The influence of religion, among other deeply personal, preconceived beliefs, in juries exemplifies the critical legal studies movement's critique of legal formalism, and the nineteen other citations of Portia's "quality of mercy" speech¹⁹ suggest that both in mercy and in cruelty, juries are a susceptible mechanism in the judicial system, as critical legal scholars and Shakespearean jurists both suggest.

Even witness testimony, a mechanism of judicial proceedings that Shakespeare does not explicitly discuss, is criticized by court officials using Shakespearean works. In the case of *Grant v. Pendley*, Judge C.A. Leddy criticizes witness testimony concerning one's reputation, saying, "At best evidence is a mere matter of opinion, and in matters of opinion witnesses are apt to be influenced by prejudice or partisanship...The inherent weakness of this character of evidence is portrayed by William Shakespeare, wherein one of his characters is made to say of another: 'Even so may Angelo, / In all his dressings, characters, titles, forms, / Be an arch villain.'"²⁰ Judge Leddy identifies that a witness's regard for another's reputation is based solely on opinion, and thus removes objectivism and formalism from witness testimony. In turn, the degeneration of witness testimony from objective evidence into subjective opinion corrupts the findings of the judges and juries who rely on witness testimony to form a verdict. This frustration with the damaging effects of witness bias is echoed by Judge George MacKinnon in the case of *U.S. v. Lynch*, where he states that allowing the subjectivity of witnesses "because of personal

¹⁹ Peterson, "The Bard and the Bench."

²⁰ *Grant v. Pendley*, 1931 Tex. App. 2090 (June 10, 1931).

friendship or fear”²¹ to dominate legal proceedings is to “make a scarecrow of the law, / Setting it up to fear the birds of prey” (*Measure for Measure*, 2.1.1). Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* is again used to portray the degeneration of law’s authority due to human characteristics of subjectivity in witness testimony. Judges MacKinnon recognizes, along with the ten other brief writers who use the same words of Shakespeare (as discovered by a December 11, 2016 *LexisNexis Academic* search of “scarecrow of the law”), that the legal standards of objectivism and formalism clash with the subjectivity of witnesses. Thus, even components of law not explicitly mentioned by Shakespeare, like witness testimony, are critiqued using Shakespeare’s works to illustrate the futility of the legal standards of objectivism and formalism, as the critical legal studies movement suggests.

IV. Idealism and Realism Beyond Shakespeare

Of course, not all eight hundred Shakespearean citations in American law can be attributed to the essence of the critical legal studies movement. The other categories of the law-and-literature movement, including interdisciplinary consideration, qualitative supplementation, and cultural insight, bolster the popularity of literary authors, like Shakespeare, within legal briefs without legal criticism, along with Shakespeare’s established cultural authority and iconicity. However, jurists across the nation recognize the shortcomings of participants in the legal process to possess objectivism and formalism, which create inequitable outcomes related to race, social status, and other preconceived notions of society. Shakespeare distinctively and actively takes part in this same recognition through his various works, like *Measure for Measure* and *The Merchant of Venice*, and therefore resonates with legal analysts and is most cited in courts across the nation attempting to reconcile legal ideals with human imperfection.

²¹ United States v. Lynch, 163 U.S. App. D.C. 6 (May 7, 1974).

The conflict between legal idealism and human imperfection that Shakespeare exemplifies in his works opens up the broader topic of how laws are to be interpreted in the first place. Can common law sensibility, which relies on individualized precedent, remedy the inflexibility of statutory law, and rescue the modern-day Claudio from Angelo? Or would the previously discussed imperfections of applying law on a common-law basis result in inequity due to legal indeterminacy? Shakespeare, critical legal scholars, and Shakespearean jurists illustrate the drawbacks of each method of legal interpretation through their respective writings, and show how instead of employing one method or the other, a balance between the two must be struck to mitigate each other's faults. Ultimately, Shakespeare's expression of the tension between legality and humanity, common law and statutory law, and idealism and realism transcends his singular period of history and articulates the critiques of law that jurists across the country have today. This, in turn, enchants legal analysts across the country to resort to the Bard for his powerful demonstrations of law's interaction with society, and perpetuates the exhausting, yet revisionary struggle between us imperfect humans and our own legal idealism.

Shakespeare in Immersive Theater:

Atmosphere and Familiarity in *Sleep No More* and *The Donkey Show*

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Meredith Slifkin

Expos 20: Why Shakespeare?

Professor Jeffrey R. Wilson

May 10, 2016

Recent years have seen the rise of a new performance style, sometimes called “interactive” or “participatory” but generally referred to as “immersive” theater. Many if not most examples of this new type of theater are based on classic texts, and adaptations of the plays of William Shakespeare are particularly popular. Examples include dreamthinkspeak’s *Who Goes There?* and *The Rest is Silence* (both based on *Hamlet*), Mike Pearson and Mike Brooks’s *Coriolanus* (*Coriolanus*), Diane Paulus and Randy Weiner’s *The Donkey Show* (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), and Punchdrunk’s *The Tempest* (*The Tempest*), *The Firebird Ball* (*Romeo and Juliet*), and *Sleep No More* (*Macbeth*) (Purcell 129-35). Why is Shakespeare so popular in immersive theater? What is it about his plays that makes them particularly suited to this new medium?

Orientation

Question/Problem,

The term “immersive theater” covers a wide variety of shows, and thus is difficult to define. “Immersive” and “immersion” in general refer to “absorption in some condition, action, interest, etc.” (“Immersion”), and thus in terms of theater to absorption in the world of the production. In her book *Immersive Theatres*, Josephine Machon identifies three central features of all immersive productions: involvement of the audience, prioritization of the sensual world, and significance of space (70). In *Shakespeare and Audience in Practice*, Stephen Purcell expands on this, saying that “spectators are typically given a role which involves physical activity and an element of decision making” (132). In the simplest terms, “immersive theater” refers to productions in which the actors and audience share the same space (hence, the audience is “immersed” in the production), and thus the actor-audience relationship is fundamentally changed. Rather than being confined to a stage, actors move through the audience, in some cases interacting with audience members directly. Thus, audience members play an active role in the production, materializing into what Jacques Rancière has termed “emancipated spectators”:

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spectators “who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the ‘story’ and make it their own story” (22), no longer merely passively absorbing what they see.

Despite the style’s short history, several Shakespeare and drama scholars have considered the phenomenon of Shakespeare in immersive theater. Most of these critical pieces take the form of reviews of specific productions, often relying heavily on personal experience. As a result, they differ in their approaches and address different issues. For example, William Worthen, in his *Shakespeare Performance Studies*, focuses on how *Sleep No More* specifically uses the text of *Macbeth* to inform everything from plot to choreography to set, rejecting the criticism that Shakespeare is irrelevant to the show and arguing instead that “despite the absence of Shakespeare’s words, *Sleep No More* spatializes a familiar and fully ‘literary’ sense of character” (132). On the other end of the spectrum, in her piece “Pedestrian Shakespeare and Punchdrunk’s Immersive Theatre,” Colette Gordon argues that *Sleep No More* strips Shakespeare’s text of its argument and interest, saying the show is “just a haunted house party” (49). While both Worthen and Gordon are interested in the role that Shakespeare plays in immersive theater, others look at the immersive qualities of the shows and the impacts they have. Purcell surveys several examples and discusses the strategies of each, focusing on the varying degrees of “immersivity” and ultimately arguing that although these shows fail in some respects across the board, they all succeed in captivating the audience in a visceral manner (144). Machon, too, considers the emotional impact of the shows in her *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance*, drawing a distinction between traditional shows in general, which ask the audience to respond intellectually, and immersive shows such as *Sleep No More*, which force an emotional response (90). In sum, these studies tend to analyze *how* immersive shows use Shakespeare’s texts or to

give an opinion as to how *well* the texts are used, however no one has yet sought to answer the first-order question of *why* Shakespeare is there in the first place.

This article explores the reasons for Shakespeare's popularity in immersive theater, looking at *Sleep No More* and *The Donkey Show* as representative examples, by considering the relationship between the needs of immersive theater and the features of Shakespeare's original texts. I argue that immersive theater has two basic requirements for its source material—popularity in the world at large and the ability to produce an emotional response—and that Shakespeare's texts are remarkably well-situated to fulfill both these criteria, as they are extremely well-known and possess distinct and vivid atmospheres, and thus are a natural choice for the source material of immersive productions.

Question/
Problem 2

Text

Method

Thesis

I. TWO EXAMPLES OF SHAKESPEARE IN IMMERSIVE SHAKESPEARE

Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, based mostly on *Macbeth*, is perhaps the most popular immersive theater production to date. After runs in both London and Brookline, MA, the show settled in New York City, where it has been extending its "limited" run since 2011. It is set in "The McKittrick Hotel," a complex of warehouses with six stories containing over one hundred rooms. The audience members (referred to as "guests" of the hotel) are directed first through a pitch black, sharply winding corridor, representing the transition from the outside world to the world of the show, into the Manderley Bar, where the 1930s setting is established, before being let into the show itself. Each person is given a mask and told not to speak, but otherwise has complete freedom to explore the space for up to three hours, as the show cycles through a loop three times (*Sleep No More*).

Audience members are thus very much in control of their experience of the show. One could choose to follow one of the over twenty characters, many of whom run between several floors over the course of one cycle. Conversely, one could instead focus on the space, exploring the various rooms and their intricate details—audience members are invited to pick up objects, read letters, sift through drawers, and even eat and drink. Changes in the film noir-inspired music and lighting indicate when particularly dramatic scenes are taking place, but otherwise the audience are given no clues as to what they “should” be doing or seeing. Given the expanse of the venue, each guest will necessarily miss the majority of the scenes, which serves to make the decision of what to seek out all the more important.

Though the show is firmly rooted in *Macbeth*, the spoken text is nowhere to be found.¹ In fact, the characters do not speak at all. Rather, Shakespeare’s characters and dramatic situations are brought to life through dance. “Emotion is really the key driver of this work, and that’s why I work predominantly with dancers. I think dance can express humanity more directly than any other art form,” Maxine Doyle (choreographer and co-director) explains (Barrett and Doyle 29). However, rather than tossing the text out completely, Doyle carefully analyzes its rhythm and structure to inform her choreography (Barrett and Doyle 29). For example, act one, scene seven of *Macbeth*, in which Lady Macbeth admonishes her husband for his cowardice, is translated into a somewhat violent sequence in which the two characters tumble and toss each other from one end of a bedroom to the other. In Gordon’s words, “One could see, feelingly, the emotional arc of the couple’s conversation, the seesawing between attraction and repulsion” (45). Thus, Shakespeare is certainly not lost in the production. In fact, according to the assistant director, “Every line of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is embedded in the multiple languages—sound, light, design, and dance—of [*Sleep No More*]” (Gordon 44).

Diane Paulus and Randy Weiner's *The Donkey Show* differs from *Sleep No More* in many respects—most obviously in the fact that it adapted from a comedy rather than a tragedy. At the same time, however, it not only shares the basic features of immersive theater, but also employs similar strategies to incorporate Shakespeare into the medium. Set in “Club Oberon,” a single large room with a balcony level, meant to represent a Studio 54-esque night club, it tells the story of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through existing '70s disco songs, including “Don't Leave Me This Way,” “We Are Family,” and “Never Knew Love Like This Before” (*The Donkey Show*). Though there is a stage in the space, the characters more often run through the crowd, who are invited to dance as though the space were truly a club. Hermia, Helena, Lysander, and Demetrius are now Mia, Helen, Sander, and Demitri, four young patrons of the same club as the audience. The second time I attended the show, during the half hour after the doors open but before the show begins, Demitri approached me, closely followed by Helen, who dragged a male audience member in tow. Helen called out, “Demitri! Aren't you jealous? Look, I'm dancing with this guy!” only to be reproached in an echo of Demetrius's line: “Tempt not too much the hatred of my spirit. / For I am sick when I do look on thee” (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 2.1.211-12). The audience is thus made to feel as though they and the characters truly share the same world, that of Club Oberon. The four lovers are simply at the club to dance and have a good time, just as everyone in the audience is. As for the rest of the characters, the mechanicals are condensed into two afro-topped friends, both named Vinnie, Oberon is the owner of the club and Titania his frustrated girlfriend, Puck is renamed “Dr. Wheelgood” and roller-blades through the crowd causing mischief, while the fairies are re-imagined as a number of glitter-covered, shirtless young men who spend most of the performance dancing atop go-go-style boxes.

Like *Sleep No More*, this show also eliminates Shakespeare's dialogue, but where *Sleep No More* uses dance to replace the spoken word, *The Donkey Show* uses music, another "emotional" medium. "I feel music is what people care about in a loyal, passionate way," Paulus said (Aucoin). She explained that popular songs effect the audience by reminding them of personal moments attached with the songs, by energizing them in the present, and by forcing them to see the songs in a new context, all of which come together to create a multifaceted experience (Paulus). "Many people experience a kind of catharsis by the end of the show," according to Paulus (Paulus). *The Boston Globe's* review of the show supports this, saying, "It's not that the show completely defies description, but rather that the sensations it creates are so visceral that words seem almost beside the point" (Aucoin).

II. THE CREATIVE GOALS OF IMMERSIVE THEATER

Although the shows that fall under the umbrella category of "immersive theater" vary, and thus have different particular goals and messages, one goal that seems to be at the heart of the medium is that of creating a visceral experience for the audience through their newfound agency. That is, the creators of immersive theater strive to access the inward feelings and bodily experiences of their audience; they seek an *emotional*, as opposed to an *intellectual*, response. As noted, Maxine Doyle considers emotion the driving force of *Sleep No More*, and Felix Barrett even more plainly states, "[I]t's all about being able to *feel* it [. . .] it's all about the visceral" (Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 95). In the case of *The Donkey Show* too, Paulus notes the catharsis—that is, the emotional release—that the show creates, and the *Globe* attests to the visceral sensations. Paulus also stresses the emotional freedom of the audience as one of her main goals for the production (Paulus). Unlike traditionally-staged shows, a full understanding of the scenes

and events taking place in immersive shows is relatively unimportant, so long as the intended emotional experience is produced in each audience member. Even the very format of the medium, with its active audience, works towards this goal, as audience members are forced to work instinctively, based on their emotions, in response to the productions.

Along with this creative goal comes a need for a familiar text as the source material. As seen in both *Sleep No More* and *The Donkey Show*, the medium enables and almost necessitates the presentation of the narrative in a fragmented or otherwise vague or unconventional manner, which often includes the elimination of the original dialogue, in order to create the desired emotional response. Given this format, a familiar text is needed in order to guide or locate the audience. As Barrett says, when you enter *Sleep No More*, “[Y]ou don’t know where the performers are, you don’t know what’s happening, you don’t know where you are” (Machon, *(Syn)aesthetics* 91). Thus, at least one point of recognition is necessary to produce any reaction other than confusion. If an audience member were, for example, to stumble upon the aforementioned bedroom scene between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, or an even more easily identifiable scene such as the murder of King Duncan (2.2) or the banquet (3.4), she would be able to orient herself within the plot of *Macbeth* and have a basic understanding of the sequence of events that occur for the rest of the night. Though a complete understanding of every action and interaction that occurs in immersive theater is not necessary, some means of orientation is.

Similarly, in the case of *The Donkey Show*, a lack of familiarity with the text could render the production nothing more than a string of popular songs, lip-synced by a variety of eccentric characters. I personally have seen the show twice, once without any knowledge of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and once having recently finished reading the play. The first time I went, I found the show confusing and could only pick up on a general emphasis on relationships and drugs.

When I went the second time, however, I was able to identify the characters and major plot points and generally understand the emotional arc of the show, which greatly improved the experience for me and allowed me to become more of an “emancipated spectator”—knowledge of the text functioned to enable my participation.

Given, then, the goal of creating an emotional response and the need for a familiar text, immersive theater naturally turns to source material that is both widely popular, and thus familiar to as wide an audience as possible, and able to produce an emotional response, especially in a way that can be translated into the language of immersive theater.

III. THE SUITABILITY OF SHAKESPEARE’S TEXTS TO IMMERSIVE THEATER

Shakespeare’s texts fulfill both of these conditions, and are in this sense especially suited to immersive theater. Firstly, Shakespeare’s plays are immensely popular and familiar to the general populace, particularly in the English-speaking world. As Alden and Virginia Vaughan assert in *Shakespeare in America*, “[M]ost Americans know, at least superficially, who he was (and is) and that he carries universal cultural cachet” (197). Shakespeare’s popularity is, of course, not a new phenomenon—he has been consistently praised from the time of his death to the present. Today, he remains required reading in many if not all American and British secondary schools, ensuring that the educated populace has almost certainly read at least one of his plays. Given immersive theater’s need for a familiar, popular text, then, there seems almost no better option than the Bard himself. Even beyond the educated populace, with greater access to Shakespeare’s complex language and elite cultural production, Shakespeare’s omnipresence in popular culture perpetuates the influence of his works and renders them familiar to all. This can be seen, for example, in recent popular films such as *The Lion King*, *10 Things I Hate About You*,

and *She's the Man*, all of which are based in Shakespeare but do not advertise the influence.

Thus, even someone who has never read the text of the play in question may have a basic idea of the plot and characters, which is all that immersive theater requires (although in many cases, those more familiar with the text are able to take more away from the experience).

More importantly, Shakespeare's plays fulfill the second criterion, namely the ability to produce the emotional response that immersive theater seeks. But how does a text generate emotion? The sizable Shakespeare studies industry would seem to indicate that his works prompt more of an intellectual response. However, immersive productions are able to tap into the visceral side of Shakespeare by replicating his atmospheres. Each of Shakespeare's plays produces and possesses a distinct atmosphere, which vividly sets the tone for the piece and evokes the desired response from the audience. As M. H. Abrams glossed it, atmosphere can be understood as "the emotional tone pervading [. . .] a literary work, which fosters in the reader expectations as to the course of events, whether happy or [. . .] disastrous" (14).² Through descriptions of settings and objects, an author can establish an atmosphere that brings his or her audience into the proper emotional state for the story at hand. During Shakespeare's time, it was necessary for a strong sense of atmosphere to be engendered by the spoken word, since Elizabethan stages were relatively bare, with only a few props used when needed. While modern theatrical productions can use elaborate sets, stylized lighting, and amplified music to establish the atmosphere,³ productions at the Globe had to rely primarily on language to produce the desired atmosphere, and so that language would have to have been powerful enough to invoke the audience's imagination (Nostbakken 18).

There is no one atmosphere common to all of Shakespeare's plays; on the contrary, each has its own specific atmosphere that is vividly created in the text. In the example of *Macbeth*, the

atmosphere is dark and mysterious. This is immediately established in the very first scene, as the weird sisters cry, “Fair is foul, and foul is fair. / Hover through the fog and filthy air” (1.1.12-13). Of this introduction, Cumberland Clark writes in *A Study of Macbeth*, “No effect could be more powerful, more indicative of what is to follow. The weird, mysterious, uncanny, supernatural atmosphere descends like a thick cloud upon the drama and never lifts throughout” (51). Indeed, this passage and the continued references to darkness, witchcraft, and blood set the tone for the entire play, such that the tragic, bloody conclusion comes as no surprise. The atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, on the other hand, is light and fantastical. Rather than filth and fog, romanticized descriptions of moonlight, starlight, and woodland settings abound. Barrett Wendell called it a “fairy atmosphere” (Wendell 314), and indeed the simple fact that the play concerns the world of the fairies and includes a character who spends the majority of the play with a donkey’s head attests to the carefree, romantic tone of the piece.⁴ Here it comes as no shock that the play ends on a jovial, rather than a dark, note.

Sleep No More and *The Donkey Show* successfully recreate the distinct atmospheres of their source shows non-linguistically, through dance, visuals, and music, such that the familiar plot is invoked. In this way, they are able to, in a sense, tell the story without telling the story. The specificity of atmosphere in the works allows immersive productions to use “visceral” artistic media (as opposed to the “intellectual” medium of language) to produce the desired atmosphere, which once established recalls the popular plot connected to it, thus layering an intellectual response on top of the emotional one. *Sleep No More* recreates the dark atmosphere of *Macbeth* through literal darkness, but also through its film noir score and sets. Some of the rooms include a graveyard, a sanatorium, a forest with a witch’s hut, and a large space filled with ruins and statues. Immediately upon entering the space, the atmosphere “descends like a thick

cloud,” just as it does in the text. The first time I visited the McKittrick, I clutched onto my companion for the entirety of the first cycle, responding to the atmospheric cues. Even after seeing the show seven times, I find myself peering around corners and creeping stealthily through the space, and I see countless others doing the same. The ‘70s disco club setting of *The Donkey Show* likewise recreates the atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The free love and drug cultures of that era perfectly match the rapidly changing relationships and bacchic fun of the lovers and the fairies in the play. The audience is encouraged to dance and let loose, and disco clubs were places for people to escape from their real lives, as though into a dream or fantasy.

In both cases, even in the absence of Shakespeare’s language, the distinct atmosphere produced invokes his plays and allows the stories and characters, familiar to the audience, to be easily recognized. To give a specific example, one of the most elaborate scenes in *Sleep No More*, commonly referred to as “The Rave,” represents act four, scene one of *Macbeth*, in which the witches deliver their second set of prophecies. The scene—from which the line “Double, double toil and trouble, / Fire burn and cauldron bubble” originates—has a definite supernatural atmosphere (4.1.20-21). The Rave begins with Hecate breathing heavily while muttering rapidly, then suddenly letting out a high-pitched shriek, which sends the three witches into a frenzied, seizure-like dance, accompanied by pulsing techno music. The trance-like state of the characters clearly suggests the supernatural, thus making those characters recognizable as the witches. From there, the chaos caused by the frantic movement, loud music, and screaming echoes the confusion and trauma that Macbeth experiences in reaction to the apparitions. Heavy use of strobe lighting allows the audience to only catch glimpses of the actors’ movements, heightening the confusion and mirroring the cryptic, unclear nature of the prophecies. The atmospheric cues

are supported by small plot details, such as a bloody child (the second apparition to appear in the text), and a small tree, all of which come together to identify the scene. Although no words are spoken and the prophecies are not all clearly laid out, the audience experiences a strong sense of chaos and horror. By recreating the atmosphere of Shakespeare's plays, immersive theater causes audiences to *feel* the same way Shakespeare intended, thus producing precisely the emotional response that it seeks.⁵

III. BEYOND SHAKESPEARE

Thus, given their distinct atmospheres and general popularity, Shakespeare's plays are a natural choice for the source material for the new medium of immersive theater, as these shows demand both a certain degree of familiarity, ensured by the popularity, and an emotional impact, provided by the atmosphere, in order to be fully appreciated. Shakespeare's texts work in similar, effective ways even in shows that take radically different approaches and appear to have different aims, such as *Sleep No More* and *The Donkey Show*. Additionally, immersive theater's general requirements of atmosphere and familiarity explain not only Shakespeare's popularity in the medium, but also the specific plays chosen. *Macbeth* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are among his most famous and widely read plays, as are *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, source shows for several other immersive productions. Thus, even within Shakespeare's body of work, immersive productions favor the more familiar options. Examples of productions based on shows such as *Troilus and Cressida*, which is less familiar and seems to beg an intellectual rather than an emotional response, are notably absent. Furthermore, these two criteria also explain the choice of source material for non-Shakespearean immersive productions. For example, Third Rail Projects's *Then She Fell*, which opened in Brooklyn in 2012 and works similarly to *Sleep No*

More, but on a much smaller scale, is based on Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (Then She Fell)*. The novel's own popularity as well as Disney's multiple adaptations have made it familiar to the general public, and a strong fantastical atmosphere pervades the work, making it as ideal for immersive theater as the plays discussed. It seems, then, that although the techniques of immersive shows can vary widely, perhaps *any* popular, atmospheric text could be translated into this new medium and introduced to a new audience.

¹ Many argue that the value of Shakespeare's works derives precisely from the language they use, which is deleted entirely here. However, immersive theater is not the first version of Shakespeare performance that contradicts this view. For example, translations of Shakespeare into other languages have enjoyed great success, even though the original spoken text has been completely altered in those cases.

² "Atmosphere" can also be called "mood," "ambience," or "*Stimmung*."

³ For example, Andrew Lloyd Webber's popular Broadway musical *The Phantom of the Opera* wordlessly establishes the ominous, somewhat supernatural atmosphere of the Phantom's lair through pounding, dissonant organ music, several fog machines, and a large gondola, which actually moves across the stage, dressed to look like a subterranean lake surrounded by candelabras and enclosed by an imposing metal gate. Of course, none of this would have been technologically possible in Shakespeare's day.

⁴ The word "love" appears over one hundred times throughout the play.

⁵ Furthermore, analyzing Shakespeare in the context of immersive theater allows us to see the immersive qualities intrinsic in his texts. While Shakespeare's atmospheres are recreated today to produce visceral responses in modern immersive theatrical audiences, in his day they were required to spark the imaginations of his audiences—the success of his shows depended on audience participation. Although this participation may not have been physical, the audience nevertheless became active creators. In fact, several scholars have noted that Shakespeare's shows included an intimate, flexible actor-audience relationship. Can Shakespeare's plays themselves be considered "immersive"? This application of the term suggests its theoretical value and its use beyond experimental theatrical or digital media.

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The Bard and Bollywood

Exploring *Romeo and Juliet* in Modern Hindi Cinema

Philip LaPorte

Expos 20: Why Shakespeare?

Professor Jeffrey R. Wilson

April 19, 2019

The Indian film industry—popularly known as Bollywood—has a deep and abiding love affair with Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Hindi film adaptations of this tragedy have been produced since at least the 1980’s, and Bollywood shows no signs of slowing. In fact, the pace has only picked up with the latest additions to the genre of *Ishaqzaade* (*Love Rebels*) in 2012, *Issaq* (*Love*) and *Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela* (*A Play of Bullets: Ram-Leela*) in 2013, *Arshinagar* in 2015, *Sairat* (*Wild in Love*) in 2016, and *Dhadak* (*Heartbeat*) in 2018. And people like them: *Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela* was India’s fifth highest-grossing film of 2013, and *Sairat* is still the highest-grossing Marathi-language film ever¹.

Orientalism

The sheer quantity of these films, even aside from their economic credentials, testifies to the almost unbelievable influence this story has had on the Bollywood imagination. No other author could be imagined to be the subject of so many adaptations in the same industry in the same decade. What is it that Shakespeare seems to supply which Bollywood and its viewers so evidently demand? And in particular, what accounts for the persistent popularity of *Romeo and Juliet*—out of all of Shakespeare’s plays—in the Bollywood repertoire?

Question/
Problem 1

Shakespeare’s presence in India dates back to colonial times, when performances of his plays were introduced around two centuries years ago. The playwright has enjoyed a fairly continuous legacy in the region since then, being picked up by Parsi theater in the 1800’s and Bollywood in the 1900’s². The phenomenon of Shakespeare in Indian film is something that has been examined by several scholars, though only a few have posited developed claims as to its explanation. Motivated by historical concerns, Vikram Thakur examines Shakespeare’s deep

Crit. Cits.
(i.e. lit review)

¹ Arti Wani, “Sairat’s Transgressive Femininity” in *Indian Cinema Beyond Bollywood: The New Independent Cinema Revolution*, edited by Ashvin Devasundaram (Routledge, 2018), 13

² Vikram Thakur, “Parsi Shakespeare: The Precursor to ‘Bollywood Shakespeare’” in *Bollywood Shakespeares*, edited by Craig Dionne and Parmita Kapadia (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 21-45.

Bollywood influence in the context of Parsi theater, its nineteenth-century precursor.³ He concludes that the English playwright's works provided a source of otherwise-unavailable action and spectacle that audiences desired of the Parsi theater companies. Given that "Shakespeare-inspired" films in particular were greatly influenced by Parsi theater," this suggests that perhaps the same can be said of modern-day Bollywood and its viewers. Suhrith Parthasarathy, on the other hand, argues that Shakespeare's success in Hindi cinema is due to restrictive government censorship of films in India. Because of Shakespeare's global reputation and acclaim, adaptations of his films can contain controversial social or political messages with less risk of being censored—as in Vishal Bhardwaj's *Hamlet*-inspired film *Haider* (2014), which was approved for release after submitting to government demands for 41 cuts⁴. Yet a third theory has been offered by Amrita Sen, who claims that Shakespeare's plays lend themselves to unique Bollywood conventions of song and dance sequences, tangled love affairs, and other classic features⁵.

None of these authors, however, examines the case of *Romeo and Juliet* in any direct manner. To address this more specific inquiry, I will explore the history of Indian marriage culture and the concept of the love-marriage, using this to contextualize several of the more popular recent adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*: Habib Faisal's *Ishaqzaade*, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela*, and Nagraj Manjule's *Sairat*. Ultimately, I will argue that although they may be applicable to other Shakespearean adaptations, the theories of Thakur and Sen are inadequate or unable to be extended to the case of *Romeo and Juliet* in

Question/
Problem₂

Method

Text

Thesis

³ Vikram Thakur, "Parsi Shakespeare: The Precursor to 'Bollywood Shakespeare'" in *Bollywood Shakespeares*, edited by Craig Dionne and Parmita Kapadia (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 21-45.

⁴ Suhrith Parthasarathy, "The Bard Meets Bollywood" in *Index on Censorship* 41, no. 1, (2016).

⁵ Amrita Sen, "Maqbool and Bollywood Conventions" in *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 4, no. 2 (2009)

Bollywood. The theory of Parthasarathy concerning government censorship in India, on the other hand, offers a partial explanation for the ubiquity of this play. Specifically, I claim that the growing popularity of the love-marriage and disapproval of restrictive caste endogamy and similar practices explains the appeal of Romeo-and-Juliet-type drama, and that Shakespeare provides Bollywood with a credible means of catering to that appeal while avoiding censorship or negative social consequences.

This evaluation shows modern Indian culture to be a complex and conflicted evolution of values. On the one hand, a dynamic progressivism is showing its support and approval of marriage for love rather than more traditional practical or social considerations. On the other hand, the necessity of Shakespeare as a medium for diverting censorship also reveals the more conservative-minded establishment in India that struggles against this. Shakespeare himself emerges as a sort of reconciliation between the two: his play promotes the values of the former while appeasing the social concerns of the latter.

stakes

I. Love and the Family in *Romeo and Juliet*

← Shakespearean Historical Evidence

A large amount of critical commentary on *Romeo and Juliet* addresses the centrality of oxymorons in the play: e.g. “O brawling love, O loving hate / O anything of nothing first create, / O heavy lightness, serious vanity . . .” (1.1.174-6). Philosopher and literary critic René Girard comments that oxymorons are the most natural linguistic structure for the story, even calling Juliet “a living oxymoron: as a lover she blesses Romeo; as Tybalt’s cousin, she curses him”⁶.

— Hist. Cit.

The oxymorons therefore set up a crucial conflict between love and family loyalty in the play, a conflict in which love ultimately triumphs. While at first Juliet rejects Romeo following

Assert

⁶ Naomi Conn Lieber, “The Critical Backstory” in *Romeo and Juliet: A Critical Reader* (Bloomsbury, 2016), 31

his slaying of Tybalt: “Was ever book containing such vile matter / So fairly bound?” (3.2.89-90), her perspective is immediately changed upon more reflection: “But wherefore, villain, didst thou kill my cousin? / That villain cousin would have killed my husband. / Back, foolish tears, back to your native spring” (3.2.110-11).

Hist. Evidence

The significance of family is developed carefully and thoroughly by Shakespeare, as has been observed by René Weis. In fact, Capulet’s role is the fourth-longest in the play (after Romeo, Juliet, and the Friar), and Lady Capulet’s is the eighth-longest⁷. It is through this engineering that Shakespearean portrays family involvement as a threat to a marriage of love. For example, Capulet appears initially to hold up love as a necessary and important part of a marriage when he speaks to Juliet’s suitor: “But woo her, gentle Paris, get her heart; / My will to her consent is but a part” (1.2.16-17). But the insincerity of this declaration is betrayed by Capulet’s gradual transformation to “I think she will be ruled / In all respects by me” (3.4.14-15) and finally to “Hang thee [Juliet], young baggage, disobedient wretch! I tell thee what: get thee to church o’ Thursday, Or never after look me in the face” (3.5.166-68).

Hist. Cit.

Anal

Hist. Ev.

Opposing images and the looming presence of family, as we will see, will both resurface to the same effect in *Romeo and Juliet*’s Bollywood counterparts.

Anal.

II. Marriage Culture in India

Cultural Historical Evidence

India is widely known for its traditions of arranged marriages and caste endogamy—the practice of marrying only within one’s own caste, irrespective of potential love interests outside of it. In fact, Giri Raj Gupta counts no less than eight forms of marriage described in Hindu

Hist. Cit.

⁷ René Weis, *The Arden Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet*, (Bloomsbury, 2014, 3rd ed.), 4

scriptures, of which just one—called Ghandarva—is primarily driven by love or affection⁸. Other forms consist of various flavors of arranged or even coerced marriages. While many of the latter are considered forbidden in modern Indian society, the general marriage pattern is according to types other than Ghandarva, the love-marriage. This is primarily because love is considered a weak or tenuous support for marriage compared with education, earning potential, or other qualities. Just 59 percent of the respondents in one study in India agreed that “meeting the prospective wife before marriage contributes to marital happiness”⁹. In addition, marriage outside caste or religion is considered to bring dishonor or hardship onto a family.

Nevertheless, support for marriage according to the Ghandarva ideal appears to be growing in the subcontinent. Researcher Lauren Corwin conducted a study of marriages in Western Bengal, finding that “the relative youth of the couples involved in ‘love-marriages’ indicates that the widespread idea that the number of inter-caste marriages is increasing has some basis in reality . . . due in part to the legalization of a secular registered marriage which does not require [caste identification or] parental consent”¹⁰. Marriage out of love or by choice is much more widespread among the younger generations, and is growing in quantity and influence.

Hist. Cit.

III. The Films ← Textual Evidence

⁸ Giri Raj Gupta, “Love, Arranged Marriage, and the Indian Social Structure” in *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* Vol. 7, No. 1 (University of Toronto Press, 1976), 75-85

⁹ Giri Raj Gupta, “Love, Arranged Marriage, and the Indian Social Structure” in *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 78

¹⁰ Laura Corwin, “Caste, Class, and the Love-Marriage” in *Journal of Marriage and Family* vol. 39, No 4 (National Council on Family Relations, 1977), 823-31

*Ishaqzaade*¹¹, meaning “Love Rebels,” was released in 2012. The film narrates a feud between the Qureshi and Chauhan families in India, and the unlikely love that develops between Parma Chauhan and Zoya Qureshi. At first, the movie appears to vindicate a cynical attitude towards the love-marriage. When Zoya falls in love with Parma, it is clear that her emotions are obscuring not only her practicality but also her ability to see Parma’s recklessness, violence, and viciousness. Zoya believes that Parma’s apparent love for her is sincere, and asks that he convert to Islam so the two can marry. Parma agrees carelessly and insincerely, though Zoya appears not to notice. After the marriage and consummation, Parma reveals that the ceremony was invalid and that he tricked Zoya into sleeping with him in an attempt to disgrace her family. This is a clear caricature of exactly the accusations that are traditionally levelled against the love-marriage in India: emotions leading to credulity and disastrous decisions.

But director Habib Faisal then turns this message on its head by changing the story. When Zoya attempts to murder Parma, his mother Parvati intercepts her and convinces Zoya that “your love is not genuine either—had it been, you wouldn’t have given up on him so easily.” She then tells Parma that he must protect Zoya, whose life is in danger from both families. The two subsequently fall in love, genuinely this time, and are married in a legitimate ceremony. The contrast between the second marriage and the first is obvious in many ways—Parma’s often cruel attitude dissolves, and the two make real sacrifices for each other. This movie thus juxtaposes in maximal contrast the difference between the straw-man love-marriage constructed by its opponents, and the transformative power of a genuine love-marriage.

¹¹ *Ishaqzaade*, directed by Habib Faisal, *Yash Raj Films*, 2012

While the second is morally vindicated by the outcome of the movie, nevertheless it ends tragically as the Qureshis and Chauhans seek to kill the two lovers—the families believe that the marriage is a threat and a disgrace to their respective religions. After being cornered helplessly, Parma and Zoya shoot each other and die in each other's arms. Rather than the suicides in *Romeo and Juliet*, the mutual killing in *Ishaqzaade* strengthens the imagery of the terrible and destructive family feud. The film can therefore be recognized as a clear statement of support for the ideal of the love-marriage and a deliberate counter to the arguments of its critics.

*Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela*¹², (*A Play of Bullets: Ram-Leela*), more commonly known as *Ram-Leela*, is one of the highest-earning *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations ever. When the respective young figureheads of the Rajadi and Sanera families—Ram and Leela—fall irresistibly in love, the violence that erupts between their families leads them to take one another's lives.

In *Ram-Leela*, arranged marriage is not only openly mocked, but the respective families of Ram and Leela are also villainized with very little subtlety. For example, when Ram saves the life of a Sanera, the Rajadi clan promises to kill him if he ever advocates joining hands with the enemy again. Ram responds by saying, “we have used words, we have used bullets: now is the time to use our brains.” Ram's wisdom is clearly confirmed by the irrationality and senseless violence that both families are proud of perpetrating—both families pledge to wipe out every member of the other, and commit violence even against children.

There is a significant motif of hands throughout the film which mark out some of the messages within it. For example, the British Indian who is supposed to marry Leela in an

¹² *Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela*, directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, *Eros International*, 2013

arranged marriage is often shown to be clumsy with his hands—they shake uncontrollably when he is handed a gun, and he fails miserably to touch Leela's feet in a flirtatious gesture. Ram tries to do the same at the festival of Holi, with obvious athleticism and grace, though Leela is too quick for him and jumps back. Later, when Leela's wedding ring is discovered on her hand by Dhankor, the head of the Sanera household, Dhankor chops off Leela's finger. Ram, on hearing of this, cuts off his own ring finger in reciprocation. In subtle ways, the imagery of hands show Ram to be a much stronger and more compassionate person than the man to whom Leela is supposed to be married—a man she clearly does not love. Ram is transformed into a bold and flashy advertisement for the love-marriage: a daring and loyal husband willing to make sacrifices for the woman that he so deeply loves. The arranged marriage is depicted as weak and insubstantial by comparison.

*Sairat*¹³ (*Wild in Love*) is a Bollywood film not in Hindi but in Marathi, a language spoken primarily in Western India. Rather than the religious or familial differences featured in the previous two films, caste differences form the basis of conflict in *Sairat*: Parshya is a young boy and a cricket player who falls in love with Archi, a higher-caste girl with a violent and murderous family who will not tolerate their relationship.

While the film acknowledges the hardships and difficulties of intercaste marriage, it nevertheless champions love as a force that cannot be overcome by these obstacles. When Parshya and Archi run away to live together in the slums away from their hostile families, the differences between themselves are soon manifest. Archi misses her family and is frustrated with the economic hardships she has forced herself into, and Parshya treats her roughly and

¹³ *Sairat*, directed by Nagraj Manjule, *Aatpat Production*, 2016

unsympathetically, even hitting her in public. Archi runs away, leaving Parshya alone with the haunting words of his host: “she’s from a rich family—the quarrels, the slums, too much for her.” While each of them believes they can cope without the other, they soon realize their mutual dependence and reunite in a moment of intense emotion. “I’ll die without you,” Parshya sobs, as Archi expresses identical feelings for him.

One of the most vivid messages from the film comes at the end, when Archi’s family visits the couple’s home in apparent reconciliation. The visitors look at photos on the walls of Archi and Parshya with their son, flip through photo albums filled with smiling pictures of the three, and observe the evident happiness of the home. While Archi and Parshya had given up their families for their love of each other, this scene illustrates the way that love has created a new and yet more dear family for them. To emphasize the point yet further, the scene then shifts to Archi’s and Parshya’s small son, who is being taken care of by a friend during the visit. She drops him off at the home, and he toddles in to see the mangled bodies of his parents, murdered by Archi’s family. The tragic conclusion of this film is what makes its message yet more effective. The obsessive caste exclusion of Archi’s relatives strips away the happiness and life from a family that has been successful in the face of overwhelming odds.

IV. Generational Politics Implications

The films that we have examined so far can all be recognized as supportive of the love marriage in India and disapproving of more conservative values—caste endogamy and family or religious loyalty over romantic love. Coupled with the rise in approval among the younger generations in India of marriage for love, we can conclude that the popularity of *Romeo and*

Juliet adaptations in Bollywood is due to their presentation of this progressive ideal. So we have successfully identified an element of Shakespeare's story that Bollywood producers require—but existence doesn't prove uniqueness. Are there other stories that can achieve the same goals? And why haven't these been employed to nearly the same degree?

This is unlikely to be the result of Shakespeare's unique compatibility with Bollywood conventions, as Sen has suggested. While some films—such as *Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela*—indeed present the exoticism and colorful dances expected of the Bollywood genre, others—including *Ishaqzaade* and *Sairat*—are noticeably lacking in this regard, presenting songs with spartan backdrops and simple costumes.

Nor is it likely to be the action and spectacle present in Shakespeare's plays, as held by Thakur¹⁴. This is because much of the action from *Romeo and Juliet* is not even present in the film adaptations—for example, there is no analogous duel between Tybalt and Mercutio in most of the films, save *Ram-Leela*—and the action that is present often doesn't come from Shakespeare's original text—the beating of Parshya in *Sairat* and of Parma in *Ishaqzaade*, for example. So what is unique to Shakespeare?

Parthasarathy's argument—that Shakespeare's global acclaim makes adaptations of his works less liable to censorship¹⁵—makes a plausible extension to the case of *Romeo and Juliet*. Censorship in Bollywood has a long history and an active presence today. In general, it has enforced standards far more conservative than those found in Hollywood or other industries. The on-screen kiss, nude scenes, and explicit sexual activity are all considered to be taboo, though

¹⁴ Vikram Thakur, "Parsi Shakespeare: The Precursor to 'Bollywood Shakespeare'" in *Bollywood Shakespeares*, 21-45.

¹⁵ Suhrith Parthasarathy, "The Bard Meets Bollywood" in *Index on Censorship* 41, no. 1.

restrictions have lightened in more recent times¹⁶. As may be guessed, however, *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations have passed the censors with both nudity and sex—elements very useful for championing a love marriage. It is reasonable to ascribe this to Shakespeare's stature as a literary genius and respected cultural icon. This is further supported by the disapproval of marriage for love that pervades the older generations, as we examined already with Gupta's study¹⁷ on marriage in India. The progressive elements of the films would likely result in unfavorable reviews and pushback in the absence of a recognized and respected name to back them. Of course, this is just what William Shakespeare provides.

This analysis helps to illuminate a certain interesting collection of forces at work in modern Indian media culture. In their desire to capture the attention and approval of Indian youth—who are by and large progressively-minded—Bollywood producers take care to endorse, more or less subtly, the values of the younger generation. At the same time, these producers struggle to reconcile this with the broadly conservative restrictions of government and social pressures potentially exerted by the older generations.

And we can see this dynamic in other places in the Indian media. In 2006, the popular film *The Da Vinci Code* was banned in India following protests from conservative-minded Roman Catholics who feared the movie portrayed the Church in a bad light. The 2015 movie *Unfreedom*, which featured lesbian relationships, was struck down by conservatives on account of its tendency to “ignite unnatural passions”¹⁸ However, the film was later released on Netflix in India, a move motivated by its appeal among viewers.

¹⁶ Ian Garwood, “The Songless Bollywood Film” in *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol 4 (2006), 169-183

¹⁷ Giri Raj Gupta, “Love, Arranged Marriage, and the Indian Social Structure” in *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* Vol. 7, No. 1

¹⁸ “Banned by CBFC, *Unfreedom* is now available on Netflix in India,” (Hindustan Times, 2018)

Shakespeare is an unexpected reconciliation point between the two sides. His plotlines oblige the desires of the growing progressive wave while his name quiets the complaints of objectors from the right. The old and the new, the establishment and its challengers, the progressives and conservatives; all find something of worth in this 16th century English playwright. You can take the British out of India, but you can't take the Bard out of Indian life.

“Surreptitious Insurrection”:

Shakespeare and the Aesthetics of Revolt in Post-Civil War Nigeria

Ella Frigyik

Expos 20.041: Why Shakespeare?

Professor Jeffrey R. Wilson

May 16, 2018

London, 2012. The first annual Globe to Globe festival saw the exposition of 37 Shakespeare adaptations in 37 different languages, all performed in the same Globe theatre that once housed the Bard¹. Mass cultural spectacles, like the inclusion of Nigeria's second largest ethnic group, the Yoruba, and their Igunnuko masked ceremony in the middle of *Itan Oginintin*, a Nigerian adaptation of *The Winter's Tale* by a well-known herder², awed the standard crowd of London theatregoers, not least because of the striking juxtaposition of iconic four-hundred-year-old English theatre with the athletic and vigorous displays put on by the Nigerian actors. This was the work of Shakespeare performed by people on an entirely different continent, planting the likes of Perdita and Florizel into dry red earth miles away from the kingdom of Sicilia. The sheer novelty of such a seemingly incongruous match made for incredible entertainment. But such a connection, between Yoruba theatre and Shakespeare, is less tangential than it may appear.

Shakespeare is remarkably prominent in Nigeria. As a British colony, Nigeria received numerous cultural impositions, one of which was the normalization of classic British cultural idols – like Shakespeare. While the sheer cultural recognition of Shakespeare in Nigeria is to be expected, there is powerful irony in the idea of Nigerians performing culturally adapted Shakespeare to a largely British audience: of the colonized returning to the colonizer to perform a piece of colonial legacy, now imbued with the culture of the once-colonized. The Nigeria-Shakespeare linkages radiate outwards. From *Itan Oginintin* at the 2012 Globe festival to renowned playwright Wole Soyinka's prison poem entitled "Hamlet", to the late 1970s Nigerian Macbeth adaptation *Aare Akogun*, to critical playwright Femi Osofisan's recent *Wesoo, Hamlet!*,

¹ Plastow et al., *Shakespeare In & Out of Africa*.

² Adesola, "Ìtàn Ògìnìntìn [The Winter's Tale]."

the confluence of Yoruba theatre and Shakespeare abounds in Nigeria, begging the question of why these two seemingly disparate cultural fields are so tightly linked.

This essay explores the flourishing of Shakespearean adaptations in the 1970s post-civil war period in Nigeria. I argue that Shakespeare's politically turbulent plot structures provided a template on which to build a "surreptitious insurrection" that was uniquely Yoruba in nature. The writers of the post-civil war period veiled subtle denunciations of the injustices perpetrated by General Gowon's military regime through the literary normalization provided by Shakespeare, and the seeming unlikeliness that colonial culture would house the revolutionary politics of the colonized. By using Shakespeare as a foundation for the "aesthetics of revolt", these political writers cast powerful political critiques while largely evading government scrutiny, the colonially normalized mask of Shakespeare veiling critique just as the Igunnuko masks of Yoruba theatre veil their performers from the audience's watchful eyes.

I. NIGERIAN POLITICAL AND LITERARY LANDSCAPE IN THE 1970S

Shakespeare critics like Martin Banham and Jane Plastow, along with Yoruba scholars like Adesola Adeyemi, have analyzed the nature of Yoruba Shakespeare adaptations. Banham and Plastow, writing in *Shakespeare In & Out of Africa*, noted the tendency for Yoruba playwrights to culturally recreate Shakespearean plays in a manner that better reflected traditional Nigerian ideology and spiritualism³. Adeyemi, focusing on *Itan Oginintin*, argued this cultural recreation was met with mixed reception from Nigerian audiences, who were divided over whether the inclusion of the traditional Igunnuko masked ceremony in a venue that could not properly encapsulate the full richness of the tradition amounted to a perversion of that

³ Plastow et al., *Shakespeare In & Out of Africa*.

tradition, or if the attempt to share a uniquely Yoruba ritual on a global stage was a commendable act⁴. But despite this scholarship on Yoruba Shakespearean adaptations, little has been done to examine the potentially political underpinnings of Yoruba theatre. The one exception is Antony Johae, who, writing in 2007, performed a close contextual reading of Wole Soyinka's "Hamlet", pointed out that Soyinka wrote this poem during a twenty-two-month period of solitary confinement in prison, in response to his revolutionary actions against Biafra and General Yakubu Gowon's military state in Nigeria. Soyinka drew parallels between the unsettled situation in Hamlet's Denmark and the uncertainty of Gowon's Nigeria⁵. Johae's consideration of the veiling of dissent with literature, and his exploration of historical subtext along with thematic intent were both powerful, but he neglected to consider Yoruba cultural recreation as an integral tool in the creation of this subtle artistic rebellion.

It is key here to note a common thread between all of the aforementioned Nigerian playwrights: they hail from the 1970s post-civil war literary resistance movement in Nigeria. Though *Itan Ogìntìn* and *Wesoo, Hamlet!* were written relatively recently, Oguntokun and Femi Osofisan were both active members of the writing community in 1970s Nigeria, and as such we can consider their work as a continuation of that movement, given its formative effect on their early careers. All of the other works here mentioned were written in or around the 1970s, with Soyinka's "Hamlet" published in 1967, and *Aare Akogun* first hitting the stage in 1972.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were times of great political turbulence in Nigeria. 1966 saw the rise of military leader General Yakubu Gowon to head of state in a bloodless inter-military counter-coup. As ethnic tensions rose, Gowon declared a state of emergency and led the

⁴ Adesola, "Ìtàn Ògìntìn [The Winter's Tale]."

⁵ Johae, "Wole Soyinka's 'Hamlet.'"

military against insurgent factions in a civil war that would last until 1970, when government forces defeated the independently declared state of Biafra in eastern Nigeria. Gowon would continue to rule until 1975, when a different military coup stripped him of power. Nigeria remained under military control for much of the 1970s⁶.

Critics, such as Femi Osofisan himself, have addressed the nature of Yoruba theatre in the post-civil war period and described the “surreptitious insurrection” undertaken by writers like Wole Soyinka⁷. Osofisan argues that political dissenters used the guise of literature to veil their criticism of the military regime, and in so doing built a culture of the “aesthetics of revolt”⁸. He claimed Nigerian plays in the post-Independence period are “intended to be as much investigative rites of sociopolitical rebellion” as “deliberate revisions of the inherited theatrical forms on behalf of that ‘hidden’ agenda” (85). In Osofisan’s argument, theatre is best created within an atmosphere of “Terror” (81), and the civil war and military regime Nigeria experienced in the late 20th century provided an ideal opportunity for drama to thrive in the wake of fear and uncertainty⁹.

II. YORUBA THEATRE

But before we can grasp the complex relations between the plot structure of Shakespeare’s plays and the realities of politics and literary resistance in post-civil war Nigeria, we must take a closer look at the cultural institution that is Yoruba theatre. From the eighteenth-century spectacle of the Alarinjo traveling theatre, all the way to the ancient Egungun masked

⁶ Phillips, “Nigeria’s New Political Institutions, 1975-9.”

⁷ Òsófisan, “REFLECTIONS ON THEATRE PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA.”

⁸ Osofisan, “Literary Theatre after the Generals.”

⁹ Osofisan.

tradition, where male leaders of the tribe don masks and masquerade as ancestral spirits, Yoruba theatrical tradition is intrinsically tied to religion, drawing inspiration from the pantheon of gods and deities, chief of which is Ogun, who is said to have cleared a dense forest to allow the other gods to pass from heaven to earth. Alarinjo performance is the model for modern Yoruba theatre, birthed in the mid-20th century and led by playwright Hubert Ogunde. The form relies heavily on the incorporation of ritualistic elements like folklore, songs, chanting, drumming, dancing, and a plethora of proverbs. These threads of cultural wisdom are laced through plays in an attempt to treat theatre as an educational and moral experience, much like ancient oral storytelling traditions. Plays are viewed as a means of passing on ideological values, and thus by their very nature require a powerful connection with the audience. At Yoruba plays it is common for the audience to chant back responses prompted by the actors, usually completing a well-known proverb the actor has left partially unspoken¹⁰. In this way, the interplay between audience and actors is key in Yoruba theatrical tradition.

III. SHAKESPEARE AND POLITICAL TURBULENCE: *MACBETH* AND *HAMLET*

Political insurrection and turbulence abound in Shakespearean plots, elements that resonate with the situation of Nigeria in the 1970s and lend themselves to subtle adaptation. Take the example of *Macbeth*, where we witness not just one, but two instances of regicide, with varying levels of legitimacy. At this basic level, *Macbeth* is a text cloaked in an atmosphere of political instability, reflecting the very real possibilities of political change in a nation close to war. But so too does *Macbeth* chart the course of a military man who, both unnerved and tempted by the prophecies of witches, wrangles his way to control of the kingdom of Scotland.

¹⁰ Adesola, "Ìtàn Ògìnintìn [The Winter's Tale]."

Shakespeare makes it clear that Macbeth is a man, first and foremost, of great military prowess – indeed, one of the first images we receive of Macbeth is that of him “unseam[ing]” Macdonwald “from the nave to the chaps.”¹¹ At the center of Macbeth’s political wrangling is his murder of the king and assumption of power, in a brutal coup. The Weïrd Sisters warn Macbeth that he can only be killed by a man not of woman-born; falsely assuming no such man lives, Macbeth is slain in battle in a climactic confrontation with Macduff, who was prematurely removed from his mother’s body. In this sense, Macbeth is often read as a tragic and cautionary tale of the perils of a military man assuming power by force.

Hamlet too is grounded in atmospheric political instability. Here it is useful to take the inspiration of Margreta de Grazia and consider *Hamlet* without the prince himself¹². The play is set in a turbulent Denmark that is still reeling from the loss of its king, the late Hamlet senior. Hamlet is forced to grapple with the concurrent assumption of power by his uncle, who may potentially have murdered his father, and the “o’erhasty”¹³ incestuous marriage of his mother and uncle. In this way, *Hamlet* depicts a country that is internally fragmented. But even beyond this internal turmoil, Denmark is being assailed by the belligerent Fortinbras and his Norwegian army. As such, Hamlet’s Denmark is an example of a nation tormented by both intrinsic and extrinsic conflict¹⁴, in a manner almost parallel to the situation of Nigeria in the 1970s.

IV. SURREPTITIOUS INSURRECTION

¹¹ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*.

¹² Grazia, “*Hamlet*” without *Hamlet*. See for deeper analysis of the external/internal forces assailing the world in which Hamlet lives.

¹³ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*.

¹⁴ Grazia, “*Hamlet*” without *Hamlet*.

Nigerian writers in the post-civil war period culturally recreated Shakespearean texts in order to both celebrate the African heritage they felt the military regime undervalued, and veil their denunciations of the injustices wrought by the war. In 1972, playwright Wale Ogunyemi first staged *Aare Akogun*, a *Macbeth* adaptation that fairly closely parallels Shakespeare's text: Akogun the warrior is praised by the king Oba for his military prowess, and raised to increasingly grand positions of power, till eventually he and his wife Olawumi murder the king and Akogun assumes command of the kingdom. Akogun is defeated in the seemingly implausible event of an eclipse, parallel to Macbeth's foe being a man not woman-born¹⁵. But there is one key difference between the texts: Akogun and Olawumi do not kill the king out of ambition as do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, but rather under the influence of Yoruba spirits.

Ogunyemi strips *Macbeth* of foreign Western ideology, retaining simply the plot structure as the key commonality. There is no element of the freewill struggle in this retelling, and the focus is instead on the havoc wrought once the spirits have dictated events in this manner. By reframing the story in a supernatural context well defined in the Yoruba canon, Ogunyemi crafted a story that was well accepted and distributed within Nigeria, in a way that Shakespeare's original text would not have been, due not only to significant language barriers but also to cultural barriers – Western elements of fate and freewill are nonexistent in traditional Yoruba folklore. This cultural reframing is key, because it allowed Ogunyemi to carry the plot of *Macbeth* over to Nigerian audiences, while veiling subtle indictments beneath the literary normalization of a pro-Yoruba theatre movement. *Macbeth* is, at its core, a story about the tragedy that ensues once a military man rises to power. *Aare Akogun* was performed during the rise of General Gowon, a military general who had also gained power after demonstrated valor in

¹⁵ Plastow et al., *Shakespeare In & Out of Africa*.

battle. In this sense, Ogunyemi's tale reads as a warning against militaristic assumption of power, made all the more relevant to Nigeria through the inclusion of Yoruba spiritual ideology, and numerous instances of song, chant, and idiom.

This technique, of veiling political commentary in culturally reframed Shakespeare adaptations, is one Osofisan takes in *Wesoo, Hamlet!* Osofisan writes that the play is situated in Yorubaland in the "last half of the 20th century"¹⁶, a time period that encapsulates the build-up to the Nigerian civil war, the war itself, and the aftermath. The play's secondary title is the *The Resurrection of Hamlet*, and Osofisan takes this quite literally, incorporating Hamlet, Ophelia, and Claudius as characters separate from their Nigerian 20th century counterparts in the play. Shakespeare's dead characters are sent down by the deity Orunmila from the afterlife to attempt to forestall "the tragedy that is about to break"¹⁷, namely, the recreation of the tragedy of Hamlet in contemporary Nigeria. These characters don "ancestral masks" (9) and function much like traditional Yoruba spirits, grounding the unfamiliar Western characters in Yoruba tradition by encapsulating their foreignness in the general inscrutability of ancestral forms. In this sense, Osofisan transformed Shakespeare's tropes into more familiar elements of Yoruba theatre, framing the story in a way that was accessible to Nigerian audiences. The motivation for Claudius' counterpart Ayíbí's murder of the king Oba Sáyédèrò is, like in Shakespeare's text, political, but Osofisan adds an economic factor too, as the Oba refuses to allow Ayíbí's proposal to build a tobacco factory in the village.

Hamlet is based in the turbulent state of Denmark, with the outside forces of Norway marshalling against the nation; *Wesoo, Hamlet!* is centered in postcolonial, (mostly) post-civil

¹⁶ Osofisan, *Wèsóo, Hamlet!*

¹⁷ Osofisan.

war, economically troubled Nigeria, with outside Westernizing forces of industry marshalled against the traditional order of the village. In this sense, the general atmospheric elements of *Hamlet* parallel the situation Osofisan wished to encapsulate and comment on. Post-civil war Nigeria prefaced the oil boom and, drained by wartime efforts, the country faced a massive economic downturn in the late 1970s, despite Gowon's efforts to revitalize the economy through the creation of the Economic Community of West African States¹⁸. By transforming *Hamlet* in this manner, Osofisan was able to craft a subtle indictment of the failed attempts of the Westernizing, economically minded military to provide for the Nigerian people – a message that was made all the more powerful by the fact that he used traditional Yoruba tropes such as song and idiom to tell it.

V. AESTHETIC REVOLT

It is important to note that surreptitious insurrection in Nigeria has not been limited to the realm of Shakespeare adaptation. Indeed, Femi Osofisan's individual artistic rebellion encompasses a vast array of theatrical material, including pieces uniquely Yoruba in plot and thematic content, such as *The Chattering and the Song*, *Morountodun*, and *Once Upon Four Robbers*. In *The Chattering* Osofisan disguises his "indictment...of the corrupt Gowon regime"¹⁹ by crafting it as a retelling of the overthrowing of nineteenth century Nigerian king, Gaha. *Morountodun* unites the Yoruba legend of Moremi, former queen of Ife, with the story of a Nigerian policewoman who led a stealthy attack on insurgents in 1968, Osofisan here masking a plea for greater gender equality in a nation bounded by traditional practices. *Once Upon Four*

¹⁸ Phillips, "Nigeria's New Political Institutions, 1975-9."

¹⁹ Osofisan, "Literary Theatre after the Generals."

Robbers proved to be a “modern folk tale”²⁰, incorporating an amorphous narrator, audience participation, song, and dance into a tale about highway conmen. Osofisan’s plays thus interweave themes from Yoruba history and theater with political commentary on the social realities of a Nigeria still reeling from political instability, a thematic concern conserved in the Shakespearean adaptations that form the main focus of this paper.

By keeping Shakespeare applicable to Nigeria, the political playwrights of the post-civil war literary resistance movement, Osofisan’s so-called “surreptitious insurrection,” were able to ground their political commentary in a context that was well suited for Nigerians to understand. This context was well suited on two fronts. Firstly, Shakespeare’s plays contain elements, like the turmoil in *Hamlet’s* Denmark, which paralleled Nigeria’s political situation, and thus served as a medium through which political messages could be conveyed. To make the message powerful these writers had to strip Shakespeare’s plots of foreign ideological elements and embody them instead with Yoruba tradition. Secondly, the differences between Shakespeare’s texts and Nigerian politics are, on a cultural level, considerable. And it was these very differences that made Shakespeare such a valuable tool for the revolt. Through the façade of colonial literature, Nigerian writers could disguise their commentary as literary, as nonpolitical. In this sense, the case of surreptitious insurrection and the Shakespearean adaptations of writers in post-civil war Nigeria demonstrates that the apparently non-political may actually be deeply imbued with political commentary. As a foreign playwright with no apparent connection to Nigerian politics, Shakespeare provided an ideal cover for a covert artistic revolt, because authorities simply did not foresee political resistance coming from artistic quarters – least of all a 400-year-old English playwright.

²⁰ Osofisan.

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Hamlet in Lithuania:
The Symbolic Productions by Eimuntas Nekrošius and Oskaras Koršunovas

Simas Šakenis

Expos 20: Why Shakespeare?

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By the time the spectators enter the theater to watch *Hamlet* by Oskaras Koršunovas, the performance is already underway - nine leading actors are present on stage. Each of them is sitting at a typical dressing room make-up table and staring at the mirror before them (see Figure 1). The mise-en-scene has no resemblance to the royal court of Elsinore whatsoever - nine dressing room tables and chairs are the only objects on stage, the costumes are all black and very inelaborate. When people have gathered and the audience lights go down, the actors suddenly start whispering the question “Who are you?” over and over again. Out of frustration that the reflections in mirrors that they are addressing are only asking back the same question instead of answering it, actors start raising the tone until each of them is desperately yelling the words as loud as they can. Suddenly, they turn at the audience one by one and freeze for a few moments, as if realizing for the first time that they were being watched this whole time. They get up, throw the chairs away from them, and start hastily rearranging the tables: the action begins.

This is the opening of one of the most acclaimed productions of *Hamlet* in Lithuanian theater, “Hamlet with a touch of genius” as it was deemed by one of the reviewers.¹ Given that the country does not have a centuries-old tradition of staging Shakespeare and that the development of its theater in the 20th century was marked by the five-decade period of Soviet indoctrination, it can be rather surprising that staging Shakespeare’s most famous tragedies could spread the names of Lithuanian theater directors around the world. Yet two productions of *Hamlet* - one made by Eimuntas Nekrošius in 1997 and the already introduced 2008 production by Oskaras Koršunovas - did receive an extraordinary recognition both on the national and international levels. Nekrošius’ *Hamlet* was chosen to be the closing performance of the Globe to Globe festival in 2012, where it was called “legendary” and praised as “one of the most celebrated Shakespearean productions of our age”.² Koršunovas’ *Hamlet* received its

international acclaim while touring some of the world's most prominent theater festivals and venues, such as BOZAR Center for Fine Arts in Brussels (Belgium), Theater Olympics in Beijing (China), Taiwan International Festival of Arts in Taipei (Taiwan), "Teatro di Roma" in Rome (Italy), "Euro-Scene" in Leipzig (Germany), NET in Moscow (Russia), "Temporada Alta" in Gerona (Spain), and Athens & Epidauros Festival (Greece), among many others.³ A very natural question may arise here: why are these two Lithuanian productions of *Hamlet* so successful? Why Lithuania and why *Hamlet*?

Currently, there is little scholarship devoted to answering these questions directly. Existing writing, most of which is in the form of critical reviews of the productions, is more concerned with giving an overview of what's at work in the two Lithuanian *Hamlets*. For example, in her review of Nekrosius' *Hamlet*, Birgit Beumers accentuates the director's ability to use theatrical devices in such way that "the text and its meaning are stripped to the bone".⁴ Ann Thompson, on the other hand, critiques the production's pretentiousness, its lack of dialogue with the audience, and "unclear" imagery.⁵ Reviewing Koršunovas' *Hamlet*, Roger Ellis outlines how the director "turns Shakespeare's narrative into a play-within-a-play" and states that the raising of "questions of self-identity, self-deception, and pretense makes his *Hamlet* strangely relevant".⁶ Where other reviewers do not raise the broader questions of Lithuania's success with Shakespeare, Ellis suggests that the popularity of Lithuanian theater directors in the international festival circuit may be explained by the fact that "their mise-en-scene is highly visual, physical, and expressive".⁷ In noting this, Ellis comes closest to answering the general question of this essay, however, there is no elaboration of the idea following this statement in his piece. While offering many valuable insights into the artistic language of Nekrošius and Koršunovas in their

productions of Shakespeare's tragedy, these scholars do not really tackle the question of what it is about the confluence of *Hamlet* and Lithuanian theater that leads to such a successful outcome.

In this essay, I argue that the metaphorical theater of Lithuania is particularly well-equipped to present *Hamlet* in new and revealing ways while the tragedy itself is considered to be in an age of textual exhaustion. Having been staged for centuries, *Hamlet* demands novelty and inventiveness in the visual expression which is very much the expertise of Lithuanian theater-makers as they have been trained to convey meanings through symbolic images in trying to avoid Soviet censorship. A close examination of Nekrošius' and Koršunovas' productions of *Hamlet* reveals how the two readings of Shakespeare's tragedy are encoded in the visual clues and metaphors devised by Lithuanian directors, while looking at the effects of Soviet censorship on Lithuanian theater explains why the works are so expressive through theatrical devices in the first place. As argued in this essay, it is their ability to offer a refreshing perspective on *Hamlet* to the audience of the 21st century, to provoke active interpretation, and reveal the subtleties of Shakespeare's text that makes Nekrošius and Koršunovas stand out from the rest.

I. Novelty in *Hamlet*

The four centuries worth of reading, discussing, and appropriating Shakespeare's tragedy does indeed "weigh heavily on those who tackle *Hamlet*"⁸ today. As described by scholars Sonya Freeman Loftis, Allison Kellar and Lisa Ulevich in *Shakespeare's Hamlet in an Era of Textual Exhaustion*, a very common cultural anxiety among people who stage, perform, interpret, or teach *Hamlet* nowadays is that there is simply nothing more left to say, that we have "exhausted the interpretive possibilities of Shakespeare's most popular tragedy".⁹ In light of this shared sense of *Hamlet*'s textual exhaustion there emerges a natural desire to experiment, to

disassemble and transform the original text as much as required in order to keep people interested and get the much-needed reassurance that *Hamlet* is still alive.¹⁰ This “remake it to save it” agenda is acutely indicative of the “Post-Hamlet” era that we find ourselves in. The modern adaptations with Hamlet as a robot, Hamlet with space aliens, Hamlet declaring himself “not Hamlet”¹¹, Hamlet in non-traditional spaces¹², or those rewriting Ophelia to fit the context of feminism¹³ or mental disability¹⁴ are all channeling the idea that *Hamlet* is in need to be reframed. The irony here is that the more we depart from the original in the pursuit of making the tragedy relevant to our times, the more we feel that the “true” *Hamlet* is used up and overdone. As noted by Loftis, Kellar, and Ulevich, this creates a closed loop of some sort: “experimentation begets exhaustion, which begets yet more experimentation”.¹⁵

What becomes truly novel in this context is the approach we may call “post-experimentation”, an antidote to the unending departure from and rewriting of the original. It’s not that there is suddenly a new idea revealed about the tragedy after years or decades of experimentation - perhaps it is true that everything significant about *Hamlet* has already been said. The major blind spot, though, is that it’s not all about *what* you say - it is the *way* you say it that can make an enormous difference, especially in mediums like theater. While the words that the characters speak in the play are set in stone, there is no constraint whatsoever on how ingeniously Shakespeare’s ideas may be conveyed via the use of visuals and other theatrical devices. Thus, instead of constantly trying to rewrite *Hamlet* so that it reflects the concerns of a modern day world (which is how contemporary theater-makers and writers are approaching the play¹⁶), one has to reread *Hamlet* and seek to convey some of the original ideas in novel and creative ways, to uncover the essence of the tragedy by means of symbolic, imaginative expression. Even if the interpretative possibilities of *Hamlet* may be exhausted, one can never

run out of ways in which this multitude of interpretations may be presented to the audiences. It is this inward trajectory towards the original text, the seeking to capture its depths instead of transforming and subverting it that differentiates the “post-experimentation” approach from plain experimentation.

Loftis, Kellar, and Ulevich point out that “the fear of cultural exhaustion is the endpoint at which things begin anew”¹⁷, as the experimentalism is “destined to burn itself out”¹⁸. The trend of radical and subversive adaptations of *Hamlet* does indeed clear up the space for subtle and revealing productions of the tragedy, and while all this noise is still around us, it is extremely refreshing to be offered a deep, symbolic, and insightful perspective on the play. For this reason, the true novelty in staging *Hamlet* in our age lies not in the unexpected or shocking reframing of the tragedy, but in the subtle and suggestive visuals, the revealing messages that are hidden or encoded in the mise-en-scene. The demand for a visually rich, metaphorical theater is, therefore, very high. As it turns out, these are the perfect conditions for Lithuanian theater-makers to enter the game of staging the “timeless” tragedy.

II. Metaphorical Theater of Lithuania

One of the major influences on the development of Lithuanian theater during the Soviet era was censorship. In order to be shown, virtually every theater production or any kind of stage performance had to be first approved by the designated officials and, if any inconsistencies with the ideology were found - edited according to the instructions of the censors.¹⁹ According to Jonas Jurašas, one of the more prominent theater-makers of that time, censors “would insist on pitiless distortion of the play’s innermost meaning”, seeing many of the motives in his work as politically dangerous.²⁰ Even a play about a famous love story from the 16th-century Lithuanian

history, *Barbora Radvilaitė*, was regarded as a “symbol of individual freedom, love of the fatherland, and of the conflict between the individual and society”. The director was accused of “nationalism, religious mysticism and exaggerated spirituality”.²¹

While Jonas Jurašas did not see a possibility of continuing his artistic work under the constraints of Socialist realism and ended up fleeing to the West, other artists kept looking for ways of bypassing the censorship apparatus. This urge to express genuine feelings and ideas in such way that, on the surface level, they would not seem inconsistent with the ideology led to the adoption of Aesopian language - “the use of allusion, allegory, or coded meaning to conceal inadmissible content”.²² According to Goda Dapšytė, a scholar that has investigated the influence of Soviet censorship on Lithuanian theater, the mastering of Aesopian language and the emergence of metaphorical theater (which she calls a “by-product” of the censorship²³) could be recognized as the most valuable heritage that the Soviet era has left in Lithuanian artistic tradition.²⁴ She points out that the metaphorical expression that once seemed to be a “temporary trend”²⁵ (in a 1979 article a theater critic Dovydas Judelevičius notes that “features of metaphorical theater could be found in the works of virtually all active theater-makers of the time”²⁶) became a “dominant norm” in Lithuanian theater in the post-Soviet era.²⁷ In fact, as Lithuanian theater-makers started to gain prominence in the international festival circuit after the country restored its independence, the symbolic visuals and revealing metaphors became the descriptors of the signature style of Lithuanian directors.²⁸ Both Eimuntas Nekrošius, referred to as “one of the founders of metaphorical theater tradition in Lithuania” by Dapsyte²⁹, and Oskaras Koršunovas, a member of the same generation of theater-makers that developed their artistic tastes during the years of Soviet occupation, have this metaphorical expression engraved deeply

into their theatrical DNA. It is for this reason that their *Hamlets* are so visual, symbolic, and revealing.

III. *Hamlet* by Eimuntas Nekrošius

Eimuntas Nekrošius' *Hamlet*³⁰ is a production that precisely fits the description of what we established as a “post-experimental” approach - it does not aim to shock the audience with a radical new framing of the tragedy but instead seeks to uncover some of the core meanings of Shakespeare's play via symbolic visualization. Very integral to Nekrošius' reading of *Hamlet* is the impression of coldness that the production aims to create. The use of materials like metal, ice, or glass (which most of the stage objects are made from) creates a sense of hostility and coldness that is not only an attribute of the “nippy and eager air”³¹ that surrounds Elsinore, but also an encapsulation of the great emotional tension and angst that has filled the royal court. The large circular saw hanging above the stage throughout the performance is a constant reminder of the terrible murder that has been committed by Claudius and of the danger that is not going away no matter what the King does (see Figure 2). Its unreachability and unassailable existence also create allusions to it being a God-like figure, an ultimate judge whom one can never hide from.

Another important element in Nekrošius' production is the use of drizzling rain, both as a force of erosion and as an intervention from the heavens. A recurring motif in the performance is when a drum is placed right at the center of the stage and the water droplets falling from above start hitting it producing a ticking sound which no human has a hand in creating (see Figures 3, 4). It is in this very immaterial, bodiless form that the ghost's first appearance to Marcellus and Horatio is illustrated by Nekrošius. This is also how Hamlet's death is portrayed at the end of the play: after saying his famous words “the rest is silence”³² Hamlet firmly grabs the drum and falls

with it on the ground, ceasing the ticking sound, which symbolized him being alive, irrevocably. The tragic ending of the play is amplified by the symbolic closing scene of the production: King Hamlet desperately tries to take away the drum from the hands of his deceased son in order to put it back where the water droplets could hit it, but without being able to do so, completely overcome with grief, he starts hitting the drum with his own hands as the curtains close with Verdi's "La Forza del Destino" playing in the background (see Figure 5).

The production is filled with visual clues that highlight the various underlying meanings in Nekrošius' interpretation of *Hamlet*. For example, during his first few appearances on stage Hamlet behaves like a child demanding attention from his mother, in a way, re-evaluating how close to him Gertrude still is: he lets his trousers slip down and waits for Gertrude to put them back on (see Figure 6); he makes strange sounds and swings on a chair like a child waiting to be stopped (see Figure 7). It is only during his first encounter with the ghost that Hamlet is turned into a grown man: King Hamlet rubs his son's hands and feet against a large block of ice - a metaphor of preparing the prince for the harsh reality he will have to face and the burdensome responsibility that is going to be laid upon him (see Figures 8, 9).

Nekrošius creates a very memorable spectacle in the scene where the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy is delivered. A large lantern made of ice is hung on the circular saw above the center of the stage and is slowly melting due to the heat of the candles (see Figure 10). Wearing a shirt made of very light, paper-like substance, Hamlet steps underneath the lantern and, as he goes on to deliver the soliloquy, the water droplets falling from the melting ice keep wetting his shirt and making it slowly disintegrate. By the end of the monologue, Hamlet's shirt is almost completely torn apart, making him stand both literally and metaphorically undressed before the audience (see Figure 11). It is by means of these suggestive visuals that Nekrošius

symbolizes how Hamlet's innermost struggle is exposed in this soliloquy, how a mere thought about the "undiscover'd country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns"³³ takes away all safety and courage from the protagonist and strips him down to the very core of his soul.

Other visual statements that Nekrošius makes in the production include Voltemand and Cornelius behaving like pet dogs to the King and Queen (see Figures 12, 13), Hamlet looking "inside" Claudius through the two paper tubes as a symbol for "I see a cherub that sees them"³⁴ (see Figure 14), Hamlet carefully crumbling coal on white sheets of paper and blowing the black dust - "some dozen or sixteen lines"³⁵ inserted into the "Murder of Gonzago" - into the players' faces (see Figures 15, 16), Hamlet sitting as a priest in the confessional when a play is about to be performed for Claudius to expose the King's deadly sin (see Figure 17), and a number of others. It is through all these powerful images that Nekrošius speaks to his audience throughout the performance, metaphorically revealing the depths of Shakespeare's tragedy. As a result, his *Hamlet* is both close to the original and extraordinarily novel.

IV. *Hamlet* by Oskaras Koršunovas

Oskaras Koršunovas' *Hamlet*³⁶ is quite different in its overall aesthetic from Nekrošius' staging of the tragedy, but at its core is the same "post-experimental" aim to engage with the original text instead of trying to subvert it. The fundamental questioning of self-identity in the opening scene (introduced at the beginning of this essay) establishes right away that the production is focused on one of the central themes of Shakespeare's tragedy - the question of honesty and deception. Koršunovas' decision to set the play in an environment that resembles a theater backstage³⁷ is very congruous with this framing of the tragedy - the unmasking that Hamlet seeks to do with most of the play's characters is directly analogous to the experience of

an actor who exits the stage and leaves the sight of the audience: a performer on a backstage. The very fact that all characters are constantly being surrounded by the mirrors of the nine make-up tables immediately prompts questions of self-analysis: which one of the reflected images is of one's true self, if any? The notion of being "fake" is also represented through the use of makeup. For instance, before his first conversation with Claudius and Gertrude, Hamlet paints his face in white, putting on a mask of some sort, and cleans it off only when everybody leaves the stage and he is about to deliver a soliloquy (see Figure 18). It is very clear from Shakespeare's text that Hamlet is suppressing his feelings in this particular scene³⁸ and Koršunovas' use of makeup is an example of how such an idea may be conveyed metaphorically through the use of visuals.

Another feeling that keeps coming up while watching Koršunovas' production is the suspicion that everyone, including Hamlet, is being deceived, that some major hazard is always lurking around. Two mysterious animal-like creatures - one with a glowing red nose resembling a mouse (see Figure 19) and the other with a huge rat's head (see Figure 20) - appear on stage occasionally to sneak around the play's characters or observe the stage action from the side. This element of Koršunovas' interpretation stems from one of the many ambiguities that Shakespeare has - perhaps intentionally - left in *Hamlet*: the relatively undeveloped and almost *too-good-to-be-true* personality of Horatio. As acknowledged by Darius Meškauskas, a performer of Hamlet in Koršunovas' production, the director's idea was to portray Horatio as a spy secretly sent by Fortinbras.³⁹ There is, of course, no line in the play that could be directly indicative of this, so the idea had to be transmitted symbolically: we see Horatio carrying the glowing red nose that was previously worn by the mouse creature (a spy?) and when we hear the drum sounds from the Fortinbras' army in the background, Horatio pantomimes beating the drum and marches according to the rhythm (see Figure 21). Another detail in Shakespeare's text that supports this

interpretation is the fact that Horatio is the only one of the main characters who does not die in the end. Koršunovas' production, therefore, ends with Horatio turning off the lights of every character's dressing room table one by one, while the marching music is playing in the background. Also, it is Horatio who says "The rest is silence" - originally a phrase of Hamlet - to close the performance. With this, Koršunovas does not leave the audience doubting who has the control in the end and who is the real beneficiary of Elsinore's massacre (see Figure 22).

While these are a few of the more noticeable and provocative visual statements that Koršunovas makes in his *Hamlet*, the production is also full of subtle visual details that enrich the reading of Shakespeare's text. The portrayal of Ophelia, for example, is flavored with suggestive imagery. Koršunovas makes her first appear on stage singing a Japanese song and performing a ritual with flowers, showcasing her affinity towards nature and beauty (see Figure 23); her meeting with Hamlet after the "To be or not to be" soliloquy is very clearly portrayed as a setup by Polonius and others, as the stage is carefully decorated with flowers and all the characters are overseeing the action (see Figure 24); Ophelia's breakdown after the "nunnery" scene is illustrated with an allusion to a funeral - she is lying on the ground while other characters are throwing flowers on her body as if she was being buried (see Figure 25); her drowning is depicted with Gertrude spilling a glass of water in her face (see Figure 26). These and other visual clues arguably contain most of the interpretative substance in Koršunovas' reading of *Hamlet*. Just like the production of his Lithuanian predecessor, Koršunovas' *Hamlet* is an example of how inventive metaphorical visualization can breathe new life into a seemingly exhausted tragedy. Koršunovas lets modern theater adapt to the 17th-century play, not the other way around.

V. Saving *Hamlet* (and others)

Are we done with *Hamlet*? Is our historical moment ready to announce the death of the Prince? The success of the two Lithuanian productions and the analysis of their novel method of approaching the exhausted tragedy should make one skeptical. Influenced by the tradition of a highly metaphorical theater of their country, the two Lithuanian directors tapped into the virtually unlimited source of artistic novelty in staging the “classics” - conveying old ideas in new ways. In the age filled with desperate experimentation and subversive rewritings of Shakespeare’s most popular play, Nekrošius’ and Koršunovas’ “post-experimental” *Hamlets* stand out as tremendously successful productions that do not aim to radicalize or deform the tragedy’s innermost meanings. Their return to the original text and inventive visualization of some of its core ideas enables them to offer a fresh perspective on the tragedy without contributing to the modern day anxiety that we have reached the end with the Dane.

Retelling Hamlet’s story through the use of symbolic visuals and highlighting the various underlying meanings via suggestive imagery is, perhaps, not as easy as repurposing the tragedy for some trendy concern of the modern times - be it robots, aliens, or feminism. It is also not at all clear that Lithuanian theater-makers would have mastered this kind of metaphorical expression were it not for the strict ideological constraints put up by the censorship of the Soviet regime. It is, however, important to recognize that this “post-experimental” approach of Lithuanians could be carving out a path for the future of staging *Hamlet*, as well as all other dramas that are or will be in danger of becoming exhausted. With this, we may be uncovering the formula for success in the 21st century’s theater - be inventive in *how* you tell the story, not in *what* story you tell.