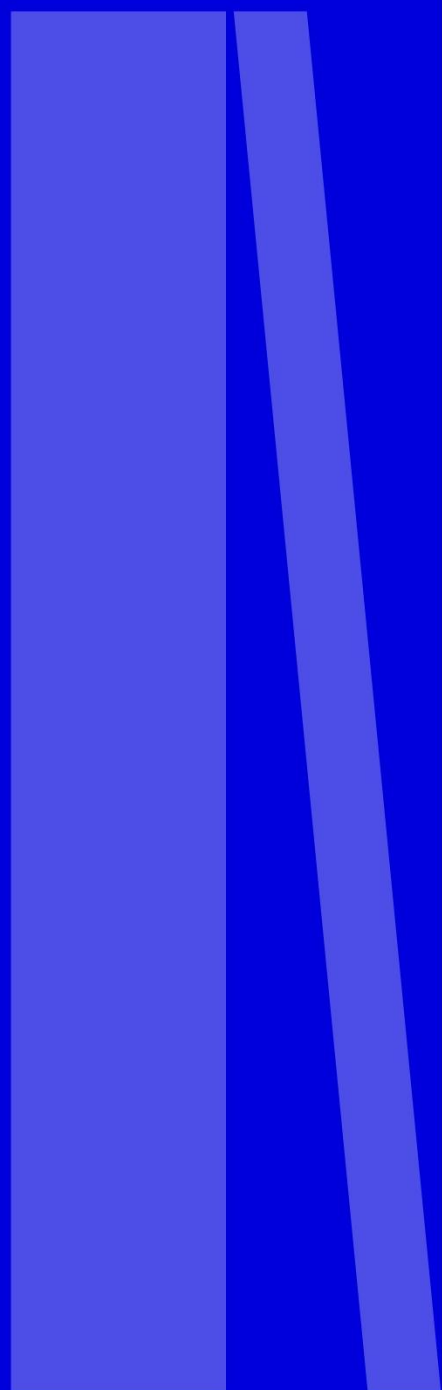


T  
H  
EORY AND  
PRACTICE IN  
ENGLISH  
STUDIES

MANY GHOSTS OF HAMLET

VOLUME XI  
ISSUE 1  
2022



THEORY  
&  
PRACTICE  
IN  
ENGLISH  
STUDIES

VOL. XI, ISSUE 1

2022

E-ISSN: 1805-0859

## THEORY AND PRACTICE IN ENGLISH STUDIES

<https://english.phil.muni.cz/research/journals/thepes>

**Theory and Practice in English Studies** (THEPES) is an open-source journal, published bi-annually by the Department of English & American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic.

THEPES welcomes articles by established as well as beginning scholars in the fields of literary studies, linguistics, cultural studies, translation studies, and ELT methodology. Submissions should accord with the conventions of *The Chicago Manual of Style, 17<sup>th</sup> Edition*.

**Editor-in-Chief** Jiří Lukl  
**Issue Editor** Anna Mikyšková

**Editorial Board** Jana Chamonikolasová, Masaryk University, Brno, CZ  
Sanja Ignjatović, University of Niš, Serbia  
Tomáš Pospíšil, Masaryk University, Brno, CZ  
Michaela Weiss, Silesian University in Opava, CZ

**Advisory Board** Petr Anténe, Palacký University, CZ  
Pavel Drábek, University of Hull, UK  
Šárka Havlíčková Kysová, Masaryk University, CZ  
Simona Hájková, Masaryk University, CZ  
Renata Kamenická, Masaryk University, CZ  
Veronika Nogolová, Silesian University in Opava, CZ  
Eliška Raiterová, Masaryk University, CZ  
Jiří Rambousek, Masaryk University, CZ  
Jeffrey Alan Smith, Masaryk University, CZ  
Klára Škrobánková, Masaryk University, CZ  
Lenka Žárská, Masaryk University, CZ

**Editorial Staff** Jiří Lukl, typesetting & web  
Ivona Vrzalová, editor  
Tereza Walsbergerová, social media  
Nicola Catherine Fořtová, copy editor  
Jeffrey Allan Smith, copy editor  
Michael Matthew Kaylor, copy editor  
Tomáš Varga, cover design  
Kíra Odenvald, illustration

**Address:** Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts,  
Masaryk University, Arna Nováka 1, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic

**Email:** [thepes@phil.muni.cz](mailto:thepes@phil.muni.cz)



THEMATIC ISSUE:

MANY GHOSTS OF *HAMLET*



EDITED BY ANNA MIKYŠKOVÁ





## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ANNA MIKYŠKOVÁ: Editorial .....	7
---------------------------------	---

### Research Articles

BEATRICE BERSELLI: "How He Met the Spectator's Heart and Held It Tight": On F. L. Schröder's and J. F. H. Brockmann's <i>Hamlet</i> in Eighteenth- Century Germany .....	13
IVONA MIŠTEROVÁ: "And in This Harsh World Draw Thy Breath in Pain, To Tell My Story": The Reception of <i>Hamlet</i> in Pilsen Theatres.....	31
DAVID LIVINGSTONE: "More Things in Heaven and Earth": New Directions in <i>Hamlet</i> Adaptations.....	49
JARROD DEPRADO: <i>Hamlet</i> /Hamnet: Haunted by "the Poison of Deep Grief" .....	61
YVONNE NICOLLE STAFFORD-MILLS: East Meets West at Tiananmen Square: Does Lin Zhaohua's Post-Tiananmen <i>Hamlet</i> Catch the Conscience of Beijing?.....	77
ASHLEY-MARIE MAXWELL: Hamlet, Prince of Japan: Examining the Translations and Performances of Japanese <i>Hamlet</i> .....	95
MATEUSZ GODLEWSKI: Textual Variants: What Happens to Them in Translation? Some Reflections on the Polish Critical Editions of <i>Hamlet</i> .....	113
NADINA VIȘAN AND DARIA PROTOPODESCU: 200 Years of Romanian <i>Hamlet</i> Retlanslation: Ghosts of the Source Text? .....	123

### Double Bill: Ophelia and Co. in Popular Music

MICHAELA WEISS: Singing <i>Hamlet</i> : Bob Dylan's Take on the Classic .....	143
FILIP KRAJNÍK: Her Majesty's Shakespeare: Shakespearean Echoes in Songs by Queen .....	151

### Interviews and Reviews

ANNA MIKYŠKOVÁ: An Interview with Kareen Seidler on Early Modern German <i>Hamlet</i> , Its Importance for <i>Hamlet</i> Studies, and Its New Translation into English.....	163
FILIP KRAJNÍK: An Interview with Pavel Drábek on Translating Shakespeare in Theory and Practice.....	173
EVA KYSELOVÁ AND KLÁRA ŠKROBÁNKOVÁ: Production Review: Double <i>Hamlet</i> – Double Trouble ( <i>Hamlet</i> , dir. by Michal Dočekal, ABC Theatre, 2021; <i>Hamlet</i> , dir. by Jakub Čermák, South Bohemian Theatre, 2022.) .....	185

MICHAL ZAHÁLKA: An Interview with Jakub Čermák on <i>Hamlet</i> , Depressive Children and the Difference between Official and Independent Czech Scenes .....	191
EVA KYSELOVÁ: Book Review (William Shakespeare: <i>Tragický příběh o Hamletovi, dánském princ</i> i, trans. by Filip Krajník. Brno: Větrné mlýny, 2022.) .....	199
ANNA MIKYŠKOVÁ: An Interview with Kateřina Fürbachová on Illustrating <i>Hamlet</i> (and Ophelia), Fashion and Ecological Activism Through Art .....	205

## EDITORIAL

*Anna Mikyšková*

THE year 2022 is rather unfortunate for celebrating *Hamlet*, in the eyes of many not only Shakespeare's greatest play, but also the greatest piece of Western literature at least since the end of the Middle Ages. The year does not mark any round Hamletian anniversary, though it falls very close to three of them: In 2023, it will be four hundred and twenty years since the publication of the (in)famous First Quarto of the play – the first ever printed edition of Shakespeare's tragedy, textually very different from the *Hamlet* which most of us know from our school years. The same year will also mark the four hundredth anniversary of the so-called First Folio of Shakespeare's plays – the first time any English playwright's dramatic works were collected in one volume (in this case, including *Hamlet*, of course). Finally, a year later will mark four hundred and twenty years since the publication of the Second Quarto of the play, the longest version of the work that we have, and one different in quite a few respects from the other two versions. Even in Shakespeare's lifetime, or shortly after, his greatest tragedy apparently lived multiple lives, both on the stage and in print.

While the words of the anonymous author of the 1604 volume of poetry *Daiphantus, or the Passions of Love*, claiming that "Prince Hamlet" is able to "please all," were true for Shakespeare's era, it is even more the case for ours. In the past four centuries, the story of the Danish prince has provoked a plethora of artists, creators and critics to define and re-define *Hamlet* anew, and generations of reading, watching and listening audiences felt a special bond with the play's main protagonist. Just as Hamlet accuses Rosencrantz of being a sponge that "soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities" (4.2), so has the entire play sucked in the times, events and lived experience to gain new relevance with every new performance, reading or re-imagination.

With the forthcoming anniversaries in view, we decided to celebrate the ongoing influence of the play on our culture and lives with the present monothematic issue of *THEPES*. And since the scope of *Hamlet*'s influence is infinitely broad, we decided to go beyond the strictly academic sphere and address the creative potential of the play from additional perspectives, be they academic research, the sphere of popular music, practical theatre, translation and visual arts.

**Beatrice Berselli** opens the issue with her study about the late eighteenth-century German performance history of *Hamlet*. By focusing on F. L. Schröder's 1776 adaptation of *Hamlet* and comparing J. F. H. Brockmann's performance as the Danish prince with Schröder's later own interpretation of the role, Berselli demonstrates how their revolutionary acting styles, newly based on physiognomy and imitation of emotions, contributed to the growing popularity of Shakespeare on German stages. **Ivona Mišterová** traces the reception of *Hamlet* productions in Pilsen theatres since the opening of the new Municipal Theatre in 1902 until the beginning of the twenty-first century. By drawing on period reviews for older productions enriched by personal experience for more recent productions, the article showcases the rich variety of directorial and acting strategies and the changing ideologies behind them that have been applied to Shakespeare in this West Bohemian city for more than one hundred years.

**David Livingstone** shifts the discussion about *Hamlet* to the world of prose fiction. In his analysis of three contemporary novels that adapt the story of the Danish prince – Lisa Klein's *Ophelia* (2006), Ian McEwan's *Nutshell* (2016) and Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet* (2020) – Livingstone identifies three adaptation strategies: the Joycean, the Stoppardian and the "updating" approach, which all, though to a different effect, play with intertextuality. With a similar focus on *Hamlet*'s non-theatrical adaptations, **Jarrold DePrado** discusses the fictional persona of Shakespeare depicted in three recent works which deal with the playwright's relationship to grief. By analysing O'Farrell's *Hamnet*, Kenneth Branagh's film *All Is True* (2018) and Dead Centre's play *Hamnet* (2017), DePrado argues that, similarly to the myth of Shakespeare the classical author, the myth of Shakespeare the grieving father transcends the limits of biographical reality and has, likewise, become part of our cultural consciousness.

**Yvonne Nicolle Stafford-Mills** directs our attention back to theatre and offers an analysis of the 1990 Chinese theatre production of *Hamlet* by Chinese *avant-garde* director Lin Zhaohua, which was shaped by the massacres that took place on Tiananmen Square in 1989. In Zhaohua's rendition, Shakespeare's most famous tragedy not only received a new *avant-garde* look, but also assumed new, topical political and social connotations, commenting on the unreliability of official political narrative, governmental control, and the inevitability of the violent events. **Ashley-Marie Maxwell** opens the topic of theatre translation with her article about the Japanese perspective on *Hamlet*. By analysing Japanese translations and adaptations, namely Shoichiro Kawai's translation of *Hamlet* (2003) – which was used for Yukio Ninagawa's several productions of *Hamlet* (2003–2015) as well as for the Takarazuka Revue's

2010 rock opera *Hamlet!!* – Maxwell traces contrasting interpretations of the Shakespearean Danish tragedy and demonstrates how the story of *Hamlet* had become rooted in the Japanese theatre tradition and cultural consciousness. In his article, **Mateusz Godlewski** focuses on the problem of textual variants of Shakespeare's plays that are usually lost in translations, which need to offer definite versions of the English text and which later determine any potential theatre productions based on those translations. On the example of Polish translations of *Hamlet* of the last two centuries, Godlewski traces various translating approaches to textual variants found in Polish *Hamlet* editions and argues for a thorough critical apparatus accompanying the translations, one that would highlight the plurality of *Hamlet* versions and, thus, mediate the original interpretative richness to non-English speakers. Lastly, **Daria Protopopescu** and **Nadina Vișan** offer a different perspective on *Hamlet* translations in their article in which they set out to test Antoine Berman's Retranslation Hypothesis on a number of Romanian translations of Shakespeare's longest tragedy. Apart from providing an insightful outline of Romanian *Hamlet* translation history, their analysis, which focuses on the lexeme *ghost* in sixteen different translations, not only exemplifies the semantic richness of *Hamlet* but also explores the underlying principles of the Retranslation Hypothesis.

The issue then continues with a section entitled "Double Bill: Ophelia and Co. in Popular Music," which offers two brief essays addressing allusions to Shakespeare in popular music. **Michaela Weiss** focuses on selected songs by Bob Dylan, showing how *Hamlet* shaped their symbolic, political and social message. **Filip Krajník**, on the other hand, goes beyond *Hamlet* to discuss Shakespearean allusions in songs by Queen and how Shakespeare's influence blends into their highly personal messages.

The last section of the issue, entitled "Interviews and Reviews," offers a number of both academic and practical takes on *Hamlet* and Shakespeare in general. It opens with an interview with the translator and Shakespeare scholar **Kareen Seidler**, who talks about her work on the *Early Modern German Shakespeare* project and her English translation of *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*, the seventeenth-century German adaptation of *Hamlet*. In her opinion, studying German early modern play texts not only gives us insight into early modern dramaturgy in general but, in the case of the German *Hamlet*, also sheds light on the English players' theatre techniques and *Hamlet*'s stage history itself. The interview that follows with the Shakespeare scholar, translator of drama, professor of theatre and theatre practitioner **Pavel Drábek** addresses the topic of translating Shakespeare both from the theoretical and practical perspective. Drábek shares with the readers his views concerning what it takes

to translate Shakespeare nowadays, as well his own experience with translating Shakespeare's dramatic works. (He is the author of the most recent translation of *Romeo and Juliet* into Czech).

The rest of the articles are all tied to *Hamlet* in Czech: **Klára Škrobánková and Eva Kyselová** first discuss two recent productions of the play, one staged last year by the ABC Theatre in Prague (directed by Michal Dočekal), while the other premiered in the studio of the South Bohemian Theatre (directed by Jakub Čermák). It is interesting to observe how differently one text can be approached, especially when staged in two very different translations: a traditional one by a preeminent Czech translator (and a theatre practitioner himself), the late Jiří Jasek (in Dočekal's production), and a brand new one by Filip Krajník (produced by Čermák), whose ambition is to present Shakespeare's words to the new generation of readers and theatregoers in a way that departs from the well-established traditions of translating the play in the country. **Michal Zahálka** interviewed Jakub Čermák, the director of the latter of the two productions, who is mostly known in Czech theatre circles for his work for the independent scene. Čermák talks about his experience with directing *Hamlet*, as well as the difference between staging a play in the capital and a regional theatre, and between the official and the independent scenes. **Eva Kyselová** further evaluates the first volume of the upcoming edition of Shakespeare in new Czech translations, entitled "William," that contains the aforementioned translation of *Hamlet* by Filip Krajník. Finally, **Anna Mikyšková** conducted an interview with Kateřina Fůrbachová, a student of a secondary art school and the illustrator of the student edition of Krajník's translation, about how her illustrations materialised, from the initial inspiration to the ultimate product, as well as her own interests and ambitions for the future.

We hope that, with the diversity of perspectives, academic insights and personal takes on Shakespeare's work and related topics in these articles, the current issue will not be just empty "words, words, words," but will, indeed, "please all."

Anna Mikyšková, Masaryk University  
anna.mikyskova@phil.muni.cz



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.

## RESEARCH ARTICLES

---





**“HOW HE MET THE SPECTATOR’S HEART  
AND HELD IT TIGHT”: ON F. L. SCHRÖDER’S  
AND J. F. H. BROCKMANN’S *HAMLET*  
IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY GERMANY**

*Beatrice Berselli*

**Abstract**

This article proposes an analysis of J. F. H. Brockmann’s *Hamlet* performance based on F. L. Schröder’s adaptation of 20<sup>th</sup> September 1776 in Hamburg, which is regarded as the beginning of Shakespeare’s conquest of the German stage. After inserting Schröder’s work within the Shakespeare-debate of eighteenth-century Germany between the advocates of the French-inspired *Regelpoetik* on the one hand and the adversaries of Germany’s dependency on French culture on the other, its *mise en scène* is read on the backdrop of Schröder’s ‘revolutionary’ conceptions of acting as inspired by the Italian actor Francesco Riccoboni. Secondly, and most importantly, the essay explores J. F. Brockmann’s performance of Hamlet as conveyed by Schink’s and Chodowiecki’s literary and figurative attestations. In this regard, it offers a comparison between Schröder’s and Brockmann’s Hamlets facing the ghost, which proves crucial in order to understand the difference between two competing, but at the same time innovative, acting styles on the German stage of the time. This intertwining of eighteenth-century German literature, figurative arts and performance theories will lead to an as yet unattempted foray into Schröder’s and Brockmann’s interpretations of *Hamlet*, which from that moment on enjoyed constant appreciation throughout the centuries and led to Shakespeare’s success all over Germany.

**Keywords**

*Hamlet*, William Shakespeare, Friedrich Ludwig Schröder, Johann Franz Hieronymus Brockmann, drama, adaptation, performance

\* \* \*

*He [Brockmann] could only say a few words to show his gratitude to the audience: tears prevented him from speaking. His performance was indeed as beautiful as touching. We all cried with him.*  
(Ruppert, quoted in Häublein 2015, 84)

SHAKESPEARE'S *Hamlet* is one of the most discussed and performed works in the Western literary canon. Its enigmatic plot, drawn from Saxo Grammaticus' chronicles, and above all its fascinating but at the same time elusive protagonist, caught in the intellectual dilemma between complex thinking and political action, are exactly what makes this play interesting and constantly open not only to new interpretations, but also adaptations. In particular, this study deals with the reception of *Hamlet* in the second half of the eighteenth-century Germany, when the play established itself on the German stage reaching the peak of its success. The first important event dates back to the year 1776, when the theatre manager and actor F. L. Schröder (1744–1816), inspired by the first remarkable translation of 22 Shakespearean plays by C. M. Wieland (trans. 1762–66) and by F. von Heufeld's first attempt of *Hamlet*-adaptation (1773) at the Habsburg Court Theatre in Prague, produced his own version of *Hamlet* in Hamburg<sup>1</sup> followed by its *mise-en-scène* with the actor J. F. H. Brockmann (1745–1812) in the title-role. Both Schröder and Brockmann contributed to the birth of a veritable *Hamlet*-fever in Germany of the eighteenth century, coming at an important juncture in the development of a German national theatre.

Before getting into the main topic of the study, it is useful to provide readers with a brief introduction concerning the historical background of the early Shakespeare's reception in the German context of the time, which is crucial for understanding the reasons behind the success of Schröder's adaptation and Brockmann's performance as Hamlet. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, Shakespeare had been little more than a name in Germany, as the "old imperial race of Middle Europe knew basically only two sources of poetical art from abroad: the ancients introduced by our clergy and schools, and French authors introduced by our nobility" (Brandl, quoted in Macey 1971–72, 261). In this context, only unattributed versions survived in the early reception of Shakespeare in Germany (Paulin 2003, 4).

It is only with K. W. von Borcke's translation of *Julius Caesar* (1741) that a Shakespeare's text appeared under Shakespeare's name for the first time, this contributing to arouse an important, highly controversial discussion about the reception

---

<sup>1</sup> The reception and appreciation of English theatre were particularly intensive in Hamburg, a liberal and progressive city overlooking the North Sea, where both the commercial and social exchange with England was actively afforded: there, people could read more easily the reports of many German travelers coming back from England, thus following English theater life with greater interest than in the rest of Europe (cf. Häublein 2015, 72). Its theatre was the first major center for the spread of the Shakespearean dramaturgy.

of Shakespeare in Germany between two opposing tendencies in the eighteenth-century drama – the French-inspired *Regelpoetik* on the one hand and the English-inspired drama criticizing Germany's dependency on French culture on the other. The "imperious advocate of a restrained, rule-governed poetics J. C. Gottsched" (Theisen 2006, 505), strongly influenced by Voltaire's dominating French point of view, who in a letter to d' Argental referred to Shakespeare as a "histrion barbare" (Voltaire 1964, 204),<sup>2</sup> denounced the typical Shakespearean traits emerging from Borcke's translation in his treatise *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst* (1730). After alluding to the lack of order and consistency which resulted mainly from Shakespeare's violation of neo-classical rules, Gottsched blamed Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* for having "so much vile action that no one can read it without disgust" (Gottsched 1962, 613, translation mine<sup>3</sup>). J. E. Schlegel, too, criticized Shakespeare's frequent "bad language," referring to his witty plays and overstated metaphors as "shortcomings" indicative of the poor and popular taste characteristic of the Elizabethan age "that couldn't be excused as *nature*" (Schlegel 1887, 78). F. C. Nicolai in his *Briefe über den itzigen Zustand der schönen Wissenschaften in Deutschland* (1755) similarly attacked Shakespeare's disrespect of rules, lack of erudition and his tendency to mix the tragic, the comic and the lyrical in a context where themes and motifs were still bound to social hierarchies and ranks. At the same time, however, Nicolai is one of the first scholars who praised the Bard's "crafted powerful, many-sided characters that could serve as a model for the renewal of German theatre" (Nicolai 1894, 87).

In fact, on the other hand, Borcke's translation of *Julius Caesar* gave young German enthusiasts their first glimpse of a new poetic drama with the possibility of a revitalization of their national theatre, in this way contributing to a progressive disappearance of French playwrights from the German *Spielpläne* and to the incorporation of Shakespeare into the German tradition within half a century. By the middle of the eighteenth century, with the rise of the bourgeoisie and permanent theatres,<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Voltaire criticized Shakespeare, particularly his *Hamlet*. In his preface of *Semiramis* (1748), he argued that: "*Hamlet* is a gross and barbarous piece and would never be borne by the lowest rabble in France or Italy. Hamlet runs mad in the second act, and his mistress in the third; the prince kills the father of his mistress and fancies he is killing a rat; and the heroine of the play throws herself into the river. They dig her grave on the stage, and the grave-diggers, holding the dead men's skulls in their hands, talk nonsense worthy of them. Hamlet answers their abominable stuff by some whimsies not less disgusting . . . Hamlet, his mother, and father-in-law, drink together on the stage. They sing at table, quarrel, beat and kill one another. One would think the whole piece was the product of the imagination of a drunken savage" (Voltaire 2015, 15, translation mine).

<sup>3</sup> If not indicated otherwise, all translations from the non-English sources are done by the author of the article.

<sup>4</sup> From the 1760s theatres in Germany had become permanent and hosted the most disparate spectators: the parterre was reserved to lower class and bourgeoisie, and the galleries to the aristocracy. This

modern society had become too complex for its theatrical representation: as “religious, political, intellectual and cultural upheavals were shifting focal points from aristocratic ruling courts to burgeoning commercial towns” (McCarthy 2013, 4), middle-class protagonists, with their everyday life concerns and ordinary situations, were gradually substituting the noble, larger-than-life, aristocratic heroes and fustian language of French court theatre. Therefore, Shakespeare started to be perceived as a modern poet, whose characters and plays offered the basis for a new kind of drama able to capture every situation and social stratum under the conditions of modern complexity and fragmentation. This “tendency” began with G. E. Lessing and culminated with the so-called *Sturm und Drang* movement. The vigor of Lessing’s attacks on Voltaire and the French school removed most of the bias against the great English dramatist and paved the way for a more favorable reception of him. Lessing, for instance, criticized Gottsched’s tendency to “frenchify” the German stage while ignoring the fact that German taste leaned more naturally in the direction of England.<sup>5</sup> His famous *17. Literaturbrief* (1759) opens with an open attack on French tradition, ranking Shakespeare’s *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Hamlet* next to Sophocles’s *Oedipus* in their power over our passions.<sup>6</sup> In particular, Lessing was fascinated by Shakespeare’s ability to catch “the fleeting shadows of individual forms, to capture the language characteristic of the most diverse classes, ages or passions” (Theisen 2006, 508) and to portray characters who, as Harold Bloom put it, “imitated . . . *essential* human nature” (Bloom 1998, 3). J. W. Goethe, too, while writing his admiration of Shakespeare in his treatise *Zum Schakespeares Tag* (1771), publicly denounced the French *Regelpoetik* as a “tiresome restraint for our imagination” (Goethe 1962, 212).<sup>7</sup> In other words, Shakespeare stood more and more “as the token figure for a liberal departure from normative poetics” (Theisen 2006, 505).

---

of course raised the issue of the mediation between the different tastes of a composite public which German playwrights tried to resolve through a new, modern kind of repertoire in both content and form.

<sup>5</sup> “The Shakespearean theater, with its bend towards the great, the terrible and the melancholic had more affinity with and more effect on the German disposition than French classicist theatre” (Lessing 2010, 334).

<sup>6</sup> “After Sophocles’s *Oedipus*, no play in the world can have more power over our passions than *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Hamlet* . . . And the *Zaire* of Voltaire, how far is it beneath the Moor of Venice (*Othello*) of which it is a weak copy and from whom the whole character of Orosman has been borrowed?” (Lessing 2014, 70)

<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare’s influence is much evident in Goethe’s drama *Götz* (1773), which, as he wrote in his *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, he completed in just six weeks without any plan, whereby he freed himself from the rule of dramatic unity beyond place or time to imitate the irregularity of Shakespearean drama (cf. Goethe 2007, 199). With a sequence of more than fifty scenes that showed the most varied hierarchies and social settings, *Götz*’s heroes, too, were consciously made to imitate great men of action in the Shakespearean manner. Like the Shakespearean tragedies, *Götz*, too, focused on dramatic scenarios of loyalty and deceit “and revolves around the ‘secret hinge’ that Goethe much appreciated in Shakespeare’s drama, where the belief in freedom of will, so characteristic of the modern individual, collides with the necessary development of the larger historical whole” (Theisen 2006, 511).

In this renewed context, the performative style too, needed more simple, energetic, yet precise and realistic acting devoted to the *imitatio naturae* (cf. Fischer Lichte 1992, 51–70) to invigorate the audiences, far from the mechanical and rigid “adroit art of improvisation that had been employed in the performances of French tragedy” (Williams 1986, 301), detached from the character and the dramatic situation. To this aim, Shakespeare’s plays were considered particularly suitable: the clever “economy” and immediacy of words in their dialogues, for instance, made it difficult for the actors to fall into long and extravagant sentences; their characters, whose inner emotional state was not explicitly expressed, contributed directly to the consolidation of an effective acting style devoted to nature, which exploited gestures, facial expressions and the language of the body to reflect colliding psychological processes.<sup>8</sup> All this is particularly evident in F. L. Schröder’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

Though adapting Shakespeare in Germany was a great challenge in the eighteenth century, not simply because of the contrasting viewpoints among the critics, but also because his plays were generally considered “readable, though not playable” (Marx 2018, 82), no assessor of contemporary public taste was more accurate in this task than Schröder, “whose adaptations were skillfully enough designed to establish a compromise between contemporary taste and Shakespeare” (Williams 1986, 295). His first adaptation of *Hamlet* was staged in Hamburg on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1776 and was met with enthusiasm by the spectators. As the *Hamburger Adress-Comptoir-Nachrichten* reports,

at the three successive performances of *Hamlet* in Hamburg the numerous audiences were so attentive, so transported, that it seemed as if there was only one person present, only one pair of eyes, only one pair of hands, because the stillness was so universal, the silence so numbed. There was wonder, weeping, and applause, which spoke for itself. (Weilen 1914, 37)

From that moment on, till the late nineteenth century, the play was performed with an uncommon regularity. Of course, its success depended on many factors, but it has to be traced primarily in the quality of the script thought for a successful performance – Schröder’s repertoire, and particularly his adaptation of *Hamlet*, in fact, brought important innovations to the German theatre. Through Schröder’s important contribution, actors were no more imitators of *dramatis personae*, but,

---

<sup>8</sup> The success of the English actor, theatre manager and playwright David Garrick (1717–1779) was rooted not by chance in his striking, highly innovative performances of Shakespearean roles, which were known in Germany thanks to G. C. Lichtenberg’s *Briefe aus London* (1775).

exactly like poets, creators of characters through the exercise of the individual imagination and a direct observation of reality, so that they turned to be real models of behavior for the public of the time.

In formulating his own ideas on acting, Schröder was strongly influenced by the theoretical ideals of the Italian actor Francesco Riccoboni (1707–1772), whose French treatise *L'Art du Théâtre* translated into German by Lessing,<sup>9</sup> he used as an artistic guide during his third directorship of the Hamburg Theatre. In his theatrical suggestions, Riccoboni demanded a “realistic” kind of spectacle<sup>10</sup> that had to go “two fingers over the natural” (Riccoboni, quoted in Birkner 2007, 22). He touched on what for German theorists and dramaturgs would become the pivot around which to build a new conception of the actor's work, which was far more complex than the memorization and mere declamation of the poetic verse. To grasp both the dramaturgical significance of their part and the specific dramatic situation they were immersed in, actors had to both study deeply their role and master their own physical means and emotions through precise psychological and anthropological competences.<sup>11</sup> In this view, they were characterized by what Riccoboni called *jeu mute* or “silent play,” namely an active participation in the action through gestures even when they themselves did not speak.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. G. E. Lessing's *Der Schauspieler* (1754). The stance of François Riccoboni against the declamatory recitation contained in *L'Art du Théâtre* was probably the reason why Lessing chose to translate the treatise immediately into German.

<sup>10</sup> *Realism* might be a tricky word in eighteenth-century drama: it was not the kind of realism such as Hauptmann's or Strindberg's, but a release from conventional declamation, in trying to imitate nature. Denis Diderot's theories, too, might be useful to explain the right meaning of this term in the context of the eighteenth century. In his essay entitled *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (1773), Diderot, probably inspired by Riccoboni, too, argued that in order to convey *realism* on stage and display the *illusion* of feeling, great actors must be guided by a form of *rational* intelligence, through which they had to show different emotions in the same situation, without perpetrating one or the other. Diderot developed such dramatic theory referring to Garrick's acting style, whose success in showing transitions of mind depended exactly on an in-depth study of how people reacted to different situations in real life. For this reason, his expression “could change in the course of five or six seconds from wild delight to temperate pleasure, from that to tranquility, from tranquility to surprise, from surprise to blank astonishment, from astonishment to sorrow, from that to terror, from terror to despair . . .” (cf. Diderot 1883, 38–43).

<sup>11</sup> These ideas probably came from the so-called *anthropological turn* of the eighteenth-century Germany that Alexander Košenina addresses in his study entitled *Anthropologie und Schauspielkunst*, in which he convincingly demonstrates that the shift from traditional and standardized conventions towards a new expressive and true-to-nature acting style was rooted in the advances in medicine, anthropology, physiognomy and experiential psychology of those years, which contributed to a greater interest in human nature and influenced the main idea that “one's psychic disposition had a direct impact on their physical condition and vice versa” (Košenina 1995, 9). This interconnection between body and soul became, of course, increasingly significant among eighteenth-century performers.

<sup>12</sup> Riccoboni followed the logic of the empiricist thought, which from the mid-eighteenth century under the impulse of English sensism, began to undermine the dominance of French rationalism, thus praising the activity of the senses as a means of experiencing reality.

The first scene of the fourth act of Schröder's *Hamlet* adaptation, whereby the protagonist offers a metatheatrical reflection upon theatre, demonstrates how the German playwright embraced Riccoboni's theories and put them into practice. It is the famous play-within-the-play, whose performance at court provides Hamlet with the piece of evidence he needs to prove his uncle's guilt. The aim of the *Mousetrap*, in fact, is to provoke uncontrolled emotions in the king and see if he is his father's murderer. For this reason, the prince in Schröder's adaptation, even more than in Shakespeare's play,<sup>13</sup> recommends the actors take on "even in the fiercest storm and whirlwind of a strong passion, a natural tone and accent, as they are spoken in everyday life and a certain moderation in controlling passions through gestures, so that the performance remains credible, noble and decent" (Schröder 1776, 68). These words are important as they are giving crucial suggestions to German actors on the innovative kind of "naturalistic" acting style Schröder was striving for,<sup>14</sup> whose aesthetics of representation related to the actor's ability to make the emotional life of a dramatic character so transparent that the spectator could read his thoughts and feelings merely from gestural and/or kinetic disposition (Riccoboni's *jeu mute*).<sup>15</sup> In Schröder's adaptation such "gestic subtext" is given by the presence of mutually coalescing codes, both linguistic and extralinguistic, expressed in semantics and syntax through deixis, "the referential axis which regulates speech-acts according to performativity, with a language that develops actions." Consequently, "characters get defined and characterized by what they say, mean or imply and even more by *how* they say it" (Serpieri 2013, 55). Schröder, for instance, improved the deictic power of his script introducing frequent exclamations like "da da liegt's!" (there, there it is!) as it will be shown later through Chodowiecki's engravings, this being a fundamental aspect

---

<sup>13</sup> "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to / you, trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it / as many of your players do, I had as lief the / town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air / too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; / for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, / the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget / a temperance that may give it smoothness . . ." (Shakespeare 2016, 78).

<sup>14</sup> In spite of other performers that simply mastered their part without knowing the overall context of it, the actors of the *Hamburger Nationaltheater* under Schröder's artistic direction had to organize periodic meetings, during which they had to study intensively the repertoire and the roles to be performed. This included repeated rehearsals to exercise an appropriate tone and accent, discussions among Schröder and the actors about the tasks and the means to reach an effective style of acting, as well as a whole interpretative analysis of the adapted work (cf. Bellavia 2011, 6).

<sup>15</sup> In this regard, contemporary audience might have been familiar with what, in the eighteenth-century Europe, was called the *art of gesture*, "a bodily incarnation of the verbal into a living drama" (Bigliazzi 2013, 77), which used "vocabulary of basic gestures, each with an individual meaning known to all in advance and all performed in accordance with given techniques and precepts of style" (Kofler 2013, 192): depictive (*malende*) gestures were mainly indicative or imitative; expressive (*ausdrückende*) were symptomatic of the internal passions of the characters.



to suggest to the actors a perfect symmetry and simultaneity of word and gesture. It is no coincidence that Gerhard Müller-Schwefe defined Schröder's adaptation as,

*Theatrical score (theatralische Partitur)*, whose lasting effect is based not on the word or content but on the impression induced by the text, which affects the spectators through facial expressions, gestures, movements and other acoustic and visual devices. Schröder conceived his adaptation exactly like this, thus focusing particularly on the non-verbal means of expressions. (Schwefe, quoted in Häublein 2015, 67)

If Schröder's adaptation established a compromise between the audience's taste and Shakespeare and provided the actors with a valid basis to exercise a new, effective style of acting, the actor J. F. H. Brockmann was probably of greater importance, as he was both the actual medium through which the German audience was brought closer to Shakespeare's beauties and also the first who at least tried to embody the kind of acting as demanded by his director. His performance of Hamlet was an overwhelming success of historic importance: thanks to his interpretation, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* became the new myth of German literature. As a guest in Berlin in 1777–78, too, Brockmann's performances of the role "earned him ovations unprecedented in the history of the German theatre" (Williams, 303), so that Moses Mendelssohn spoke of a proper *Hamlet-hysteria*.<sup>16</sup>

Brockmann, with his highly illusionary, enchanting and compelling way of recitation, and his protean skills in portraying different and at times opposing feelings and attitudes, was the perfect example of the *ansprechende Gestalt* (appealing figure) first theorized by Riccoboni and much appreciated by Schröder. His capacity to embody and convey mixed and contrasting emotions by means of facial expressions made him a master of all the softer features and transitions of humanity. The most important and detailed description of Brockmann's Berlin performance confirming this is given by Friedrich Schink in his seventy-page descriptive study *Ueber Brockmanns Hamlet* (1778):

I think Brockmann's Hamlet is a true work of genius . . . in the first scene he walks slowly and trembling, with the most eloquent expression of pain, his eyes downcast, his arms crossed, a true ideal image for a painter who

---

<sup>16</sup> "Once I came back from Hannover, everyone was so enthusiastic about Brockmann's vivid performance of *Hamlet*, that even in all kitchens and servants' rooms nothing else was spoken of. The playhouse was so crowded, that it was very hard to find a place: it was a proper *Hamlet-hysteria*" (Mendelssohn, quoted in Weilen 1914, 63).

wants to sketch pain! While the King speaks, he remains silent, yet his silence is more eloquent than a profusion of words. He sighs deeply from his chest, his eyes burst into tears and his knees tremble. Meanwhile, in the midst of these signs of sadness, we notice clearly enough the struggle of the strongest passion. (Schink, quoted in Weilen 1914, 42–43)

Schink goes on by commenting on Hamlet's encounter with his friends Gustav, Bernfield and Ellrich in the tenth scene of the first act of Schröder's adaptation, in which Brockmann foregrounds an extreme fluctuation of passions and feelings. First comes melancholy, then disgust and finally pain. "Particularly," Schink continues,

what makes Brockmann a great actor is the extraordinary eloquence of his face, i.e., his mimicry. His eyes, wet by tears, are kept downcast and a dark veil of bad thoughts covers his forehead. His friends join the scene, Hamlet recognizes them, he wipes his eyes and stifles his tears. A cheerful smile crosses his cheeks and eyes, but it is only the smile of a dawning day . . . Here you can see the *Virtuoso* and the master in his art. He playfully jumps from one passion to another and masters every kind of expression. His nuances are fine and worthy of such a great artist (Schink, quoted in Weilen 1914, 43).

Not only did Brockmann's Berlin production win the German audience's and scholars' favor beyond expectation, but it was also documented by Daniel Chodowiecki, painter, etcher and later director of the Berlin Academy of Art. His twelve *Hamlet* engravings were published in the *Berliner Genealogischen Taschenkalender* of 1779 (Kofler 2013, 188) and help to understand better how Schröder's adaptation of *Hamlet* was performed.

On the sixth of the twelve engravings (see Figure 1), Brockmann/Hamlet appears "absorbed by the most serious reflections about to be or not to be" (Birkner 2007, 24). There is no single detail seeming artificial in this scene. Here, Brockmann's mimicry breaks with the French artificial acting style of the time and goes hand in hand with Riccoboni's innovative art of gesture in displaying Hamlet's personality. Looking at the image, Hamlet's words „Schlafen? Vielleicht auch träumen. Da, da liegt's!“ (To sleep? Perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub!)<sup>17</sup> are emphasized by an outstretched finger, through which Brockmann highlights Hamlet's feeling of "visualizing" his "dreams" in front of him.

---

<sup>17</sup> Significant is Schröder's elimination of the Shakespearean "rub" in Act III, Scene II (Shakespeare 2016, 64), through which he underlines more the resoluteness and determination of his Hamlet, rather than his reflective nature.

In the ghost scene<sup>18</sup> (see Figure 2), Hamlet's cue „Seht ihr den nichts hier? Da da liegt's!“ (Don't you see anything here? There it is!), the phrase “da da liegt's” comes once again, and reflects Schröder's stage direction: “Er zeigt mit dem Finger auf dem Geist” (He points with his finger at the ghost) (Schröder, quoted in Kofler 2013, 188). As Schink duly reports commenting on this scene, “the right foot and the body bending forward, the head position, everything is appropriate to the situation . . . and excellent. The queen is led to believe that he wants to go after the ghost of his father” (Schink, quoted in Weilen 1914, 45). By stepping forward and outstretching both his arms and forefingers, Brockmann emphasizes Hamlet's psychological turmoil in front of his father's ghost. At the same time, he effectively represents the deictic power of the script through the intertwining of gestural and verbal signs: he moves his finger in front of him as if he had found externally with his eyes what he felt inwardly with his keen perception, thus showing his desire “to make its unsensual ideas to sensual ones, imitate them and put it on stage as soon as they become more vivid and visible through bodily changes. This instinct is flawless everywhere” (Engel 1812, 90).

There is yet another illustration that deserves particular attention (see Figure 3). In this scene, located at the end of Act III, Hamlet leaves Ophelia with the words: “In ein Nonnenkloster geh” (Get thee to a nunnery), standing very close to Ophelia, almost leaning on her. He moves towards her, with his waving coat and steps indicating



**Figure 1:** “J. H. Brockmann and D. Ackermann in Act III, Scene 9 of Hamlet” (1778) by Daniel Chodowiecki, engraving on paper © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence

<sup>18</sup> This scene was particularly praised by Lessing in his twelfth piece of his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767), whereby he compared the “ridiculous” ghost of Ninus in Voltaire’s *Semiramis* with the ghost of Hamlet’s father: “I notice a difference between the ghosts of the English and French poets. Voltaire’s specter is nothing but a poetic machine, there only for the sake of the knot; it does not interest us in the least for itself. Shakespeare’s ghost, on the other hand, is a real acting person whose fate we share; it arouses shudders, but also pity. This difference arose, no doubt, from the different ways in which both poets thought of ghosts in general. Voltaire regards the appearance of a deceased as a miracle; Shakespeare as a completely natural occurrence” (Lessing 2010, 84).



**Figure 2:** “J. H. Brockmann, D. Ackermann and F. L. Schröder in Act IV, Scene 11 of *Hamlet*” (1778) by Daniel Chodowiecki, engraving on paper © Museum Associates/LACMA

great haste and restlessness, as well as a visible excitement emerging from his expression. In looking at Ophelia with empathy, “Brockmann uttered the words ‘Geh in ein Nonnenkloster’ in a tone of gentle seriousness and persuasion; there is no better advice for you, Ophelia, than: ‘Geh in ein Nonnenkloster’” (Schink, quoted in Birkner 2007, 26).

The comparison between Chodowiecki’s and Johann Esaias Nison’s illustrations of this scene might be helpful to understand better Brockmann’s great impact on this scene. Nison portrayed an Augsburg performance (1777) of the actor Andreas Schopf (1743–1813) performing Schröder’s *Hamlet* (See Figure 4). While Brockmann’s expressive movements, gestures and mimicry are symptomatic of an innovative acting style, Schopf’s performance conforms to the tradition. His right hand performs a *port de bras*, which Voelcker defines as a “bare standardized and unspontaneous gesture” that had been harshly criticized by Lessing as well: “the *port de bras* consisted merely of an apparently

involuntary raising of the arm and hand, which aimed at showing something through a beautiful, but distracting gesture, without thereby helping to illustrate the meaning or the sense of the speech” (Lessing, quoted in Voelcker 1916, 143).

In 1778, year and a half after the premiere of *Hamlet* in Hamburg and just week after the famed and described Berlin guest performances, Brockmann left Schröder and his company to join the Viennese *Burgtheater*. At this point, Schröder, who had so far played the ghost and the first gravedigger, decided to take on the title-role himself. When he did, he adapted *Hamlet* again, this time being more faithful to the English original, in that he incorporated direct borrowings from a new and vastly superior prose translation of Wieland’s *Hamlet* by J. J. Eschenburg. Published between 1775 and 1777, Eschenburg’s translation supplied a rich critical apparatus based on current English scholarship that increased theoretical interests in aesthetic and poetological questions on Shakespeare. This led Schröder to a more precise and faithful reading of the Bard and his plays. Schröder published his final version in 1778 in a collection



of plays entitled *Hamburgisches Theater*. By the way of translation, this *new* Hamlet sported even more the qualities of a man who is able to master his own fate.



**Figure 3:** "J. H. Brockmann and D. Ackermann in Act III, Scene 9 of *Hamlet*" (1778) by Daniel Chodowiecki, engraving on paper © Museum Associates/LACMA



**Figure 4:** "Andreas Schopf and Theresia Schimann in Act III, Scene 9 of *Hamlet*" (1777), by Johann Esaias Nilson, engraving on paper. Source: Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung, University of Cologne

At this point, it will be useful to draw a comparison between two competing but equally innovative acting styles, one more inclined to indulge the audience's taste (Brockmann), the other being more "faithful" to the naturalness of the Shakespearean text (Schröder). It was largely up to the actor to what degree s/he studied the play's author, the assigned role and how s/he worked out the details of its characterization.<sup>19</sup> This explains why Brockmann at times did not play Hamlet in the full sense of Schröder. Mendelssohn, for instance, had already doubted whether Brockmann had accurately studied the manifold variations of the moods in which the Bard let

<sup>19</sup> See note 14.

his Hamlet fall (cf. Mendelssohn 1972, 107–09). In fact, as an anonymous reviewer identified as Schink observes,

Brockmann, at times, misinterpreted Hamlet, perhaps enraptured by the vivacity of his spirit and constantly stimulated by the desire to amaze and captivate an entire audience; Schröder, on the other hand, neither blinded by judgments, prejudices or authorities, nor particularly interested in the audience's positive feedback, could convey the very character of Hamlet, because he fathomed it through his great perspicacity. Brockmann played most of the monologues merely with a mournful, elegiac, and melancholic tone, whereas Schröder could stage the different affects struggling in his heart through many variations in his tone. (Schink, quoted in Weilen 1914, 53)

On the one hand Brockmann was conceived as the *erste Virtuose* who, like all the *virtuosi*, did not prioritize a particular closeness to the script and its spirit, but rather an effective staging of himself as *grand'attore* to gain the audience favor; he was “completely focused on entertaining and astounding an entire audience, the realism of his performance was limited by a slight artificial kind of acting devoted to *Schönheit*” (Schink, quoted in Weilen 1914, 44). Although Brockmann, stimulated by Schröder, introduced Riccoboni's innovative acting style and his theories on *eloquentia corporis* on the German stage for the first time, he tended, like many of his contemporaries, to use the role to show his *bravura*, thus being too much the *Hanswurst* or court jester typical of the German popular theatre and extempore performances of the 1730s and 1740s, which in the 1770s were already seen as a late baroque mannerism. “Excelling at moments requiring a lightly ironic attitude towards the world, mingled with servility and self-pity” (Williams 1986, 306), Brockmann's Hamlet could not emphasize sentiments like anger, disgust, terror and irritation at the same time, but fell sometimes into a constant, plaintive, moaning tone even in passages where bitterness should have been in the foreground. All this strongly emerged in the fourth scene of the third act, whereby Brockmann was criticized by Schink because of his way of performing his first meeting with the ghost:

The ghost appears, Mr. Brockmann crosses himself, throws down his hat, stands with trembling knees, breaths heavily and jumps *forward* – and while the ghost approaches him, he addresses him in a broken voice. Beautiful! Excellent! But allow me the following objection! The appearance of a ghost, the appearance of my father's ghost . . . cannot but raise the highest degree of horror and surprise. Now I ask everybody if horror and surprise bend the body forward or backward? The latter I think. So, if I played Hamlet, I would follow Mr. Brockmann's nice and natural idea of crossing himself

and throwing down his hat but bend my body *backward* . . . If I take this scene as reality . . . I feel my whole body wincing in horror, my limbs freezing, my eyes popping out, my breath shortening, my knees trembling, my voice ceasing . . . But if an actor is not able to feel such a situation, if this horror is not real but only imitated, I can only see the actor, not the man; I can only see Brockmann, not Hamlet. (Schink, quoted in and translated by Kofler 2013, 189)

If Schink praised Brockmann's gestures of crossing himself and throwing down his hat when facing the ghost, he also criticized his lack of consistency and psychological truth in this scene, as well as his incapability of communicating his fright by bending forwards (see Figure 2): here, Brockmann perpetuated the same feeling, playing the entire scene in a constantly trembling tone without paying attention to other facets of emotion, such as deep, heartfelt pity for the unfortunate ghost and overflowing bloody desire of revenge on the murderer. In this way, Brockmann could not convey a complete realistic illusion.<sup>20</sup>

Schröder, who in the meantime adapted *Hamlet* for the third time and therefore could deepen his studies on Shakespeare, represented the protagonist more as an embittered and cynical outsider than a sorrowing young man and in that, according to Schink, more realistically and more closely to Shakespeare's Hamlet. "[Schröder] neither overtly displayed his actorial talents, nor asked for audience approval: he was never out of his role, this was transformed entirely in his mind, as food changes into blood" (Williams 1986, 307). Schröder paid more attention than his colleague to reproducing the exact emotional substance and the spirit of the original text, so that his Hamlet dominated the scene as "a resolute avenger, a worthy son of his warrior father, imbued with an unwavering resolve to efface the affront to his parents' memory" (Checkley 1959, 414). Unlike Brockmann, Schröder did not perform Hamlet's encounter with the ghost as a confrontation with isolated gestures, but rather developed his reactions from a complete identification with the character's situation, thus proving himself even more skilled than his colleague Brockmann in showing transitions and mixed states of mind. His Hamlet, for instance, responded to the ghost as Schink thought he should:

Astonished, Schröder/Hamlet staggered back, panting and trembling in every limb, his hat fell. His body was still bending backwards: he remained in that position for a few seconds, then gradually bent forward again, listened to the ghost and answered his words with a firm tone. By uttering the words "Wofür sollte

---

<sup>20</sup> Diderot's theories explain better the reason why Brockmann could not convey a complete realistic illusion. See note 10.

ich mich fürchten?“ (What should I be afraid of?), I noticed an extraordinary determination in his expression. In the middle of the playhouse, Hamlet was completely caught by his thoughts with a veil of shudder, as he demonstrates through his gestures. However, in the conversation with his father’s spirit, there was no trace of trepidation or fear. Hamlet stood in front of him with firm courage, full of desire for discovering things that he had already partly suspected. Throughout the scene, the spectators could see alternately pity and extreme pain working in his heart. The following monologue is one of his most striking: for a while, he stares speechlessly at the ghost that has disappeared. Finally, he bursts into tears and repeats in a solemn and melancholic tone his father’s last words. (Schink, quoted in Weilen 1914, 53–54)

Through his play, Schröder turned Brockmann’s monotony in this scene into a rich alternation of moods: the seemingly uncontrollable, paralyzing effects of fear, which, however, are mastered by Hamlet’s resoluteness in order to focus on what the ghost was saying, are expressed by Schröder at a point where it is almost impossible to distinguish between the reaction of the character and the one of the actor. Particularly, the dropping of his hat becomes the emblem of his bodily shock at the appearance of his father’s spirit. His numbness to it, his turmoil which can be felt to the point of physical paralysis, reflects precisely an interaction between the powerful forces of the soul and its external expression. This scene led Schröder’s Hamlet through pity to determination, “to a renewed anger that, in the monologue following, transformed itself into a violent disgust at the world in which he found himself” (Williams 1986, 306), these being feelings and expressions which characterized also Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Garrick’s performance. In fact, with his playing, Schröder redeemed what also Lessing had in mind when he read the passage in Shakespeare.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, even if Schröder’s performance emphasized the rigorous and cynical side of Hamlet more than his predecessor and was, according to the experts’ statements completely devoted to Shakespeare’s characterization and text, contemporaries still preferred Brockmann’s Hamlet, whose performance not only came first and got it accepted to the general public, but was also considered an absolute novelty, especially outside Hamburg. Moreover, unlike critics like Schink, most of the audience was unfamiliar with the original Shakespearean text and was probably more sensitive to emotionally charged performances than the ones matching the ideal Shakespeare had designed:

---

<sup>21</sup> “All our observations concentrate on Hamlet and the more signs of a mind shattered by shudders and terror we discover in him, the more willing we are to take this ghost that is causing this turmoil in him to be what he considers it to be. The ghost reaches an effect on us, more through him than through himself. The impression that the ghost has on him is transmitted to us” (Lessing 2010, 230).



Spectators did not care much about Hamlet's reaction when facing the ghost. They appreciated more striking performances and harmonious poses. Therefore, actors took inspiration more from Brockmann and his kind of acting devoted to the *Schönheit-Prinzip* than from Schröder and his *Wahrhaftigkeitsprinzip*. The last, however, demonstrated through his Hamlet a more precise and deeper knowledge of Shakespeare. (Häublein 2015, 86)

Despite his initial harsh criticism, Schink acknowledged Brockmann's role in bringing both Hamlet and Shakespeare closer to the German public: "on the one hand he caricatured Hamlet for sure, but on the other he could guarantee his eternal triumph among the audience: the most important success for an actor lies in meeting the spectators' heart and holding it tight" (Schink, quoted in Häublein 2015, 91). As an anthropologist and psychological expert, Brockmann provided the theatre with a real case study for interpreting human mechanisms of the psyche primarily through gestures, thus mastering most of the time "a perfect harmony between facial expressions, voice (*vox*) and bodily movements (*motus*) to provoke the most extraordinary illusion among the audience" (Heeg 2000, 153). Having in mind Riccoboni's ability to convey a psychologically realistic portrayal through his *jeu mute* and Schröder's innovative theatrical practices, Brockmann too demonstrated his talent with the naturalness of his movements and emotional subtlety. The descriptions and illustrations of his bodily postures and voice modulation, indicating certain feelings and psychic processes, paid homage to a new, revolutionary acting technique based on the observations of physiognomy and the imitation of emotions, which increased the features of Hamlet's personality and let the German spectator identify with the very nature of his character.

### Bibliography

- Bellavia, Sonia. 2011. "Le *Vorschriften über die Schauspielkunst* di Friedrich Ludwig Schröder." *Acting Archives Essays Supplement*, no. 13: 1–21.
- Bigliazzi, Silvia. 2013. "Performing Intertextuality in Translating Rewrites." In *Theatre Translation in Performance*, edited by Silvia Bigliazzi, Peter Kofler and Paola Ambrosi, 77–96. London: Routledge.
- Birkner, Nina. 2007. "Hamlet auf der deutschen Bühne. Friedrich Ludwig Schröders Theatertext, Dramentheorie und Aufführungspraxis." *Das achzehnte Jahrhundert* 7, no. 31: 13–30.
- Bloom, Harold. 1998. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Checkley, C.S. 1959. "Rumanian Interpretations of *Hamlet*." *The Slavonic and East European Review* 37, no. 89: 413–29.
- Diderot, Denis. 1883. *The Paradox of Acting*. London: Chatto&Windus.

- Engel, Johann Jacob. 1812. *Ideen zu einer Mimik*. Berlin: Mylius.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. 1992. "Entwicklung einer neuen Schauspielkunst." In *Schauspielkunst im 18. Jahrhundert. Grundlagen, Praxis, Autoren*, edited by Wolfgang Bender, 51–70. Stuttgart: Steiner.
- Goethe, J. W. 1962. *Gesammelte Werke in Sieben Bände*, Bd. 6. Rheda-Wiedenbrück: Bertelsmann Lesering.
- Goethe, J. W. 2007. *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. Berlin: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag.
- Gottsched, J. C. 1962. *Versuch einer chritischen Dichtkunst*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Häublein, Renata. 2015. *Die Entdeckung Shakespeares auf der deutschen Bühne des 18. Jahrhunderts*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.
- Heeg, Gunther. 2000. *Das Phantasma der natürlichen Gestalt. Körper, Sprache und Bild im Theater des 18. Jahrhunderts*. Frankfurt a. M.: Stroemfeld Verlag.
- Kofler, Peter Erwin. 2013. "To do, to act, to perform. Franz Heufeld's and Friedrich Ludwig Schröder's Hamlet-Adaptations for the German stage." In *Theatre Translation in Performance*, edited by Silvia Bigliazzi, 180–96. London: Routledge.
- Košénina, Alexander. 1995. *Anthropologie und Schauspielkunst. Studien zur eloquentia corporis im 18. Jahrhundert*. Tübingen: H. G. Kemper Verlag.
- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. 2010. *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. Berlin: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag.
- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. 2014. *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*. Berlin: Berliner Ausgabe.
- Macey, Samuel L. 1971–72. "The Introduction of Shakespeare Into Germany in the Second Half of Eighteenth Century." *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, no. 2: 261–69.
- Marx, Peter, W. 2018. *Hamlets Reise nach Deutschland*. Berlin: Alexander Verlag.
- McCarthy, John A. 2013. *Shakespeare as a German Author*. The Hague: Brill Rodopi.
- Mendelssohn, Moses. 1972. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog.
- Nicolai, F. C. 1984. *Briefe über den itzigen Zustand der schönen Wissenschaften in Deutschland*, edited by Georg Ellinger. Berlin: Verlag von Gebrüder Paetel.
- Paulin, Roger. 2003. *The Critical Reception of Shakespeare in Germany 1682–1914*. Native Literature and Foreign Genius. New York: Olms.
- Schlegel, J. E. 1887. *Vergleichung Shakespeares and Andreas Gryphs bey Gelegenheit des Versuchs einer gebundenen Übersetzung von dem Tode des Julius Cäsar, aus den Englischen Werken des Shakespear*. In *Deutsche Litteraturdenkmale des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts*, edited by Bernhard Seuffert. Heilbronn: Verlag von Gebrüder Henninger.
- Schröder, Friedrich Ludwig. 1777. *Hamlet, Prinz von Dännemark. Ein Trauerspiel in 6 Aufzügen*. Hamburg: Heroldsche Buchhandlung.
- Serpieri, Alessandro. 2013. "Semantics and Syntax in Translating Shakespeare." In *Theatre Translation in Performance*, edited by Silvia Bigliazzi, Peter Kofler, Paula Ambrosi, 50–60. London: Routledge.
- Shakespeare, William. 2016. *Hamlet*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Theisen, Bianca. 2006. "The Drama in Rags: Shakespeare Reception in Eighteenth-Century Germany." *MLN* 121, no. 3: 505–13.

- Voltaire. 1964. *Correspondances*. Genève: Institut et Musée Voltaire.
- Voltaire. 2015. *Sémiramis. Tragédie en cinq actes*. Paris: Theatre Classique.
- Voelcker, Bruno. 1916. *Die Hamlet-Darstellungen Daniel Chodowieckis und ihr Quellenwert für die deutsche Theatergeschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts*. Leipzig: Voss.
- Weilen, Alexander (von). 1914. *Der erste deutsche Bühnen-Hamlet. Die Bearbeitungen Heufelds und Schröders*. Wien: Wiener Bibliophilen-Gesellschaft.
- Williams, Simon. 1986. "The Great Guest Arrives. Early German Hamlets." *Theatre Journal* 38, no. 3: 291–308.

**Beatrice Berselli** is a second-year PhD student in German Literature at the University of Verona. Her PhD project deals with an in-depth analysis of the literary, political and ideological relationship between two great representatives of the *Exilliteratur*, Klaus Mann and Stefan Zweig. More specifically, the aim of the research is to produce the most detailed and extensive scholarly edition of their letters, as yet unpublished. She published a book on Lessing's *Laokoon* and essays on translation theory, Edgar Allan Poe, Arno Schmidt, Alfred Andersch and W. G. Sebald. Her research interests are focused on German Romanticism, *Briefkultur*, *Emotionsforschung* and Interdisciplinary Studies.

**Contact:** [beatrice.berselli@univr.it](mailto:beatrice.berselli@univr.it)



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.

**“AND IN THIS HARSH WORLD DRAW THY BREATH  
IN PAIN, TO TELL MY STORY”: THE RECEPTION  
OF *HAMLET* IN PILSEN THEATRES**

*Ivona Mišterová*

**Abstract**

*Hamlet* is one of Shakespeare’s most widely discussed and popular plays. Its reception history is as long as its stage history. It also found its way to Pilsen theatres. The aim of this article is to trace the reception of the productions of *Hamlet* that have been staged in Pilsen since the opening of the new Municipal Theatre in 1902. The first part draws on a range of period theatre reviews and critical commentaries, whereas the second part is based on the author’s aesthetic experience. The article furthermore attempts to find out how directorial intentions and choices, along with particular acting strategies, shaped the Shakespearean productions in question.

**Keywords**

*Hamlet*, William Shakespeare, the Municipal Theatre, the J. K. Tyl Theatre in Pilsen, Shakespeare Festival, 1916

\* \* \*

**Introduction**

STAGING *Hamlet* naturally presents a considerable directorial challenge as it is Shakespeare’s longest and perhaps most difficult text. Understanding the play, in addition to Hamlet and the other characters as well as the relationships between them, is particularly hard. Whether Hamlet will be a sensitive and hesitant prince, a neurotic intellectual, a seeker of truth or a righteous avenger is naturally a question of dramaturgy and directorial intention.

The objective of this article is to trace the reception of theatrical productions of *Hamlet* on Pilsen’s stages since 1902, when the new Municipal Theatre was opened, through the twentieth century to the present day. Following a chronological structure, it focuses on how theatre reviewers perceived the productions in a given period of time and to what features and elements they paid attention when evaluating

them. The first four sections, which deal with the productions staged from the start of the twentieth century until the 1970s, draw mainly on period reviews published in local newspapers. The use of reviews, however, raises some problems. Except for certain rarities, especially in the case of the early twentieth-century productions, they suffer from subjectiveness, incompleteness or even fragmentariness, and they may be oriented by pragmatic concerns. It is thus necessary to view them with a critical eye. The remaining three sections, which are concerned with the productions staged at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium, are based on the author's self-report. The Hamletian overview concludes with the production of *Hamlet* presented at the International Theatre Festival to show that Pilsen's audiences have an opportunity to see a number of foreign language performances of Shakespeare's plays. One of them was produced by the Lithuanian theatre ensemble Meno Fortas and directed by Eimuntas Nekrošius in 1997, starring Andrius Memontovas.

## **1. *Hamlet* Viewed through the Lens of Theatre Reviewers**

### **1.1 *Hamlet* at the beginning of the twentieth century**

One of the first premieres in the newly opened Municipal Theatre in Pilsen was *Hamlet*. It was staged on 18 October 1903 by Vendelín Budil.<sup>1</sup> The director based the play on a new translation by a Czech poet Josef Václav Sládek (1899), which was first performed on that occasion. Although the contemporary announcement of the play's premiere incorrectly listed a Czech actor Josef Jiří Kolár<sup>2</sup> as the translator, post-premiere reviews set the record straight. The mistake regarding the translator's name was to some extent understandable, since Josef Jiří Kolár was not only an actor, but also a translator. He did translate, among other things, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which was performed at the Estates Theatre in Prague in 1853. Interestingly enough, Kolár's translation was also used by Emil Kramuele in the very first production of *Hamlet* in Pilsen in 1864, which can be seen as a symbolic contribution to the celebration of the tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth.

Although the translator was eventually correctly identified, Budil's directorial intention remained more or less unspecified. The reviewer of the regional periodical

---

<sup>1</sup> The new Municipal Theatre was opened in September 1902 with the premiere of Smetana's opera *Libuše*, which met with rapturous applause. From its opening in 1902 until 1912 the Municipal Theatre was under the direction of Vendelín Budil (1847–1928), an actor, set and theatre director, and translator.

<sup>2</sup> Josef Jiří Kolár (1812–1896) was a Czech actor, director, translator, and writer.

*Plzeňské listy*, signed with the abbreviation NB, which represented the former director of the Švanda Theatre Company Pavel Nebeský, limited himself to an evaluation of the actors' performances without any specific mention of the direction or dramaturgy. As in previous Shakespearean productions, Budil was probably influenced by his directorial and acting models, Josef Jiří Kolár and Ermete Zacconi,<sup>3</sup> when directing *Hamlet*. Josef Jiří Kolár's acting style bore the strong stamp of Romanticism, which was especially evident in his portrayal of Shakespeare's characters. Ermete Zacconi's performance was dominated by naturalism and verism and laid stress on psychological characteristics. Whereas Kolár emphasised Hamlet's rawness, which escalated to despair resulting from his inability to take revenge, Ermete Zacconi underscored the psychopathic details of the characters and their actions.

The Danish prince was enacted by Miloš Nový.<sup>4</sup> His Hamlet was a psychologically complex character, whose mind was troubled and at certain moments cut off from the common reality. As the reviewer noted, "in a critical, tragic situation, [Hamlet] acts in such a way that he gives the impression of being unreasonable, insane, and even mad" (NB 1903, 4). This assessment, however, does not indicate whether Nový's Hamlet resorted to the pretence of madness or actually suffered from insanity. The actor excelled especially in the monologue "To be or not to be" (3.1), in the scene with the players (3.2), and the scene in Hamlet's mother's bedroom (3.4).

Anna Archlebová's Ophelia impressed the audience with her attractive appearance, nicely decorated robes, and a precise Czech pronunciation, which was not common at that time, as the reviewer noted (NB 1903, 4). However, her grace contrasted with her not very successful acting style, which did not reach the same level as other actors, which might have been the reason why she was engaged only in the year 1903. As the reviewer further noted, Vilém Šádek as the Ghost was too tearful, wailing, and unroyal. Although it is not directly confirmed in the list of roles, Rudolf Deyl mentions in his memoirs that the role of Polonius was played by Vendelín Budil (Deyl 1973, 69). Although the performance of *Hamlet* was not quite up to scratch in all respects, as the reviewer observed, the final impression was altogether "astounding." The theatre review does not explicitly mention the set design, but it was probably created by Budil himself. He was a gifted painter and often complemented the set design with his own proposals.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ermete Zacconi (1857–1948) was an Italian stage and film actor.

<sup>4</sup> Miloš Nový (1879–1932) was a Czech actor, director, and theatre director. He honed his acting and directing skills when working with Vendelín Budil at the Municipal Theatre (1902–1914).

At the end of the year 1906, Budil staged one of his famous New Year's Eve programmes. It was an entertaining show featuring well-known characters from national and international plays. The diverse theatrical collage was entitled *The End of Tyranny*. The tyrant was Shakespeare's usurper of the throne Richard III, who was awakened from a terrible dream before his battle with Richmond by a visitor. Since Richard III cannot clearly see who the visitor is, he asks him the same question as the sentinel Barnardo asks the other guard Francisco at the beginning of *Hamlet*, “Who's there?” (*Hamlet*, I.1.1). As in *Hamlet*, the question does not elicit the expected answer, since the speaker is a young teacher, Zajíček, from Alois Jirásek's play *The Lantern* (Lucerna, 1905), who offers him an “unused cassation.”<sup>5</sup> The show featured well-known scenes and soliloquies from *Hamlet* (the prince's scene with Polonius, Ophelia, and his monologue “To be or not to be”). Hamlet and Richard III further met a number of other dramatis personae, such as Bizet's Carmen, “our swaggerers” and “the bartered bride.”<sup>6</sup> The theatre review published in *Plzeňské listy* described Budil's programme as a divertissement with funny moments (NB 1907, 2). The humorous New Year's Eve theatre collage, designed to entertain the audience on the last day of the year, allowed Budil to apply his knowledge of plays and operas, while developing his artistic creativity and imagination. Since the plays from which Budil drew inspiration for his show were performed on the stage of the Pilsen theatre, it can be assumed that the audience had them fresh in their minds and could be amused by the unusual roles assigned to the characters and their uncommon encounters.

## 1.2 *Hamlet* in 1916

The second production of *Hamlet* took place in 1916, when the world commemorated the tercentennial anniversary of Shakespeare's death.<sup>7</sup> The Shakespeare tercentenary celebration in the Czech lands can be understood not only as a great theatrical achievement, but most importantly as a presentation of Czech national self-awareness

---

<sup>5</sup> In Jirásek's *The Lantern*, the teacher Zajíček tells a village girl Hanička that a glorious welcome is being prepared for the arrival of the princess. It also includes a celebratory music composition known as a cassation.

<sup>6</sup> *Our Swaggerers* (*Naši furianti*, 1887) is a Czech comedy written by Ladislav Stroupežnický. Budil staged the play on 26 February 1903. *The Bartered Bride* (*Prodaná nevěsta*, 1866) is a comic opera in three acts composed by the Czech composer Bedřich Smetana to a libretto by Karel Sabina. It was performed during Budil's directorship in 1905.

<sup>7</sup> As Clara Calvo points out, the commemoration of the poet's death in Britain epitomised the defence of the spiritual property of the nation, threatened by a German invasion (Calvo 2004, 81).

and identity. It furthermore attempted to strengthen the autonomy of the Czech theatre and demonstrate the Czech pro-Allied attitude during the Great War.<sup>8</sup> Prague contributed to worldwide Shakespeare celebrations with a cycle of sixteen Shakespearean productions, mostly directed by Jaroslav Kvapil with Josef Václav Sládek's translations.<sup>9</sup> The festival was undoubtedly an important event in the Czech Shakespearean theatrical tradition.<sup>10</sup> The Pilsen celebration of Shakespeare's anniversary was not as magnificent as in Prague; however, four Shakespeare productions (*Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) were staged at the beginning of May 1916. Of these four, *Hamlet* met with an especially enthusiastic response from audiences and reviewers alike. The production was directed by Jaroslav Počepický from J. V. Sládek's translation.

*The Plzeňské listy* reviewer remarked that the experienced Shakespeare actor Bedřich Karen<sup>11</sup> played a melancholic prince, who succumbed to emotion and his sombre mood (Bureš 1916, 4). His emotions, however, fused with rational thoughts. Even during his emotional outbursts, he did not abandon his rational thinking. He mused both on his own inner feelings and the surrounding world, yet this philosophical contemplation led to his complete mental and physical exhaustion.<sup>12</sup> His face was pale and unhealthy-looking, with sunken cheeks and deep-set eyes. His

---

<sup>8</sup> Czechia was a part of Austria-Hungary, fighting together with Germany (the Central Powers) against the Allied Powers (Great Britain, France, and Russia). The Czech appropriation of Shakespeare was first associated with the search for political autonomy rather than with cultural independence. It gained even greater significance during the Great War, since it embodied the spirit of the nation.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on Czech Shakespeare festivals, see Filip Krajník and Eva Kyselová's chapter in *Shakespeare on European Festival Stages* (2021), 55–74.

<sup>10</sup> As Martin Procházka argues, notwithstanding the attempt to transform Shakespeare's work into cultural capital, due to the character of the national theatre, it rather preserved its status quo as a sacred gift (Procházka 1996, 51).

<sup>11</sup> Bedřich Karen (1887–1964) was a theatre and film actor. In 1910, he was engaged by Vendelín Budil to the Municipal Theatre, where he portrayed a number of Shakespearean roles, e.g., Lysander (1913), Prince Hal (1913), Lucentio (1914), Bassanio (1914), and Ferdinand (1915).

<sup>12</sup> It may be assumed that Karen's *Hamlet* was influenced by Eduard Vojan's performance in the role of the Danish prince. Vojan first performed *Hamlet* in 1905, then in 1915, as part of a Shakespeare Festival in 1916, and shortly before his death in 1920. In comparison to the 1905 production, Vojan further developed and emotionally deepened his performance. He kept the prince's cultivation, his painful, sharp irony, and the gesticulations of a noble tragic figure. The prince, however, had matured. The former youth transformed into a man in whom adolescence and maturity mingled and churned. *Hamlet*'s transformation was naturally reflected in his behaviour. The prince's sadness and irony gained a new dimension – from playful mocking that balanced philosophical consideration and wistfulness, wrathful and unfriendly sarcasm accompanied by grimaces, piercing glares, and laconic speeches in which he chastises his surroundings, to the desperately ironic complaints on the impossibility of his love towards Ophelia and an alienation from all that is human. The "To be or not to be" soliloquy no longer sprang from the abyss of his deepest despair as in the previous productions and carried deep philosophical tones rather than merely being a painful personal confession (see Mišterová 2016, 111).



mood swings ranged from periods of elation and restless activity to those of melancholia and resignation. An important clue to Hamlet’s character, particularly with regard to his mental distress, was provided by the “To be or not to be” soliloquy, interpreted most likely in terms of national independence (Bureš 1916, 4). Although the contemporary review commented mainly on individual artistic performances and did not mention any suspect metaphors or even cuts, the idea of a search for (not only moral) freedom was probably shared in a circumspect way with the audience, which might have felt they were involved in Hamlet’s quest for answers to the fundamental questions of existence and the meaning of life (Mišterová 2017, 220). Even the prince’s comment on “the time out of joint” (1.5.196) or Rosencrantz’s remark that “their [players’] inhibition comes by the means of the late innovation” (2.2.328–29) might have alluded to a political subtext.<sup>13</sup> The theatre review does not mention Fortinbras or the concept of his final speech. It can be assumed, though it is not confirmed, that the scene was omitted, as it was in the Prague production of *Hamlet* in 1915.<sup>14</sup>

Otýlie Beníšková emphasised Ophelia’s humble love, devoted obedience and madness stemming from unrequited love. According to contemporary critics, Fišer’s Polonius lacked a warmer fatherly tone in his speeches to the quick-tempered and sometimes too hasty Laertes (Vladimír Jerman). Jaroslav Počepický sharpened the edges of Claudius’s villainy and added a human dimension to the character. Adolf Kreuzmann transformed the ghost of Hamlet’s father into a majestic apparition.

The author of the set design was Bohumil Krs.<sup>15</sup> Krs’s maximally simplified set, consisting of two arches, which were connected by two side walls with doors, allowed for quick and efficient scene changes. Costumes, also based on Krs’s designs, were in harmony with the simple scenic arrangement. Krs’s feeling for colour was mainly shown in lighting, which used red for the bloody events and yellow for the scenes of ugliness.

### 1.3 The First Republic *Hamlet*

In 1922, Bedřich Jeřábek, the former director of the Slovak National Theatre, became director of the theatre. His focus was mainly on opera and operetta. The development of the drama company rather stagnated in terms of both quantity and quality.

---

<sup>13</sup> With the outbreak of the Great War, the Pilsen theatre was closed. In 1916, the theatre director was appointed a commander of the Pilsen war hospital and a captain of artillery (Kříž 1927, 52).

<sup>14</sup> Likely (yet not only) in reaction to the criticism against the removal of Fortinbras’s scene, Kvapil added the role of the Norwegian crown prince into the performance in 1916. The role of Fortinbras was played by Vendelín Budil’s disciple Miloš Nový (1879–1932).

<sup>15</sup> Bohumil Krs (1890–1962) was a painter, graphic designer, illustrator and set designer, a graduate of the Prague School of Arts and Crafts.

Only Shakespearean stagings somewhat rose above the generally mediocre productions, one of which was *Hamlet* (1926), and Shaw's *Saint Joan* (1925).<sup>16</sup>

*Hamlet* was the last Shakespearean production of Jeřábek's directorial period. The performance was directed by Jaroslav Počepický, who also designed the set. He staged the production based on Sládek's translation and cast Josef Fišer as the Danish prince. As in previous cases, the theatrical reviews were rather sketchy. A theatre reviewer of the *Český deník* observed that Josef Fišer captured the prince's vigour, particularly in the scene in the queen's bedroom, rather than a certain resignation and hesitancy (DK 1926, 5). The performance of Heda Židová as Ophelia was awaited with both doubts and hopes, since, until then, the young actress had only acted in operettas and comedies (e.g., *Peg of My Heart*, 1924 and *Lady Fanny and the Servant Problem*, 1925). Židová, however, rendered the role successfully and created a believable Ophelia. Otýlie Beníšková's Gertrude was a combination of royal dignity and femininity. In many moments, Gertrude's feminine desires prevailed and pushed her royal majesty into the background. She was more a woman than a queen. Antonín Tihelka's Claudius was marked by excessive good-heartedness, which did not correspond to the nature of the character. Vladimír Javůrek's Ghost gave the impression of excessive pathos and affectation.

Počepický's set design made use of a unified concept of the stage space. The change of scenes in the homogeneous and largely abstract space was often allusive, e.g., the royal chamber was turned into a cemetery by replacing the queen's bed with a cross. The uniformly designed space undoubtedly allowed for a quick and efficient sequence of scenes, but at the same time, according to contemporary reviews, deprived the audience, accustomed to Skupa's decoratively rich sets, of an artistic experience.

#### 1.4 The Normalisation *Hamlet*

*Hamlet* was staged again after a hiatus of forty-eight years in the year 1974. The premiere took place on 30 March based on a new translation, which the director Ota Ševčík commissioned from Milan Lukeš to "help him realise the basic idea of the production – the problem of humanity's irreconcilability with the smallness of spirit,

---

<sup>16</sup> At the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, an unfortunate event marked the theatre's operation. On 17 August 1922, the theatre warehouse burned down, along with the decorations, so a new wardrobe and decorations had to be purchased. A famous Pilsen puppeteer, Josef Skupa (1892–1957), participated in the restoration of the decorations and extensive technical modernisation of the Pilsen stage in 1922–1923.

with compromise and opportunism” (JPA 1974, 13, translation by author). The set design was created by the guest set designer Jaroslav Dušek.

The 1974 *Hamlet* should be perceived through the lenses of “normalisation,” whose objective was to eliminate reformism and legitimise the new status quo, albeit based on pre-reformist principles. The main features of the normalisation programme were bureaucracy, the absolute power of the establishment, and the push to oust the opposition and non-party intellectuals. As Zdeněk Stříbrný observes, “theatres were closely watched, especially after the Soviet-led military invasion in 1968. This was called the period of normalization officially but totally falsely, because everything was becoming more and more abnormal” (Stříbrný 2007, 201). It is thus probably not surprising that the normalisation *Hamlet* (1974) accentuated the theme of the search for the truth and the meaning of life, strengthened by the motif of revolt against fate. The play about the removal of the usurper of the throne thus spoke to the audience with a parallel to the contemporary situation.

The directorial concept, which benefited from the logical and meaningfully accurate translation by Lukeš, focused on Hamlet’s painful and difficult journey in search of the truth. The role of Hamlet was alternated by Viktor Vrabec and Pavel Pavlovský. Both actors rendered Hamlet in accordance with their own experience and age.<sup>17</sup> Viktor Vrabec’s Hamlet was close to a sensitive, sophisticated intellectual who carefully considered his words and acts. According to theatre reviews (JPA 1974, 13), Vrabec’s thoughtful performance became the axis of the production. In contrast, Pavel Pavlovský gave the impression of a wounded youth who longed to punish the intruder on the throne. Thanks to both actors, Hamlet was enriched with a number of attributes. He acted with wisdom and prudence, thinking through the steps of his deeds thoroughly and logically. Hamlet’s wisdom was combined with conscientiousness, fairness and perhaps certain circumspection. He was not, however, an indecisive *cunctator*, since his seemingly hesitant caution was conditioned and driven by a desire to reveal the truth about what had really happened. He was neither a great hero nor a cowardly weakling. He was a man who knew his goal and wanted to achieve it. He wanted to punish Claudius, but revenge was only his secondary need, subordinate to the need to know the nature of his father’s death. Based on theatre reviews, it can be assumed that his madness or abnormal behaviour were to some extent mitigated and suppressed. The prince’s deeds, on the other hand, were characterised by an internal logic and integrity of means of expression. His pursuit of truth and vengeance showed the veracity of a man aware of his responsibility and consequences of his acts (MIK 1974, 5).

---

<sup>17</sup> Viktor Vrabec was born in 1941 and Pavel Pavlovský was born in 1944.

Claudius was portrayed by Jiří Samek as a strict ruler and self-proclaimed ruthless usurper. In the view of critics, Queen Gertrude, played by Netta Deborská, was characterised by the passion and lust of an ageing monarch, who had eyes only for her new and still young husband, whom she blatantly embraced whenever she could. Inside her heart, her royal majesty was at odds with her physical desire for Claudius, her conscience and perhaps even a deep-hidden maternal love. In contrast to the excessive physicality of Claudius and Gertrude, the character of Ophelia (Nad'a Konvalinková/Věra Vlčková) was built on the different experiences and temperaments of both actresses. Konvalinková's Ophelia looked more youthful and more naive. The more sincere and transparent she was, the more clearly her mental transformation became apparent. Although only seven years older, Vlčková's Ophelia resembled a more mature young woman, who became emotionally attached to Hamlet with a certain fatal resignation.

Jan Dušek's set design divided the stage into sections with retractable white curtains, which, according to the theatre reviewer, evoked the appropriate atmosphere, but at the same time prevented a greater expansion of acting, since their functionality often failed (for example, during the scene with players, in which the king, situated with his throne on a narrow gallery, did not have enough space to show his reaction to the revelation of his secret, 3.2). The simple nature of the set design and its black and white colouring corresponded with the modest costumes (guest designer Jarmila Konečná) that enhanced the characterisation of the individual characters.

## **2. *Hamlet* in the new millennium**

### **2.1 A Harmless Hamlet?**

*Hamlet* was not performed on the stage of the J. K. Tyl Theatre until 2001. The reason for such a long gap in staging may have been the unwelcome subject of the overthrow of the usurper of the throne in the era of "one-party rule." The premiere took place on 15 December 2001 under the direction of Jan Burian, according to Martin Hilský's translation. The music was composed by Petr Kofroň. The premiere was eagerly awaited. The director described his intention with the following words:

I rely more on the power of literature and, let's say, acting based on contradiction, with a smaller proportion of directorial and scenographic means to tell the story clearly. I wish our production did not provide a simplistic interpretation of this world, and indeed of Hamlet's story. Rather, it should ask for

the meaning of this story, because I am convinced that we are living in a moment when it is more important to ask questions than to be convinced of something (Burian 2001, n.p., translation by author)

The directorial intention did not experiment with new perspectives on the Danish prince or insensitively updated the play in the spirit of the computer age. The imaginary camera focused on Hamlet, his search for truth, and his effort to repair the world and establish justice and order in a time that is out of joint, which the prince himself is at the end of the first act. The director's intention resonates with Philip Schwyzer's reading of Hamlet's words, that stem from the encounter with the ghost of his dead father and refer to both “the age in which he lives and the rhythm of things, the beat of events” (Schwyzer 2013, 213).

The directorial intention was in harmony with Karel Glogr's architectural set, allowing the production to run smoothly. The stage was dominated by an unchanging passageway complex with a staircase and gallery, built of a combination of glass, Plexiglas, and soft metal. The building not only suggested the idea of a majestic royal castle, but also reflected the action on stage through the physical properties of the materials used. However, the walls of the castle did not create a true image of reality. Through deliberate distortion, they suggested that the familiar and hitherto secure microcosm of the castle of Elsinore had been disrupted by the death of King Hamlet and the subsequent events. The mirror walls of Elsinore Castle represented an imaginary optical key to the real actions (or intentions) of individual characters often hidden behind (seemingly) pleasant words. The open and walk-through construction of the castle indicated the possibility of the intervention of external factors, while at the same time leaving all characters a certain escape route from what should or could have happened. The external factor was the ghost of Hamlet's father, who appeared in full armour on the illuminated glass top of the castle to tell Hamlet the truth about his murder. With his dignified demeanour and knightly armour, he gave the impression of awe and reverence. Petr Kofroň's music was employed to suggest the elements of atmospheric and psychological drama. It was used when it was necessary to illustrate mysterious actions and mental processes.

Dana Hárová's costume design illustrated the characters of the dramatic personae. Hamlet (Viktor Limr) was dressed in a simple black garment, which evoked not only his grief over the death of his father, but also a certain sobriety and detachment from the events at the royal court. Queen Gertrude (Monika Šváblová) and Claudius (Pavel Pavlovský) were visually connected by the scarlet colour of their garments, which complemented each other. The red colour of their clothes was a constant reminder of the fratricide and marriage, which not only followed too hastily after

the death of King Hamlet but was unacceptable from a religious point of view due to the familial relationship. Hamlet thus had the sinful and incestuous act of his mother and uncle, now his stepfather, constantly before his eyes. Ophelia's (Andrea Černá in alternation with Klára Kovaříková) mental transformation was underlined by the change from a dark purple evening gown, which she wore like a carefree girl courted by a Danish prince, to a white dress indicating her mental and physical purity and foreshadowing first her helpless despair and then her death. Horatio (Michal Štěřba), Laertes (Martin Stránský), Rosencrantz (Vilém Dubnička) and Guildenstern (Jakub Zindulka) were dressed in long cloaks. The tiger motifs of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's clothes gave the impression of danger and predatory instincts.

At first sight, Limr's Hamlet gave the impression of a harmless, seemingly self-absorbed man who, with the privilege belonging to fools to tell people the truth to their faces, struck everyone with precisely aimed words. Even in his feigned madness, he could not conceal, and probably did not even want to, a certain uncontrollability, provocativeness, and self-confidence. As a centrepiece, he permeated all the action on stage, whether he was actually present or not. From his words, the reactions of those close to him, and the actions of those who successfully or unsuccessfully feigned interest in the prince, the overall picture of all the members of the royal court was gradually put together like a mosaic. Pavel Pavlovský portrayed Claudius as a fratricide, intriguer, and a ruthless usurper of the royal throne. At the same time, however, he did not lack the representativeness of royal majesty and perhaps a certain amount of discretion and ingenuity to disguise his unscrupulous manipulative practices.

Fortinbras's tribute to the dead Hamlet (5.2.348–56) was omitted from the production, which essentially suggested a certain finality to the plot without the possibility of further continuity. It was as if the circle of events closed with Hamlet's death. The last words in Burian's production belonged thus to Hamlet, not Fortinbras. The elimination of Fortinbras's speech outlined, as mentioned above, a certain completeness of events without further continuation. At the same time, however, it raised questions about the eventualities of the further development of the Danish kingdom. The end of the production opened up an essentially unlimited space for reflection and contemplation. What path will the kingdom take under the new monarch? Will Fortinbras establish a just government, or rather a "strong hand," as his name suggests?

## 2.2 A Teenage *Hamlet*

A distinctive example of a Shakespearean reworking for adolescents is *Hamleteen*, whose premiere took place in February 2012 at the Alfa Theatre in Pilsen. As the title

indicates, greater emphasis was placed on Hamlet's uneasy adolescence and his search for identity than on his quest for justice and revenge. The most striking difference between the original play and the adaptation was the way in which Hamlet searched for his identity and identified himself as a member of various subcultures such as Scouting, punk and emo. The adaptation underscored the private dimension of the classic story and provided the audience with insight into adolescents' inner world including feelings, struggles, perceptions and wishes.

The production was characterised by a number of innovative elements. Shakespeare's tragedy was transformed into a musical farce, embedded in the present and imbued with sarcasm. There was often black humour in the parallels and consonances with Shakespeare's play. This purely Czech adaptation compressed Shakespeare's longest and perhaps most notorious play into three “phases,” each representing a different subcultural identity. In this new Shakespeare paradigm, the old Hamlet was an enthusiastic Scoutmaster, who has transformed the Danish kingdom into a Scout camp, subject to strict military discipline, including regular morning exercises, earning badges (called little “beavers”), cleaning tents and grounds and wearing Scout uniforms with pride every day (Mišterová 2013, 70). Not everyone was happy with the status quo, of course, particularly Claudius, who tended to resist authority. His rebelliousness resulted in the improper completion of his assigned tasks and subsequent deduction of points. Although he tried to bottle up his feelings of anger, this affected his relationship with his brother, and he finally reached a boiling point. He aired his frustration and wrath towards the old Hamlet, of whom he was, moreover, jealous. However, despite his uncouth behaviour and not particularly pleasing appearance, Gertrude was attracted more to him than to her husband, who showed no interest in their marriage. Scouting, not his wife, had the elder Hamlet's full attention. Gertrude felt neglected and trapped. Her hasty second marriage was thus more understandable given that she was unhappy and wanted to enjoy life. Other Shakespearean characters also took on different statuses. Laertes was a homosexual, who was unhappily in love with Hamlet. Before he went West, he warned his sister against Hamlet's immaturity and egoism. Soon afterwards, he returned home, however, transformed into the Dead Man. Hamlet's childhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, resembled debauched boozers, and Polonius was the manager of a disreputable house. Ophelia looked like an energetic girl for whom chocolate acted as an instant antidepressant, helping her to feel better.

The main focus of the performance was adolescence. It told the story of a youngster who tried to cope first with his father's passion for Scouting, and then with his

death. Hamlet's initial identification with Scouting was motivated and supported by his father. In this sense, the old Hamlet embodied authority and the moral principles to be followed. For the young Hamlet, earning a merit badge, which he proudly wore on his uniform, was the highlight of his Scouting experience. His subsequent punk and emo interludes underlined the intense emotional distress and alienation he experienced after the death of his father. Yet, he refused any offers of help and comfort from others who feared for his sanity. However, his suffering was not in vain. He finally realised that even his father had not been perfect and had had weak spots. It was exactly at that moment he attained maturity that he came to understand the truth about his father's death (and his fallibility) and his mother's happiness in her new marriage. Accepting the truth required, no doubt, great personal courage. If Hamlet was able to accept the truth about his parents and himself, then he was able to step into adulthood. Cured of his idealism (Scouting), rebellion against conventions and a new family structure (punk) and extreme sensitivity and introversion (emo), he found the *raison d'être* for his life and his true identity (Mišterová 2013, 72–73).

### 2.3 A Fragmentary *Hamlet*

Beginning in 1992, the Pilsen theatre has been a host and co-organiser of the International Festival Theatre (Mezinárodní festival Divadlo). Since its establishment, a number of remarkable productions of plays by Czech and foreign playwrights has been staged. *Hamlet*, under the direction of the Lithuanian director Eimuntas Nekrošius, was produced in 1997.<sup>18</sup>

Eimuntas Nekrošius staged his productions at many theatre festivals, including Wiener Festwochen, Berliner Festwochen, Festival d'Automne, and Chicago International Theatre Festival. He was awarded numerous theatre awards, including the Grand Prix Bitez (1988) and the European Award for New Theatre Realities. During the Pilsen International Festival Theatre, he staged, among others, Pushkin's *Little Tragedies* (*Malé tragédie*, 1994), and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1997, translated by Aleksas Churginas) and *Macbeth* (2000). Nekrošius cast a non-actor in the role of Hamlet, a young Lithuanian singer Andrius Mamontovas (b. 1967), known throughout Lithuania for his songs of defiance and melancholy. Mamontovas, who captivated

---

<sup>18</sup> Eimuntas Nekrošius (1952–2018) was a Lithuanian theatre director.



audiences with his rock star image – involving a punk hairstyle, an earring in his ear and a denim outfit – portrayed a “rough and tumble” Hamlet in his acting debut.

Nekrošius’s four-hour production was an impressive adaptation of Shakespeare’s play, which was based on a loose grouping of symbolic signs and images that made use of real elements of nature, e.g., the rocking chair, on which the ghost of Hamlet’s father was diligently rocking, caught fire and was extinguished by water that had been brought to the stage by the Ghost in the form of ice. Theatre reviews commented on the production quite enthusiastically:

Nekrošius’s *Hamlet* is concrete yet painfully literal. It is believable in the sense of physical pain, fear, and cruelty. Ice, water, fire, and ashes are not the expressions of the elements, they are authentic and real, it is these elements that cause the cold, the dirt, and the pain. Not to the characters who are being portrayed, but to the actors who play them. Every feeling, and every emotion is experienced bodily, on the bodies of the actors. Nothing is a mere sign; everything astonishes with its authenticity (Mezinárodní festival Divadlo 1997, n.p., translation by author).

The director stages his performances exclusively in Lithuanian with simultaneous translation and refuses to work with actors other than those who speak his native language. Communication is a key concept for Nekrošius, even though it is not a traditional verbal type. Nekrošius converts words into sensually concrete images and symbols, creating thus a specific language of denotations and connotations. His denotations are common objects and substances, such as a carpet, an axe, apples, and water, which in the overall context take on an almost magical meaning. However, individual denotations cannot always be assigned clear-cut meanings. The amount of connoted meaning depends not only on the audience’s knowledge of Shakespeare’s plays, but also on the director’s intention to convey a certain degree of new message and the overall context of the production. The ambiguity, or, more precisely, multiplicity of connoted meanings is characteristic of Nekrošius, though, in some cases, it is rather difficult to decipher.

Nekrošius’s production was quite demanding for the audience: it was performed in the director’s native language, was mostly figurative and did not follow the exact line of Shakespeare’s tragedy. The director only loosely combined certain scenes or only their fragments, with an eleven-member cast. Nekrošius’s staging can be characterised as a suggestive and allusive adaptation of Shakespeare’s tragedy with a concrete idea, supported by remarkable acting performances and a captivating

visual design and music. However, for anyone who is not familiar with *Hamlet*, it may remain a sequence of disconnected and perhaps unconnected images.

## Conclusion

The first *Hamlet* (1903) at the newly opened Municipal Theatre in Pilsen was a production by Vendelín Budil with Miloš Nový in the title role. Budil is to be credited with introducing Sládek's new translation, which was used for the first time in Pilsen. The production was marked by a romantic directorial approach enriched with psychological elements. *Hamlet* (1916), staged during the Great War on the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death, reflected a strong anti-German sentiment, which resonated with the strong anti-German spirit of Kvapil's Shakespeare cycle presented in Prague in the same year. Hamlet thus became a symbol of the pro-Allied attitude of the Czechs. In the character of Hamlet, Bedřich Karen combined an intense emotional experience with pragmatic thinking. His acting style was influenced by Eduard Vojan's performance, which dominated the National Theatre in Prague at that time and was the climax of the Shakespeare festival. The inter-war *Hamlet* (1926) can be seen as an enrichment of the predominantly operatic and musical repertoire during Jeřábek's directorship. A significant innovatory element of the production was atmospheric lighting, which used colours to express emotions. Počepický's directorial concept was symptomatic of the increased depiction of the psychological and emotive states of characters, and Hamlet particularly came to the forefront. The normalisation *Hamlet* produced after a 48-year gap in 1974 invited the audience to build a deeper meaning behind the scripted lines. Pavlovský's/Vrabec's Hamlet was a seeker of truth and revenge whose pursuit reflected the contemporary situation of the forced restoration of the Soviet-like political and social system.

Burian's production in 2001 was the first post-1989 *Hamlet*. It was neither a simplification of Hamlet's story nor an answer to the questions that Shakespeare's play raises, but it asked questions itself and left enough room for the audience to rethink Hamlet's quest for truth and revenge. *Hamleteen* (2012), which was intended for young adults, followed Hamlet's journey from adolescence to adulthood, marked by his effort to establish his own identity by associating himself with various subcultures, which served as a self-defence mechanism for dealing with his father's murder. The guest Lithuanian festival production (1997) showed new and unconventional ways of adapting Shakespeare's play based on a free combination of fragmentary Hamlet motifs. Language became of secondary importance since the emphasis was placed on loosely connected visual images raising questions about the meaning of Shakespeare's tragedy and offering specific insights into Nekrošius's vision of the play.

## Bibliography

- Bureš, Josef. 1916. “Rubrika Divadlo a umění. Hamlet.” *Český deník* LII, no. 125: 4.
- Burian, Jan. 2001. “William Shakespeare – Hamlet. Přeložil Martin Hilský,” theatre bill, J. K. Tyl Theatre, premiere on 15 December 2001. Theatre bill created by Marie Caltová. Divadlo J. K. Tyla v Plzni. Tisk Kalous & Skřivan, s.r.o.
- Calvo, Clara. 2004. “Shakespeare and Cervantes in 1916: The Politics of Language.” In *Shifting the Scene: Shakespeare in European Culture*, edited by Ladina Bezzola Lambert and Balz Engler, 78–94. Newark: University of Delaware Press.
- DK. 1925. “Divadlo a umění. Lady Fanny a její služebnictvo.” *Český deník* XIV, no. 354: 2.
- DK. 1926. “Divadlo a umění.” *Český deník* XV, no. 48: 5.
- Deyl, Rudolf. 1973. *Vavříny s trny*. Praha: Československý spisovatel.
- Holeček, Vladislav. 1924. “Divadlo, literatura a umění. Peg mého srdce.” *Český deník* XIII (60), no. 166: 5.
- JPA. 1974. “Plzeňský Hamlet.” *Tvorba. Týdeník pro politiku, vědu a kulturu* 21: 13.
- Krajník, Filip and Eva Kyselová. 2021. “Chapter 4. Shakespeare at Four Castles: Summer Shakespeare Festival in Prague, Brno, Ostrava (Czech Republic) and Bratislava (Slovakia).” In *Shakespeare on European Festival Stages*, edited by Nicoleta Cinpoes, Florence March and Paul Prescott, 55–74. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Kříž, František. 1927. *Divadlo města Plzně v letech 1902–1927*. Plzeň: Dělnické družstvo tiskařské v Plzni.
- MC. “Premiéra hry Williama Shakespeara již v sobotu 30. 3. 1974 – Hamlet roku 1974.” *Pravda* 55, no. 73: 5.
- Mezinárodní festival Divadlo. 1997. “Divadlo 1997.” Program ročníku 1997. <http://festival.divadlo.cz/rocniky/roc97/hamlet.asp>.
- MIK. 1974. “Plzeňský princ Hamlet.” *Lidová Demokracie* XXX, no. 198: 5.
- Mišterová, Ivona. 2013. “Hamleteen: A Search for Identity.” In *A Search for Identity*, edited by Ivona Mišterová and Eva Skopečková, 64–85. Pilsen: University of West Bohemia in Pilsen.
- Mišterová, Ivona. 2016. “‘Listen to Many, Speak to a Few’: Eduard Vojan’s Hamlet on the First Czech Stage.” *Anglica. An International Journal of English Studies* 25 (3): 107–17.
- Mišterová, Ivona. 2017. *Inter arma non silent musae: anglická a americká dramatická tvorba na českých a moravských divadelních scénách v době první světové války: 1914–1918*. Praha: Triton.
- NB. 1903. “Rubrika Divadlo: činohra.” *Plzeňské listy* 237: 4.
- NB. 1907. “Rubrika Divadlo a činohra.” *Plzeňské listy* 1: 2.
- Procházka, Martin. 1996. “Shakespeare and Czech Resistance.” In *Shakespeare: World Views*, edited by Heather Kerr, Robin Eaden, and Madge Mitton, 44–70. Newark: Associated University Presses.
- Shakespeare, William. 2008 (1987). *Hamlet*. Edited by G. R. Hibbard. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Schwyzer, Philip. 2013. *Shakespeare and the Remains of Richard III*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stříbrný, Zdeněk. 2007. *The Whirligig of Time: Essays on Shakespeare and Czechoslovakia*. Edited by Lois Potter. Newark: University of Delaware Press.

**Ivona Mišterová** is a senior lecturer at the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czech Republic. She received her Ph.D. in English and American Literature from Charles University in Prague. Ivona has published monographs on performances of British and American works staged in Czech theatres in the 20th and 21st centuries, for instance *Anglo-americké drama na plzeňských scénách* (Anglo-American Drama on Pilsen Stages, 2013) and *Inter Arma non Silent Musae. Anglická a americká tvorba na českých moravských divadelních scénách v době první světové války* (Inter Arma non Silent Musae. English and American Drama on Czech and Moravian Stages during the Great War, 2017).

**Contact:** yvonne@kaj.zcu.cz



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.



**“MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH”:  
NEW DIRECTIONS IN *HAMLET* ADAPTATIONS**

*David Livingstone*

**Abstract**

Hamlet seems to be everywhere, from t-shirts encouraging the drinking of “two beers or not two beers” to advertisements for everything under the sun. Hollywood has entered the fray with its box-office animated hit *The Lion King* or the popular motorcycle gang television series *Sons of Anarchy*, to name but a few examples. We would seem to have reached Hamlet overload. Does the Prince of Denmark have anything left in the tank for contemporary readers of serious fiction?

This paper will examine three recent Hamlet adaptation novels: Lisa Klein’s *Ophelia* (2006), Ian McEwan’s *Nutshell* (2016) and Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* (2020). The above-mentioned novels will be used to exemplify three of the most frequent current approaches, all amounting to forms of intertextuality: the Joycean, involving tracing links between Shakespeare’s life and the plays; the Stoppardian, consisting of spin-offs of the play focusing on characters other than Hamlet himself; the ‘updating’ approach where the bare bones of the plot of the play are employed for a narrative taking place in the present day. Hamlet, despite his fears of falling into oblivion, very much lives on “to tell my [his] story” (Shakespeare, 5.2 302).

**Keywords**

Adaptations, Shakespeare, contemporary novel, *Hamlet*, intertextuality

\* \* \*

IN line with Hamlet’s dying appeal to Horatio to not allow his fate to fall into oblivion, writers have continued to return to the tale of the Prince of Denmark up to the present day. The same holds true for Shakespeare’s plays in general of course as is evidenced by the recent Hogarth Shakespeare project,<sup>1</sup> among other things. The adaptations come in many forms: novels, theatre plays, films, short stories, comics and even computer games. While some adaptations attempt to retell or at least update Shakespeare’s original play, others use the plot as inspiration to branch off in new directions.

---

<sup>1</sup> See my recent paper dealing with three of the Hogarth Shakespeare novel adaptations (Livingstone, in press), or Krajník and Weiss’s essay on *Hag-Seed*, Margaret Atwood’s re-imagining of *The Tempest*, published within the project (Krajník and Weiss 2021).

In an attempt at formulating a systematic approach, I have divided the recent adaptations into three categories, acknowledging of course that this is far from definitive. All of them rely, to varying degrees, on intertextuality. The three novels chosen for analysis are the following: Lisa Klein’s *Ophelia* (2006), Ian McEwan’s *Nutshell* (2016) and Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* (2020).

I call the first of the three categories the Joycean approach, making reference to the musings of Stephen Dedalus in the Irish National Library in the Scylla and Charybdis chapter in *Ulysses*, where the young semi-autobiographical character pontificates to his literary acquaintances on links between Shakespeare’s personal life and the plots of his plays, *Hamlet* in particular. Although much of what Stephen theorizes about is not wholly original or even meant in sincerity, this finding of parallels between Shakespeare’s life and art has continued to inspire creative approaches, in this particular case, the recently published novel *Hamnet*.

The second could be called the Stoppardian approach, in connection with the classic of the Theatre of the Absurd *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* from 1967. Tom Stoppard chooses to focus on two minor characters from the play with only brief appearances by Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and others. These adaptations take the form of offshoots or spin-offs of sorts of the main plays. Lisa Klein’s novel *Ophelia* from 2006, later made into a film from 2018, embodies this approach.

The third and final category is the most experimental and arguably least faithful to the original Shakespearean text. These works consist of present-day retellings and/or updatings, where the connection with the original play is often less than apparent or obvious. Ian McEwan’s remarkable *Nutshell* from 2016, in contrast to many less successful experiments, will be used to exemplify this approach.

These categories are not of course completely clear-cut and definitely tend to overlap and even blend into one another.

The most recent adaptation is by the Northern Irish novelist Maggie O’Farrell whose ninth published book *Hamnet* has met with universal critical acclaim. The attention is very much deserved in particular for the way in which Anne Shakespeare (Hathaway), called Agnes in the novel, is portrayed, not only when coming to terms with the death of her beloved son, but in general. In contrast to almost all of the fictional treatments of William Shakespeare and his family, she is refreshingly not portrayed as a harri-dan who drives her husband away from home and into the arms of London. As Germaine Greer has pointed out in her extremely insightful and influential book *Shakespeare’s Wife*, Anne is inevitably proclaimed guilty without any actual evidence. The most famous example of this is in the hit film *Shakespeare in Love* where Anne is dismissed in mere passing as a mistake when the playwright tries to get back on the good side of his love interest Viola.

The connection with Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* is not, of course, as developed as is the case in the other two novels discussed below. The book makes much over the bewitching parallel between the name *Hamnet* and the name of Shakespeare's tragedy, even invoking the authority of Stephen Greenblatt who argues that the names are two variants of the same name in a kind of preface to the novel (O'Farrell 2020). Whether this is true or not is debatable and beyond the realm of my expertise, but the book seems to ignore the obvious fact that *Hamlet* was not a name dreamed up by Shakespeare, but a personage (fictional or not) taken from the *History of the Danes* (*Gesta Danorum*) by Saxo Grammaticus. James Joyce, through his alter-ego Stephan Dedalus, of course popularized this notion of there being a connection between the play *Hamlet* and Shakespeare's premature deceased son Hamnet: "To a son he speaks, the son of his soul, the prince, young Hamlet and to the son of his body, Hamnet Shakespeare, who has died in Stratford that his namesake may live for ever" (Joyce 1960, 188–89).

O'Farrell makes this connection integral to the conclusion of her novel when Agnes, almost four years after the death of Hamnet, finds out about the production of the play and makes her one and only trip to London to confront her husband about it. She is maliciously informed about her husband's seemingly callous decision by her stepmother Joan: "Because of course he would never call it that without telling you first, would he, without your by-your-leave?" (O'Farrell 2020, 343)

Agnes is initially furious about her husband's insensitivity (an issue which has been building up for years): "There has been some odd, strange mistake. He died. This name is her son's and he died, not four years ago" (O'Farrell 2020, 344). Upon arriving in London, she makes her way to her husband's lodgings only to be told he is at the theatre on the other side of the Thames. She notices, however, a letter addressed to her with only the salutation attached thus far. The reader later learns that Shakespeare has been working up to write her about this sensitive decision to write the play using their late son's name and is resolved to do so after the performance of the play: "He will cross over the river, go back to Bishopgate and write to his wife, as he has been trying to, for a long time. He will not avoid the matter in hand. He will tell her about this play. He will tell her all. Tonight. He is certain of it" (O'Farrell 2020, 355).

Determined to hate what her husband has dared to do, she is won over in the end while watching the play. The characterization by the actor playing the role of Hamlet in the play has apparently been based on their son and has even been provided by her husband with the mannerisms and appearance of the beloved lost Hamnet: "Her son, her Hamnet, is dead, buried in the churchyard . . . Yet this is him, grown into a near-man, as he would be now, had he lived, walking with her son's gait, talking



in her son’s voice, speaking words written for him by her son’s father” (O’Farrell 2020, 365). Agnes finally acknowledges the beauty of the tribute her husband has created to their son’s life and memory. The poignancy of the scene is enhanced by O’Farrell making use of the legend that Shakespeare actually played the role of Hamlet the father’s ghost:

Hamlet here, on this stage, is two people, the young man, alive, and the father, dead. He is both alive and dead. Her husband has brought him back to life, in the only way he can. As the ghost talks, she sees that her husband, in writing this, in taking the role of the ghost, has changed places with his son. He has taken his son’s death and made it his own; he has put himself in death’s clutches, resurrecting the boy in his place. (O’Farrell 2020, 366)

Although Greenblatt, like myself, is very much sceptical concerning the main premise of the novel, he does provide a heart-felt tribute to her accomplishment in a review of the book by referencing Ben Jonson’s emotional tribute to his own deceased boy, “On My First Son”:

But I too am convinced that Shakespeare drew upon his grief and mourning to write the astonishing, transformative play that bears his son’s name. With her touching fiction O’Farrell has not only painted a vivid portrait of the shadowy Agnes Hathaway Shakespeare but also found a way to suggest that Hamnet was William Shakespeare’s best piece of poetry. (Greenblatt 2021)

The novel *Ophelia* by Lisa Klein attempts to give a voice to Hamlet’s love interest in the play. The book consists of a fairly straight-forward first-person narration from the age of ten or so. Ophelia is brought up by her father, she is a tom boy, who enjoys books and learning, much more so than her brother Laertes. The characterization would seem to have been influenced by Virginia Woolf’s influential ponderings concerning a sister of Shakespeare in *A Room of One’s Own* who is as equally talented and imaginative as her brother, but never provided with the support to pursue her artistic dreams. Brought into the court as a lady-in-waiting to Gertrude, she develops a crush on Hamlet from a young age. She is also interested in herbs and poultices, becoming a healer, hereby sharing this feature with the Agnes character in *Hamnet*.

The novel frequently interjects lines from the original play, sometimes in unexpected and surprising places. When bantering flirtatiously with Hamlet, now as a teenage girl, for example, she boldly answers one of his cheeky comments and is complimented as follows by the young Prince: ““She scored a hit, a palpable hit!” Hamlet cried, and staggered as if pierced by a sword. ‘Sharp as a rapier is this lady’s

wit” (Klein 2006, 54). This seems to be the beginning of Ophelia’s ardour being returned by the young Prince. Ophelia, for a change, anticipates Hamlet’s words from the play upon their next meeting. “‘Still I am beating my wings against the walls of my cage,’ I said ruefully, ‘for Elsinore sometimes seems a prison to me.’ Instantly I regretted my words, for I did not wish to seem ungrateful. ‘I only wish that I could freely come and go—’” (Klein 2006, 59). Echoing the lines of Hamlet’s first soliloquy in act one scene two, the Prince also paraphrases his own famous lines:

“There is disease in Denmark. My father is not two months dead, his flesh still clings to his bones, and yet my mother takes a new husband. Indeed it is the cold funeral meats that furnish today’s wedding table,” he said bitterly, speaking more to himself than to me. (Klein 2006, 98)

The lovers end up marrying in clandestine, along the lines of *Romeo and Juliet* with only Horatio as a witness, and come up with a scheme to fool their parents and the court:

“I have a plan, husband,” I said brightly, touching his arm to regain his attention. “What better way to hide that we are married than to pretend a courtship? You shall pursue me, for my father believes that you do. I will deny you and seem the virtuous daughter, while we steal secret kisses from each other.” “Yes! We will feign love to hide love. This is a paradox I will act with pleasure,” said Hamlet, leaning in to kiss my throat where my heartbeat was visible. (Klein 2006, 129)

At times the paraphrases and citations come across as irritating. “‘Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!’ he cried, seizing his forehead in his hands. His face was twisted with agony. Was he rehearsing the role he meant to play at that night’s entertainment?” (Klein 2006, 141). These summaries of the speeches from the play seem occasionally contrived and forced. The present writer at least ends up feeling like he is being talked down to somehow, with everything being over-explained.

In contrast to the play, Polonius is killed by a guard and Hamlet is framed for the murder. Ophelia does a Juliet-like trick of feigned death and is rescued from the grave by Horatio. In line with Hamlet’s famous insulting dismissal in the play “Get thee to a nunnery” (Shakespeare, 3.1.122), she escapes to a convent, eventually bearing his child and finally receiving the following from Horatio:

The letter bore, alas, Horatio’s news of the death of Hamlet and the ruin of all Denmark. *The final fruits of evil have spilled their deadly seeds . . . It was the sight of his dying mother that spurred Hamlet’s revenge at last . . . Laertes and Prince Hamlet have slain each other . . . I have failed in the*

*task you set me . . . Forgive Hamlet . . . he loved you deeply.* Horatio's words filled my veins with sorrow and touched my heart like the quickest poison, bringing blackness like the oblivion of death. (Klein 2006, 242)

She becomes the convent doctor/healer and finally gives birth to a son, revealing her true identity to the nuns in residence: "'My son's name is Hamlet, as was his father's, and he is a prince of Denmark'" (Klein 2006, 302). In the epilogue to the novel, Klein provides the tale with a romantic happy ending with the arrival of Horatio at the convent, who informs Ophelia of her husband's final words.

"I held Hamlet as he took his last breath. He and your brother forgave each other their wrongs. That much I did achieve."

"Thank you," I whisper.

"Hamlet lamented that he left behind a name so wounded, and he bade me tell his story, which I do still." (Klein 2006, 324)

Ophelia and Horatio are in love and live happily ever after with young Hamlet, who will perhaps one day return for his rightful kingdom. It seems the story is ripe for a sequel.

Lisa Klein in a conversation with an anonymous interviewer at the end of the novel actually acknowledges her debt to Tom Stoppard, "I enjoyed and admired *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, and, like Stoppard, I wanted to write 'between the lines' of *Hamlet*, weaving Ophelia's story into the existing time frame of *Hamlet*" (Klein 2006, 334). Stoppard did not, of course, do anything of the sort, but instead employed the minor characters to undertake something highly original and distinct, which unfortunately cannot be said for Klein's novel or the mediocre film which it served as the basis for. *Ophelia* seems to have been hampered by its insistence on keeping too strictly to the bare bones of the original plot of the play. One wonders if this Stoppardian approach might be better suited to the theatre or perhaps the short story.

One highly original example of the latter is the delightful short story "Yorick" by Salman Rushdie from 1982, a self-proclaimed "cock-and-bull story" (Rushdie 1982, 81) which turns the entire plot of the play on end, making young Hamlet the killer of his father, by means of Yorick, in a fit of jealousy over the jester's attractive, but ill-smelling wife Ophelia. Hamlet's crime, however, comes back to haunt him leading to something along the lines of the original plot of the play.

Haunted by the phantom of his crimes, he starts to lose his reason. His own Ophelia he treats badly, as you know; his cracking brain confuses here with the unbearable memory of the fool's foul-smelling wife . . . and (to cut

this short) at last the prince, who once turned speech to poison, drinks from a poisoned cup. (Rushdie 1982, 80)

The difference in skill and ingenuity is immediately apparent, while Klein's book ponderously moves along in predictable fashion, Rushdie's story bursts with invention.

The same could very much be said for the last novel subject to the current analysis, Ian McEwan's recent *Nutshell*, which takes place in the present-day in London. The novel's title comes from act two scene two of the play when Hamlet first greets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and gives voice to his melancholy and depression, "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams" (2.2.252–55).

McEwan imagines his yet unnamed Hamlet as just that, bounded "upside down in a woman. Arms crossed, waiting, waiting and wondering who I'm in, what I'm in for" (McEwan 2016, 1). The Hamlet-foetus, in the nine month of pregnancy, is certainly not at peace, but is instead a helpless eavesdropper to the plotting of his mother Trudy and his uncle Claude to murder his poet father John and inherit his valuable house in London. The novel is told in the first-person from the baby's helpless perspective: "My mother *is* involved in a plot, and therefore I am too, even if my role might be to foil it. Or if I, reluctant fool, come to term too late, then to avenge it" (McEwan 2016, 3).

Old Hamlet in this version is a middle-aged, overweight struggling poet, who is not only being cuckolded by his businessman brother, but also apparently exploited by younger poets whose careers he is trying to further:

Various of my conjectures have proved wrong in the past, but I've listened carefully and for now I'm assuming the following: that he knows nothing of Claude, remains moonishly in love with my mother, hopes to be back with her one day soon, still believes in the story she has given him that the separation is to give them each "time and space to grow" and renew their bonds. That he is a poet without recognition and yet he persists. That he owns and runs an impoverished publishing house and has seen into print the first collections of successful poets, household names, and even one Nobel laureate. When their reputations swell, they move away like grown children to larger houses. (McEwan 2016, 10–11)

In contrast to his father, who "knows by heart a thousand poems" (McEwan 2016, 11), his uncle Claude is a boorish property developer whose conversation is full of pompous inanities, and to insult to injury, always seems to be ready and willing

to have sex with the expecting mother. McEwan hilariously captures the indignity of poor baby Hamlet’s predicament:

Not everyone knows what it is to have your father’s rival’s penis inches from your nose. By this late stage they should be refraining on my behalf. Courtesy, if not clinical judgement, demands it. I close my eyes, I grit my gums, I brace myself against the uterine walls. This turbulence would shake the wings off a Boeing. My mother goads her lover, whips him on with her fairground shrieks. Wall of Death! On each occasion, on every piston stroke, I dread that he’ll break through and shaft my soft-boned skull and seed my thoughts with his essence, with the teeming cream of his banality. Then, brain-damaged, I’ll think and speak like him. I’ll be the son of Claude. (McEwan 2016, 21)

There is no doubt that this manages to ingeniously invigorate the, occasionally time-worn and stale, Freudian reading of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

McEwan once again includes direct citations and variants of some of the original lines of the play, but here with much more ingenuity and pizzazz. Instead of the would-be warrior comparison with mighty Hercules in act one scene two, we have “but no more like my father than I to Virgil or Montaigne” (McEwan 2016, 33). Another fresh play on the lines from the original play consists of a updated commentary of the “What a piece of work is man” (Shakespeare, 2.2.293–308).

But lately, don’t ask why, I’ve no taste for comedy, no inclination to exercise, even if I had the space, no delight in fire or earth, in words that once revealed a golden world of majestic stars, the beauty of poetic apprehension, the infinite joy of reason. These admirable radio talks and bulletins, the excellent podcasts that moved me, seem at best hot air, at worst a vaporous stench. The brave polity I’m soon to join, the noble congregation of humanity, its customs, gods and angels, its fiery ideas and brilliant ferment, no longer thrill me. (McEwan 2016, 91)

McEwan’s ongoing references to the technological and social developments of twenty-first century Europe, and England in particular, make baby Hamlet’s existential concerns about the future particularly relevant, managing to touch on many of the concerns young people are having about the future and whether it makes sense to be born into this world at all or procreate. The foetus narrator learns about the mounting ills of the world through the podcasts his mother listens to. This is only part of the horrors he is being exposed to: “Profitable and poisonous agriculture obliterating biological

beauty. Oceans turning to weak acid. Well above the horizon, approaching fast, the urinous tsunami of the burgeoning old, cancerous and demented, demanding care” (McEwan 2016, 26–27).

The treatment of the actual murder is innovative and witty, involving poisoning John with a smoothie. After the fact, Claude is slick and remorseless, while Trudy is ‘complicated’ to say the least. She is initially very much in with the plan, only to be plagued by remorse. With the police closing in on the two accomplices, things begin to turn sour. Just as they are about to make a run for it to the Continent, Trudy’s water breaks. Upon realizing she is not going to be able to escape, she decides not to face her punishment alone and hides Claude’s passport. Trudy gives birth to the hero of the novel with Claude’s begrudging assistance. The novel comes to an end with the police at the door to arrest them and the new-born staring up at his treacherous mother:

My mother moves me so we can exchange a long look. The moment I’ve waited for. My father was right, it is a lovely face. The hair darker than I thought, the eyes a paler green, the cheeks still flushed with recent effort, the nose indeed a tiny thing. I think I see the entire world in this face. Beautiful. Loving. Murderous. I hear Claude cross the room with resigned tread to go downstairs. No ready phrase. Even in this moment of repose, during this long, greedy stare into my mother’s eyes, I’m thinking about the taxi waiting outside. A waste. Time to send it away. And I’m thinking about our prison cell – I hope it’s not too small – and beyond its heavy door, worn steps ascending: first sorrow, then justice, then meaning. The rest is chaos. (McEwan 2016, 198–99)

In contrast to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the novel closes with the main protagonist’s life only beginning, but “the rest is silence” (Shakespeare, 5.2.311) for the voice of our baby hero.

Kate Clanchy in a review for *The Guardian* expresses what many people probably thought upon hearing about the premise behind the novel: “This may not sound like an entirely promising read: a talking foetus could be an unconvincing or at least tiresomely limited narrator, and updatings of Shakespeare often strain at their own seams” (Clancy 2016). McEwan’s novel nevertheless succeeds in providing a truly fresh take on the often re-told and re-hashed tale of Hamlet the Dane.

Clanchy’s characterization of certain less successful “updatings,” and adaptations in general, in her review is unfortunately generally the rule not the exception. As is the case with literary treatments of Shakespeare the man, the less faithful and reverent adaptations tend to be (in many cases, certainly not all) the most interesting.<sup>2</sup> All three of the novels include actual quotations from *Hamlet* and other works

---

<sup>2</sup> For more on this issue, see Livingstone 2019.

by Shakespeare. This technique can become trying and annoying at least in the present author’s opinion; *Nutshell* is most able to successfully pull it off, while *Ophelia* overindulges.

There will undoubtedly be further new directions in the future, a case in point being the current film release *The Northman* directed by Robert Eggers which claims to return to the source material on Hamlet or Amleth. Shakespeare’s text is nowhere to be seen in the film, but is amply compensated for by brutal violence and attention to period details and costumes. There will certainly be new adaptations to come exploring gender issues, queer politics, science fiction renderings, etc. (animals have already been tried with *The Lion King*, but perhaps something along the lines of *Flush* by Virginia Woolf or the novel *Shakespeare’s Dog* by Leon Rooke may be in the workings).<sup>3</sup> It is also a given that international adaptations will continue to flourish placing the plot in new, exotic locales (Kashmir, India in Vishal Bhardwaj’s film *Haider*, 2014); California’s Central Valley (in the motorcycle gang television series *Sons of Anarchy* by Kurt Sutter, 2008–2014), among others. Hamlet’s story will continue to be told and retold, in both familiar and less recognizable forms “in this harsh world” (Shakespeare, 5.2.301).

## Bibliography

- Allers, Roger, director. 1994. *The Lion King*. Walt Disney Pictures.
- Bhardwaj, Vishal, director. 2014. *Haider*. UVT Motion Pictures.
- Clanchy, Kate. 2016. “Nutshell by Ian McEwan review – an elegiac masterpiece.” Review of *Nutshell*, by Ian McEwan. *The Guardian*. August 27, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/27/nutshell-by-ian-mcewan-review>.
- Eggers, Robert, director. 2022. *The Northman*. Universal Pictures.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 2021. “A Wisewoman in Stratford.” Review of *Amnet*, by Maggie O’Farrell. *The New York Review*, January 14, 2021. [https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2021/01/14/hamnet-shakespeare-wisewoman-stratford/?lp\\_txn\\_id=1349176](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2021/01/14/hamnet-shakespeare-wisewoman-stratford/?lp_txn_id=1349176).
- Greer, Germaine. 2007. *Shakespeare’s Wife*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Jonson, Ben. 2005. “On My First Son.” *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, edited by Margaret Ferguson, Tim Kendall and Mary Jo Salter, 323. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Joyce, James. 1960. *Ulysses*. Aylesbury: Penguin Books.
- Klein, Lisa. 2016. *Ophelia*. New York: Bloomsbury.

---

<sup>3</sup> Both of these novels are told from the perspective of a dog, a canine belonging to Elizabeth Barrett Browning in the former case and one belonging to Shakespeare himself in the latter.

- Krajník, Filip and Michaela Weiss. 2021. “‘Their hour will be his hour’: Margaret Atwood’s *Hag-Seed* and the Conventions of Renaissance Revenge Plays.” *Hradec Králové Journal of Anglophone Studies* 8, no. 1–2: 80–86.
- Livingstone, David. (in press). “Great Expectations: Adapting Shakespeare in Two Texts from the Hogarth Shakespeare Project.” *American, British and Canadian Studies*.
- Livingstone, David. 2019. *In Our Own Image: Fictional Representations of William Shakespeare*, Olomouc: Palacký University.
- McCarthy, Claire, director. 2018. *Ophelia*. Covert Media.
- McEwan, Ian. 2016. *Nutshell*. London: Vintage.
- Norman, Marc and Tom Stoppard. 1998. *Shakespeare in Love: A Screenplay*. New York: Miramax Film Corp and Universal Studios.
- O’Farrell, Maggie. 2020. *Hamnet*. London: Tinder Press.
- Rooke, Leon. 1983. *Shakespeare’s Dog*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Rushdie, Salman. 1982. “Yorick.” In *Shakespeare Stories*, edited by Giles Gordon, 70–81. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Shakespeare, William. 1987. *Hamlet*, edited by G. R. Hibbard. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stoppard, Tom. 1967. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. New York: Grove Press.
- Sutter, Kurt. 2008. *Sons of Anarchy*. Century City: FX Networks.
- Woolf, Virginia. 1983. *Flush: A Biography*. San Diego: Harcourt, Inc.
- Woolf, Virginia. 1985. *A Room of One’s Own*. Houndmills: Macmillan.

**David Livingstone** is an American citizen living and working in the Czech Republic for the last thirty years. He teaches Shakespeare, modernism, Czech culture, children’s literature and American folk music at Palacký University, Olomouc. His doctoral dissertation, entitled *Subversive Characters and Techniques in Shakespeare’s History Plays*, attempted feminist and cultural materialist readings of the first Henriad in particular. He recently published a book, *In Our Own Image: Fictional Representations of William Shakespeare*, which looks at the wealth of novels, plays, short stories, films, television series and even comics focused on Shakespeare as a character.

**Contact:** david.livingstone@upol.cz



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.





# **HAMLET/HAMNET: HAUNTED BY “THE POISON OF DEEP GRIEF”**

*Jarrold DePrado*

## **Abstract**

William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* remains a cultural touchstone after over 400 years, inspiring readers, scholars, and artists. Shakespeare himself occupies a unique place in the Western canon: both a creator of inspired art and a pop culture icon. The scant biographical details about Shakespeare have garnered an equal amount of attention and speculation. A particular focus is given to Shakespeare’s relationship to grief, given the death of his son Hamnet at age eleven, and whether it is reflected in his written work, especially *Hamlet*. Comparing the fictional depictions of a grieving Shakespeare in Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* (2020), Kenneth Branagh’s *All Is True* (2018), and Dead Centre’s *Hamnet* (2017), a consensus arises of Shakespeare as a grieving father who looks to reconcile his relationship to his deceased son through art in various ways. Ultimately, the fictional Shakespeare serves as a cultural figure of mourning that transcends the limits of biographical accuracy.

## **Keywords**

Biographical criticism, grief literature, Hamnet Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, historical fiction, parental loss

\*\*\*

“what a wounded name,  
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me!”  
– Hamlet (5.2.329–30)<sup>1</sup>

IT is no hyperbole to say that William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is the best-known and most frequently discussed play in the English language. Its pervasiveness in pop culture over the past 400 years is renewed by the multitude of writing – fiction and non-fiction – about every facet of its legacy. We are haunted by the play that keeps finding

---

<sup>1</sup> References to Shakespeare are drawn from The Arden Shakespeare Third Series *Complete Works* (2020), edited by Ann Thompson, David Scott Kastan, H. R. Woudhuysen, and Richard Proudfoot. In other versions, “I leave” is written as “live.” Both are appropriate in evaluating the legacy of everyone involved: Hamlet, Shakespeare, and Hamnet.

new resonance. Just as we find cultural relevance in Shakespeare’s works today, there are also frequent attempts to see the author reflected in his work. *Hamlet* in particular is studied as a cipher for Shakespeare’s expressions of grief – both from the philosophical musings on death by the eponymous prince and the similarity between the title and the name “Hamnet,” Shakespeare’s only son who died in adolescence a few years before the play was written. The connection seems obvious, as James J. Marino (2014) writes: “[S]ince the most personal work is held to be the most moving, the most moving is deemed to be the most personal; the poet’s life is detected where his verse seems best” (60). Many scholars believe that a multitude of answers lies in the potential symbiosis between *Hamlet* and Hamnet:<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare’s relationship with his son is the key to understanding Shakespeare’s conception of *Hamlet*, just as the play could help us understand Shakespeare’s grief.

Through Juliet, Shakespeare famously asks “What’s in a name?” (2.2.43), minimizing the importance of what a specific name entails. In the case of the widespread, contentious debate over whether Shakespeare uses his plays to mourn the death of Hamnet, the name is everything. The close proximity between the spellings of Shakespeare’s *magnum opus* and his only son is tantalizingly apt for analysis:<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare’s most potent reflections on death are espoused by a character (and in a play) bearing a name similar to that of his recently deceased son. Historically, it is unclear what to make of the strange set of circumstances surrounding the naming of the play. Most of Shakespeare’s canon is taken from earlier sources, and *Hamlet*’s origins trace back to the medieval story of a character named “Amleth” and an early modern dramatic adaptation (now lost), often credited to either Shakespeare himself or Thomas Kyd.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, it has been argued that “Hamlet” and “Hamnet” were interchangeable names at the time, but perhaps only because Hamnet Sadler – Shakespeare’s friend and neighbor, and his son’s namesake – is listed as “Hamlet Sadler” in Shakespeare’s will (Honan 1999, 90). These unresolved issues frustrate modern scholars who, despite knowing more biographically about Shakespeare than nearly any of his contemporaries, continue to seek out Shakespeare’s emotional response in his works, particularly *Hamlet*. When considering the role of grief

---

2 See Greenblatt (2004), Bray (2008), Miller (1026), Smith (2011, 2012), and Wheeler (2000).

3 Sigmund Freud does just that in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), diagnosing Hamlet with an Oedipus complex. Freud also writes about the Hamlet/Hamnet connection but focuses more on the potential impact that the death of his father had on the playwright. Peter Bray (2008) builds on Freud’s work and argues that *Hamlet* and Shakespeare both struggle with a “spiritual emergency.”

4 Kyd is a strong contender because of the similarities to his *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1580s), often considered a spiritual predecessor to *Hamlet*. Scholars continue to speculate about the missing early version of *Hamlet*, referred to as the *Ur-Hamlet*.

in Shakespeare's life, we have the same line of inquiry as Brutus in *Julius Caesar*: "How that might change his nature, there's the question" (2.1.13).

Biographic details about Hamnet Shakespeare are unsurprisingly scarce: he and his twin sister Judith were born in 1585, both named after the above-mentioned Sadler and his wife. Shakespeare was away in London for the majority of Hamnet's childhood and was most likely unable to make it home before his son died of unknown causes in 1596, at age eleven. These minimal details are often enough to whet the appetite to better understand Shakespeare, who left behind a large canon of dramatic and poetic works but no personal writing. Similarly, the reason for writing *Hamlet* several years after Hamnet's death is ripe for speculation. Stephen Greenblatt (2014) suggests that even if Shakespeare adapted the story and produced *Hamlet* out of "strictly commercial considerations, the coincidence of the names – the writing again and again of the name of his dead son as he composed the play – may have reopened a deep wound, a wound that had never properly healed." Whether true or not, the desire to perform a biographical reading of Shakespeare's works, especially *Hamlet*, ultimately reveals more about the audience than the author. Or, as Marino (2014) puts it, "biographical criticism has always been autobiography in disguise" (62).<sup>5</sup>

Because of our cultural affinity to Shakespeare's works and, as Annalisa Castaldo (2022) writes, "because he is so well known, so instantly recognizable, Shakespeare is a convenient mythos figure who can be used for a variety of purposes" (9). Since there is no definitive answer to whether and how Shakespeare grieved, several fictional works make use of the scarce historical information to humanize the mythic Shakespeare through his personal experience with loss. Two recent works, both bearing Hamnet's name as the title, revisit the relationship between the Bard and his son from different perspectives: *Hamnet*, a 2020 novel by Maggie O'Farrell, and *Hamnet*, a 2017 "one-child" play written by Bush Moukarzel and Ben Kidd.<sup>6</sup> Both works answer the unresolved questions with a fictionalized Shakespeare that processes the loss of his son by channeling it into his writing. Additionally, Ken Branagh's 2018 film *All Is True* examines Shakespeare's relationship with Hamnet by focusing on the long-term domestic impact of grief. These works all humanize Shakespeare, not least of all as we consider our relationship to *Hamlet* as literature of mourning

---

<sup>5</sup> Marino also realistically concludes that reading for "signs of Shakespeare's personal bereavement in *Hamlet* is a closed hermeneutic, leading only and always to its initial principle. These claims are neither false nor true. They are merely expressions of belief" (59).

<sup>6</sup> The writing credit is given to Dead Centre, the production company where they are co-writers and directors, along with producer Rachel Murray.

and examine the transcendent experience of being haunted by “the poison of deep grief.”<sup>7</sup>

“I beseech you instantly to visit  
My too much changed son”  
– Gertrude (2.2.35–36)

Maggie O’Farrell, in the author’s note to *Hamnet* (2020), addresses the unknown cause of Hamnet’s death by recognizing that the plague, Black Death, or “pestilence as it would have been known in the late sixteenth century, is not mentioned once by Shakespeare, in any of his plays or poetry,” leading her to “[wonder] about this absence and possible significance” (370). Kathryn Harkup (2020) recounts several instances where Shakespeare alludes to the plague, but acknowledges that “no playwright depicted [the] plague in any realistic way or detailed its awful effects. It is almost as though the topic were too terrifying to mention or show onstage” (210).<sup>8</sup> O’Farrell’s work, subtitled *A Novel of the Plague*, is as much a dramatization of the marriage of the Shakespeares as a meditation on the loss of a child to the plague.<sup>9</sup> The first half of the novel jumps back and forth between the early relationship of Shakespeare and Agnes Hathaway – whom history knows as “Anne” – and the days leading up to the death of Hamnet. While the novel generally focuses more on Agnes, it does portray a young, well-read Shakespeare often pitted against his father, John, an irascible glove-maker who has been impoverished and publicly shunned. Much has been written about Shakespeare’s relationship with his father, whose death in 1601 may have had an impact on the composition of *Hamlet* as well.<sup>10</sup> Because or in spite of this

---

<sup>7</sup> Spoken by Claudius (4.5.75). The word “grief” appears 15 times in the text of *Hamlet*: five of them attributed to Claudius and three to his Player King representative, with a large emphasis placed on survivor’s guilt, not simply Hamlet’s filial obligation.

<sup>8</sup> Allusions to the plague are usually part of a curse that “either shows an absolute and serious hatred for recipients of the oath, or gallows humour of the blackest kind” (Harkup 2022, 210), perhaps most famously by Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*: “A plague o’ both your houses!” (3.1.101, 108). None of Shakespeare’s characters succumb to the plague offstage either, since “the theatre was an escape from everyday worries and audiences did not need reminders of the reality of the terrible pestilence” (210).

<sup>9</sup> Lovelock (2022) reminds readers that there was no recorded outbreak of the plague in Stratford the summer that Hamnet died (164), a pivotal revelation in *All Is True*.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Wheeler outlines an interesting chronology: Shakespeare would have been about Hamnet’s age when his father began to fall on financial hard times and become ostracized. Additionally, the year that Hamnet died is the same year that Shakespeare “secures the coat of arms that made his father and himself gentlemen” (137–38). One could argue that there was a cosmic trade-off where Shakespeare regains his father’s honor at the cost of his son. Or one could dive into the financial disparity between two fathers (John and William Shakespeare) with sons at a comparable age. As with much

paternal tension, Shakespeare remains a largely absent figure for the young family as he works to make a name for himself in London.

The second half of the novel depicts Agnes's response to Hamnet's death, particularly since her husband is not home when Hamnet dies. Believing that Judith is the one in mortal danger, Shakespeare is unprepared for the loss of his son, which evokes one strong, public emotional response on his part: "[T]he sound that comes out of him is choked and smothered, like that of an animal forced to bear a great weight. It is a noise of disbelief, of anguish," which Agnes can conjure up for the rest of her life (272). Beyond this, and after the funeral, Shakespeare's public grief is muted: "No crying, no sobbing, just sighing," and pacing the floor, unable to sleep (277). Agnes is frustrated by the continued absence of her husband. It is bad enough, as she keeps reminding him, that he was not there (278). By internalizing his grief, he effectively leaves his wife to mourn on her own, disappearing into "the place in [his] head": "Nothing can keep you from it. Not even the death of your own child" (286). The reader can see flashes of his grief that Agnes cannot, as Shakespeare is haunted by memories of his son "everywhere he looks: Hamnet" (280). But Agnes finds her husband as bafflingly elusive in the aftermath of Hamnet's death as scholars do. She cannot comprehend how he can "abandon" his family, both emotionally and physically, and return to London to work (285). For a woman who has been a model of strength, self-determination, and autonomy throughout the novel, the loss of Hamnet and the perceived aloofness of her husband transform her into "a woman broken into pieces, crumbled and scattered around" (277). Later, receiving a hastily written letter from him, Agnes hears about Shakespeare having "great success with a new comedy": "A comedy," she responds, leaving the reader to infer her incredulous tone (294).

Historically, Shakespeare did not retreat into grief after Hamnet's death, as sources note that he purchased a larger house, became more social, and his "creative activity seems undiminished, or even to have increased" (Smith 2012, 30). Rather, Greenblatt (2014) argues that Hamnet's death is the catalyst for a transformation within his writing. It allowed him to find a more developed style with a character, Hamlet, who can articulate a complex evolution of thoughts in a way that his earlier characters cannot. Additionally, Keverne Smith (2012) catalogs the changes in motifs in Shakespeare's work after Hamnet's death, which point to "evidence of displaced and incomplete, complicated mourning" (30): an increase in the number of supposedly-dead characters who are resurrected (31); young women who pretend to be their

---

of Shakespeare's biography, particularly what he was aware of during this time, speculation is the only tool available.

male twin (33–34); a larger emphasis placed on father-daughter relationships, not merely father-son (35); parents wracked with guilt, often over loss (36); and displaced families restored to order (37–38). Scholars also note that, in the wake of Hamnet’s death, Shakespeare did not write the brooding tragedies of much later years, but, rather, comedies and history plays. O’Farrell’s novel explains this by having Shakespeare rely on the latter genre as “a subject safe for him to grapple with”: “no pitfalls, no reminder, no unstable ground to stumble upon . . . only with them can he forget what happened” (303). Shakespeare returns home to arrange a purchase of a larger house, nearly a year after Hamnet’s death, to relocate Agnes and their girls<sup>11</sup> “away from all of this” and he only returns sporadically over the next several years (321, 329).

Left to run their new home in Stratford on her own, Agnes is visited by her stepmother, bringing news of Shakespeare’s next play, a tragedy, and is presented with a playbill on which “right in the middle, in the largest letters of all, is the name of her son, her boy, the name spoken aloud in church when he was baptised, the name on his gravestone, the name she herself gave him” (344). Agnes is scandalized by the play bearing the name of her deceased son, Hamnet/Hamlet, and charges to London to see it for herself and confront her thoughtless husband. Watching the performance of *Hamlet*, she discovers Shakespeare playing the Ghost of Hamlet’s father<sup>12</sup> and vacillates between wanting to see the performance and leaving, particularly when she hears her son’s name spoken, wondering “How could he thief this name, then strip and flense it of all it embodies, discarding the very life it once contained? How could he take up his pen and write it on a page, breaking its connection with their son?” (363) But she is captivated by the character of Hamlet, in whom she sees Hamnet “grown into a near-man, as he would be now, had he lived” (364). Watching Hamlet and the Ghost interact, she realized that “Her husband has brought [Hamnet] back to life, in the only way he can” and, as the Ghost, has “done what any father would wish to do, to exchange his child’s suffering for his own, to take his place, to offer himself up in his child’s stead so that the boy might live” (366). This interaction gives them both a sense of catharsis, especially since closure seems a distant dream for the still-grieving parents.

---

<sup>11</sup> The Shakespeares’ first child, Susanna, was born in 1583.

<sup>12</sup> There is anecdotal evidence from Nicholas Rowe (1709) that Shakespeare did actually perform this role. Despite Bloom’s assertion that “we *know* that Shakespeare acted the ghost of Hamlet’s father” (1998, 424, emphasis added), Cain (2016) reminds us that this is based on hearsay written “nearly a century after Shakespeare’s death and [Rowe] does not give a source” (82). Cain and Marino (2014) are both succinct in reminding us just how much is taken for granted as “fact” concerning Shakespeare’s biography.

Setting aside its historical setting or omitting the details that make it about the Shakespeare family, the novel's nuanced portrayal of parental grief is more about coping with loss than mere historical fiction about Shakespeare. The reader can see the isolating and debilitating effects on Agnes as well as Shakespeare's desire to smother emotional triggers in his work, regardless of who they are, or were, historically. Since much of Shakespeare's scholarship is based on a reading of (and into) the works he left behind, O'Farrell also looks to unpack the Shakespearean mythos by humanizing him and his family based on the minimal materials available. However, it is notable that Agnes, not the narrator, unlocks the relationship between Shakespeare's play and his son. During her visit to see the performance of *Hamlet*, she (and the reader) finally understands how Shakespeare is processing grief – not just through writing but by literally embodying the role of the Ghost to symbolically guide his son in a time of need. Both the novel and its heroine perform the same ritual as centuries of scholars: looking for evidence of the author's grief in *Hamlet*. Because this *is* a work of fiction, it is not as constrained as scholars are in understanding the "true" story of Shakespeare's connection between the two. William E. Cain (2016) reiterates a running criticism that all the "guesswork and surmise," particularly with this Hamnet/*Hamlet* connection, "is stimulating and fun, but it is fiction, more about us than about him" (81). This is not to suggest that Agnes is incorrect in what she perceives on stage. However, as the first person to embody the role of the biographic scholar, she is trying to confirm Shakespeare's relationship to grief based on an unconfirmed motive for his involvement with *Hamlet*. In true scholarly form, whether true or not, Agnes finds what *she* needs: a version of Shakespeare whose subtextual grief confirms the emotional connection he has to the play.

"And so have I a noble father lost;  
A sister driven into desperate terms"  
– Laertes (4.7.26–27)

In his 2018 film, *All Is True*, Kenneth Branagh<sup>13</sup> plays an older Shakespeare who returns to Stratford after the Globe Theatre burns down in 1613.<sup>14</sup> As in O'Farrell's

---

<sup>13</sup> Branagh established his on-screen Shakespeare credentials directing and starring in *Henry V* (1989), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), *Hamlet* (1996), and *Love's Labour's Lost* (2000); directing *As You Like It* (2006); and starring in Oliver Parker's *Othello* (1995). He has an extensive stage resume directing and starring in several Shakespearean productions and has even portrayed Shakespearean film icon Laurence Olivier in the film *My Week with Marilyn* (2011).

<sup>14</sup> As per the preface to the film, the Globe caught fire and burned down due to a canon misfiring during a 1613 production of *Henry VIII*. The title of Branagh's film is the same as the subtitle



novel, the film paints a picture of domestic life for the Shakespeares years after Hamnet’s death, with the long-absent Bard now at home in retirement. Shakespeare is still haunted by the death of Hamnet nearly 20 years afterwards, not least of all because the latter appears in hallucinations throughout the film. In an interview with Gary Crowds (2019), Branagh describes his approach to Shakespeare as trying to “explore the gaps between genius and human”: having Shakespeare return home “traumatized” after the tragic loss of his theatre, he must reconcile the problems with the family he left behind (32). Branagh’s Shakespeare is quiet and introspective, but acutely aware of his shortcomings as a husband and father. His two surviving daughters are grown but quickly find marital complications that interrupt Shakespeare’s intended retirement. Susanna, unhappily married to Dr. John Hall, is accused of having an illicit relationship with Rafe Smith.<sup>15</sup> Judith is unmarried and determined to remain so. She is particularly cold towards Shakespeare upon his return and confronts him about feeling pushed aside in his obvious favoritism towards the deceased Hamnet.

Much to Judith’s chagrin, Shakespeare’s focus on having a male heir<sup>16</sup> – in this case, a grandson – reflects how he still fixates on all the potential lost with Hamnet’s death. Specifically, the film invents Hamnet’s proclivity toward writing, with some of his surviving poems becoming Shakespeare’s prized possessions. Judith unleashes years of vitriol on her father, who seems ready to leave the bulk of his inheritance to his son-in-law, and confronts him about his feelings toward her: “Every time he reads those bloody poems, which aren’t even that good! He thinks why did *she* survive not him? . . . Why did the wrong twin die?” (21:00) Branagh’s Shakespeare is unable to contradict what Judith says here, but he is in the same emotional spot as O’Farrell’s Shakespeare. Despite knowing that his presence would not have changed anything, he is aware of his absence when Hamnet died and continues to mourn all that his son could have been:

Hamnet died and I wasn’t here! I know that! Hamnet died and the plague took him. But the plague’s taken millions and it would have taken him

---

of *Henry VIII: All Is True*. The film labels the fire as the reason for Shakespeare’s retirement, which is unconfirmed historically.

<sup>15</sup> While not mentioned in the film, Smith was the nephew of Shakespeare’s friend Hamnet Sadler. The accusations and fallout of Susanna’s alleged affair are also dramatized in Peter Whelan’s 1996 play *The Herbal Bed*, in which Shakespeare is mentioned but is not an onstage character.

<sup>16</sup> An ill-fated concern of Shakespeare’s, whose intricate will made specific provisions for male heirs, leaving his family with prolonged legal issues and scholars with questions about his relationship to his wife and daughters. Judith had 3 children, none of whom lived long enough to marry. Susanna’s sole child, a daughter named Elizabeth, was married twice but had no children. Shakespeare’s lineage ended with her death in 1670.

whether I was in Stratford or London or on that godforsaken highway. We just- we lost our boy! I know that! And I wasn't here! How many times can I say it? I wasn't here! We lost our brilliant, brilliant boy and I – (52:25)

However, Judith intercuts to undermine Shakespeare's faulty perception of his children. She admits that she, not Hamnet, wrote the poems and that her brother simply copied them down in his handwriting. "Hamnet wasn't brilliant," she tells him, "And you saw what you wanted to see. You saw yourself!" (52:50, 53:50) Since Shakespeare naturally assumed the poems were Hamnet's and, as Anne reminds him, "praised him so," a family conspiracy was born to let Hamnet take credit for Judith's poems. What is devastating for Shakespeare is not just losing the poems he ascribed to the late Hamnet – Judith, after claiming ownership of them, burns them all – but also hearing that Hamnet played along because he "dreaded" Shakespeare's visits, feeling he could never live up to the pressure placed on him. Once tensions cool, Shakespeare apologizes to Judith, who feels guilty for having "stolen Hamnet from [him] twice. Once by surviving him, and now by taking [his] dream of him away" (59:16). Shakespeare takes the loss of Hamnet's legacy in stride, even referring to Judith as a poet, his "new dream." Judith eases up on her resistance to her prescribed gender role by getting married to Thomas Quiney. However, Quiney is already engaged to another woman, Margaret, who is pregnant. Margaret's subsequent death in childbirth brings yet another mark of shame to the Shakespeare family, which has already grappled with John Shakespeare's penury, Anne being pregnant when she married Shakespeare, and the above-mentioned scandal with Susanna.

Shakespeare continues to work to resolve his domestic problems, but something still bothers him about Hamnet's passing. This more nuanced portrayal of Shakespeare is not limited to bouts of anger, depression, and guilt. He is more like Hamlet in unraveling a mystery surrounding the death of a loved one who haunts him.<sup>17</sup> As he tells Anne and Judith after checking the Parish Register, it does not make sense that there were so few deaths ascribed to the plague the summer that Hamnet died since the "Black Death is a scythe," killing large numbers indiscriminately, "it is not a dagger" (1:19:55). When pressed, Anne remains adamant, but Judith reveals the truth: frustrated by the adoration and attention Hamnet received from Shakespeare, she threatened to tell their father the truth about the authorship of the poems.

---

<sup>17</sup> He is also haunted by his father, though not with hallucinations. John Shakespeare's sordid reputation hangs over Shakespeare, as he fights to escape the stigma his family was supposed to overcome through the sheer force of his self-acknowledged genius (and money). What is perhaps difficult for Shakespeare to hear from the ever-perceptive Judith is that he desperately saw himself in Hamnet: not just the abilities but also a father who was able to recognize and appreciate them. Shakespeare certainly lacked the latter and overcompensated for it with Hamnet to the family's collective detriment.

Hamnet became so distraught at the prospect of his father learning he was not a writer that he threw himself into the pond and drowned. As Castaldo (2022) reflects, “Shakespeare has come to realize the cost of genius is not just isolation but actual destruction – of his theatre, his marriage, and his son’s life” (102). Judith once again feels immense remorse and considers herself responsible for her brother’s death: Judith lied; Hamnet died. But Shakespeare does not hold Judith responsible, and in fact, this allows their relationship to begin again on more open ground.

The film places Shakespeare into unfamiliar territory: now a rural gardener far from the streets of London, his professional fame replaced by compounded familial shame. Since there are no overt references to the writing of *Hamlet*, it is unclear whether Branagh’s Shakespeare sees the connection between his son and the play that O’Farrell’s does. Either way, relinquishing control over the legacy of Hamnet also eliminates the *possibility* of seeing his son as the prince. It is Judith, not Hamnet, who bears a resemblance to the tragic hero: lamenting a usurper’s place as the heir to her father’s literary throne, she uses her intelligence to battle her demons and allow the truth to ultimately prevail, even at a personal cost. Hamnet, by contrast, is relegated to becoming Ophelia by keeping a secret from his judgmental father and ultimately succumbing to suicide. With the genders of the characters reversed, *Hamlet* seems tragically prophetic in hindsight far beyond what Shakespeare might have imagined. Just as O’Farrell’s Shakespeare finds solace in how he interprets *Hamlet*, Branagh’s version finds closure in learning to let go of his son’s potential ambitions. Both cases reinforce that Shakespeare’s biography and canon remain open to interpretation by the audience and the author. They both start with the perplexing uncertainty of how Shakespeare grieved, but nearly every work—both scholarly and fictional—begins with the premise that he *must* have grieved.

“what would you undertake,  
To show yourself your father's son in deed  
More than in words?”  
– Claudius (4.7.122–24)

In an interview with *The Guardian*’s Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore (2018), Bush Moukarzel dismisses the idea that because the infant mortality rate was much higher in Shakespeare’s time, parents did not grieve the loss of their children: “Cancer is more prevalent now. It does not mean every single life is not mourned with exceptional power [...] Every loss of a life would have been felt acutely.” It is inconceivable in the twenty-first century to think that the loss of a child at any time would not be

devastating for a parent. This is where fiction finds the key to understanding the biographically elusive Shakespeare: grief is the great humanizing emotion through which we can move from scholarly speculation to artistic recreation of the life of the Bard. In the above depictions of Shakespeare, we find a grieving father looking for his son. Moukarzel and Ben Kidd's "one-child" play *Hamnet* (2017) focuses on the eleven-year-old son, trapped in an otherworldly setting and dressed in modern clothes, searching for his father. The play is more abstract than O'Farrell's novel but also delves into the relationship between Hamnet and *Hamlet* more overtly than in Branagh's film: *Hamnet* (2017) even borrows *Hamlet*'s opening line, "Who's there?" (9)

However, the play is not *Hamlet*, as Hamnet reminds the audience often: "[Y]ou haven't heard of me. You'll think you have at first. But then you'll realize you were thinking of someone else" (10). Contrary to what we see in O'Farrell's novel, or what scholars might be looking for in *Hamlet*, Hamnet is acutely aware that he is not the prince. The above depictions of Shakespeare focus on him processing grief by elevating Hamnet and honoring his legacy. Here, Hamnet is searching for a father whom he does not know and who probably "wouldn't recognize" him anyway (14). Once again, there is a consistent depiction of Shakespeare as the absent father and, as in Branagh's film, Hamnet feels as though he is unable to live up to his father's expectations. He tells us from the beginning that he does not know his father but, like a Shakespearean scholar, he attempts to glean more about him from *Hamlet*: he admits to the audience that he is not a "great man . . . not yet," but is "learning to speak like a great man," as he recites the first line of "to be or not to be" (10). Rather than being honored by the play, Hamnet is intimidated by a character he does not understand and cannot embody.

As in O'Farrell's novel, there is a direct connection to the Ghost scene when Hamnet selects a volunteer from the audience to "be [his] dad" (18), acknowledging that the Ghost is also a "great man," if different from a "nice man" (20–21). When Shakespeare finally makes an appearance on stage, he and Hamnet are separated both physically and emotionally, meeting as awkward strangers in two different realms. Hamnet inundates his father, the supposed "great man," with questions such as "Why did you go away" (27) and "Who do you prefer: me, or Hamlet?" (35). With the latter, while rhapsodizing over Hamlet's various character traits, Shakespeare ultimately reveals the central conceit of why we continue to look for him in his works, particularly *Hamlet*: "[I]t's easy to know so much about a fictional character, because they're alive for such a long time. In fact, they outlive us. There's so much time to get to know them. Whereas people, especially children, like you... they're not as easy to know" (35). It is simpler to apply scholarly criticisms to better understand

the psychology of a character, particularly if they have been part of Western culture for over 400 years. This is true of Hamlet, not Hamnet, and it is true of Shakespeare himself. As mentioned, his mythic status has led scholars and artists to recreate mythological tales to explain the grief that we assume he experienced, many of which are variations on a theme. All three works of fiction discussed here draw from a shared psychological reading of Shakespeare as someone who feels guilty over his estrangement from his family<sup>18</sup> and grief over the premature death of his son: “I was always coming back. It’s you that went away. Forgive me!” (37)

For the majority of *Hamnet* (2017), Shakespeare is merely a projection on a screen behind Hamnet, never physically interacting nor inhabiting the space together. However, the two characters swap settings late in the play when Shakespeare recites a portion of Lady Constance’s speech from *King John*:

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,  
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,  
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,  
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,  
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form;  
Then, have I reason to be fond of grief? (43)

Moukarzel’s<sup>19</sup> Shakespeare remains “haunted” by the loss of Hamnet, just as his son argues that his father is haunting him (42), inspiring him to perform this speech. Just as scholars have debated *Hamlet*’s connection to Shakespeare’s grief, this passage from Act 4, Scene 3 of *King John* is another that garners attention. Shakespeare’s writing of the latter is generally attributed to around 1596, the year of Hamnet’s death. While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the play was written – either before or after Hamnet’s death – the speech continues to be a poignant expression of grief and the loss of a child.<sup>20</sup> But *Hamnet* (2017) is abstract enough to not focus

---

<sup>18</sup> The depiction of Shakespeare as the distant father is carried over into a fourth medium: Neil Gaiman’s comic series *The Sandman*. Annalisa Castaldo (2004 & 2022) has written extensively about this. In short: in the “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” issue (1990), Shakespeare stages the play for the various fairy creatures who are characters in the play itself. Hamnet is ignored and pushed aside by his father, who is more focused on the show. Then, when Hamnet is later taken by Titania, he dies and is permanently separated from his father, reinforcing again that he was sacrificed in favor of Shakespeare’s artistic work (Castaldo 2022, 65; 2004, 104–05).

<sup>19</sup> While writing credit is shared by Dead Centre, Moukarzel played the part of Shakespeare when it was staged.

<sup>20</sup> Gemma Miller (2016) argues that the date of its composition is irrelevant since this “verbal construct of grief is so divorced from the reality of [Lady Constance’s] son’s death that it is less an expression of ‘true grief’ than a mere morbid fantasy” (222).

on the importance of a chronological timeline. When Shakespeare recites this speech alone on stage, we see another example of how the Bard turns his private grief into a public performance. As with *Hamnet* (2020), the reality of whether Shakespeare did this matters less than our ability to find another connection to Shakespeare: not just through his works but as a parent whose grief inspires those works.

“What is he whose grief  
Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow  
Conjures the wandering stars and makes them stand  
Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I”  
– Hamlet (5.1.244–47)

In the “Library” section of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), Stephen Dedalus puts forward a theory not dissimilar from O’Farrell’s novel: that in acting the part of the Ghost, Shakespeare was addressing Hamnet as much as Hamlet.<sup>21</sup> Richard P. Wheeler (2000) maintains that “Stephen pulls Shakespeare so deeply into the orbit of Joyce’s own preoccupation with spiritual fatherhood that the narrative finally tells us more about Joyce than it does about Shakespeare” (153). This is the same biographical reading that is applied to Shakespeare: because this is revelatory in understanding authors from a century ago, it must also work for authors from four centuries ago. Once again, Castaldo (2004) writes that Shakespeare occupies a “uniquely ambiguous position,” whose instantly recognizable canon of works and physical appearance makes him a “celebrity” with an “image [that] functions much as his plays do” (94–95). Regardless of the historical accuracy of the correlation between Hamnet’s death and Shakespeare’s plays, particularly *Hamlet*, the works discussed above show that the playwright transcends the limits of biographical reality. In short, while scholars continue to search for evidence to understand Shakespeare’s mental state, one greater purpose is transcending his mythic status as a literary genius to become a universal symbol of grief. Much like in Shakespeare’s plays, the historical accuracy matters less than the character development and the story the audience can connect to. As such, and absent of any personal writings, the characters Shakespeare left behind are seen as surrogates for his emotional output. As these fictional works look to humanize the elusive Bard, he becomes the character whose mind we look to unravel. Shakespeare’s legacy is dependent on his work, in no small part due to *Hamlet*’s

---

<sup>21</sup> There are several works by Joyce scholars that examine this scene and its implications within the novel more in-depth. See Rasmussen (2019) for example.

sustained prevalence today. Scholars continue to ask us to consider the multitude of influences on Shakespeare the mythic author since we “shall not look upon his like again.” Accurate or not, the fictional works instead argue that Shakespeare the grieving father has an equal claim to that legacy, remembering that first, “He was a man, take him for all in all.”<sup>22</sup>

### Bibliography

- Bloom, Harold. 1998. “Hamlet.” In *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, 383–431. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Branagh, Kenneth, dir. 2018. *All Is True*. Sony Picture Classics, 2019. 1 hr., 40 min. Blu-Ray Disc, 1080 HD.
- Bray, Peter. 2008. “Men, Loss and Spiritual Emergency: Shakespeare, the Death of Hamnet and the Making of Hamlet.” *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality*, 2, no. 2: 95–115.
- Castaldo, Annalisa. 2004. “‘No more yielding than a dream’: The Construction of Shakespeare in *The Sandman*.” *College Literature*, 31, no. 4 (Fall): 94–110.
- Castaldo, Annalisa. 2022. *Fictional Shakespeares and Portraits of Genius*. York: Arc Humanities Press.
- Cain, William E. 2016. “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction: Shakespeare at 400.” *Society*, 53: 76–87. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-015-9983-2>
- Crowdus, Gary. 2019. “Shakespeare in Life: An Interview with Kenneth Branagh.” *Cinéaste*, 44, no. 2 (Spring): 31–37.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 2004. “The Death of Hamnet and the Making of Hamlet.” *The New York Review of Books*, October 21, 2004. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2004/10/21/the-death-of-hamnet-and-the-making-of-hamlet>.
- Harkup, Kathryn. 2020. *Death by Shakespeare: Snakebites, Stabbings and Broken Hearts*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Honan, Park. 1999. *Shakespeare: A Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lovelock, Julian. 2022. “Maggie O’Farrell, *Hamnet* (2020).” *The Business of Reading: A Hundred Years of the English Novel*. Cambridge: The Letterworth Press: 162–70.
- Marino, James J. 2014. “Burbage’s Father’s Ghost.” *English Literary Renaissance*, 44, no. 1 (Winter): 56–77.
- Miller, Gemma. 2016. “‘Many a time and oft had I broken my Neck for their amusement’: The Corpse, the Child, and the Aestheticization of Death in Shakespeare’s ‘Richard III’ and ‘King John’.” *Comparative Drama*, 50, no. 2/3 (Summer & Fall): 209–32.

---

<sup>22</sup> The final quote, broken in two, is Hamlet’s short, public assessment of his father (1.2.186–87), compared to the much loftier one he recites alone earlier in the scene (1.2.139–53). Like Hamlet, perhaps Shakespeare too had difficulty expressing everything he wanted to publicly and, therefore, needed the artistic distance of the performative nature.

- Moukarzel, Bush and Ben Kidd. 2017. *Hamnet*. London: Oberon Books.
- O'Farrell, Maggie. 2020. *Hamnet*. London: Tinder Press.
- Rasmussen, Irina D. 2019. "Riffing on Shakespeare." *Joyce Studies Annual*: 33–73.
- Sebag-Montefiore, Clarissa. 2018. "Hamnet: a play for Shakespeare's forgotten son (and one 11-year-old actor)." *The Guardian*, September 11, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/sep/11/hamnet-a-play-for-shakespeares-forgotten-son-and-one-11-year-old-actor>.
- Shakespeare, William. 2016. *Hamlet*, rev.ed., edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, Arden Shakespeare, 3rd ser., London: Bloomsbury.
- Shakespeare, William. 2020. *Complete Works*, edited by Ann Thompson, David Scott Kastan, H. R. Woudhuysen, and Richard Proudfoot, Arden Shakespeare, 3rd ser., London: Bloomsbury.
- Smith, Keverne. 2011. *Shakespeare and Son: A Journey in Writing and Grieving*. Santa Barbara: Praeger.
- Smith, Keverne. 2012. "Almost the 'Copy of My Child That's Dead': Shakespeare and the Loss of Hamnet." *Omega*, 64, no. 1 (2011–2012): 29–40. <https://doi.org/10.2190/OM.64.1.c>
- Wheeler, Richard P. 2000. "Deaths in the Family: The Loss of a Son and the Rise of Shakespearean Comedy." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 51, no. 2 (Summer): 127–53. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2902129>

**Jarrold DePrado** teaches at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut, in the Languages & Literature and Catholic Studies departments. His research is focused on drama, specifically musical theatre and Shakespeare; adaptation studies; and American politics.

**Contact:** [depradoj@sacredheart.edu](mailto:depradoj@sacredheart.edu)



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.





# EAST MEETS WEST AT TIANANMEN SQUARE: DOES LIN ZHAOHUA'S POST-TIANANMEN *HAMLET* CATCH THE CONSCIENCE OF BEIJING?

Yvonne Nicolle Stafford-Mills

## Abstract

Prompted by the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacres, Chinese *avant-garde* director Lin Zhaohua directed China's first modern, *avant-garde* approach to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, rejecting the Soviet-inspired standard of period pictorialism and "Westernization" of the Chinese actors. Through Lin's *avant-gardist* role-sharing between characters commonly perceived as opposites, such as Claudius and Hamlet, he strove to blur the perceived lines between moral opposites and wrestle with the complexities of truly understanding an event beset with conflicting accounts and mitigated by a strict governmental control of information. However, the control and flow of information was clearly not Lin's only concern with the events surrounding Tiananmen. He plainly saw within the unfolding of events in *Hamlet* the symbolic enactment of the same inevitability, espoused by political theorists, that led to the government's crackdown of protestors in Tiananmen. It is, therefore, through the lens of this inevitability that Lin's *Hamlet* must be understood, and through this reflexive reading of Lin's *Hamlet*, a greater understanding of the clouded Chinese perspective of the events that led up to the Tiananmen massacres can be attained. The production thus serves as not only a distinct break from the previous tradition of Chinese Shakespeare performance, but actively comments on the complexity of the socio-political context from which the production emerged, firmly situating Shakespeare not only as China's "contemporary" (à la Jan Kott), but as a vehicle for political discourse.

## Keywords

*Hamlet*, Lin Zhaohua, Tiananmen, *avante-garde*, adaptation, Shakespeare, performance

\* \* \*

CARRIED from the time of British imperialism and global trade expansion in printed texts and the oral narratives of sailors, Shakespeare's works spread across the globe and were assimilated into cultures separated from Early Modern England by religion, race and cultural tradition. His works found their way into the vernacular

of lands as foreign to England as the Middle East and China, and onto their stages as well. In China, Shakespeare became an iconic figure, hugely influential in the modernisation of Chinese drama, and a driving force of the emerging *huaju*, or “spoken drama,”<sup>1</sup> of the People’s Republic of China. As in the Soviet Union and other emerging Communist nations, Chinese writers of the twentieth century paid homage to the greatness of the foreign playwright and revered English Renaissance humanism and the model of the “New Man,” with its focus on the individual and his place in society. Production of Shakespeare’s works on the Chinese stage, however, saw a more tenuous and uncertain progression, largely influenced, and thereby restricted, by the adoption of Soviet theatrical adaptation practices and by the fear that subversive politics might be dropped into productions, either intentionally or carelessly.

While Shakespeare’s works were used as models for the emerging *huaju* of the Chinese theatre, such performances were often mitigated by Soviet theatre practices that precluded politicised Shakespeare and excluded production of *Hamlet*, as Stalin had during World War II because, according to Dennis Kennedy, “its political allusions [were] too sensitive for a supreme dictator” (Kennedy 1993, 4). Even when a modern adaptation of *Hamlet* finally premiered in 1984 it was mounted in traditional, Soviet-inspired style – featuring Renaissance costumes, wigs and prosthetic noses (used to “westernize” the appearance of the Asian actors) – creating “a universe of fairy tale and legend, comfortably remote” (Esslin 1964, xix), within a performance space that was symbolically neutral and politically non-threatening. Still in the 1980s, as China emerged from the deadly and isolating Cultural Revolution, Shakespeare was not perceived to be China’s “contemporary” as he had been re-imagined, via Jan Kott, in so many Eastern European post-Communist capitals.<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare’s Eastern European “indigenization,” to borrow the term from Arjun Appadurai (1990), was so complete that the Polish critic, Jan Kott, wrote the treatise *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* to illustrate a Shakespeare that absorbs the concerns and culture of the time and location in which he finds himself produced. Kott writes that “through Shakespeare’s text we ought to get at our modern experience,

---

<sup>1</sup> *Huaju* is translated as “spoken drama” and marks a break with earlier Chinese theatrical traditions such as Beijing opera, that predominantly featured music and text that was sung and/or chanted.

<sup>2</sup> The Germans, for example, coined the phrase “*unser Shakespeare*” as Shakespeare was indigenised and put to political use on the stages of the German speaking world. The German use of the phrase, ‘our Shakespeare,’ points to the existence of a Shakespeare that cannot be fixed or located solely within one nation or culture. The phrase also indicates that Shakespeare becomes the cultural property of the societies into which he is introduced, be it Germany, Poland or, as in the case of Lin’s production, China. Each culture develops a concept of ‘our Shakespeare.’

anxiety and sensibility” (Kott 1964, 59). Despite Eastern Europe’s embracement of Shakespeare as its contemporary, before Lin Zhaohua’s 1990 production, Shakespeare, and especially *Hamlet*, was still performed as a champion of humanism in China, distanced from the perils of the People’s Republic and the everyday life of the Chinese people. However, in 1989, in the aftermath of the student uprising of Tiananmen Square, the detachment between Shakespeare’s Danish scholar-prince and the Chinese people was to abruptly end.

In the aftermath of the socio-political upheaval of the Tiananmen disaster, Lin Zhaohua’s 1990 production of *Hamlet* situated Shakespeare both as a vehicle for emerging Chinese *avant-gardism* and as a medium through which to navigate and comment upon the political and social atmosphere of post-Tiananmen China. Lin’s choice to share roles traditionally viewed as moral opposites between actors, humanizing villains and villainizing heroes, effectively depicted the moral sphere in shades of grey, and further emphasized the tragedy and death that loomed over China after Tiananmen. The events leading up to Tiananmen, according to Lin’s politically sensitive adaptation, were therefore too complex to be viewed as black and white or through a formulaic interpretation of simple cause and effect. Similarly, Lin’s adaptation portrays the events that lead up to the climactic carnage of *Hamlet*’s conclusion as a complex network of causes prompted by deep philosophical thought on the part of characters traditionally, and often simplistically, viewed as moral opposites.

The political immediacy of Lin’s play is made manifest through a reflexive reading of both the events surrounding the Tiananmen massacres and Lin’s adaptation of *Hamlet*. Alexander C. Y. Huang, in his book *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange*, espouses the critical framework of “presentism” to understand the interplay between Shakespeare’s historicity and that of the foreign culture producing his works. He explains:

Questions about the politicalization of artistic works, historical accuracy, and authenticity, as well as ideological authority, revolve around the idea of rewriting as a venue where the present is seen in the art of the past and vice versa. [...] Presentism, a critical operation that brings contemporary events to bear on premodern works, privileges the extended presence in time and space of artistic works and foregrounds the historicity of contemporary readers and critics. (Huang 2009, 143)

The politicalisation of Lin’s *Hamlet* is thus an inextricable reaction to the events of Tiananmen. Shakespeare’s time was one of significant socio-political flux, a background transmuted thematically into much of his work, and it is the reflection

of this political uncertainty that Lin transmuted into his vision of a distinctly Chinese *Hamlet*. Huang adds that it is no surprise, therefore, that in China and elsewhere, “the most dramatic transformation and urgent transmuting of Shakespearean valences (both positive and negative) occurred during revolutions” (Huang 2009, 142), as the works of Shakespeare hold a remarkable ability to comment on contemporary society. Similarly, the difference in location (and time), and thereby socio-political atmosphere, between Shakespeare’s Early Modern England and the locality of performance allows political engagement through performance in repressive and censored regimes such as the PRC. Such temporal and physical separation provides a perceived level of political correctness that can be easily and subtly manipulated in the production of politically charged foreign works.

Lin Zhaohua’s interpretation of *Hamlet* can be seen as a form of intercultural revision, according to the definition provided by Dennis Kennedy and Yong Li Lan in *Shakespeare in Asia*, in which Shakespeare’s plays become estranged

in a Brechtian manner in order to create a new text, a third text, which is neither the original nor the estranging device but the result of their performative interaction. Thus the mode is heavily dependent on the director as intervener or auteur in the modernist tradition, itself imported from the West. (Kennedy and Yong 2010, 10)

While such theatre tends “to move away from political applications into more self-consciously aesthetic realms [...], we must keep firmly in mind that the aesthetic never loses political nuance” (Kennedy and Yong 2010, 10). As Huang asserts, “[w]hen history has been held hostage, theater artists found ways to speak through dramas disconnected from local circumstances. Theatre speaks through its new locality in the play” (Huang 2009, 128). Thus, through the process of localization, Lin’s production of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was given immediacy in the rapidly evolving socio-political atmosphere of pre and post-Tiananmen China.

Within the text of *Hamlet*, as within the climate of his contemporary China, Lin saw a fatalistic inevitability in political conflict and death. He interpreted Hamlet and Claudius’ contemplation and eventual enactment of violence toward each other in light of the violence of Tiananmen and concluded that violence for political gain is a losing situation all around. Chinese Shakespeare performance scholar, Ruru Li, explains that “the way Lin read [Hamlet] was plainly conditioned by the social, political and economic changes that were taking place in China” (Li 2006, 4). As Gary Shiu and Daniel Sutter explain in their article “The Political Economy of Tiananmen Square,” “while the Communist Party leaders desired economic reform, they

never favored a political liberalization which would weaken their hold on power” (325). Protestors mistakenly interpreted the government’s growing economic liberalisation as the starting point for further social and political liberalisations. However, Shiu and Sutter explain that “[t]he regime would not tolerate political opposition and acted accordingly” (325). The rhetoric used by Shiu and Sutter analyzes the decision to violently suppress student uprisings in terms of a “game between the central government and a province” and the central government’s reaction as one necessary to squelch illusions of provincial autonomy (326). Their rhetoric further analyzes the events of Tiananmen in terms of “strategy” and a “fight.” As a monopolist “challenged by an entrant in any one of its markets [...] fights the first entrant to establish a reputation for toughness,” the government of the PRC responded violently to the protestors in order to dispel any future attempts by groups to undermine its central authority (Shiu and Sutter 1996, 326). Similarly, political scientist Melanie Manion, also analyzes the events of Tiananmen in terms of a contest, or “duel,” between the opposing protestors and central government in *Beijing Spring, 1989: Confrontation and Conflict* (Manion 1990, xiii–xlii). The imagery of this description, whether intentional or not, clearly connects the protests and their aftermath to the climax of Shakespeare’s tragedy, when the Danish royal family and all those closest to it are similarly pressed into an inevitable and tragic denouement. Such rhetoric further illustrates the elements of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* that Lin saw so clearly connected to Tiananmen and highlight the sort of reflexive reading of history and performance that Alexander C. Y. Huang asserts.

The fatalistic readings of such theorists as Manion, Shiu and Sutter, suggest an inherent distrust of the government of the PRC and assert a sort of inevitability to its actions in Tiananmen. While China was in a period of political growth and evolution, the demands of Tiananmen protestors for democratic reform came too fast and threatened the social stability of China and the hegemonic control of the central ruling party. Xiaobo Su explains that the protest movement forced the government to suspend “the call for a radical political reform” (321). The government interpreted the actions of the protestors as a direct threat to its political power and authority, just as Claudius interprets Hamlet’s “madness” as similarly threatening to his regime.

Randolph Kluver’s analysis of the climate that led to the Tiananmen crackdown further indicates the socio-political atmosphere to which Lin responded in his production of *Hamlet*. His rhetoric, like Manion’s, provides startling insight into the appropriateness of Lin’s instinct to approach Tiananmen theatrically through Shakespeare’s masterpiece. Kluver writes that “the drama that played out in Tiananmen Square was indeed an epic battle over the future of China” (73). Again, Kluver

like many other theorists, represents the events surrounding Tiananmen as a dramatic battle between opposing forces, only Kluver's analysis takes on a more complex and balanced nuance as he analyzes three main perspectives on Tiananmen – the CCP's, the protestors' and the Western world's – to demonstrate "how collective political action flowed in the subsequent events" (73). While many theorists have focused their analyses on the inevitability of the violence in Tiananmen, Kluver's analysis highlights the continuing control of information on the part of both the Chinese government, and to an extent the American government, that has slanted the public's understanding of the events. Kluver writes that to this day in China, "[t]here is no public acknowledgement of any government culpability, and the government steadfastly refuses to allow any public consideration of what actually transpired" (94). Kluver's analysis focuses on the flow of information and the rhetorical devices utilised by all players in the events surrounding Tiananmen, but even his broadened analysis contains an underpinning of inevitability in its final conclusions.

*Hamlet*, as envisioned by Lin Zhaohua, is similarly concerned with the flow of information and the inability of the players involved to distinguish fact from fiction or clearly and honestly express their intents. Hamlet's quest for vengeance is plagued by doubt, and he is stunted by his inability to publicly reveal the truth of Claudius' actions. Lin Zhaohua's decision to share the roles of Hamlet and Claudius and employ other doubling devices throughout his work, clearly indicates Lin's awareness of the complexities of truly understanding an event beset with conflicting accounts and mitigated by a strict governmental control of information. However, the control and flow of information was clearly not Lin's only concern with the events surrounding Tiananmen. He plainly saw within the unfolding of events in *Hamlet* the symbolic enactment of the same inevitability, espoused by political theorists, that led to the government's crackdown of protestors in Tiananmen. It is, therefore, through the lens of this inevitability that Lin's *Hamlet* must be understood, and through this reflexive reading of Lin's *Hamlet*, a greater understanding of the Chinese perspective of the events that led up to the Tiananmen massacres can be attained.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is not only a play about the inevitable conflict that results from contended power, it is also a play about the inevitability of death. Death is the force that ignites the central conflicts of the play and several of its characters contemplate man's fraught relationship with it. By framing his adaptation within the dialogue of the gravediggers, Lin asserts a fatalistic interpretation of *Hamlet* and, by extension, of post-Tiananmen China, where the deaths of hundreds to thousands of protestors loomed as specters in the collective consciousness. From the moment that Claudius seized control of Hamlet's kingdom, to the play's final duel, inevitable

forces were set in motion that would lead to one or both of their deaths. As Shakespeare's tragedy teaches us, when there is contention over the rule of a monarchy, that contention is only solved through the death of at least one of the contenders. Similarly, the scholar-protesters of Tiananmen Square were deceived by a false sense of security and a belief that they had freedoms that they clearly did not. From the moment they marched on Tiananmen, to the moment the army rolled into the Square armed with tanks and automatic rifles, the duelists had been pressed into a battle in which retreat was a possibility neither side was willing to entertain. This must have been a most troubling and fearful reality for protesters and hardliners alike. The protesters felt certain that they could not back down from their demands without their movement being considered an abject failure, and hardliners knew that they could not be embarrassed by these public demonstrations of disapproval. Those protests would surely lead to revelations about the corruption and inherent flaws within the government.

In the aftermath of the massacre, the people of China desperately sought "relief from the sense of anger, impotence, and frustration" that all were feeling (Hicks 1990, xv–xx). To Lin Zhaohua, China's premier *avant-garde* theatre practitioner, loneliness dominated the national mind-set in the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacres. So it was in early 1990 that the Lin Zhaohua Drama Studio (LZDS) staged a production of *Hamlet* – a play focusing upon the character that could certainly be perceived as the most lonely, alienated and disenfranchised in the entire Shakespeare canon. Lin founded the LZDS in 1989 in order to escape the constraints imposed upon government-funded theatre companies. This artistic and political move gave the director the freedom to pursue his *avant-garde* approach to his dramatic work and allowed him to work outside of the government mandated quotas "for presenting plays with modern or revolutionary themes" (Li 2006, 4). Furthermore, the stylization of the production represented a definitive break from archetypal Chinese characters, a break enhanced by the naturalised speech patterns and behaviors of the actors, which moved away from the more traditional declamatory style and gestural cues that defined character types in traditional Chinese theatre.

Lin's *Hamlet* was no longer a pensive European prince in Western Renaissance clothing, a wig and a prosthetic nose. Instead, Lin's *Hamlet* appeared on a post-apocalyptic set, with debris and billowing gray fabric covering the walls and floor, wearing no makeup, and dressed in plain, contemporary Chinese attire. The costumes were largely monochromatic in shades of black and grey, with a few splashes of red in the costumes of Gertrude and Laertes, arguably two of the most passionate characters of the play. Two rows of ceiling fans rotated above the set and served as



a reminder of the contemporary setting of the play. They were lowered during the final duel, and thus became a vital scenic element of the fight scene. An old barber's chair served as the monarch's throne and was the only set piece (Lin 2007).

The existential angst that permeated post-Tiananmen Chinese society greatly influenced Lin's production. "I liked the loneliness of Hamlet," Lin said. "During that period, people had lost their vitality completely" (Li 1999, 356). Metaphors such as "prison, nightmares, a sterile promontory, a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors, and so on" contributed to this sense of loneliness that pervaded post-Tiananmen China, and, as Li Ruru asserts, "might have sounded like allusions to the Communist regime, with its strict control of dissent" (Li 1999, 357). The government of the People's Republic of China had effectively isolated its people from one another. Its use of unrestrained and unspeakable violence against the protesters, much like Claudius's decision to send Hamlet off to England for execution, made it clear that any union of people organising themselves against the Communist regime could not be tolerated. The censorship of the event in the public discourse of the PRC effectively isolated the populace and ensured that no solace would be found through unbiased investigation into the event or communal sharing of grief.

The populace was fragmented and frustrated, and with strict government censorship of any public discussion of the events of 4 June, the people were left with nowhere to turn but inward. This was a self-reflexive instinct that Lin also saw in Hamlet, which led to the sharing among Claudius, Hamlet and Polonius of Hamlet's most self-reflective speech in which he queries "To be or not to be." Of this self-reflection, Lin said, "What we are facing is ourselves. To face oneself is the most active and bravest attitude modern people can possibly assume" (Li 1999, 357). It was from within this inwardly reflective movement that Lin's *Hamlet* emerged. By taking on the lines of others and witnessing their lines spoken by opposing characters through Lin's use of role doubling, Lin's characters literally had to face themselves. Through the production, Lin's audience was able to look into the events of the Beijing Spring and find their own moralistic questioning and search for truth reflected, not only in the play's hero, but in its villain as well.

In its avant-gardism and highly eclectic approach to Shakespeare, represented both visually and through Lin's unique choice of sharing the role of Hamlet with the actors playing Claudius and Polonius, the project was a hugely revolutionary,<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> "Revolutionary" is here used with a multiplicity of meanings. The production represented a break with traditional Chinese stagings of Shakespeare, and thus opened up new possibilities of meaning and interpretation both of *Hamlet* itself, and Shakespeare in general. The play was also politically active, as it emerged in direct response to the Beijing Spring, and while it does not incite physical revolution, it does represent a potential revolution in how to think about the historico-political events that lead to its creation.

innovative form of Chinese theatre. The text was adapted by translator Li Jianming with the intention of adhering to Lin's overarching vision of Hamlet as "one of us," and rather than a painstaking attempt to remain true to Shakespeare's original script, the tradaptation brought Prince Hamlet directly into the chaotic world of 1989 China. The gravediggers opened each act of the play with snatches of their dialogue from Act 5, emphasising the image of Denmark, and life in general, as being haunted by death. If "Denmark's a prison," then China before and after Tiananmen had similarly found itself entombed, not only by stark governmental control, but by the deaths of vast numbers of protestors. The jovial laughter and distance between the gravediggers' perceptions of death, and the stark reality of it revealed by Tiananmen, served to highlight the indiscriminate nature of death. This alignment of contemporary China with a graveyard emphasises the restrictive and life-threatening environment of the People's Republic. The repeated appearances of the gravediggers also provided greater weight to the play's inevitable and grim conclusion. In the struggle for power and revolutionary regime change under authoritarian rule, both in the PRC and in Lin's *Hamlet*, all actions, whether for good or ill, lead to death. The prison that China was before the Tiananmen crisis, followed by the graveyard it became in the wake of the massacres, was a stark and horrific image, the responsibility for which, according to Lin Zhao-hua's political *Hamlet*, could not be so clearly and absolutely assigned to the government hardliners who ordered the military suppression in Tiananmen and subsequently controlled the public discourse surrounding the events of 4 June.

Just as Shakespeare's Claudius manipulates his brother's court into accepting his questionable ascension to the throne, Chinese government hardliners censored damning news coverage of the Tiananmen massacres and spun a web of rhetoric to extricate themselves from blame. Such gerrymandering only furthered Lin's desire to examine the complex socio-political and emotional factors that resulted in the massacres. His production deftly drew parallels between the Chinese people's search for truth and Hamlet's own desperate search for validation of his fears surrounding his father's death and Claudius' usurpation. However, Hamlet is not solely a victim of Claudius' treachery or the ghost's damnable demand for vengeance, and Shakespeare's play actively examines the question of Hamlet's free will and his culpability in his own demise and in the deaths of those around him.

According to Lin, Shakespeare's Prince Hamlet, "was lucky. He could represent justice and put justice into practice. He could also die bravely like a man. But in modern theatre [as in modern life] [...] there is only despair. It is true that, except for facing up to ourselves, we have no way out" (Li 1999, 358). In Lin's modern *Hamlet* there was to be no brave death for the Prince, just as there was no justice for victims of the atrocities perpetrated by the Chinese government. Hamlet, as analogue to Chinese hardliners and protestors alike, was destroyed by the folly of his

own plotting and, as Li Ruru explains, “revenge became an act of self-destruction” (Li 1999, 356). As soon as Tiananmen protestors escalated their demands beyond greater freedoms in the press and academia and labeled the current governing regime their enemy, the state positioned itself into the duel, willing to take decisive and violent action to maintain a semblance of control over its populace. Similarly, as soon as Hamlet’s “madness” appears to be a direct threat to the safety and sovereignty of Claudius, and by extension the realm, Claudius takes steps to ensure Hamlet’s destruction. Claudius’s attempt on Hamlet’s life only prompts Hamlet to return from his banishment ready to enact his mission of revenge, and the dual/duel plots of each man only leads to their collective demise. Hamlet and Claudius, like Beijing protestors and hardliners, learn too late that dissent against authoritarianism too easily results in violent suppression that is destructive to both the regime and its dissenters. As Lin expresses through his *Hamlet*, when violence meets violence, as when protestors armed with homemade weapons met government troops, it only further incites the authority to quell dissent absolutely. Lin thus strove to blur the line between guilty and innocent, demonstrating that when power is contested through violence there can be no winners.

In one of the most controversial and daring dramatic choices, Lin Zhaohua shared the roles of Hamlet and Claudius between two different actors. Horatio, the loyal friend, doubled as the treacherous friend Rosencrantz, and Laertes doubled as Marcellus. By employing this doubling device, according to Li Ruru, in his study “Shakespeare in China: Old Man Sha in the Middle Kingdom,” Lin strove to “blur the lines between the moral opposites in apparently opposed character roles” (4). Each actor had his primary role, but at several key moments during the play the actors playing Hamlet and Claudius would exchange roles, thus recognising the connections between apparent opposites and “suggesting that the characters *all* shared elements of good and evil, honesty and falsehood” (Li 2006, 4). This blurring of moral distinctions further emphasises the production’s ties to Tiananmen, as depending on the rhetoric the Chinese were listening to, the protestors were either dissidents and traitors or martyrs for freedom and democracy. The government of the PRC argued that they were taking appropriate measures to quell what they viewed as a threat to the stability of the PRC, their ideology, and the safety of its people.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Claudius argues that Hamlet’s “liberty is full of threats to all” (Lin 2007) and concludes he must be shipped to England and put to death.

---

<sup>4</sup> Xitong Chen, Mayor of Beijing during the student protests, wrote in a report to the National People’s Congress (NPC), “To safeguard the social stability in the city of Beijing, to protect the safety of the life and property of the citizens and ensure the normal functioning of the party and government departments at the central level and of the Beijing Municipal Government, the State Council had no alternative but to declare martial law in parts of Beijing” (quoted in Chen 1990: 75).

As the world has come to note, the government's violent suppression of protestors during the Beijing Spring was excessive and unnecessary. However, at the time the government of the PRC acted out of fear for the safety of its own survival, much as Claudius came to the conclusion that only through Hamlet's death would his rule, and thus the realm, be safe. The manipulative rhetoric of officials such as Mayor Chen clearly mimics that of Claudius as he justifies his swift ascension to the throne in the second scene of the play. As Claudius explains the apparent threat of Fortinbras, he implies his decisive actions will dispel Fortinbras' "weak supposal of our worth" (Lin 2007), thus protecting the safety of the nation and its people. Claudius' language even implies his court, and by extension his kingdom's, unquestioning support of his decisions. He declares, "nor have we herein barred / Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone / With this affair along" (Lin 2007). His speech, just as that of Chen and other hardliner supporters, clearly leaves no room for debate and asserts that his actions have been solely for the protection of, and at the will of, the people. The Tiananmen event, and the attempts to justify it afterward, represented the most extreme form of censorship that the government could have perpetrated against its people, crushed the democratic hopes of its populace, and rendered the people, like Hamlet, voiceless and isolated.

In Lin Zhao-hua's adaptation of *Hamlet*, he strove to highlight the confusion and chaos that ensued following the Tiananmen massacres. Citizens and government officials alike strove to make sense of the unfolding events, but instead of finding definitive answers, censorship only further confused the situation. All of those involved in the incident were left with innumerable unanswered questions and a certain level of shared responsibility. Thus Lin employed the *avant-garde* adaptive device of role doubling to further highlight the confusion and shared culpability of the event, and to point to the very human decisions that were made on the parts of all involved. Hamlet, like the protestors, fought for what he ultimately came to believe, through intense analysis and moralistic reasoning, was right. Similarly, Claudius lashed out at Hamlet because Hamlet had become a danger to him, and, thereby, through extension, a danger to the state.

The actor playing Claudius also played a significant role in *The Mousetrap*, the play-within-a-play performed before the court. Through Claudius' physical participation in *The Mousetrap* in the dual (doubled) role as the murderer Lucianus, the psychological process of Claudius envisioning himself performing the murder, so similar to his own murder of King Hamlet, is made tangible for both Claudius and the audience. However, this does not appear to be another situation of doubling. Instead, Claudius's actions seem to represent his psychological progression as he

witnesses, and participates in, a representation of his own foul deed. The scene plays like a mental double-take, as it takes Claudius imprinting himself in the action twice before he demands lights and the scene dissolves into chaos. Instead of maintaining Claudius as a passive observer in the presentation of *The Mousetrap*, Lin chooses to externalise Claudius' reaction to the play by making him an active participant. Although the Player King and Player Queen present the play in a highly stylized comedic fashion, utilising a representative gestural vocabulary, Claudius' reaction to, and participation in, the scene demonstrates its real and dangerous consequences.

The play begins as in Shakespeare's original, with the court gathered to witness the play-within-the-play. The throne has been moved upstage right to accommodate the King. As Hamlet introduces Lucianus, the actor who plays Horatio enters, in another characteristic Lin doubling, and crosses behind Claudius. The positioning of the two actors, with the murderer poised above the King, clearly aligns the two characters in intention and identifies them with each other for the audience. The suggestive tone of Lucianus' voice, as he begins his lines, "Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit and time agreeing" (Lin 2007), emphasises Claudius' reaction, rather than representing the literal scene that the rest of the court witnesses. The other actors' eyes remain fixed on the action in the center of the stage where the Player King and Queen perform, so it is only Claudius who feels the ominous weight of Lucianus' lines. As Lucianus continues his speech, Claudius rises hypnotically and moves toward the Players, miming poison in hand. In a daze, Claudius pours the poison into the Player King's ear and removes the Player's crown as he dies. As Hamlet narrates Lucianus' murder of Gonzago for his estate, Claudius rises, eyes fixated on the crown now in his hands. Ophelia cries out, "The King rises," and Polonius commands, "Give o'er the play!" (Lin 2007) All freeze momentarily, and then the scene moves backward, with each actor reversing his blocking as a VHS set to rewind, to begin again with Claudius' pantomimed poisoning. The repetition of this scene represents Claudius' inability to avoid the acts that it depicts, and only by having to repeatedly deal with the reality of his crimes does Claudius' guilt and fear boil over into the chaotic scene that ensues.

In the play-within-the-play's reenactment of the murder, Polonius' command is shouted directly at Claudius. This time the words seem to represent a warning – something in Claudius' reaction to the murder on stage leaves Polonius fearing that his (re)actions will reveal more than is safe. Polonius' words pull Claudius out of his solitary moment of reliving the murder, and he is suddenly aware of his guilt and the possibility that others are also now aware. Claudius looks at the crown in his hands, the haze in his eyes clears into understanding, and his eyes grow wide in fear

and disbelief at the realism of his ‘pretended’ action. He throws the crown from his hands in horror, and as Claudius’ reaction builds, his body visibly trembling, Lucianus/Horatio sneaks back into his place in the play, picks up the fallen crown, holds it for a moment, and places it on his head. The King is left center stage, as Gertrude asks, “How fares my lord?” (Lin 2007), Claudius looks down at Lucianus with the crown now in the actor’s hands and begins calling for lights with increasing intensity. The scene dissolves into chaos, as all take up the cry for lights and run off stage in various directions.

For Claudius, *The Mousetrap*, forces him to envision himself within the action, witnessing and psychologically participating in not only the pretend action on stage, but his own real actions that the play-within-the-play dramatises. When Claudius momentarily pauses to take in Lucianus poised with the crown in his hands, Lin situates Claudius as an observer and the scene that preceded as an externalisation of Claudius’ own internal psychological wrestling with the real actions represented in *The Mousetrap*. Through the play, Claudius not only has to re-experience his horrific crimes of fratricide and usurpation, but also comes to fear that his actions have come to be known by at least Hamlet. The scene is repeated twice, once to allow for the psychological reliving of Claudius’ crimes, and a second time for that reliving to crystallise into a reaction of guilt and fear. The fact that his actions can be so tangibly re-enacted before him through *The Mousetrap* demonstrates the inescapability of his crimes and also reinforces that memory, both personal and collective, can haunt the guilty as it does the victims.

Just as Claudius was unable to forget his crimes, both because of his own conscience and because of its representation through *The Mousetrap*, the governmental hardliners who ordered the violent suppression of Tiananmen protestors could not deny or escape their actions as they were televised across the globe. Thus hardliners, like Claudius, were forced to wrestle with the televised representations of their actions and the internal psychological retelling of their horrific crimes that memory commands. While Polonius’ command to end the play was too late to censor the apparent revelation to Hamlet of Claudius’ guilt, the Chinese government was able to censor the video captured of Tiananmen within their own borders. They were unable, however, to control its distribution throughout the world. Lin further complicates the notion of censorship and its relationship to truth by moving the scene of Claudius’ failed confession to after Hamlet is sent to England. Thus, although Hamlet can interpret Claudius’ reaction to *The Mousetrap* as an admission of guilt, he is prevented from gaining absolute certainty by Lin’s dislocation of scenes. Claudius’ direct admission of guilt thus becomes private knowledge between Lin’s audience

and Claudius, much as the televised depictions of state-endorsed violence in Tiananmen provided the global audience with hard truth of the Chinese government's guilt while denying similar knowledge to the Chinese people themselves.

During the play-within-a-play, Polonius emerges as a more commanding character, able to direct the king and those around him with his startlingly pointed command, "Give o'er the play!" (Lin 20047) This command, although intended in its original Shakespearean version to stop the Players, functions in Lin's reimagining as more of a command to Claudius. It almost appears that Polonius is trying to prevent the king from inadvertently admitting he is guilty of a similar crime, which prompts Claudius to throw the crown from his hands. The audience is left wondering how much Polonius knows and where he really sits within the political hierarchy. Polonius may have his own motives and ambitions to power, motives that the audience and the other characters can only guess at by observing his actions. Was he, actively or passively, part of the assassination of the former King, or at least involved in its concealment? Lin's interpretation certainly makes this a real possibility. This moment may also shed light on the decision for Polonius to double as Fortinbras at the end. Fortinbras is passing through Denmark under the pretense of a war with the Polacks, but ends up gaining his original intent of conquest of Denmark. Does this dual casting hint at a deeper political involvement for Polonius, or a hidden involvement in Claudius' usurpation as well? Certainly, his role in this scene as the mouthpiece of the king aligns him with officials like Chen Xitong, who was paraded as an ostensible outsider to justify the actions of top-ranking government hardliners. Such lower-ranking officials, while not directly involved in the decision-making process that led to the massacre of Tiananmen protestors, became implicated when they acted as the mouthpieces of the government and justified the heinous crimes as necessary for the safety of the nation. Such spectacles of complacency added to the complexity and confusion surrounding the events at Tiananmen and Claudius' reaction to the representation of his own evil deeds. There were so many players involved with conflicting personal or state-mandated agendas, that motivations and actions were difficult to identify with any level of certainty.

Lin's choices of role doubling are deliberate and methodical. Although the various roles that one actor embodies are intended to be distinct from one another, each character the actor plays informs and complicates the others. This adaptation of the play's casting further separates Lin's production and approach to Shakespeare from traditional Chinese conceptions of character as absolute. The role sharing between Polonius, Claudius and Hamlet solidifies this play's connection to the psychological and moral

confusion from which the production emerged. By giving the morally ambiguous Polonius, and the traditional villain, Claudius, a share in the character of Hamlet (and Hamlet a stake in Claudius' role) and, most importantly their own roles in the "To be or not to be" speech, Lin highlights his theme of Hamlet as "one of us" (Li 1999, 356). Hamlet is just steps away from being Claudius, as his bloody actions at the end of the play indicate. Likewise, Claudius is not free from moralistic musings or a conscience, as his role in *The Mousetrap*, his failed confession and his contemplation of "To be or not to be" illustrate. Here in Beijing, at least, Hamlet was no longer the humanist Renaissance hero, and Claudius was no longer simply the usurping villain.

Hamlet, the scholar-prince, can be aligned with the politically active scholar-protesters of Tiananmen Square, and Claudius with Beijing hardliners. However, what was left intentionally ambiguous in Lin's production was the assignment of blame, complicated by the inability to locate the truth about the tragedy that unfolded in Beijing only months before. Each player in Lin's cast was a "reluctant duelist" (Manion 1990, xiii), struggling with much the same thoughts, fears, doubts and the moralistic uncertainties, of Hamlet. Each actor queried, "To be or not to be?" and each raised doubts over his own role in the world in which he found himself. In the ultimate moment of confrontation between the prince and his uncle, after Hamlet's duel with Laertes, Lin, had his actors switch roles for one final time. After Hamlet's fatal thrust at Claudius, the pair become locked together in a final fatal embrace. The sound of blood dripping on the canvas-covered floor enhances the tension of the prolonged moment. When they finally separate, it is Hamlet, not Claudius, who falls. Claudius, now speaking Hamlet's lines, implores Horatio to "report my cause aright" (Lin 2007) and then names Fortinbras as his successor as ruler of Denmark. The death of Hamlet thus occurs within the physical body of Claudius. Hamlet has become, in the literal sense of the word, King Claudius; ironically and tragically, the ruling monarch only long enough to pronounce this one final command to Horatio and appoint a successor. Just as government hardliners reasserted the faultlessness of their reaction to Tiananmen, and continue to deny any culpability through their censorship and manipulation of the evidence from Tiananmen, Hamlet's final words become a reassertion of Claudius' right to rule and hegemonic order. It will not be Hamlet's cause that is reported to the people of Denmark, it will only be Claudius'. Thus both Hamlet and Claudius, like hardliners and protestors, fall victim to their own delusions of power and control. The true tragedy is that the reality of Tiananmen, much like the reality of Hamlet's plight, has become obscured in the complexity



of conflicting ideologies among its many players. Hamlet and Claudius' grandest 'dual/duel' delusion is re-enacted and symbolized by their shared death.

As suggested by the theories of Bertolt Brecht, one can surmise that Lin's decision to split the roles of Hamlet and Claudius is part of a technique to "dislocat[e] our stock associations" because "we have a horrible way of taking all the characteristics of a particular type and lumping them under one single head" (Brecht 1964, 11). This production, through various Brechtian distancing effects, challenges its audience to engage primarily critically, and only secondarily emotionally, with the material being presented. It does not allow a complacent and inactive audience to simply be swept up in a thrilling tale of intrigue, but rather forces a self-reflective and critical reaction that is at once commentary on China's socio-political climate and representative of Lin's interpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* within a distinctly contemporary Chinese context.

Modernising Shakespeare in this manner was something that was nearly entirely unknown in China prior to this production, but it was Lin Zhaohua's desire that his audience see Hamlet as "one of us" (Li 1999, 356) a true contemporary in Jan Kott's use of the word. Lin thus moved away from traditional socialist interpretations of *Hamlet* as the great champion of Renaissance humanism, and brought the play into direct communication with the chaos and confusion of post-Tiananmen China. As Kott writes, "*Hamlet* is like a sponge. Unless it is produced in a stylized or antiquarian fashion, it immediately absorbs all the problems of our time" (Kott 1964, 64). Although Lin's *avant-garde* approach perplexed and confounded audiences unfamiliar with the more Western interpretive and aesthetic devices employed by the director – such as modern dress, *avant-garde* textual and casting manipulations, and the non-pictorial, time-period ambiguous set – in retrospect his production cannot be separated from the political atmosphere from which it emerged.<sup>5</sup> As the PRC's populace strove to understand the tragedy they had so recently endured, the visual and moral chaos created, intentionally, in this production directly commented on the atmosphere of the times. The loneliness and isolation that followed the putting down of the student uprising was encapsulated in Lin Zhaohua's *Hamlet*, which, by blurring the lines that separate villain and hero, fact and fabrication, dramatically and artistically expressed the unending struggle to discover truth in the chaos and censorship of post-Tiananmen China.

---

<sup>5</sup> While the first iteration of this production was met with mixed criticism, Lin's enormous success as China's premier *avant-garde* director is testament to the evolution and acceptance of increasingly experimental *huaju* within China. His production of *Hamlet* has become a favorite of audiences, as it has seen revivals in 1994, 1995 and, most recently, in 2008.

## Bibliography

- Appadurai, Arjun. 1990. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Theory Culture Society* 7, no. 2: 230–38.
- Brecht, Bertolt. 1964. "Three Cheers for Shaw," In *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willet, 10–13. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Chen, Xitong, "Report to NPC on Quelling the Counter-Revolutionary Rebellion." In *Beijing Spring, 1989: Confrontation and Conflict*, ed. Michel Oksenberg, Lawrence R. Sullivan and Marc Lambert, 55–88. New York: M. E. Sharp.
- Esslin, Martin. 1964. Introduction. In *Shakespeare our Contemporary*, by Jan Kott, xi–xxi. New York: Norton & Co.
- Lin, Zhaohua, dir. 2007. *Hamlet*. Beijing Shi.
- Hicks, George. 1990. Introduction. In *The Broken Mirror: China After Tiananmen*, ed. George Hicks, xv–xx. Harlow: Longman Group UK Limited.
- Huang, Alexander C. Y. 2009. *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kennedy, Dennis, ed. 1993. *Foreign Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kluver, Randolph. 2010. "Rhetorical Trajectories of Tiananmen Square." *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 1: 71–94.
- Kott, Jan. 1964. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. New York: Norton & Co.
- Levith, Murray. 2004. *Shakespeare in China*. New York: Continuum.
- Li, Ruru. 1999. "Shakespeare on the Chinese Stage in the 1990s." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50, no. 3: 355–67.
- . 2006. "Shakespeare in China: Old Man Sha in the Middle Kingdom." *Internet Shakespeare Editions*. University of Victoria, updated 7 June 2006. <https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/Criticism/shakespearein/china1/index.html>
- Mackerras, Colin. 1983. "Theater and the Masses." In *Chinese Theater From Its Origins to the Present Day*, ed. Colin Mackerras, 145–83. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Manion, Melanie. 1990. "Reluctant Duelists." In *Beijing Spring, 1989: Confrontation and Conflict*, ed. Michel Oksenberg, Lawrence R. Sullivan and Marc Lambert, xiii–xli. New York: M.E. Sharp, Inc..
- Qixin, He. 1986. "China's Shakespeare." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37, no. 2: 149–59.
- Shiu, Gary and Daniel Sutter, "The Political Economy of Tiananmen Square." *Rationality and Society* 8, no. 3: 325–42.
- Su, Xiaobo. 2011. "Revolution and Reform: The Role of Ideology and Hegemony in Chinese Politics." *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 69: 307–26.
- Yang Zhang, Xiao. 2006. "The Chinese Vision of Shakespeare (from 1950–1990): Marxism and Socialism." In *Shakespeare in the Worlds of Communism and Socialism*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk and Joseph G. Price, 270–82. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

**Dr. Yvonne Stafford-Mills** is a tenured professor of English at Cerro Coso Community College where she also serves as the Academic Senate President. She is actively involved in curriculum development and success initiatives for first-year English students. She obtained her PhD from the Claremont Graduate University in 2016, where she was the recipient of the Claremont National Scholars scholarship for interdisciplinary research. Her research interests include non-Anglophone production of Shakespeare, theatre and contemporary Shakespeare performance, performance theory, and fantasy and dystopian literature and film. She is author of a number of publications including most recently an article entitled “‘Blood Draws Flies’: Arab-Western Entanglement in Sulayman Al-Bassam’s Cross-Cultural *Hamlet*” in *Language, Literature and Interdisciplinary Studies* journal (2018). She has also directed numerous theatrical productions, including *As You Like It*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, among many others. She has performed in such roles as Hamlet in *Hamlet*, Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Cordelia in *King Lear*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, and The Witch in *Into the Woods*.

**Contact:** yvonne.mills@cerrocoso.edu



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.

## HAMLET, PRINCE OF JAPAN: EXAMINING THE TRANSLATIONS AND PERFORMANCES OF JAPANESE *HAMLET*

Ashley-Marie Maxwell

### Abstract

Through the numerous translations and adaptations of *Hamlet* in Japan, this article examines the importance of this play in the Japanese cultural and historical consciousness, as well as the new life that it receives through contemporary adaptations, namely through Yukio Ninagawa's numerous productions of this play (during the 2003–2015 period) and Takarazuka Revue's 2010 rock opera musical entitled *Hamlet!!*. *Hamlet* in Japan benefits from a long history of productions that are influenced by the classical theatres of Japan, specifically Kabuki and Noh. Furthermore, the linguistic changes made to the text contribute to the reinterpretation of the play and the expansion of roles that are not possible in the original English, and Shoichiro Kawai's translation in particular acts as a bridge between Shakespeare's poetry and the Japanese understanding of his works. Finally, this article looks at Hamlet's key line of "to be or not to be" as it gains an entirely different meaning when translated into Japanese and loses its existential quality in favour of a more human idea of life and death that ties in with the themes explored in the play.

### Keywords

translation, performance, adaptation, Japanese theatre, Shakespeare, Hamlet, Kabuki, Takarazuka

\* \* \*

HISTORICALLY, *Hamlet* has held a place of interest in Japan since the 1800s due to its portrayal of the human and deep emotional ties to kinship and clan. Kaori Ashizu writes: "Japanese responses to Shakespeare in general, and *Hamlet* in particular (the play which seemed to afford the best window into the Western mind), have, in complex ways, been bound up with larger questions of national self-identity and Japan's relationship to the West" (2014). Shakespeare became especially popular during the Meiji era because, "after the long-secluded country opened its doors to the West, [he] was among the first English literary figures to be introduced

in Japan” (Minamitani 1990, 177). Prior to the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912), the Tokugawa shogunate had gone through great lengths to expel foreigners and foreign culture, including religions, from Japan, as well as to isolate the country to protect its government from outside influences (Vaporis 2020, 87–90).<sup>1</sup> During this time, Shakespeare was completely unknown to the country and its people, so when he was finally introduced, there was an explosion of appreciation for the Bard and his works. Along with the wish to perform these Western plays in Japan came the need to translate them not only linguistically, but culturally too. The first translations of the plays “were heavily influenced by the way Shakespeare’s works were received in Victorian England, the cultural legacy of the Edo period, and the prevalent trend in Japan of admiring the West and combining Japanese and Western cultural elements” (Oki-Siekierczak 2014, 206). Before the Meiji period, “Japan had almost no access to Shakespeare’s works of either the Renaissance or Neoclassical era” (Oki-Siekierczak 2014, 206), meaning that Japan’s first encounter with the Bard was one that was already watered down and tame compared to the original Early Modern versions of the plays.

*Hamlet*, as is the case with *Macbeth*, is sometimes staged in a feudalistic style – with *samurai*, *daimyo*, and *hime* – of the Edo period,<sup>2</sup> yet modern directors like Yukio Ninagawa explore *Hamlet* through a different lens, one that combines the cultural values of Japan with the poetry and humanity expressed in Shakespeare. In other instances, *Hamlet* is given a contemporary overhaul, such as in the all-female Takarazuka Company’s rock opera musical *Hamlet!!* (2010) in which the emphasis is placed on the female characters, especially Ophelia, and their power and agency in the play. No matter which version, however, something remains very clear: Japanese adaptations of *Hamlet* all carry the ghosts of history, both Shakespeare’s sometime overbearing presence as well as Japan’s cultural past.

Shoichiro Kawai’s *New Translation: Hamlet* (2003) is the basis for many stage productions of *Hamlet* in Japan, including the two cited above, because of its close translation of the First Folio and its attention to the rhythm of the language that seeks to bring Shakespeare’s poetry to light in a non-Germanic context. Kawai explains that his work is one of many, as “*Hamlet* is probably the most frequently translated

---

<sup>1</sup> Contrary to the popular belief that all foreigners were forced out, the shogunate made a distinction based on the cultural impact of foreigners’ presence: “After the Portuguese were expelled from Japan . . . the only Europeans allowed to remain were the Dutch, who were not interested in converting the Japanese to Christianity . . . The Portuguese were expelled because the Tokugawa could no longer tolerate the threat to their nation building that the Catholic missionaries and their supporters represented” (Vaporis 2020, 90).

<sup>2</sup> For examples of Edo-inspired adaptations and performances of Shakespeare, see Graham Holderness’ book *Samurai Shakespeare: Early Modern Tragedy in Feudal Japan* (2021).

literary work in Japan with more than forty Japanese translations . . . in the last hundred years” (2006, 39). Translation work of Shakespeare into Japanese is no easy feat – the socio-cultural ghosts of ancestral Japan are present in the language to this day, and their influences can be felt through the performances of Shakespeare on stage. Historically, “the language used by Shakespeare was often wrongly interpreted or translated,” but “Shakespeare was revered as a great Western personality, representing the wisdom of England” (Oki-Siekierczak 2014, 208). Kawai’s translation in particular tries to be as accurate to the Early Modern English as possible, despite the obvious linguistic differences, which allows for the Bard’s wisdom, so highly praised during the Meiji period (Oki-Siekierczak 2014, 208–209), to continue to flourish in modern-day Japan. Furthermore, in terms of the performability of the translated work,

[w]hile no comprehensive theoretical frame can be envisaged in theatre and literary criticism, and . . . in translation studies as well . . . the performative turn at least has had the lasting merit of favouring the centrality of translation in the theatrical event as both a literary and a performative act to be looked at as a specific activity for the theatre in performance. (Bigliazzi, Ambrosi and Kofler 2013, 3)

While many scholars situate works as either performances or adaptations of the original text, translated works can be seen as being their own mode of adaptation, in the same sense as a setting change can constitute an adaptation. Even though “no convincingly comprehensive method has been elaborated or even roughed out” (Bigliazzi, Ambrosi and Kofler 2013, 3) with respect to examining translation in the context of performance and adaptation, translation work has become an important part of the discussion when examining plays from a transnational perspective. If translation is a form of adaptation, then the latter “implies a process rather than a beginning or an end, and as ongoing objects of adaptation all Shakespeare’s plays remain in process” (Fischlin and Fortier 2014, 3). To label these types of works is difficult and, to an extent, unnecessary and at times reductive. The point of interest in examining translated Shakespeare is found in the process and transformation of the text and how it simultaneously reflects Shakespeare’s messages and the socio-cultural reality of the country where the play is presented. Fischlin and Fortier (2014) explain that “there are only labels [such as adaptation, addition, recontextualization, etc.] with more or less currency, connection to history, and connotations both helpful and misleading” (2–3). These labels can be restrictive, which is why there may be a need to focus more purely on the text and its output rather than its place in modern theory.

The linguistic spectres or, in Derridean terms, the Shakespearean “legacy” echo in the Japanese translations of *Hamlet* despite the grammatical and syntactic differences. For these reasons, this article examines the effects of the Japanese language on the meaning or reshaping of the English text, especially the existential nature of Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy, outside of the divisive labels of performance and adaptation, and how these effects are reflected or presented onto the stage through Ninagawa and Takarazuka’s productions of *Hamlet* based on the same translation by Kawai.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Translating Shakespeare into Japanese

Unlike English, Japanese has a hierarchical and gendered structure embedded in the language. This is especially apparent in the pronouns and verb conjugations that can change drastically depending on who the speakers and the listeners are. Tetsuo Kishi notes that

... the [pronoun] selection becomes far more complicated because one may have as many as twenty different forms of the second-person pronoun to choose from. Some are extremely formal and polite, some archaic, while others are very intimate, or clearly derogatory. Some are used only by men and some only by women. Moreover, there are also as many or, perhaps, even more forms of the first-person pronoun, and so the combination of a first-person pronoun and a second-person pronoun can be varied almost infinitely. (Kishi 2012, 70)

This naturally creates problems of translation when adapting Shakespeare into Japanese. Some aspects of Shakespeare are, understandably, lost in the changes, most specifically the intimacy between the characters because it is “almost mandatory for strangers to speak to each other in a formal style with polite verb suffixes” (Kishi 2012, 73). Once the characters form more intimate relationships, this may change, but, for the most part, politeness between characters of different sexes and social classes is maintained. What is more, the ambiguous genders expressed in Shakespeare are often muddled or toned down when translated into Japanese because of the nature of the language.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, “at least two different forms of verb suffixes are

---

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article are my own.

<sup>4</sup> By “ambiguous genders,” I refer to the plays in which the characters cross-dress into the opposite sex for plot purposes. These moments create confusion in the plays as well as tension between the characters. For example, Rosalind’s disguise as Ganymede in *As You Like It* allows for homoerotic

used in spoken Japanese: the polite and the familiar . . . [and] [s]ome postpositional words are used primarily by women, some primarily by men, and if a member of one group uses a word that is supposed to belong to the other group, his or her sexual identity is likely to be seriously doubted by the listener” (Kishi 2012, 70), which can then affect the translation work as one must be very careful with their choice of pronouns and verbs. To further complicate the matter, the characters (*kanji*) in the written language add nuance to the words that the spoken language can lose. The reading of the *kanji* can vary depending on whether the word is read by its sound (*on yomi*) or by meaning (*kun yomi*),<sup>5</sup> which invariably changes the interpretation of the word. This is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s own early modern English language, the meaning of which has changed over time. Some of these words used to have meanings that are no longer ascribed to them or that have become obsolete in common usage. In this way, the linguistic difficulties encountered when translating from English to Japanese can be likened to the work of transcribing from early modern English to today’s language.

Despite these difficulties, Shōyō Tsubouchi, Japan’s first major Shakespearean translator, decided to work on the canon “to promote a truly national drama and literature that might appeal to all classes of society” (Gallimore 2019, 275). The need to translate Shakespeare was because “Shōyō . . . believed that it was only through theatrical realization in their own language that Japanese people could fully understand Shakespeare” (Gallimore 2019, 277), and this need to understand the Bard came from “the new Meiji government[’s] . . . [pursuit of] an ambitious and vigorous policy of modernization, essentially understood as a need for ‘Westernization’” (Ashizu 2014). Despite his best efforts, Tsubouchi “published fragments of a translation [of *Hamlet*] in 1885 . . . but did not get beyond the first act. His translation employed a formal, old-fashioned style and language” (Ashizu 2014) but, by then, *Hamlet* had already entered the national consciousness and encouraged translation and adaptation work, which continues to this day. Though the initial aim of the Meiji government was to “Westernize” Japan, the resulting effects of having imported

---

undertones to take place between Rosalind/Ganymede and Orlando. The crossdressing women of Shakespeare are androgynous, a trait that is common with Japanese theatre, especially in the all-male Kabuki and the all-female Takarazuka.

<sup>5</sup> To illustrate the difference, let us look at the character for “dance.” The *on yomi* reading is “*bu*” (such as in the words *kabuki* or *butai* – stage)) whereas the *kun yomi* reading is “*ma*” (as in the word *mimai* – visiting someone who is sick). Both pronunciations refer to the word “dance,” but they are used differently based on the context or the combination with other characters, and the meaning of the character shifts from one usage to the next. In the spoken language, this nuance can be lost, which is why Kawai discourages the use of unclear or less obvious *kanji* readings in translations (2006).



and translated Shakespeare was one of assimilation, appropriation, and carving of a national identity rather than a move to occidentalize the East.<sup>6</sup> Japan quickly adopted Shakespeare as one of its own, creating what is known as “Japanese Shakespeare” – a hybrid concoction of European/English values and Japanese culture. “Japanese Shakespeare” truly belongs to the Japanese consciousness as the Bard’s plays take on new shapes on stage that are typically a blend of Western ideas and Eastern culture and stage techniques. Shakespeare’s plays are used as a vehicle through which Japan can understand its own cultural past.

In terms of his work on *Hamlet*, Kawai declares that “it is no longer sufficient to translate the mere meanings of the words as previous translators have done. [His] new translation seeks to reconstruct the original sound structure. Replacing the blank verse with a rhythmical Japanese of a somewhat archaic nature” (2006, 39). This position argues against the traditional modes of translation that, up until now, concerned themselves with the perfect transposition of meaning rather than the poetry of Shakespeare. However, the “archaic” Japanese rhythm reflects Tsubouchi’s work that was rooted in Meiji-era language. During that time, “*Hamlet* became popular in Japan as literature rather than as a work for the stage” (Ashizu 2014), which can be interpreted as the loss of the experience of Shakespeare’s most emotionally and psychologically complex play. Naturally, plays can be read and enjoyed, but they are better suited for the stage as their purpose is to visually and auditorily entertain. To this effect, Kawai received help from Mansai Nomura, a Kyogen<sup>7</sup> actor and director, who “read [the translation] aloud from beginning to end” (2006, 40), thereby giving life to the words in the way they were intended. A play is, first and foremost, meant to be spoken and performed, which is why Mansai’s contribution helped with ensuring the quality of the work in terms of its playability. While translated works are concerned with the written understanding, the nature of a play demands that the work be translated in a way that makes sense rhythmically when spoken. This

---

<sup>6</sup> In terms of appropriation, Fischlin and Fortier (2014) write: “This word suggests a hostile takeover, a seizure of authority over the original in a way that appeals to contemporary sensibilities steeped in a politicized understanding of culture;” however, “appropriation can take place without altering the original in itself” (3). I use the word here in a more positive light, one that encourages a sharing and understanding of one another’s cultures rather than a seizure of a foreign cultural legacy. To appropriate Shakespeare in the Japanese context is to accept him as a method through which to explore Japan’s ancient theatre culture.

<sup>7</sup> According to MIT Global Shakespeare: “Kyogen is a form of traditional Japanese theater that developed as a sort of intermission and comic relief between the solemn noh acts . . . There are usually only two or three roles, always played by male actors” (“Kyogen (Japanese theater form)” 2022). Furthermore, Kawai states that “‘Kyogenizing’ Shakespeare is a good way of furthering our understanding of his plays, for Shakespeare is arguably more akin to Kyogen than to modern Western theatre” (2009, 264–65).

is what Kawai wanted to achieve with his *Hamlet* and, evidently, the Japanese Shakespeare directors would seem to agree, favouring his translation over that of several other readily available versions.<sup>8</sup>

The process of modifying Shakespeare and his plays to fit the Japanese cultural context is one that takes place in two-fold. For one, “Shakespeare is often ‘japanified’ or ‘japanized,’” by having “Japanese names being given to the various characters” (Robertson 1998, 131). The other method is by incorporating typically Japanese elements into the staging, usually perceivable through the stage techniques and costumes. Translation work adds to this japanization through the linguistic choices made, such as the archaic language that Kawai hints at. Consequently, Kabuki (and Noh) traditions are further exemplified through the choice of casting in Japan. Kawai explains that “[p]resumably, one reason why there are so few mothers in Shakespeare’s plays is that the Elizabethan players lacked any equivalent of the Japanese tradition of female impersonators (especially in Kabuki) and male impersonators in Takarazuka. In Japan, given these traditions, there is nothing awkward about transgender casting” (Kawai 2009, 269). While the Elizabethans used young boys to portray women on stage, Japan regularly mixes genders between the actors and the characters they play – and this, without a second thought, as it is culturally and traditionally accepted on stage.

Seeing as how the language itself is gendered, it is interesting to see how it is then wielded by actors and actresses who specialize in portraying the opposite sex on stage. In Yoshihiro Kurita’s 2002 *Hamlet*, for example, the lead actress who played the eponymous character, Mira Anju, was a retired Takarazuka male performer, while Ophelia was played by a Kabuki-trained, female-performing actor, Jun Uemoto (Kawai 2009, 270–71). Both actors were specialists in their respective roles, which explains why they were chosen for these cross-gendered portrayals. In a way, Japan’s history of cross-gender casting has led to some male actors being very good at performing stylized women on stage, and vice versa.<sup>9</sup> These actors can then use the strict conventions of the language and subvert them by attributing the gendered-pronouns to themselves without fear of social judgement because, on stage, it is an expected – and accepted – process.

---

<sup>8</sup> Although the exact number of translations is unclear, Kawai compiled 42 different versions of the line “to be or not to be,” indicating that there are at least as many full translations of *Hamlet* in Japan.

<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that actresses do not make good women on stage, for example. On the contrary, there are excellent actors and actresses who can perform either sex convincingly based on the theatre traditions of Kabuki, Noh, and Takarazuka. Actors and actresses who perform the opposite sex on stage are trained artists who have devoted their careers to perfecting these crossdressing and crossgendering techniques.

## 2. Female Hamlets and their Ghosts

When discussing female Hamlets in the Japanese context, the first thing that comes to mind is the musical revue company, Takarazuka. The company opened its doors in 1913, following the end of the Meiji period, and has employed women exclusively for its productions since then. Meiji translators highly regarded Shakespeare's women and, "regardless [of] their shrewdness, stubbornness, and other qualities as rather strong women, the Japanese translators projected Shakespeare's female characters . . . as paragons of virtue and fidelity" (Oki-Siekierczak 2014, 209). Takarazuka Company followed this idea in their practices, which also resonated with the Meiji government's motto of "good wife, wise mother" (Robertson 1998, 61–63). Takarazuka actresses are widely famous in Japan and, sometimes, some of them also find fame in the West. Takarazuka Company is known for pushing gender boundaries through its performances and focusing on androgyny on stage. In fact,

[i]n Giles Block's 1995 Japanese production (Shochiku Theatre, Tokyo) Hamlet was Rei Asami, from the all-female Takorasaka [sic] company who were reversing the centuries-old *onnagata* tradition of all-male casting. Takorasaka [sic] implicitly critiqued a society that had clung to conventions of gender representation from a distant age; yet a group of actresses had staged *Hamlet* in Japan as early as 1907 and the kabuki-trained actress Yaeko Mizutani played Hamlet successfully in 1933 and 1935. (Howard 2007, 5)

Asami Rei played a feminized Hamlet in her post-Takarazuka years during which time she had been an *otokoyaku* Top Star.<sup>10</sup> The link between Takarazuka and Kabuki traditions run deep; the *otokoyaku* (a female actor playing as a man) is the exact opposite of the Kabuki *onnagata* (a male actor playing as a woman), and the elements found in Kabuki are often transposed to the modern Takarazuka stage. As per Howard's comment, Kabuki-trained actresses played *Hamlet* much earlier than Takarazuka, but today's conservative Kabuki theatres do not typically employ actresses, leaving the space open for Takarazuka actresses to take on these roles. Moreover, Takarazuka productions not only feature talented women, but also create glitzy, French cabaret-style shows that incorporate music, sequined-costumes, and heavy makeup.

---

<sup>10</sup> In Takarazuka, actresses are divided into two types of roles: *musumeyaku* (female performers) and *otokoyaku* (male performers). The *otokoyaku* are central to the Takarazuka aesthetic and are more often glorified over their female counterparts. The emphasis is always placed on these cross-dressing actresses and their performances.

At first glance, a rock opera of *Hamlet* seems atypical of Shakespeare adaptations; however, the link to music is not as strenuous as what it may seem. Ambroise Thomas, a nineteenth-century French composer, turned *Hamlet* into a five-act opera that was very successful and is still performed today.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, Takarazuka's *Hamlet* is not the first of its kind, but it is one of the few all-female performances of the melancholic play. In Takarazuka's hands, the play takes on a new, lighter feeling than in the heavy French opera. Ophelia's role in this version is significantly changed compared to other stagings of the play. After her death, Ophelia returns to the stage as a ghost-like figure who follows Hamlet's adventure, until his own death, after which they are reunited. In typical Takarazuka fashion, the play closes on a joyous reunion of the lovers, clothed in white, and dancing and singing happily in their afterlife.

For Takarazuka, Ophelia is given a new role beyond the mad and suicidal princess in the original *Hamlet*. This addition is unique to Takarazuka, and these extra lines and scenes do not exist in Kawai's translation. *Hamlet!!*'s director, Fujī Daisuke, added this ghostly Ophelia to give her a voice beyond the bounds of the Shakespearean text. According to Abraham and Torok, "phantoms are not the spirits of the dead, but 'les lacunes laissées en nous par les secrets des autres' [the shortcomings left in us by the secrets of others]" (quoted in Davis 2005, 374). This idea resonates well with Ophelia's extended role in the play as she haunts the stage as a reminder and reflection of Hamlet's psyche. Seeing as how this psychoanalytical idea is, first and foremost, targeted at "transgenerational trauma and family secrets" and that it is a "mediation in fiction of the encrypted, unspeakable secrets of past generations" (Davis 2005, 374), Ophelia's physical haunting is a clear representation of the family feud that persists even after her death.

As with Hamlet, Ophelia descends into madness after the death of her father, making her a foil for the prince – and a foreshadowing of what will happen to him later in the play. Ophelia's ghost therefore reflects the secrets between the previous and the current generation. Naturally, when speaking of ancestral hauntings, King Hamlet's ghost comes to the forefront of the discussion, but it is Ophelia who is at the heart of the story in Takarazuka's rock opera musical. In terms of Japanese theatre, Ophelia's ghost is a common stage mechanism often seen in Kabuki and Noh theatres whereby the supernatural world spills onto the stage to both haunt and remind

---

<sup>11</sup> The latest of which was at the Opéra Comique, Paris, in 2018.

the other characters of their existence. In fact, “[i]n the world of Noh, the return of the dead to the world of the living is a familiar motif and one may even argue that Noh masks themselves represent inscrutable psychic entities filled with deep-seated grudges” (Kawai 2009, 267), the latter of which become a major preoccupation for the plots of Noh plays. What is more, Japan’s native religion, Shintoism, contributes to this understanding of ghosts and hauntings.<sup>12</sup> When combined with Shakespeare, the hauntings take on a philosophical aspect due to the characters’ soliloquies that offer a look into their minds. Furthermore, “Shakespeare’s plays are similar to the Noh stage, a vestige of an old culture, filled with passionate thoughts, and one has only to pick up a mask lying there to revitalize its hidden power” (Kawai 2009, 267), which makes Shakespeare’s work all the more powerful for its ability to bridge two seemingly very different worlds.

### 3. Ninagawa’s *Hamlet*

Kabuki, being one of the three classical theatre forms of Japan,<sup>13</sup> influences theatre productions to this day, including Yukio Ninagawa’s world-renown Shakespeare adaptations. Ninagawa’s admiration for Western plays and playwrights is reflected throughout his career, from his beginnings with the Greek tragedies, to his lifelong love of Shakespeare and repeated productions of specific tragedies. Ninagawa staged *Hamlet* eight times, both at home in Japan and abroad in England, between 1978 and 2015, and each production was japanized in varying degrees. In Ninagawa’s 2015 version of *Hamlet*, for example, “the scene of the play-within-the play is revealed through the Kabuki technique of *furi-otoshi* (the dropping of a huge curtain)” (Kawai 2016, 25). When Ninagawa began producing Shakespeare’s canon, “his aim was not to revere a sophisticated higher foreign culture but to show how relevant Shakespeare could be to our modern life” (Kawai 2008, 270). This aligns with Tsubouchi who believed that Kabuki “*furigoto* [was] a genre with a potential ‘to unite the nation’ as Shakespeare and opera had done in nineteenth-century

---

<sup>12</sup> Not only were “noh theatre and kabuki theatre . . . derived from early court entertainments and religious rituals,” but “Shinto, ‘the way of the gods,’ revered the processes of nature. Similar to early Chinese Daoism, Shinto had neither dogma nor creed, just actions to unite gods, ancestral spirits, and people in one divine way of life” (Kuritz 1988, 97). In this respect, Japanese classical theatre is engrained in the religious tradition of ancient Japan. Furthermore, modern theatre, being an extension and often revitalization of classical drama, continues to rely on this cultural legacy.

<sup>13</sup> The two others being *Bunraku* (puppet theatre) and *Noh* (mask plays).

Europe” (Gallimore 2019, 275).<sup>14</sup> For both the translator and the director, Kabuki is a similar point of interest when discussing Shakespeare in Japan. Kabuki and Shakespeare, therefore, go hand in hand in Japanese translations, adaptations, and performances. During the eighth edition of Ninagawa’s *Hamlet*, actor Mikijiro Hira stated that “being Japanese is the foundation of his works. Once elements of Japanese culture are integrated, how can he stage the works with a touch of Japan in such cultural collision; this has been his concern” (“The World’s Ninagawa” 2015, 00:30–00:50). Even though Ninagawa references traditional Japanese culture and traditions in his work and integrates Kabuki elements into his productions, “[his] spectacular approach is no different from . . . Western directors in that they both believed that as directors they had to do something to Shakespeare – modernise or japanize – to make him accessible to the modern audience” (Kawai 2008, 274). It is through this idea that Shakespeare maintains his relevance in Japan as the combination of his works with culturally recognizable modes of acting make him an easy choice for directors like Ninagawa.

Ninagawa’s productions differ from Takarazuka’s inasmuch as the focus of the play is more on the emotions evoked by the text rather than gender dynamics between the characters. Takarazuka’s actresses allow for a sensuous, feminized filter to be placed over *Hamlet*, while Ninagawa’s work fully appropriates and modifies Shakespeare to fit the Japanese cultural context. Ninagawa’s frequent signposting via costumes, stage decor, and music firmly places *Hamlet* in Japan, and nowhere else. For both, though, Kawai’s translation contributes to this appropriation and assimilation of Shakespeare’s themes as the linguistic choices automatically divert the meaning from the original English.

Ninagawa’s work blends the two contrasting views of East and West by exporting his japanized Shakespeare back into the English-speaking world. This ability to bridge the two is perhaps not unique to Ninagawa, but he is certainly someone who perfected it and made it internationally popular. The re-introduction of a Japanese Shakespeare into his own English society makes for an interesting dialogue around the power of translations and transnational adaptations. It is not all that common for Japanese productions of Shakespeare to gain fame outside of Japan, so Ninagawa’s success at doing this allows him to have his brand of Shakespeare be recognized all

---

<sup>14</sup> Gallimore explains that “*Furigoto* (literally “shaking piece”) was in fact one of a number of popular dance forms, but it was Shōyō’s idea that as a set solo piece performed to musical accompaniment, usually at a climactic moment of a *kabuki* play, it resembled an operatic aria or Shakespearean soliloquy in its expressive individuality” (2019, 275).

around the world as well as for international audiences to be exposed to an unusual Shakespeare – and an unusual *Hamlet*.

#### 4. *Ikiru beki ka, shinu beki ka, sore ga mondai da*<sup>15</sup>

Seeing as how Kawai's translation is based on the First Folio of 1623, it is perhaps interesting to point out the fact that the same line in the First Quarto was originally written differently. In 1603, the line read as: "To be, or not to be, I there's the point" ("Hamlet (Quarto 1, 1603)" 2019) but only one year later, the line was changed to what we recognize today as the "official" version: "To be, or not to be, that is the question." The difference between the first and second version lies in the word choice from "point" to "question," which creates a different kind of nuance to the existential first half of the line. Furthermore, the semantic journey of the verb "to be" is interesting in itself: the verb that we use today was originally two separate verbs in Old English, with "be" meaning "exist, come to be, become, happen" and "was/were" meaning "remain, abide, live, dwell" (Harper 2022). The second verb, that we now recognize as a past tense conjugation, surprisingly ties in with the Japanese language's interpretation of the concept of being and existence.

Due to the fact that "there is no 'to be' verb in Japanese" (Dabbs 2021),<sup>16</sup> the translation of Hamlet's most famous "to be or not to be" line transforms into "to live or to die," giving this opening line a new meaning and interpretation that is wholly dependent on the language of reception. The second half of the line, *sore ga mondai da*, indicates two nuances within its operative word, *mondai*. Kawai's choice of the word *mondai* can be understood as either "problem" or "question," further changing the Japanese understanding of the Shakespearean line. While the original is existential, the translation indicates a choice, or a problematic, between life and death, something that resonates well with the main theme of the play. The 1603 version of the line in English does away with the existential question posed in 1623 and leaves little room for philosophical questioning like in the Japanese translation.

---

<sup>15</sup> The line is sourced from Shoichiro Kawai's *Shinyaku Hamuretto* [*Hamlet: A New Translation*] (2003) and translates directly as: "To live or to die, that is the problem." This is Kawai's interpretation of the "to be" soliloquy's opening line.

<sup>16</sup> However, even though there is no verb equivalent for the English "to be" in Japanese, there are other ways of expressing the sentiment, such as with the copula *desu*. For example, *watashi wa Hamuretto desu* (I am Hamlet) indicates a state of being, but it would be difficult to use *desu* in the way that the "to be" line demands it. Another similar word in Japanese is the intransitive verb *iru* (to be (animate things)) or *aru* (to be (inanimate objects)) but, once again, these verbs cannot be used in the same context as the English "to be" as their meaning is closer to "presence" rather than "existence." Throughout Kawai's compilation of 42 translated "to be" lines, most translators used *ikiru/shinu* (live/die) or variations of it to express the state of being (Takai 2016).

Hamlet is driven throughout the story by his desire for vengeance, and many characters suffer the consequences of this path that he forges for himself, which leads them to their deaths. Hamlet's first encounter with the realities of death is when he comes across Yorick's skull, which signifies the end of all things and the decay after life. Meanwhile, the innocent Ophelia becomes a collateral victim of Hamlet's revenge when she tragically ends her life in Act IV. Polonius's death reminds us of King Hamlet's demise, and Hamlet's father visits (or haunts) him and spurs him on his quest for vengeance, thereby placing life and death as antitheses of one another. Claudius's life can be seen as "the problem" mentioned in the translated line because his life is linked to King Hamlet's death. Because of his greed and lust for power, Claudius commits fratricide and usurps the throne, leading to the foregone conclusion that if Claudius were dead, then King Hamlet would be alive, and vice versa. Neither of them can exist whilst the other is alive because they both want the same thing: to rule Denmark.<sup>17</sup> These elements are already present in the English text, but they come to life in the Japanese translation as the struggle for life and death is felt through Hamlet's most famous philosophical musing.

This subtle but observable change in the language allows for a more understandable meaning to be breathed into *Hamlet* in the twenty-first century than if the existential thematic were to remain. Ninagawa himself said that "after directing *Hamlet* four times with such celebrated actors as Mikijiro Hira in 1978, Ken Watanabe in 1988, Hiroyuki Sanada in 1995, and Masachika Ichimura in 2001, [he] was not fully satisfied with any of them [the productions], but [was] pleased with the 2004 production and [said] that he now understands *Hamlet*" (Kawai 2006, 40). Evidently, this specific translation of the play added clarity while maintaining the poetic rhythm that is so important to both Shakespeare and Kawai. The translated "to be" line follows the seven-five-seven pattern that is reminiscent of a *haiku*, thereby further japanizing Shakespeare to fit with the culturally recognizable sign as "[this pattern] is the most popular Japanese rhythm" (Kawai 2006, 41). When Takarazuka's Hamlet (Ryu Masaki) sings this line in the opening scene of the production, she adds to it the English equivalent which shows the close relationship between Shakespeare's legacy and Japan's appropriation:

---

<sup>17</sup> Claudius's role in the play, even though underdeveloped compared to Hamlet's, serves to create a clear distinction between the old and the new, the living and the dead, and the strong and the weak. In fact, "although Claudius is referred to throughout as 'the king,' there is the feeling that the 'real' king is the elder Hamlet, of whom we see in Claudius a grotesque and inferior copy . . . More than one characteristic of Claudius is a reminder of Antichrist, the man of sin who was to rule in place of Christ for a short period of war and terror before the final trumpet sounded . . . [Claudius's] rule begins when the true king disappears" (Guilfoyle 1981, 125).



HAMLET. To be or not to be,  
To be or not to be.  
*Ikiru beki ka, shinu beki ka,*  
*Sore ga mondai da.*  
(Fuji 2010, 00:04:10–00:04:20)

Interestingly, Hamlet sings these lines many times during the production, including right after the scene of Ophelia's burial. After Hamlet declares that he "loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers could not, with all their quantity of love, make up [his] sum" (Fuji 2010, 01:44:35–01:44:50), Hamlet sings the theme song: "to be or not to be, *shinu, nemuru, nemuru, nemuru, soshite osoraku wa yume o miru* [to die, to sleep, to sleep, to sleep, and most likely to dream]" (Fuji 2010, 01:46:30–1:46:44). Once again, Kawai's choice of words for his translation is representative of the lives and deaths of the characters and, when combined with Takarazuka's clever weaving of the words into the theme song, the key moments are highlighted by Hamlet's famous words. Comparatively, Ninagawa's 2003 production, which featured a stripped stage in the style of "Peter Brook's 'empty space'" (Kawai 2008, 280), used the "to be" line following the original chronology set by Shakespeare. Hamlet, played by Fujiwara Tatsuya, speaks the lines somberly – a stark contrast to Ryu Masaki's upbeat singing in *Hamlet!!* – and stalks the dark stage with nothing but a small candle burning dimly in his hand (Ninagawa 2003, 2:58–3:04). Death is more easily felt in this dark and dreary atmosphere, and Fujiwara's delivery hints at the underlying madness that is rooted in the prince's mind.

## 5. A New Perspective

Through Kawai's translation, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* gains a new interpretation while still maintaining its original qualities that make it so compelling to read and to perform. Even though *Hamlet* has been translated into every imaginable language – including imaginary ones such as in *Star Trek*'s Klingon – it is in Japanese that the tale morphs into something less philosophical and more instinctual. Life and death are at the core of this story, and while one might argue that that is always the case, no matter which language it is in, the fact that it is transposed to the Japanese cultural context puts these elements in conversation with questions of gender, as in Takarazuka, and national identity, as with Ninagawa. Death, in Takarazuka, is transcended in the shape of Ophelia, and her ghost becomes a reminder that Hamlet's selfish revenge is the reason for everyone's demise. In Ninagawa's 2003 production, the bleakness of the stage and the costumes contribute to the original image we have of Shakespeare, yet,

in his 2015 production, the colourful Kabuki-style clothing and decor echo the cultural heritage of Japanese Shakespeare, from Tsubouchi's first translations and the subsequent importation and appropriation of Shakespeare's canon.

The linguistic ghosts of Shakespeare's English continue to haunt the Japanese translations despite the inevitable changes (and losses), imitating the ghosts who haunt Hamlet throughout the play. While some of these specters are maddening – the need for authenticity, for example, others reflect the psyche and the cultural consciousness of a country or of a time period. Even though Kawai refuses to allow for losses in translation and does his best to adapt *Hamlet*'s rhymes, it is impossible to accomplish a perfect, word-for-word rendition as the language's structure does not permit it. Kawai's work differs from others': "Whereas it is the academic's job to immerse themselves in their research, [he] approach[es] [his] work differently by placing priority on the staging of plays" (Takai 2016). This ethic is what created a faithful translation of the original text, while still maintaining its spoken integrity on stage. Ninagawa's productions from 2003 onwards were based on Kawai's work, as was Takarazuka's 2010 musical.

Due to Japan and its theatres' long relationship with Shakespeare, the numerous translations, adaptations, and performances of his plays have entered the cultural identity of the country. The japanification of Shakespeare began in the Meiji period, but it continues to be shaped and reshaped today because of theatre directors and companies who continue to see the value in the Bard's works and who understand the impact his works have had on the forging of a national identity. Ultimately, translations of *Hamlet* into Japanese allow for a different interpretation of some of the key scenes, as with the "to be" soliloquy. The shift from the question of existence to that of life and death reflects the themes of the play and speaks of a Japanese cultural and religious legacy embedded in the very structure of the language. With this new outlook on the famous play due to Kawai's choice of words for his translation, *Hamlet* can then become a completely different work under Ninagawa's expert blending of Japanese classical theatre and Shakespeare's aesthetics, or with Takarazuka's female-focused narrative which gives Hamlet an alternate happy ending despite his tragic life.

## Bibliography

- Ashizu, Kaori. 2014. "What's *Hamlet* to Japan?" *Hamletworks.org*. Accessed April 27, 2022. [http://triggs.djvu.org/global-language.com/ENFOLDED/BIBL/\\_\\_\\_\\_Ham-Jap.htm](http://triggs.djvu.org/global-language.com/ENFOLDED/BIBL/____Ham-Jap.htm).
- Bigliuzzi, Silvia, Paola Ambrosi and Peter Kofler, eds. 2013. *Theatre Translation in Performance*. London: Taylor & Francis Group.

- Dabbs, Thomas. 2021. "Shoichiro Kawai: The Kawai Project." *Speaking of Shakespeare*, Youtube video, 1 hr. 16 min, November 11, 2021. Accessed April 27, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yolIZXYnV5k>.
- Davis, Colin. 2005. "Hauntology, spectres and phantoms." *French Studies* 59, no. 3: 373–79. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/kni143>.
- Fischlin, Daniel, and Mark Fortier, eds. 2014. *Adaptations of Shakespeare: An Anthology of Plays from the 17th Century to the Present*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Fujī, Daisuke, director. 2010. *Hamlet!!* Japan: Hankyuu Corporation, 2 hr. 20 min 23 sec.
- Gallimore, Daniel. 2019. "Of Ponds, Lakes, and the Sea: Shōyō, Shakespeare, and Romanticism." In *British Romanticism in Asia: The Reception, Translation, and Transformation of Romantic Literature in India and East Asia*, edited by Alex Watson and Laurence Williams, 273–92. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Guilfoyle, Cherrell. 1981. "King Hamlet's Two Successors." *Comparative Drama* 15, no 2: 120–38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41152943>.
- "Hamlet (Quarto 1, 1603)." 2019. *Internet Shakespeare Editions* (Database). University of Victoria. Accessed April 30, 2022. [https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/Ham\\_Q1/complete/index.html](https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/Ham_Q1/complete/index.html).
- Harper, Douglas. 2022. "be (v.)." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Accessed June 18, 2022. <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=be>.
- Holderness, Graham. 2021. *Samurai Shakespeare: Early Modern Tragedy in Feudal Japan*. Brighton: Edward Everett Root Publishers.
- Howard, Tony. 2007. *Women as Hamlet: Performance and Interpretation in Theatre, Film and Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kawai, Shoichiro. 2006. "Translating the Rhythm of Hamlet." *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance*, vol. 3: 39–44. <http://hdl.handle.net/11089/1495>.
- . 2008. "Ninagawa Yukio." In *The Routledge Companion to Directors' Shakespeare*, edited by John Russell Brown, 269–83. London: Routledge.
- . 2009. "More japanized, casual and transgender shakespeare." In *Shakespeare Survey 62: Close Encounters with Shakespeare's Text*, edited by Peter Holland, 261–72. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2016. "Some Japanese Shakespeare Productions in 2014–15." *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance* 14, no 29: 13–28. <https://doi.org/10.1515/mstap-2016-0013>.
- Kishi, Tetsuo. 2012. "'Our Language of Love': Shakespeare in Japanese Translation." In *Shakespeare and the Language of Translation*, edited by Ton Hoenselaars, 68–81. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Kuritz, Paul. 1988. *The Making of Theatre History*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall College Div.
- "Kyogen (Japanese theater form)." 2022. MIT Global Shakespeares: Video and Performance Archive. Accessed April 29, 2022. <https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/glossary/kyogen/>.

- Minamitani, Akimasa. 1990. "Hamlet in Japan." *Japan Quarterly* 37, no. 2: 176–93. Accessed April 25, 2022. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/hamlet-japan/docview/1304281011/se-2?accountid=12543>.
- Ninagawa, Yukio, director. 2003. "藤原竜也 舞台 ハムレット 前半(八) HAMLET(part8)." *Hamlet*. Japan. Youtube video, 9 min 49 sec. Accessed April 25, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9p3W31LMnc>.
- Oki-Siekierczak, Ayami. 2014. "Meiji Japanese Shakespeare as a Source of Wisdom." *Linguistics and Literature Studies* 2, no. 7: 206–10. doi: 10.13189/lls.2014.020705.
- Robertson, Jennifer. 1998. *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Takai, Jiro. 2016. "A triple-minded Shakespearean in Japan." University of Tokyo. Accessed April 29, 2022. [https://www.u-tokyo.ac.jp/focus/en/features/f\\_00076.html](https://www.u-tokyo.ac.jp/focus/en/features/f_00076.html).
- "The World's Ninagawa Presenting his 8th edition of Hamlet." 2015. Taiwan: National Theater & Concert Hall. Youtube video, 6 min 19 s. Accessed April 25, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKRwD0R6wHY>.
- Vaporis, Constantine Nomikos. 2020. *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life During the Age of the Shoguns*. New York: Routledge. Accessed June 18, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003005292>.

**Ashley-Marie Maxwell** is a doctoral candidate in English Studies at the Université de Montréal (Canada). Her research focuses on Japanese adaptations and performances of Shakespeare in a contemporary cultural and social climate. Her work focuses on performance and adaptation, Global Shakespeare, East Asian theatre, women in theatre, and popular culture. She is the recipient of a grant of excellency from her home university and is a member of the SPRITE research group. She is currently finishing her doctoral dissertation entitled "Cross-Dressing Shakespeare: Performance and Adaptation in Contemporary Japanese Theatre" and is also working on a project that examines Shakespeare's presence and influence in television and popular culture.

**Contact:** ashley-marie.maxwell@umontreal.ca



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.



**TEXTUAL VARIANTS: WHAT HAPPENS TO THEM  
IN TRANSLATION? SOME REFLECTIONS ON  
THE POLISH CRITICAL EDITIONS OF *HAMLET***

*Mateusz Godlewski*

**Abstract**

The problem of textual variants of Shakespeare's plays has always been addressed in English critical editions, which discuss them at length and facilitate comparison between text versions. The textual history of a play becomes largely irrelevant in the case of translation, which has a "flattening effect" on textual variants: Shakespeare in translation is Shakespeare standardised. Theatre, a primary recipient of new translations, is likewise not particularly concerned with textual variance. Do problems resulting from the rich textual history of Shakespeare's plays resurface in the case of critical editions of translations, supplemented by rich critical apparatus? If so, in what ways did translators and editors approach them?

The goal of this essay is to examine these questions in the context of the Polish reception of Shakespeare and *Hamlet* in particular. The textual situation of Shakespeare's most celebrated tragedy is complex and Polish translators adapted a variety of approaches to address this issue. This essay takes into account selected editions from the last two centuries. First, the translation of *Hamlet* by Władysław Matlakowski, published in a bilingual edition, was appended with an exceptionally extensive critical apparatus and constitutes a noteworthy position in the editorial history of Polish Shakespeare. Other significant editions are "professorial" translations by Władysław Tarnawski and Andrzej Tretiak. Later translations by Witold Chwalewik and Juliusz Kidyński are pioneering in this regard, as they seem to present editorial revisionism in their attempt to highlight the plurality of *Hamlet* versions.

**Keywords**

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, translation, reception, critical editions, textual variants

\* \* \*

IN the introduction to *Shakespeare and Textual Studies*, Kidnie and Massai observe that "editing and textual studies achieved unprecedented visibility in the 1980s and 1990s alongside the advent of a certain type of historically oriented scholarship" (2015, 1). This growing interest in the "rationales underpinning modern editorial

methods” (Kidnie and Massai 2015, 1) may still be observed in the particular attention paid to the textual variance of Shakespeare’s plays by the editors of *The Arden Shakespeare* third series. It offers not one, but two volumes focusing on *Hamlet*. The “standard” edition contains “an edited and annotated text of the 1604–5 (Second Quarto) printed version of *Hamlet*, with passages that are found only in the 1623 text (the First Folio)” (Thompson and Taylor 2016c, xxii) printed as an appendix. A second volume, *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623* is a supplement without precedent in the long history of *The Arden Shakespeare*, which (like most critical editions of Shakespeare) has been associated in the past with single-text, eclectic editions.<sup>1</sup> It contains the First Quarto and Folio versions of the play in their entirety, edited and annotated. Explaining their decision to offer three different variants of Shakespeare’s tragedy, the editors stated: “we believe that each of the three texts has sufficient merit to be read and studied on its own. We fervently hope that readers will . . . experience the imaginative power of all three texts, and explore and weigh the scholarly debates surrounding their origins” (Thompson and Taylor 2016c, 11). At the same time, they also assured that the supplemental volume is entirely optional: “we imagine the majority of readers will be content with just one *Hamlet*” (Thomson and Taylor 2016d, xxii).

This essay will consider editorial dilemmas resulting from textual variation in the contexts of Shakespeare in translation in general, and the history of Polish reception of *Hamlet* in particular. There is an extensive critical literature discussing Polish renderings of *Hamlet* from translatorial and editorial perspectives;<sup>2</sup> the focus of this essay, however, is the approach to textual variation which often reveals the need for critical editions. Thompson and Taylor observe “a lack of consensus among *Hamlet*’s editors over the nature of the editorial project” (2016b, 532), but it goes without saying that the majority of problems which preoccupy the editors of Shakespeare’s texts do not concern the editors working on their translations.<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare in translation is usually Shakespeare “standardised,” as the translations have the “flattening

---

<sup>1</sup> “Our edition prints three texts, but almost all previous editors of *Hamlet* have printed just one, basing it on either Q2 or F. (For example, Harold Jenkins in his 1982 Arden edition chose Q2, whereas G.R. Hibbard in his 1987 Oxford edition chose F)” (Thompson and Taylor 2016a, 148). The editors explain their decision and provide a detailed account of the composition of *Hamlet* – the textual history of the play – not only in the large section of the Introduction, but also in one of the appendices to the volume entitled “The Nature of the Texts.” See Thompson and Taylor 2016b.

<sup>2</sup> Especially significant in the present context is a recent study by Agnieszka Romanowska on the paratextual devices used by translators and editors in the twentieth-century translations, focusing on “socio-political and historico-literary contexts” (2018, 41).

<sup>3</sup> Due to this fact, for the sake of this paper I am using the term “textual variance” in a narrow sense, meaning different text versions (*Hamlet* Q1, Q2 and F1) and without taking into account print variants (variant readings within a single text version on the level of letters) or editorial variants (as traced, for instance, in *The Shakespeare Variorum* editions).

effect” on textual variants: the spelling and punctuation discrepancies between variants are neutralised, and “translated texts usually exhibit greater metrical regularity” (Cetera-Włodarczyk 2019, 60). The theatre as a primary recipient of new translations is likewise not particularly concerned with the editorial problems resulting from textual variance. Therefore, the readers of Shakespeare in translation are rarely given any alternative to, for instance, “just one *Hamlet*” referred to by the editors of *Arden Shakespeare*, and they are denied the possibility to “explore and weigh the scholarly debates” surrounding these texts. This predicament may to some extent be remedied by critical editions. As Anna Cetera-Włodarczyk notes, “without critical editions, the readers of a translation are, in a sense, kept in the dark about these problems; they are unaware of the complex derivation of the original text or the eclectic nature of the basis used by the translator in constructing the target version” (2019, 60–61). Let us then consider selected Polish translations and editions of Shakespeare’s plays which either address this issue from the critical perspective, paving the road for critical editions, or constitute noteworthy translation projects which deal with the issue of textual variance in an unconventional way.

The translation of *Hamlet* by Władysław Matlakowski, an eminent Warsaw physician, is unique from the historical perspective (Cetera-Włodarczyk and Kosim 2019, 257). Published in 1894, the eight-hundred page volume is a bilingual edition supplemented by unprecedentedly long introduction to the text and a critical commentary. The translation itself, written in prose, was of secondary importance and Matlakowski declared it to be merely an addition to the critical text (1894, CCCXCII). As a translator, he adopted a philological approach, focusing on the literal meaning at the cost of poetic values of the text (Cetera-Włodarczyk and Kosim 2019, 258). This made the scholars not consider it as a translation of any artistic ambitions (see, e.g., Tarnawski 1914, 221); the reception focused rather on Matlakowski’s impressive monograph on *Hamlet*, which in the Polish critical literature on the tragedy is a work of unparalleled comprehensiveness even today.

Matlakowski addressed the issue of textual variance at length in his commentary. A long subchapter in the introduction is dedicated to Shakespeare’s sources and the textual history of *Hamlet*, summarised by the end as “a sojourn into a tedious field of hermeneutical investigation” (Matlakowski 1894, CXLIX; my translation). Having enlisted all the main differences between the versions of *Hamlet* and abstracted the prevailing theories regarding their origins and authorship, he concludes that the question about the authoritative text of *Hamlet* remains unanswered. Matlakowski also added his own evaluation of the First Quarto text, which he considered to include passages poetically inferior to the rest of Shakespeare canon.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> With the exception of some passages from *Pericles* and *Henry VI* (Matlakowski 1894, CXLVII).



As a translator and editor, his approach is rather standard in this regard: he relied on the multiple editions of Shakespeare (also in translation) to produce a unified, comprehensive text, noting the discrepancies between variants in the footnotes and accompanying commentary. Even though his monograph has been criticised by many scholars over the decades (see, e.g., Chwalewik 1969, 72), as one of the first comprehensive *Hamlet* studies in Poland it has been considered a major source of information on the famous tragedy. As such, it undoubtedly raised the awareness of the convoluted textual and editorial history of Shakespeare's play.<sup>5</sup>

The Inter-War Period, as described by Krystyna Kujawińska-Courtney, was "the time of Shakespeare's full-fledged entrance into the Polish critical and scholarly studies," and the new editions of Shakespeare's plays published in that period "were usually accompanied with extended introductions written by eminent Polish academics" (2002–2004). In the context of this essay one needs to mention the works of two Polish scholars, Andrzej Tretiak and Władysław Tarnawski. Tretiak wrote extensive introductory text for his translation of *Hamlet*, as well as for *The Tempest*, *King Lear*, and *Othello* (1923–1927). In 1922 Tretiak's own translation of *Hamlet* was published in the renowned series of Biblioteka Narodowa ("National Library") publishing house. The series was of an academic character; the text was accompanied by extensive footnotes and preceded with an introduction, in which Tretiak discusses, among others, the textual and editorial history of the play. Tretiak's translations have been grouped by the commentators along with Tarnawski's as scholarly or "professorial," i.e., "philologically faithful, but without any artistic merits" (Romanowska 2018, 44). Tarnawski during the Second World War worked on translating all Shakespeare's plays. Only eight of them were published: three in the pre-war period and five more after Tarnawski's tragic death in 1951 after the imprisonment enforced by the Security Office of the communist state. Tarnawski's rendering of *Hamlet* was published in two separate editions, which indicates the significance of his translatorial input. Printed first in the series aimed at young students with an introductory essay (by the editor, Grzegorz Sinko) it soon reappeared in a scholarly series from the same publishing house. For that second publication, the translation was revised by yet another literary historian, Stanisław Helsztyński, whose informative essay presented the reader with *Hamlet*'s many textual problems. As assessed by Agnieszka Romanowska, "Tarnawski's solid scholarly version must have been assessed as reliable enough to be presented, within only two years, in two editions with clearly

---

<sup>5</sup> Matlakowski's comprehensive study proved to be influential in the following decades, as it was a source of knowledge and inspiration for artists such as Stanisław Wyspiański and other translators like Roman Brandstaetter. For more on Matlakowski's influence and the reception of his work, see Cetera-Włodarczyk and Kosim 2019, 259–64.

educational aims” (2018, 46). The input of Tretiak and Tarnawski into Polish reception of Shakespeare, only briefly outlined here, is not to be understated and their translations constitute essential works in the context of Polish critical editions.

In 1963 Witold Chwalewik published an edition of *Hamlet* which on the most superficial level may be compared with Matlakowski's, as they are both philological translations published in bilingual editions abundant in editorial and translatorial paratexts.<sup>6</sup> Chwalewik was a prominent, yet somewhat controversial figure in the history of Polish reception of Shakespeare. Fascinated with Shakespeare's references to Poland, in 1956 he wrote a much discussed monograph *Polska w "Hamlecie"* ("Poland in *Hamlet*") and in the commentary to his translation he argued that one of Shakespeare's sources for the tragedy was a semi-legendary Polish story of a king eaten by mice. As an editor and commenter of *Hamlet*, he was rather selective. Stanley Wells in his review of the volume observed that Chwalewik's translatorial paratexts accompanying the English part of the publication are "a series of individual notes to the play rather than a running commentary to it" and that he wrote "about those aspects that most interest him" (1966, 97). Nevertheless, Chwalewik's editorial strategy is notable in the context of this essay due to his attention to the textual variance. An introductory note in English is preceded by a longer foreword in Polish focused "mainly on the history of good and bad editions and on textual intricacies" (Romanowska 2018, 47). The edition provided a reprint of the First Folio text (from the Globe edition), supplemented with meticulous endnotes enlisting the differences between textual variants, and Chwalewik's translation of the play from both Folio and the Second Quarto variants. Significantly, the information about sources used by the translator is indicated on the title page as a subtitle of this particular edition, highlighting its relevance. Agnieszka Romanowska assessed that "Chwalewik's paratexts reveal that his temperament was that of a scholar, not that of translator" and, what is worth emphasising, that "this edition was of undeniable value at the time when the availability of foreign scholarship was limited by the iron curtain" (2018, 48).

The other Polish rendering of *Hamlet* which may be considered pioneering in this regard was Juliusz Kydryński's translation of the First Quarto text published in 1987. Kydryński is best known as an author of commentaries which accompanied the Shakespearean translations by Maciej Słomczyński, one of the most influential

---

<sup>6</sup> In 1970, Grzegorz Sinko referred to Matlakowski's and Chwalewik's translations as "bilingual, commented editions" which he found most useful as they represent the state of Shakespeare studies; he also added that in his commentary Chwalewik takes into account more contemporary critical literature and his own perennial studies on the subject (1970). It needs to be mentioned, however, that Chwalewik himself was very critical of Matlakowski's monograph (1969, 72).

Polish translators in the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> The afterwords by Kydryński were criticised as rather superficial and overly laudatory to the work of his collaborator. Nevertheless, Kydryński – a huge admirer and enthusiast of Shakespeare without academical background – took upon himself the task to educate the Polish readers on the subject of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. He produced translations of the plays by Marlowe, Jonson and Kyd, among others, previously unknown to the Polish audience. His ambition behind *Hamlet*, the only translation of Shakespeare he wrote himself, may be seen in the same light: Kydryński saw the role a translator primarily as cognitive and educative for the benefit of a given society (1969). Although the translation of the First Quarto was originally commissioned by theatre (but was never staged; Kydryński 1993, 246n1), in the introduction Kydryński argued that publishing such a text may help to understand the historical contexts and the textual history of Shakespeare's tragedy (1987, 98). Like other non-artistic renderings discussed earlier, his translation was focused on the literalness in the philological sense, striving for the semantic accuracy at the cost of poetic qualities of the text. However, he also emphasises that his publication does not have an academic character and is not targeted at scholars. Supplemented only by a concise introduction, it is a highly original translation project of a vastly different kind than Chwalewik's. It is noteworthy in the context of "Polish Shakespeare" as a publication which arises from a conviction that "non-conventional" variants of Shakespeare's plays are more than a mere curiosity to be mentioned in a footnote. Kydryński's text remains the only Polish translation of this version and even though it has never gained much critical attention, it is to be appreciated as a translatorial undertaking which "introduced in Poland the idea of independent value of various editions reflecting various stages of Shakespeare's plays' original reception" (Romanowska 2018, 51). As a text targeted at a wider audience it is a noteworthy attempt at raising the awareness of *Hamlet*'s complex textual history using entirely different means than his more scholarly-oriented predecessors.

These rare attempts at highlighting the matters usually overlooked by the publishers, editors, or translators, are all the more noteworthy in the light of the silence on the subject of Maciej Słomczyński and Stanisław Barańczak, the two most influential translators of Shakespeare of the second half of twentieth century. Słomczyński's translations, originally published with the afterwords by Kydryński, in the subsequent editions were complemented by the texts by Jan Kott (the second, bilingual

---

<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy in the context of this essay that Słomczyński's translation of *Hamlet*, with the afterword by Kydryński, was published first in 1978 as a bilingual edition; however, unlike Chwalewik's translatorial project, it was not planned as a scholarly edition, but rather targeted at wider audiences. See Romanowska 2018, 49.

edition of *Hamlet*, 1999) or the leading Shakespeare scholar, Marta Gibińska (hard cover, eight volume collected edition of Słomczyński's translation, 2004), but none of the publications had scholarly ambitions nor were particularly concerned with the textual variants. In a somewhat similar manner, the first editions of Barańczak's translations (especially *Hamlet*) were published in a way which manifested their theatrical origins, and after a change of the publisher, later editions included foreign critical essays as the only paratexts.<sup>8</sup>

In the introduction to *Translating Shakespeare for the Twenty-First Century* it is observed that "exploding the traditionally narrow boundaries of the domains of bibliography and textual studies, more and more work is being done on the wealth of implications to be drawn from textual variants and divergent editions" (Carvalho Homem 2004, 7), what ultimately emphasises the instability of Shakespeare's texts. In the context of Polish reception of Shakespeare such a tendency can be observed in the way the most recent Shakespearean translations by Piotr Kamiński are being published. Produced in collaboration with Anna Cetera-Włodarczyk, a Shakespeare scholar editing and supervising the series, the translations are accompanied by an extensive critical apparatus consisting of a detailed introduction and commentary. In the interviews Kamiński emphasised the semi-scholarly character of these publications, stating that it may be considered the first actual critical series of Polish translations of Shakespeare (2012). In all six volumes published since 2009,<sup>9</sup> the textual basis is discussed: it is stated that the translator worked on the multiple critical editions of the English texts, all of which are enlisted in the bibliography. The scholarly approach is highlighted in these publications and the significance of the critical series of Shakespeare's plays in modern Polish translation is not to be overlooked. However, the form of the series and its publishing history indicates certain problems resulting from attempts at balancing between the critical ambitions and the market attractiveness as understood by the publisher. There are notable issues with the distribution of the editorial paratexts which are the effect of the negotiations with the publishing house, such as the footnotes limited only to the necessary passages so as not to disrupt the reading experience.<sup>10</sup> The complex relations between translator, editor, and publisher signal still existing preconceptions disregarding an extensive critical apparatus

---

<sup>8</sup> E. g., in 1999 Znak publishing house issued Barańczak's *The Tempest* with the afterword by Northrop Frye and in 2000 his *Julius Cesar* with the afterword by S. F. Johnson. See Romanowska 2018, 52.

<sup>9</sup> The six plays translated by Kamiński and published in collaboration with Anna Cetera-Włodarczyk are *Richard II* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 2009), *Macbeth* (W.A.B. 2011), *Twelfth Night* (W.A.B. 2012), *The Tempest* (W.A.B. 2012), *The Winter's Tale* (W.A.B. 2015), and *The Merchant of Venice* (W.A.B. 2015; second edition: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 2021). *Hamlet* in Kamiński's translation was staged in Warsaw in 2019 (Teatr Dramatyczny), but the translation has not been published in printed form.

<sup>10</sup> See Cetera and Kamiński 2014.

as superfluous to a text of literary value on its own, or intimidating to a potential reader. In order to unreservedly address the matters of textual variance in translation, such prenotions need to be overcome.<sup>11</sup>

Discussing these issues, Anna Cetera-Włodarczyk observes that “the lack of critical editions enforces translation strategies based on strong domestication of the text; due to a false idea of the homogeneity of Shakespeare’s style, such strategies also eliminate the differences in style and register exhibited by the originals” (2019, 61). The diagnosis is decisive: “the decline of critical editions testifies to a crisis in the humanities” (Cetera-Włodarczyk 2019, 61). The critical series of Kamiński’s translations not only constitutes the most recent chapter in the history of Polish critical and translatorial reception of Shakespeare; it also signals “paradigmatic changes that have affected textual scholarship and the editing of Shakespeare and early modern drama in recent years” (Kidnie and Massai 2015, 2) in the context of translation.

This essay incorporates the research results of the state-funded project The e-Repository of the Polish 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Shakespeare Translations: Resources, Strategies and Reception (NCN Opus 14, 2017/27/B/HS2/00853).

### **Bibliography**

- Carvalho Homem, Rui. 2004. “Introduction.” In *Translating Shakespeare for the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Rui Carvalho Homem and Ton Hoenselaars, 1–24. Amsterdam–New York: Rodopi.
- Cetera, Anna and Piotr Kamiński. 2014. “Jak brzmi polski Shakespeare?” Interview by Alicja Bielak and Piotr Sadzik. In *Abychmy w ten przekład pilnie weźrzeli. Wobec tłumaczenia tekstów dawnych*, edited by Alicja Bielak. 212–37. Warsaw: Wydział “Artes Liberales” UW.
- Cetera-Włodarczyk, Anna. 2019. “‘It takes a genius to set the tune, and a poet to play variations on it’: Some Remarks on the Irksome (Im)possibility of Editing Shakespeare in Translation.” *Przekładaniec*, special issue, “Translation History in the Polish Context”: 46–62. <https://doi:10.4467/16891864ePC.19.003.11261>.
- Cetera-Włodarczyk, Anna, and Alicja Kosim. 2019. *Polskie przekłady Shakespeare’a w XIX wieku. Część 1. Zasoby, strategie, recepcja*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- Chwalewik, Witold. 1969. *Szkice z literatury angielskiej: studia i wrażenia*. Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.

---

<sup>11</sup> Another notions outside the scope of this essay which shape the series in question and are worthy of discussion are the textual authority of the translator and the legal issue of the copyright to the editorial version of the texts.

- Matlakowski, Władysław. 1894. "Wstęp." In *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* by William Shakespeare, edited and translated, with introduction, notes and supplements by Władysław Matlakowski M. D. VIICDXVII. Cracow: Types of the Typography of the Jagellonian University.
- Kamiński, Piotr. 2012. "Natura Szekspira." Interview by Joanna Walaszek. *Dwutygodnik.com* 91, September 2012. Accessed April 23, 2022. <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/3935-natura-szekspira.html>.
- Kidnie, Margaret Jane, and Sonia Massai. 2015. "Introduction." In *Shakespeare and Textual Studies*, edited by Margaret Jane Kidnie and Sonia Massai, 1–10. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kujawińska-Courtney, Krystyna. 2002–2004. "Shakespeare in Poland." In *Shakespeare Around the Globe*, a collection of essays published by the University of Victoria. Accessed April 3, 2022. <https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/Criticism/shakespearein/index.html>.
- Kydryński, Juliusz. 1993. *Przypisy do Szekspira*. Warszawa: Kwiaty na Tor.
- Kydryński, Juliusz. 1969. "Szekspir i Sito." *Dziennik Polski*, no 93, April 20, 1969. E-teatr.pl. Accessed March 17, 2022. <https://e-teatr.pl/szekspir-i-sito-a115779>.
- Kydryński, Juliusz. 1987. "Posłowie." In *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. Translated by Juliusz Kydryński. 96–105. Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Romanowska, Agnieszka. 2018. "Translatorial and Editorial Paratexts in Polish Editions of *Hamlet*." *Journal of Adaptation and Film Performance* 11, no. 1: 41–56. [https://doi.org/10.1386/jafp.11.1.41\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jafp.11.1.41_1).
- Sinko, Grzegorz. 1970. "Hamlet dla dorosłych." *Miesięcznik Literacki*, no. 8. Encyklopedia Teatru Polskiego. Accessed March 17, 2022. <http://www.encyklopediateatru.pl/artykuly/82035/hamlet-dla-doroslych>.
- Tarnawski, Władysław. 1914. *O polskich przekładach dramatów Szekspira*. Cracow: Akademia Umiejętności.
- Thompson, Ann and Neil Taylor. 2016a. "Additions and Reconsiderations." In *Hamlet*. Revised edition. The Arden Shakespeare. Third series, edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. 143–68. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Thompson, Ann and Neil Taylor. 2016b. "Appendix 2." In *Hamlet*. Revised edition. The Arden Shakespeare. Third series, edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. 504–67. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Thompson, Ann and Neil Taylor. 2016c. "Introduction." In *Hamlet*. Revised edition. The Arden Shakespeare. Third series, edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. 1–142. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Thompson, Ann and Neil Taylor. 2016d. "Preface." In *Hamlet*. Revised edition. The Arden Shakespeare. Third series, edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. xix–xxii. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Wells, Stanley. 1966. "Witold Chwalewik: *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (Winter): 97–98. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2867620>.

**Mateusz Godlewski** graduated with MA degree in English Studies from University of Warsaw and with a postgraduate degree in Film Studies from the Institute of Art at the Polish Academy of Science. From January 2020 to July 2021, he was a member of the team working on the digital repository *Polski Szekspir UW* which aims at providing access to Polish Shakespeare translations as well as to case studies reconstructing their origin and reception.

**Contact:** mat.a.godlewski@gmail.com



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.

## 200 YEARS OF ROMANIAN *HAMLET* RETRANSLATION: GHOSTS OF THE SOURCE TEXT?

Nadina Vişan

Daria Protopopescu

### Abstract

In discussing retranslation in his 1990 seminal article, Antoine Berman laid the foundation of what came to be known as the Retranslation Hypothesis. According to this rather controversial hypothesis, no first translation can do full justice to the original. Only a second, a third, or, say, a fifteenth target text might get to that point of grace where what has been lost in the first attempts will be at least partially recovered. In the present paper, we intend to check this hypothesis by looking at Romanian versions of Shakespeare's "poem unlimited" (Kermode, 2001), *Hamlet*. Our focus is on the translation of the exchange between Old Hamlet and Young Hamlet and on how the lexeme "ghost" and its "synonyms" fare in the target texts that have been produced by Romanian translators. In our comparative textual analysis, we make use of Berman's analytic of translation (Berman, 1984), which will provide the tools with which to evaluate the various target texts in our corpus. Another important goal of our analysis is tracing instances of intertextuality in translation, i.e., traces of "filiation" and/or "dissidence" (Zhang & Huijuan, 2018) between versions, which we take as compelling evidence in favour of the Retranslation Hypothesis.

### Keywords

*Hamlet*, retranslation, intertextuality, explication, rationalization

\* \* \*

*"The greatest play in the English language has a ghost at its heart."*  
(Susan Owens, *The Ghost: A Cultural History*)

### Introduction

THE current paper aims at investigating various translations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into Romanian done over the past two hundred years. It is essential to mention from



the very beginning that in the practice of translating Shakespeare's plays into Romanian, there is a distinction between page-oriented translation, the so-called drama translation, and stage-oriented translation or theatre translation (see Bigliuzzi 2013, 5, and Zaharia 2018, 185).

Our paper covers more than two centuries' worth of translating tradition of *Hamlet* into Romanian. To this effect, we need to specify that we are aware of the existence of at least fifteen versions of *Hamlet* spanning a period that covers a little over two centuries from approximately 1820 to 2010. There are a few more translations that are stage oriented (for example, Nina Cassian's version, as yet undated and unpublished) to which we had no access as they are not available for public consultation. What we have noticed, however, is the tendency of Romanian directors to combine already existing page-oriented translations and adapt them according to their vision and needs.

From a chronological / historical point of view, we can split the translations of *Hamlet* into Romanian into four distinct periods that follow Romania's turbulent history. To this effect, we have identified a group of nineteenth-century translations, some of which have never been published (TT1 in Table (1) below). Interestingly, nineteenth-century translations of *Hamlet* into Romanian are, in fact, translations of adaptations of the play in German (TT1, TT3) or French (TT2 and TT4), so they are not direct translations of the English text. Three of the page-oriented translations (TT9, TT13 and TT15) were done by pairs of translators, as can be seen in Table (1) below. One important remark we need to make here is that there is a number of stage-oriented translations of *Hamlet* dating to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. These translations were never officially published and they only circulate among theatre companies. In these particular cases, it seems to be a trend to have a combination of translations of *Hamlet* done by various translators (some of them are the page-oriented translations mentioned in Table (1) below), made to suit the needs of the cast or the director.

## **1. The Corpus**

The earliest translation of *Hamlet* is an unpublished text by Ioan Barac (ca. 1820), a so-called manuscript translation, which appears to be based on German adaptations of the play. The same is true of Stern and Manolescu's translations. Similarly, the translation published by D. P. Economu in 1855 uses a famous French adaptation of *Hamlet* by Alexandre Dumas and Paul Maurice from 1847 (Zaharia 2018, 186–87, Ionoaia, in press). In order to better understand the idea behind the adapted translations, we need to provide some background information about the translations and translators. Ioan Barac, for instance, had legal training and had knowledge

of Latin, Hungarian and German, which explains why this first “translation” of *Hamlet* is actually a translation from a German adaptation, since Barac had no knowledge of English.

The early translations of the twentieth century are, in fact, the first ones to be done from English. It is also worth mentioning that both Manolescu’s (TT4) and Protopopescu’s second translation (TT8) are stage oriented, the latter being explicitly marked as such in its preface and in the cast of characters published at the beginning of the play instead of *Dramatis personae*. There are several other later stage-oriented translations of *Hamlet*. However, and this seems to be a widespread practice in Romanian theatre, they are mostly combined translations of already existing published texts compiled and adapted to fit the vision and needs of actors and directors. Table 1 provides an accurate chronology of the Romanian translations of *Hamlet*. We could not access Vasile Demetrius’s or Ionel Nicolae’s versions.

**Table 1**

A periodization of Romanian translations of *Hamlet*

Periods	Translations of <i>Hamlet</i> into Romanian
Nineteenth-century translations	Ioan Barac (cca1820) TT1 (TT= Target Text)
	D.P. Economu 1855 TT2
	Adolphe Stern 1877 TT3
	George Manolescu 1881 TT4 (stage-oriented)
Early twentieth-century translations up to the communist era	Victor Anestin 1908 TT5
	Ion Vinea 1938-1944 TT6
	Dragoş Protopopescu 1938 TT7
	Dragoş Protopopescu 1942 TT8 (stage-oriented)
Translations during the communist era	Maria Banuş and Vera Călin 1948 TT9
	Petru Dumitriu (Ion Vinea) 1955 TT10
	Ştefan Runcu (Aurora Cornu) 1962 TT11
	Vladimir Streinu 1965 TT12
	Leon Leviţchi and Dan Duţescu 1974 TT13
Post-communist, twenty-first-century translations	Dan Amedeu Lăzărescu 2009 TT14
	Violeta Popa and George Volceanov 2010 TT15
	Ionel Nicolae 2016 TT16

During the communist period, it is interesting to see that some translations were published under a different person’s name as is the case with the 1955 and 1962 versions (i.e., TT10 and TT11). The 1955 version, which appears under the name

of writer Petru Dumitriu, was, in fact, authored by poet Ion Vinea, who had translated Shakespeare between 1938 and 1944. He was acknowledged as the author in a subsequent republication of a volume comprising his translations of Shakespeare's plays in 1971 and later on in 2018. The 1962 version published under the name Ștefan Runcu is, in fact, the work of poetess Aurora Cornu (Martin 2020, 82) who took this pseudonym for translation purposes. Dan Amedeu Lăzărescu's translation of *Hamlet* was first published in 2009, years after his death. He was trained as a lawyer but embarked upon the great project of translating Shakespeare around the same time that Levițchi and Duțescu led the project of translating Shakespeare as well. However, since Levițchi and Duțescu had philological training, they never granted any attention to Lăzărescu's work and ignored it altogether. So, although, Lăzărescu's translation of *Hamlet* was published in 2009, it was done some time during the 1970's. After the fall of communism, we have a notable project of translating Shakespeare for the third millennium, led by George Volceanov, and from the translation of *Hamlet*, first published in 2010, we could tell that he attempted to update the language employed in his predecessors' versions.

## **2. Another Go at Cracking the Retranslation Hypothesis**

In discussing retranslation issues for Romanian versions of *Hamlet*, we will focus on those target texts that have an English source text. In the broader acceptance of the term "retranslation," all the versions mentioned above can count as forms of retranslation, but it would be counterintuitive to compare target texts that have different source texts for the purposes of this investigation, i.e., the checking of the Retranslation Hypothesis, as it was formulated by Berman in 1990.

It is common knowledge that the literature on retranslation relies on the so-called "Retranslation Hypothesis" (henceforth the RH), stated by Antoine Berman in a seminal article he wrote in 1990. Considered by many a universal of translation and criticized by many others, the RH acknowledges retranslation(s) as forms of repairing translation loss in a first, imperfect, version. In Berman's terms, no first translation can be the definitive translation (here, Berman uses the term "great," which in itself is debatable). A second claim is that subsequent retranslations – whether consciously or unconsciously – seem to take the first version as a sort of point of reference, in that they strive to recoup losses inherent in this first version.

The points made by Berman in his famous article were amply discussed (Koskinen and Paloposki, 2010 and 2019, Van Poucke and Gallego, 2019) and were challenged in a series of studies (one of the most recent being Sharifpour and Sharififar,

2021), in which corpus translation studies play no small part (Dastjerdi and Mohammadi, 2013, Van Poucke, 2017, Oyali, 2018, Sanatifar and Etemadi 2021, *inter alia*), yet no conclusion has been definitively reached so far, partly because an evaluation is difficult to make and because methods differ. What is, after all, a “great” translation? What criteria should be used in identifying one?

To this effect, the present paper attempts to offer some answers by making use of more clearly defined patterns of investigation. We restrict our discussion by mainly investigating to what extent Berman’s claims are verifiable in the various Romanian versions of *Hamlet*, with a focus on “ghost” terms. With respect to the first, and the most notorious, claim of the RH, the present paper takes as point of reference Berman’s own criteria of evaluation. We have chosen thus to employ Berman’s “analytic of translation” – which pre-dates his retranslation article by six years – because we believe that Berman’s claim can be better understood and/or verified if integrated in the translational framework devised by Berman himself. In his 1984 study, Berman identifies a few “deforming tendencies” in translation that might impair the overall literary effect of the target text and might deform the (semantic) richness of the source text. He thus discusses the tendency of translators to overtranslate (to produce longer and more explicit target texts) or rationalize (to reorder the syntax of the source text when there is no need for it), or even to ennoble (to choose a marked lexical variant over the generic term) or impoverish (to choose an unmarked lexical variant over the marked one) the source text. By pointing out what a translator should not do, Berman provides clues about what a “great” translation should be. He then goes on to say, in his 1990 article, that a “great” translation can rarely be the first one. Revisions/ retranslations are therefore necessary, as they are all attempts to recapture the textual richness existent in the source text. In an attempt to preserve consistency with Berman’s considerations and further illuminate his much-debated claims, we intend to make use of Berman’s list of translation no-no’s and verify the first point of the RH.

With respect to the second point of the RH, we rely on a study recently published by Zhang & Huijuan (2018), which contributes to the foundation laid by Berman and, we believe, adds invaluable insight to it: the second point in the RH, which states that subsequent target texts take the first (or a previous) target text as a point of reference, is associated with the notion of “intertextuality in retranslation” (henceforth IR). IR is defined as any kind of relationship that ties together various target texts. Two particular instances of intertextuality are discussed and illustrated by Zhang and Huijuan: filiation, i.e., “textual similarities that reflect a filial stance of one translation towards another,” and dissidence, i.e., “textual differences that

indicate one translation is made to distinguish from or even compete against another” (2018, 4–5). IR can be identified at various textual levels, from lexical, semantic, syntactic levels to stylistic, narrative levels, where recurring or specific elements can be analyzed in various target texts so as to establish either filiation or dissidence. Translation strategies themselves can be investigated and taken as proof of filiation or dissidence, as Zhang & Huijuan point out (2018, 4). If instances of filiation or dissidence are traceable in at least some of the target texts in our corpus, it means that the claim that subsequent target texts benefit from a previous target text is verifiable. This, in turn, would mean that the second point of the RH is valid. Since our interest lies in looking at how the term “ghost” and its synonyms were (re)translated into Romanian, we will further restrict our investigation to the lexical level and to strategies in translation to which Romanian translators resort.

### 3. Analysis

The first point of investigation is the way in which Romanian target texts deal with the translation of the pair *Ghost/ghost*. For reasons of space, we do not provide back-translations for the texts discussed, but we do analyze the words and phrases of interest in detail. We differentiate between *Ghost* that appears in *Dramatis personae* and *ghost* that appears in the text of the play. In the characters’ list, *Ghost* is in the vicinity of *bona fide* proper names (Hamlet, Gertrude, Polonius, etc.) and other common nouns of the most generic kind (Players, Priest, etc.). Due to its being part of a *Dramatis personae* list, *Ghost* is thus granted a status similar to that of proper names themselves (capital letter, no determiner). Common nouns turned proper names are generally translated into the target language with an equivalent that is preserved as such throughout the play. This is a natural reflection of the original (Shakespeare himself employs the term *Ghost* consistently in the source text) and it is one of the simplest and easiest forms of equivalence in translation. It follows that the strategy employed by translators for the *Dramatis personae* term should be that of equivalence. We argue that a similar strategy of equivalence should also be employed in the case of the common noun *ghost* used in the rest of the text of the play, since this term should be paired with its “proper name” counterpart in terms of genericity. If one considers the set of synonyms available in Romanian for the pair *Ghost/ghost*, two terms are the likeliest candidates, because they appear as the most generic in Romanian: *stafie* (< Greek) or *fantomă* (< French). The other terms available are all marked variants in point of either register or frequency or cultural specificity. If you consider the list below, the last seven terms can be seen as culture-specific, as they

refer to various Romanian types of revenants: *spirit* “spirit” (< Latin), *spectru* “spectre” (< French), *umbră* “shadow” (< Latin), *duh* “spirit” (< Slavic, older form), *vedenie* “apparition” (< Slavic, older form, derived from the verb *a vedea* “to see”), *nălucă/nălucire* “illusion” (back-formation from a verb derived from Latin *lux*, meaning “light”) and its Slavic pair *năzăritură* “illusion” (back-formation from a Slavic verb *zarja* meaning “shine”), *arătare* “apparition” (< Latin), *fantasmă* “phantasm” (< French), *apariție* “apparition” (< French), *strigoi* “the (evil) spirit of a man whose sins have not been pardoned” (a derivation from Latin *striga*) and its Slavic pair *moroi* (< Slavic *mora*), *iazmă* “evil apparition” (< probably Slavic), *necurățenie* metaphorical use of “state of uncleanness” (< Latin), *pricolici* “evil spirit of dead person often taking the shape of an animal” (< Hungarian), *vidmă* “apparition, witch” (< Ukrainian), *vârcolac* “Romanian mythological being that eats the Sun and the Moon; apparition” (< Bulgarian).

Now, if we consider the table below, we can see that different strategies are employed in the translation of the *Ghost/ghost* pair:

**Table 2**

Versions of *Ghost/ghost*

ST (Source Text)	GHOST	HAMLET: Alas, poor <b>ghost</b> !
<b>TT6</b> Ion Vinea 1938-1944 (1971)	DUHUL	HAMLET: <b>Duh</b> sărman!
<b>TT7</b> Dragoș Protopopescu 1938	UMBRA	HAMLET: Sărmană <b>stafie</b> !
<b>TT8</b> Dragoș Protopopescu 1942	STAFIA	HAMLET: Ah <b>stafie</b> sărmană . . .
<b>TT9</b> Maria Banuș and Vera Călin 1948	FANTOMA	HAMLET: Sărmană <b>umbră</b> !
<b>TT10</b> Petru Dumitriu (Ion Vinea) 1955, 1959	DUHUL	HAMLET: <b>Duh</b> sărman!
<b>TT11</b> Ștefan Runcu (Aurora Cornu) 1962	SPIRITUL	HAMLET: Sărmane <b>spirit</b> !
<b>TT12</b> Vladimir Streinu 1965	FANTOMA	HAMLET: O, <b>duh</b> sărman!
<b>TT13</b> Dan Duțescu and Leon Levițchi 1974	DUHUL	HAMLET: Vai, biet <b>Duh</b> !
<b>TT14</b> Dan Amedeu Lăzărescu 2009	SPECTRUL	HAMLET: Sărmană <b>umbră</b> !
<b>TT15</b> Violeta Popa and George Volceanov 2010	STAFIA	HAMLET: Biet <b>spirit</b> , vai.

As pointed out by Nicolaescu (2012, 290), of the many variants mentioned above, Vinea's target text (TT6/10) appears to be the one that was the most influential for subsequent versions. If we are to use Pym's term, Vinea's translation could be seen as a landmark for subsequent target texts, having become a real "pseudo-original" (2004, 90). However, as Nicolaescu (2012, 288–89) remarks, Vinea's text is, in fact, characterized by a tendency towards localization and archaization, which is verified by the use of the lexeme *duh* "ghost, spirit," a noun taken from Slavic and rarely used unless it appears in set phrases (like, for instance, *Sfântul Duh* "the Holy Ghost," or *Duhul Lămpii* "the genie of the Lamp"). From this point of view, it might be argued that both TT12 and TT13 are indebted to TT6/10, having chosen to employ a similar term. In point of consistency, as seen in the table above, only TT6/10, TT8, TT11 and TT13 manage to employ a similar equivalent for the *Ghost/ghost* pair. TT7, TT9, TT12, TT14 and TT15 use different terms for *Ghost* and *ghost*, respectively, which is marked by italics in the table above. One of the reasons for inconsistent lexical choices in translation is, without doubt, dictated by prosody. More than that, we have noticed that in TT7, even the "proper name" *Ghost* appears translated inconsistently: it alternates between UMBRA and STAFIA, which, to our mind, is a breach of equivalence and translation norms. Interestingly enough, TT8 seems to be an improvement on TT7 (as both versions belong to the same translator). TT8 appears as a revised version of TT7 and in that it qualifies as a "better" translation from Berman's point of view. It is more consistent and does away with a lot of the instances of rationalization we noticed in the previous version.

An interesting problem is posed by the translation of *ghost* employed with a different tinge of meaning in the source text (see Table 3). As pointed out by Schmidt in his lexicon, Shakespeare employs the noun *ghost* with five meanings: a) the spirit of a deceased person, b) a supernatural being, c) a spectre, d) life, soul (like in *give up the ghost*) e) a dead body ("I'll make a ghost of him that lets me," *Hamlet* 1.4.85) (1971, 453). All Romanian translators chose to attempt equivalence and managed to translate the pun – using the strategy of PUN-PUN, see Delabastita's typology of pun-translation (1993, 192) – but only TT7, TT8, TT11, TT13 and TT15 are consistent in that they make use of the same lexeme that has been employed for the translation of *Ghost* (the *Dramatis personae* term). It comes as no surprise that these are almost the same target texts that have been consistently translating the pair *Ghost/ghost* in the previous example (see Table 2). We believe that consistency is crucial in the translation of this pun. It follows that TT7, TT8, TT11, TT13 and TT15 manage full equivalence, while the others manage only partial equivalence.

**Table 3**

Versions of *I'll make a ghost of him*

<b>ST</b>	Hamlet: Unhand me, gentlemen. By heaven, <b>I'll make a ghost of him</b> that lets me! (act I, scene 4)
<b>TT6</b> <b>Ion Vinea 1938-1944 (1971)</b>	Hamlet: Jos mîna, domnii mei! Fac un <b>strigoi</b> din cel ce-mi ține calea p. 176
<b>TT7</b> <b>Dragoș Protopopescu 1938</b>	Hamlet: Lăsați-mă! Pe ce-am mai sfânt, fac <b>stăfie</b> Din cine-mi stă în cale la o parte! p. 41
<b>TT8</b> <b>Dragoș Protopopescu 1942</b>	Hamlet: Lăsați-mă, pe ce-am mai sfânt, fac <b>stăfie</b> Din cine-mi stă în cale! La o parte! p. 31
<b>TT9</b> <b>Maria Banuș and Vera Călin 1948</b>	Hamlet: Dați-mi drumul. În numele cerului, <b>nălucă</b> fac din orișcine îmi stă în cale. p. 45
<b>TT10</b> <b>Petru Dumitriu (Ion Vinea) 1955</b>	Hamlet: Jos mîna, domnii mei! Fac un <b>strigoi</b> din cel ce-mi ține calea p. 41
<b>TT11</b> <b>Ștefan Runcu (Aurora Cornu) 1962</b>	Hamlet: Prieteni, dați-mi drumul! Jur, <b>spirit</b> fac din cel care mă ține! p. 201
<b>TT12</b> <b>Vladimir Streinu 1965</b>	Hamlet: Drumul, gentilomi! <b>Strigoi</b> îl fac pe cine-mi stă-mpotrivă! p. 67
<b>TT13</b> <b>Leon Levițchi and Dan Duțescu 1974</b>	Hamlet: Jos mîna, domnii mei. Jur să-l preschimb în <b>duh</b> pe-acela care Mă va opri! p. 29
<b>TT14</b> <b>Dan Amedeu Lăzărescu 2009</b>	Hamlet: Lăsați-mă, vă rog, Sau fac <b>strigoi</b> din cel ce mă oprește! p. 81
<b>TT15</b> <b>Violeta Popa and George Volceanov 2010</b>	Hamlet: Dați-mi drumul, domnilor. Care-mi stă în cale, jur că-l fac <b>stăfie</b> ! p. 348

Additionally, it would be interesting to trace instances of filiation by looking at the use of such special lexemes as the very marked variant *strigoi*: following TT6/10 (Vinea's influential version), TT12 and TT14 employ the same lexeme for the translation of the pun. As none of the other translations evince similarities, it becomes apparent that TT6/10 is a sort of landmark for subsequent versions and that IR is indeed at play here.

It is also worth looking at the syntax of the Romanian versions. While most target texts employ the canonical VERB NOUN pattern (*fac un strigoi/stăfie/duh* "(I'll) make a ghost"), TT9, TT11 and TT12 opt for topicalization (NOUN VERB) and place emphasis on the noun (*nălucă/spirit/strigoi fac* "a ghost (I'll) make"). This particular strategy which can be interpreted as rationalization makes these three versions stand out as the "dissidents" of the set.



Another interesting pair of phrases is *spirit of health/goblin damned*, which appears to be crucial for understanding Hamlet's doubts in deciding whether the apparition is either benevolent and trustworthy or evil, not to be trusted, a revenant (Nicolaescu 2001, 58). It thus appears that the use of *spirit* has a positive connotation, which again should be consistently marked in translation. It is important to point out that the two phrases are not symmetrical in point of syntax and style (no repetition, no symmetry, no chiasmus, etc. is employed in the source text, although, as pointed out in the literature (Kermode 2001, 128), repetition and hendiadys are quite abundant in *Hamlet*). This means that Shakespeare probably avoided figures of repetition or parallelism purposefully in this case, which is a feature that should also be rendered in translation.

**Table 4**

Versions of *a spirit of health, or goblin damned*

ST	Be thou <b>a spirit of health</b> , or <b>goblin damned</b> , (act 1, scene 4)
<b>TT6</b> <b>Ion Vinea 1938-1944 (1971)</b>	De ești duh sfânt sau blestemat strigoi, p. 175
<b>TT7</b> <b>Dragoș Protopopescu 1938</b>	... De ești duh bun, sau duh împielițat, p. 38
<b>TT8</b> <b>Dragoș Protopopescu 1942</b>	De ești duh rău sau binecuvântat, p. 29
<b>TT9</b> <b>Maria Banuș and Vera Călin 1948</b>	De-ai fi spirit binefăcător sau duh necurat, p.44
<b>TT10</b> <b>Petre Dumitriu (Ion Vinea) 1955</b>	De ești duh sfânt sau blestemat strigoi, p. 39
<b>TT11</b> <b>Ștefan Runcu (Aurora Cornu) 1962</b>	De ești un spirit bun sau unul rău, p. 199
<b>TT12</b> <b>Vladimir Streinu 1965</b>	Blajine duh sau iazmă blestemată, p. 63
<b>TT13</b> <b>Leon Levițchi and Dan Duțescu 1974</b>	De ești duh bun sau osîndit; p. 27
<b>TT14</b> <b>Dan Amedeu Lăzărescu 2009</b>	Ești oare-o umbră binefăcătoare Sau ești un sol al iadului? p. 77
<b>TT15</b> <b>Violeta Popa and George Volceanov 2010</b>	Tu, spirit bun ori demon blestemat, p. 347

Some of the Romanian translators choose to employ different syntax for the adjectives used as epithets. In Romanian, the canonical order is ADJECTIVE NOUN,

but a non-canonical variant is possible (NOUN ADJECTIVE), where the adjective is postposed. Thus, TT6/10 (Vinea's translation) *duh sfânt sau blestemat strigoi* "ghost holy or damned revenant" manages a chiasmus of the type noun-epithet-epithet-noun. TT7 and TT8 (Protopopescu's first and second versions) change strategy: in TT7 Protopopescu uses the same lexeme for *spirit/goblin* and opposing postposed epithets: *duh bun sau duh împielițat* "ghost good or ghost devilish," while in TT8 he reverses the order of the epithets (just as TT6/10 did): *duh sfânt sau blestemat strigoi* "ghost holy or damned revenant." Interestingly enough, TT9 makes use of the Latin word (*spirit*) in Romanian thus managing equivalence and placing it in opposition with its Slavic counterpart (*duh*): *spirit binefăcător sau duh necurat* "spirit beneficent or ghost unholy." TT11 also retains the noun *spirit* as the common term for both entities and makes use of repetition, choosing as recurrent element the indefinite article and its pronominal substitute: *un spirit bun sau unul rău* "a spirit good or one bad." TT12 rationalizes the syntax and does away with the adverbial of condition, opting for a vocative construction: *Blajine duh sau iazmă blestemată* "oh, meek ghost or goblin damned." His lexical choices are the Slavic *duh* which is used with a positive connotation and the very rare, culture-specific, obsolete *iazmă*, which makes this particular fragment sound poetic and archaic. TT13 undertranslates using the same head noun *duh* and associating it with two opposing adjectives: *duh bun sau osîndit* "ghost good or doomed." TT14 overtranslates and explicitates by asking a direct question instead of hypothesizing: *Ești oare o umbră binefăcătoare/Sau ești un sol al iadului?* "Are you a shadow beneficent/ Or are you a herald of hell?" Finally, TT15, opts for a structure that we deem closest to what Shakespeare wrote, although TT15 is also guilty of rationalization since it gives up the conditional clause in favour of a vocative marked by the second person singular pronoun *tu* "you": *Tu, spirit bun ori demon blestemat* "you, spirit good or demon damned." In this translation, *spirit* is placed in opposition with *demon*, which seems to be close to the lexical choices made in the source text, since the word *goblin* does not, in fact, have a Romanian equivalent. In point of IR, while most target texts seem to use a similar syntactic structure (the shortened form of the adverbial conjunction of condition, *de* "if" and a conditional clause, plus various combinations of nouns cum epithets), TT12, TT14 and TT15 seem to adopt a stance of dissidence by employing vocative constructions (TT12 and TT15) or direct interrogation (TT14).

It would be interesting to see whether the lexeme *spirit* is consistently translated in other contexts. Let us consider the table below:

**Table 5**

Versions of *perturbed spirit*

<b>ST</b>	Hamlet: Rest, rest, perturbed <b>spirit</b> ! (act 1, scene 5)
<b>TT6</b> <b>Ion Vinea 1938-1944 (1971)</b>	Hamlet: O, pace ție, suflet chinuit! p. 184
<b>TT7</b> <b>Dragoș Protopopescu 1938</b>	Hamlet: O, fi pe pace, duh fără odihnă! p. 53
<b>TT8</b> <b>Dragoș Protopopescu 1942</b>	Hamlet: Ah, fi pe pace, duh fără odihnă... p. 42
<b>TT9</b> <b>Maria Banuș and Vera Călin 1948</b>	Hamlet: Potolește-te, duh fără odihnă. p. 53
<b>TT10</b> <b>Petru Dumitriu (Ion Vinea) 1955</b>	Hamlet: O, pace ție, suflet chinuit! p. 53
<b>TT11</b> <b>Ștefan Runcu (Aurora Cornu) 1962</b>	Hamlet: O, pace ție, spirit chinuit! p. 212
<b>TT12</b> <b>Vladimir Streinu 1965</b>	Hamlet: Așteaptă-n pace, suflet nempăcat! p. 87
<b>TT13</b> <b>Leon Levițchi and Dan Duțescu 1974</b>	Hamlet: Te-alină, duh neogoit! p. 38
<b>TT14</b> <b>Dan Amedeu Lăzărescu 2009</b>	Hamlet: Fii liniștit, năprasnic duh! p. 25
<b>TT15</b> <b>Violeta Popa and George Volceanov 2010</b>	Hamlet: Odihnă, ție, spirit frământat! p. 355

Traces of filiation can be identified between TT6/10, TT11 and TT15 both in point of syntax (the use of the Dative second person singular pronoun *ție* “to you” and of the adjective *chinuit* “tormented” or the noun *spirit* “spirit”), however TT6/10, which is considered to be the most prestigious, albeit archaizing, version, is almost the only one which employs the noun *suflet* “soul,” not borrowed by any of the other target texts, apart from TT12. In fact, nowhere in *Hamlet* is the word *soul* used in association with the Ghost. The use of this particular phrase, *suflet chinuit* “tormented soul,” seems to be in consonance with the observation made by Nicolaescu regarding the tendency of this version to domesticate and localize the Shakespearean text, bringing it closer to the perception of the Romanian readership and “explaining” it to the understanding of this readership (2012, 57): while one of the meanings of the Romanian noun *spirit* is that of “ghost,” no such meaning is available for *suflet*, which is frequently related to philosophy and religion (“eternal, life-giving force of divine origin”). The translation of *spirit* by *suflet* thus forces a particular interpretation on ghosts as entities with soul (see Catholic and, possibly, Orthodox views

on ghosts) as opposed to the Protestant view (ghosts are soulless, evil creatures) (Owens 2017, 49–51). TT12 seems to borrow both the noun *suflet* “soul” and the noun *pace* “peace” from TT6/10, opting for explicitation: the repetition *rest, rest* is translated as *așteaptă-n pace* “wait in peace.” In fact, as a clear example of translation loss, none of the target texts analyzed here preserves the repetition in this case. Instances of filiation can be also traced between TT7, TT8, TT9, TT13 and TT14, all of which opt for the noun *duh*. TT7, TT8 and TT9 even make use of the same phrase, i.e., *duh fără odihnă* “ghost without rest/peace.” TT13 might be seen as dissident when employing rare epithets such as *neogoit* “unsoothed,” while TT15 makes use of the epithet *frământat* “troubled” which, just like its English counterpart, is part of a set phrase: *suflet frământat* “troubled soul,” thus subtly hinting at, but not openly supporting, a religious interpretation.

In fact, the first mention of the Ghost in *Hamlet* is by using a deictic demonstrative and a common noun (*this thing*), resumed later by *this dreaded sight . . . this apparition*. All three phrases can be seen as forming a [+proximous] deictic chain where another feature seems to be [-animate]. The Ghost is perceived as an abomination, a paradox, a thing that walks and talks, a presence and yet an absence, as Nicolaescu notices:

The “thing,” *this thing* (notice the use of the deictic *this* to instantiate its presence in the here and now) is at the same time “nothing.” It is both a presence and an absence. Furthermore, it is both visible and invisible. When invisible, there is no knowing whether the “thing” is absent or present. It may be present and see us while we do not see it. (Nicolaescu 2001, 54)

What happens in translation? Table 6 shows that the only target text (apart from TT1 which is an adaptation from German) that chooses to translate *this thing* by *lucru* “thing” is TT6/10, while none of the other target texts employ this literal translation. This is because in Romanian the noun *thing* is not used to express anything but inanimate entities and cannot be used in the plural so as to convey vagueness as it is in English (“He said things to me” cannot be translated with *Mi-a spus lucruri*. The translation needs to explicitate for it to make sense in Romanian: *Mi-a spus tot felul de lucruri neplăcute*. “He said all sorts of unpleasant things to me.”) This is why explicitation is one important strategy in the translation of *this thing* (“that phantom,” “the apparition,” “the wonder,” etc.). TT12 even resorts to ennoblement by translating *this thing* with *moftul acela* “that trifle.” Notice that the [+proximous] feature of the demonstrative is replaced by [+distal], which is an instance of impoverishment (to use another of Berman’s terms) and modifies the semantics of the original. A second strategy here is omission (Ø), which is possible since Romanian is a null-subject language and the subject can be left out (not lexically realized). But this creates translation loss that is impossible to repair, since both the deictic demonstrative

and the noun *thing* have meaning in the source text. In point of filiation or dissidence, it becomes apparent that TT6/10, the version that is supposed to be the most influential of all, is not a source of inspiration in this case.

**Table 6**

Versions of *this thing*

ST	Marcellus: What, has <b>this thing</b> appeared again to-night? Barnardo: I have seen <b>nothing</b> . act 1, scene 1	Back-trans- lation
TT1 Ioan Barac (cca1820)	Bernfeld: Spune-mi de s-au mai arătat <b>lucrul acela</b> și în noaptea aceasta. Elrich: Încă n-am văzut <b>nimica</b> .	that thing nothing
TT2 D.P. Economu 1855	- [omitted]	
TT3 Adolf Stern 1877	Marcel: Părut'a iar <b>năluca</b> , astă noapte? Bernardo: Nu am văzut <b>nimic</b> . p. 7	the illusion nothing
TT4 Victor Anestin 1908	Marcellus: Ce mai e, a apărut <b>fantoma</b> iar în astă noapte? Bernardo: N'am văzut <b>nimic</b> . p. 10	the phantom nothing
TT6 Ion Vinea 1938-1944 (1971)	Marcellus: S-a mai ivit o dată <b>lucru acela</b> ? Bernardo: Eu n-am văzut <b>nimic</b> . p. 148	that thing nothing
TT7 Dragoș Protopopescu 1938	Marcellus: Văzuși <b>ceva</b> din nou? Barnardo: <b>Nimic! Nimic...</b> p. 9	something nothing, nothing
TT8 Dragoș Protopopescu 1942	Marcellus: Ați mai văzut <b>minunea</b> ?... Barnardo: <b>Încă nu</b> ... p. 3	the wonder not yet
TT9 Maria Banuș and Vera Călin 1948	Marcellus: Spune! Și'n astă noapte s'a arătat? Bernardo: N'am văzut <b>nimic</b> . p. 22	Ø nothing
TT10 Petru Dumitriu (Ion Vinea) 1955	Marcellus: S-a mai ivit o dată <b>lucru acela</b> ? Bernardo: Eu n-am văzut <b>nimic</b> . p. 7	that thing nothing
TT11 Ștefan Runcu (Aurora Cornu) 1962	Marcellus: Ce, <b>arătarea</b> a venit din nou? Bernardo: Eu n-am văzut <b>nimic</b> . p. 173	the apparition nothing
TT12 Vladimir Streinu 1965	Marcellus: Eh, <b>moftu-acela</b> a mai ieșit ast-noapte? Bernardo: Eu n-am văzut <b>nimic</b> . p. 7	that trifle nothing
TT13 Leon Levițchi and Dan Duțescu 1974	Marcellus: În noaptea asta s-a ivit din nou? Bernardo: Eu n-am văzut <b>nimic</b> . p. 5	Ø nothing
TT14 Dan Amedeu Lăzărescu 2009	Marcellus: <b>Fantoma</b> a venit la miez de noapte? Bernardo: Nu, n-am văzut <b>nimic...</b> p. 31	the phantom nothing
TT15 Violeta Popa and George Volceanov 2010	Marcellus: Hai, zi, s-a arătat și-n noaptea asta? Barnardo: Eu n-am văzut <b>nimic</b> . p. 326	Ø nothing

## Conclusion

A brief look at the translation of the lexeme *ghost* and some of its synonyms indicates that our attempt to check the first point of the RH can be seen as successful since TT6/10 (Vinea's translation), taken as a point of reference for subsequent target texts, shows a number of inconsistencies (or deforming tendencies, such as explicitation, rationalization, etc.) that come to be repaired in later versions. Most instances analysed (with the exception of the last one) also prove that TT6/10, probably due to its being reprinted many times, remains an important landmark for subsequent versions, which either borrow (filiation) or depart (dissidence) from it constantly. This seems to indicate that IR is at play and that the second point of the RH is supported.

Our paper has analyzed various Romanian target texts by using Berman's approach to literary translation in the hope of gaining further insight into the principles lying at the basis of what later came to be known as the Retranslation Hypothesis. Strictly from this particular perspective, we believe that our textual analysis proves that Berman's proposal regarding translation loss and gain is worth revisiting and pondering. Ultimately, the aim of this paper has been to demonstrate that such a translational analysis can provide new angles for investigating textual richness and semantic "limitlessness" in *Hamlet*.

## Bibliography

- Berman, Antoine. 1984/2000. "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign." In *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti and Mona Baker, 284–89. New York: Routledge.
- Berman, Antoine. 1990. "La retraduction comme espace de la traduction." *Palimpsestes* 4: 1–7.
- Bigliazzi, Silvia. 2013. "Introduction." In *Theater Translation in Performance*, edited by Silvia Bigliazzi, Paola Ambrosi, and Peter Kofler, 1–26. New York: Routledge.
- Dastjerdi, Hossein Vahid, and Amene Mohammadi. 2013. "Revisiting 'Retranslation Hypothesis': A Comparative Analysis of Stylistic Features in the Persian Retranslation of *Pride and Prejudice*." *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics* 3, no. 3: 174–81.
- Delabastita, Dirk. 1993. *There's a Double Tongue. An Investigation in the Translation of Shakespeare's Wordplay with Special Reference to Hamlet*. Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi.
- Ionoaia, Eliana. (in press). "The Retranslation of Hamlet's Soliloqui in Act III, scene 1 – to Adapt or not to Adapt". *Analele Universității din București – Limbi și Literaturi Străine*, vol. I., 2020.

- Kermode, Frank 2001. *Shakespeare's Language*. London: Penguin Books Limited.
- Koskinen, Kaisa, and Outi Paloposki. 2010. "Retranslation." In *Handbook of Translation Studies*, vol. 1, edited by Yves Gambier and Luc van Doorslaer, 294–98. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Koskinen, Kaisa, and Outi Paloposki. 2019. "New Directions for Retranslation Research: Lessons Learned from the Archeology of Retranslations in the Finnish Literary System." *Cadernos de Traduções* 39, no. 1: 23–44. doi:10.5007/2175-7968.2019v39n1p23.
- Martin, Anca-Simina. 2020. "A Quantitative Analysis of the Romanian Translations of Shakespeare's Bawdy Puns." *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 6, no. 2: 64–86, <https://doi.org/10.24193/mjctst.2020.10.04>.
- Nicolaescu, Mădălina. 2001. *Meanings of Violence in Shakespeare's Plays*. București: Editura Universității București.
- Nicolaescu, Mădălina. 2012. "Translations of Shakespeare in Romania – Going from Local to Global?" *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 20, no. 3: 285–96. doi:10.1080/0907676X.2012.702398.
- Owens, Susan. 2017. *The Ghost: A Cultural History*. London: Tate Publishing.
- Oyali, Uchenna. 2018. "The Retranslation Hypothesis and Lexical Borrowings in Bible Translations into Igbo." *Lebende Sprachen* 63, no. 1: 84–100. doi:10.1515/les-2018-0005.
- Pym, Anthony. 2004. *The Moving Text: Localization, Translation and Distribution*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Sanatifar, Mohammad Saleh, and Mahboobeh Etemadi. 2021. "One Step Closer to the Theorization of Berman's Hypothesis: Analysis of Farsi (Re)translations of *The Little Prince*." *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Translation Studies* 6, no. 1: 75–96. doi:10.22034/efl.2021.272059.1074.
- Schmidt, Alexander. 1971. *Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary*, vol. 1. New York: Dover Publications.
- Shakespeare William. ca. 1820. *Amlet, Prințul de la Dania. O tragodie in cinci perdele. După Sakespeare*. Translated by Ioan Barac. Library of the Romanian Academy, Ms. 209, n.d.
- Shakespeare William. 1855. *Hamlet, principele Danemarcei; dramă in cinci acte si optu părți de la Shakespeare*. Translated by D. P. Economu. București: Imprimeria lui Ferdinand OM.
- Shakespeare William. 1877. *Hamlet prințul Danemarcei. Tragedie în 5 acte*. Translated by Adolphe Stern. București: Editura Librăriei Leon Alcalay.
- Shakespeare William. 1881. *Hamlet, tragedie în 5 acte și 13 tablouri*. Translated by George Manolescu. The National Theatre of Bucharest Library, Ms. 124.
- Shakespeare, William. 1908. *Hamlet*. Translated by Victor Anestin. București: Editura Librăriei Alcalay & Co.
- Shakespeare, William. 1938. *Hamlet*. Translated by Dragoș Protopopescu. București: Fundația pentru literatură și artă "Regele Carol II".
- Shakespeare, William. 1942. *Hamlet*. Translated by Dragoș Protopopescu. București: Editura SOCEC & Co., S.A.R.

- Shakespeare, William. 1948. *Hamlet*. Translated by Maria Banuș and Vera Călin. București: Editura de stat.
- Shakespeare, William. 1955. *Hamlet*. Translated by Petru Dimitriu (Ion Vineanu). București: Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă.
- Shakespeare, William. 1962. *Hamlet*. Translated by Ștefan Runcu (Aurora Cornu). București: Editura pentru Literatură.
- Shakespeare, William. 1965. *Tragedia lui Hamlet, prinț de Danemarca*. Translated by Vladimir Streinu. București: Editura pentru Literatură.
- Shakespeare, William. 1971. *Teatru Shakespeare. Henric al V-lea. Hamlet. Othello. Macbeth. Poveste de iarnă*. Translated by Ion Vineanu. București: Editura Univers.
- Shakespeare, William. 1974. *Hamlet*. Translated by Leon Levițchi and Dan Duțescu. București: Editura Univers.
- Shakespeare, William. 2009/2016. *Hamlet*. Translated by Dan Amedeu Lăzărescu. București: Editura Pandora M.
- Shakespeare, William. 2010. *Hamlet*. Translated by Violeta Popa and George Volceanov. Pitești: Editura Paralela 45.
- Sharifpour, Pardis and Masood Sharififar. 2021. "An Investigation of Retranslation Hypothesis in English Translations of Rumi's Poetry." *Translation Review* 111, no. 1: 26–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07374836.2020.1860843>.
- Van Poucke, Piet. 2017. "Aging as a Motive for Literary Retranslation." *Translation and Interpreting Studies* 12, no. 1: 91–115. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1075/tis.12.1.05van>.
- Van Poucke, Piet, and Guillermo Sanz Gallego. 2019. "Retranslation in Context." *Cadernos de Traduções* 39, no. 1: 10–22. doi:10.5007/2175-7968.2019v39n1p10.
- Venuti, Lawrence. 2008 (1995). *The Translator's Invisibility*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Zaharia, Oana Alis. 2018. "Nineteenth-century Romanian Translations: *Hamlet* for the Page or for the Stage." *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis* 13, no. 3: 185–94.
- Zhang, Huanyao, and Ma Huijuan. 2018. "Intertextuality in retranslation." *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice* 26, no. 4: 576–92. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2018.1448875>.

**Nadina Vișan** is Professor in the English Department, University of Bucharest, Romania. Her main interests lie in the direction of historical linguistics and translation studies. She is the author of *A Discourse Representation Theory Analysis of the Perfect in English and Romanian* (University of Bucharest Publishing House, 2006) and *Elements of English Lexicology* (University of Bucharest Publishing House, 2015) as well as co-author of *New Perspectives on English Grammar* (Institutul European Publishing House, 2014).

**Contact:** nadina.vișan@lils.unibuc.ro



**Daria Protopopescu** is Associate Professor in the English Department, University of Bucharest, Romania. Her main interests lie in the direction of historical linguistics, terminology and translation studies. She is the author of the book *Elements of English Terminology* (University of Bucharest Publishing House, 2013) and co-author of *New Perspectives on English Grammar* (Institutul European Publishing House, 2014). Her research areas include terminology, translation studies, syntax and the history of the English language.

**Contact:** daria.protopopescu@lils.unibuc.ro



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.

DOUBLE BILL: OPHELIA AND Co.  
IN POPULAR MUSIC

---



# SINGING *HAMLET*: BOB DYLAN'S TAKE ON THE CLASSIC

Michaela Weiss

BOB Dylan has often been called the Shakespeare of popular music, be it “the Shakespeare of his generation” (see *Encyclopedia Britannica* n.d.) or “Shakespeare in crocodile slippers” (DER SPIEGEL 1997). Though the comparison between the folk/rock singer and the Bard might seem far-fetched, Dylan himself embraced it and put Shakespeare as a character into his song “Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again” (1966):

Well, Shakespeare, he's in the alley  
With his pointed shoes and his bells  
Speaking to some French girl  
Who says she knows me well  
And I would send a message  
To find out if she's talked  
But the post office has been stolen  
And the mailbox is locked.

While pointing out the trickster aspect of Shakespeare by evoking his “pointed shoes and his bells,” he introduces Shakespeare as a street artist rather than a distant classic on a pedestal. Dylan further contemplated their shared artistic concepts in his 2017 Nobel Prize acceptance speech.<sup>1</sup> As he noted, Shakespeare – considered a “literary classic” by modern scholarship – was in his own time primarily a dramatist, and his creative process and vision were not primarily a question of making “literature”:

The thought that he was writing literature couldn't have entered his head. His words were written for the stage. Meant to be spoken not read. When he was writing *Hamlet*, I'm sure he was thinking about a lot of different things: “Who're the right actors for these roles?” “How should this be staged?” . . . [B]ut there were also more mundane matters to consider and deal with. “Is the financing in place?” “Are there enough good seats for my patrons?” “Where am I going to get a human skull?” I would bet that the farthest thing from Shakespeare's mind was the question “Is this *literature*?” (“Bob Dylan Banquet Speech” 2017)

---

<sup>1</sup> Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016 for creating new poetic expressions.

A similar attitude is adopted by Dylan, who never considered himself to be creating “literature” but songs, and whose concerns also include practical arrangements:

But, like Shakespeare, I too am often occupied with the pursuit of my creative endeavors and dealing with all aspects of life's mundane matters. “Who are the best musicians for these songs?” “Am I recording in the right studio?” “Is this song in the right key?” Some things never change, even in 400 years. Not once have I ever had the time to ask myself, “Are my songs *literature*?” (“Bob Dylan Banquet Speech” 2017)

Despite the original artistic visions and concerns of Shakespeare and Dylan, they are now both considered the classics of literary studies. Surprisingly, Dylan has become anthologized in poetry volumes since the early 1970s (for instance Erik Frykman, *A Book of English and American Verse: Shakespeare to Bob Dylan*, 1971) and his popularity has been steadily rising especially since the 2016 Nobel Prize award.

The affinities between Shakespeare and Dylan have already received considerable attention (for instance Andrew Muir's book-length study *Bob Dylan & William Shakespeare: The True Performing of It*, 2019). Current critical studies, however, focus predominantly on Shakespearean references in Dylan's work in general (Christopher Ricks, *Dylan's Vision of Sin*, 2003) rather than exploring Dylan's use and re-interpretation and re-contextualization of individual Shakespeare's plays. Yet, there is one tragedy which strongly resonates in both Dylan's life and work: *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.

The personal importance of the play for Dylan is manifested by the fact that he called his German poodle Hamlet – though he later gave him to Rick Danko, the founding member of the Band, because of the dog's immense size (Gray 2006, 188). The significance of *Hamlet* for the musician is further enhanced by the fact that Dylan was compared to the play's protagonist, especially after he was photographed at Elsinore Castle in 1966 (Muir 1970, 170). John Hughes observes that Dylan's work is based on “transitional subjectivity, in motion between the no longer and the not yet.” The connection between Dylan's public persona and the young Hamlet became even further strengthened in the late 1960s. Hughes specifically mentions the “witty, barbed, enigmatic, fleet-footed, retaliatory, gnomic, unfathomable” comments Dylan made at press conferences or interviews (Hughes 2013, 7).

The first time Dylan explicitly mentions *Hamlet* in his songs is in one of his most popular and critically acclaimed compositions, “Desolation Row” (*Highway 65 Revisited*, 1965), which was until 2020 his longest song (11:21). Though it is written as a classical ballad, it does not contain a linear narrative. Instead, it is comprised

of surrealistic vignettes, blending elements of classics and popular culture. Besides the naïve Romeo and the practical and worldly Cinderella, there is one verse devoted to Ophelia:

Now Ophelia, she's 'neath the window  
For her I feel so afraid  
On her twenty-second birthday  
She already is an old maid. (Dylan 1965)

Ophelia is thus presented as a woman formed by her family and religious faith, who has given up on romance and life. Her lack of initiative and independent thinking, as well as her consequent suicide, then constitute her major sin – “lifelessness.” She is protecting herself from disappointment and love by wearing “an iron vest,” a sign of chastity:

To her, death is quite romantic  
She wears an iron vest  
Her profession's her religion  
Her sin is her lifelessness. (Dylan 1965)

This “iron vest” can be further related to Hamlet's famous quote: “Get thee to a nunnery,” which can be understood either as convent or a brothel.<sup>2</sup> The duality between temptation and obedience, between desire and submission, is then reflected in Dylan's lyrics, where Ophelia is torn between Noah's rainbow and the Desolation Row:

And though her eyes are fixed upon  
Noah's great rainbow  
She spends her time peeking  
Into Desolation Row. (Dylan 1965)

Repressed by the iron vest of conventions, she is leaning to the promise of eternal life, as she does not have access to a fuller view of the world (she is positioned beneath the window). She is only daring to peek into the Desolation Row (or the world of experience) but she does not act on it – unlike the worldly and more practical

---

<sup>2</sup> “nunnery, n.,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 1989, OED Online (Oxford UP), Accessed 24 June 2022 <<http://www.oed.com/>>. Hamlet's words could be construed as an accusation that Ophelia has been prostituted by her father Polonius, whom he calls a “fishmonger” or pimp (2.2.171; see Shakespeare 2006, 290 fn. 120).

Cinderella, who rejects the wooing of the naïve, lost Romeo and keeps sweeping the messy Desolation Row.

Another song in which Dylan draws on *Hamlet*, though without a direct reference to the play, is “Ain’t Talking” (*Modern Times* 2006).<sup>3</sup> The opening stanza is introducing a garden, which was a place of crime:

The wounded flowers were dangling from the vines  
I was passing by yon cool and crystal fountain  
Someone hit me from behind. (Dylan 2006)

This image, referring potentially both the Garden of Eden (the place of the first sin) and the garden of ugliness from Hamlet’s first soliloquy (1.2.129–159), is then followed by a desire for revenge from the afterlife, as the murder was left unresolved and will have major consequences:

Heart burnin’, still yearnin’  
No one on earth would ever know. (Dylan 2006)

The perspective then shifts to (the unnamed) Hamlet, who addresses his mother and expresses his frustration over the evil lurking in everyone around him.<sup>4</sup> The speaker proclaims himself to be “worn down by weepin’” in a world that has stopped making sense:

Well, the whole world is filled with speculation  
The whole wide world which people say is round. (Dylan 2006)

There is no detailed depiction of the murder, and even the ghost’s testimony can be read as speculations. The presence of the ghost and its allegations change the speaker’s perspective and affect his trust towards people around him. He realizes that his position in the court can become a limiting obstacle to his revenge plans:

They will crush you with wealth and power  
Every waking moment you could crack  
I’ll make the most of one last extra hour  
I’ll avenge my father’s death then I’ll step back. (Dylan 2006)

---

<sup>3</sup> Even though Thomas speculates that besides *Hamlet*, the song could refer to the killing of Julius Caesar (Thomas 2019, 67).

<sup>4</sup> So pray from the mother / In the human heart an evil spirit can dwell / I am a-tryin’ to love my neighbor and do good unto others / But oh, mother, things ain’t going well.

Before he executes his revenge, he is partially protected by “a dead man’s shield,” i.e., his father’s name and legacy, while, at the same time, he is crushed by his own power and wealth, especially in his relationship to Ophelia or his former friends:

The suffering is unending  
Every nook and cranny has its tears  
I’m not playing, I’m not pretending  
I’m not nursing any superfluous fears. (Dylan 2006)

His plan, however, does not cause his suffering only, but also the pain of others: be it Ophelia (“that gal I left behind”) or, in Shakespeare’s play, the accidental murder of Polonius, or the indirect murders of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Yet, as Dylan’s Hamletian speaker proclaims, he is not playing a game, he only follows his plan and there is no way back and no mercy if the plan fails: “There’ll be no mercy for you once you’ve lost.”

The last song where Dylan refers to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is his last released piece “Murder Most Foul” (2020), which is not only his longest track to date (16:54), but, at the same time, it showcases Dylan’s obsession with intertextuality and Shakespeare. The title is a direct quotation from the opening of *Hamlet* (Act 1, Scene 5), where the ghost, which claims to be Hamlet’s father, comments on its death: “Murder most foul – as in the best it is – / But this most foul, strange and unnatural” (1.5.27–28). The opening of the song immediately establishes a connection between the murder of Hamlet’s father and the assassination of President Kennedy:

’Twas a dark day in Dallas, November ’63  
A day that will live on in infamy. (Dylan 2020)

Both murders happened in the daylight and the Shakespearean reference resonates throughout the song, as the song title is then employed as a refrain. While Hamlet’s father was murdered by his brother while resting in the garden, as was his custom, President Kennedy was shot in Dallas, taking the traditional parade route:

Shot down like a dog in broad daylight  
Was a matter of timing and the timing was right  
You got unpaid debts, we’ve come to collect  
We’re gonna kill you with hatred, without any respect  
We’ll mock you and shock you and we’ll put it in your face  
We’ve already got someone here to take your place. (Dylan 2020)



What both murders share is their suddenness as well as disrespect towards the rulers. The murder of the king was “cleaner,” in the sense that the murderer remained anonymous and did not shed his opponent’s blood. As such, however, he did not demonstrate courage and heroism. Instead, the murder was premeditated, and Claudius betrayed not only his family, but also the divine and political order in the entire country (see Krajník 2022, 30–31). The same is true for the President’s assassination, as Dylan sings:

The day they blew out the brains of the king  
Thousands were watchin’, no one saw a thing  
It happened so quickly, so quick, by surprise  
Right there in front of everyone's eyes  
Greatest magic trick ever under the sun  
Perfectly executed, skillfully done. (Dylan 2020)

The analogy between Hamlet’s father and the President is already established in the first line, where Kennedy is called the king. While both rulers are killed and replaced, their legacy, or their soul/spirit did not die with them:

They piled on the pain  
But his soul's not there where it was supposed to be at  
For the last fifty years they've been searchin’ for that. (Dylan 2020)

Their ghost – or a spirit – just keeps reminding the living of the violation of the principles of honor, order, and democracy. Moreover, the method of execution of both murders can be in fact read as a desecration of morality, humanity, and faith:

They killed him once and they killed him twice  
Killed him like a human sacrifice. (Dylan 2020)

When the ghost reveals to Hamlet the details of his death, Hamlet realizes that he underestimated the consequences of his father’s death and the danger embodied by his uncle. As John Dover Wilson notes, the king had no time “to make his peace with Heaven. Claudius had seemed to Hamlet a satyr before this, now he knows him as something more deadly, a smiling, creeping, serpent – very venomous” (Wilson 1935: 44). The poison used to murder the king can be understood on a symbolical level as well, as a web of intrigues, lies and conspiracies, the beginning of a dark era for the country. Dylan even calls the times following Kennedy’s death the “age of the Antichrist”:

The day that they killed him, someone said to me, "Son  
The age of the Antichrist has just only begun." (Dylan 2020)

The rule of Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy's vice president, was marked by the Cold War, expanded involvement in the Vietnam War, race riots, and an increased crime rate (Levy 2003, 89-90). Johnson thus became one of the most controversial presidents, whose secretive politics put in danger American values and integrity. Similarly, while Claudius at the beginning appears to be a competent monarch (see his handling of the conflict with Norway), his reign ultimately causes a disaster for the country, with an outsider taking the crown at the end. Dylan thus uses *Hamlet* to address pressing political and social issues, demonstrating the universality and timelessness of Shakespeare's legacy as well as for his own personas.

The present study provides a brief outline and a starting point for more complex research dedicated to the roles and functions of individual Shakespeare's plays in Dylan's oeuvre, demonstrating the centrality of *Hamlet* in Dylan's life and artistic production.

This paper is a result of the project SGS/10/2022, Silesian University in Opava internal grant "Text z moderní lingvistické a literární perspektivy" (Text from Current Linguistic and Literary Perspectives).

## Bibliography

- "Bob Dylan." In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Accessed May 12, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bob-Dylan-American-musician>.
- "Bob Dylan Banquet Speech." *The Nobel Prize*. Accessed May 12, 2022. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2016/dylan/speech/>.
- Dylan, Bob. 2006. "Ain't Talking." In *Modern Times*. New York: Columbia Records.
- Dylan, Bob. 1965. "Desolation Row." In *Highway 65 Revisited*. New York: Columbia Records.
- Dylan, Bob. 2020. "Murder Most Foul." In *Rough and Rowdy Ways*. New York: Columbia Records.
- Dylan, Bob. 1966. "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again." In *Blonde on Blonde*. New York: Columbia Records.
- Frykman, Erik. 1971. *A Book of English and American Verse: Shakespeare to Bob Dylan*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.
- Gray, Michael. 2006. *The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*. New York: The Continuum.
- Hughes, John. 2013. *Invisible Now: Bob Dylan in the 1960s*. New York: Ashgate.

- Krajník, Filip. 2022. "Svár rozumu a emoce v Shakespearově *Hamletovi* [The Strife Between Reason and Emotion in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*]." In *Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare, 15–50. Brno: Filip Krajník.
- Levy, Debbie. 2003. *Lyndon B. Johnson*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications.
- Muir, Andrew. 2019. *Bob Dylan & William Shakespeare: The True Performing of It*. Falmouth: Red Planet Books.
- Ricks, Christopher. 2003. *Dylan's Vision of Sin*. London: Viking.
- "Shakespeare in crocodile slippers." DER SPIEGEL interviews BOB DYLAN 16-10-97. Accessed May 12, 2022. <https://www.interferenza.net/bcs/interw/97-oct16.htm>.
- Shakespeare, William. 2006. *Hamlet*, edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. London: Arden Shakespeare.
- Wilson, J. Dover. 1935. *What Happens in Hamlet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Michaela Weiss** is Associate professor at the Department of English and American Studies at the Institute of Foreign Languages at the Silesian University in Opava, Czech Republic. She teaches courses on English and American literature, Literary Theory and Criticism, and Creative Reading and Writing. Her main areas of interest include American Jewish literature, graphic novels, and women's studies. She has published two monographs: *Jewishness as Humanism in Bernard Malamud's Fiction* (2010) and *Tradice a Experiment: Americká židovská próza v období modernismu* (Tradition and Experiment: American Jewish Prose in the Modernist Era, 2020) 12 book chapters concerning metamodern literary strategies, gender identities, graphic novels, and dystopias, as well as journal articles on adaptations and American Jewish literature. She co-edited a series of conference proceedings *Silse* (2009–2022) and a monograph series *Modern Approaches to Text Analysis* (2017), and *Text Analysis and Interpretation* (2019). She is currently working on a book *Community, Geography, and Language in the Works of Irena Klepfisz*.

**Contact:** michaela.weiss@fpf.slu.cz



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.

## HER MAJESTY'S SHAKESPEARE: SHAKESPEAREAN ECHOES IN SONGS BY QUEEN

*Filip Krajník*

OUTSIDE the fandom, the popular image of Queen is nowadays largely linked with the band's mid-1980s music and visual style. Most of the tribute bands present Queen as if they have just fallen off their 1986 Magic Tour – which, as it transpired, was the last opportunity to see the band's original members playing live together – with occasional glimpses into the band's earlier and later repertory. Following the 2018 biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody*, some of Queen's earlier material returned to the consciousness of casual listeners, as well as on the set list of the band's latest Rhapsody Tour. Still, it would be difficult to argue that pieces such as “Keep Yourself Alive,” “Doing All Right” or “Death on Two Legs” resonate with the masses today as much as the iconic “Under Pressure,” “Radio Ga Ga” or, let us say, “One Vision” (which, of course, does not necessarily say much about the actual quality of the songs).

Especially Queen's earlier period (roughly up until their 1977 album *News of the World*) was famously marked by experimentation and eclecticism, both in the band's music and lyrics. The rich, multi-layered arrangement of the early- and mid-1970s' Queen songs frequently accompanied stories full of (false) prophets (“The Prophet Song” from *Queen II*), direct references to the Bible (“Jesus” from *Queen*), Tolkien-esque landscapes (Mercury's cycle of “Rhye” songs in *Queen*, *Queen II* and *Sheer Heart Attack*), direct quotations from Victorian poetry (Robert Browning's *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* in “My Fairy King” from *Queen*), subtle gestures towards American classics (E. A. Poe in “Nevermore” from *Queen II*) or playful responses to operatic icons such as Monteverdi, Purcell or Mozart (“Bohemian Rhapsody” from *A Night at the Opera*; see McLeod 2001, 194). While literary and cultural references are to be found in Queen's later works as well (“The Invisible Man” from the 1989 album *The Miracle*, for instance, inspired by the same-named novel by H. G. Wells), it was in their early period that the band seems to have been particularly open to such impulses.

In his volume *Shakespeare and Popular Music* (2010), Adam Hansen devotes several chapters to the importance of Shakespeare for (especially British) music of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s; not a single time, however, does he mention Queen or any of its individual members. While it could be argued that Queen never strove

to employ Shakespearean motifs or images to represent Shakespeare, his stories or his characters *per se* (no more than the aforementioned “My Fairy King” represents Browning or “Nevermore” represents Poe), it would be false to assume that Shakespeare did not leave his visible mark on Queen’s works.

When Queen entered the British popular music scene in the early 1970s, Shakespeare was one of its staples and his influence could hardly be avoided. As Hansen argues, The Beatles – regarded by Queen as their “Bible, all along, in so many ways” (Doyle 2021, 67) – who in the early 1960s “represented a new form of peculiarly *national* popular-cultural identity” (Hansen 2010, 84; *italics original*), in various forms “engaged with and changed an icon of national identity – Shakespeare” throughout their career (85) (most notably when performing in the 1964 TV spoof of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; see Hansen 2010, 87–94). Several years later, “Shakespeare came to figure heavily in popular psychedelic and counter-cultural musics of the late 1960s and early 1970s” (Hansen 2010, 94), being referred to by Pink Floyd, The Byrds, David Bowie and others (94–98).

It is a testimony to Queen’s eclectic approach to song-writing that their most overtly Shakespearean song was inspired by Shakespeare only indirectly – and not even through a work of literature. In a 2013 interview, the band’s drummer, Roger Taylor, recalled that while Freddie Mercury “had this very sharp brain,” he (Taylor) “never once saw Freddie with a book.” Taylor, however, continues that “he [Mercury] had all these words about this painting” (Blake 2021, 70). The painting Taylor referred to was Richard Dadd’s mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century *The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stroke* and the “words” were Mercury’s song of the same title, released in 1974 on the band’s second album *Queen II*.

The infamous Victorian painter Richard Dadd (1817–1886) was particularly popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s as an imagined “heroic Victorian counter-cultural ancestor” – an interest that waned after 1974, when the Tate Gallery (now Tate Britain) for the first time exhibited all Dadd’s available works with more factual (and less fantastical) commentary (Tromans 2011, 6). The aforementioned *The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stroke* did capture Mercury’s imagination during one of his visits to the gallery (as Clerc argues, Mercury at the time “deepened his taste for high culture” by drawing inspiration from classic artists; Clerc 2020, 72), and the singer subsequently showed it to the rest of the group, considering the piece’s atmosphere a perfect contribution to the “phantasmagorical universe that Mercury and May wanted to develop on the album [*Queen II*]” (Clerc 2020, 72).

The story behind the painting (which Mercury undoubtedly knew) is at least as fascinating as the work itself. In 1843, Dadd, who had previously suffered from mental issues, stabbed his father to death, believing that “some such sacrifice was demanded

by the gods & spirits above” (Tromans 2011, 61). Dadd subsequently spent the rest of his life in several psychiatric institutions. Before these events, Dadd had established himself as a painter of (besides other themes) Shakespearean scenes and motifs: at the Royal Academy of Arts exhibition in 1840, he presented his take on the closet scene from *Hamlet* (showing the then star actors Charles Kean as Hamlet and Ellen Tree as Gertrude), as well as scenes from *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice* (both untraced today); in 1841, he painted his *Young Lady Holding a Rose*, which strongly evokes Ophelia, while, at the exhibitions of 1841–1842, he presented the trio of fairy paintings, now known as *Titania*, *Puck* and *Come Unto These Yellow Sands* (inspired by *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*, respectively; Tromans 2011, 21–35). During his years in Bethlehem Hospital in Lambeth, Dadd was allowed to continue painting and created two of his most famous Shakespearean artworks: *Contradiction: Oberon and Titania* (1854–1858) and, of course, *The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stroke* (ca 1855–1864).

While both of the pictures share many stylistic similarities, it is not difficult to understand why it was the latter that particularly attracted Mercury’s attention. The painting depicts a single moment when a fairy feller is swinging his axe with which he is about to split a nut for Queen Mab’s new chariot. Around him, in the middle of a forest, is gathered a diverse assemblage of mythological creatures, some distinctively Shakespearean (Oberon and Titania, who are not fighting this time, but look like a reconciled couple, with Titania resting on Oberon’s shoulder), some not (Cupid and Psyche). That the motif of fairies was close to Mercury can be seen even in the band’s crest that the singer designed in the early 1970s and in which he represented himself by a pair of fairies (referring to his astrological sign, Virgo).

“The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stroke” is the second song on the “Black Side” of the *Queen II* album, following another pseudo-mythological piece by Mercury, entitled “Ogre Battle.” Written in a much lighter style than its antecedent, the rhythm and arrangement of “The Fairy Feller’s Master-Stroke” neatly represents the commotion of dozens of fairies and the overall chaotic atmosphere of Dadd’s picture, while giving the song a distinctively old-fashioned air (instead of the piano, Mercury plays the harpsichord in throughout the track). For the lyrics, Mercury drew directly from Dadd’s poem describing his artwork that he wrote at Broadmoor Hospital in January 1865.<sup>1</sup> The “vocabulary from another age” resonating throughout Mercury’s

---

<sup>1</sup> The poem, entitled *Elimination of a Picture & its subject – called The Feller’s Master Stroke*, is largely a catalogue of the painting’s characters in rhyme. The full text is printed as an appendix in Tromans 2011 (pp. 186–93) or in the only stand-alone edition so far, published by the independent Hiding Press (Dadd 2020).



song that Clerc mentions (72) is thus, in fact, largely Dadd's. It is, however, interesting to observe how Mercury, in order to make Dadd's words fit the musical piece, plays with the Shakespearean landscape.



**Figure 1:** Richard Dadd: *The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke*. (Public domain, source: Wikimedia Commons.)

While the number of characters from the picture needed to be reduced for the purposes of a rock song (which is two minutes and forty-one seconds long), all the main Shakespearean elements remain. Queen Mab, the central character of the image's story, is mentioned only in passing: from the song, we never explicitly learn that



Figure 2: Oberon and Titania.



Figure 3: Queen Mab's chariot.

the fairy feller is going to crack the nut to make the Queen a new chariot (which Dadd explicitly mentions in his *Elimination*); however, while Dadd mentions "King Oberon & his Queen" among the observers (20),<sup>2</sup> Mercury identifies Titania by her name, as known from Shakespeare's play. It is also noteworthy that the following line of the lyrics, "Mab is the queen and there's a good apothecary-man," links the apothecary with other well-known Shakespearean characters, while in Dadd's poem, apothecary is just one of a group of gathered characters from another part of the painting named by their professions: "soldier and sailor, tinker or tailor / Ploughboy, apothecary, thief" (21). The epithet "good," furthermore, might associate

the figure with the character from *Romeo and Juliet*, bringing to mind the "true apothecary," as Romeo calls him upon drinking up the poison in Juliet's tomb (5.3.119).

While in "The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke," Shakespearean echoes do little more than populate the bigger picture (in this case literally) with neat little details, for his short (just one minute and forty-three seconds) lullaby "Lily of the Valley" from the *Sheer Heart Attack* album (1974), Mercury returned to Shakespeare in a more subtle and meaningful way. "Lily of the Valley" is a breather just before the middle of the album, following four energetic hard/glam/pop rock tracks and preceding pieces such as the hard rock/rock'n'roll "Now I'm Here" or the heavy/speed metal "Stone Cold Crazy." Although the lyrics of the piece are elusive, they clearly

---

<sup>2</sup> The quotations from *Elimination* are referred to by the pages of Dadd's original manuscript as given by Tromans. The Hiding Press edition does not give the line numbers and the pages of the slim volume are not even numbered.



describe an inner turmoil (“I am forever searching high and low / But why does everybody tell me no?”) of a lover, who wishes to keep his confusion secret from his love, the eponymous “lily of the valley.” The lyrics invoke mythological images, such as “Neptune of the seas” and a mention of the realm of Rhye, which Mercury previously (in the aforementioned 1973 track “My Fairy King” from *Queen*) described by means of Browning’s fantasy land inside a mountain where the Piper of Hamelin has led all the town’s children (except for one).

While the overall situation of the song – presenting the conflicted lover lying awake next to his sleeping lady (“I lie in wait with open eyes”) – resembles Act 3, Scene 5 from *Romeo and Juliet*, in which Romeo knows that he should leave his Juliet, desperately wanting to stay at the same time, to describe his dilemma the lover invokes two other major Shakespearean characters. When expressing his confusion, the singer says, “I follow every course / My kingdom for a horse,” which is, of course, a quotation from Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, from the moment when King Richard is losing his battle and is desperately crying for help (5.4.7). At another point, the lover is imagining that he is addressing his love saying, “Serpent of the Nile / Relieve me for a while / And cast me from your spell and / Let me go.” The image of the “Serpent of the Nile” comes from *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which Antony, who lives under Cleopatra’s spell, calls his love “my serpent of old Nile” (1.5.26). Just like King Richard, Antony ultimately loses his battle, which costs him his life. Mercury’s fictitious lover thus knows that if he stays with his “lily of the valley,” it might lead to his destruction.

The band’s guitarist, Brian May, in an interview stated that “Lily of the Valley” is, in fact, biographical and that Mercury (at the time still living with his girlfriend Mary Austin) in it expressed his confusion about his sexuality: “It’s about looking at his girlfriend and realising that his body needed to be somewhere else” (Thomas 1999, 79). If May is correct, we can see that Mercury saw fit to describe his personal strife in Shakespearean terms. He did not, however, attempt to represent Shakespeare or enter a cultural dialogue with the Bard – instead, Mercury appropriates Shakespeare’s language for his own original message.

The last example of Shakespearean influence on music by Queen comes from the band’s album *Made in Heaven*, released in 1995 after Mercury’s death. One of the few songs recorded after the *Innuendo* sessions (otherwise, *Made in Heaven* mostly contains pre-*Innuendo* material, either previously unreleased or newly re-mixed) is “A Winter’s Tale” – in fact, it is the last song that Mercury finished.<sup>3</sup> Just

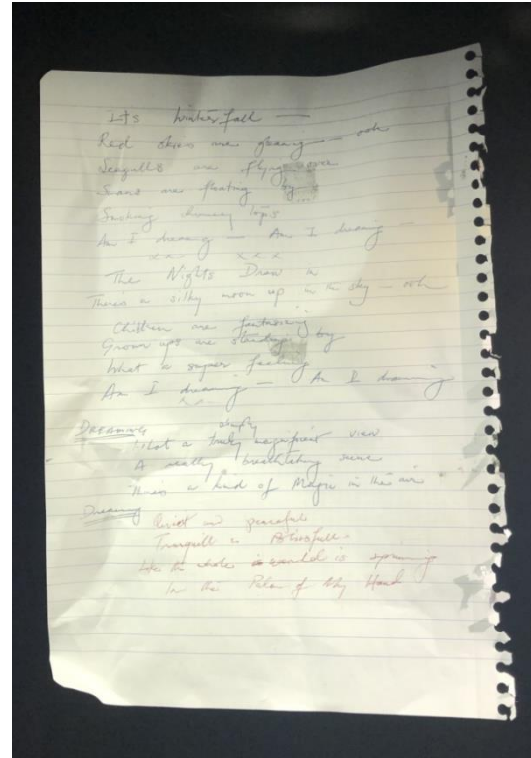
---

<sup>3</sup> The last recorded vocals of Mercury were for the ballad “Mother Love,” written by himself and Brian May. However, “Mother Love” famously remained unfinished and May needed to supply his vocals for the song’s last verse after Mercury’s death. Mercury’s handwritten lyrics for both

as Taylor's "The Invisible Man" from *The Miracle* (1989) has little to do with H. G. Wells's novel or May's "Brighton Rock" from *Sheer Heart Attack* (1974) shares almost nothing with the story of Graham Greene's work of the same title, so have the psychedelic sound and moody atmosphere of "A Winter's Tale" little in common with Shakespeare's late comedy *The Winter's Tale*. However, since its release, the song has become an example of life imitating art.



**Figure 4:** Irena Sedlecká's statue of Freddie Mercury in Montreux, Switzerland. (Photograph: Filip Krajník)



**Figure 5:** Lyrics of "A Winter's Tale," written by Freddie Mercury. (Photograph: Filip Krajník)

In the final scene of Shakespeare's play, the statue of the dead Queen Hermione comes to life to reunite with her husband, the Sicilian King Leontes, and her daughter, Perdita. In 1996, more than five years after the song had been recorded, the iconic three-meter bronze statue of Freddie Mercury by Irena Sedlecká (who was, quite ap-  
positely, a Bohemian, born in Pilsen) was erected at Lake Geneva in Montreux, not far from the Mountain Studios where Mercury's last songs were recorded. When in the Shakespeare play King Leontes first sees the statue of his wife, he exclaims,

---

"A Winter's Tale" and "Mother Love" are nowadays displayed at Queen's Mountain Studios in Montreux, Switzerland, where the band's last sessions with Mercury took place.

“O royal piece! / There’s magic in thy majesty” (5.3.38–39). Mercury’s statue, on the other hand, is immortalised in the opening lines of Queen’s 1997 ballad “No One But You (Only the Good Die Young)”: “A hand above the water / An angel reaching for the sky.” If one of the themes of *The Winter’s Tale* is overcoming death through the magic of art, the last Queen songs, including “A Winter’s Tale,” have surely contributed to the afterlife of both the band and its lead singer, whose work and legacy are still alive, even more than thirty years after his demise.

While the employment of Shakespearean motifs by Queen was rarer and less obvious than that of some of their contemporaries, the band was surely aware of Shakespeare’s cultural significance and was able to work with it in a playful and creative way for their own unique ends and creations. Interestingly enough, of all the four members of Queen, the one who worked Shakespearean motifs into the band’s songs was their lead singer, whom Taylor rather unflatteringly described as “not what you’d call a well-read man” (Blake 2021, 70).

Portions of this article were presented in the lecture “Spirituality and Anxiety in Songs by Queen,” delivered at the Silesian University in Opava, Czech Republic, on 26 October 2021.

### **Bibliography**

- Blake, Mark. 2021. “Roger Taylor Interview.” *Mojo: The Collectors’ Series: Queen (Part 2: The Works 1980–2021)*: 62–73.
- Clerc, Benoît. 2020. *Queen: All the Songs*. Translated by Simon Burrows, Caroline Higgitt and Paul Ratcliffe. New York: Black Dog and Leventhal Publishers.
- Dadd, Richard. 2020. *Elimination of a Picture & its Subject – called The Feller’s Master Stroke*. Philadelphia: Hiding Press.
- Doyle, Tom. 2021. “Bohemian Rhapsody.” *Mojo: The Collectors’ Series: Queen (Part 1: The Works 1970–1979)*: 62–73.
- Hansen, Adam. 2010. *Shakespeare and Popular Music*. London: Continuum.
- McLeod, Ken. 2001. “Bohemian Rhapsodies: Operatic Influences on Rock Music.” *Popular Music* 20 (2): 189–203.
- Shakespeare, William. 2011. *Complete Works*. Revised edition. Edited by Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and Scott Kastan. London: Arden Shakespeare.
- Thomas, David. 1999. “Their Britannic Majesties Request.” *Mojo* 69 (August 1999): 72–88.
- Tromans, Nicholas. 2011. *Richard Dadd: The Artist and the Asylum*. London: Tate Publishing.

**Filip Krajník** is a lecturer in English literature at the Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. His main research interests are late medieval English poetry and early modern English theatre. With Anna Mikyšková, he is currently co-editing a volume on Restoration and early 18<sup>th</sup>-century theatre culture, entitled *Restoration Reshaping: Shifting Forms, Genres and Conventions in English Theatre, 1660–1737* (forthcoming 2023). His translation of *Hamlet* into Czech premiered in South Bohemian Theatre in České Budějovice in April 2022.

**Contact:** filip.krajnik@phil.muni.cz



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.



# INTERVIEWS AND REVIEWS

---



AN INTERVIEW WITH KAREEN SEIDLER ON EARLY  
MODERN GERMAN *HAMLET*, ITS IMPORTANCE  
FOR *HAMLET* STUDIES, AND ITS NEW  
TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH

Anna Mikyšková

**KAREEN Seidler** holds a PhD and an MA from the University of Geneva and an MPhil from the University of Cambridge. Her MPhil dissertation on *Romio und Julieta* was awarded the Martin Lehnert Prize of the German Shakespeare Society. She has taught at the University of Geneva and at Freie Universität Berlin and worked as assistant editor for the *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*. Currently, she is a translator and editor for several scholarly and commercial venues. Additionally, she works for the German Institute for Humour.

**AM:** Can you tell us something about yourself and your research interests? When did you become interested in early modern theatre and what do you find most fascinating about it?

**KS:** Like a lot of kids, I read *Macbeth* in school, but the real love affair with Shakespeare and early modern theatre started during my studies in Geneva. I attended a few seminars on Shakespeare, and one about (versions of) *Romeo and Juliet*, taught by Lukas Erne (who later became my PhD supervisor and eventually co-editor). And so I learnt that there is not just one *Hamlet* text, but actually three early modern versions. And I was hooked. I've always loved close reading and I also studied comparative literature. So comparing texts was a lot of fun. A little later, I learnt about the German version of *Hamlet* – *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*.

Also, I'm a big theatre fan (lately rather in the audience or in front of the screen, during my studies also onstage or backstage), for instance, I directed Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good morning Juliet)* for the Geneva English Drama Society and we went to the Edinburgh Fringe with the English Department theatre group, presenting our own Shakespeare adaptation.

There are many things I find fascinating about early modern theatre, for instance, that there was no such thing as a "fixed" text (which we have taken so seriously



for such a long time); the imaginative ways in which different spaces were used; how a ‘world’ could be conjured with words, gestures and movement instead of props and scenery; the different layers of meaning in language that can sometimes only be unearthed with detailed study.

**You were a member of the research project *Early Modern German Shakespeare* at the University of Geneva, whose aim was to prepare and publish critical editions of four early modern German adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays, namely *Romio und Julieta* (*Romeo and Juliet*), *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* (*Hamlet*), *Tito Andronico* (*Titus Andronicus*), and *Künst über alle Künste* (*Taming of the Shrew*). The first volume with *Romio und Julieta* and *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* was published by Arden in 2020, the second volume with the two remaining plays came out quite recently in February 2022 (congratulations!). What was the main inspiration for the project and how did you become part of it?**

I actually wrote [my PhD](#) on *Romio und Julieta* and *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*. It also included annotated and collated editions of the German texts. So when Lukas Erne proposed that I be part of the project, I was of course thrilled and more than happy to participate.

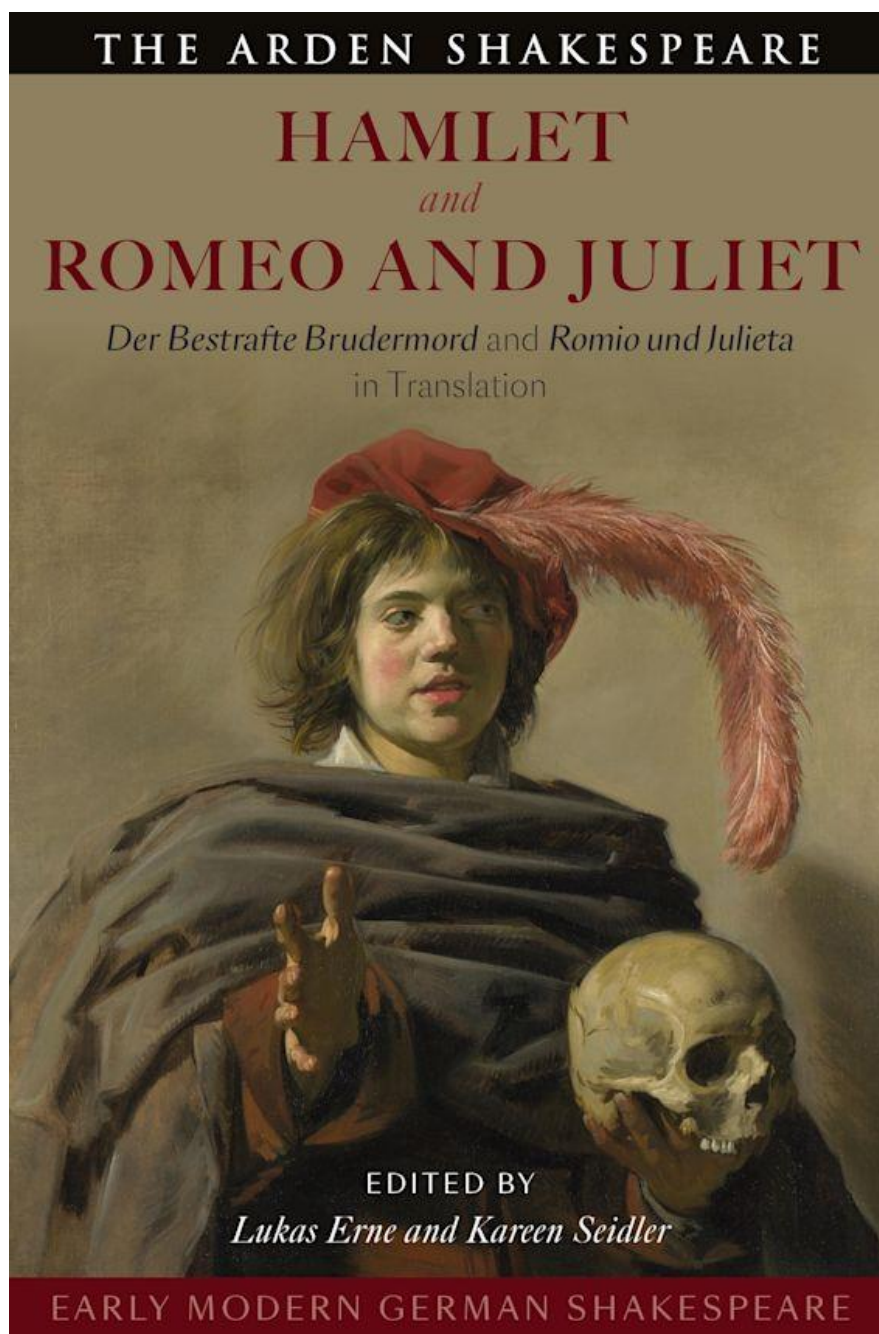
The main inspiration for the project was a growing interest in, shall we say, non-normative versions of Shakespeare’s and early modern plays – and the fact that although English-speaking Shakespeareans were familiar with these German texts in the nineteenth century (when English-speaking scholars still read German!), this is no longer the case in the twenty-first century. So the aim was to make these texts available to the English-speaking scholarly community. Our editions provide readable English translations, a rich commentary which explores the texts’ relationship to Shakespeare’s and informative, scholarly introductions.

**Why is it important to know the early modern German versions of Shakespeare? How can these texts broaden our understanding of Shakespeare or early modern theatre business in general?**

These texts, much like the early quartos (or “textually challenged quartos,” as Lukas Erne calls them), are early modern theatrical evidence, also evidence of early modern staging to a certain extent. In many instances, they can contribute to scholarly discussions on specific moments in Shakespeare’s plays or even help to elucidate textual cruxes for editors or theatre historians.

To give just one example: In Hamlet’s encounter with his mother in Act 3, *Brudermord* provides its answer to the long-standing question of whether Hamlet, when asking his mother to look “upon this picture, and on this” (*Hamlet*, 3.4.51), is referring to large wall-portraits or miniatures of his father and his uncle: “there

in that gallery hangs the portrait of your first husband, and here in this room hangs the portrait of the present one” (*Brudermord*, 3.5.5–7). Here and elsewhere, the early German versions are an important and, so far, underused resource for the problems Shakespeare’s texts pose.



Lukas Erne and Kareen Seidler’s volume with the first critical English translation of *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* (Arden 2020).

**Why did you and your colleagues choose these four German texts for your critical editions? Are there more German adaptations of Shakespeare's plays that wait for their English scholarly translation?**

The texts of six German *Wanderbühne* (literally, "strolling stage") plays based on Shakespeare survive: in addition to our four edited plays, there is *Das Wohlgesprochene Uhrtheil, oder Der Jud von Venedig* (*The Well-Spoken Judgment or the Jew of Venice*, a loose adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*) and Andreas Gryphius' *Absurda Comica oder Herr Peter Squentz* (*Absurda Comica or Mister Peter Squentz*, featuring the Pyramus and Thisbe sequence from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). We chose our four playtexts because their relationship to Shakespeare is clearest and most relevant. Another seven Shakespearean plays only appear in performance records or repertory lists. And a plot summary (or "argument") of a performance of *King Lear* has been preserved. Additionally, a number of plays by other early modern English authors were adapted (and some texts are extant), for instance, by Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Dekker.

**You translated the German version of *Hamlet*, entitled *Der Bestrafte Brudermord oder Prinz Hamlet aus Dännemark*. Do we know when the German play was written or to which version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* it is most related?**

*Hamlet* was probably first brought to the Continent in the early seventeenth century and adapted for German audiences. This adaptation considerably shortened the play (for instance, nearly all soliloquies have been cut) and streamlined the plot. The play was again adapted around the 1660s, when elements such as the Prologue were added. The text we have was printed in 1781, based on a manuscript dated 1710.

As for *Brudermord*'s relationship to Q1, Q2 and F *Hamlet*, the situation is quite tricky. One thing is certain: *Brudermord* is not the Ur-*Hamlet*. That is to say, *Brudermord* is based on Shakespeare and not vice-versa. However, fascinatingly, *Brudermord* contains elements that are unique to Q2/F and elements that are only found in Q1. In quite a few instances, for one line from *Brudermord*, the first half is actually from Q1 and the second from Q2. So it seems most sensible to assume that *Brudermord* is based on an early Shakespearean acting version that contained elements of both Q1 and Q2.

**What is known about the staging history of *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* and/or its original audiences?**

Only a single performance of a *Hamlet* play in Germany is reliably documented. On 24 June 1626, a "Tragoedia von Hamlet einen printzen in Dennemarck" was

performed at the court of Dresden. Yet we do not know how close this performance was to the extant text. *Romio und Julieta* was also performed in Dresden during this time. This was probably not the first performance of a *Hamlet* play in Germany – nor the last.

The English Comedians (as the English itinerant players were called) started out by performing in their mother tongue. The large majority of the population had no knowledge of the English language, yet, according to the Englishman Fynes Moryson (who travelled throughout Europe in the 1590s) despite “not vnderstanding a worde [the English] sayde” everyone (“both men and wemen”) “flocked wonderfully to see theire gesture and Action.”<sup>1</sup> Possibly, while the performances were still in English, only extracts of plays were performed, which were largely intelligible without language. The Germans were so fascinated, because they did not know professional theatre companies. In a sense, the English Comedians can be credited with founding German professional theatre.

**What are the main differences between Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*? To what extent is the German text determined by the fact that it used to be staged by German wandering players?**

One main difference is length: Q2 of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is about 3,800 lines long, F about 3,600 lines and Q1 only about 2,200 lines. In comparison, *Brudermord* is really short. It only counts 1,200 lines. The play has been streamlined. Once an action is planned (e.g. to spy on Hamlet and Ophelia) it is immediately carried out. In a similar vein, the night scenes in Shakespeare’s Act I (I.i, I.iv, I.v) have been grouped together at the beginning of *Brudermord*. The German play has untangled and simplified the different strands of the Shakespearean plot. The subplots are largely eliminated (e.g., Rosencrantz and Guildenstern only appear as “servants” when they are to accompany Hamlet on his sea voyage and are later renamed “bandits” when they attempt to kill him).

What *Brudermord* shares with other *Wanderbühne* plays is an emphasis on physicality. This originated at the time when the texts were first adapted for audiences who did not understand the language the plays were performed in. Ophelia’s madness is transformed into physical comedy, the Ghost boxes one of the guards over the ear, and Hamlet escapes the two “bandits” in a slap stick episode.

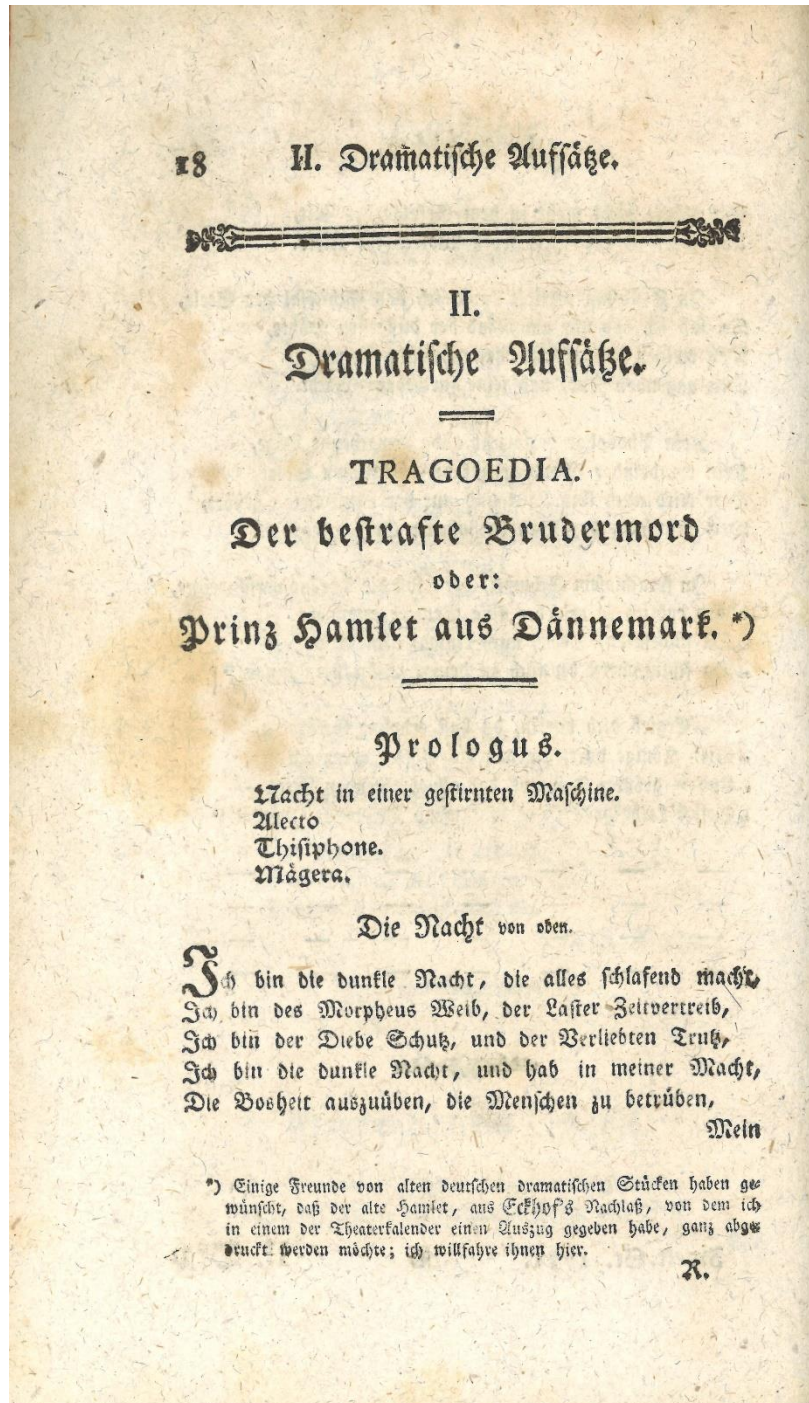
The text of *Brudermord* contains a few elements that can be traced to German players, for instance Act 2, Scene 7 – corresponding to Act 2, Scene 2 in Shakespeare

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Hughes, ed., *Shakespeare’s Europe: Unpublished Chapters of Fynes Moryson’s Itinerary: Being a Survey of the Condition of Europe at the End of the 16th Century* (London: Sherratt & Hughes, 1903), 304.



– dramatizing the arrival of the players at court. Here, the leader of the players is called Carl. This scene contains a transparently topical passage about Carl Andreas Paulsen (1620–1687) and his company.



Title page of *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* (1781).

**Can you give us any specific example of early modern staging practice present in *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*? Was it a challenge to translate the play for readers not necessarily familiar with early modern English or German theatre traditions?**

In the Prologue, Night enters “*from above*” (0.0 SD). This implies the use of stage machinery and it illustrates that while around 1600 the English Comedians performed on make-shift stages with little or no scenery, towards the end of the seventeenth century, the companies had elaborate scenery and stage machinery at their disposal. One of my favourite passages from a contemporary document lists the following scenery that is to be painted for the court theatre in Český Krumlov (where *Romio und Julieta* was performed in 1688 and where the extant manuscript originated): seven clouds, seven waves, a shore, twelve water animals, a whale, a prison, twenty-two sheep and three turtles.<sup>2</sup>

I believe that our translation and edition present the texts in a way that makes them easily accessible for any scholars or students interested in early modern drama and theatre.

**I was surprised to learn that the German version of *Hamlet* contains a prologue, in which the Night and three Furies foreshadow the story of the tragedy. What is, in your opinion, the significance of the prologue? Was it a usual practice of German itinerant playing companies or is there more to it?**

The Prologue is likely to have been a late addition (probably during the 1660s); it contains several echoes of Andreas Gryphius’ *Carolus Stuardus* (1657), and its style has been termed “Senecan” (G. R. Hibbard).<sup>3</sup> There are some inconsistencies between the Prologue and the plot of the play which also suggest that it was added later. It was by no means unusual to have a play preceded by a prologue, for early modern German as for early modern English playtexts. The German adaptation of *The Shrew* also features a prologue. The purpose of the Prologue in *Brudermord* may have been to add some “gravity” to the play – and a spectacular beginning.

**What was the biggest challenge in your translating process? For instance, were you not too much influenced by your knowledge of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*?**

The biggest challenge was undoubtedly the early modern German language, especially allusions or idioms that are not easy to understand, even for native speakers of modern German. One very useful resource is Grimm’s *Wörterbuch*, which, to a certain extent, is the German equivalent of the OED. When it came to translating verse, we

---

<sup>2</sup> Josef Hejnic and Jiří Zálaha, “Český Krumlov und die Theatertradition,” *Teatralia zámecké knihovny v Českém Krumlově* 1 (1976): 37–63, 49.

<sup>3</sup> G. R. Hibbard (ed.), *Hamlet*, Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford, 1987), 373.

were very fortunate to have Anthony Mortimer to help us out, an experienced translator of poetry (Petrarch, among others).

Previous translators of *Brudermord* had a tendency to ‘Shakespeareanize’ their translations: they tried to make their English translation sound as close to the original Shakespearean text as possible – presumably to highlight the proximity of the adaptations to the source. This was certainly not our aim. We translated as faithfully as possible, while keeping the text readable and accessible. Our collation and annotation point to the many parallels to Shakespeare’s texts. Of course, it is nearly impossible to work on *Brudermord* without having *Hamlet* as a constant companion. But I believe we managed to steer clear of emulating Shakespeare’s language in our translations.

**What was your strategy in the choice of the language register? Did you want your translation to make an impression of an early modern English text of a kind, or did you opt for a more contemporary language?**

Our edition is particularly concerned with the relationship between the German adaptations and the Shakespearean originals, and this can only be revealed by a reasonably close translation. On the other hand, we have tried to arrive at a text that feels natural and is easily readable in English, and that occasionally entails a departure from what the German text literally says. When such departures are significant, we draw attention to our translation choices in the commentary. We have therefore decided to translate the texts into modern (British) English. Yet while we have tried to steer clear of the awkwardly archaic, and given the origins of the texts we have translated, we think there is a limit to how modern the translations should sound.

**Do you think that your English translation of *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* could be staged one day? Could, in your opinion, both actors and audiences appreciate this alternative version of a well-known story?**

Yes, of course. I’d be very happy to be involved! The edition is also intended for theatre practitioners – and audiences. Our translation of *Romio und Julieta* was performed in [an online staged reading](#) and we did [an online read-through of the translation of \*Tito Andronico\*](#) by Lukas Erne and Maria Shmygol. Both texts worked really well in performance and I’m sure that our *Brudermord* would, too.

**What are your future translating projects? Any chances you will be working with early modern material again or do your professional plans lie elsewhere?**

Currently, I’m working as a freelance translator and proofreader. I’ve also translated some other early modern texts, for instance, [a selection of essays by the theatre scholar Claude-François Ménéstrier](#) and articles and book chapters on theatre and history. And I certainly hope that more work in that vein will be coming my way.

*Anna Mikyšková*

**Dr Seidler, thank you very much for your time and I wish you all the best in your future translating projects.**



Dr Kareen Seidler (from her personal archive).

Anna Mikyšková, Masaryk University  
anna.mikyskova@phil.muni.cz



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.





AN INTERVIEW WITH PAVEL DRÁBEK ON  
TRANSLATING SHAKESPEARE IN THEORY  
AND PRACTICE

*Filip Krajník*

**PAVEL Drábek** is a preeminent Czech Shakespeare scholar, musician, theatre practitioner, author of several plays and (mini)operas, currently professor of theatre at the University of Hull, UK. As the author of a monumental volume on translating Shakespeare (not only) into Czech, entitled *České pokusy o Shakespeara* (*Czech Attempts at Shakespeare*, Větrné mlýny publishers, 2012), we asked Pavel a few questions about the history of translating Shakespeare two hundred years ago and what it takes to translate Shakespeare now.

**FK: Ten years ago, you published a monumental volume on Czech translations of Shakespeare from the very beginning up until the early 21st century. What led you to researching this topic?**

PD: In 1996, the remarkable theatre director Eva Tálská (1944–2020) had an idea: to stage *King Lear* at the Husa na provázku Theatre in Brno. Tálská was also the founder and creative spirit of Studio Dům, a youth theatre company that worked side by side with Husa, under the auspices of the CED (Centre for Experimental Theatre). Studio Dům was a unique undertaking that raised an entire generation of theatre makers and scholars in the 1990s and early 2000s. It had several workshops or departments and each of them was led by a professional. I was a musician in the music department, playing the double bass and composing, working with Miloš Štědroň. As was characteristic of her ways, whenever Tálská worked on an idea, everyone around her by default also worked on that idea. So when she decided to stage *King Lear*, we were all involved. And Tálská didn't just stage Shakespeare's play with Husa, starring Jiří Pecha, she also included several of us from Studio Dům in smaller roles. Apart from playing the trumpet (which I am still unsure I ever could), I was also assisting with some background research, translating bits and bobs from Shakespeare's sources and reading English scholarship for her and her dramaturg Radan Koryčanský. I noticed that Tálská used E. A. Saudek's translation as a point of departure (and

that was the translation declared in the programme notes), but she also looked at J. V. Sládek's, Bohumil Štěpánek's and Milan Lukeš's translations, and composed her own version from them. That was new and I was intrigued.

But that wasn't everything. Studio Dům also worked on other by-product projects inspired by *King Lear*. I wasn't particularly keen on getting very involved, as I had had my share of touring with Studio Dům productions for several years and I felt the pressure of the final two years of my Master's looming large ahead of me. So one day, I had a serious word with Tálská and told her that I would be happy to continue writing music but wouldn't be able to get involved in any new productions because they were too time-consuming and I had my studies to tend to and all that. She heard me out – or I thought she did – and I walked down the stairs from her office when I was accosted by a strange man I had never seen before: “You! You are coming to my acting workshop!” he declared. I explained to him politely that this couldn't be, as I was a musician, not an actor, and was just leaving the theatre. And he snapped back: “Who cares! Get some proper clothes and I am awaiting you in the workshop!” So I became an actor, a co-author and pretty much also a producer in Hubert Krejčí's *commedia dell'arte* adaptation of *King Lear*. Hubert Krejčí (1944–2022) was one of a kind, and he taught me everything I know about making theatre. I spent the next three years touring our *Arlekino vévodou bretaňským aneb Král Leyr a jeho tři dcery neboli Zkamenělý princ* (*Arlekino the Duke of Brittany, or King Leyr and his three daughters, ossia The Petrified Prince*); two recordings of the show are available on YouTube. The show was a collage of *Lear*, of the anonymous *King Leir* play and the many chronicle stories I had read, as well as pretty much every other Shakespeare play that could be pillaged for dramatic loot. We worked with all available translations and whatever we couldn't find we wrote ourselves, with Hubert and Simona Juračková. Very importantly, we workshopped everything with the actors first. Writing something is all very nice, but unless it flies, it's no good. So if it didn't work on stage, we scrapped it. Over the three years we played *Arlekino* about 35 or 37 times, and no two shows had the same script: especially for me as the leading comedian figure, the text changed every night.

That's how I got hooked. During one of our endless discussions about Shakespeare, Hubert suggested – as he loved to do – that someone (meaning me) should collect and publish again the oldest translations of Shakespeare because they were the best. I was so foolish as to consider that idea seriously, and the rest is history.

**What has changed in the field of Czech translations of Shakespeare (or perhaps translation of Shakespeare in general) since the volume's publication?**

This is a big question and I can answer only in part. Since 2012, when my book eventually came out, there have been a number of university students taking Czech

translations of Shakespeare as their topics for essays and diploma theses. I am not claiming full credit of course. Jiří Josek (1950–2018) and especially Martin Hilský have become something of a celebrity in their own right, so the topic gained traction and attracted a lot of interest. I would like to think that there has also been a shift in understanding of what theatre translation is, not just of Shakespeare but of other playwrights, namely the classical ones. The ongoing project on “English Theatre Culture 1660–1737,” which you lead, is in many ways a continuation of this interest.

As for translation of Shakespeare in general – that is, outside Czech academia – the field is very different to what it was a decade ago. This is especially due to the decolonisation of Shakespeare studies, to the indefatigable work of international Shakespeareans (impressively active in Hungary, Poland, Ukraine, Germany, France, Italy and Spain, to name just a few nearby countries), and the realisation that “Shakespeare in translation” is so much more interesting than the beaten path of “Shakespeare the national poet.” There is an immense amount of liveness in translated Shakespeare – at least to my view. Staging the original English Shakespearean text is all nice and good but how many times would you like to see a ground-breaking *King Lear* or *Romeo and Juliet* delivering the same old words, no matter how much you loved them? Things are changing. Even the leading brand, the Arden Shakespeare, has launched two new series dedicated to Global Shakespeare Inverted and to Early Modern German Shakespeare, both including translation of Shakespeare as their key subject area. I am sure we haven’t seen the end of it yet.

**The first translations of Shakespeare into Czech appeared in the late 18th century. Compared to other European nations, is that early or late? Were there any special circumstances that inspired the first translation efforts in the Czech Lands?**

The earliest retellings of Shakespeare in Czech come from 1782, and the earliest surviving play script (K. H. Thám’s *Makbet*) was published in 1786. This is comparatively quite early. When the complete works were translated by the Museum team, between 1853 and 1858 (though it took until 1872 for all of the plays to get published), this was the first complete translation in any Slavic language.

But this question is less interesting for the competition of who comes first, but rather for the intensity with which Shakespeare’s works entered the culture. And that had happened much earlier and without Shakespeare’s name attached to it. English actors toured central Europe from at least as early as the 1590s. They certainly performed in Prague in October 1602 and then passed through the Czech lands

on several occasions, certainly in 1607. (We even hypothesised about this speculative visit to Jindřichův Hradec in our opera *Pickelhering 1607 aneb Nový Orfeus z Bohemie*.) English actors performed in Jägerndorf (today's Krnov) in 1610 and played a key role in establishing Czech theatrical culture as we've known it ever since. Whether any of the plays were Shakespeare's or adapted from Shakespeare is moot. Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Dekker, Philip Massinger, William Rowley and James Shirley are more likely as the front runners in seventeenth-century central Europe, but *Romeo and Juliet* and *King Lear* were certainly on the repertoire, if not during Shakespeare's lifetime, then shortly afterwards. The fact that these plays were performed in early modern German is just a matter of historical accident. I wouldn't personally give much weight to Czech-language nationalism. That would be anachronistic, foolish and myopic. And potentially dangerous.



*České pokusy o Shakespeara* by Pavel Drábek charts the history of translating Shakespeare in the Czech Lands from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century up until the turn of the millennium.

When the plays were finally translated into Czech, this went hand in hand with the emancipation of the Czech language in the Josephinian reform era of the 1780s, and the publications were clearly aimed at a Czech language population living in towns outside of Prague. So the question is not just historical and nationalist, but also demographic.

**For Czechs, Shakespeare has become an adopted national poet of a kind. To what extent have translations into Czech contributed to this status of his? Or was it rather Shakespeare's rising status in England and Continental Europe that made translating his works such a prestigious effort over the years?**

Shakespeare has become an adopted national poet for every other culture, together with the illusion that that culture's relationship with Shakespeare is unique. Resurrected during the Enlightenment era, Shakespeare became the perfect mouthpiece for an aspiring culture. We can find analogies of Czech Shakespeare in many countries, earlier or later: in Germany, in France, in Spain, in Italy, in Hungary, in Poland, in Romania, in Bulgaria... Cultivating a national Shakespeare was the sign of a phase of cultural maturity. This is not to sound cynical about it, but national Shakespeares were a much-discussed topic of the 1990s and early 2000s, and the stories are almost identical wherever we look. Shakespeare becomes the go-to metaphor to voice aspirations that can't be spoken aloud. At the same time, befriending and adopting Shakespeare as a national poet has had a bit of intellectual snobbery about it, as if to signal: "Look, we also belong to the cultivated, progressive, enlightened West. We are in the civilised club now!" If we look at the historic details of such pronouncements and such ambitions, we find fascinating things. But these tell us less about Shakespeare than they do about the culture that produced them. (A recent book by Peter Marx, *Hamlets Reise nach Deutschland*, is a wonderful analysis of this process in the German context.)

**Since the late 19th century, translating Shakespeare into Czech has been connected with efforts of strong single persons from theatre, literary or academic spheres: Josef Václav Sládek at the turn of the 19th century, Erik Adolf Saudek in the mid-20th century, Jiří Josek and Martin Hilský at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. You, however, have been calling for a collaborative approach to translating Shakespeare. What is the difference between these two methods when it comes to the final product, that is, a translation of a Shakespeare play?**

I am not sure we can speak about two methods. I would personally see the two approaches as characteristic of their era. Sládek ended up translating on his own because Jaroslav Vrchlický and Eliška Krásnohorská had given up. The three of them had agreed to translate Shakespeare anew between them. Krásnohorská delved into *The Tempest* but abandoned the effort, allegedly because she was too shy to translate the indecencies. Vrchlický made a pass at *Hamlet* but "his creative spirit" (period witnesses tell us) "was too free to be subjected by the strict discipline of Shakespeare's play." In other words, Vrchlický wasn't as confident in English as he was in Romance

languages and he couldn't compare with others who were much more rigorous in their knowledge of English. Such as Sládek, who spent several years in the United States of America, lying low after he attracted the attention of the Austrian police during his revolutionary proclamations of 1868. In other words, that translation was also supposed to be a team effort, as had been the case of the generation before (the Muzeum translation). Unfortunately, the myth-making of public intellectuals turned Sládek into a solitary, suffering genius and set a precedent for the generations to come.

In the 1920s, Bohumil Štěpánek teamed up with his schoolmate René Wellek and decided to translate *Hamlet*. Štěpánek, like Vrchlický, was a francophone philologist, while Wellek studied English. This was a team effort, but the self-effacing Wellek edited himself out of it. Štěpánek then went on translating some 34 plays. Saudek, who was another of his schoolmates, then burst in with his *Julius Caesar* in 1936, and what followed was an embarrassing story of jealous rivalry and land grabs from Saudek's side. Štěpánek was living in Paris at the time and had little idea that Saudek was ruthlessly getting rid of him as his rival. This trite ethos continued throughout the next twenty-five years. It was only with the advent of the new generation – Zdeněk Urbánek, Václav Renč, Jaroslav Kraus and the unfortunate František Nevrla – that Saudek's cult started to wane.

In about 1997 I asked Milan Lukeš (1933–2007) why he and others didn't publish more new translations of Shakespeare in the 1970s and early 1980s. He surprised me with his reply: "Out of solidarity with Stříbrný." Zdeněk Stříbrný (1922–2014) was a leading Shakespeare scholar. He had worked with Saudek as his editor and collaborating scholar, but he was also the one to recommend Urbánek's groundbreaking *Hamlet* in 1959 – much to Saudek's anger. (The story goes that Saudek was furious when he found out. "Madam! Madam! Jesus! Come over here quickly," Saudek's housemaid is said to have shouted. "Mr Saudek is murdering young Mr Stříbrný!") Václav Renč and Kamil Lhoták would both send the first versions of their Shakespeare translations to Stříbrný too. But then, after 1968, Stříbrný was kicked out of the Faculty of Arts at Charles University and taught English as a second language somewhere in a mathematics institute, and wasn't allowed to publish. And Lukeš said that everyone else refused to publish Shakespeare out of solidarity. If Stříbrný can't, then we won't. That remained the case until the thawing around the Perestroika years of the early 1980s.

When Martin Hilský and Jiří Josek established themselves as the two prominent Czech translators of Shakespeare, the culture wasn't very open to dialogue and the collaborative mode. We are talking of the 1990s and the early 2000s. This was the age of strongman politics – or we should perhaps say the politics of solitaires.

I believe we have arrived at a time when the collaborative mode – a creative and rigorous scholarly dialogue – is much more welcome and also has much more to offer us than the well-tested approach of translator solitaires.

**Your volume ends with a vision of the new future generation of Shakespeare translators. Your proposed criteria for this new generation are quite broad, ranging from fundamental cultural, social and philosophical changes, to typological changes in actors themselves. Do you see now, a decade later, any development along these lines towards a new translation dramaturgy?**

I certainly do. We work with a number of colleagues now on translations of English Restoration plays. We debate and disagree, but also listen to one another and refine our understanding of the plays and the translation problems. We also work with theatre practitioners – dramaturgs, directors, actors, voice coaches – and these debates all impress themselves on the translations and make them better.

We have also started treating Shakespeare to this. You have yourself translated *Hamlet* – and there were about seven or eight different people who have read your early versions and made suggestions. I have translated the first quarto of *Romeo and Juliet* and in my case the collaboration was more closely with the creative team staging it. In completing the translation for book publication, I would like to ask colleagues for their input too. The Větrné mlýny publishers are launching a new series called William, in which we will be issuing these new translations of Shakespeare. Krajník's *Hamlet* is coming out any day now, in June 2022, as I write these words.

**For various reasons, the image of a translator of Shakespeare in Czech society is, first and foremost, one of a scholar, ideally an elderly university professor. What skills or qualities should a translator of Shakespeare in your opinion have? Is the association with the academic environment really necessary?**

This is a tricky question. On the one hand, I wouldn't like to say what skills and qualities they *should* have. There are even amateur translations of Shakespeare – and while I personally don't take them seriously as translations, they have their purpose and they make things more interesting. On the other hand, I have very particular ideas of what I would like a translator of Shakespeare to have so that our efforts are complementary and mutually enriching in the same purpose. That purpose is *making beautiful new theatrical translations*. To that end, I think a translator should first and foremost have a sense of theatre. A friend of mine once said that if you've never weed in your pants during a show out of sheer joy, you shouldn't make theatre. For me this is a metaphor for the measure of what theatre can do as an experience – individually, socially and culturally. Beauty is part of this, but also an acute awareness of how theatre relates to the world we live in.



If I were to bring it down from the metaphysical cloud and speak of individual skills, qualities and competencies of an ideal Shakespeare translator, then here is my top five:

1. a refined mastery of the target language;
2. a certain musicality in working with breathing and rhythm;
3. a solid knowledge of the drama, literature and theatre of Shakespeare's time, including the practicalities of early modern theatre making;
4. a solid knowledge of the drama and theatre throughout history up till now, because that's the arsenal of the translator's dramatic ammunition;
5. an inquisitive mind that doesn't settle for routines and methods.

**If you were to write the final chapter of your book now, what would your image of a new generation of translators of Shakespeare into Czech look like? And are there any parallels for it in other national or language cultures?**

I would like to think and hope that the new generation of Czech translators of Shakespeare will be an open and collaborative culture that offers a variety of approaches. And I hope that individual approaches won't close the options down but engender new creativity. We have seen quite a lot of complacent stagnation in Czech theatre, drama and literature in the recent two decades, and too much assuming of old established epistemological securities. Too much playing it safe. The same is true of the translation of the classics over the last half a century. When it comes to Czech Shakespeare, apart from a few outliers, the foundations of the field have remained pretty much unchanged since the late eighteenth century and August Wilhelm Schlegel's Romantic pomp of seeing something sacred in every syllable of Shakespeare.

As for parallels elsewhere, that's a more difficult question. Collaborative and team translation is certainly a current issue, but Shakespeare seems to be holding firmly onto positions. It seems to me there is a bit of fetishism in being a Shakespeare scholar and a Shakespeare translator: I converse with a deity. But that shall pass soon, I hope, and a more open approach will gain momentum.

**You yourself made a new translation of *Romeo and Juliet* that premiered last year in Slovácké divadlo in Uherské Hradiště last summer. What was your dramaturgical approach to your work and how would you say your translation differs from others that are still regularly staged?**

Lukáš Kopecký became the artistic director of Slovácké divadlo and wanted to start the new season with something fresh. So he asked me for a translation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Because of time and also because of his willingness to risk artistically,

we agreed on the First Quarto version, which is shorter and much more comedic in its tempo and its situations. Lukáš and I had worked together on a number of occasions. He had directed two of my radio plays – *Princ Mucedorus a princezna Amadina* (2017), which is a loose translation of the anonymous Elizabethan tragicomedy *Mucedorus* (first printed 1598); and then *Košice 1923* (2019). He had also directed a cycle of mini-operas for the Ensemble Opera Diversa called *Grobiáni* (Tricksters, 2019), which we had conceived with Hana Hložková, our dear friend and genius dramaturg. The individual stories of the *Grobiáni* cycle were inspired by early modern English jigs. The piece I wrote with Ondřej Kyas, *Dorotčiny námluvy*, is an adaptation of the jig *The Wooing of Nan*.

From that point of view Lukáš and I were an old team. For *Romeo and Juliet* we agreed that we would go for the down-to-earth poetry and strip the story of the anachronistic Romantic veneer it has acquired in the popular imagination. I am reductive now but we went for blind passion, helplessness and the chaos the play stirs up. Some of the humour and raunchiness of our *Romeo and Juliet* had found its way from *Mucedorus* and from the *Grobiáni* cycle.



From the production of *Romeo and Juliet*, trans. Pavel Drábek, dir. Lukáš Kopecký (Photograph: Marek Malůšek).

On a textual level, my approach was different in that I tried to follow the rhythmical movements of Shakespeare's play, rather than a strict blank verse. Shakespeare's

verse is rather irregular – an incomplete line here, an oddity there. I noticed that each persona tends to have different speaking rhythms. So for instance Old Capulet often speaks in a combination of tetrameters and trimeters, rather than in regular pentameter. That brings along a certain weight and tempo-rhythm. It marks Capulet's age. For me, this visceral quality is more important than some psychological consistency or stylistic finesse. When Capulet gets angry (and he does so quite easily), he snaps using very down-to-earth words and makes himself heard in no uncertain terms. Similar things are true with other characters, and I hope that this is a feature that gives the play a different quality in performance.

**As a translator, would you say it is easier or more difficult to translate a play that most of the audience members know in some form, have possibly read it more than once and remember some of the most iconic passages?**

I think it's different, not necessarily easier or more difficult. It will just get more attention. Everyone is curious what you'll do with it. I understand that some translators may be awed by the prospect of retranslating a famous passage. I enjoy it: the drama of the job lies there. Also, we are talking about the theatre, and a bit of provocation is healthy: it calls a rush of blood to the system and everyone in the theatre becomes more alive. And that's good, I think.

**Do you yourself have any favourite translation or translations of Shakespeare's play(s) and why?**

There are three Czech translations of Shakespeare that I particularly like:

1. Prokop Šedivý's *King Lear* of 1792. An unknown gem that I would like to see performed on stage: powerful lines written by an experienced theatre maker.
2. Antonín Přidal's *Othello* (1981) for its harsh and raw poetry that gives this play an uncompromising verve.
3. And, Alex Koenigsmark's version of *Troilus and Cressida* (1979), which was initially going to be called *Do postele s Kressidou* (To bed with Cressida), but the censors wouldn't have it. It was published later as *Noc s Kressidou* (A night with Cressida). Koenigsmark's is perhaps the most remarkable translation for me: he wrote it for the director Ivan Rajmont (1945–2015), to whom I owe a lot. Koenigsmark didn't translate literally. He took the structure of the dialogue and rewrote the lines. So, a scene in Shakespeare would have 15 speeches by 3 different speakers about a certain incident. Koenigsmark would keep this structure (15 speeches by 3 speakers), just use different words to write the dialogue about the incident. This is translation as theatrical reconstitution.

I find all three very inspiring and hope that they'll attract theatre makers to do something with them – or with their kind of creative translation.



Professor Pavel Drábek (Photograph: Marek Olbrzymek).

Filip Krajník, Masaryk University  
filip.krajnik@phil.muni.cz



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.



**PRODUCTION REVIEW:**  
**DOUBLE *HAMLET* – DOUBLE TROUBLE**

William SHAKESPEARE: *Hamlet*. Directed by Michal Dočekal, performed by Městská divadla pražská, Prague. Premiered 30 October 2021.

William SHAKESPEARE: *Hamlet*. Directed by Jakub Čermák, performed by Jihočeské divadlo, České Budějovice. Premiered 22 April 2022.

*Eva Kyselová*

*Klára Škrobánková*

THE story of *Hamlet*, perhaps the most famous play that there is, has a special position in the history of Czech drama. It has, nevertheless, been absent from Czech theatres for some years. Until October 2021, the most recent staging of *Hamlet* was Zdeněk Dušek's production in the Municipal Theatre Zlín in Southeast Moravia; no new *Hamlet* had been staged in the Czech capital since 2013. After the obligatory coronavirus break, two productions of William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* emerged on the Czech stage – in October 2021 in Prague and in April 2022 in České Budějovice, South Bohemia. Both productions use modern imagery and music; the approaches of the directors, however, differ significantly. As the creators of the pieces claim, the *Hamlet* in Prague is supposed to be “the study of madness in mad times,”<sup>1</sup> whilst the staging in České Budějovice sees the tragedy as a “struggle for love, justice, and power.”<sup>2</sup>

**One Hamlet Cannot Take It All**

*Hamlet* directed by the artistic director of Prague City Theatres (Městská divadla pražská), Michal Dočekal, premiered on October 30, 2021, in the ABC Theatre. Choosing Jiří Josek's translation, Dočekal, together with the dramaturges Jana

---

<sup>1</sup> From the description on the web of the theatre: <https://www.mestskadivadlaprazska.cz/in-scenace/1511/hamlet/>.

<sup>2</sup> From the description on the web of the theatre: <https://www.jihoceskedivadlo.cz/porad/2503-hamlet>.

Slouková and Daniel Příbyl, decided to supplement Shakespeare's text with additional verses from Vladimír Holan's and Ivan Diviš's poetry, a handful of lines from Heiner Müller's postmodern drama *Die Hamletmaschine* and Jean-Luc Legarce's monodrama *Les Règles du savoir-vivre dans la société moderne* (*Rules for Good Manners in the Modern World*), as well as passages from Julien Beck's *Living Theatre*. The inclusion of such excerpts aims to emphasize the modernity and topicality of *Hamlet* to the contemporary audience, commenting on the long (and to a certain extent tiring) history of the Danish prince on the European stage. Maybe we have already seen it all? Maybe we are all Hamlet, weary of our maddening everyday existence in the post-covid world?

The set of Dočekal's production, a white space on the stage, is dominated by a framed, life-sized picture of a beach. The characters gather in what looks like an exhibition center or, perhaps, an art venue, where a sofa or a chair can be added, promptly changing the set into a bedroom or a living room. Later on in the play, the picture moves into the background, shifting the focus to a big, frosted glass window, in which, from time to time, a spying Claudius or Polonius can be seen. Breaking the fourth wall, stage left is a vanity table where the characters apply their make-up or change their costumes.

The characters fashionably blend into the white background of the stage. Hamlet (Tomáš Havlínek), contrary to the predominant European tradition, is not dressed in black – at first, he wears striped pajamas, later he changes into casual khaki/beige clothes. Nothing visually denotes his royal heritage, making him, to quote Jan Kott's famous words, our contemporary. The rest of the characters share this contemporaneity – Ophelia (Beáta Kaňoková) wears a chic powder pink dress, Gertrude (Ivana Uhlířová) dons a pantsuit, Claudius (Tomáš Milostný) sports a sweater and a pair of Nikes and only jokingly puts on a plastic toy crown. Yet, despite the visual modernity of the production and the texts supplementing Shakespeare's original drama, it is hard to understand what the director wanted to say with this concept of *Hamlet*. The motivation of the characters is generally confusing, with the actors changing their demeanor every other scene. The best example of this character uncertainty is Ophelia, who oscillates between a modern, emancipated woman in the relationship with Hamlet, and an abused daughter of the physically violent Polonius. Her behavior changes constantly – she is confidently pushing Hamlet away, playing with him, keeping up with his fake madness and, minutes later, without any external pressure, starts hysterically crying. Her madness seems to appear much earlier than in Shakespeare, culminating in her singing Iggy Pop's "I Wanna Be Your Dog," only to later enter the stage with a pack of dry dog food, which she hands out to those around her instead of the usual flowers.

The acting of the cast is not on the same level – Ivana Uhlířová as Gertrude is informally expressive, Filip Březina's Horatio is angrier than Hamlet but it is unclear why, Tomáš Milostný as Claudius has an obvious problem with speaking in verse and Havlínek's Hamlet is emotionally distressed from his very first lines, which eventually leads to his inability to escalate his behavior further, forcing the actor to resort to mere outbursts of helplessness (Havlínek's or Hamlet's?).

On the one hand, Dočekal's production features a number of interesting and novel ideas – Gertrude and Claudius behave like teenagers in love, sidelining the question of power; the colorfully dressed troupe of arriving actors, contrasting with the white space, and neutrally colored costumes of the “ordinary” characters, such as the quiet, observant Horatio (who, dressed in black, looks more like Hamlet than Hamlet himself), who is seen typing the story of Hamlet as the play unfolds, ultimately to take on his quest to share the story with the world. However, these ideas do not work together to create a conceptually stable production of modern *Hamlet* and rather present a display of loosely connected, effectively and pleasantly looking scenes. There seems to be no central idea or theme tying the individual scenes together. The numbers are skillfully arranged, full of intertextual jokes and pop-cultural references, but they all function as one-off events, not facilitating any deeper understanding as to why these elements are present. The more the director tries to be provocative (burying Ophelia's body in a sofa-bed, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern looking like hip-hop singers), the more conventional and sterile the production becomes – it never really transgresses the limits of traditional drama as the concept of the production does not attempt to challenge Shakespeare's text.

### **Totally Cool Hamlet**

After the Prague City Theatres decided to use Josek's translation instead of the new one by Filip Krajník, the South Bohemian Theatre in České Budějovice unexpectedly decided to make use of the latest version of the play. Martina Schlegelová, the artistic director of the theatre, however, chose to stage their *Hamlet* in the studio theatre, the so-called Půda (the “Attic”), which is usually reserved for experimental and chamber pieces. Another surprising choice was the director of the production – Jakub Čermák is currently known for his radical adaptations of classical dramas (*Maryša* by the Mršník brothers, Stroupežnický's *Naši furianti*). It was obvious that Čermák's direction on a small stage would not be traditional, classical, or idyllic. Yet, what one can do in Prague might not work in a regional theatre, which is heavily dependent on the subscription system and its somewhat conservative audience. This might be



why Čermák's *Hamlet* is not the director's most eccentric piece, even though the production rejects the usual, provincial style and is not afraid to be original and distinctive.

The production works with postmodern references, the plot is set on a stage resembling a cheap disco club, with the central focus on a big photograph of King Hamlet (Pavel Oubram) and his funeral. The whole cast attends, bringing flowers as a sign of formal condolence; only Hamlet is hiding among the audience, occasionally saying "My dad died" to the microphone. Those who would expect a depressed and insecure Hamlet will be disappointed. Dan Kranich as Hamlet is a self-confident man, very loudly expressing his disagreement with his mother's new husband, but it is not clear whether it is because of the Oedipus complex or simple male rivalry, since Claudius is not performed by an elderly actor, but by Kranich's peer, Jakub Koudela. His interpretation of the new king works in the intentions of instinctive and physical dominance, by which he controls everyone around him, most importantly Gertrude.

Čermák uses Kranich's full artistic potential and his musical talent (Kranich is, in fact, the founder of the hip-hop band Past) – some parts of Hamlet's monologues are delivered in the form of a suggestive hip-hop song, which brings the character significantly closer to the younger audience. The prince is the representative of the younger generation, allowing young people in the audience to identify with him as his family problems might be shared by many spectators. Although Kranich does not always keep up with the pace and rhythm of the performance, he dominates the small stage but does not try to steal the spotlight and overshadow his colleagues.

Eliška Brumovská as Ophelia is a great partner for this Hamlet. In her artistic expression, she is neither hysterical nor extreme. It is obvious that the couple's relationship is intimate, and the director is not afraid to emphasize the romantic and sexual subtext of their bond. Čermák's interpretation of Ophelia is not vulgar, but she is not her father's passive and obedient daughter either. She does not hide her sexuality and physical longing for Hamlet – on the contrary, Ophelia is not afraid to demonstrate her desire and simply seduces Hamlet.

The long Shakespearean text has undergone significant changes and shifts. Ophelia's final scene is omitted; instead of giving flowers, Brumovská sings the iconic Czech song "Modlitba pro Martu" ("A Prayer for Martha"). Fortinbras's arrival has also been cut. After Claudius' and Hamlet's deaths, Horacio bashfully puts the royal crown onto his head, concluding the production.

Hamlet and Horacio's relationship is quite specific – next to the handsome Hamlet, Horatio looks a bit like an outsider, wearing glasses, having an odd hair-style and a speech impediment. He is an apparent admirer of his royal friend,

looking up to him, and wanting to be like him. In the finale, the focus ultimately shifts to Horatio, evoking a parallel to the relationship between Tom Ripley and Dickie Greenleaf from *The Talented Mr Ripley*. After a moment with the crown on his head, Horatio stands up and confidently and authoritatively stares at the audience. Such an ending is open to the audience's interpretation: Did Fortinbras not fit onto this tiny stage? Is this scene a metaphor for a tyranny that is being replaced by another? Does this gesture refer to the biblical "the first will be last and the last will be first"?

The interpretation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – in this case, the girls "Guildie" and "Rosie" – is not entirely clear either. Casting women as Hamlet's friends is nothing new, but this gender swap seems to be only superficially motivated. Guildie and Rosie are Hamlet's acquaintances from their wild party years, they share a history and therefore provoke Ophelia's jealousy as she sees them, scantily dressed, embracing and pampering her beloved. Yet they are quick to change sides and allow Claudius to manipulate them into tricking Hamlet, whom they were spoiling mere minutes ago. Despite still being referred to as university students, they are shallow, and the actresses further devalue the characters with unnecessarily eccentric gestures to the point one wonders how the intelligent rebel Hamlet could ever befriend such gold-diggers. Both actresses (Nicole Tisotová and Daniela Šišková) also play the two clowns/gravediggers, dressed in black latex costumes, colored wigs and circus clown masks, balancing between life and death (the similarity with the clown from the horror movie *IT* is surely not coincidental). They put on a deliberately bad puppet show with Yorick's skull, which they subsequently pass on to Hamlet. The moment when Hamlet realizes the transience of life is thus unnecessarily transformed into a primitive routine that lacks the fundamental importance of Shakespeare's writing.

Krajník's translation works well on the stage, it does not bear any signs of excessive word-to-word paraphrasing of the English original. The actors are successful in tackling the Renaissance text even though the level of their rhetorical skills differs from person to person.

After a long time, the two new Czech Hamlets are individuals that the audience finds worth following. The spectators want to experience Hamlet's sorrows and anxiously wait for what will happen and who will kill whom, although the motivation, pace and dynamics of the productions are not always balanced. Regarding the South Bohemian *Hamlet*, it is necessary to appreciate the audience's readiness and willingness to accept a brand-new translation that has previously never been tried on stage. We are excited to see which theatre chooses Krajník's translation, what the academic and critical response will be, and whether it will become a legitimate part of the Czech Shakespearean canon.

*Production Review: Double Hamlet – Double Trouble*

Eva Kyselová, Academy of Performing Arts  
eva.kyselova@damu.cz

Klára Škrobánková, Masaryk University  
skrobankova@phil.muni.cz



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAKUB ČERMÁK  
ON *HAMLET*, DEPRESSIVE CHILDREN  
AND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OFFICIAL  
AND INDEPENDENT CZECH SCENES

*Michal Zahálka*

**Jakub Čermák** is the co-founder and artistic chief of Depresivní děti touží po penězích (Depressive Children Yearn for Money), an award-winning independent theatre company based in Prague. He graduated with a B.A. in film directing from Prague's Academy of Performing Arts, Faculty of Film and TV. He is noted for his highly visual, unorthodox aesthetics. In addition to his work with his own company, he has directed in publicly subsidised theatres in Prague, in the regions and recently also in Poland. In 2022, he directed a production of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at South Bohemian Theatre in České Budějovice in a new translation by Filip Krajník.

**MZ:** You are mostly associated with something that might be called “avant-garde theatre.” At the same time, however, in the last fifteen years or so, you have been constantly returning to classical texts, both literary and dramatic. Is it convenient to employ such classics, including the works of Shakespeare, because they attract audiences, or do you see some special value in them?

**JČ:** It has transpired that, although I'm very interested in the present, I've always been gravitating towards the classical canon in some way. At secondary school, I was quite conservative in terms of theatre and art; only later, influenced by people around me, including my then boyfriend, who did abstract paintings which I didn't understand, I gradually discovered and delved into other forms, those that weren't taught at school. However, even when I started doing theatre, I always asked myself the question “Why am I doing this particular piece?” Perhaps I was even obsessive when I insisted on finding some reason, some topicality. And I haven't changed in this respect. I don't pick classical texts because they'll more likely attract audiences (luckily, with Depressive Children, we've always had audiences), but out of some pride and egotism I like to wedge or sneak myself in, and I'm always happy when

we manage to interpret the play differently or in a surprising manner. This, of course, is not the case with *Hamlet*, as there's nothing there that can be interpreted in a new way. (*Laughs.*)

**When you did the production *Višňový Sade* (*The Cherry Sade*), I always wondered whether the combination of *The Cherry Orchard* and the Marquiz de Sade was entirely based on the pun. (In Czech, the word “sad,” or orchard, and the name “Sade” are homophones. – ed.)**

This one was co-directed by Martin Falář and myself, and I don't remember which of us made that connection. It really was based on the pun; but, at the same time, Ranevskaya lived in Paris, so we had the first part where the audience can see her enjoying indecent pleasures spiced with philosophy; and then, when the Revolution breaks out, she hurries back to Chekhovian Russia, which is a very uncomfortable and backwards place. Sometimes out of a silly idea emerges something that makes sense dramaturgically and significantly enriches the work.

**Let's focus on *Hamlet* for a while. You said there's nothing that could be interpreted in a new way. However, you are a very visual director – for our readers benefit, let's mention *Maryša*, a classic of Czech realism, which you staged almost completely silent. Could you tell us in what respect you find Shakespeare's proverbial “words, words, words” attractive and inspiring?**

I probably wouldn't have picked *Hamlet* – this choice came out of long dramaturgical meetings about what the theatre (*South Bohemian Theatre in České Budějovice* – ed.) wanted. Long ago, Martin Falář and I wanted to stage *Hamlet* at the National Monument at Vítkov, in Prague, and I wanted to play the roles of Hamlet and Ophelia. Hamlet was supposed to have a ridiculous number of shoes, and it was going to be a series of situations in which Hamlet is unable to make any decision, including which shoes to wear. Now the decision to stage *Hamlet* was made, and it forced me, among other things, to read the text of the play in its entirety – before that, I had seen it staged a hundred times and I had read some of the scenes, but I think I'd never read the whole thing. I was surprised how slow and lengthy the play was, as well as by the fact of how uncertain it is at moments. I understand – I hope! – what Hamlet says in the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy, but I'm not sure why it is placed where it is. I even moved it to a different place in my production. And maybe it's the uncertainty that provokes the creators. On the other hand, with the closet scene, the play gathers a fast pace and becomes very thrilling before it again slowly reaches the finale (which we cut significantly as well). When you asked about “words, words, words,” whether it means the speeches or Filip's translation – let me start with the translation. I liked that it's not primarily poetic and is, in a way, very accurate. When I try

to give my obsessive instructions to the actors, I try to be as exact as possible, and I think that Hamlet, too, tries to grasp the complex and complicated reality by being accurate with his words. So, this topicality and emphasis on the detail were things that I liked very much about the translation. As for the speeches, when I said that you cannot interpret *Hamlet* in a new way, I think there might be a book describing every character (I've never seen such a book, but I imagine there very well could be one), for instance Horatio – the most boring character I have seen on Czech stages – and you'll find there how it was done in the past, all the variants that you may combine in a creative way. And I think it was this combinatorics that intrigued me most about *Hamlet*. When we had the first read-through, I asked the actors which *Hamlets* they'd seen and what they remembered, so when I recalled those I'd seen myself, I mostly remembered boredom, not being excited at all.



From the production of *Maryša (mlčí)* (*Marysha (is silent)*), directed by Jakub Čermák. (Photograph: Michaela Škvřňáková)

**And is there any *Hamlet* on Czech or foreign stages that you've seen and found intriguing as an ordinary audience member?**

I cannot say, off the top of my head, but I primarily attend other kinds of drama as a theatregoer, so I don't feel really competent to judge them. But it wouldn't probably happened yet that I'd fall in love with a production of *Hamlet*.

**You mentioned Filip's translation. I collaborated on it as a consultant, and what intrigued me about his approach was that it opens the text to entirely new interpretations, different from the general tradition, so to speak. On the other hand, one could say that the translation of *Hamlet* by Jiří Josek from 1999 sounds somewhat less problematic and more contemporary. I don't want to say Filip's translation is bookish, but it's surely challenging to the reader. How did you cope with this on the stage?**

Some of the actors, not many but some, responded to this feature of the text even during the first read-through. But then they all took a liking to Filip because they saw how he endured all my ideas and interpretations. At one point – I think it was the actress playing Rosie (*the female version of Rosencrantz – ed.*) – someone asked a question, and Filip answered it the best he could. I let him finish and then said something like, well this was the academic opinion and now I'll tell you how we'll do it for real. He was able to withstand all of this very bravely. (*Laughs.*) Maybe that was the reason why the actors no longer had any objections to the translation. It is certainly true that this is not an easy idiom to learn or pronounce. But easiness is not the value of a translation for me. Although comparing texts in detail is not really my scene, I feel that, in the case of Hilský's translation, at times the idea is crystal clear, that he is able to convey it and I never need to stop and think about the meaning. I feel that, in the case of other translations, I must concentrate when reading it or even listening to the text. From the very beginning, I knew I wanted to do a *Hamlet* that would be very contemporary – in terms of the visual aspect, in terms of the acting expression, in terms of the overall message or even the concept of the characters. In this respect, the easy flow of the speeches is not that crucial to me. It is ultimately up to the actor to convey the lines, to make them understandable to the audience.

**Is there any Shakespearean material that you'd be tempted to work on?**

I'm almost embarrassed to say it, because it is played everywhere and I think some of the productions are very good – *Macbeth*. For several years now I've been longing to make an all-female *Macbeth*. No male element at all – Macbeth would be a woman, Lady Macbeth as well. I've already got in mind plenty of beautiful, fantastic, wild carnal scenes that'd show that this play about machismo, or toxic masculinity as it is fashionably called nowadays, could very well work with the female element, presenting the side of women that we perhaps overlook a bit nowadays, for better or worse, that of sexuality, of combativeness. I'd really love to do that, but I'm

afraid there's no theatre in the Czech Republic that would be brave enough to put on this interpretation of the play.



From the production of *Hamlet*, directed by Jakub Čermák. (Photograph: Alexandr Hudeček)

**We'll see if you're right or not. After years that you focused on independent theatre and your own ensemble, you started collaborating with publicly subsidised theatres, namely in České Budějovice, and also have one past and one future production in Jihlava, both currently being theatres with great potential. Is it a different kind of experience? Plus, in České Budějovice, you did *Hamlet*, which is a great title for a regional theatre, but staged in the studio theatre. How did this happen?**

Because they're afraid to let me on the main scene. (*Laughs.*) However, this coming season, or the one after, I'll be on the main scenes both in České Budějovice and Jihlava. I didn't want to put *Hamlet* in the studio theatre. Not because of the prestige or anything like that, but because from Venuše ve Švehlovce Theatre, where I primarily work, I'm used to a big space where I'm strong in terms of composition, of placing the actors and of being able to create emotions there. I was really afraid that I wouldn't be able to create anything in České Budějovice, that the actors wouldn't even fit there, but begrudgingly I must admit that it's possible to work even in the studio

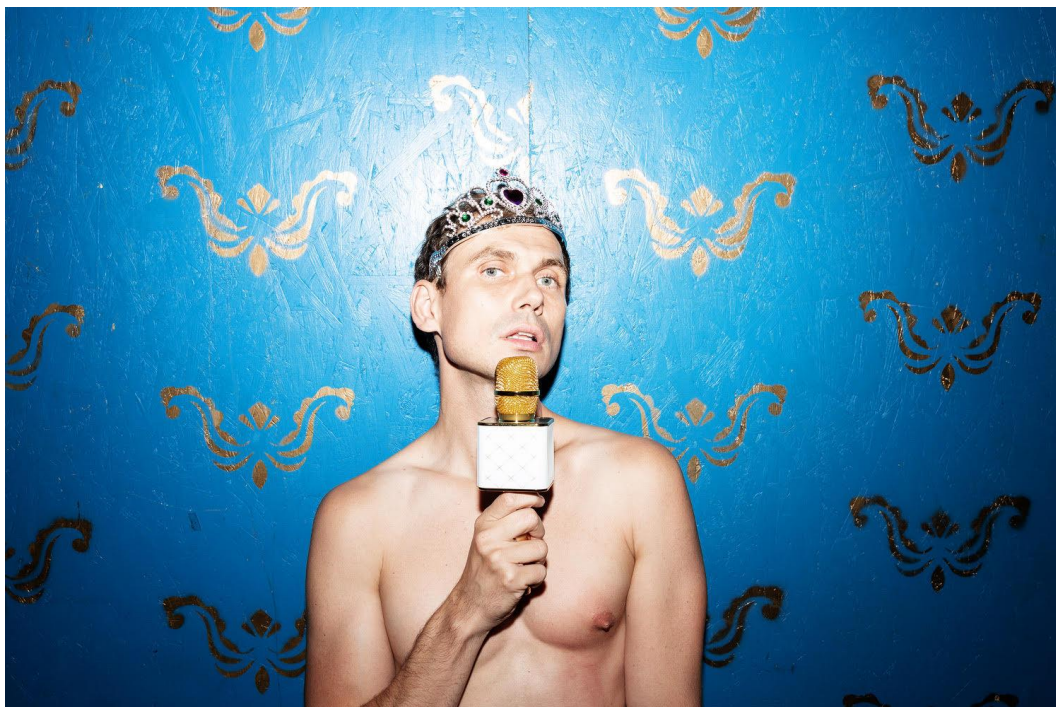


theatre. (*Laughs*) Before I went to České Budějovice, I was angry with myself that I agreed with the studio theatre, and I was telling myself that this was the last time, that I'd tell them next time that I wanted the main scene because the small one makes me nervous. The size of the scene influences me significantly in terms of what's going on the stage. I had a number of ideas for *Hamlet* that we simply couldn't realise. But working for publicly subsidised theatres is like going to a spa. When I made the first experience with Horácké Theatre in Jihlava, where I did *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, I became angry with theatre critics who write about independent theatre. They should all make a deep bow to every independent scene. When they write about these kinds of theatre, it's as if they were comparing one-legged and two-legged athletes competing. The conditions are so different and, even when the final production on an official scene turns out to be worse than on an independent one, these cannot really compare in terms of possibilities. My admiration to all people who work in the independent theatre sphere and are successful has grown massively. I love *Depressive Children* and everything we do together, but I love it that I have two or three productions in official theatres because they're incredibly relaxing for me. However, I've seen a number of cases of the director who succeeds on an official scene and ultimately leaves his original ensemble, so I need to be careful with this as I don't want to leave *Depressive Children*, and I know I need to dedicate my time and effort to them.

**And what is your experience with actors in official theatres, where you cannot always work only with people whom you'd prefer? Any negative experience with a self-confident local actor?**

I have never had any negative experience in terms of someone refusing my style or approach. However, my productions in publicly subsidised theatres are in some way tamer than what I do with my ensemble. It's not because of my cowardice or their incompetence, but if I see theatre as communication, there's no point in staging *The 120 Days of Sodom* or *Martyrdom or the Art of Suffering* like I do in my theatre because I'd scare the audience. I think I know methods for how to give the people something that they wouldn't expect, but my goal is not to go somewhere and make a production that'd scare them away. Rather, I want to create something that might be different from what they're used to – but that's not my primary goal, it's rather my means. I want them to have a positive experience, I want them to enjoy themselves, so both in terms of the choice of themes and forms I approach different kinds of audiences differently.

*Michal Zahálka*



Director Jakub Čermák. (Photograph: Michaela Škvrňáková)

Michal Zahálka, Arts and Theatre Institute, Prague; Charles University  
michal.zahalka@idu.cz



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.



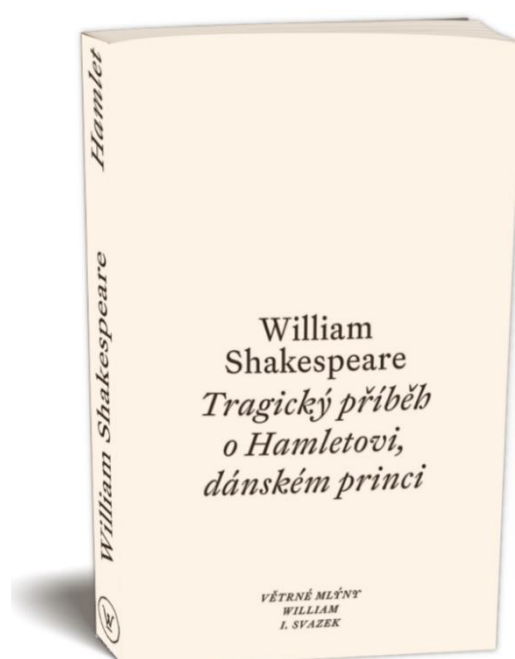
## BOOK REVIEW: HAMLET – THE NEXT DANISH IDOL

William SHAKESPEARE: *Tragický příběh o Hamletovi, dánském princi*, translated by Filip Krajník. Brno: Větrné mlýny, 2022.

Eva Kyselová

FEW national cultures know as much as the Czech one does that a new translation of a play by Shakespeare is a social, cultural and, in a way, political event. This is even more the case with *Hamlet*. Translations of this supreme revenge tragedy have been a staple of Czech literature, translation tradition, theatre, as well as the sphere of literary criticism, for more than two centuries. This has created the impetus to challenge the boundaries of its interpretation, to challenge a dramatic piece that has an infinite number of semantic layers.

Czech theatre of the last two decades has been impacted by translations of *Hamlet* by two authors – Martin Hilský and Jiří Josek (both premiered in 1999 and were subsequently published as books). They both still enjoy great popularity; indeed, Martin Hilský's life-long effort (or even mission) to record, translate, educate on Shakespeare – indeed, continually to make the work, life and time of the English Renaissance playwright present – has elevated him from the position of a translator to one of a respected and praised celebrity. Progress, however, cannot be stopped and the renditions of Josek and Hilský no longer represent the most up-to-date trends in translation for the theatre. It is praiseworthy that the long and rich tradition of translating Shakespeare into Czech continues and that the first in a series of new Shakespearean translations is *Hamlet*, especially when the translation was not done with only the printed form in mind.



The goal of the new edition of Shakespeare's works, entitled *William* and published by Větrné mlýny publishers, of which the translator and literary scholar Filip Krajník is the general editor, is to revise and present Shakespeare's drama in new renditions, liberated from the conventions and interpretations of the past. It seeks to be attracting the attention of theatre practitioners who might be interested in staging them, but also of general readers, inviting them to give a chance to old but still exciting dramatic texts.

Krajník's translation, bearing the quarto title *The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (it is perhaps the first Czech translation of *Hamlet* based on the 1604/5 quarto of the play rather than the 1623 folio version), is accompanied by several studies, examining the work from diverse perspectives. Even the introductory note, written by the translator himself in collaboration with the preeminent expert on Shakespeare's work Pavel Drábek, presents a manifesto of a kind (although explicitly rejecting this designation), an artistic programme that not only covers the current Shakespeare edition, but also establishes new goals and ambitions for translating *Hamlet* into Czech.

The text defines Krajník's translation against the two most recent renditions of *Hamlet* into Czech (that is, Josek and Hlinský's), suggesting they are not communicative enough and are growing obsolete, without, however, drawing attention to its own self-confident interpretational – or generational – form of translation. *Hamlet* always embodies the sensibilities of the present generation, regardless of the translator or the director's age. Hamlet is simply an archetype of an angry individual, his attitude springing from life experience. This is why Krajník's translation can be considered generational, not just ongoing: the translator himself represents a certain research method, following and defining himself against his models, pushing the boundaries of the research, while taking into consideration his own individuality, as well as his own generation. Hamlet is not just an "anonymous fellow" – and neither should his translator be.

Krajník's competence is not in doubt: the translator is an enthusiastic and learned Anglicist and historian. His translation superbly employs the language to the extent that it does not shy away from going against the established routine or tradition (which is most obvious in the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy); at the same time, it respects the literary value of the text, since in its infinite multi-layeredness lies the play's (im)perfection and timelessness. This translation does not speak with the splendour or pomp of Hlinský's wordplays that please the ear, nor does it opt for the sharpness and poignancy of Jiří Josek, who never hesitated to get to the point. In Krajník's *Hamlet*, each of the characters has his or her own place and the audience is frequently invited to stop and think, "So what did he mean by that?" This itself is no

small achievement. Although this *Hamlet* is not essentially political, it is engaged in terms of the level of the liberalisation of the text (which the translator comments on in detail in the footnotes), as well as of the liberty which he thus gives the potential producers (a liberty that they have already made use of – see the review of Jakub Čermák's recent production of Krajník's translation in the present issue of *THEPES*).

It may have been Krajník's rich experience with the translation of fantasy literature (above all, of Philip K. Dick) that helped him find and summon up the courage for his innovative approach to what is perhaps the most canonical play, one that is to some extent known by everyone with any education.

The volume includes the aforementioned contextual studies that follow the story of *Hamlet* from several points of view. The essay by Anna Mikyšková provides a survey of the stage history of the play in the Renaissance, the Restoration and eighteenth century England. Mikyšková charts in detail not only the chief performers of the play's protagonist, but also describes the theatrical conventions of the time, elucidating the shifts that took place on English stages after the re-opening of the theatres in 1660. The author is an Anglicist and presents the historical context in an engaging way; however, uncertainty and simplification take place when she moves to the sphere of theatre history. It is too general to argue that we live in the times of post-Freudian psychologisation of dramatic characters. The author's work with the Czech term "klaun" (the equivalent to the English "clown") is somewhat awkward – even in Czech theatre discourse, the English phrase "clowns and fools" is commonly used, with their clear differentiation in the context of Elizabethan theatre. The thirty-page study includes generous notes and works with a number of sources; it is therefore somewhat surprising that, after such laborious research, the author does not come up with a stronger statement regarding the staging history of the play as opposed to finishing her text with a laconic observation about the diversity of the various past forms of *Hamlet*.

As a loose sequel to Mikyšková's essay, the theatre scholar and Anglicist Klára Škrobánková charts the stage history of *Hamlet* from Edmund Kean's iconic treatment of Hamlet at the beginning of the nineteenth century up until the most recent experimental interpretations in the new millennium, including the crucial film adaptations. The author does not attempt to cover the topic completely (that would require a whole volume); instead, she presents a collection of the most interesting (and most radical) Hamletian productions thus far. A large space is devoted to females who have enacted Hamlet, referring to the well-known proposition about the Prince's ambiguous non-masculinity and, in contrast, the female features of the character. It is noteworthy that these gender experiments were the domain of the last century, while the current theatre practice seems reluctant to entertain them. Škrobánková's

essay is a gateway of a kind to *Hamlet* as a pop-cultural phenomenon, an iteration of the play and the character that the audience might encounter before even seeing or reading the piece as a whole.

Any edition of a new Czech translation of *Hamlet* would be incomplete without a reflection on the staging tradition in Czech theatres. In his essay, David Drozd comments on selected Czech productions of the play done after 2000. Drozd's text is also very "picky," focusing on the interpretations of the play by the directors Jan Nebeský, Jan Mikulášek, Miroslav Krobot and Daniel (today Daniela) Špinar. He also briefly mentions the so-called transitional productions, that is, those that immediately preceded the year 2000. Drozd's survey is not all that systematised. The author subjectively and selfishly chose productions that he himself considered noteworthy – which he is absolutely entitled to. Thanks to Drozd's selection, readers are given the opportunity to follow the trend of the recent years of ever-younger Hamlets on Czech stages. While Jan Nebeský's production (that premiered in 1994 and was staged until 2002) featured an already middle-aged David Prachař in the eponymous role, Patrik Děrgel in Švanda Theatre in Prague moved the role more toward the young generation.<sup>1</sup> The two current Hamlets, Tomáš Havlínek in Prague City Theatres and Dan Kranich in South Bohemian Theatre, can indeed speak to their peers about their issues, such as boredom, indifference, depression, the desire to go one's own way and the clash with authorities.

The first volume of *William* by a collective of authors enters the Czech Shakespearean space confidently; however, it looks as if it does not yet fully know whom it seeks to address. On the one hand, there is a precise translation with detailed explanatory notes, while on the other, there is a (in places too) light-hearted and emotional style of acknowledgement at the volume's beginning. Perhaps Hamlet's speech to the players about modesty of expression would have been apposite here. The edition seeks to cover a number of spheres – English studies, theatre studies, history, linguistics, as well as theatre practice (the last one being testified to by what is called "dramaturgical translation," a new method and term coined by the *William* collective). This is only natural and understandable. This, however, also appears to be the reason why the volume struggles with imbalance, at places even inaccessibility, both in terms of form (switching between the author plural and singular; rather impractically translating well-known English names, such as The Globe, The Swan, etc., into Czech) and the nature of the contributions of the individual authors.

---

<sup>1</sup> In this context, I would add one of the most interesting adaptations of the play for young audiences, *Hamleteen*, by Tomáš Jarkovský and Jakub Vašíček which premiered in 2012 in Alfa Theatre in Pilsen, West Bohemia.

*Eva Kyselová*

Hamlet is a play of passion, reason, dilemma and rebellion, and reading the first volume of *William* evokes precisely these emotions. God save Hamlet!

Eva Kyselová, Academy of Performing Arts  
eva.kyselova@damu.cz



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.





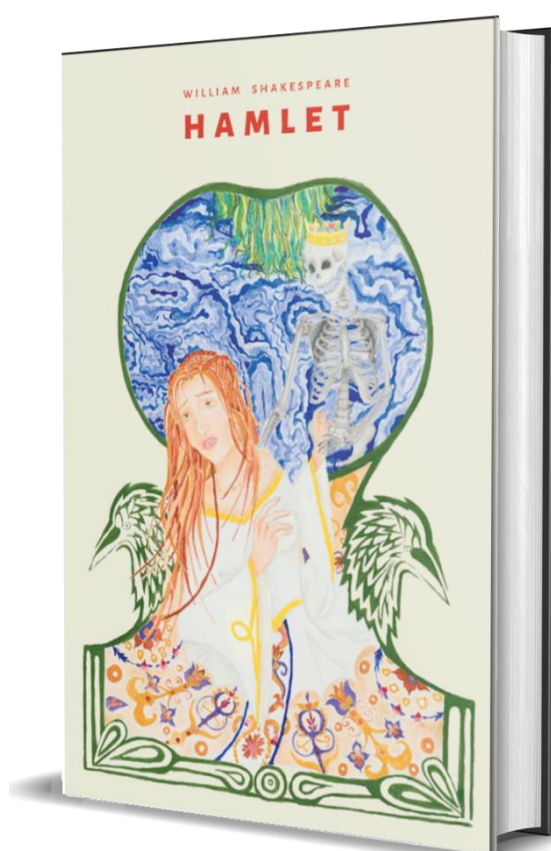
AN INTERVIEW WITH KATEŘINA FÜRBACHOVÁ  
ON ILLUSTRATING *HAMLET* (AND OPHELIA), FASHION  
AND ECOLOGICAL ACTIVISM THROUGH ART

Anna Mikyšková

FILIP Krajník's translation of *Hamlet* (see Eva Kyselová's review in this issue) has been published in two variants: as the first volume of the "William" series, which will in upcoming years publish Shakespeare's dramatic works in new Czech translations, and as a stand-alone volume, aimed primarily at students and accompanied by unique illustrations made by a young art-school student, Kateřina Fůrbachová. We met with Kateřina to ask her about what it was like to illustrate Shakespeare's greatest play, about her interests, plans and ambitions, as well as her favourite music...

**AM:** Could you tell our readers something about yourself and how you became the illustrator of the new Czech edition of *Hamlet*?

**KF:** Of course! My name is Kateřina Fůrbachová, I'm sixteen years old and I'm a first year student of fashion design at secondary school. I love vintage and retro stuff, especially fashion from the 50s, 60s and 70s. Fashion is my biggest love which I want to be really good at and which I want to pursue. Another passion of mine is environmental activism and eco-life. That's why I also work as a volunteer for Greenpeace. I got to *Hamlet* by a sheer accident and an unbelievable stroke of luck. Filip Krajník, the translator of the play, approached me via Instagram at someone's suggestion, asking me whether



I'd be interested in making a cover design for his book. He believed in me even though I hadn't given him any portfolio of my previous work. He just wanted a young artist from South Bohemia since his translation was going to premiere in South Bohemian Theatre. So this gift fell into my lap, so to speak. And I'm extremely grateful for it.

**The cover is the first thing that the future readers see and on the basis of which they usually decide whether they'll purchase the book or not. Can you tell us how you worked on yours and where you drew inspiration for it from?**

First of all, I got thoroughly acquainted with the play and came to understand the story and its atmosphere. Then I started working on various designs in which I tried to determine for myself who or what I wish to depict – and how. Then I selected the painting technique and kinds of paints. I mostly drew inspiration from various film adaptations of *Hamlet*, but I also found it in Mucha's posters and the 1970s' psychedelic style.

**Why did you pick Ophelia as the main motif? Is there anything about this character that particularly caught your attention?**

I think Ophelia's quite an overlooked character. I find that sad because, to my mind, she's much more than just a beautiful girl whom Hamlet loved. I also liked the idea that the title of the work is *Hamlet* – after a male character – but the book cover would tell the story of a tender and beautiful girl.

**Could you also tell us something about the illustration that appears on the play's title page inside the book? Where did it come from and what does it depict?**

I don't like explaining my works since I don't believe everything we create needs to have a background story or an explanation. I believe that if the work looks nice or evokes certain feelings, it should be enough. Anyway, the cover design sprang up very spontaneously. I was just kissed by a muse when I'd already finished a version that we ultimately didn't use. But we utilised the central element of that unused design and you can see it inside the book on the title page. It's of – as I see it – a genderless character, conveying the story and atmosphere of the play. The second version, the one that actually made it on the cover, came to me quite unexpectedly. All of a sudden, I had a vision of how to express Ophelia's suffering. So the cover depicts Ophelia in a colourful dress that expresses her purity, fragility and also her life before her father's death. Then there's the willow, the skeleton and the river that symbolise death and hopelessness luring Ophelia. And the ravens? Or are they chickens? Those you'll have to interpret for yourselves. They are precisely the part of the work that is there for aesthetic reasons, sparking the viewers' creativity and imagination.



**You created the illustrations with special eco-friendly paint supplies. How important is the issue of ecology for you and how does it, in your opinion, relate to art in any form?**

I've already mentioned that ecology is very important to me. For ecological and ethical reasons I'm a vegetarian and am planning to turn full vegan. I also try to lead a zero-waste life. A form of art that is definitely related to ecology is fashion. Fashion – "fast fashion" in particular – has a monstrous impact not only on the planet as a whole, but also on poor

countries and people who make these clothes. That's why I buy my favourite 70s and 60s items responsibly, either in second-hand shops or from sustainable brands.

**In one of the previous issues of *THEPES*, the painter and illustrator Olivia Lomenech Gill mentioned that, as an artist, she'd like to be socially involved in a positive way. Do you think that, through their work, artists can positively influence other people's behaviour? Is this your future goal as well? Is there any message that you'd like to pass to people?**

Through art, people definitely can convey their attitudes and opinions to influence others. So yes, it's totally possible to have a positive influence on other people through art. In the future, I want to be chiefly involved in fashion. And, of course, I want to spread happiness through my work rather than doing harm with it. Which is why I already know that my own brand will be sustainable. And it would be ideal if this future brand of mine collaborated with some non-governmental organisation and became a symbol of activism in the fashion domain. The message I'd like to pass on is definitely one of sustainability. And that our planet is beautiful, but it's also the only one we have.

**You repeatedly mentioned your studies and your liking for retro fashion. Why did you pick this branch in particular and what makes retro fashion so appealing to you? Would you like to draw from it in the future as a designer or is it just your personal taste?**



I first encountered fashion design when my friend and I made cosplay costumes for a Melanie Martinez concert. Sewing totally grabbed me. All I did during Covid was to create stuff and so I really explored the depths of my creativity. I realised how much I love creating when I started studying to be a nurse. I quickly found out then that I couldn't live without art so I started looking for an art school – where I ultimately ended up. So I picked fashion design because I love looking good and creating beautiful things. What I enjoy about retro fashion is the colours, patterns and designs. Nothing's ever kitschy in vintage and there's never too much of anything in it. That's precisely what I enjoy. But what I like most is that vintage, and the 1960s style

in particular, is the direct opposite of our current times. That gives me an opportunity to stand out and be different. My clothes will definitely be influenced by the fashion of the 60s and 70s, as well as by the psychedelic style. But I hope that, later on, I'll be able to grasp these in a unique way and absorb them into my own distinctive style.

**What are your professional plans for the future? Any dreams or goals that you'd like to share with our readers?**

I think I've already outlined them. To be an eco-symbol of the fashion world. And fill the world with my love. (*Laughs.*) So there you go.





*“The message I’d like to pass on is definitely one of sustainability. And that our planet is beautiful, but it’s also the only one we have.”*



**But let's go back to Shakespeare. Was illustrating *Hamlet* your first encounter with the Bard? Have you got a favourite Shakespeare play or story?**

I first met Shakespeare at basic school, where we read *Romeo and Juliet*. So I knew Shakespeare before. But I wasn't that familiar with *Hamlet*. However, since then it has become my favourite Shakespearean play. Let's not go into this too much – otherwise it'll transpire that I'm a literary ignoramus. (*Laughs.*)

**What is your relationship to the theatre in general? Is there any play that you like most?**

I enjoy theatre very much. One of my roommates from the halls of residence is a conservatoire student and she sometimes manages to get cheap tickets for beautiful productions. I always look forward to seeing them. I like ballet, opera, musicals, as well as spoken drama. But my absolutely favourite production so far is *The Man in the Iron Mask* – it was the first musical that I ever saw. I can still feel the epic atmosphere and my being enchanted by the great acting. I also enjoyed the historical costumes, of course. I'd like to design some Baroque costumes for a theatre production one day myself. I'd love that!

**Wow! Hope we'll be able to see your work on the stage one day! The cover for the new edition of *Hamlet* was your first commission for a book illustration. What kind of experience was it for you? Would you be interested in repeating this role in the future or are you planning to focus solely on fashion and fashion design?**

It was a wonderful experience and I'm extremely grateful for it. It was so pleasant chiefly because of Filip Krajník, who offered me the job. I'm glad I could collaborate with such a fair and considerate person. I'm happy that I could try what it takes



to be an illustrator so I'll never need to wonder what it takes or what it is like. If I were asked to do something like that again – I would probably say yes. But since I want to focus on fashion design and establish myself in this field, I don't really want to be a professional illustrator. So yes, if I were approached again with a commission, I'd be happy to do it, but I don't see it as my future profession.

**Is there anything you'd like to tell our readers or is there any question that we haven't asked and you'd like to answer?**

Go and visit my Instagram account, [f.kacik.u](https://www.instagram.com/f.kacik.u), and my TikTok profile, [kacka560](https://www.tiktok.com/@kacka560). And have a beautiful day! Hope it's one full of sunshine, happiness and love!

**And now for the most important thing: As a proud Queen fan, what is your favourite song or album by Queen and why?**

The album is easy – *Sheer Heart Attack*. But as far as my favourite Queen song is concerned, I still don't know. I like them all in a way. Of course, I like some better than others but I can't really say I have a "Number 1." It'd be a shame to pick just one out of so many good songs and say it is "the best."

**Many thanks for your time and we wish you all the best in all your future endeavours!**

Anna Mikyšková, Masaryk University  
anna.mikyskova@phil.muni.cz



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.



