Shakespearean Adaptations for Young Adults

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Abstract
Shakespeare's plays are undoubtedly among the most frequently translated, staged, adapted—both for stage and screen—and (over/mis)quoted. His plays and sonnets are widely read and are generally considered canonical, with their appeal crossing thematic, geographical and chronological boundaries. Each generation of recipients responds to Shakespeare's work in a different way. The present paper discusses Shakespearean adaptations which aim to encourage young recipients to engage with Shakespeare through the use of young people's language. First, the article examines how emoticons, textual portrayals and hashtags are used to render Shakespeare's plays in new ways. The OMG Shakespeare *series, which has been both criticized and praised, represents a transformation of Shakespeare's plays into new forms,* e.g. srsly Hamlet *(Courtney Carbone, 2015),* YOLO Juliet *(Brett Wright, 2015),* Macbeth #killingit *(Courtney Carbone, 2016), and* A Midsummer Night #nofilter *(Brett Wright, 2016). In addition, attention will be devoted to the representations of and allusions to Shakespeare and Shakespeare's characters in popular culture. The paper concludes by discussing how new, non-traditional interpretative choices may impact the reception of Shakespeare and his work on younger audiences.*

Keywords
William Shakespeare, adaptation, appropriation, reception, SMS language, popular culture

Framing: Adaptation

The act of adapting, to paraphrase the German literary scholar Wolfgang Iser, has currently achieved great popularity. Not only has it developed into a distinctive genre, but it has given rise to an independent field of research, Adaptation Studies. Adaptation occurs in almost every kind of art, including literature, music, theatre, film, television, computer games, and new media, such as blogs, vlogs, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, etc. In addition, intermedia, which are characterised by the cultural theorist Eric Vos as "artistic phenomena that appear either to fall between established categories or to fuse their criteria,"[1] allow for the creation of distinctive hybrids and crossbreeds containing more than one form of art. Strictly speaking, intermedial adaptations are the outcomes of concurrent and thorough blending processes, "comminglings" as Daniel Fischlin calls them,[2] taking place in discursive and technical fields. Moreover, intermedial adaptations or "comminglings" can be also considered from the point of view of Henry Jenkins's term "convergence."[3] Given its complexity and diversity, adaptation may be viewed through the lenses of identity, reception, and history.

1 Eric Vos, "The Eternal Network. Mail Art, Intermedia Semiotics, Interarts Studies," in *Interart Poetics: Essays on the Interrelations of the Arts and Media*, eds. Ulla-Britta Lagerroth, Hans Lund, and Erik Hedling (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 325.

2 Daniel Fischlin, "Introduction," in *OuterSpeares: Shakespeare, Intermedia and the Limits of Adaptation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 3.

3 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York, London: New York University Press, 2004), 2–3.

The term "adaptation" references a number of definitions and concepts. In her discussion of the meaning of the term, Margaret Jane Kidnie characterises adaptation as "an evolving category [that] is closely tied to how the work modifies over time and from one reception space to another."[4] The final impression of the newly-created work is naturally influenced by the recipient's familiarity with the original. In other words, the recipient's response to the adaptation arises from the evocation of similarities to and differences from the original. The simultaneous presence of familiarity and novelty allows the recipient's mind to oscillate between what is known (if anything) and what is new. Whereas familiarity raises expectations, novelty contradicts, disrupts or even subverts them. In this respect, any work, be it original or adaptation, is perceived against the horizons of expectations, i.e. the criteria that the recipient uses to evaluate a work at a given period in history and that is (pre)determined by the literary conventions and norms of the time. Although familiarity with the original work undeniably benefits readership/spectatorship, it would be wrong to suppose that previous knowledge is a fundamental (and insuperable) prerequisite for a proper understanding of the adaptation.

The closeness of the intertextual relationship between the original text and a new cultural product can be signalled by the title of the latter. As Julie Sanders argues, the more formal the title of the adaptation, the closer it usually stands to the original.[5] However, as Sanders argues at a general level, the relationship to the original "remains present and relevant, but it is as a grafting has taken place of a segment, or rootstock, of the original text."[6] Furthermore, she provides a list of possible varieties of adaptation, which include a version, a variation, an interpretation, a continuation, a transformation, an imitation, a pastiche, a parody, a forgery, a travesty, a revaluation, a revision and a rewriting.[7] This enumeration can be enriched by the notion of BADaptation, a term originally coined by Jim Kraus in his playful *Laugh-a-Day Book* (2012) and further developed by Kamilla Elliott, who argues that "adaptations have been dubbed bad (as well as many synonyms for bad) for violating moral and national ideologies as well as theories of ideal originals."[8]

Shakespeare Adaptation

It goes without saying that Shakespeare's works are a frequent subject of various adaptive processes and strategies, not forgetting the fact that Shakespeare himself adapted other works, or, more precisely, drew upon a number of various sources and adapted them to fit contemporary tastes. As Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier observe in their anthology of Shakespearean adaptations ranging from the seventeenth century to the present, "Shakespeare's works have, from their inception,

4 Margaret Jane Kidnie, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2009), 5.

5 Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 22.

6 Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 55.

7 Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 18.

8 Jim Kraus, *The Laugh-a-Day Book of Bloopers, Quotes & Good Clean Jokes*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 2012), 258; Kamilla Elliott, "The Theory of BADaptation," in *The Routledge Companion to Adaptation*, eds. Dennis Cutchins, Katja Krebs, and Eckart Voigts (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), 5–27.

been both the product and the source of an ongoing explosion of re-creation."[9] Shakespearean re-workings take different forms including literary, cinematographic and (inter)medial remakes. Moreover, they often work across literary genres. Shakespearean portmanteau of adaptations offers many such examples, e.g. plays (Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, 1967; *Love's Fire*, 1998;[10] *Humble Boy* by Charlotte Jones, 2001), novels (*The Prince of West End Avenue* by Alan Isler, 1995; *Gertrude and Claudius* by John Updike, 2000) and poems (*Pop Sonnets* by Erik Didriksen, 2015). Of particular importance in this respect is the Hogarth Shakespeare project, launched in London and New York in 2012, which encourages highly respected contemporary novelists to retell Shakespeare's works. Seven adaptations by British, American, Canadian, and Norwegian writers have so far been published: *The Gap of Time* (Jeanette Winterson, 2015, based on *The Winter's Tale*), *Shylock is My Name* (Howard Jacobson, 2016, *The Merchant of Venice*), *Vinegar Girl* (Anne Tyler, 2016, inspired by *The Taming of the Shrew*), *Hag-Seed* (Margaret Atwood, 2016, drawing on *The Tempest*), *New Boy* (Tracy Chevalier, 2017, based on *Othello*), *Dunbar* (Edward St Aubyn, 2017, an adaptation of *King Lear*), and *Macbeth* (Jo Nesbø, 2018). *On Hamlet*, by the American novelist Gillian Flynn, is coming in 2021. In addition, Shakespeare's works have inspired numerous film adaptations based either directly or indirectly on his plays (Jiří Trnka's puppet film *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1959; Grigori Kozintsev's *Hamlet*, 1964; Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*, 1990; Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet*, 2000; Sherwood Hu's *Prince of the Himalayas*, 2006, and many others).[11] In this respect, the set of humorous reworkings of literary classics entitled *Twitterature*, *The World's Greatest Books in Twenty Tweets or Less* (2009) by Alexander Aciman and Emmett Rensin should not go unnoticed.

Perhaps not so surprisingly, Shakespeare's plays have also inspired PC game developers and have entered a 3D virtual world. At the end of 2007 the eagerly expected multiplayer online role-playing game *Arden: The World of William Shakespeare* was released. With the Arden project funded by a MacArthur Foundation grant, the game itself was designed by a team led by Edward Castronova, an associate professor of telecommunications at Indiana University.[12] The game takes place in the virtual city of Ilminster, where the players' online characters (avatars) interact with characters from Shakespeare's plays, complete assigned tasks and answer trivia questions to improve their scores. As noted Shakespeare scholar Peter Holland observes:

> Such online quest-games or MMOG (Massive Multiplayer Online Games) are a form of theatrical experience in which the player becomes transforming performer, engaging not only with the ingenuity of the platform's creators in the setting tasks, and providing screen effects sufficient to engage and maintain interest, curiosity and a determination to reach the next level, to continue playing, but

9 Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, "Introduction," in *Adaptations of Shakespeare. A critical anthology of plays from the seventeenth century to the present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 1.

10 *Love's Fire* is a collection of seven plays by American playwrights inspired by seven of Shakespeare's sonnets, i.e. 118, 128, 140, 75, 102, 94 and 153–154.

11 For more information on Jiří Trnka's puppet films, see Kamila Vránková, "Dreams and Magic in the Illustrations and Puppet Movies of Jiři Trnka." *Belgrade English Language and Literature Studies*, vol. 7 (2015): 93–106, doi 10.18485/bells.2015.7.5.

12 *Arden: The World of Shakespeare* was based on a role-playing game *Neverwinter Nights* (2002), using the Aurora Engine open source software, which was subsequently utilised to create *Arden*.

> also the opportunity for connection with other gamers, to become part of a community, to share the experience in real as well as in virtual time, though not real space.[13]

The game, however, provoked contradictory reactions. Whereas scholars who found the Shakespeare framework enjoyable struggled with the gameplay, gamers familiar with MMOG and MMORPG found the tasks unexciting and not challenging enough.[14] Due to a lack of interest from the gaming community, the MacArthur Foundation ceased funding the development of *Arden* after one year.

Released in 2009, *Romeo: Wherefore Art Thou?* became more successful. In this game, players assume the avatar of Romeo, with whom they can navigate through ten levels of Shakespeare Country collecting roses and chapters from Shakespeare's plays while avoiding various dangers. Through a modification of *The Typing of the Dead: Overkill* (not recommended for younger players), Shakespeare has also entered the world of horror. In this game, which fuses the elements of horror and (black) comedy, players shoot zombies by entering words and sentences from Shakespeare's works, e.g. "Watchman to my heart" (*Hamlet* 1.3), "Melted into air" (*The Tempest* 4.1), "Defy the foul fiend" (*King Lear* 3.4), and many others. A weird combination of zombies appearing on screen without any apparent logic along with the random use of Shakespeare quotes out of context would seem to fill neither an educational nor an entertainment role. On the other hand, the literacy arcade game *'Speare*, which was developed by Daniel Fischlin and the Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project in 2007, combines the elements of an arcade game with educational purposes. The goal of the game, intended for youth aged 10–15, is to complete a mission by recovering stolen knowledge, e.g. words, phrases and facts which draw upon Shakespeare's plays, particularly *Romeo and Juliet*. As the developers claim, the game aims to reinforce "the value of creative communication and literacy instead of violence and destruction."[15]

Other examples of distinctive and often creative Shakespearean adaptations can be found on YouTube, which offers a number of Shakespearean inventions. A fake trailer for the non-existent James Cameron film *Hamlet* draws on a scene from *Last Action Hero* (1993), a film directed by John McTiernan and starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. The scene on which the YouTube "mash-up" trailer for Cameron's *Hamlet* is based takes place during teenager Danny's English class where students are being introduced to Shakespeare's tragedy and Danny's teacher presents the character of the Danish prince as one of the first action heroes. In McTiernan's film, the class is shown a clip (3.3) from Laurence Olivier's black-and-white *Hamlet* (1948). Here, as the distinguished Hamlet of Olivier gradually comes to the conclusion not to kill Claudius while he is praying, Danny lets his imagination flow and recreates a new image of a decisive, cigar-smoking and heavily armed "Terminator-Hamlet" who is ready to solve any problem instantly with his sword or his shotgun. A muscular Hamlet dressed in short-sleeved ornamented attire suddenly replaces Olivier on screen and addresses Claudius directly: "Hey Claudius, you killed my father. Big mistake!" and

13 Peter Holland, "Performing Shakespeare for the Web Community," in *Shakespeare in Hollywood, Asia, and Cyberspace*, eds. Alexander C. Y. Huang and Charles S. Ross (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2009), 252–264.

14 Brett Greatley-Hirsch and Michael Best, "Within this wooden /2./O": Shakespeare and New Media in the Digital Age," in *The Shakespearean World*, eds. Jill J. Levenson and Robert Ormsby (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 443–462.

15 "'Speare—the Literacy Arcade Game," Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project, http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/speare.cfm.

subsequently throws his uncle through the coloured stained glass. Later on, when an old man requests of Hamlet to "Stay thy hand, fair prince!" he retorts: "Who said I'm fair?" The recipient must concur when the narrator claims that "No one is going to tell this sweet prince good night."[16]

The YouTube trailer released by the fictional Spirit Pictures builds on and extends the adaptation of Hamlet from *Last Action Hero* using clips from various period-set films to create a more fully-formed parodic Shakespearean (and Schwarzeneggerian) appropriation, one which takes place "somewhere in the middle of Europe" and centres on the theme of revenge. This Hamlet certainly does not suffer from hesitancy, but is a man of action. His transformation into a stereotypical Hollywood hero is confirmed by the narrator's comment, "Hamlet is back and is not happy," which becomes the catchphrase of the trailer.[17]

Shakespeare's works have obviously been interpreted, reinterpreted, adapted, and appropriated in many ways, through both literary and non-literary art forms, and intended for various target audiences. Still, rather than a finished product, a Shakespearean adaptation should be viewed as an ongoing process, one which aims to re-contextualize the reworking to fit new circumstances and settings.

OMG Shakespeare

Shakespearean adaptations and appropriations occur across various genres. However, not much scholarly attention has been devoted to a newly-emerging Shakespearean "offshoot" written in the abbreviated language of short text messages (SMS). An example of such a specific Shakespearean transformation, which deploys the text message language often used by young adults, is a new series entitled *OMG Shakespeare*. This set of re-imagined Shakespeare adaptations was written by New York children's book editors Courtney Carbone and Brett Wright and published by Penguin Random House in 2016. The series consists of four Shakespearean remixes: *YOLO Juliet*[18] (Brett Wright), *srsly Hamlet* (Courtney Carbone), *Macbeth #killingit* (Courtney Carbone) and *A Midsummer Night #nofilter* (Brett Wight). The second of these, which will be briefly discussed in this paper, retells the story of the Prince of Denmark through text messages, emoticons, smileys, Facebook updates and Instagram hashtags.

In *srsly Hamlet*, Shakespeare's original is reformulated and transformed into a specific kind of remix, which is nevertheless difficult to define. Kylene Beers calls it a "text reformulation" which helps readers, particularly young people, to orientate themselves in the structure of the play and motivates them to read the original work.[19] The idea of transforming, or rather rewriting, Shakespeare's tragedy into SMS language in the period of the growing text messaging culture is, at least, an interesting idea. The key question arises, however, as to what particular purpose the *OMG Shakespeare* series serves, and whether this specific non-standard form of writing can

16 Shane Black and David Arnott, *The Last Action Hero*, directed by Joe McTiernan (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1993), Film.

17 "Hamlet is back and he is not happy," YouTube video, 3:29, "Spirits Pictures", January 29, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1j-wvCtzuI.

18 'You Only Live Once'.

19 Kylene Beers, *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do*, (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003), 160.

encapsulate the essence of Shakespeare's tragedy. In other words, it is still disputable to what extent the adaptation changes the communicative value of the original tragedy.

At first sight, the notes on the packaging of the *OMG Shakespeare* box set, particularly regarding *Hamlet*, look tempting.

> *Hamlet*, one of the greatest stories ever told . . . in texts?! Imagine: What if Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, and the tragic Ophelia had smartphones? A classic is reborn in this fun and funny adaptation of one of Shakespeare's most famous plays!
> A kingdom on the brink of war.
> A stolen throne.
> A boy seeking revenge.
> <3 and h8. The classics just got a whole lot more interesting. ☺[20]

Recipients can thus expect the application of typical SMS language features, such as phonetic and non-phonetic abbreviations, the omission of characters, the absence of orthographical rules, and the use of emoticons and smileys. As Peter Holland notes in his chapter on "Forgetting Performance," which was delivered as a plenary lecture at the ESRA Shakespeare Conference in Gdansk, Poland, in 2017, a number of funny jokes emerge, the first one coming at the beginning of the text.[21] When Horatio asks Marcellus and Bernardo if they have read an article he posted on www.NorwegianNews.com, Marcellus openly admits that it is "TL;DR" [too long, didn't read] and requests a recap (1.1).[22] The acronym TL;DR seems to be symptomatic not only of the origin of the *OMG Shakespeare* series, but also of contemporary reading conventions in general, as many readers (not only young ones) are gradually abandoning reading original texts in favour of simplified, shortened or paraphrased versions. Of course, this is not to say that each adaptation/appropriation is necessarily simplified—quite the other way around, as some of the aforementioned cross-genre adaptations suggest.

Turning back to Courtney Carbone's *srsly Hamlet*, Facebook, one of the most famous and successful social platforms, is humorously referred to through the category of "relationship status." After Polonius forbids Ophelia to speak to Hamlet (1.4 in Shakespeare's text), she posts a status update from "In a relationship" to "It's complicated." Later on, she updates it from "It's complicated" to "Single" when the Prince sends her to a nunnery (3.1.45). In this case, Ophelia's status update seems to be not merely a display of a particular stage of her relational development with the Prince, but also an evidence for her broken relationship and worries.

Another feature of smartphone communication commented upon in the adaptation is the sharing of images. In this respect, an amusing allusion to the application of filters to photographic images is made by Hamlet when he forces his mother to compare his dead father's kingly appearance with that of Claudius, who has obviously altered his image using filters to enhance his physical appearance (3.4):

20 Penguin Random House, *OMG Shakespeare* Series. https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/series/OGS/omg-shakespeare.

21 Peter Holland, "Forgetting Performance," in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Performance*, ed. James C. Bulman, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 170.

22 All quotes are taken from Courtney Carbone, *srsly Hamlet* (New York: Random House, 2016).

Hamlet: Mom look at this pic.
(sending a photograph of King Hamlet in his armour to Gertrude)
Look@Dad. Look how royal and regal he is. He LOOKS like a true king because HE IS A TRUE King. This was your husband.
Gertrude: Aw. I loved that outfit.
Hamlet: Now look@Claudius.
(sending an artistically-processed photograph of Claudius in jeans)
See how many filters he uses? You can't honestly tell me you're *attracted* to him. …[23]

This brief SMS dialogue replaces a lengthy conversation in Shakespeare's original between the prince and his mother about "the counterfeit presentment of two brothers" (3.4. 54). Similarly, Hamlet's subsequent description of his uncle as "a murderer and a villain, … a vice of kings, / A cut-purse of the empire and the rule" (3.4.96–98) is replaced with his pointed remark on image filtering and enhancement, which obviously gives the impression that reality has been manipulated and misinterpreted. The modified image, moreover, shows the perception of Claudius through Gertrude's lens of love and, ironically, makes Gertrude's choice of a new husband more understandable. In contrast, a photograph of the ghost of Hamlet's father made by Marcellus in the first scene of the first act is accompanied by the brief but eloquent hashtag #NoFilter to convey the ghost's "dreaded sight" (1.1.25). The photograph thus successfully (and humorously) stands for Horatio's "fear and wonder" when he sees the ghost of the recently dead King Hamlet walking on the ramparts of Elsinore. Similar authentic photographs are live-posted by Horatio when reporting on Laertes and Hamlet's duel (5.2). These are obviously meant to inform Claudius and Gertrude about the progress of the combat to which they are mere observers.

No less inventive is the use of hashtags, which are meant to send a large amount of information to readers. When Hamlet reveals to Horatio how he replaced Claudius's order for his immediate execution with the instructions to let Rosencrantz and Guildenstern be "put to sudden death, / Not shriving time allowed" (5.2), his hashtag reads #BWAHAHAHA[24], which openly reveals his triumph. Not surprisingly, a similar tone of self-satisfaction and pretended coolness appears in the form of the truly millennial slang in Claudius's final hashtag after having announced Laertes and Hamlet's duel: "@Hamlet @Laertes: I challenge u 2 a duel! Place your bets, ladies & gentlemen. Winner gets #SWAG#SWAG#SWAG#SWAG" (5.2). Claudius's brief announcement replaces the original monologue in which he becomes a self-proclaimed judge or referee of the duel, decides what will happen if Hamlet strikes the first, the second or even the third blow, and promises, among other things, to drink to Hamlet's health (5.2.259–270).

It is probably not a coincidence that the end of the SMS language play is abundant in hashtags posted by Gertrude (having drunk the poisoned wine: #Nom#Nom#Nom), Horatio (commenting on Laertes's poisoned sword: #CheaterCheater,), and Laertes (hit by his own poisoned sword: #MyBad). Even Hamlet, at the moment of his own death, remembers his father, mother, Claudius, Polonius, and Ophelia, who are all dead and gone, and wishes they "#RIP #ExceptClaudius" (5.2). He next asks Horatio to tell the Norwegian king, who has just arrived at Elsinore, the truth and to remember him.

23 Carbone, *srsly Hamlet*, 61.

24 BWAHAHAHA is an interjection which expresses uncontrollable laughter.

As in Shakespeare's tragedy, in *srsly Hamlet* Fortinbras speaks the last word, here laconically: "Oh, HELL NO. What the WHAT?!?! #SoManyBodies." (5.2) This utterance by Fortinbras captures in a different way the atmosphere of death which has just struck so many people (5.2.366–377). Finally, together with Horatio, Fortinbras concludes the story of *srsly Hamlet*:

> Horatio (CC): It's a long story [an open book emoticon]. Let's talk IRL [in real life].
> Fortinbras (CC): Sure thing, bro. In the meantime [an alarm clock emoticon],
> prepare a hero's burial for Hamlet. I hear he was a good egg. Scrambled, but good.
> [a thumb up emoticon Angry Mob likes this][25]

What else could be added? Perhaps #NoComment or #Agreed.

Conclusion

Each volume of *OMG Shakespeare* contains a list of characters who appear and do not appear in the book. The latter are called "characters you won't meet in this book/aka people w/o smartphones" and include Osric; gentlemen; a Lord; a Captain in the Norwegian army; ambassadors to Norway; an English ambassador; players who take the roles of Prologue, Player King, Player Queen, and Lucianus in *The Murder of Gonzago*; a messenger; sailors; a gravedigger's companion and various attendants. Readers can also benefit from two helpful appendices entitled "The 411 [information] for those not in the know" and 'Some emotions [sic] you might find in this book."

Carbone's *Hamlet* retold in SMS text language is not only a new form of adaptation but, in fact, a new form of cultural artefact, brought forth in a world dominated by ubiquitous smartphones and social networks. For the Facebook, Twitter and Instagram generation, *srsly Hamlet* is probably perfectly comprehensible and digestible, in contrast to some adult readers less skilled and experienced in the use of emoticons, abbreviations and other D/E-tools, for whom the series can be TL, or rather TD [too difficult] to read. Through encountering this text, young people may also feel closer to the characters, whose text messages (= utterances), though based on the plot and familiar quotations from the play, are chatty and informal. This brings us back to our initial question: can *OMG Shakespeare* encompass the essence of Shakespeare's plays? The answer is not so clear-cut, and it is mainly up to the reader to decide. Yet comparison is not possible without the reader being familiar with the original. The series should therefore serve as an introductory source of basic information, a sort of Shakespeare metatext, (hopefully) supplemented in the course of time with Shakespeare's full-length tragedy.

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25 Carbone, *srsly Hamlet*, 101.

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