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## "Is this the Noble Moor?" Re-viewing *Othello* on Screen through "Indian" (and Indian) Eyes

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FROM HIS VERY ARM, PUFFED HIS OWN BROTHER" | 3. "THIS ONLY IS THE WITCHCRAFT  
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### ABSTRACT

Relatively recent derivatives of *Othello* filmed in Britain and the USA, *Othello* (dir. Geoffrey Sax, 2001), and *O* (dir. Tim Blake Nelson, 2001) have re-fashioned the play into contemporary scenarios stressing economic, racial, and gender — political — issues that characterize the multicultural social fabrics in hegemonic countries. Needless to say, such strategies render Lodovico's question near the end of act 4, scene 1 — "Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate / Call all-in-all sufficient?" (*Othello*, 4.1.261-62) — more pressing by at once specifying and amplifying the societal and ethnic implications of the terms "noble" and "Moor" in the twenty-first century. This essay examines two other recent films based on Shakespeare's *Othello* that employ adaptative approaches to foreground similar issues: the nearly unnoticed Mexican production *Huapango* (dir. Iván Lipkies, 2003), and to a lesser degree, the critically successful Indian film *Omkaara* (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj, 2006). In contrast with the films mentioned above, these pictures were made in developing nations with distinct social and cultural profiles, where the aforementioned economic, racial and gender matters take, or demand to take, forms of their own for significant local appropriation. Among the topics to be explored and illustrated in this essay are the contrasting, yet (socio)logically comparable scenarios

wherein the screenwriters re-set Shakespeare's tragedy, which again feature issues that are as much shared as culture-specific — in particular, the issue of violence, both criminal and domestic.

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*In memoriam Francisco José, my true brother.*

The love that cinema showed Shakespeare throughout the 1990s, kicked-started by the release of Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* in 1989, seemingly decreased in the 2000s. Remarkably, however, between 2001 and 2006 five modern-dress and language adaptations of one play were produced: the British *Othello*, by Geoffrey Sax (2001); the American *O*, by Tim Blake Nelson (2001); the Mexican *Huapango*, by Iván Lipkies (2003), which is the "Indian" film in my title; Alexander Abela's *Souli* (2004), a film from Madagascar; and the authentically Indian *Om-kara*, by Vishal Bhardwaj (2006). It is also noteworthy that three out of the five were made outside the English-speaking world. The two English-speaking productions have drawn limited interest from Shakespeareans.<sup>1</sup> Of the "foreign language" versions, *Om-kara* promptly, and deservedly, captured the attention of scholars, while Abela's picture has been scarcely seen and dealt with,<sup>2</sup> and the Mexican production went largely unnoticed until around 2009.<sup>3</sup> Today, *Huapango* is somewhat known in Shakespeare studies,<sup>4</sup> but remains practically unacknowledged in Mexico, as it was from its release.

This multi-cultural interest in re-fashioning the tragedy of the "noble Moor" not only testifies to the fact that "even if *Othello* was not originally a play about race, its history has made it one" (Okri, in Loomba 1998, 150), but also invites an exploration of the ways in which "Shakespeare . . . becomes a means for 'other' people to negotiate their own past and contemporary contexts" (151). Discussing a Khathakali production of *Othello*, for instance, Ania Loomba found that although it "skirt[ed] all questions and histories of difference in its powerful appropriation of this story of difference, it [was also] anxious to craft a vocabulary that would allow it to experiment with plays like *Othello* without violating its own specific codes of signification" (153). Both *Om-kara* and *Huapango* similarly appropriate and intelligently "skirt" the "story of difference" inherent in Shakespeare's play, and re-view it on screen "within indigenous performative and intellectual histories" (Loomba 1998, 159) that place these films beyond easy assumptions regarding heritage, mimicry, or the all-important notion of otherness. At present, the "histories" of both Indian and Mexican culture intersect with a dreadful

sign of the times: violence, in all its forms; and this demands — among so many other things — intellectual and performative engagement, which these contemporary takes on Shakespeare's tragedy of difference provide in keeping with their own ways and limits, while still displaying a considerable number of points in common.

### 1. " . . . PARTED WITH FOUL AND VIOLENT TEMPEST"

For present purposes, the violence in *Huapango* and *Omkara* may be catalogued according to three simple categories described by Slavoj Žižek: "subjective" violence, notorious and easy to decry; "symbolic" violence, "embodied in language and its forms" (2008, 8); and "systemic" violence, which comprises "the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of dominance and exploitation" (9). Due to its regulatory nature, systemic violence is often tacitly accepted in the continuum of social exchange; hence, strong displays of sympathy in the face of the blatantly negative consequences of the socio-economic relations at the core of such a continuum are easily made, most often legitimately, while the majority of empowered agents within society remain indifferent to the noxious foundations of such relations. Current social contracts seem, at best, capable of offering only mitigating responses to the inevitable results of their own imperatives of exploitation, abuse and repression (see Žižek 2008, 9-15, 36).

Gender, racial, and domestic violence are often mixed in social exchange and often linked to *Othello*, where "the racial difference between husband and wife exacerbates the inappropriateness [of his violent acts], since the legitimacy of domestic violence was determined as much or more by the status relation between the two parties as by the severity of the violence" (Dolan 1999, 216). Dolan's comment implicitly imports Žižek's categories, identifying "subjective" and "symbolic" violence by virtue of their evident negativity, but also the "systemic" kind, by assimilating the codes of "honor" that would render violence "legitimate" to the dynamics of domestic coexistence. In *Othello*, however, although the obvious violence invites immediate reprehension, the covert type is not quite clearly indicted but lingers, awaiting the sort of academic exegesis that succeeds reading rather than accompanies the tragic experience obtained in performance. *Othello* harbors a paradox of civilization: "The more admirably idealist we grow, the more we stoke up within us a lethal culture of self-hatred" (Eagleton 2003, 208). *Omkara* and *Huapango* deal with such violence more simply, but very efficiently, by stressing the systemic kind embedded in male "honor" without dwelling on the "nobility" of their "moors." In *Huapango*, however, this kind of violence

is even more pointedly shown to reside in male complicity rather than in rivalry, since its Iago-equivalent does not seek revenge against Othello through Desdemona, but the other way around: *she* is his express object of hatred. In *Othello* — and in *Omkaara* — the violence of "honor" stems from a multilayered narrative of competition between males and fatally affects the disempowered members of the domestic sphere. But in *Huapango* that violence is jointly exercised without the mediation of true rivalry between the two males upon the female "other" who, although overdetermined by a culture of abnegation and abjection, is ultimately fictionalized by both men as impervious and ungrateful to male devotion — as a "fair and cruel" threat to their supremacy. For reasons of space, and of my evident limitations to engage one over the other, I will explore the Mexican film far more than the Indian.

## 2. " . . . THE DEVIL, FROM HIS VERY ARM, PUFFED HIS OWN BROTHER"

*Omkaara* is set in the rural, conflicted northern region of Uttar Pradesh, boldly exposing its dark political underside through its dialect and profanities. As in his brilliant film *Maqbool* (2003), which is based on *Macbeth*, Vishal Bhardwaj makes Shakespeare's narrative bear on contemporary India through the language of "Bollywood," as illustrated by his ability to integrate the mandatory "item songs" seamlessly into the fabric of his adaptation. Throughout, Bhardwaj finds effective correlatives for nearly every ingredient in Shakespeare's plot, making key factors intelligently significant to the complex and highly contrasting context of modern India.

Bhardwaj makes *Omkaara* (Ajay Devgan) the chief henchman of a local *Bhaisahib* (Naseeruddin Shah), a mighty politician who dictates *Omkaara*'s every move through a ubiquitous cellphone. Early on, *Omkaara* is identified as a "half-caste," and his racial status contributes to the spite that Raghunath Mishra, the *Bhaisahib*'s lawyer (Kamal Tiwari), feels for him almost as much as the fact that *Omkaara* has abducted his daughter Dolly (Kareena Kapoor), with her consent, on the very day of her arranged marriage with Rajju (Deepak Dobriyal). The *Bhaisahib* is temporarily in prison awaiting trial, and while Dolly's father weathers the legal case against his boss, *Omkaara* and his right-hand man Tyagi (Saif Ali Khan) kill the main witness for the prosecution, solving the case in practical, if illegal, fashion. *Omkaara* is a blue-collar agent in a chain of criminal violence that sustains his *Bhaisahib*'s power, while Dolly's father is the white-collar one. Their differences, therefore, are neither absolute nor easily put down to racial terms or vertically defined hierarchies of power.<sup>5</sup>

If anything, the corrupt politician relies more on his strong arm from the shadows (figure 1)<sup>6</sup> than on his lawyer, his mask of legitimacy, who beweeeps the elopement of his daughter with the "half-caste dog," eliciting more tolerance than confidence from his boss (figure 2). In the Mexican film, images of weeping men will also prove decisive.



*Figure 1*



*Figure 2*



*Figure 3*

Further on, despite the evident concern that Omkara is defined as a "half-caste" may cause among Indian viewers, his racial status does not seem to bear overly on what brings about the film's fatal ending. In *Omkara* the myth of Iago's "motivelessness malignity" is also openly dismantled. Tyagi is not a "motiveless" devil, and he does not hold a racial grudge against Omkara. Instead, he is identified as Omkara's "brother," his faithful fellow gunman, a top member of Omkara's clan. Bhardwaj motivates Tyagi's revenge by means of Omkara's public choice (figure 4a) of Kesu (Vivek Oberoi) — a younger, more educated man who will obtain the decisive support of the students in the coming elections — as his "right hand guy" or *Bahubali* (figure 4b), overlooking Tyagi's fifteen years of loyalty (figure 4c).



*Figure 4a*



*Figure 4b*



*Figure 4c*

Omkara is aware of the risks underlying his decision, which are suggested by the distant but powerful mob that has witnessed and now celebrates the choice (figure 4d).



*Figure 4d*

The *Bhaisahib* is likewise aware of such risks, and turns to ask Omkara: "What about Tyagi?" "He's a brother," says Omkara; "he will understand." But Tyagi weighs his disappointment in his brother more than the political advantages afforded by Kesu. The destructive process, then, is set

between "brothers" — violent men used to having one another's back — one of whom will no longer trust the other, because the other has chosen to trust outside his circle. A tragedy of difference is thus triggered, but it runs opposite to Shakespeare's. *Omkara* explores systemic violence more overtly than its source does: it proceeds inside-out instead of outside-in, foregrounding disaffiliation from the original outlawed group over flawed assimilation to the legally hegemonic social body. Thereafter, Tyagi's revenge takes place in expected fashion, with many interesting twists and turns. Despite its debatable moniker, "Bollywood" has a strong tradition of filmmaking, with a syntax and identity of its own. *Omkara* features "a vocabulary that [allows] it to [effectively] experiment with plays like *Othello* without violating its own specific codes of signification" (Loomba 1998, 153).

### 3. "THIS ONLY IS THE WITCHCRAFT I HAVE USED."

What about *Huapango*? To begin with, *huapango* is a basic form of popular music from the Mexican region of the *Huastecas*.<sup>7</sup> Iván Lipkies, the co-writer and director, develops his film around a wide selection from the infinite variety of *huapangos* existing in my country, each one keyed to a particular episode in the film. Employed for love, comedic, parodic, or patriotic songs, *huapango* is also frequently used for the exchange of improvised wordplay by rival performers, in verses often crass, highly misogynist, and homophobic, though clever and funny, as befits a macho culture and tradition. Against the grain of the "Golden Age" of Mexican cinema (mid-1930s to late 1960s),<sup>8</sup> Lipkies includes one such exchange without disguising or tempering its crudeness in a sequence that, significantly, no one finds aggressive or injurious, even the women, the immediate objects of its symbolic violence. The very opposite — a similar but sanitized match of wits — is one staple filmic scene in the memory of Mexicans since the mid-twentieth century: the exchange between Pedro "the bad" Infante and Jorge "the good" Negrete in *Dos tipos de cuidado* (roughly translated as "Two men deserving/inviting respect/caution," dir. Ismael Rodríguez, 1953; figure 5).



*Figure 5*

Lipkies's allusion to Mexico's quintessential "buddy picture" and his extensive citations of the tradition in which it is securely nested are indispensable for understanding *Huapango*. The vast majority of Mexican audiences would surely not miss them, as much of the "sentimental education" in our culture derives from that filmic past.

Thus, the writing, artistic design, direction, and overall production values of *Huapango* align overtly with one predominant genre from the "Golden Age" of Mexican cinema: melodrama, in the specific vein of *drama ranchero* — i.e., a melodrama set in a rural environment — as opposed to another favorite, *comedia ranchera*, which though set in a similar milieu, in most aspects moves logically in the opposite direction, as befits its dramaturgic definition. This is a vital distinction, for *Huapango* complies with features common to both *ranchero* genres, melodrama and comedy, but operates as the former in pointed contrast with the latter. Significantly, the paradigmatic *Dos tipos de cuidado* is a *comedia ranchera*, resembling a myriad other pictures that sing the praises of a happy-go-macho, Mexican version of Arcadia — a pastoral fiction free of class, racial, and gender issues and other political inconveniences, where buddy-loyalty trumps unfortunate misunderstandings and enables final shots such as figure 5: in the happy end, gallant Jack "good" and gallant Jack "(un)bad" do get their Jills and nothing ever goes ill — or so the self-delusion goes.<sup>9</sup>

*Huapango* thus conveys the *ranchero* atmosphere to perfection, purposefully evoking the site of so many narratives of love, Mexican-style, from supposedly by-gone days. But unlike a *comedia ranchera* and more in keeping with the tradition of *drama ranchero*, *Huapango* not only offers a negligible degree of topical socio-political commentary, but more importantly, forgoes the lightness of pace and tone whereby the *comedias*

achieve their mandatory felicitous closure. Instead of an issue-free flow of bucolic playfulness, Lipkies's film turns loose, full-throttle, the energies of Mexican melodrama, the "tropical" passions at odds with one another that fuel the classics of the genre, such as *El peñón de las ánimas* (dir. Miguel Zacarías, 1942) or *Bodas trágicas* (dir. Gilberto Martínez Solares, 1946, a direct antecedent of *Huapango*). For starters, as already suggested, in *Huapango* Iago (therein named Santiago)<sup>10</sup> does not seek revenge against Othello (Otilio) through Desdemona (Julia), but the other way around.

Julia (Lisset) is Santiago's (Manuel Landeta) long-time partner in a company of dancers from Tamaulipas,<sup>11</sup> who are seeking to win a national competition for the third time in a row. But she is also his express object of hatred. Like Tyagi's malignity in *Om-kara*, Santiago's is anything but motiveless. His evil passion arises when, just as he is about to propose to Julia during a break from rehearsals, the young woman unexpectedly — and worse, publicly, humiliatingly — announces to the troupe that she is marrying Otilio (Alejandro Tommasi), a cattle-rancher at least twenty years her senior and the wealthiest man in the region. Henceforth the wrath of Santiago, a middle-class general goods retailer, is aimed sharply at the modest Julia, who in his fantasy — treacherously, surely out of greed — has spurned his "true" love. Soon after we learn of Santiago's motives, Julia marries Otilio in great public display of joy and riches; during the splendid wedding feast, Santiago dupes Otilio into unsuccessfully riding a bull, which leaves him severely crippled, confined in a huge cast to a wheel-chair. For this and other reasons, instead of enjoying her newly wedded status, Julia rejoins the troupe.

With the preparations for the competition as background, the plot of *Huapango* then follows *Othello* quite closely, as Santiago effects the prescribed torture of the title character's mind, the manipulation of Cassio — here called Felipe (Alfredo Castillo) — and the production of "ocular proof" (*Othello*, 3.3.365) right on cue. All this leads to Julia's death at the hands of her obsessed husband, who just as predictably takes his own life, while the troupe, even without its best dancers, wins the contest in a nearby arena. This closeness to Shakespeare's plot, however, is throughout supplemented with fine twists. In *Huapango* Santiago, who never gets to enter the scene of Otilio's crime and suicide, is neither charged with a crime nor arrested, as the original Iago is; instead, right before the film's closing shot, his distraught sister Margarita (Goretti), who is partly an equivalent of Emilia, regrets her prior indulgence of Santiago's actions and promises to "let everyone know" he is guilty, thereupon moving him to a tearful litany of denial. On the other hand, in the closing minutes of *Om-kara*, Tyagi is strangely let go unharmed from the scene of the crime

by Omkara himself, only to have his throat boldly, and quite justly, cut by his wife Indu (Kokona Sen Sharma, the Emilia of this film), who is next shown about to commit suicide. It is in these subtle, sure-handed, and locally meaningful variations on the basic plot of Shakespeare's play that both *Omkara* and *Huapango* frequently excel.

Nevertheless, the fundamental twist in *Huapango* remains the shift in target of Santiago's wrongdoing from the "moor" to his wife. Santiago's passion is presented not merely as that of a spurned lover but, even worse, as that of a would-be lover, for Julia is never shown to even be aware of his feelings. This is also the stuff that many Mexican songs of unrequited, Petrarchan love are made of; the film contains several examples of them, set to *huapango* music. Generally speaking, in the lyrics of those songs the female who fails to acquiesce to the devoted male's desires is severely indicted for her "cruelty and thanklessness."<sup>12</sup> Santiago, characterized as a firm believer in these clichés, thus becomes the resentful and quasi-demonic villain of our melodramatic tradition. Among other things, once he feels hurt by the "ingrate" Julia, he performs acts of black magic, speaks ungodly words in church, plots and effects Otilio's fall from grace with an evil look, surprises him out of his sleep as Otilio recovers from the accident by suddenly emerging from the shadows beside his bed, and openly harasses Julia with total impunity. Since this "heartless" woman proves unworthy of his "pure adoration," Santiago's evil bent grows beyond doubt and redemption, as must be in melodrama, Mexican style.

But if *huapango* music often serves as a vehicle for tropically-inflicted, quasi-Petrarchan songs, above all it is *always* music for dancing, and the film uses the dance contest as a book-ending device: a rehearsal is the core of the opening sequence, while the closing sequence, the tragic ending, happens as the actual competition takes place. After the credits roll, a powerful, rhythmical tapping of hard heels is heard over a black screen until the camera shows the typical footwear for *huapango*, and then the dancers, practicing energetically in rehearsal clothes. A choreographer named Angélica (María Elena Velasco, also the film's co-writer) interrupts to berate her pupils' sloppiness and then asks her minion Santiago to "show them how." There is no music, only tapping and stepping to rhythm, and no wardrobe: this is the raw reality within the fiction of the film. At the same time, the sequence suggests that the whole affair is pre-scripted, although undergoing refinement and awaiting actualization. The symbolic content of the dance will *become*. First, it will become as the manifestation of a cultural paradigm — for *huapango*, like much Mexican popular music, flaunts its deeply macho discourse, as the film frequently demonstrates. It is not surprising that, after years of dancing with Julia,

Santiago is positive that she must love him. Consistent with this fantasy, he has even fetishized Julia and keeps a private altar with pictures of their joint victories (figure 6). Tellingly, the altar hosts additional icons; some appear to be legitimately Catholic while others seem characteristic of regional witchcraft.



*Figure 6*

But the dance that is taking shape will also become the *reality* underlying the fiction of both *Othello* and *Huapango*: a reality that unmasks the fictional niceties of the dance and discloses its true contents. The death of Julia at Otilio's hands and his ensuing suicide will not be rehearsed fictions, but the real things; not "tragic destiny" but the outcome of systemic violence, the reality that intersects the artistic product — as Julia dies, the dance concludes at the site of the competition, earning the company their third victory in a row. Lipkies creates a splendid contrast between "art" and "life," a comment on the gap between the idealized work of art and its real colors and consequences. The seductive energy of *huapango* comes alive in the here and now of a dance — a fiction sublimating a violence historically idealized as "civilizing" foundation — while its reality occurs unbridled in the form of a criminal action that, even when fantasized as "justice," precludes civilized construction. Thus, *Huapango* "un-moors" Shakespeare's play to focus on what may be termed the lady's tragedy, not the lord's. Gender, more than class or race, is at the heart of this narrative of senseless violence.

#### 4. "LIKE THE BASE INDIAN..."

In the main parts of *Huapango*, class markers suggest contrast rather than create strong tension; they are far more topical than truly thematic within the film. And the same applies, in general, to ethnic markers. The signature villain of Mexican filmic melodrama transferred almost untouched to television and the ultra-popular genre of soap-opera, from which Lipkies's *Huapango* fully recuperates it to close a cycle of national self-deception: the fair-skinned and clear-eyed actors playing the leads (Otilio, Santiago, and Julia) are far more characteristic of prejudiced, audience-pleasing casting than truly illustrative of our very complex ethnic palette. Because of its near lack of emphasis on ethnic distinctions, save for a few topical hints, to foreign eyes *Huapango* may seem strangely uninterested in addressing racial issues. But in a sphere as biased and hypocritical about race, class, and gender as Mexican society is, double standards are *the* standard, the safeguard of systemic violence. If overtly the film is loaded with displays that are critical of misogyny, it is also inevitably underscored by similarly critiqued indices of classism and racism.

At first sight, it may look as though Lipkies and Velasco have reduced Shakespeare's masterpiece to melodrama, Mexican soap-opera style. Clearly, this was one of the assumptions that made the film a failure with Mexican audiences and critics: a deeply rooted prejudice among "discriminating" people against whatever smells, even faintly, of commercial entertainment. On the other hand, many rejected the very idea that a pointedly Mexican film could be made from a Shakespeare play, simply because "it isn't Shakespeare" — an attitude, like the former, reeking of pseudo-intellectual prejudice. But a third brand of prejudice may have played an even larger role in this film's being a total box-office flop: over the last forty years *Huapango*'s co-writer, María Elena Velasco, has been best known as a comedienne whose feature character is an "Indian" — more specifically, a parodic characterization of one among the many deprived native Mexican women who move to cities in search of relief, usually by pandering or begging at street corners. Velasco has played this character under the name *La India María* (figure 7) for most of her career — which explains the lame joke in my title — and is readily identifiable to all Mexican eyes as a staple of popular entertainment, especially on variety or sit-com TV shows, and low-budget, low-brow movies.

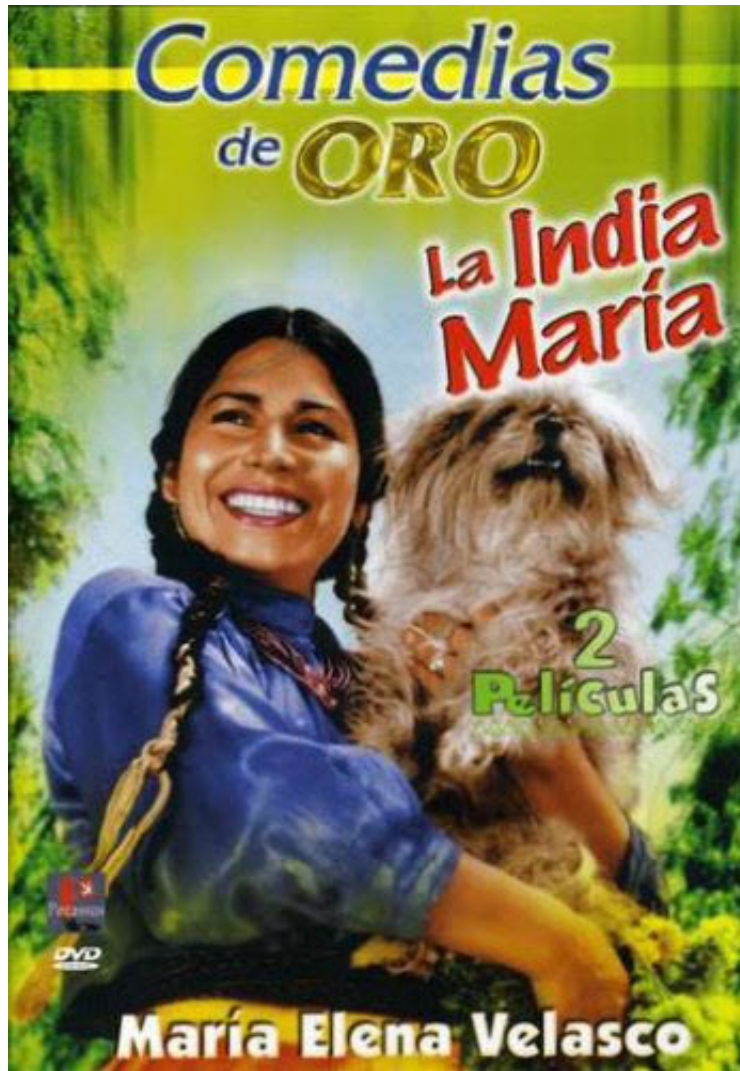


Figure 7

However much criticism may be justifiably raised against Velasco for stereotyping the women she purports to vindicate, for decades, peaking in the 1970s and 1980s, *La India María* has been a popular icon of social "truths" (all truths being relative) in Mexico and the rest of Spanish-speaking Latin-America, as well as to Latinos in the USA — offering a prime example of the gap between a performative-filmic culture deeply rooted in the "unrefined" popular mind and one held by audiences that are more "demanding." A glance over the Web suffices to confirm Velasco's impact: there are hundreds of clips of her work on YouTube, some indicating half-a-million hits, surrounded by numerous positive comments and lively discussions; many users proudly hail her as their true representative.<sup>13</sup>

But Velasco's talents and accomplishments are not confined to her parodic

persona. As a token of her range, she has also directed many of her own movies and is actually the most prolific Mexican woman film-maker in history, regardless of judgments about quality (cf. Rashkin 2001, 76). Still, to many prejudiced minds, her personage and pseudonym are inseparable from vulgarity, bad taste, garishly folkloric nonsense, and despicable illiteracy — in a Mexican word, she is an *India* ("Indian" or "native"), a term we never use to mean a native from India but rather as a racial slur relating to the original inhabitants of Mexico, suggestive of all the derogations above. How could she ever write anything worthwhile? Thus, the nearly absolute disregard for *Huapango* in its own country was, to a certain extent, "racially" motivated, in spite of the fact that the quality of *Huapango* begins, if anywhere, with Velasco's deep knowledge and sharply contemporary interpretation of Shakespeare's play, her keen understanding of Mexican cinema and its social implications, and her consequential high-quality screenwriting.

Furthermore, *Huapango* cannot be listed among the growing trend of more glamorous Mexican films recently embraced by the "inclusive" segments of Hollywood and sidekicks, even when some of those films arguably exploit pseudo-intellectual urban folklore of the same or worse kind as the films of *La India María*.<sup>14</sup> And *Huapango* does not fit that mold because it looks too much like an old-fashioned *ranchera* movie — i.e., like a film set in a rural landscape from the mid-twentieth century, the kind that Mexicans between thirty-five and fifty-five, like Lipkies and myself, grew up watching. That resemblance is definitely true, but also deliberate.

## 5. "O CURSE OF MARRIAGE . . ."

However simple Santiago's motivation is, his story of revenge against a *different* "moor," a *female* (a gendered) "other," is complex, far from soap-opera, finely crafted from Shakespeare's play, and in many ways works against Shakespeare's play. Therein lies the highest merit of this script, the "Indian" script: it consistently subverts familiar signs of Shakespeare's plot, turning the tables on easy assumptions and expectations. For starters, in *Huapango* "Desdemona" is not demoted from her original niche but replaced in a "higher" one. Marrying Otilio is desirable, not socially demeaning; it is an exceptional event, as in *Othello*, but unlike in that play, it is exceptional because it fulfills the ambitions of any woman in this environment, as shown by the varied reactions when Julia announces her wedding. Otilio is rich and powerful, respected and admired, a perfect provider. He is the best "catch" in town, as he complies with and reinforces all expectations of modern matrimony, especially its

retributive/commercial aspects. Julia's parents, furthermore, attend the wedding gladly, even joyously; and before the wedding, Otilio shows Julia a large house that he has bought for her as a wedding gift. In *Huapango*, there is no Brabantio; his complaints and expressions of shame and racial hatred, and his curse against his daughter simply cannot exist. More significantly, though maybe less conspicuously, Velasco and Lipkies cancel one of Othello's most interesting marks of otherness and outsidership: his lack of an appropriate place in which to reside with Desdemona.

Among many other variations that Velasco and Lipkies play on Shakespeare's plot, one stands out: the marriage of Julia and Otilio is never consummated, an ironic comment on the conventional value of virginity: she actually dies a virgin, a sacred figure in Mexican religious and social iconography, here immolated by her own worshipper. In *Omkara* something similarly ironic may be said to happen, though conversely and more in keeping with Shakespeare's layout. Dolly and Omkara elope on the day she was to marry Rajju, to whom she was duly betrothed, and they live together as a couple before their wedding takes place near the end of the film. But Omkara kills Dolly that night, when their henceforth unlawful marital situation should have become legitimate. In *Huapango*, by contrast, the wedding takes place at church. Afterwards, outside it, the groom displays his horsemanship — in a shot (figure 8a) recalling images that made Mexican cinema the most popular in the Spanish-speaking world of the mid-twentieth century (figure 8b) — and then performs a symbolic abduction of the bride (figure 8c), a reverse allusion to their elopement in *Othello*.



*Figure 8a**Figure 8b**Figure 8c*

In *Huapango*, Otilio and Julia marry happily and legally before the whole town and then *play* an action that, originally illegal and "subjectively" violent, is symbolically received with admiration; an act that exemplifies systemic violence and was glorified as a "gallant" gesture in Mexican

cinema for ages.

At the wedding feast, under pressure from Santiago and friends to display his manliness, Otilio consents to ride a bull that leaves him severely injured and confined to his bed and bedroom for several weeks with a monstrous, sexually satirical cast on his leg (figure 9) — hence, the lack of consummation of his marriage.



*Figure 9*

The "general" is thus reduced to a helpless spectator and will decline into the dark that Santiago gradually brings into his house until he becomes a pathetic figure, permanently drunk, lost in the shadows of his room (figure 10).



*Figure 10*

Otilio's condition enables a witting or unwitting, but relentless critique of the male paradigms of the "Golden Age" of Mexican cinema, when the Mexican industry ruled supreme in Spanish-speaking cinema with dozens of films about the rugged and manly life in the country and urban films depicting the survival of the strong in mean streets, with the "better man" always coming out on top and the woman often following behind her man's horse (figure 11).<sup>15</sup>



*Figure 11*

Allusions to that era abound in *Huapango*. Comparing figures 12a and 12b suggests that the film's cinematography evokes the highly recognized and influential work of Gabriel Figueroa, who teamed up with Emilio Fernández for some of the most successful Mexican pictures of the 1940s, such as *Flor Silvestre* (1943) and *Enamorada* (1946, whence figure 11 derives), as well as with Luis Buñuel in *Los Olvidados* (1950).



*Figure 12a*



*Figure 12b*

Likewise, the male characters of *Huapango* strongly resemble in their general looks the stars of that time, such as Pedro Armendáriz, a staple in Fernández's films, or the legendary singers and actors Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante (see figure 5). Moreover, *Huapango* uses music and lyrics of particular significance in connection to some scenes, again in keeping with the codes and vocabulary of classic Mexican cinema, yet subverting its paradigms. By means of quiet self-irony, *Huapango* questions the values underscoring the films of the Mexican "Golden Age" and undermines structures that have survived for generations — above all, those highlighting, praising, and ultimately promoting hard-core machismo. The strongest instance is the brief, splendidly ironic, almost documentary sequence near the end of the film, where we see boys and girls between six and twelve happily rehearsing to the tune of a particularly misogynist *huapango*.

Lipkies also carefully develops a subtle complicity between Santiago and Otilio, the poster-boys of their kinds: the rich and respected man here, there the master dancer with killer looks and charm. Unsurprisingly, their complicity starts at the wedding, when they share a drink and Santiago makes a lewd remark about tonight being Otilio's "big night" that, although overheard and disliked by Julia (figure 13a), is positively received by Otilio with a look of knowing approval (figure 13b).



*Figure 13a*



*Figure 13b*

The same happens twice more: first, as Otilio is surprised out of his sleep by the presence of Santiago in the dark — he has come to share yet another bottle with Otilio, who seems satisfied with that explanation; and then when these two big boys "playfully" appreciate a "beautiful" handgun. This "game" quickly leads to Santiago's slander of Julia, however, and ends with Santiago's face and voice visually replacing the threatening weapon — previously framed to look as though it were aiming at Otilio's head in anticipation of his actual suicide (figures 14a and 14b) — next to the ear of his otherwise great buddy (figure 15). The film often pairs Otilio with Santiago by framing them together or by visually correlating their mutual regard or approval, thus bringing to mind some classic couples of "buddies" in the history of Mexican cinema. Thereby, however, *Huapango* also reminds us of many instances of male collusion that have presided over gender relations in Mexican society, profusely represented in our cinema, virtually always in the "positive light" shed by handsome and charming leading men.



*Figure 14a*



*Figure 14b*



*Figure 15*

In *Huapango*, however, Santiago's charm is confined to his looks and foiled by his hypocrisy, while Otilio is every way the public man of integrity who nonetheless is violent and crude in private. In *Huapango*, a joint act of confirmation of homosocial premises and energies protects male predominance through secrecy and the confusion it provokes in the "other."

This intimate complicity spreads until a whole "social network," so to speak, becomes complicit in the tragedy, if unwittingly so. Velasco has fragmented Shakespeare's Emilia and Roderigo into several parts, all of which at one point or other accommodate Santiago's wishes or play into his hand. Julia wants to stay home and take care of Otilio, but Angélica and the mayor of the town (Alfredo Sevilla) persuade him to "give her permission" to come back to rehearsals, and so she does. During rehearsals, Santiago grows aggressive and crass (figure 16a), and Julia thinks about quitting the troupe after strongly rejecting his cynical advances — a major transgression of her conventional role. However, although everyone notices, no one complains or intervenes: Santiago is the pet of the choreographer, and of some of the dancers, too. Julia remains Santiago's partner because she owes it not only to her crew but also to Otilio, who has an invested political interest in sponsoring the festival, as his secretary Felipe (the Cassio of this film) argues; eventually, she is persuaded to stay in the dancing company (figure 16b).



*Figure 16a*



*Figure 16b*

Later, with help from some prostitute friends, Santiago manages to get Felipe drunk and then angrily dismissed by his crippled boss. At yet another moment, Margarita, Santiago's sister — and captive housemaid — agrees to plant a blouse that Santiago has stolen from Julia at a place where it may eventually reach Otilio and provide "ocular proof." Finally, there is Nacho (Rafael Romero), the openly homosexual dresser of the company, who talks Julia out of leaving Otilio for good after he strikes

her: "He loves you so," the gay man says, "and it hasn't been easy for him, being in these circumstances. Then again, he still hasn't made good on his duties, has he? What do you say? Let's give him a second chance, shall we?" (*Huapango* 2003); in the context of the film, Nacho's use of the first person plural is pointedly meaningful. Nacho then proceeds to re-do Julia's hair for the decisive dance (figure 17).



*Figure 17*

As Louis Montrose observes, "Experiences of historical and cultural exclusion of otherness may . . . provoke a compensatory embrace of the dominant culture, a desire for acceptance and assimilation" (1989, 25). This is true of Nacho, of course, but more importantly of Julia: every time she seems close to rejecting the cumulative demands of self-abnegation made of her, she invariably succumbs to social pressure and to her own gender-history of self-effacement.

Santiago's incremental victories happen within a simple but crucial framework for the crisis of modern marriage: "When the wife demands the entitlements associated with being an individual, at least since the early modern period, or when these entitlements are too egregiously negated her, the fragile equilibrium of marriage falls apart" (Dolan 2008, 7). This condition, which Dolan (following Regan 1999) attributes to the fact that women are "often assigned the job of preserving marriage at their own expense" (7), connects with Santiago's success inasmuch as it is continually helped by the fact that Julia never quite crosses the line between merely sensing and actually growing aware of her "entitlements

as an individual." She dies not only due to the tacit conspiracy between Santiago and Otilio, but also for giving in to others' "noble purposes" that infallibly cancel her potential for self-determination. In turn, Santiago and Otilio commingle easily in terms of "entitlements" as individuals precisely because they can, eyes closed, identify the *same* "corrupting" energy in the female "other": both suppose that Julia has betrayed them; by both she is constructed as an "ingrate," as a fundamental threat to the homonormative foundations of society.

## 6. "BUT THIS DENOTED A FOREGONE CONCLUSION."

In the end, the macho men of *Huapango* are employed to decry the paradigms of classic Mexican cinema. Upon receiving "ocular proof" and before killing Julia, Otilio fully partakes of Santiago's delusions: earlier, the dancer was shown to imagine Otilio as his rival during a rehearsal; now, as he cries in his dark corner while holding the torn blouse, Otilio pictures Julia with Felipe (figures 18a and 18b).



*Figure 18a*



*Figure 18b*

This is not unusual for movies based on *Othello*. In *O*, for instance, Odin (Mekhi Phifer) cannot help but see Cassio (Andrew Keegan,) instead of himself, in the mirror when he is in bed with Desi (Julia Stiles), which leads him to grow sexually violent towards her (figures 19a and 19b).



*Figure 19a*



*Figure 19b*

What is remarkable about the Mexican production is its unflinching characterization of Otilio as not only metaphorically impotent but also pathetic, undeserving of sympathy — nothing like a "noble Moor." The infection of his mind is complete, his connection — or "marriage of true minds"? — with Santiago is consummated, and his ensuing attitudes and actions are nothing short of grotesque and disgusting. Crippled and impotent, isolated, powerless, and increasingly degraded in his drunkenness, Otilio falls into a metaphorically beastly condition derived more from complicity with his "buddy" than from the evil insidiousness of a disgruntled and subtle subordinate. *Huapango* submits its "moor" to a relentless critique of his willing gullibility hardly applied to any other member of the distinguished line of filmic *Othellos*. Unlike that of Shakespeare's Othello and Iago, the relationship between Otilio and Santiago functions almost horizontally, rather like the one between Omkara and Tyagi — which renders both films more sharply critical of systemic male violence by characterizing their "moors" as oriented more to domestic aggression than as partially pushed and cornered unto it both by the doings of a petty but lethal schemer and the weight of social and ethnic outsidership. Where Othello is, at least partly, a victim, the Indian and the "Indian" "moors" are more straightforward perpetrators, even if, to a degree, blindfolded ones. On the other hand, Santiago's only reaction after the tragedy is to sob and repeatedly murmur, in infantile monotone, "I didn't kill them" (*Huapango* 2003; figure 20). These grown men cry far worse than the lawyer in *Omkara*.



*Figure 20*

The remarkable sequence of Julia's death closes this process: the fiction of love perfected into dance during rehearsals is now performed to perfection — as in the movies! — on the scaffold at the arena where the contest is held. The final dance is made to alternate with the death of Julia, the reality of this movie's fiction, in a splendid job of editing that takes us from one location to the other in a fascinating crescendo. Julia is now gone from the contest, following Nacho's advice, to "rescue" her marriage and does not dance the final, decisive number with Santiago. Thus, while an alternative pair of dancers, a fiction of love and lovers, performs the closing *huapango* at the arena, in the dark of the house things happen contrariwise to Shakespeare's plot: here, in the reality of this film's love and lovers, it is Julia/Desdemona who awakens Otilio/Othello with a tearful plea. But he, after praising her beauty and calling her endearing names, strangles her in a grotesque dance interspersed with increasingly intense takes of the *huapango* of seduction that is being performed on the scaffold. For every shot of Otilio's brutally real violence, there is a cut to the increasingly tense and emotional tapping and stepping of the dance, of the fiction of love and seduction, until the accompanying music stops and the soundtrack consists only of the hard beats of the dancers' hard heels, evoking the aural input of the opening sequence but now with artistic perfection, as Julia ceases to breathe. Near the end of her agony, Julia's hand runs down Otilio's face, from his forehead to his lips, just as it did twice before, though then with love and joy (figures 21a, 21b, and 21c), thus completing the narrative and symbols of Lipkies' film: Julia's three

caresses — as Otilio's fiancée when he presents her with the house; as his wife, at the wedding reception; and now, as the object of his violence — are perfectly differentiated, yet at once united in tragic commentary regarding their potential meaning vis-à-vis the reality that now cancels all positive options that are so beautifully and powerfully, though also ambiguously, offered in the fiction of the dance.



*Figure 21a*



*Figure 21b*



*Figure 21c*

Although to some *Huapango* might seem to fall in the frequent trap of "erasing the racial politics of *Othello*" and thus "flatten it into a disturbingly misogynist text" (Loomba 1998, 162), the film effectively appropriates Shakespeare's play as "a means for 'other' people to negotiate their own past and contemporary contexts." Its outcome does not derive from a reductive interplay of "good" and "bad" characters engaged in a war of raw, exacerbated emotions, but from a long, historically blind endorsement of the worst possible paradigms of gender relations in its given society. The film historicizes, constantly undermines, and dissects those models down to their deplorable foundations.

In this respect, *Omkara* and *Huapango* articulate well with one another. For example, an early shot from *Huapango* (figure 22a), in which Julia — standing behind the bars of a window in the luxurious house that Otilio had given her — cries out that she is marrying "the best man in the world" bears an interesting likeness to one of Dolly arriving at the prison where the *Bhaisahib* is locked up in order to confront her father about her elopment (figure 22b).



*Figure 22a*



*Figure 22b*

Likewise, Julia is later shown surrounded by male bodies during a rehearsal (figure 23a), while Dolly is framed to similar effect inside the prison (figure 23b).<sup>16</sup>



*Figure 23a*



*Figure 23b*

Moreover, the looks of complicity exchanged by Santiago and Otilio here and there have something in common with the way in which Bhardwaj frames Dolly's father's fatal advice to Omkara regarding his daughter's potential to "betray more men": as the half-caste approaches his now authorized wife-to-be on the other side of the street, the father's car cuts into the frame, and the men are shown almost to share a common space (figure 24), while the sad figure of the renegade daughter is merely a

distant reflection (figures 25a and 25b).



*Figure 24*



*Figure 25a*



*Figure 25b*

The lawyer, the man who "legitimizes" the brutal and ruthless world in which Omkara and Tyagi find and lose whatever used to make them "brothers," looks at his disowned child with an expression that seems to prove that his hatred for the half-caste daughter-abductor can still make room for a bit of male-bonding. At the same time, however, the look in the eyes of Omkara is impossible to discern — a masterful decision by Bhardwaj, who will nonetheless clarify our doubts about it with the final shot in his film: Dolly, still wearing her bridal clothes, dead on her bed, swings above the underlying body of Omkara (figures 26a and 26b), as if they were the testimony of a strange cult in which goddess and worshipper can never find grounds to come together in terms other than those of a received fantasy.



*Figure 26a*



*Figure 26b*

The final shot of *Huapango* speaks the same language as the camera, full-tilt overhead, pans over the dead couple, showing Julia, still in her gorgeous and dignified *huasteco* costume, and Otilio in his robe, pajamas, and cast, the hole in his head making a sharp contrast with the flowers on her head, looking somewhat like a dog at her feet — crippled, useless, a sad tribute at the shrine that he created for his virginal wife after killing her (figure 27).



Figure 27

Like *Othello*, both *Huapango* and *Omkara* make systemic violence prevail over subjects that only too late awaken to their tragic outcome. Unlike in Shakespeare, the *Othello* characters of these films are less tragic figures than criminals — blinded, yet still criminal. Both films "un-moor" the "Moor of Venice" by adapting the title part as a more sharply defined "other" than the still hard-to-pin-down dramatis persona that Shakespeare wrote. But this sharpens the spectator's attention, not only to the tragic conditions but also to the effects and implications of his crime, an artistic goal less grandiose but made more urgent by the current social and domestic violence in both the Indian and the Mexican contexts. In the criminal world of *Omkara*, male standards apply in full strength of violence as the driving force of social relations, while in *Huapango* they seem even more harmful, since their violence is concealed in the fabric of social convention. The final words of Tyagi to Omkara suggest what brings about these similar processes of destruction and self-destruction — "My truth and my lies have all got blurred together" (*Omkara* 12006) — just like the fantasies of Santiago, which from the fiction of a rehearsal, on screen become the reality of a fiction of love that has been real too long.

## NOTES

1. Among them, see Barbara Hodgdon (2003) on *O* and Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe (2007) on Sax's *Othello*.

2. See, however, Burnett 2008.
3. This paper was originally presented in the panel "Un-mooring the Moor Beyond Cultural Borders," which I organized for the 2009 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Washington, D.C.
4. Douglas Lanier has included the film at least since 2009 in his excellent lectures on the history of *Othello* on screen, and Burnett has presented papers including the film at least three times in international events since 2010; both must be preparing or publishing their studies as I revise this.
5. See Nishi Pulugurtha 2009, especially 107.
6. Figure 1 is interestingly similar to figure 3 (Santiago and Rodrigo from *Huapango*): both show silhouettes of male complicity in the dark.
7. Comprising the south of the state of Tamaulipas, and the northeast sections of San Luis Potosí, Querétaro and Hidalgo, as well as the north of Veracruz, in eastern Mexico.
8. For general information on this subject, see García Riera (1992).
9. For a thorough discussion of the genre, see Ayala Blanco (1993), especially 54-55.
10. To a Spanish speaker, the name Sant-Iago (Saint Jacques or Saint James) constitutes a self-evident irony. Additionally ironic — and mere coincidence in Shakespeare, though arguably an in-joke of the film — is the well-known Spanish tradition that identifies Saint James as a "Moor-killer" (Santiago *Matamoros*).
11. Tamaulipas is the easternmost state on the Mexico-U.S. border, and perhaps the most severely hit by the current wave of criminal violence; curiously, one of its main towns is called Matamoros. *Huapango*, released in 2003, makes no reference whatsoever to such violence. On the other hand, the film was not shot in Tamaulipas but on locations in or much closer to Mexico City.
12. Significantly, a song Otilio sings to Julia at their wedding feast is not a *huapango* but a waltz and bespeaks a love "triumphant."
13. For an entrance point into this phenomenon, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d26MMTRALkc> (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d26MMTRALkc>).
14. Case in point: *Amores perros*, dir. Alejandro González Iñárritu (2000). For information on recent Mexican filmmaking, see González Vargas, Carro, and García Tsao (2006).
15. A telling piece of trivia: the motto of the State of Jalisco's Association of *Charros* (roughly, "cowboys," now a category indicating men very adept at horse-riding and at a variety of Mexican rodeo activities) remains "*Patria, Mujer y Caballo*" ("Fatherland, Woman, and Horse"), a variation on the old motto of the National Federation of Charros, where the last two terms were actually inverted.

16. Curiously, throughout *Huapango* Otilio calls Julia *muñequita* — literally, "dolly."

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# *Lear's Daughters*, Adaptation, and the Calculation of Worth

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ABSTRACT | I. MULTIPLICITIES: AUTHORITY AND ADAPTATIONS | II. SHAKING THE FAMILY  
TREE OF ADAPTATION | III. "HOW MUCH?": WOMEN, ART, AND COMMODIFICATION | IV.  
CONCLUSION | NOTES | REFERENCES

## ABSTRACT

By rewriting *King Lear* in 1987, the Women's Theatre Group (WTG) challenged the ideology of the New Right in Britain, which was characterized by an appeal to an allegedly idyllic past and the promotion of free market economics, individualism, and patriarchialism. The WTG contested the dominant political climate of the 1980s by being committed to feminist theater and composing collectively *Lear's Daughters*, a prequel to Shakespeare's tragedy. Valuing feminist collaboration like that done by the WTG is key to understanding the play, the WTG, and the concept of adaptation, in particular its relationship to the prequel. As it illustrates the characteristics of adaptation, the WTG's prequel opposes two conservative measures of worth: fidelity criticism, which values source over adaptation, and the commodification of women and their creative endeavors being championed by the New Right in the 1980s. Through an unflattering portrayal of Shakespeare's monarch, *Lear's Daughters* exposes the devastating consequences of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's calculation of human worth. Ultimately, in both form and content *Lear's Daughters* objects to Thatcherism and illustrates the difficulty women and artists experienced when attempting to escape this ideology.

Counting and calculating are at the heart of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1607). Repeatedly asking, "How much?" and "How many?" the seventeenth-century tragedy illustrates how human worth can be quantified. As Gloucester and Kent discuss the division of land in the play's opening scene, they speculate on whether Albany or Cornwall will receive the larger portion of Lear's realm based on the amount of fondness the monarch has shown the men (*King Lear*, 1.1.1-6).<sup>1</sup> Not long after this conversation, Lear announces that he has "divided / In three our kingdom" (1.1.35-36) and then asks his daughters, "Which of you shall we say doth love us most, / That we our largest bounty may extend / Where nature doth with merit challenge?" (1.1.49-51). This question sets the play on its precipitous downhill trajectory and, like the opening dialogue, suggests that affection can be parceled out like so much land. In response to their father's inquiry, Goneril and Regan wax hyperbolic about their infinite love for him. Cordelia, on the other hand, defines the precise amount and kind of affection each party owes the other (1.1.91-92, 93-101). Unhappy with Cordelia's response, Lear recalculates her worth. Concluding that her "price is fallen" (1.1.194), the monarch divides Cordelia's promised land between her elder sisters, leaving his youngest daughter with "nothing" (243).

In the following act, Lear again quantifies his daughters' love, this time according to the number of followers each woman will allow him to retain in his retirement. Angry that Goneril limits him to fifty knights, Lear turns to Regan, whom he believes will permit him to keep all of his one hundred men. His middle daughter, however, corrects him, saying that even "fifty followers" is too many; "but five and twenty" will be permitted in her house (2.2.402, 413). Lear responds by siding once again with his eldest daughter because by promising fifty followers, he reasons, Goneril is "twice [Regan's] love" (2.2.426). But neither woman is interested in housing Lear's men. "What need you five and twenty, ten, or five . . . What need one?" (2.2.427-29), they ask rhetorically, leaving Lear, much like his youngest daughter, with nothing.

*Lear's Daughters* (1987), a prequel to Shakespeare's tragedy, confronts *King Lear's* preoccupation with numbers and the calculation of human worth. The play's authors, Elaine Feinstein and the Women's Theatre Group (WTG), explore this theme in order to critique the right-wing policies of then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher's support of patriarchal values, reliance on free market economics, and emphasis on individualism are held up for scrutiny in *Lear's Daughters*, as can be seen in the play's preoccupation with numbers. This interest in counting is apparent at the beginning when the Fool (figure 1) counts the "six parts" the "four actors" will play and remarks on the "One stage, One audience, One castle, [and] One prop" involved in the production (Feinstein 2000, 217). The cast members then join together to repeat the numbers "One, Two, Three, One, Two, Three, One, Two, Three" in a

game of blindman's bluff (Feinstein 2000, 217). Reversing this numerical progression, the Fool holds up her fingers in order to count the characters in the play:

*(holds up three fingers)*

Three princesses.

*(holds up two fingers)*

Two servants.

*(holds up one finger)*

One king offstage.

*(holds up one finger on other hand)*

One queen dead. (Feinstein 2000, 217)

After reconsidering, the Fool summarizes the situation differently. Doing the "*same finger business*," she proposes that the play features

Three daughters,

Two mothers,

One father,

and the Fool. (Feinstein 2000, 217)



*Figure 1. The Fool Counting (Hazel Maycock, 1987)*

The significance of the pairs on these lists, such as "One queen" / "the Fool" and "Two servants" / "Two mothers," is explained later in the play. From this early point, though, it is apparent that there is always just "One king," "One father." Lear is presented as standing on his own; the countdown ("Three . . .

Two . . . One") always leads to him. *Lear's Daughters*, however, challenges the monarch's centrality by never bringing him on stage and by exposing the consequences of the kind of counting and calculating upon which Lear's — and, more broadly speaking, the patriarchy's — system of social relations is built. The WTG is critical of number One, the patriarch who entraps his wife, daughters, and female employees in a corrupt economy in which he assesses their value.

The WTG's critique of Shakespeare's monarch can best be understood by acknowledging that in the 1980s Britain was being encouraged to embrace "a new public philosophy . . . rooted in the open affirmation of 'free market values' — the market as the measure of everything — and reactionary 'Victorian' social values — patriarchalism, racism, and imperialist nostalgia" (Hall and Jacques 1983, 11). By rewriting *King Lear*, the WTG challenged the ideology of the New Right, which, as epitomized by Thatcher, was characterized by an appeal to an allegedly idyllic past<sup>2</sup> and the promotion of free market economics, individualism, and patriarchalism. In order to illustrate this claim and to examine the nature of adaptation, Part I of this essay explains how the WTG challenged the dominant political climate of the 1980s by being committed to feminist theater and by composing collectively *Lear's Daughters*. Valuing such feminist collaboration is key to understanding the play, the WTG, and, as Part II reveals, the concept of adaptation, in particular its relationship to the prequel. The second section of this essay proposes that embracing the dispersal of authority, as the WTG did in composing *Lear's Daughters*, and rejecting linearity, as the play itself does, opens up a space in which to discuss the nature of adaptation free from the constraints of fidelity criticism, which ranks sources as superior and prior to adaptations.<sup>3</sup> Fidelity criticism is not the only conservative measure of worth challenged by the WTG, however. In *Lear's Daughters*, they also object to the commodification of women and their creative endeavors in the 1980s. As Part III explains, through an unflattering portrayal of Shakespeare's monarch, *Lear's Daughters* exposes the devastating consequences of Thatcher's calculation of human worth. Ultimately, in both form and content the play objects to Thatcherism and illustrates the difficulties that women and artists experienced when attempting to escape this ideology.

## I. MULTIPLICITIES: AUTHORITY AND ADAPTATIONS

From its beginnings in the 1970s, the British theater collective that would come to be known as the Women's Theatre Group challenged contemporary ideas about the role of women in theater and the role of theater in politics. In 1973, a group of artists — ranging from those who had little commitment to feminism but were upset at the dearth of opportunities for women in the

theater to feminist street performers and feminists who looked to the stage as a political platform — joined together to perform in the Women's Theatre Festival. This occasion marked "the first time feminism and theatre had confronted each other directly [. . .] [N]ew questions inevitably arose about the relationship between politics and art, and the position of women within the theatre industry itself" (Wandor 1981, 49). The issues addressed during this groundbreaking season would continue to influence the group, particularly in the year following the Festival, when the collective split in two, with some members calling themselves The Women's Company and others joining together under the title The Women's Theatre Group. As Michelene Wandor argues, the former company did not cohere because they lacked a common political vision (Wandor 1981, 49-50). In the case of the WTG, however, a fervent commitment to feminism was in large part responsible for their success beginning in 1974 and continuing to the present day. Now called The Sphinx Theatre Company, the ensemble remains committed to the politics that were at the center of the group nearly forty years ago. Their mission, as they report in 2012, is to "offer strong roles for actresses . . . give women directors the opportunity to work on projects they are passionate about . . . [and maintain] a strong track record of convening conferences about women in the arts" (Sphinx Theatre Company 2011). The continuing need for this kind of work is clear: although women comprise 52% of the population, only 35% of actors, 23% of directors, and 17% of writers are female (Sphinx Theatre Company 2011).

In 1987 the WTG called attention to numbers of a slightly different kind in service of a similar political agenda with their play *Lear's Daughters*. Although at one point in its history the play was billed as being written solely by Elaine Feinstein, this fantasy of singular authorship does not match the reality of the creation of *Lear's Daughters*. When composing the prequel, the artists favored partnership over individuality and put into practice what they stated was a defining feature of the WTG. "Our group," they announced in a press release, "[. . .] has always functioned in a totally collective manner, trying to avoid leadership and hierarchies" (quoted in Wandor 1981, 51).<sup>4</sup> Though initially Feinstein wrote the playscript herself, when she presented the text to the group the WTG was dissatisfied with it. As a result, the women revised the play collectively during a series of workshops. Critics' responses to this collaborative authorship were not positive; many found it unsettling not to be able to identify a single individual as the creator of the play. The reviewers' "underlying discomfort" was the result of the absence of an "identifiable 'subject' (or individual) to be criticized in relation to the 'object' which is the play" (Goodman 1993a, 99). Despite the pressure put upon them, however, the WTG's members remained committed to collaborative authorship, refusing to come forward individually to admit to having any unique hand in the play.

Only after "lengthy discussion with the group" did it become clear that Janys Chambers was responsible for the final editing of *Lear's Daughters* (Goodman 1993a, 97-98).<sup>5</sup>

The WTG's reluctance to identify a single person responsible for the play and its commitment to feminism set the group in opposition to the dominant ideology of contemporary Britain. In the 1970s and '80s, the nation was warned about socialism's ever present threat to the Free World and taught that in the Cold War era, gender politics were a non-issue. Because of her unique role as a successful female world leader, Margaret Thatcher might have been expected to have aligned herself with feminist politics. She preferred, instead, to move "between various incarnations of femininity, depending on the current political advantage" (Hadley and Ho 2010, 5). The first, and to this point only, female Prime Minister of Britain, Thatcher sometimes called attention to gender in order to secure the public's support — for example, by reminding them that her experience as a housewife and the daughter of a grocer meant that she appreciated the need to live within a budget. At other times, however, Thatcher ignored or rejected the significance of gender politics, such as when she asserted that "she owed nothing to women's lib" (Hadley and Ho 2010, 4). Thatcher's ambivalence about gender is evident not only across her career, as Louisa Hadley and Elizabeth Ho suggest, but within speeches she delivered during the Cold War era. Ambivalence in these speeches is not neutral or apolitical, but rather results in a picture of Thatcher as decidedly anti-feminist. In communiqués delivered in the mid-seventies, for example, Thatcher raises the issue of gender only in order to disparage it as a petty concern in light of the build-up of socialist forces the world over. Examining excerpts from these speeches allows us to appreciate the political issues to which the WTG was responding, in particular the relationship, as Thatcher saw it, between individualism and gender.

In a speech to the Conservative Party in 1975, Thatcher initially appears to address head-on the issue of gender expectations: while being introduced at the convention, she cleans the podium with a feather duster that is color-coordinated to match her suit, much to the delight of the crowd. Contrasting with this performance of a housewife's duties was, generally speaking, Thatcher's public role in politics and more specifically this speech, which championed individualism over collectivity in a way that ostensibly nullified Thatcher's own professional achievements outside the domestic sphere. First contrasting Socialists, whom she claimed would have people "be numbers in a state computer," to Conservatives, who "believe [people] should be individuals," Thatcher congratulates her party for its conviction that "every human being is equally important." Less inclusively, though, she then explains that the Free World hinges upon masculine individualism: "A *man's* right to

work as *he* will, to spend what *he* earns, to own property, to have the state as servant and not as master: they are the essence of a free economy, and on that freedom, all our other freedoms depend" (Thatcher 1975c, emphasis added). Underscoring her commitment to a model of government that would reject collectivity at all costs, Thatcher's remarks (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oK3eP9rh4So>), including her choice of the noun "man" over "person," have the unfortunate effect of undoing the cheeky joke she had set up earlier with the feather duster, one that might have provoked a meaningful discussion of gender expectations in both public and private life (Thatcher 1975b).<sup>6</sup>



*Screen Shot from Margaret Thatcher's Speech to the Conservative Party Conference (1975)*

The following year, in response to having been labeled by the Soviets at the *Red Star* newspaper as "The Iron Lady," Thatcher delivered another speech in which she initially called attention to gender, but only in order to pit it against the threat of socialism. By pointing to the incongruity between her performance of femininity and the masculine titles with which she had been labeled, Thatcher seems to be priming her audience for an illustration of the idea that gender is a social construct. She pretends to wonder how a lady donning a "Red Star chiffon evening gown, [her] face softly made up, and [her] fair hair gently waved" could possibly be "the Iron Lady of the Western World, a Cold War warrior, [and] an Amazon philistine" (see Thatcher 2010).<sup>7</sup> Once the laughter from the crowd dies down, however, Thatcher abruptly switches course, now accepting these titles, though not in service of feminism.



*Screen Shot from Margaret Thatcher's Iron Lady Speech (1976)*

The Prime Minister elects not to grapple with the politics of labels such as "The Iron Lady" and "Amazon" or to appropriate these names in a politically astute move, as other groups have asserted agency by redeploying labels foisted upon them.<sup>8</sup> Rather, she dismisses these titles as the products of short-sighted individuals who do not comprehend the threat that socialism poses to the Free World. "Yes," Thatcher asserts, implying that any reasonable person would agree with her views, "if that's how they wish to interpret my defense of values and freedoms fundamental to our way of life . . . they're welcome to call me what they like."<sup>9</sup>

Thatcher's lack of interest in gender politics,<sup>10</sup> coupled with her anxiety about the Soviets, led her to promote individualism, which she presented to the public as simple common sense, just as she would later do regarding the entire phenomenon of "Thatcherism."<sup>11</sup> "There is no alternative," she famously asserted, thereby naturalizing an ideology that, in reality, was only one story among many.<sup>12</sup> The WTG, on the other hand, encouraged its audiences to imagine alternatives to stories — about socialism, individualism, and gender — that Thatcher's government touted as inevitable. The threat the company posed to Thatcherism explains the distress felt by the critics of *Lear's Daughters* when they could not identify a single author of the play. Ensclosed in a culture where fear of socialism appeared to necessitate a negation of feminist concerns and where individualism was championed and socialism vilified, collaboration between politically astute women, not surprisingly, made audiences of the Thatcher era uncomfortable. Together, the WTG and, as I will explain in Part III, its adaptation of *King Lear* challenged Thatcher's politics of individualism, which is best encapsulated in a remark made by the

Prime Minister in the same year *Lear's Daughters* was performed: "There is no such thing as society" (Thatcher 1987).<sup>13</sup>

Against this political backdrop, which championed individualism as the defining feature of Western civilization, Shakespeare scholars, much like the WTG, were questioning traditional conceptions of authorship founded on the Romantic notion that the author was a unique genius, separate from and high above his/her culture. In the era when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan understood combating socialism to be their primary duty as leaders of the Free World, Stephen Orgel, for example, questioned whether authority could be located in a single individual. In 1981, he made the point that "most literature in the [early modern] period, and virtually all theatrical literature, must be seen as basically collaborative in nature" (Orgel 1981, 6). While "Shakespeare might seem to be an exception [to this collaborative theatrical practice], since he was not simply the playwright but also an actor and shareholder," this is not the case. Rather, as Orgel makes clear, "[Shakespeare] was simply in on more parts of the collaboration" (3-4). In 1988, Stephen Greenblatt concurred, arguing in *Shakespearean Negotiations* that "the [early modern] theatre is manifestly the product of *collective* intentions" (Greenblatt 1988, 4, emphasis added).<sup>14</sup>

Valuing joint authorship both in the early modern period and the late twentieth century is certainly key to challenging the image of the lone Author and to recognizing the politics of artists' negotiations with their cultures. Acknowledging the significance of collaboration also allows us to understand the nature of adaptation broadly conceived, for *all* adaptations must be said to be authored by many, not by one. Authority is dispersed in adaptations, though Lizbeth Goodman misses this point when she argues that "unlike [in] Shakespeare's original," *King Lear*, "there is no single author for *Lear's Daughters*" (Goodman 2003, 38). That the early modern theater was collaborative calls Goodman's assertion into question, so that when looking for the so-called "source" of *Lear's Daughters*, we are faced with two versions from which to choose: *The History of King Lear* (Q1) and *The Tragedy of King Lear* (F). Which *King Lear*, then, are we talking about when we say "Shakespeare's original?" Even if this is splitting hairs and the question can be answered by a conflated version of the play,<sup>15</sup> there remains the fact that we must look further back than Shakespeare's text because it is not the "original" story of an aged father who experienced problems with his three daughters and his land. The tale of King Leir was a part of ancient British history (c.800), recorded by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his twelfth-century *Historia Regum Britanniae* and later retold in various other places, including the *Mirror for Magistrates* (1574), *Albion's England* (1586), *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587), and *The Faerie Queene* (1590). To this list we

can add the anonymous play, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* (1605) and the seventeenth-century lawsuit involving Sir Brian Annesley and his three daughters, two of whom attempted to have their father declared mentally incompetent so that they could possess his estate. Sir Brian's youngest daughter, Cordell, however, sided with her father in order to save him from the nefarious designs of her sisters.

Collectively, these versions of the king's story might be thought of as being sources for *King Lear* and thus for *Lear's Daughters*. Considering Shakespeare's and the WTG's plays in these terms illustrates that they, like all adaptations, are "palimpsestic" (Hutcheon 2006, 9). Gérard Genette's analogy of the hypertext as a palimpsest, in which "on the same parchment, one text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through" (Genette 1997, 388-89), describes both *King Lear* and *Lear's Daughters* as plays that contain echoes of past texts and yet simultaneously tell their own stories. Shakespeare's work with living playwrights, actors, and writers as well as his engagement with the dead — an 800-year-old tale and its many tellers — complicate the notion of the "single author" in the case *King Lear*, a play concerned both with Britain's history and its future. The WTG similarly engaged with past authors and present circumstances when they composed their play by working with Shakespeare, his sources, and his reputation in order to create *Lear's Daughters*, "a play which speaks directly to audiences of the Thatcherite years" (Griffin and Aston 1991, 13).

Although both Shakespeare's and the WTG's plays are the palimpsestic results of collaborative authorship, most readers would label *King Lear* as an adaptation. *Lear's Daughters*, on the other hand, would be relegated to the category of the prequel. Linda Hutcheon has argued that, like plagiarisms and fan fiction, "sequels and prequels are not really adaptations [because] . . . there is a difference between never wanting a story to end . . . and wanting to retell the same story over and over in different ways" (Hutcheon 2006, 9). This point is certainly worth making; intuitively, we know that there is something different about the relationship between *King Lear* and *Lear's Daughters* than the relationship, for example, between Shakespeare's play and Jane Smiley's 1991 novel *A Thousand Acres*. Hutcheon's dismissal of prequels and sequels, however, is ultimately "unnecessarily confining" (Fortier 2007, 5). Her classificatory strategy precludes the kind of "openness" that Mark Fortier advocates, which in this case would allow for an acknowledgment of the qualities that prequels and sequels share with adaptations (Fortier 2007, 1). A more fruitful way of characterizing the relationship between adaptations and prequels/sequels is to imagine the latter as being a particular type of the former. Prequels and sequels stretch a narrative's boundaries and so are

somewhat different from adaptations, which remain within a source's narrative frame. However, prequels and sequels simultaneously illustrate key characteristics of adaptations: namely, (1) the phenomenon of ghosting; (2) the role and nature of repetition; (3) the political position the adapter takes when creating an adaptation; and (4) the disruption of a linear relationship between source(s) and adaptation. Looking closely at these characteristics reveals that the relationship between adaptations and prequel/sequels is more inclusive than Hutcheon proposes and illustrates how this unique textual mode allowed the WTG to critique Thatcherism.

## II. SHAKING THE FAMILY TREE OF ADAPTATION

In order to appreciate the relationship between adaptations and prequels/sequels, it is useful to consider Marvin Carlson's concept of "ghosting," which "presents the identical thing" that audience members "have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context" (Carlson 2001, 7). In *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, Carlson contends that this experience is especially pertinent to the theater and can manifest itself through actors' previous roles or personal lives, materials used in productions, the playing space, and the stories told on stage. Though he does not theorize about adaptation *per se*, Carlson discusses how narratives such as myths, folktales, and histories have been "recycled" in the theater. Like narratives, characters are also commonly reused on stage, as Carlson explains:

In the case of recycled characters the audience is expected to bring to its experience not a knowledge so much of such a specific narrative line but, rather, of the character traits of one or more familiar figures, who continue to demonstrate those already known traits within changing situations. When [. . .] a group of recycled characters appear together in a variety of narratives, not only individual traits may be repeated but also ongoing relationships. What results is a much looser kind of narrative recycling. (44-45)

This description of character recycling is fitting to prequels and sequels because in them we see familiar characters in unfamiliar situations. In *Lear's Daughters*, for example, knowing audiences<sup>16</sup> are familiar with Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia from Shakespeare's play. However, the time period in which the play is set is unfamiliar to them. Viewers see Lear's daughters as younger girls rather than as the women they are at the beginning of *King Lear*. If character recycling like that done in *Lear's Daughters* is "a much looser kind of narrative recycling," then narrative recycling is the broad category, and character recycling is a subset of it. A similar relationship exists between adaptations and prequels/sequels: adaptation could be considered to be the larger category, with prequels/sequels being a type of adaptation. As such,

although they are distinguishable, as Hutcheon contends, adaptations, prequels, and sequels share key characteristics, including ghosting and its corollary, repetition.

Ghosting occurs because of repetition; the audience's perception of a play is affected because a narrative or character is reused. As Carlson suggests in his description of narrative recycling, however, ghosting relies not only on sameness, but also on difference (Carlson 2001, 27). This paradox — repetition with a difference — is central to adaptations, prequels, and sequels and is especially apparent in the recycling of Shakespeare's plays. These adaptations remind us of a moment in history when repetition was thought of differently than we tend to think of it today. Consider, for instance, early modern writers Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey's poems compared to Francesco Petrarch's and to each other's, or Sir Philip Sidney and William Shakespeare's sonnets in relation to their predecessors' verses. These poems demonstrate that while imitation was important to their work, early modern writers did far more than repeat mindlessly an earlier style. The same can be said of Shakespeare's drama, which borrowed from many texts but did not replicate without adding to, critiquing, or otherwise reworking them. The notion of repetition without a difference is short-sighted, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri have explained: "Mimicry is a very bad concept, since it relies on binary logic to describe phenomena of an entirely different nature. The crocodile does not reproduce a tree trunk, any more than the chameleon reproduces the colors of its surroundings" (Deleuze and Guatarri 1987, 11). Similar to animals who adapt to their environments but never become identical to them, adaptations such as *Lear's Daughters* involves "repetition but without replication" (Hutcheon 2006, 173).<sup>17</sup>

*Lear's Daughters* repeats *King Lear* with a difference by preserving the play's main characters and simultaneously pushing its narrative boundaries back to the years before Shakespeare's play begins. To remind audiences that repetition is not always replication, *Lear's Daughters* juxtaposes sameness and difference in Scene 2 when the daughters' births are described by the Nurse. Initially, it seems that the events are identical. There is a strange natural occurrence during each of the births, and the children are all linked symbolically to royalty. When Goneril is born, the Nurse reports, "a comet rushed through the sky, leaving a red tail in the black," and the Queen's crown, which falls off her head during labor, encircles the newborn (Feinstein 2000, 218). As Regan is delivered, a volcano erupts. Her mother sits on her throne to give birth to the baby, who is described by the Nurse as looking like "a ruby dropped out onto the velvet plush" (218). Rather than announcing Cordelia's story aloud as she had done with Goneril and Regan, the Nurse whispers to the youngest about her birth, which leads the older girls to harangue Cordelia until she reveals the

details of her origin. Like with the others, there was an odd occurrence in nature when she was born, and so when Regan hears about the hurricane, she prematurely concludes "It's the same, it's the same" as hers and Goneril's beginnings (219). Cordelia, though, contradicts Regan by revealing that, unlike at her sisters' births, when she came into the world, "Lear was there" (219). As Goneril and Regan's disappointment upon hearing about this difference suggests, Lear's presence is evidence that the monarch's third daughter is more precious to him than his other two. But, though "the infant daughters compensat[e] for their father's neglect by deifying his memory" (Saunders 1999, 405), the play makes it clear that being the king's favorite is not all it is cracked up to be.

Indeed, the relationship between parents and children in *Lear's Daughters* (and in *King Lear*) is fraught, to say the least. As a mode, adaptation — including prequels and sequels — is similarly pressured by the filial relationship it is presumed to have with its source text.<sup>18</sup> When the "source" or "original" is identified as the parent text, it occupies the dominant, authoritative position. The adaptation is left to be the perennial child, a subordinate who is permanently undeveloped and saddled with a secondary status. By its very nature, however, adaptation resists the family tree;<sup>19</sup> rather, like the rhizome, it is "antigenealogy" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 21) because

it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb "to be," but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, "and . . . and . . . and." This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb "to be" . . . [K]now[ing] how to move between things [means] . . . to overthrow ontology, do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 25)

Adaptations defy "filiation" and fidelity criticism, which depend upon chronological order and an implicit hierarchy between the parent/original and the child/adaptation. They "overthrow ontology" by holding both before and after at once in the present moment. Adaptations simultaneously look to the past and the present — and, in the case of sequels, to the future — and embody multiplicity, i.e., the "and . . . and . . . and" that Deleuze and Guattari champion. Author Jane Smiley has intimated as much in her description of the experience of writing *A Thousand Acres*. Composing the novel was as if, she said, there were "two mirrors facing each other in the present moment, reflecting infinitely backward into the past and infinitely forward into the future" (Smiley 1996, 56).

In order to understand Smiley's mirror analogy and the kind of time-travel that adaptations encourage, it is useful to consider how history was represented on

the early modern stage. As with adaptations, at that point in the theater's history the lines separating distinct moments in time were often blurred in performance, and audiences were aware of this fact. Henry Peacham's sketch of *Titus Andronicus* (figure 3) offers a good example of the anachronistic nature of the early modern theater, for in it "two modes coexist: the Elizabethan soldiers attend their Roman general on a stage where past and present confront each other as, perhaps, at no other time in history" (Rackin 1990, 1-2).



Figure 3. Henry Peacham's *Titus Andronicus*, c. 1595

The texts of early modern plays were similarly illustrative of the situation suggested by Peacham's drawing. Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, for instance, presents its audience with a "temporal bricolage" (Walsh 2006, 339). Dekker's play "juxtaposes the fifteenth-century city of Simon Eyre and the late sixteenth-century city of the Rose Theatre, producing a jarring historicity . . . The play is infused with other anachronisms, from its mention of tobacco and firearms to its references to sixteenth-century stage plays" (339, 340). Although as Phyllis Rackin has explained, a sensitivity to distinguishing between moments in time was developing in the period, while historiographic texts attempted to avoid anachronism, dramatic texts and performances were less concerned with eliminating it (Rackin 1990, 95). Not insistent on separating now from then, early modern audiences routinely held two or more moments in time in their minds at once.<sup>20</sup> They were often aware of this fact because stage anachronisms had the ability to "produce a kind of alienation effect" (Rackin 1990, 94).

Adaptations work in a similar way, as they never let knowing audiences forget

that they are looking simultaneously backward to the "original(s)" and forward to the adaptation. Prequels and sequels, in particular, emphasize adaptations' disruption of linearity as they push at a narrative's boundaries, forcing audiences to confront before or after alongside now and then. As a result, adaptations, prequels, and sequels are best thought of as being affiliated or as forming an "alliance" with Shakespeare's texts, many of which are themselves adaptations.<sup>21</sup> Thinking of a rhizomatic rather than a filial model transforms the vertical relationship between texts into a horizontal relationship and frees adaptations from the limitations of linearity. Viewed in this way, texts have a relational rather than a hierarchical connection and as such, they work together collectively rather than competitively.

The WTG's *Lear's Daughters* illustrates these qualities of adaptation. The play has rightly been called a reaction against "a genealogy of 'false fathers'" (Goodman 1993b, 220), including Shakespeare, his play, and its main character. Not only does the content of *Lear's Daughters* bear this out, as I will discuss in Part III, but so does the play's inherent challenge to linearity. *Lear's Daughters* shakes the family tree of adaptation by moving simultaneously in two directions, thereby resisting a hierarchical relationship with its predecessor. The play disrupts the linearity expected of adaptations, which, as common sense would have it, maintains that the adaptation can only ever exist belatedly, in the wake of the "original." Written in 1987, *Lear's Daughters* does, of course, succeed *King Lear*, but, as a prequel placing itself prior to the beginning Shakespeare's play, it simultaneously precedes the seventeenth-century tragedy. Looking back in time and positing how Lear's familial and political situation came to be, the WTG deconstructs the past as it does the present. Implicitly asking, "What came before Shakespeare?" *Lear's Daughters* demands acknowledgment of the many earlier versions of Lear's story and so questions the alleged singularity of authorship.

As it looks back to a time before Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the WTG's play simultaneously speaks to late twentieth-century concerns. *Lear's Daughters* "argues with a government that prohibits 'pretended' families and that uses Shakespeare as one of its tools by which to maintain and promote its own regressive political views" (Bennett 1996, 53). Written just prior to the enactment of Section 28, which suppressed public discussion of homosexuality in Britain,<sup>22</sup> *Lear's Daughters* confronts its cultural moment. Fearing that an alternative family model would usurp one founded on patriarchal privilege, the New Right sought to silence opposition to the status quo in the late 1980s. By revealing the shortcomings of the traditional familial structure, and, as discussed above, by working collectively and bringing gender politics to the fore, the WTG challenged the dominant ideology of their era.

### III. "HOW MUCH?": WOMEN, ART, AND COMMODIFICATION

As the WTG critiques *King Lear* by exposing the alleged naturalness and benevolence of the patriarchy as the construction of a corrupt government, they simultaneously indict Margaret Thatcher for calculating the worth of women and artists in the 1980s. Motivating the company's opposition to Thatcher was the fact that under the Prime Minister, "the idea (current since 1945) that the arts provided an indispensable national forum — in which current views of the world could be questioned or contested and through which new views could be disseminated — was rejected as the self-serving justification of a subsidised left-wing elite" (Davies and Sinfield 2000, 141). Thatcher greatly reduced funding for the arts and forced artists to rely on market forces rather than on government subsidies. Thus, artists were pressured to seek corporate sponsorship and to produce art that reinforced rather than challenged societal norms (141-42).

The WTG, however, refused to comply. Instead, they confronted the issue of artists being compelled to go to market by linking this situation to women's experience in the economy of gender in *Lear's Daughters*. In the opening scene of the play, the Fool tells the audience a knock-knock joke that primes them for the calculating of worth that is to follow:

Knock, Knock.  
 Who's there?  
 Godfrey.  
 Godfrey who?  
 Godfrey tickets for the play tonight. (Feinstein 2000, 217)

Pitting herself against the audience, since they have presumably paid while she has apparently gotten in for free, the Fool reminds viewers that they have counted their money and handed it over in exchange for a show. This initial joke addresses the monetary value placed on art and harkens back to the WTG's earliest days when, as the members note, they endured the "difficulties of functioning without any subsidy whatsoever" (quoted in Wandor 1981, 51). Choosing to begin *Lear's Daughters* with the Fool's routine encourages audience members to think about the value they place on art and to consider the price paid by groups like the WTG who, when denied adequate funding, were compelled to create plays such as *Lear's Daughters* out of nothing.

The Fool's jest is only the beginning of her association with money. Throughout *Lear's Daughters*, as she holds out her hand to receive compensation for her services, the Fool calls attention to the intersection between artists and women in a culture where both have become goods to be sold on the market. In a poignant moment near the end of the play, the Fool

reports on her attempts to make Lear laugh by telling him jokes that involve counting. Her first jest begins with the question, "How many kisses does it take to keep a king happy?" "103," she explains: "One to kiss his tears away. One to kiss his fevered brow. One to kiss him deep in passion and 100 to kiss his arse!" (Feinstein 2000, 232) Unsurprisingly, Lear hits the Fool in the face because her counting makes him the butt of the joke. When the Fool tries another jest that involves numbers, however, the king very much enjoys himself. "A man goes up to a woman in the street," begins the Fool. "'How much?' he says. She is outraged. 'What do you think I am?' and the man says, 'We know what you are, love, we're just discussing the price.'" Lear is tickled by this joke: "The King laughs — and laughs. He laughs as though he would burst" (Feinstein 2000, 232). The monarch's reaction is fitting since for him all women, not just prostitutes, have a price that indicates their worth. Unlike the man in the joke, however, for the king there is no negotiation over fees, only the fact that women can be equated with money and men set the price. As a reward for this joke, the Fool is paid by Lear in a curious way: "Taking the Fool's ear he twists it to open its mouth. He places a coin on the edge of its tongue and the Fool (mimes swallowing coin, gulps)" (232). By ingesting the money, the Fool makes the point that for the starving female artist, biting the hand that feeds you is not a viable option. Furthermore, women and money are inseparable in a world where Lear calculates women's worth. The Fool's treatment here makes explicit what is examined elsewhere in the play: women's worth, which is located in their bodies, is created and calculated by men, and thus the females in *Lear's Daughters* are always, already trapped.

Further underscoring the connection between women, their art, and the monetary value placed on them by the patriarchy, the king's daughters introduce themselves by describing the materials with which they create: Goneril paints, Regan carves wood, and Cordelia works with words. The daughters' art, however, is devalued in Lear's kingdom. We hear no more about it until the end of the play, when Regan says that she "used to carve with my knife, create beauty from distortion" until she realized the extent to which she and Goneril were at the mercy of their father. Her carving will continue in Shakespeare's play, as we know, though it will be in the service of playing "a new game which will not be beautiful" (Feinstein 2000, 232). In the final moments of *Lear's Daughters*, Cordelia also remarks on her art when she explains the verbal self-censorship she must observe in order to remain of value to her father. As apparent in his interactions with the Fool, Lear will fund art that pleases him; and, as Shakespeare's play confirms, he will deny financial support to performances that do not. This point that women's creativity is limited by patriarchal whim speaks to the WTG's critique both of the scant financial support they received in their early days and the limited opportunities for women in theater in the 1980s. "[I]n a theatre industry

dominated by revivals of Shakespeare's plays," as Goodman has explained, "to work in well-funded theatre [in the 1980s], female actors too often found themselves in the wings, waiting for their moment to walk on and deliver their few lines" (Goodman 2003, 39). Though women's ability to be creative was curtailed by a Shakespeare-dominated industry, the WTG's play "turned that dynamic on its head" by never bringing Lear onstage and instead focusing on the women in his life (39). That Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia harbor artistic tendencies connects their plight to the WTG's situation as it brings into view another kind of creative activity associated with women and similarly regulated by the patriarchy: the production of children.

In Scene 10, the Fool explicitly connects children, money, and women when she announces that this is the part of the play where the "Fool talks about investment" (Feinstein 2000, 227). She then places a coin down the front of her skirt and says, "Nest egg, pension, taken care of, rainy day, looked after, old age" and rubs her belly (227). The connection between children and money is solidified when a moment later, the Fool pulls a doll from under her skirt as though she has birthed it and announces, "Investment." Although investing in the future as one might do with a retirement fund is similar to having children since both might provide for a person in his/her old age, Lear's financial plan unfortunately requires that someone else pay his dividends. The Fool explains who loses in this economic system when she says, "Three princesses all grown older, thinking about their father and counting the cost" (227). The cost of what becomes apparent as the scene unfolds: Goneril must keep track of women's value for her father; Cordelia is made to spin around in order to entertain Lear until she falls dizzy on the floor; and Regan uncovers the truth of her mother's death — three miscarriages that were the result of the king's demand for a son.

As the women in the play suffer in this economic system, the WTG speaks volumes, "offer[ing] a materialist discourse, a critique of capitalism" (Griffin and Aston 1991, 13). The company achieves this goal by examining the consequences of living with and, in the cases of the Fool and the Nurse, working for Lear. The hired women reinforce the point that for Lear all women have a value, and, as with feminist theory of the 1980s,<sup>23</sup> "the theme of economic valuing of women's work is brought to the fore" in the play with their presence (Goodman, 2003, 41). When the Nurse first joins the household, the Fool explains that there are "Three daughters. With two mothers — one buying, one selling. One paying, one paid" (Feinstein 2000, 219). The repetition of two mother-figures in the play is significant, as is the difference between them. Lear's wife pays bodily for her service to the king. Dying after complications from pregnancies that were forced upon her by Lear, the Queen is valued by her husband solely in terms of her body's potential to produce a

male heir. "[T]he dead queen's job of mothering is [then] hired out to the Nurse" (Goodman 2003, 41). Discarded when her "services are no longer required [. . .] Just like the Queen when she didn't make the right sort of boy-child for him," the Nurse too is trapped in an economy where, we soon discover, he who sets the prices is inept with numbers (Feinstein 2000, 231).

Although Lear ultimately determines that the Queen is disposable and exchangeable for other women, as the Nurse explains to Regan, "She *was* important to [Lear]. She organized the budget. Looked after his interests. Night after night when he wasn't with her, adding and subtracting to balance the figures" (Feinstein 2000, 228). The Queen must assume the role of the accountant because, ironically, Lear has no head for numbers. "He is very distressed by reading documents like these," she says, referring to the ledgers in which the accounts are kept. Because of Lear's poor financial planning, "the budget is in chaos. Taxes aren't being paid, and there's no income from the fields" (219). Lear, who cannot handle figures and "so by and large he doesn't read" the account books, is not adept at managing his estate (219). Thus, the females in his life are compelled to keep track of the worth of land, taxes, and even their own bodies. Lear owns the land and the bodies, and though women have an insider's perspective on the king's system, the play illustrates how difficult it is to escape such a corrupt economy.

This difficulty is made apparent during Goneril's trip to the cellar with Lear, which is ominous not only because of the implication of incest, but because the sexual act is coupled with money. As she looks on the "crowns, coins, breastplates, gold bars, all glowing in the candlelight," Goneril is told by Lear, "When you are Queen, this will be yours." He then instructs her that for now, "This will be our secret — just you and me — and you mustn't tell." "And then," Goneril adds, "he put his hand (*silence*) on my shoulder" (Feinstein 2000, 228). The implication here is that Lear may have transferred his carnal desires from his wife to his daughter as he refers to the young girl as "Queen" and lays a hand on her. But whether or not he sexually abuses Goneril, Lear certainly compels his daughter to take on her mother's role when, like the Queen before her, she is put in charge of the accounts. Goneril tells the Nurse, "He came in last night and pushed [a ledger] at me. 'Your mother used to do this so you can now. It's the accounts.' Columns and columns of figures" (229).

Although the king insists that Goneril replace his wife, once she is in charge of the finances Lear's eldest becomes more like her father than her mother, soon understanding the world in terms of numbers. Her ability to calculate women's worth in men's terms is apparent when Regan attempts to engage her sister in conversation about their impending marriages. Instead of addressing Regan's concerns, Goneril focuses on reading the ledger and responds laconically to

her sister. Goneril's lack of interest in her marriage is apparent; unlike her sister, the romantic, she is pragmatic. The eldest understands that "It's our jobs. It's what we're here for. To marry and breed." She then informs her sister that Lear's daughters are "valuable merchandise" to be sold at their father's will (Feinstein 2000, 229). Regan's sudden announcement that in seven months she will have a baby momentarily shocks Goneril. The eldest cannot believe that her sister "could . . . be so stupid." Regan protests: she is not stupid, but rather like the rat in the Fool's earlier joke, she is stuck in the middle. "I've always been number two, between one and three, but nothing," she complains (229). Now, since she has created a child of her own, Regan believes that she will have something special. Goneril explodes her sister's dream by explaining to Regan the consequences of her pregnancy. Showing her sister the amount she is worth with and without an illegitimate child, Goneril underscores the relationships among women, creativity, and money in the play. Though Regan is reluctant to look at the account book, Goneril is forceful, compelling her sister to see that the ledgers

say Regan, Second Daughter of Lear, is worth this much, and . . . [t]hese figures say My Lord Duke of Cornwall owns this much. These figures say Regan will marry Cornwall and then Cornwall will own more and Lear will get a grandson, a legitimate heir and they will all be contented men. However, Regan, Second Daughter of Lear, with bastard child, is worth this much! (GONERIL rips out page from ledger, crumbles it and throws it on the floor . . .) Get rid of it! (229-30)

In this system where women's "value-invested form amounts to what man inscribes in and on its matter; that is, her body" (Irigaray 1985, 187), there is no room for Regan's romantic notions of love. Whether she "lie[s] in bed at night . . . feel[ing] [her] heart beating so fast" when she thinks of marriage, the reality is that she is a commodity, and as it stands, she is damaged goods (Feinstein 2000, 229). In this scene, Regan illustrates Gayle Rubin's explanation of the way that cultural norms regarding sexuality are acquired: "Each new generation must learn and become its sexual destiny, each person must be encoded with its appropriate status within the system" (Rubin 1997, 42). Under the tutelage of Goneril, Regan learns that she is no longer a virgin who is "pure exchange value" (Irigaray 1985, 186), nor does she occupy the other acceptable position in Lear's economy, the mother. "Mothers are essential to [the social order's] (re)production," of course, but "[t]heir responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it" (185). In not conforming to heteronormative expectations for reproducing within an approved marital relationship, Regan challenges her status as a commodity, and as a result, her worth diminishes.

As Goneril's lesson to her sister illustrates, women in *Lear's Daughters* are like

numbers in the ledger, always on the verge of adding up to nothing. Once Regan understands the dire consequences of performing an independent creative act, she seeks to restore her worth as a "gift," for neither she nor her sister can imagine a world in which "'commodities' refused to go to 'market'" (Irigaray 1985, 196). Lear's middle daughter thus undergoes a painful abortion, which reminds us that women's creative (re)production, free of the rules of the market, is not permitted in a world where "men exchange women [and thus] it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges" (Rubin 1997, 37). Regan recognizes the importance of her interaction with Goneril and reinforces the link between women's art and reproductive capability when, at the end of the play, she contrasts her former artistic "energy and creativity" with what occurs at this moment: "And then 'Get rid of it,' she said, 'Get rid of it,' and that was all. The veil was pulled away from my eyes," Regan explains, "and I could see what [Lear] had done to [Goneril], had done to me" (Feinstein 2000, 232).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In telling the story behind *King Lear*, the WTG provokes the audience to look afresh at the aged king for whom many readers of Shakespeare's play feel pity. As Shakespeare shows us, Lear's system of calculating women's worth costs him his sanity, his kingdom, his relationship with his family, and, ultimately, his life. His daughters, who lose their creativity, agency, and humanity, also pay a heavy price. As the WTG questions the patriarch at the center of Shakespeare's play and is committed to collaborative authorship and feminist politics, the company critiques Margaret Thatcher's privileging of the market and the individual in late twentieth-century Britain. Collectivity/multiplicity, the WTG argues, is positive and productive; individuality/singularity is destructive and limiting. This insight is provocative not only for what it can tell us about *King Lear* and contemporary British politics, but also for what it reveals about the relationship between adaptations, prequels, and sequels and their so-called "sources." *Lear's Daughters* illustrates that adaptations inherently challenge a linear model in which the parent text determines the adaptation's worth as the play reassesses the value of adaptations, prequels, artists' collaborative efforts, women's work, and women's bodies.

By calling our attention to numbers and the manner in which women and their creations are valued, *Lear's Daughters* ultimately advocates for a world "without additions and accumulations, one plus one, woman after woman . . . Without sequence or number. Without yardstick or standard . . . exempt from masculine transactions: enjoyment without a fee, well-being without pain, pleasure without possession" (Irigaray 1985, 197). Achieving this, the WTG argues, begins with rejecting an economy like Thatcher's that calculates artists'

and women's worth, as the Nurse does at the end of *Lear's Daughters*. When she opens the letter terminating her as an employee of the household once the two eldest daughters have married, the Nurse finds money inside the envelope. She refuses, however, to accept this, her final payment. "Money he gives me. Pieces of silver. What do I want with his gold?" she remarks in disgust (Feinstein 2000, 232). Refusing to participate any longer in a market where her worth is determined by a political leader, the Nurse leaves, offering the money instead to another of Lear's employees. "Here, Fool. Grovel for it, Fool, for that I shall never do!" the Nurse says scornfully as she tosses the coins at the monarch's entertainer and leaves Lear's castle on her own terms (232). The final image of *Lear's Daughters* harkens back to these lines and to the beginning of the play while making the point that artists and women are placed in a difficult position when their worth is dependent upon their going to market: the Fool turns to the audience and "*Holds out[her] hand for money*" just before the lights go to black (232).<sup>24</sup>

## NOTES

1. All references to *King Lear* are to the Conflated Text in *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (Shakespeare 1997).
2. See Sinfield (1989), 4.
3. In this section and throughout this essay I use the term "adaptation" to describe *Lear's Daughters* primarily because my analysis builds on and critiques Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation*, which uses this term exclusively. And as Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier acknowledge, though the label "adaptation" is not perfect, it has advantages over other, similar, terms. Most relevant to this essay is Fischlin and Fortier's point that "[a]daptation implies a process rather than a beginning of an end." Furthermore, adaptation "is the word in most common usage and therefore capable of minimizing confusion" (Fischlin and Fortier 2000, 3). Though Fischlin and Fortier reject "appropriation," a term commonly used to describe texts such as *Lear's Daughters*, it could be used to classify the WTG's play. See (Desmet 1999, 4) and (Marsden 1991, 1) for definitions of this term.
4. The assertions of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) regarding authorship could be said to be those of the WTG. The authors reported that they wished "[t]o reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I." Furthermore, to them, Deleuze and Guattari's collaboration meant that "[w]e are no longer ourselves [. . .] We have been aided, inspired, multiplied [. . .] A book is an assemblage [. . .] and as such is unattributable. It is a multiplicity" (3-4).
5. As Goodman explains, the collaborative nature of the play made its authorship

difficult to pin down, as can be evidenced by the variety of ways in which the authors were presented to the public (98-99). The original script of the play announced them as follows:

*Lear's Daughters*

by The Women's Theatre Group and Elaine Feinstein

copyright 1988 The Women's Theatre Group and Elaine Feinstein

The first advertisements, however, presented the authors differently:

*Lear's Daughters*

by Elaine Feinstein

Women's Theatre Group

Finally, the handbills and programs for the play appeared thus:

*Lear's Daughters*

by Women's Theatre Group

6. For the full text of this speech, see Thatcher 1975c.
7. For the full text of this speech, see Thatcher 1976.
8. Consider, for example, "Reclaiming Cunt" in Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (Ensler 2008, 101-102) or the use of the term "slut" in the "Slut Walks" that recently took place across North America in response to a Toronto police officer's advice to women that they "avoid dressing like sluts" in order to reduce the chances of being sexually assaulted (Stampler 2011).
9. The blending of masculinity and femininity in the person of Margaret Thatcher has preoccupied critics and was satirized in the 1980s by the Spitting Image puppet of the Prime Minister, which was often shown dressed in a man's suit and smoking a cigar:



*Margaret Thatcher Puppet, from Spitting Image Wiki*

See Hadley and Ho (2010) for a discussion of Thatcher's "contradictory blending of male and female attributes" as represented by the puppet (5). In the same volume, see Kim Duff's essay "Let's Dance: The Line of Beauty and the Revenant Figure of Thatcher" for further analysis of the puppet, which underscored the fact that Thatcher was "masculine and feminine *at the same time*" (Duff 2010, 181, emphasis in original). To be sure, Thatcher's dual gender stands in contrast to the WTG's Fool who, as Leslie Ferris (2009) has said, "flouts sexual ambiguity" to political ends (106).

10. See also Thatcher's avoidance of the topic at a press conference after winning the Conservative leadership in 1975 (Thatcher 1975a).
11. Hadley and Ho remark that when Thatcher claimed in 2003 that she did not invent "Thatcherism," she was rejecting the notion of her politics being "an ideological approach" in favor of considering it to be "a natural historical development" (Hadley and Ho 2010, 6).
12. See Alan Sinfield's very astute explanation of cultural production, including the significance of this statement made by Thatcher, in *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain* (1989, 23-38).
13. For the text of the entire interview in *Women's Own* (31 October 1987), see Thatcher 1987.
14. Though the influence of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism has been widely felt, it nonetheless continues to be difficult for readers to appreciate the collaborative nature of the early modern theater. Perhaps this is because even as early as 1623, Shakespeare was marketed as a sole creator. "Whether

consciously or not, the folio editors placed Shakespeare outside the common and accepted practice of co-authorship in Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline drama," as Brian Vickers has noted. "[Thus, the editors] laid the way for a quasi-bardolatrous belief in Shakespeare as the special case, the Romantic genius who needed no adjutants" (Vickers 2002, 18). Long after the seventeenth century, and despite the declaration that the Author is dead, the desire to cling to the single, identifiable playwright continued. In 2001, Jeffrey Masten complained that though the point about the early modern theater being a collaborative endeavor had been established by Bentley, Orgel, and himself, editors still could not come to terms with how to deal with multiple authorship. "If the fact that collaboration was the 'dominant mode of textual production' in the early modern theater has been widely recognized now as a thread of theatrical/literary history," Masten writes, "it has largely not altered our editions of the plays thus produced" (Masten 2001, 113).

15. See the *Norton Shakespeare* for its *King Lear: A Conflated Text* (Shakespeare 1997, 2493-567).
16. I borrow the phrase "knowing audience" from Linda Hutcheon, who uses it to identify audiences who are familiar with an adaptation's "source" text.
17. See Hutcheon and Bortolotti (2007) for an extended discussion of the relationship between cultural and biological adaptation.
18. See, for example, Hutcheon (2006), 32.
19. See Ruby Cohn (1976), who argues that adaptations should be conceived of as "offshoots," a term she wrongly judges to be a "neutral word" (Cohn 1976, 3). As she aims to "indicate how far the shoots grow from the Shakespearean stem" (3), Cohn invokes a plant metaphor, which is not dissimilar to the family tree metaphor implied by Hutcheon's use of "offspring." A related but somewhat less hierarchal term, "ancestors," is employed later by Bortolotti and Hutcheon (2007), though it too, I would argue, invokes the problematic image of a family tree.
20. This flexibility regarding the relationship between moments in time may help explain why audience members themselves were so often found appropriating the plays they saw in the theater in their everyday lives, as Charles Whitney has explained (see Whitney 2008).
21. Fortier suggests something similar about one particular adaptation's relationship to other texts: "[Heinrich] Muller's *Hamletmachine* does not descend in a filial genealogy from Shakespeare, but is written in a rhizomatic web of alliances: Artaud, Brecht, Sartre, Franz Fanon, Ulrike, Meinhoff, Conrad" (Fortier 1996, 7). This observation, as I suggest here, can be applied to adaptations more broadly speaking.
22. Section 28 was enacted in 1988 and not revoked until 2003, which, incidentally, was the year immediately following Thatcher's retirement from

public life. It reads as follows:

28. (1) The following section shall be inserted after section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986 (prohibition of political publicity) —

2A. — A local authority shall not —

(a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality;

(b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.

23. See, for instance, Hartsock 1983.

24. As I hope this essay illustrates, claiming that a text is composed by a single individual is short-sighted. I would like to extend my gratitude to Jonathan Chambers, Kim Coates, Julie Haught, and Scott Magelssen for their helpful suggestions during the creation of this project.

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## PERMISSIONS

Figure 1. The Fool Counting. Image from The Sphinx Theatre Company website. <http://www.sphinxtheatre.co.uk/> (<http://www.sphinxtheatre.co.uk/>) [accessed on 18 November 2012].

Figure 2. Margaret Thatcher Puppet. Image from the Spitting Image Wiki. [http://spittingimage.wikia.com/wiki/Margaret\\_Thatcher](http://spittingimage.wikia.com/wiki/Margaret_Thatcher) ([http://spittingimage.wikia.com/wiki/Margaret\\_Thatcher](http://spittingimage.wikia.com/wiki/Margaret_Thatcher)) [accessed on 18 November 2012].

Figure 3. Henry Peacham's *Titus Andronicus*, c. 1595. Image from The Artchive Virtual Gallery. [http://www.artchive.com/web\\_gallery/H/Henry-Peacham/Illustration-from-Titus-Andronicus,-by-William-Shakespeare.html](http://www.artchive.com/web_gallery/H/Henry-Peacham/Illustration-from-Titus-Andronicus,-by-William-Shakespeare.html) ([http://www.artchive.com/web\\_gallery/H/Henry-Peacham/Illustration-from-Titus-Andronicus,-by-William-Shakespeare.html](http://www.artchive.com/web_gallery/H/Henry-Peacham/Illustration-from-Titus-Andronicus,-by-William-Shakespeare.html)) [accessed 18 November 2012].

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# Music as Facing-Page Translation in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*

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## ABSTRACT

Andrew Goodwin observes that "[o]ne absence in postmodern theorizing about music television lies in the neglect of music," and this crucial absence extends to assessments of Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*. Although film critics and scholars have almost universally cited "MTV stylings" and the teen-friendly soundtrack as central to the film's success, none of them has examined the music itself in more than a cursory fashion, raising the possibility that the highest-grossing Shakespeare film in cinematic history has been fundamentally mischaracterized. While it is true that *Romeo + Juliet's* flash-cut camerawork often gives it a music-video-like visual style and that Twentieth Century Fox vigorously marketed the film with the music-television demographic, the MTV references obscure Luhrmann's unusual approach to using music in adapting Shakespeare for the screen — in particular, his striking decision to have it provide "modern-day . . . equivalencies that could decode the language of Shakespeare." Using both semiological and musicological approaches, I analyze the function and effects of the music track in *Romeo + Juliet* and conclude that its "translational" mandate makes it behave very differently not only from the music in a video, but also from most movie sound tracks. Far from providing an entrée into or helping "dumb down" the source material for a Shakespeare-challenged audience, the fragmented sound collage of *Romeo + Juliet* serves as an agent of disruption, working to alienate the viewer, psychologically and physically, from the fictive world and to trigger a strenuous intellectual effort. Ironically, this purported source of the movie's commercial success enacts Eisenstein's Marxist notion of the cinematic experience as an active dialectical process.

A decade after the Shakespeare film boom was declared over and the postmortem began, there remains a consensus among scholars on two points: first, that Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *William*

*Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, which grossed nearly \$150 million worldwide in its cinematic release (*Romeo + Juliet* 1996), represents the boom's apotheosis; and, second, that music was central to the movie's success. Indeed, *Romeo + Juliet* has been referred to so universally as a kind of extended music video that the uninitiated would be justified in believing it to be a product of the music industry rather than a film in its own right. Douglas Lanier, in his analysis of Shakespeare's fluctuating "cultural capital" in the post-boom period, performs the typical triangulation of the film's commercial success, music, and purported music-video essence when he refers to its "MTV video style and pop visuals" and says that it "established the template for teen Shakespeare, the signature genre of the period" (2010, 107).

This characterization of *Romeo + Juliet* does not belong to the retrospective view alone: nearly every review and article published about the film at the time emphasizes the central role of its soundtrack and cites these same "MTV stylings." Among the film critics, the *New York Times*' Janet Maslin writes that "Baz Luhrmann . . . invents a whole new vocabulary . . . [that] calls for pink hair, screaming billboards, tabloid television stories, [and] music-video editing" (1996). Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* remarks, "The film reworks Shakespeare in a frenzy of jump cuts that makes most rock videos look like MTV on Midol" (1996). Welton Jones of the *San Diego Tribune* comes straight out and calls *Romeo + Juliet* "an extended music video" (quoted in Lehmann 2002, 132). The Shakespearean scholars concur. Samuel Crowl says, "The film's young stars, coupled with its relentless, in-your-face MTV visual style and soundtrack, made its treatment of Shakespeare's tale immediately and excitingly available to its audience" (2003, 119). Douglas Brode observes that "some sequences played like extended MTV rock videos . . . Hip-hop music played loudly and incessantly" (2000, 56). Even Julie Sanders, in an extended semiotic analysis of the film's music that would seem by definition to present a more complicated view of *Romeo + Juliet*, falls into line, assuming that the film's audience is made up of "the MTV generation . . . a visually literate, quotation-literate audience" (2007, 161).

There can be no denying that these perceptions have some basis in fact, and that if critics and scholars have taken the generic links between *Romeo + Juliet* and music-video culture too far, or applied them too loosely, this also is not without cause. Twentieth Century Fox deliberately encouraged the conflation of the movie with music television from the outset by vigorously marketing *Romeo + Juliet* to the MTV audience (in both the channel-specific and larger cultural senses). It had a half-hour *Romeo + Juliet* special aired on MTV (Wetmore 2006, 123) and created a promotional trailer, featuring De'sree's "Kissing You" and the heavy bass riff of One Inch Punch's "Pretty Piece of Flesh," overlain with flash cuts from the film, that looked (if it did not necessarily sound) like a music video. The studio strongly promoted the Volume 1 soundtrack, issuing a string of hit singles from it, and later released a Volume 2 soundtrack, as well as a special "music edition" DVD containing interviews with the composers and sound-mix engineers. And perhaps most important, it fostered a powerful demographic overlap between *Romeo + Juliet*'s audience and the music-television audience by particularly targeting female teens — a group whose "re-enfranchisement" within the music-marketing industry (Straw 1988, 6) was instrumental to creating the singles-based, high-turnover culture out of which MTV emerged in the early 1980s.

Meanwhile, although Luhrmann accepted the MTV parallels with only lukewarm enthusiasm (York

2006, 60), he nonetheless contributed to them by aiming his movie explicitly at the "youth culture," by giving music a central role in capturing this demographic, and by employing a cinematographic style that features the ultra-quick-cut, "post-classical" camerawork typical of the music video, in which "the rhythm of the images [is] carefully reunited with physical rhythm [of the music]" so that "the video, like the song, has its basis in rhythm" (Berland 1993, 38-39). These factors, together with a music track played at intrusive volume levels at many points in the film (albeit briefly, for the most part), gave movie critics every reason to assign *Romeo + Juliet* a strong MTV sensibility. Academics, similarly, were justified in seeing in Luhrmann's film the same "collagist" ethos, full of freneticism and intertextual pastiche, that characterizes a number of seminal early music videos and makes the form, in some scholars' opinion, the apogee of postmodernist media genres (see, for instance, Straw 1988; Kaplan 1987; Fiske 1986).

The trouble with these references is that they are as vague as they are pervasive. While they may represent accurately the film's marketing strategy, and to a certain extent its visual style, they give a misleading picture of Luhrmann's use of music in his approach to adapting Shakespeare for the screen. Since music is indeed as central to *Romeo + Juliet* as is generally held, this is a significant point of inaccuracy. Andrew Goodwin observes, with commendable mildness, that "[o]ne absence in postmodern theorizing about music television lies in the neglect of music" (1993, 46); this crucial absence extends to assessments of *Romeo + Juliet*. None of the texts that reference "music television" or music videos examines the music itself in more than a cursory fashion. Even Julie Sanders's article is more a textual analysis than a musical one, in the sense that it either associates the songs' lyrics with the film images (for instance, the lyrics to "Angel" with the scene of Juliet wearing angel wings) or examines the effects of their literary intertextual references (for instance, Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, used in the film at the end of the tomb scene). Given that writers almost universally fail to theorize about the music-video genre or specify what aspect of "MTV style" they have in mind, the comments do not really even refer in any meaningful way to music videos, but rather seem to be shorthand for the film's commercial quality. Conventional wisdom about *Romeo + Juliet* therefore extends from a premise that is both unexamined and untested, making it possible that the highest-grossing Shakespeare film in cinematic history has been fundamentally mischaracterized.

A closer look at the use of music in *Romeo + Juliet* suggests that this is indeed the case. While it is true that Luhrmann and his team deliberately put much of the film's music in harness with the visuals to create what he calls "modern-day . . . equivalencies that could decode the language of Shakespeare" (Luhrmann 1996), music so employed does not result in anything like a music video. In fact, it results in quite the opposite: a filmic construct whose music track subserves the narrative to a remarkable degree and "manipulatively hyperexplicates" (Brown 1994, 2) the narrative in a way perhaps not attempted since Hollywood composer Max Steiner wrote his notorious "mickey-mousing" underscores for *Mildred Pierce* and *Don Juan* in the 1940s. In subordinating the aural track to translational purposes, Luhrmann violates both the central premise of the music video and the basis of music-television culture itself: the sanctity of the song. As Will Straw points out, the music-video era came about when the recording industry, trying to solve the problems of slow turnover and low innovation rates caused by the 1970s album-oriented approach to marketing, put new primacy on "the individual song as the basic unit within the marketing of . . . music" (1988, 7).

Whatever disruptions music videos may have caused in the listener's traditional ways of processing music, they respected the genre's *raison d'être*, preserving the central element of "the song as a singular structure . . . the structure never contested in the video" (Berland 1993). By contrast, the process of creating the *Romeo + Juliet* sound track was, in the words of score mix engineer Geoff Foster, "a matter of breaking down elements from the multi-tracks," to the extent that "[composer/mixer] Nellee [Hooper] had conversations with certain managers saying the record company will not release your multi-tracks, which means that all we've got is your stereo mix, and we can't use it in that form, so it will be butchered" (2007). Lurhmann's use of music also violates the converse rule of music videos: that "[their] visual-semantic complexity rarely . . . allows the song to challenge the video's seduction of the viewer" (Berland 1993, 39). As I argue below, the *Romeo + Juliet* sound track, with its deliberate intrusiveness, systematically interrupts precisely that seductive process.

In fact, the decision to use music to perform a literally (and literarily) hermeneutic function confounds almost every traditional approach to film-music theory and practice, and resonates through the filmic whole. Having a movie provide, essentially, a facing-page translation for its own dialogue track is both radical and conservative — the latter in the sense that it heralds a return to techniques used in the "silent" era, such as the use of captions and, more relevantly, a music track that "consist[s] of pieces with different tempi and moods strung together, like tracks of a compilation album" (Chion 2009, 407). I argue that Lurhmann's seemingly simple decision to employ a significant portion of the music as a linguistic "translator" sets the stated intent of increasing accessibility at odds with the actual effect by repeatedly disrupting the viewers' absorption into the diegetic world, forcing them to engage in an effortful intellectual process of reconciliation and impeding the film's thematic and narrative coherence.

In my examination of the way the music's translational mandate acts on the film's structure, viewership experience, and ontological whole, I follow K. J. Donnelly's call for a "dual logic" in film-music analysis that employs both semiotic and musicological tools for observing the ways in which the music works in the overall film (2001, 3). I look at not only what Claudia Gorbman terms "cinematic codings" that express the interplay of musical and other filmic elements, but also "cultural codings" (otherwise known as *topoi*, or "style topics") that aid the viewer's interpretation on a number of levels (1987, 3). Given that the sound track contains both classical underscore and popular songs, it seems fitting to apply both the conventional theory of style-topic function in narrative films and Ronald Rodman's more recent ideas about what might be called "generic style topics" — a recognition, as Rodman points out, that "unlike themes in the classic film score, traits of . . . characters [in films with popular-song sound tracks] are not represented by singular leitmotifs. Instead, it is the *style* of the popular songs that signify as leitmotifs in the film" (2006, 126, emphasis in original). To a considerable degree, however, the peculiar workings of the music track in *Romeo + Juliet* stymie both traditional and new soundtrack theories.

The comprehensive implications of Lurhmann's musical employment can best be understood by first considering the typical aims and the global effects of music within a film's fictional construct. One of the primary goals of most film music, as Gorbman writes in her still-definitive *Unheard Melodies*, is to "render the individual an untroublesome viewing subject; less critical, less awake" (1987, 5), as

well as to "act as a suturing device" that "lessens spatial and temporal discontinuities with its own melodic and harmonic continuity" (6). The viewer, she notes, "tends to be conscious of the discourse (elements, including music, that enunciate the story) only insofar as it 'transgresses' or 'interrupts' story (that which is enunciated)" (31). Other major functions of film music include establishing and sustaining mood, moving the viewer emotionally by means of pitch-relation affectiveness (that is, the harmonic and melodic progressions of the music), and aiding narrative interpretation by the use of culturally recognized motifs or styles of music (the abovementioned "style topics"). In sum, a movie's music track is typically characterized by invisibility, inaudibility, emotional signifying, continuity, unity, and narrative cuing (Gorbman 1987, 73).

Film-music theorists increasingly recognize, as well, that sound tracks using popular songs function somewhat differently — partly because in order to fulfill their function, they must be made intermittently overt, and partly because the subliminal absorptive effect of the classical underscore, which Anahid Kassabian calls "assimilating identification," is usually replaced with more individualized "affiliating identifications." In other words, many of the emotional and mnemonic associations made between viewers and the movie through the music will "depend on histories forged outside the film scene, and . . . allow for a fair bit of mobility within it" (2001, 3). Nonetheless, the basic roles of the music remain the same. In the soundtracks for Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, Emile Ardolino's *Dirty Dancing*, and Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise*, for instance, "popular" songs such as "Son of a Preacher Man," "I've Had the Time of My Life," and "Wild Night" play at sufficient length to create continuity and mood and to build emotional affect even for those viewers who are unfamiliar with the song and have imported no extra-filmic associations.

### MUSIC AS FRAGMENTATION

The portions of the *Romeo + Juliet* sound track that act as an "equivalency" to the Shakespearean dialogue perform none of the functions listed above. They are, to start with, necessarily conspicuous: a "translator" must be consciously registered in order to work. The songs with lyrics carry a special burden, as they are literally the only source of modern-day language in the movie. Luhrmann not only retains the play's Shakespearean dialogue, but also uses Shakespearean language and references in posters, signs, and newspaper headlines. Perhaps even more anomalously, the hermeneutically employed music cues, whether songs or scored elements, are kept very short, as part of their mandate to synchronize tightly with the visual track. Notwithstanding critics' commentaries about "continual, in-your-face music" and "hip-hop music played incessantly," the contemporary songs associated most strongly with *Romeo + Juliet* are used only fractionally. For example, of the nearly five-minute span of Gavin Friday's "Angel" found on the triple-platinum-selling CD *Music from the Motion Picture 1* (Hooper, de Vries, and Armstrong 1996a), within the movie the first five notes alone constitute Juliet's motif, and the longest iteration, at the masquerade ball, lasts only thirty seconds. As short as this is, it is longer than any other stretch of contemporary music in the film's sound track. The audible portion of Garbage's "Local God" runs for fifteen seconds. One Inch Punch's "Pretty Piece of Flesh," written with the filmmakers to accompany the verse that Sampson of the Montague Boys recites in the gas-station scene (and played again in their car after the ball), is twelve seconds long, with lyrics for only several of those seconds. Even the Cardigans' "Lovefool," which reached the number-one position on the charts in cross-marketing between the Cardigans' CD

*First Band on the Moon* and the *Romeo + Juliet* soundtrack ("First Band" 2012), plays for only six seconds. Meanwhile, the filmmakers' decision to bring in sound editor Roger Savage at the beginning of the shoot, so that "work on sound and image overlapped" (Cook 2010, 69-70), also means that most of the songs were commissioned specifically for the film, so that viewers during the film's first run, at any rate, could import few extra-filmic associations.

Nor are contemporary songs the only kind of music put to the service of "translation" and thus asked to fulfill non-normative operations of film music. Many scored sections of the sound track created by composers/sound producers Nellee Hooper and Marius de Vries (as distinct from the film's third credited composer and main underscorer, Craig Armstrong) share that mandate and are similarly fragmentary and conspicuous. De Vries says, "Many of the musical gestures which served as themes were not sequences of notes which were recognizable melodies so much as they were excerpts from our source material, or they were parts of a song that we decided to use in the film that we were then able to quote from, not just musically but textually" (2007). Like the songs, these "musical gestures" often come from unrelated genres and are stylistically incongruous; if one listened to the music from the film's first ten minutes, one might think it was anything from an epic drama to a punk documentary to a *Road Runner* cartoon. Such generic disjuncture is disruptive enough to be very rare, even in films that seem to use a wide range of music. Rodman points out, for instance, that the overall tone of the ostensibly diverse *Trainspotting* soundtrack is set by the dominating presence of variations on "Britpop" (2006, 131). Ken Garner, likewise, finds as common characteristics of the music on Quentin Tarantino's soundtracks that "it is old [and] it is referential to distinct musical, film, or media genres" (2001, 191). Though the same generalizations could be made about *Romeo + Juliet's Music from the Motion Picture* CD, they cannot of the music within the film itself, which swings from Mozart to Sergio Leone, from Wagner to The Butthole Surfers, from epic choral to scratch-grunge, from soul ballads to solo clarinet.

We have, then, a significant element of the music track to *Romeo + Juliet* that does not function as music normally does in a film (and certainly nothing like it does in a music video). It does not establish a tone. It does not set any consistent mood for any length of time. It creates neither temporal nor narrative continuity. It highlights rather than obscures the "seams" and disjunctions of other filmic elements. It does not move the viewer emotionally in any traditional way. Instead, it jars, alienates, and confuses, keeping us emotionally destabilized and intellectually alert and making us aware of the film as a film. Thus, even while the "accessible" musical genres and blatant musical "tags" may help to "translate" the Shakespearean scenario and dialogue, they simultaneously make the film's fictional world difficult to access and even more difficult to remain in. In a section called "breaking the rules," Gorbman concedes that "certain conditions . . . may require one principle [of film-music use] to take precedence over another" and gives as an example that "in its illustrative function, mickey-mousing music often becomes noticeable, violating the principle of inaudibility" (Gorbman 1987, 91). It is hard to imagine, though, that she or any student of film-music history envisaged a filmmaker choosing to violate the principle so often and to such an extreme degree as Luhrmann does in *Romeo + Juliet*.

Perhaps the most notable instance of the music's translational (and hence disruptive) effect comes in the gas-station battle between the Montague Boys and the Capulet Boys, the latest of "three civil

brawls bred of an airy word" (*William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* 1996; 1.1.9). At this early point in the movie, when the characters' identities and the basic plot are not yet established, the filmmakers were particularly concerned about the fact that, in the words of *Romeo + Juliet's* co-writer Craig Pearce, "[Shakespeare] writes in this obscure language called Elizabethan, and ninety percent of the world can't understand it" (Luhmann and Pearce 1996). This scene, while misrepresentative in degree, is representative in kind. No other scene after this is quite so frenetic, either visually or musically, but the cinematographic and musical techniques are characteristic of much of Luhmann's overall style. The "modern-day equivalency" the filmmakers chose for conveying to the audience the nature of the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets was the trope of the spaghetti Western. Accordingly, the camerawork features techniques typical of that genre, from swish-pans to slow-motion shots. The music, intermittently, follows suit. Pearce notes, "The music [when the Capulet Boys arrive in the scene] is sort of reminiscent of a Sergio Leone type Western. Tybalt, when he's presented, you know, you get the image of a big bad gunslinger. So it says to the audience, even if you can't quite tune your ear into the Shakespearean dialogue at that early stage, they're going 'Okay, he's a scary guy'" (Luhmann and Pearce 1996).

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Using music to indicate genre and character is, of course, nothing new; indeed, "music that is reminiscent of a Sergio Leone type Western" is the very definition of a "style topic" — that is, part of "the vocabulary of a rudimentary system of musical signification" that "film composers rely on [to elicit] predictable responses" (Neumeyer and Buhler 2009, 22). Spaghetti Western topics — twanging guitars, open chords, male choruses singing intervals of thirds and fourths in a kind of faux-Indian chanting, sound effects of wind on an open plain — are used so widely that film-music books often cite them as an easily referenced example of the technique, with the imputation that they are hackneyed even by style-topic standards. According to *Romeo + Juliet's* editor, Jill Bilcock, the filmmakers acquired that part of the music for the gas-station scene by the simple expedient of taking it from pre-existing movies: "We just went down to the local video shop and got out all the spaghetti Westerns and stole the music off it and chopped it up and put it on the cut, because we wanted it to be like that, a spaghetti Western" (1996).

The main point of complication, of course, is that *Romeo + Juliet* is not a Western. The "gunslinger" music is used nowhere in the film except when the Montagues and Capulets are in a scene together. (Despite Pearce's suggestion, the motif does not attach to Tybalt, who appears at the ball, for instance, without instigating it.) It happens even then only for a stretch of seconds at a time, just long enough to "tag" the narrative setup of the scene, and interrupts between other "tags," none from the same genre. In the gas-station scene, the distinctive twanging of the guitar abruptly cuts into the heavy bass riff of "Pretty Piece of Flesh" and is itself interrupted several times by pockets of silence, strange vocal screeching, background tympani, and a violin/cello *sforzando* marking the freeze-frame-captioned identification of Benvolio.

It is almost impossible to overstate how anomalous this kind of "sound collage" is in the world of film music. Legendary film composer Quincy Jones is merely "fantasiz[ing] the impossible" when he says, "I've always wanted to see the juxtaposition of a Victorian setting with modern soul music. It would really crack me up to find, in the middle of a scene out of Dickens, James Brown screaming

away as the town crier" (quoted in Gorbman 1987, 83). Obtrusively fragmented music is especially forbidden inside a montage. So invariably is a continuous musical underlay used to suture the visuals of a montage that film-music theorist Roger Hickman even puts it in terms of an imperative: "The rapid number of cuts in a montage often necessitates the use of music to create a sense of unity. Usually a single musical mood is projected" (2006, 41). In the gas-station scene, however, the music has a different set of mandates: to match as closely as possible each new occasion for identification within the scene; to function as an aural-register duplicate for the textual captions; and in general to synchronize tightly with the visual track, which is providing the other "equivalencies."

In his choice to give translation primacy over other musical functions, Luhrmann is defying two key traditions of film-music practice. First, he is using the "popular" songs in *Romeo + Juliet* as part of the underscore. Second, he is using the underscore as (in a manner of speaking) an overscore. Despite the impression of continuity that they impart, underscores are in fact highly — though very subtly — fragmentary, written in spans of seconds rather than minutes. Frank Skinner's classic book *Underscore* gives us some idea of this. He composes the music for one scene in the following manner:

For the first cue at twelve and one-third seconds (0.12 1/3) a phrase is written for full orchestra as Stanhope rides away, with a diminuendo for the dialogue at fifteen and one-third seconds (0.15 1/3). Here Kitty says, "Why did he leave me here?" rather sadly, so an English horn phrase is written. At nineteen and one-thirds seconds (0.19 1/3) is a cut to the thugs. Ominous chords are employed in the lower register. The snare drum and tympani effect reappears. (1960, 31)

Max Steiner, similarly, "wrote detailed descriptions of the action into every bar of his musical sketch" for *Mildred Pierce* (Buhler 2001, 45). Compared to this tight coordination between soundtrack and visuals, not to mention control over affective intent (as seen in the introduction of the English horn for a line spoken "rather sadly"), songs are usually musical loose cannons. However carefully chosen and manipulated, they have what Anahid Kassabian calls "an aleatory quality . . . a loose fit with the visuals [that] contributes further to the larger range of identification possible with pop soundtracks" (2001, 80). As Kassabian points out, the musical cue may start off exactly matched with the beginning of the visual passage, but it cannot stay closely matched, and the longer the song goes on, the more loosely it fits.

In the *Romeo + Juliet* score, though, segments of "song" are for the most part used interchangeably with the scored elements in short, close-fitting cues. The initial *Music from the Motion Picture* CD is misleading in this regard, as it plays all the songs fully; the *Volume 2* CD, which features the rest of the music, gives a more accurate picture of the intermixture of song fragments and score, noting that the "Original Score contains samples from 'Talk Show Host' (Radiohead) . . . 'Kissing You (Love Theme from *Romeo + Juliet*)' . . . 'Cough Syrup' (Butthole Surfers) . . . 'Torclivia' (John King and Mike Simpson) . . . and 'To You I Bestow' (Edmund Enright)" (Hooper, de Vries, and Armstrong 1996b, liner notes). As a method of exteriorizing the characters' moods and thoughts in "translation" of the Shakespearean dialogue, filling in gaps in that dialogue instead of adding lines to the play, identifying the characters and adding to their characterization, the musical tags function exactly as intended (incidentally adding a musical hyper-explicitness to the aural band that matches the hyperbole and literalization in the image track). When the Montague Boys pull into the gas station in

the first post-Prologue scene, Justin Warfield of One Inch Punch raps "the boys, the boys" as the image track goes into freeze-frame and a caption saying "The Montague Boys" appears.



*The boys, the boys . . .*

The most audible fragment of "Angel" plays when Juliet appears at the ball in angel wings. "Lovefool" plays for a few seconds in the giddy moment when the Nurse tells Juliet that Romeo wants her to come to the church and get married. "The You and Me Song" plays when the two have first confirmed their love.

By the same token, however, the songs must draw attention to themselves, which by definition contradicts the nature and function of an underscore. The very blatancy required for the tags to carry out their annunciatory function means that they disrupt the viewing experience, so that the movie insistently draws attention to itself as artifact and artifice. It is hard to think of another film that so consistently breaks whatever mood it has established and rejects the viewer's full entry into the fictional filmic world.

The stylistic incongruities dictated by the music's "translational" role have an even greater impact on the film when they occur between scenes than when they occur within them. Granted, in some instances the music is allowed to smooth over changes of scene in traditional fashion — for instance, when Mozart's Symphony No. 25, played during the preparation for the Capulet ball, starts while the camera is still on Romeo and Benvolio at Sycamore Grove. In others, the musical incongruity makes sense as signaling a corresponding incongruity in the characters' state of mind, as when the

aggressive, screaming guitars that play while Romeo chases and then shoots Tybalt are abruptly intercut with the childlike, ethereal vocals of Stina Nordenstam's "Little Star," played over the unknowing Juliet's "mansion of love" soliloquy. At other times, however, startling changes of visuals are attended by equally startling changes of musical genre in adjacent scenes, imparting to the film an effect of not only fragmentation, but also segmentation. This is particularly notable with the first music to appear in the film, Craig Armstrong's epic choral composition, "O Verona."<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that this does not come at the beginning of the film: *Romeo + Juliet*, significantly, has no opening theme. The first visual shows a snowy black-and-white television set suspended on a dark screen as a female newscaster reads the Prologue, with "news headline" text behind her; all other tracks are silent. Since music is one of the chief means by which the filmmaker directs interpretation, music as an opening frame, as Hickman notes, is particularly important in "alerting the audience . . . to the beginning of the film; introducing the dominant musical theme of the film as a whole . . . establishing the mood of the film as a whole; [and] foreshadowing significant aspects of the story" (2006, 36). Silence in the music stratum of the sound track at the film's beginning is a highly destabilizing move, akin to a film opening in the middle of an action scenario without providing any narrative exposition (as in, say, *The Matrix*). Although the viewers are receiving some amount of information about Luhrmann's approach through the image track, they have no clear idea of how they are meant to interpret the words, nor what to expect from the film — what mood, style, or level it is likely to take.

However, when the "newscast" has finished, we are visually and aurally sucked through the television screen into the world of "Verona Beach," and the Prologue is reiterated (in what Peter S. Donaldson observes is the first of the film's many "doublings" [2002, 64-65]). This time it is not only delivered more sententiously, in a man's voice-over, but its interpretation is guided by Armstrong's choral composition. The portentousness inherent in large-scale choral singing — especially lyrically unintelligible singing in what seems to be a foreign language, and even more especially in a work that seems to allude in its title and "style topic" mode to *Carmina Burana's* much-used "O Fortuna" — imparts gravitas to the establishing montage of police and news helicopter, the skyscrapers of "Verona," the freeze-framed, captioned identifications of the film's main players (signally excepting Romeo and Juliet themselves), and the proleptic, trailer-like flashes of key scenes in the movie to come. The bewildering visual track, with its quick cuts, captions, steep angles, and mix of incongruous images, is given not only spatiotemporal continuity, but also, through the constancy and structural predictability of the music track, narrative and thematic coherence. This far into the movie, if the music is to be trusted, Luhrmann's adaptation would seem to be one in a fairly traditional Hollywood vein, with the source material treated as "high culture" and the story played as high tragedy.

The music immediately proves an unreliable narrator, though, as a right-to-left wipe clears away the epic atmosphere from the screen and a muscle car packed with the "Montague Boys" drives down the highway to the accompaniment of raucous, bass-driven scratch-grunge. This scene is deliberately jarring and contains a number of incongruities. For one thing, the dialogue track, already alienated from all the other tracks as the film's anachronistic and anomalous element, is also internally misaligned here by virtue of the fact that the Shakespearean dialogue — "A dog of the house of

Capulet moves me!" — is delivered in an unintelligible yell. Gregory, the Montague Boy doing the yelling, almost, but not quite, breaks the fourth wall: although ostensibly he addresses the people in a passing sedan, the fact that he is facing the camera means that the highway would have to be running directly out of the real-world space where the audience is sitting. However, the main jolt of the scene stems from the change in music. Nothing the viewer *sees* on the screen is particularly out of keeping with the setting that has been established in the previous scene: it is easy enough to identify as the same location during daytime hours. Nor does the cinematographic style of quick cuts and extreme angles change significantly between the two scenes. To the extent that the viewers are surprised visually — for instance, at the casual, semi-skinhead appearance of the Montague Boys — it is because "O Verona" had led them to expect something more dramatic and formal.

mp3

They could not have known, though, that the music itself was going to behave in such a manner. "O Verona" acted exactly as an opening theme should, if somewhat belatedly: it pulled the viewer in and made coherence out of chaos. Now the music reverses its personality, colluding with the chaotic visuals to disorient the audience, as if punishing their willingness to believe the fictive proposition. These two early scenes demonstrate the power of music to unify discordant visuals and establish expectations, in both a positive and negative manner.

The aural shock does more, though, than shatter the viewers' newly established mood and knock them back out of the diegetic world into the spectator's sphere. It also triggers the first of many attempts to reconcile scenes, to make sense of seemingly contradictory information. Again, the *visual* information in the second Prologue and the highway scene, although not cohesive, is coherent; it requires only to be kept up with and sutured narratively in order to make sense. The music track, however, is telling the viewers very different, and initially incompatible, things, forcing them to revise retroactively their understanding. The musical elements of the second Prologue scene and the highway scene cast those scenes into reciprocal confusion. One could see the juxtaposition as an egalitarian move, a statement that "high" and "low" culture are equally present and equally important in the filmmaker's value system. Alternatively, the highway scene could be read as a move to mock the self-importance of the adults who run Verona and carry out their (presumably corporate-based) feud. If one takes the music of the opening at face value, on the other hand, it could be that the import of the feud and the treatment of the story as high tragedy are legitimate, and Sampson and the other Montague Boys are showing themselves to be oblivious to the consequences of the fight in which they are participating. Whatever the reading, it is mainly the music track that creates the mock-epic high/low quality of the film's first minutes and initiates the viewers' struggle for understanding. By the time the strains of "O Verona" start up again at the end of the gas-station scene, the audience has learned to mistrust its prima facie message and to suspect that someone is making fun of something with it — a suspicion that becomes generalized when we cannot figure out what exactly is being mocked.

The destabilization of the underscore's normative function carries through when "O Verona" reprises during Romeo's re-entry into Verona from exile in Mantua to join Juliet in her tomb. Once again, the attendant visuals are of choppers, bird's-eye views of the city streets, police on the ground, sharpshooters kneeling and aiming. This time around, the quality of the music is matched by the

intensity and import of the action, making it more evident that we are supposed to take the choral bombast seriously. Far from confirming through repetition a certain reading of the scenes to which it is attached, though, this use of leitmotif sends interpretation into even greater flux. The first time the theme played, in the second Prologue scene, the music that came directly afterward encouraged us to understand it, retroactively, as indicating mockery, or at least parody. The filmmakers, in the meantime, seem to confirm our suspicions that they mean to deride the corporate adult world out of which the feud is generated. The idea that "O Verona" is meant more pretentiously than portentously and attaches generally to the adult world rather than the feud, has also been encouraged by the fact that a separate, incontrovertibly sincere theme for Romeo and Juliet's tragic fate, "Slow Movement," has been played throughout. Yet now the theme is playing in a context that virtually forbids us to understand it as ironic. Leitmotifs used in film do often change from iteration to iteration — moving, for example, from major to minor keys to connote sadness, being played on different instruments to express a change of mood or condition, dissolving into disharmony to mirror or foreshadow events. However, for the music and its corresponding visual elements to stay the same even while their context changes the way we read them only confuses our interpretation further and largely defeats the point of a leitmotif.

At this point, the multiple ironies of the MTV references begin to show themselves. Far from being a continuous element in the construct, as it is in a music video, the music here is the main agent of disruption and fragmentation. While generically the presence of contemporary "rock" music may make a certain audience feel more comfortable, within the film the juxtaposition of this music with other genres works to alienate the viewer, both psychologically and physically. The component of *Romeo + Juliet* that has been held most responsible for "dumbing down" the source material actually triggers a stringent intellectual effort, arguably more of one than if Luhrmann had given the movie a "period" score, in the manner of Nino Rota's famous music for Franco Zeffirelli's version, and left the Shakespearean dialogue musically "untranslated." And through creating, in effect if not by intent, an inelastic aural collage, this purportedly most "commercial" aspect of the movie enacts Eisenstein's Marxist (and markedly uncommercial) notion of the cinematic experience as an active dialectical process, a "*collision of . . . factors [that] gives rise to an idea*" (2009 19, emphasis in original).

### MUSIC AS ASSIMILATION

Only in the stretches when the filmmakers want to let the audience "enjoy the beauty of [Shakespeare's] language" (Bilcock 1996) and the music is released from its unwonted duties as a textual translator does it relax into its customary function as "assimilator" and affective agent. Not coincidentally, these are the parts of the movie that feel most *like* a movie, and I would suggest that they, not the so-called "MTV" segments, contribute to the film's aesthetic success. These stretches allow the viewer (whether a female teen or otherwise) to sink into what Gorbman calls "a bath or gel of affect" (1987, 5) in relationship to three crucial thematic aspects: Romeo's character, as relayed musically by the leitmotif "Talk Show Host," commissioned from Radiohead for the film (Randall 2000, 218); the love between Romeo and Juliet, as verbally expressed by the music and lyrics to "Kissing You" and legitimated by the subsequent orchestral versions of that song; and the pair's tragic fate, signaled by Craig Armstrong's 1994 string composition, "Slow Movement." Each of these compositions creates a low band of aural repose and quietude within the film's surrounding

freneticism.

As if in recognition that the obstructive nature of the music in other segments has undermined the viewer's trust and kept her or him physically and emotionally unsettled, these compositions are designed for maximum film-music effect. For one thing, they are generally positioned between frames of silence or other quiet music. The first iteration of "Talk Show Host" begins to play, unusually, beneath an interlude for solo clarinet. The diegetic version of "Kissing You," sung at the Capulet ball, comes after the sonic confusion of Romeo's drug trip has been end-stopped by him dunking his head in water; thereafter, it usually follows silence in the music track (five full minutes of it, in the balcony/pool scene) or extends out of the equally quiet (and musically similar) "Slow Movement," as when Romeo goes to Juliet's bedroom after the slaying of Tybalt.

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"Slow Movement," the theme of Romeo and Juliet's tragedy and the piece of music that receives by far the most playing time in the movie, almost always emerges musically out of "Kissing You," to the extent that it often feels, fittingly, like a variation on that theme. We hear it first in the ballroom scene, after Romeo and Juliet meet and kiss to the accompaniment of Des'ree singing "Kissing You" (sometimes onscreen, sometimes off). As Juliet ascends the stairs to her mother and the Nurse, revealing to Romeo that she is a Capulet, the strings begin moving downward, against her, into the "ominous" range, and "Kissing You" slides into "Slow Movement." The strings continue downward and acquire discordant augmented notes, as the Nurse whispers to Juliet that Romeo is a Montague. Beneath noisy diegetic music within the fiction, the "fate" theme sustains Romeo's sense of foreboding as he delivers the lines "my only love, sprung from my only hate" — an apt description of the music, which has evolved from a love theme into a harbinger of death. "Slow Movement" traces the main line of Romeo and Juliet's star-crossed fate, recurring after Romeo kills Tybalt; under the voice-over of Juliet's thoughts about the killing (after which it morphs back into "Kissing You" to tell the viewer that she has forgiven Romeo); when Romeo falls into the pool on the morning of his banishment, spurring Juliet to speak of "an ill-divining soul"; as Juliet refuses Paris; as Romeo speaks to the "dead" Juliet. Tellingly, where Mercutio's requiem is a variation on the opening choral composition "O Verona," Juliet's is sung over the chords of "Slow Movement."

All three of the emotionally affective pieces are also played at length. Although this statement would appear to be only marginally true of "Talk Show Host," which completes just a couple of full cycles (verse, chorus, guitar-riff interlude) when it is played at Sycamore Grove and again in Mantua, that changes in the film's afterlife on DVD. In this format, "Talk Show Host" accompanies every item on the menu, thus functioning essentially as the film's post-theatrical opening music and providing a consistent musical frame that the cinematic version lacks.

mp3

Thom Yorke's vocals, though lyrically unintelligible in the film (and not heard on the DVD menus), also associate Romeo with Radiohead, enforcing the idea that the speaker in that band's end-credits song, "Exit Music for a Film," is Romeo.

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"Kissing You" is played at lengths which, in the opinion of FilmTracks.com's editorial writer, "will test the patience of some listeners" (Editorial Review 2009). After the diegetic version has ended during the ball scene, segued into the orchestral version, and then transmuted into the "fate" theme (i.e., "Slow Movement"), it follows Romeo out of the mansion and signifies that his new love overrides all other states of mind, as it literally plays on top of both the dance music that invariably attends Mercutio and the reprise of "Pretty Piece of Flesh," once again issuing diegetically from the Montague Boys' car. Likewise, during the "balcony" (i.e., pool) scene, "Kissing You" starts after Romeo and Juliet have fallen into the pool and plays throughout their protracted flirtation and attempts to part from one another, interrupted only briefly by a faint echo of "Angel" that ties that theme to the visual motif of water as both love and death. "Slow Movement," meanwhile, not only recurs with regularity, but at one point comprises a musical cue that is a staggering fourteen-minutes long.

Most importantly for their affective purposes, all three compositions have key structural traits that make listeners feel the music as trustworthy and sincere. First, they center around the tonic chord and note of the key they are in, with only small stepwise movements away from this harmonic "home." This minimizes the effect of larger tonal increments that spur "a sense of loss and anxiety in . . . [the] various departures from [the harmonic] order, and then reassure the listener by finally returning to that order" (Brown 1994, quoted in Neumeyer and Buehler 2009, 20). "Talk Show Host" renders this flattened aspect ideally, even while it represents Romeo and is therefore more lyrical and expressive than most of the other songs. The song's quiet, minor-key guitar riff moves stepwise down two degrees to repose on the tonic and repeats this motion several times; then a synthesizer stretches in a lazy, elastic movement to the tonic of the relative major key, the dominant, and back to the minor-key tonic, like a cat that had started to get up and then decided not to. The closed cadences and repetition signify solitude and interiority and help counter the potentially parodic effect of Romeo's bad verse and romantic impetuosity.

Both the chords and the melody of "Kissing You" are limited and highly repetitive in pattern, essentially walking the two steps up and two steps down between the tonal center and its relative minor (generally felt as the "happy" and "melancholy" versions of the same location), passing through the traditional inverted five-chord on the way. This restriction of range is reinforced even more by the lock-step parallel motion between chords and melody through most of the song. The simple structure could be said to accelerate the "avant/après" process, and hence our familiarity, by using the same chord progression (ii-vi-Vb-I-Vb-vi)<sup>2</sup> and nearly the same melody for its verse and chorus structures. We have then a case of the almost complete predictability that makes a song immediately memorable, together with a small vocal range that allows the viewer to hum along subvocally and ingrain the music in her or his head. Thus, the leitmotif function can act rapidly even on viewers with little or no musicality.

Despite the narrow range of motion, the song also functions admirably in its affective purposes. No chord pattern makes the listener feel more as though he or she has walked up the steps to home, fulfillment, and rest than vi-Vb-I; it is the musical equivalent of the words "You complete me" or "I

am home." Similarly, no pattern is more effective than I-Vb-iv at moving the listener into a kind of comfortable wistfulness, with even the normally steep drop down into the dominant chord filled in by the chord inversion. The song's pitch relations impart dignity to the young lovers' interactions even when other filmic components — the visual track, which records the potentially risible interactions of the young couple; the sound-effects track, which records much splashing of water; the dialogue track, which features sometimes amusing exchanges — might make the scene a less than dignified one. "Slow Movement" takes the static, restful nature of "Kissing You" and imbues it with a quiet sense of foreboding that contrasts with the bombast of "O Verona," the other "portentous" composition. With the violas sustaining the tonic note, the rest of the strings descend in steps down below the tonic, giving the listener the sensation of being pressed further and further below the surface of the ground (or, perhaps, the water).

These stretches of quiet, sanity, and genuine emotion in the aural band, paralleling slower camera cuts and longer scenes in the visual track, an amplified dialogue track, and (often) the sound of water in the sound-effects track, valorize Romeo and Juliet's love and intact humanity within the frantic world of mass culture that surrounds them. Simply the "organic" sound of chords being played quietly on a grand piano at the introduction of "Kissing You" and the sustained cellos and violas of "Slow Movement" soothe the viewer's much-assaulted ears and move her or him into a new mood of relaxation, out of which she or he will come only reluctantly. It also makes untenable at least one reading of the film: Luhrmann is not mocking love, and he is not playing Romeo and Juliet's relationship for comedy. He is honoring it with musical beauty. Likewise, the movie's sympathy for their doom is signaled and enforced by "Slow Movement."

## CONCLUSION

Although the unusual presence of music in *Romeo + Juliet* has led critics and academics to misperceive it, they have generally agreed that Luhrmann has not wrought significant injury upon the story itself. Except for a growing number of academics who follow Courtney Lehmann's belief that Luhrmann takes Arthur Brooke's 1562 *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* more as his source than he does Shakespeare (2002, 139), most who look through Luhrmann's bewildering audiovisual innovations believe that the *Romeo and Juliet* behind *Romeo + Juliet* remains the same, and that Luhrmann's version can be seen as another instance of "repetition with variation . . . the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (Hutcheon 2006, 4), if perhaps with a little more variation and piquancy than usual. Granted, executives at Twentieth Century Fox tried to mitigate the inevitably unhappy conclusion by making Luhrmann put in post-mortem flashbacks to happier times (Cook 2010, 79), and elisions of the play leave Paris still alive, but nonetheless the lovers are dead, and the ending newscast shows them being covered with sheets and taken away on ambulance gurneys. It would seem that, unlike with his feature-film debut *Strictly Ballroom*, which is usually read as a happy-ending version of *Romeo and Juliet*, this time Luhrmann is resigned to being "stuck with Shakespeare's downbeat ending" (Travers 1996, quoted in Lehmann 2002, 144).

As with the opening, though, this music-less ending is a false frame, the first half of a double limen. The final ending frame, which might equally be taken as standing outside the movie or as constituting its true conclusion, is Radiohead's end-credits song, "Exit Music for a Film"; and this

song, arguably, provides the most significant "modern-day equivalency" of all by suggesting an alternative ending, a rewriting of the story itself. Lyrically, it repositions Romeo either at a point just before he acknowledges (erroneously) that Juliet is dead, when he still has hope of a life together, or, perhaps, earlier that day, as a prothalamion, before he observes his banishment. "Pack and get dressed," he tells Juliet, "before your father hears us / before all hell breaks loose." Harmonically the song is unusual in that it establishes neither a major nor a minor key, since the tonic chord (B) is missing its third, the middle note of the triad that determines modality. Accordingly, it moves between a melancholy and hopeful mood, as the lyrics start over a minor chord, but at the end of each verse the guitars move the third-note up half a tone to form the major. The melodic line, centered around the five-note (rather than the one- or three-note, which would give a stronger sense of stability due to those notes' proximity to "home"), jumps down to touch the one-note briefly before moving back up and then, at the end of each verse, coming to rest on the one-note, which would close the cadence with finality if not for the guitars' contradictory move into the major. The indeterminate moods keep us uncertain whether to read the song as poignant in its futility (if we take Juliet already to be dead) or openly hopeful (if we believe that the song's position outside the diegetic world means that it has the power to rewrite).

What does seem certain is that Juliet wakes to join Romeo in his indictment of the adult world: "You can laugh / a spineless laugh / let all your rules and wisdom choke you." Her voice is in the synthesizer line of the contrapuntal movement of the song's C-section, a line that is mixed almost as high as the melody, running in counterpoint — a musical form historically taken to indicate equal partnership. The extreme voice-crossing here — the synthesizer line moving up in large intervals as the vocal line moves down in reverse parallel, the two crossing paths to take the other's position — is the musical equivalent to the shared sonnet the lovers construct on first meeting, and unites them, fittingly, in hatred and rebellion just as the sonnet united them in love. It turns out, perhaps, that vague readings of the music have once again led to a false analysis, this time in the opposite direction.

It is likely that these complex musical functions, lying as they do well below the level of most filmgoers' consciousness, are indeed less important to the selling of *Romeo + Juliet* than the various elements of Twentieth Century Fox's "synergistic marketing" campaign (York 2006, 57): the music-video-like trailers, the demographic overlap between the film and the MTV audience of the time, the forceful promotion of the soundtracks. These promotional strategies cater frankly to what Richard Burt and Lynda Boose indict as the "strictly market-responsive milieu" (Boose and Burt 1997, 12) of anti-intellectual America, the most lucrative audience for any mainstream English-language film. But these are extra-filmic attributes, and we need to be careful to identify them as such. With the exception of Luhrmann's "post-classical" cinematographic style, the designation of *Romeo + Juliet* as a music video cannot validly be carried over to the film itself, and failing to make this distinction not only mischaracterizes the movie, but also obscures a much more revolutionary use of music and a much more interesting approach to the problems of adapting Shakespeare than is suggested by the tag phrase "extended music video." Further, if we continue to see Luhrmann's film as a "template" for commercially viable filmic adaptations of Shakespeare without recognizing the ways in which the mood-disrupting use of music within the film works against the commercial effect achieved by the use of music outside the film, neither critics nor future filmmakers will understand correctly the

schematic for its success.

The implications of such issues affects many areas: adaptation theory, film theory, emerging ideas about youth culture, film-music theory, and questions about Shakespeare's marketability. Oddly, some of the most extended and serious treatments of the film — e.g., those by Courtney Lehmann and Peter S. Donaldson — omit mention of the music altogether. I would suggest that these analyses err on the other side of the spectrum from those that miscast the movie as a form of MTV video, and contend that no reading is likely to be complete or accurate without taking into account *Romeo + Juliet's* music.

## NOTES

1. Although neither the film credits nor the CD liner provides a breakdown of scoring duties among the film's three credited composers (Armstrong, British alternative-pop/dance producer Nellee Hooper, and Luhrmann regular Marius De Vries), other sources convincingly attribute the film's orchestral elements to Armstrong. For instance, several of these elements, including "O Verona" and "The Balcony Scene," appear on Armstrong's CD *Film Works, 1995-2005* (Armstrong 2012).
2. Here I use the small-letter notational style to indicate inversions. Vb means the V (five) chord in first inversion — that is, with its third note rather than first note in the root position. Likewise, Vc would mean the V (five) chord in second inversion. Roman numerals without small letters following are assumed to be in root position; the "a" is implied.

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# Introduction to Shakespeare and African American Poetics: An Essay Cluster Published in Association with the *Langston Hughes Review*

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## ABSTRACT

This Introduction uses the example of Langston Hughes's volume *Shakespeare in Harlem* to meditate on the connections between the two terms joined by the copula in this essay cluster's title, "Shakespeare and African American Poetics."

Seventy years ago, Langston Hughes published *Shakespeare in Harlem*, a volume of self-described "light verse," illustrated with etchings by the well-known British graphic designer E. McKnight Kauffer and set in the contemporary modernist typeface of Vogue Extra-Bold.<sup>1</sup> The volume foregrounds, as Rebecca Walkowitz suggests, multiple questions about the location and meaning of both terms in the title. Is "Shakespeare" subject, or predicate? Are poem (and volume) located in Harlem, "where Shakespeare stands for 'great poetry'? . . . Or does the poem contain the elements of Harlem that sounds like Shakespeare: does it register moments of Shakespeare in Harlem, a refinement of Harlem into Shakespeare?" (Walkowitz 1999, 513).

The "brief and saucy" title lyric, only eight lines long, comprises two

quatrains, rhymed abcb in a pattern that some have compared to folk song or "'Negro' call and response," depending on whether the second speaker belongs to the Harlem community or stands outside it (Walkowitz 1999, 513). It tells a story of love, loss, and community: the first stanza concludes plaintively, "Where, oh, where / Did my sweet mama go?" and the second retorts that "they say" she "Went home to her ma" (Hughes 1942, 111). The droll refrain, which appears in lines one, two and five, modifies the early modern nonce-phrase "hey nony nony," as "hey ninny neigh," and "nonny noe." "Nonny nonny" is also, as the *OED* notes, an Elizabethan slang term for the female genitalia,<sup>2</sup> and it appears as such in Ophelia's lament in *Hamlet* 4.5.164, in Balthazar's arch song "Sigh no more, ladies" in *Much Ado* 2.3.63, 71 and in Edgar's injunction (as Poor Tom) to keep "hand[s] out of plackets" with the interjection "suum, mun, ha, no, nonny" (*King Lear* 3.4.90, 92; Shakespeare 1997).<sup>3</sup> Walkowitz continues, "As 'Shakespeare in Harlem' points to Shakespeare's bawdy songs, it represents not 'low' Shakespeare so much as Shakespeare's own conjunction of high and low cultures," including the "oral . . . [and] performance tradition that constituted Shakespeare as such" (Walkowitz 1999, 513). In other words, we can look at Hughes's volume as an appropriation or collaboration with Shakespeare, one that deliberately and wittily takes on the "low" or parodic elements of Shakespeare.

Hughes's wit and his self-conscious presentation of the volume as — "light verse. Afro-Americana in the blues mood. Poems syncopated and variegated in the colors of Harlem, Beale Street, West Dallas, and Chicago's South Side" (Hughes 1942, Foreword, n.p.) — have, however, "almost certainly doomed [the volume] to critical neglect" (Ford 1992, 446). But scholars have re-evaluated both Hughes's deliberately casual description of these poems and the physical presentation of the volume. Karen Jackson Ford quotes the volume's colophon in order to argue that its material form develops Hughes's own poetics: "The headings are set in Vogue Extra-Bold, a typeface designed in our time with the aim to express the utmost simplicity" (Hughes 1942, 125, quoted in Ford 1992, 446). The volume's "un-sonnet sequence . . . treats love as a social rather than a merely private problem," she argues, and its form, content, and sources participate in Hughes's ongoing "poetry of simplicity" (Ford 1992, 448).

The volume also, it seems, enjoys a more complex relationship to nostalgia and the past than earlier critics had assumed. Arnold Rampersad notes that, although Hughes initially detested E. McKnight Kauffer's black-and-white etchings of African Americans with what

Hughes called "nappy hair" — hair that was completely out of fashion in the Harlem Hughes knew — Hughes later found himself delighted with both the "bold type" and with the images, comforting himself with the thought that "nappy" hair would one day become fashionable again (Rampersad 2002, 2:9, 35) and that his own work, like Shakespeare's, would be read long into the future. The typeface's being "designed in our time" and the volume's descriptors, "syncopated" and "blues," suggest that *Shakespeare in Harlem* might do more than merely translate elements of Harlem into Shakespearean lyric, or move bits of Shakespeare into Harlem to see what became of them, or find Shakespearean words and situations in Harlem music and life. Douglas Lanier quotes this short lyric in its entirety and suggests instead that "Hughes, chronicler of the Harlem Renaissance, makes the even more daring claim that an African American poet working in the quintessential idiom of his culture might claim the mantle of the exemplar of the earlier Renaissance — Shakespeare"; moreover, "for Hughes conjoining Shakespeare and black music was potentially empowering" (Lanier 2007, 77).

This essay cluster briefly commemorates this "potentially empowering" conjunction of Shakespeare and African American cultural production, and the release of Hughes's volume in 1942. Each essay-submission for this issue went through a more complex review process than usual, being blind-reviewed by a Shakespearean from the board of *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, and by an African Americanist from the board of the *Langston Hughes Review*. We therefore present two outstanding essays that contribute significantly and provocatively both to the study of Shakespeare and appropriation and to the scholarship of African American poetics. Chris Roark's posthumous essay claims for Toni Morrison what Lanier claims for Hughes: that Morrison's work constitutes appropriation in its truest sense, and that her writing fundamentally challenges a Western or Shakespearean notion of identity or what he calls a "soliloquy sense of self." Adam Meyer's essay investigates the productive use that African American authors have made of Shakespeare's Shylock; such appropriations, he argues, can transform the character "to represent a wide range of attitudes towards Jews and towards Black-Jewish relations." We are grateful to the current and former editors of the *Langston Hughes Review*, for allowing us to use their board and readers, and to all the scholars who sent us submissions for this cluster.

## NOTES

1. E. McKnight Kauffer is best known for his iconic Modernist poster designs, including Flight, "the first Cubist advertising poster published in England" (Heller 1992).
2. *OED* int. and n., B2 quotes John Florio, *Queen Annas New World of Words* (1611): "a womans pleasure-pit, nony-nony or pallace of pleasure." *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, University of Georgia [accessed 18 December 2012]. The original citation appears in the third column, page 194, sig. R1v. *Early English Books Online*, GALILEO, University of Georgia [accessed 18 December 2012].
3. References to the plays of Shakespeare come from the *Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (Shakespeare 1997).

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# Victim and Villain: Shylock in the African American Imagination

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ABSTRACT | SHYLOCK AS VICTIM | SHYLOCK AS VILLAIN | SHYLOCK AS BOTH |  
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## ABSTRACT

In examining the allusions that a variety of African American writers have made to the figure of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, this essay demonstrates that these writers have followed a general pattern that has long existed of viewing the character as either a victim or a villain. While some African American writers see a kindred spirit in Shylock, one whose vilification by Venetian society parallels the negative ways in which African Americans have been treated in America, others view him as an embodiment of Jewish economic exploitation. By appropriating Shylock in these opposing ways, these writers attempt to place Shakespeare on their side in promoting either positive or negative views of the history of Black-Jewish relations.

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*Ira Aldridge, "the African Roscius," as Shylock*

In his autobiographical volume *Lovesong* (1988), the African American writer Julius Lester recounts having been given a volume of Shakespeare's plays for Christmas when he was twelve years old. His mother recommended that he begin reading with *The Merchant of Venice*. Reflecting on these events, the older Lester muses that, if he were giving a volume of Shakespeare to his own child, he would probably not suggest that particular play as a starting point. Nevertheless, the fact that his mother did so and that he followed her advice proved to be a crucial step in his own personal growth and

development. Lester recalls of his youthful first reading of the text that "I do not even know what a money-lender or interest is, but I know that Shylock is being mistreated because he is a Jew" (Lester 1988, 21). "Angry" at this mistreatment, the young Lester plows through the difficult work and finds that, in Shylock, "I encounter myself in literature for the first time" (21-22). He concludes the remembrance by wondering why the character and the play affected him so deeply: "[I]s it simply that through Shylock I learn that blacks are not the only people in the world who must ponder in their flesh the meaning of meaningless suffering?" (22).

If we know anything about Lester, we might be tempted to dismiss this scene as being an exception among African Americans.<sup>1</sup> Since the main focus in *Lovesong* is adumbrated in its subtitle, *Becoming a Jew*, we should not be entirely unprepared for Lester to respond to this particular play precisely because of its Jewish content. Through the course of his life, Lester gradually discovers himself to be a Jew at least as much as he is an African American, eventually converting to (or, more precisely, recommitting to) the faith.<sup>2</sup> Yet Lester is far from the only African American writer to have referred to *The Merchant of Venice*. Several others have done so in a similar light, seeing in Shylock a man who was reviled for his religious beliefs just as African Americans have been reviled for their skin color. In contrast, several African American writers have referenced Shakespeare's character in a very different light, seeing in him an embodiment of negative, but largely accurate, stereotypes of Jewish merchants. In showing this bifurcation of response, African American writers are repeating the pattern that has existed in the general public and critical reaction to the play over the last 150 years or more, a dichotomy that sees in Shylock either a victim or a villain.

Indeed, theatergoers have long been divided about the nature of Shakespeare's play itself: is *The Merchant of Venice* an anti-Semitic play? Some critics argue quite the contrary, that the text is actually speaking out against anti-Semitism. Hermann Sinsheimer, for example, writes of Shylock's "Hath not a Jew" speech that "it is an outburst against inhumanity and injustice which one cannot but suppose to be the poet's own opinion. And the conclusion is that Shakespeare must have realized that something was wrong with the treatment of the Jews" (Sinsheimer 1963, 110). Similarly, Martin D. Yaffe asserts that Shakespeare intended "to correct what he [saw] as the theologically unwarranted and politically deleterious abuse of Jews as Jews in the name of Christian teaching" (Yaffe 1997, 47). Frederick Turner calls

Shakespeare "one of the greatest pioneers in humankind's long struggle to throw off the evils of racism and anti-Semitism" (Turner 1999, 85). On the other hand, some critics have argued that, no matter what its artistic merits might be, the play is irredeemably anti-Semitic. Derek Cohen, for example, asserts that it is "a profoundly and crudely anti-Semitic play" (Cohen 1991, 305), a position seconded by Harold Bloom (Bloom 1991, xvi). Cohen believes that the text is anti-Semitic "not by virtue of its portrayal of an individual Jew in uncomplimentary terms but solely by its association of negative racial characteristics with the term Jewish or with Jewish characters generally," specifically when it results in "a moral relationship between the insistent equation of the *idea* of Jewishness with acquisitive and material values while the *idea* of Christianity is linked to the values of mercy and love" (Cohen 1991, 306). Whether anti-Semitic or not, the play has certainly been used in the past, and can be used again in the future, by people who wish to promote anti-Semitism.<sup>3</sup> When African American writers invoke the name of Shylock or play upon the Shylock stereotype in their works, therefore, they are doing more than merely alluding to Shakespeare's text: they are deploying specific strategies of appropriation in taking Shakespeare's character and re-creating him so as to represent a wide range of attitudes towards Jews and towards Black-Jewish relations, both positive and negative, sometimes re-fashioning him as a victim of racial prejudice and sometimes re-fashioning him as an exploitative merchant, depending on the particular use they hope to make of his image.

### SHYLOCK AS VICTIM

Lester's youthful reaction to *The Merchant of Venice* certainly places Shylock in the former light, as a victim of Venetian prejudice whose status resembles that of African Americans, a position that had been taken by Black speakers and writers dating to as far back as 1789. In that year, an unknown "Free Negro" gave a speech entitled "Blood and Slavery" in which, attempting to prove that Africans are men, he simply appropriated Shylock's famous "Hath not a Jew" speech wholesale, replacing the word "Jew" with the word "Negro" and the word "Christian" with the words "white man" (Gottheimer 2003, 4). He also added the following: "Are we not exposed to all the same wants? Do we not feel all the same sentiments — are we not capable of all the same exertions — and are we not entitled to all the same rights as other men?" (4). The "Free Negro" clearly sees himself as a Shylock figure, set apart from the rest of society through no fault of his own and, as a result, wrongly treated as something less than human.

Along these same lines, Frank J. Webb, in his novel *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857) — the second novel by an African American to be published — presents an African American character who compares himself to Shylock. Mr. Walters has accumulated a huge fortune, but he resents the role that race has played in his life. "Time after time," he says,

"when scraping, toiling, saving, I have asked myself. To what purpose is it all? — perhaps that in the future white men may point at and call me, sneeringly, 'a nigger millionaire,' or condescend to borrow money of me. Ah! often, when some negro-hating white man has been forced to ask a loan at my hands, I've thought of Shylock and his pound of flesh, and ceased to wonder at him." (Webb 1969, 275-76)

Waters, a Black man, finds himself in a position so similar to that of Shakespeare's Jew that the comparison is almost inevitable. His expression of empathy is similar to those of the "Free Negro" and of the young Lester.

In Jessie Redmon Fauset's novel *Comedy: American Style* (1933), to cite another example, the character Phebe makes the following statement:

"I think we all spend too much time on color . . . It doesn't seem to make sense to me. . . . We're all people, aren't we? It's like that thing we had to learn in *The Merchant of Venice* . . . 'Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions' . . . and all the rest of it. Perhaps some day the world will see how silly it all is." (Fauset 1995, 237)

Like Lester, Phebe links the struggle of the Jew in anti-Semitic Venice (or early modern England) with that of the African American in contemporary racist America. Similarly, as Murray Friedman reports, "*The New York Times* once asked [Booker T.] Washington to name his favorite passage from Shakespeare; he selected Shylock's 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' speech in *The Merchant of Venice*. To Washington, Shylock's plea on behalf of Jews and brotherhood had an echo in the appeal of blacks to be treated as men and brothers" (Friedman 1995, 35). This may also explain why Chester Himes used Portia's "The quality of mercy" speech as the epigraph to his first autobiography, but then titled the volume *The Quality of Hurt* (1972). In Ann Petry's novel *Country Place* (1947), to cite a final example, the character Mrs. Gramby, although white herself, responds to a white racist's anti-Semitic remarks about a Jewish lawyer by echoing Shakespeare in stating that "The Jew,

as you call him, is a man like yourself. With the same desires, the same weaknesses . . . [s]ubject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer" (Petry 1971, 88). This remark causes her to remember the first time she had seen a production of *The Merchant of Venice*, which was on her honeymoon. Petry, like Lester and the other African American writers noted above, clearly wants to compare the tragedy of anti-Semitism that affected Shylock to the tragedy of racism that is affecting their own lives and those of their Black characters.<sup>4</sup>

In each of these cases, the comparative allusion is predicated on an interpretation of Shylock as a model victim of unwarranted prejudice and, consequently, unwarranted suffering, a man whose "Hath not a Jew" speech is a plea for universal tolerance and equality of treatment. When we turn to an examination of the stage history of the play, however, we find that such an interpretation has not always prevailed, and in fact may have arisen closer to our own time than to the bard's. Ironically — or perhaps not, as I am arguing here — one of the people who did much to popularize such a view of Shakespeare's Jew was an African American, the actor Ira Aldridge. Having found the New York theatrical world barred to him because of his color, Aldridge went to England in 1825 and began to earn a name for himself playing black roles. Some of the plays he appeared in were significant pieces, most notably Shakespeare's *Othello*, but many of them were melodramas or farces in which he was cast as a slave or a buffoon. Even so, with abolitionist sentiment running high in England at the time, Aldridge managed to slip in some social commentary. In his role as Hassan, "the vengeful moor" (Lindfors 2007, 181) in the play *The Castle Spectre*, for example, he spoke out against slavery: "Am I not branded with scorn? Am I not marked out for dishonor? Was I not free, and am I not a slave? Was I not once beloved, and am I not now despised? . . . Can I remember this and not hate these white men? Can I think how cruelly they have wronged me, and not rejoice when I see them suffer?" (quoted in Marshall and Stock 1958, 86). In its echoing of Shylock's "Hath not a Jew" speech, Hassan's plea was perhaps fresh in Aldridge's mind when, in 1830, he began to perform in white roles, including the one that he would perform most often during the rest of his career (Lindfors 2007, 183), that of Shakespeare's despised moneylender.

Not long before Aldridge's time, Shylock had typically been portrayed as "soul-less . . . ridiculous in his demands and his insatiable anger and impudence"; actors "present[ed] him as a caricature" (quoted in Marshall and Stock 1958, 234). The modern, "tragic hero" view of

Shylock had begun to emerge on stage, despite the early date of the Free Negro's speech, only in the early nineteenth century. In 1814 the actor "Edmund Kean risked his professional career on a sympathetic interpretation of Shylock . . . and as a result established his reputation" (Prior 1981, 481).<sup>5</sup> Viewing his performance, the English essayist William Hazlitt commented that "our sympathies are much oftener with [Shylock] than with his enemies" (481). The character was still less than admirable, but Kean did "raise [him] above sordidness, to endow him with a large measure of dignity and humanity" (Gross 1992, 128). Beginning in 1831, Aldridge took this one step further. As a Dutch reviewer said of one of his performances, "Shylock doesn't appear so hateful anymore; the natural acting style of the artist elucidates his character and provides motives for the sharp traits" (quoted in Lindfors 2007, 227). Indeed, many critics have argued that Aldridge's portrayal of Shylock was so effective precisely because of his personal identification with the role of a social outcast. "[P]erhaps Aldridge identified with Shylock's bitterness over the neglect of his people and the injustices done to him personally," Joost Groenboer asserts (Lindfors 2007, 227), while another unnamed critic stated more bluntly that "[b]eing himself a representative of a despised race, he could strongly and truly portray the feelings of wronged Jews" (quoted in Lindfors 2007, 250). Aldridge's acting was particularly appreciated in Russia: "One Press report told of a procession of Jews headed by the Rabbi coming to the theatre to thank him for his interpretation of Shylock. For the first time in Russian theatre history, Shakespeare's Jew became a human being" (Marshall and Stock 1958, 288; see also Hill 1984, 20). Along similar lines, another Russian critic noted that "Ira Aldridge is a mulatto born in America and feels deeply the insults levelled [*sic*] at people of another colour by people of a white colour in the New World. In Shylock he does not see particularly a Jew, but a human being in general, oppressed by the age-old hatred shown towards people like him, and expressing this feeling with wonderful power and truth" (quoted in Marshall and Stock 1958, 234). The Russian historian M. P. Pogodin said of Aldridge's performance that "deep in the heart of every ecstatic spectator, sacred conscience is heard; no, under the dark skin the same flaming blood is excited, the poor heart beats with the same common human feelings, from the stained breast burst the same heavy sighs as ours, a black body quivers from pain the same as the white" (quoted in Marshall and Stock 1958, 233). Whether the echo of Shylock's "Hath not a Jew" speech is intentional in this passage or not, it is certainly present.

Although Aldridge received excellent reviews throughout England and,

especially, on the Continent,<sup>6</sup> he was never a success on the main stages in London. Some ascribe this to racism. Bernth Lindfors even argues that this professional frustration probably figured into and advanced his portrayals of social outsiders like Shylock, stating that the exiled African American "could empathize totally with a Venetian Jew who suffered bitter injustices at the hands of bigoted whites" (Lindfors 2007, 189). British critics "accused him of being in league with the Jews, whose petitions for civil rights were then being considered by parliament" (Lindfors 2007, 74). Whatever the reason, Aldridge's portrayal of Shylock was overlooked in the theatrical center of London at the time and so the acting breakthrough is generally attributed to Henry Irving's portrayal of Shylock in 1879. Here for the first time a major actor dared to show the character "as a victim, even in his villainy" (Gross 1992, 146-47). Shortly before the production premiered, an article appeared in the journal *Theatre* (owned, not coincidentally, by Irving himself) that "argued fervently that in essence the play was a plea for toleration: 'the sympathy enjoyed by Shylock is designedly aroused in the interest of the great but downtrodden race he represents'" (Gross 1992, 155). Since that time, this interpretation has prevailed in the theater and among critics, including the Black writers we looked at earlier and the Black actors who followed in Aldridge's wake, *The Merchant of Venice* being a play that remained particularly popular among Black actors and dramatic ensembles for many years to come.<sup>7</sup>

The most significant passage in the text to support this sympathetic, Shylock-as-victim, interpretation is, of course, Shylock's own "Hath not a Jew" speech, to which the "Free Negro," Fauset's Phebe, Booker T. Washington, and Petry's Mrs. Gramby all refer. Putting forth his explanation as to why Antonio has continually insulted him, Shylock contends that it is primarily because

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions, fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" (*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.58-67)<sup>8</sup>

Shylock's questions — at least until the last one — are like the best of rhetorical questions: they cannot be answered except in the affirmative. If the Venetians must therefore grant that Shylock is human, then how

can they justify their inhuman treatment of him? This is the pivot upon which Shylock's position as a tragic figure turns. As Charles Knight asserts, "It is impossible, after this exposition of his feelings, that we should not feel that he has properly cast the greater portion of the odium which belongs to his actions upon the social circumstances by which he has been hunted into madness. He has been made the thing he is by society" (Knight 1991, 16). Sinsheimer goes even further, asserting that Shylock "proclaim[s] something like the equality and the equal rights of man — not bombastically or sententiously or piously, but realistically so that it can be understood by every 'groundling' in the pit" (Sinsheimer 1963, 109).<sup>9</sup>

The "Free Negro"'s use of Shylock's speech reinforces both of these points. First, he uses Shylock's tactics exactly in forcing his white listeners to accept him as a man and then questioning their inhuman treatment of him. Second, later in the speech he notes that "You make us slaves; you implant in our minds all the vices which are in some degree inseparable from that condition; and you then impiously impute to nature, and to God, the origin of those vices, to which you alone have given birth; and punish in us the crimes of which you are yourselves the authors" (Gottheimer 2003, 5). Given this historical precedent, it is not so surprising that African American students living more than one hundred years later, more than 300 years after *The Merchant of Venice's* premiere, would have memorized the "Hath not a Jew" speech in school, as Fauset asserts that they did in *Comedy: American Style*, nor that the speech affected Julius Lester so strongly.

Within the play itself, furthermore, there is a connection between Shylock's "Hath not a Jew" speech and people of African descent, namely the Prince of Morocco. In the Prince's initial speech, when he is urging Portia not to dislike him for being Black, he asks her to select the most handsome white man so that the two can "make incision for your love, / To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine" (1.3.6-7). Morocco's point, of course, is that his blood is the same color as any other person's, that "under the skin, all men are brothers" (Goddard 1969, 150). This is exactly the same point Shylock makes when he asks, "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" (3.1.64).<sup>10</sup> Thus, it seems clear that "Morocco's exclusion early in the play" is setting the stage for "Shylock's later" (Overton 1987, 23).<sup>11</sup>

Nor should we discount the extra-textual connection between *The Merchant of Venice* and the similarly named *Tragedy of Othello*, *The Moor of Venice*. Shakespeare clearly positions Shylock, the Prince, and

Othello as outside the Venetian mainstream; in this manner, Mary Janell Metzger argues, his drawing of a "connection between blacks and Jews as alien others helped construct the racialized notion of Englishness" itself (Metzger 1998, 55). Several African American writers have noted this connection, such as Leon Forrest in *Divine Days* (1993) and Ishmael Reed in *Japanese by Spring* (1993),<sup>12</sup> and it has been commented on quite extensively by the Afro-Caribbean (and part Jewish) writer Caryl Phillips.<sup>13</sup> In his travelogue *The European Tribe* (1987), Phillips comments on his feelings while visiting Venice. "How did Othello live in this astonishing city?" he asks. "Sixteenth century society both enslaved the black and ridiculed the Jew" (Phillips 1987, 45). Later he notes that, because he has "identified with" Jews since he was quite young, he has "never been able to admire *The Merchant of Venice*" since he feels that "there is no denying that the play is anti-Semitic in its assumptions" (54). Still, he states that "Shylock is my hero" (55) and further asserts that "most black Americans, despite anti-Semitic statements, would have some understanding of [Shylock's] position" (55). In his subsequent novel, *The Nature of Blood* (1997), which is set during several different historical periods in Venice, Phillips depicts Othello wandering through the Jewish ghetto. Although neither Shylock nor *The Merchant of Venice* are explicitly named, they are certainly in the background of these scenes and serve to bring out the connections between Othello and Shylock as social outcasts, largely through no fault of their own.<sup>14</sup>

To modern audiences, Shylock, the Prince, and Othello are seen as victims of prejudice, good or at least potentially good people who are driven to madness by a hypocritical society. They may start out as stock characters, the Jew and the Moor, and they may have been seen in that way for a long time, but today's readers see in them, particularly in Shylock, a real person who is suffering undeservedly. "As the play proceeds," John Lyon writes, "Morocco and Shylock both appear on the stage as particular human beings who jostle disconcertingly against the initial prejudices and stereotyping labels. It is more particularly in their later appearances that the fool in Morocco and the villain in Shylock give way to a fuller revelation of human suffering" (Lyon 1988, 42). Modern readers and audiences of whatever ethnic affiliation tend to identify themselves with the persecuted minority figure — Shylock — rather than the persecuting majority figure — Antonio. Shylock is thus seen by Jewish and Black readers, among others, as a man who is unjustly persecuted. He has completed the trajectory that Leslie Fiedler subsequently mapped out: "from grotesque to pathetic, from utter alien to one of us" (Fiedler 1986, 63). This is certainly the way Julius Lester

viewed the character when he first read the play on Christmas Day in 1951.

### SHYLOCK AS VILLAIN

In 1969, however, Lester made an allusion to *The Merchant of Venice* that showed a very different, and much less positive, view of the character, one that can also be found in the works of other African American writers. By this time Lester, having graduated from Fisk University, was beginning to make his way as a young artist in New York and was caught up in the extreme racial politics of the day. A radio personality on the independent station WBAI, Lester found himself embroiled in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Schoolteachers' Strike, one of the most distressing events in the history of Black-Jewish relations in America. He had had as a guest on his talk show a Black teacher, Leslie Campbell, who had read a poem that had been written by one of his students, a fifteen-year-old girl named Thea Behran; entitled "Anti-Semitism" and dedicated to Albert Shanker, the Jewish president of the United Federation of Teachers, the poem began, "Hey, Jewboy, with that yarmulke on your head / You pale-faced Jewboy — I wish you were dead" (Lester 1988, 51). Campbell was suspended, but then reinstated. When Shanker asked that he be suspended again, Lester countered, "'What does he want, two pounds of flesh?'" (54). His invocation of Shylock in this instance does not conjure up the image of a victim of Venetian anti-Semitism but instead that of a heartless villain. Indeed, this remark could not help but call to mind the historical prejudices against Jews that went into Shakespeare's creation of Shylock in the first place.

One of the primary ways in which Shylock differs from the Prince of Morocco or Othello in the eyes of Shakespeare's Venetians, which is to say one of the primary ways in which Jews differ from Moors in the Elizabethan imagination, is in his relationship to money. Indeed, without Shylock's supposed usuriousness and greed, *The Merchant of Venice* simply could not have been written, and his supposed usuriousness and greed has everything to do with his being a Jew. Although everyone in the play — with the notable exception of Portia — is consumed with money in way or another, a simple summary of the play's action shows that Shylock is the only one who is abused for his way of trying to advance his interests, as he is a usurer. Usury does not mean much to modern audiences, but in the play's setting, Venice being one of the foremost financial cities of the day, as well as in Shakespeare's England, it was a very big deal. Christians were not

permitted to lend money to one another at interest, based on a Biblical passage about how one is to treat one's brother (Deuteronomy 23.19), but those who needed capital and were willing to pay managed to get around this injunction by noting that it did not apply to the Jews, who were not "brothers." In much of Christian Europe, Jews thus became associated with occupations involving moneylending, while at the same time being condemned for their sinful ways by the good people who could not do business without their services.<sup>15</sup> Even in modern times, this association with money continues to be present in some references to Shylock, including references by African Americans, that make of him a villainous figure — an "economic villain" (Spencer 1988, 141). Venice's anti-Semitism may have made Shylock a villain, but he is a villain nonetheless. This is the context in which Lester referenced the usurer's desire for a pound of flesh in light of Albert Shanker's activities during the school controversy in New York; knowing the play as well as he does, Lester must have understood how cutting this allusion would be to Shanker as a Jew.

The stereotypical image of the exploitative Jewish businessman, which has played a significant role in Black-Jewish mercantile relationships in America, is the version of Shylock that Lester was alluding to in 1969, not the view of him as a tragic outsider figure, as he had first thought him to be. Nor is he the only African American to have seen Shakespeare's character in this light, one that fits right in with the pre-Kean history of stage presentation of Shylock, as we discussed earlier. In 1926, for example, a newspaper editor opined of Jewish philanthropy in Norfolk's black *Virginia Journal and Guide* that, "while the Jew 'sympathizes with and helps us[,] he also 'gets his pound of flesh for doing it'" (quoted in Friedman 1995, 81). When citizens in Harlem complained about the unfair economic practices to which they were subjected, their anger was directed (at least ostensibly) at Jews, and again, Shylock imagery was evoked. Murray Friedman notes that, in the 1930s "[s]tereotypes of the 'fiendish Jewish landlord' and the 'Shylock' were taken up by blacks in the slums of Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh as well as New York, even though many tenement owners were not Jewish" (Friedman 1995, 92). Irving Louis Horowitz, who grew up in Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s, notes that the Jewish "[s]hopkeepers were the visible enemies. For black militants they were the devil whites, for other blacks, Jews ascendant or ghetto profiteers. The 'merchant of Venice' had come to Harlem" (Horowitz 1990, 86). Far from identifying with Shylock as the receiver of prejudice, these African Americans saw him as an embodiment of everything that was keeping them poor and near despair.

A similar image of Shylock appears in other texts by African American writers, such as the novel *Flight* (1926), by Walter White. In this novel Jean, a light skinned Black who has moved from New Orleans to Atlanta, complains about the African Americans in the rising metropolis that "they are aping the white man — becoming a race of money-grubbers with ledgers and money tills for brains and Shylock hearts" (White 1969, 54). In referencing perhaps the most overtly anti-Semitic line in *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio's plea to the court to stop arguing with Shylock because "You may as well do anything most hard / As seek to soften that — than which what's harder? — / His Jewish heart!" (4.1.79-81), the allusion conjures up a host of negative associations regarding Jews and their relationships to money. In Joseph A. Walker's play *The River Niger* (1973), similarly, the protagonist John Williams kids his best friend Dudley Stanton, a Jamaican doctor, about his stinginess in the buying of alcohol; "One for the road!" he says. "Why didn't you buy one for the road before we hit the road. Shylock stingy bastard" (Walker 1973, 55). At another point John tells the story of a dog he once owned who "was the squarest, most unhip dog in the world! . . . Named him Shylock!" (41). For both White and Walker, to call someone a Shylock is to offer him an insult, displaying a negative view of the character's personality traits.<sup>16</sup>

The Black writer who has done the most to translate this image of the economically villainous Shylock figure into contemporary America is James Baldwin. Although I am aware of only three explicit references to this particular Shakespearean play in Baldwin's oeuvre, the Shylock figure, expanded beyond usury as it has become in modern America to include all manner of Jewish mercantile enterprise, exists in the background of several of his works. Take, for example, his depiction of the Jewish landlord Rabinowitz in his novel *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone* (1968). The narrator, a famous Black actor named Leo Proudhammer, recalls times in his youth when his family could not pay the rent that they owed to Rabinowitz. The landlord

complained that our shiftlessness, which he did not hesitate to consider an attribute of the race, had forced him, himself, an old man with a weak heart, to climb all these stairs to plead with us to give him the money that we owed him. And this was the last time — he wanted to make sure that we understand that this was the last time. The next time our ass would be on the sidewalk. Our father was younger than Mr. Rabinowitz, leaner, stronger, and bigger. With one blow into that monstrous gut, he could have hurled him down the stairs. And we know how much he hated Rabinowitz. For

days on end, in the wintertime, we huddled around the gas stove in the kitchen because Rabinowitz gave us no heat; and when the gas was turned off, we sat around the kerosene stove. When windows were broken, Rabinowitz took his time about fixing them; the wind made the cardboard we stuck in the window rattle all night long, and when snow came the weight of the snow forced the cardboard inward and onto the floor. Neither Rabinowitz nor the city was alert about collecting garbage or shoveling away snow; whenever the apartment received a fresh coat of paint, we bought the paint and painted the apartment ourselves; we caught and killed the rats; a great chunk of the kitchen ceiling fell one winter, narrowly missing our mother. We all hated Rabinowitz with a perfectly exquisite hatred; great, gross, abject liar of a Jew — and this word in our father's mouth was terrible, as dripping with venom as a mango is with juice — and we would have been happy to see our proud father kill him. We would have been glad to help. (Baldwin 1969, 12-13)

While there is no explicit reference to the moneylender of Venice here, the lineage is not hard to see. A nineteenth-century actor steeped in playing the role of Shakespeare's villainous Shylock would have relished an opportunity to perform Baldwin's dastardly Rabinowitz.

The first of Baldwin's three explicit references to *The Merchant of Venice* appears in a little-known newspaper article from 1964 entitled "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare." He explains his initial condemnation of the playwright by noting that, "in the way that some Jews bitterly and mistakenly resent Shylock, I was dubious about Othello (what did he see in Desdemona?) and bitter about Caliban" (Baldwin 1964b). The connection Baldwin draws between Shakespeare's most famous Jew and his most famous Moor is interesting, as is his assertion that Jews are "mistaken" in their resentment of Shylock, whereas he is correct (presumably) in his "bitterness" over the portrayal of Caliban; Baldwin's use of the Shylock figure, as we will see below, indicates that he finds Shakespeare's character to be largely an accurate representation.

For our purposes here, however, Baldwin's second and third explicit allusions to *The Merchant of Venice* are more significant. Very similar to each other, these two references are quite telling in light of the mixed signals Baldwin sent out throughout his career regarding Jews, especially Jewish merchants. The first of them appears in *A Rap on Race*, a dialogue held between Baldwin and the anthropologist

Margaret Mead and published in 1971. Baldwin has been speaking about his disdain for the state of Israel, the establishment of which he sees as a blatant ploy by the West to gain a strategic advantage in the region at the cost of displacing millions of Palestinians,<sup>17</sup> when the following conversation takes place:

Baldwin: We put a handful of people at the gate of the Middle East, in an entirely hostile, embattled area where they could be murdered at any moment and we knew it, not because we loved the Jews but because we could use them.

Mead: And because the promoters of Zionism could use the British. Remember, those were parallel points.

Baldwin: I remember the Merchant of Venice, too.

Mead: *Really?*

Baldwin: Yes! The Jew was still doing the Christian's dirty work. (Baldwin and Mead 1971, 208-209)

Baldwin's final overt allusion to Shakespeare's text appears in his "An Open Letter to the Born Again," published in 1979 in the wake of the Andrew Young affair, in which the African American Ambassador to the United Nations was forced to resign his post (under Jewish pressure, according to some observers) because he had met secretly with leaders of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, at that time considered an outlaw group. Focusing once again on the issue of Israel, Baldwin asks, "Does no one see the connection between *The Merchant of Venice* and [Edward Lewis Wallant's] *The Pawnbroker*? In both of these works, as though no time had passed, the Jew is portrayed as doing the Christian's usurious dirty work" (Baldwin 1985b, 655).

These two references to *The Merchant of Venice* might seem to reflect an empathetic understanding of the social circumstances that played such a large part in Shylock's creation. Baldwin certainly shows himself to be aware of the line of thinking used by the "Free Negro," that Venice created Shylock so that it could then excoriate him. He might appear to be viewing the moneylender as victimized more than victimizer. But is this actually the tone of the passages? Are they not rather condemnations of Jews for so readily accepting the role of middleman? The fact that Baldwin found it necessary to follow his statement "The Jew was still doing the Christian's dirty work" with the immediate disclaimer "I am not accusing Jews when I say that" (Baldwin and Mead 1971, 209) indicates that he is afraid someone might think he *is* blaming the Jew for playing that role, a defensiveness which perhaps shows that that is precisely what he is doing. Indeed, an examination of Baldwin's comments about Jewish merchants in such

essays as "The Harlem Ghetto" (1948) and "Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White" (1967) brings out Baldwin's view of "the Negro's ambivalent relation to the Jew" (Baldwin 1955, 55), showing a number of instances of statements that can only be seen as going along with and even perpetuating the negative Shylock/Rabinowitz stereotype.

The same can be said of Baldwin's final comments on the relationship between Jewish merchants and black patrons, which were made in 1984 when he gave an impromptu lecture at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, a transcript of which was later published in *The Black Scholar* as "Blacks and Jews." Speaking about the then-recent disclosure of Jesse Jackson's 'Hymietown' remark made while on the Presidential campaign trail, Baldwin showed in many ways that his ideas hadn't changed much since the time of "The Harlem Ghetto" more than thirty-five years earlier. The tape recording begins with Baldwin once again invoking the Shylock figure, although not naming him as such explicitly: "He comes to collect the rent, so you know him in that role. He runs the grocery store and gives you credit, so you know him in that role" (Baldwin 1988, 3). He then goes on to examine many of the issues he had written about in the earlier pieces. He discusses the shared heritage of Blacks and Jews in the Old Testament, for example,<sup>18</sup> but only to make the point that "unconsciously a black person tends to expect more from a Jewish person than he expects from anybody else. And because the American Jew in this country is essentially a white man, this expectation is always defeated with a resulting accumulation of bitterness" (Baldwin 1988, 3). Of the Jewish merchant, he says that

part of the hazard of being a Jew, historically and actually, and part of precisely the danger I was talking about when I began about the way a Jew intrudes himself on a black person's attention is because he is the only white man you see. But then part of the hazard, actually, morally, historically of . . . being a Jew is finding yourself doing the Christian's dirty work . . . The people who own Harlem, for example, never arrive to collect the rent. The people who are really responsible for the misery all up and down those streets do not run the pawn shop. (Baldwin 1988, 9, second ellipsis mine)

Although Baldwin adds that "it's not a condemnation" (9), as he had in his similar conversation with Margaret Mead about *The Merchant of Venice*, his actual point of view regarding the Jew as economic middleman is somewhat hard to pin down, as he gives conflicting evidence. He clearly says "I am not anti-Jewish" (5), yet some who

heard the speech were not convinced. Baldwin's reliance on the negative Shylock stereotype made him suspect from the beginning and the tone of his subsequent remarks left many members of the audience wondering. His "penetrating eye" may have seen "the oppressor as *also* the oppressed," as Wole Soyinka wrote (Soyinka 1989, 17),<sup>19</sup> but that did not prevent him from falling prey to the syndrome he himself identified whereby victims "do not distinguish one oppressor from another, nor see through to the root principle of their oppressions" (Baldwin 1985a, 430) and therefore strike out indiscriminately, hitting potential friends as well as real and imaginary foes. It should not have surprised him when these people took umbrage at being hit.

The person who took the most umbrage, in fact, was none other than Julius Lester, at that point in time a professor in the Afro-American Studies Department at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and present for Baldwin's talk. Between the time of Lester's allusion to Shylock during the Brownsville Schoolteachers' strike of 1968 and Baldwin's appearance at the University of Massachusetts in 1984, much had changed in Lester's life. Most significantly, he had become a practicing, even a devout Jew. He describes in *Lovesong* how Baldwin had joined him at Shabbat meals on several occasions and how close a bond they had forged. Thus he felt even more betrayed by what he saw as the anti-Semitism of Baldwin's spontaneous classroom lecture. "I was shocked," he writes, "when Jimmy referred to Jews as being nothing more than 'white Christians who go to something called synagogue on a Saturday night rather than church on Sunday'" (Lester 1988, 210). He went on to assert that "I know he is not an anti-Semite, but his remarks in class were anti-Semitic, and he does not realize it" (210). Lester also felt that, during the question-and-answer period that followed Baldwin's remarks, he had stood idly by while Black students were essentially given "permission to stand up and mouth every anti-Semitic cliché they knew and they did so, castigating Jewish landlords and Jews in general" (210). When Lester confronted him about it, according to Lester's account, Baldwin admitted that he had not spoken "as someone who understands Jewish suffering and Jewish fears" (211) and promised to apologize to the Jewish students whom he had offended. He never did. As a result of this encounter, Lester found himself shunned and ostracized by the members of the Afro-American Studies Department, leading to his being relocated to the Judaic and Near Eastern Studies Department, where he remained for many years.<sup>20</sup>

The irony, of course, is that Baldwin "pointed out the possibility that people were using [Jesse Jackson's 'Hymietown'] slip as a golden

opportunity to set blacks and Jews against each other" (Leeming 1984, 366), yet this is exactly what happened as a result of his own statements. Baldwin may speak out against stereotypes — he told Margaret Mead that "it is very difficult to ask people to give up the assumptions by which they have always lived, and yet that is the demand the world has got to make now of everybody, [b]ecause the assumptions by which we have all lived so far are as inhuman as the Spanish Inquisition — or the Third Reich" (Baldwin and Mead 1971, 161) — yet he also perpetuates them. There can be little doubt that Baldwin's "experience of the adversarial relations between blacks and Jews in Harlem left the remnants of a grievance" (Campbell 1991, 277) and that the lingering effect of this stereotype prevents him from achieving what he despaired of ever finding back when he wrote "The Harlem Ghetto" in 1948: "any real and systematic cooperation . . . between Negroes and Jews" (Baldwin 1955, 57). As long as he continues to be affected by the negative Shylock stereotype, there can be little chance of rapprochement.

### SHYLOCK AS BOTH

It seems that there is also little likelihood of rapprochement between the two divergent views of Shylock in the African American imagination that we have sketched out here. That the same character can result in such opposed appropriations is no doubt a tribute to Shakespeare's genius as well as to the imaginations of the African American writers who have traced out these paths of development as a specific response conditioned by a strongly felt personal and cultural experience of being a social outcast. The situation is summed up well by Brian Murdoch, the translator of Mirjam Pressler's young adult novel *Shylock's Daughter* (2001), who stresses how "difficult" a character Shylock himself is: "He can be seen in the play either as a victim, properly protesting that Jews are exactly the same as everyone else ("If you prick us, do we not bleed?" he asks), and utterly destroyed at the end, or he can be seen as a potentially murderous old miser, who cares more about his money than his daughter" (Murdoch 2001, 253-54). The play lends itself to these various interpretations, depending on one's subject position. If one is in the position of having been the victim of prejudice, one's reaction to prejudice is rarely average, according to the psychologist Gordon Allport, but is instead likely to be either very low or very high in prejudice. "Being a victim oneself disposes one either to develop [sympathy with] or [aggression toward] other out-groups," he notes (Allport 1979, 155). As our survey of African American literary responses to *The Merchant of Venice* has shown, Black writers have

displayed both of these reactions. While many African American writers look to Shylock as a fellow victim of racism and invoke Shakespeare's character in calling for tolerance and equal treatment, others perpetuate the villainous anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jewish economic greed embodied in Shylock and transport them to modern America.

## NOTES

1. Lester cites similar enthusiasm when he reads Leon Uris's *Exodus* in 1958 and when he hears a lecture by Rosey Poole, the translator of Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, in 1961.
2. For more on Lester's relationship to Judaism, see my essay "'Gee, You Don't Look Jewish': Julius Lester's *Lovesong*, an African-American Jewish-American Autobiography" (Meyer 1999).
3. For an interesting discussion of this issue see Laurence Lerner's "Wilhelm S. and Shylock" (2006), as well as Wesker 1990, 182-83, Overton 1987, 24, and Gross 1992, 273 and 319-23.
4. For a fascinating African reaction to *The Merchant of Venice*, see Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* (Dinesen 1983, 258-60). I must credit John Gross (1992, 255-56) for alerting me to this passage.
5. See also Toby Lelyveld: "Kean was the first to break with the tradition that made of Shylock a preposterous fool" (Lelyveld 2006, 219).
6. For reviews particularly of Aldridge's Shylock, see Marshall and Stock 1958, 139, 187, 197, 227, 229, 232, 236, 286-87 and Lindfors 2007, 183, 186, 189, 240, and 250.
7. Another Black actor, Morgan Smith, appeared in London in Shakespearean roles including Shylock, but he was less successful than Aldridge had been (Marshall and Stock 1958, 135; Hill 1984, 29-30). Errol Hill reports that in America in the 1870s, *The Merchant of Venice* was the fifth most frequently produced Shakespearean work among African Americans (Hill 1984, 45); in 1905, it was the first text selected by Atlanta University when it began "the custom of presenting a Shakespeare play by the graduating class" (83), while it was the second Shakespearean play produced by both the Howard University and the Washington Dramatic Clubs (85, 86).
8. All references to *The Merchant of Venice* come from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans (Shakespeare 1974).
9. For contrasting interpretations of this speech, see Palmer 1969, 125 and Prior 1981, 494-95.
10. For more on this connection see Golden 1958, 176.

11. See also Barbara K. Lewalski's statement that "This defeat and lessening of Morocco . . . foreshadows the defeat and conversion of Shylock" (Lewalski 2006, 181).
12. References to these allusions can be found in Erickson 2007, 9 and 106.
13. See Phillips's interview with Maya Jaggi, quoted in Erickson 2007, 198.
14. See Erickson 2007, 109: Phillips "intimates a Shakespearean link between the Venice that constructs the Jewish ghetto and the Venice in which Othello must negotiate his way. . . . Although *The Merchant of Venice* is never named in the novel, its thematic relevance is evident. The novel presupposes our awareness of Othello and Shylock as two ethnic outsiders, and it calls on this awareness not only in relation to early modern Europe but also in connection with contemporary attention to blacks and Jews. Phillips's parallel stories stress their major common bond in the prejudice that both characters have experienced at the hands of white Europeans."
15. One *OED* definition of "Jew" states: "As a name of opprobrium or reprobation; spec. applied to a grasping or extortionate money lender or usurer, or a trader who drives hard bargains and deals craftily" (quoted in Spencer 1988, 89).
16. Although I am not aware of Amiri Baraka ever making a direct allusion to Shylock or *The Merchant of Venice*, his call for "dagger poems in the slimy bellies / of the owner-jews" (Baraka 1991, 219) caused at least one critic to make such a connection, when Ethan Goffman observed that Baraka dismisses Jewish achievement and sees only "the 'hooked grin' of a Shylock obsessed with money" (Goffman 2000, 104). In *The System of Dante's Hell* (1963), Baraka again provides an image of a modern Shylock, without directly naming him as such: "10 feet up on the wall, in a kind of balcony, a jew sat, with thick glasses and a cap, in front of a table. He had checks and money at the table & where the winding steps went up to him a line of shouting woogies waved their pay & waited for that bogus Christ to give them the currency of that place. Two tremendous muthafuckers with stale white teeth grinned in back of the jew and sat with baseball bats to protect the western world" (Baraka 2000, 107). It is a bit surprising that more of the Black Arts Movement writers did not allude to Shylock, as their "portray[al] of Jews as metonymic for dominant exploitation" (Goffman 2000, 99) fits right in with the ethos of Shakespeare's text, as these writers would have interpreted it.
17. Baldwin was consistent throughout his career in his denunciations of Israel; see "An Open Letter to the Born Again" (Baldwin 1985b, 655),

- "Blacks and Jews" (Baldwin 1988, 4), and interviews in Standley and Pratt 1989, 85-86, 135, and 149.
18. In "The Harlem Ghetto," Baldwin points out that, within the context of the Black church, "the negro identifies himself almost wholly with the Jew. The more devout Negro considers that he *is* a Jew, in bondage to a hard taskmaster and waiting for a Moses to lead him out of Egypt. The hymns, the texts, and the most favored legends of the devout Negro are all Old Testament and therefore Jewish in origin" (Baldwin 1955, 55). See also Schulberg 1989, 143-44. Baldwin's novel *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953), which grows directly out of his own early experience in the church, both as the (step-)son of a minister and as a popular boy preacher, contains several such references linking the African American struggle with the Jews of the Old Testament. See Baldwin 1977, 68, 70, 97, 114, 129, and 197 (the last a reference to the Curse of Ham). See also "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind" (Baldwin 1964a, 54).
  19. See also Sylvander 1980, 17, 18.
  20. For more on this controversy see *The Black Scholar* 19.6 (1988): 16-43.

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### PERMISSIONS

Ira Aldridge, "the African Roscius," in the role of Shylock. Courtesy Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library.

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## "My Mother's Fussing Soliloquies": Toni

### Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Shakespeare

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ABSTRACT | LOSING VOICE IN SHAKESPEARE AND MORRISON | JUDGING IN *THE BLUEST EYE* | TRAPPED IN SOLILOQUY | FROM SOLILOQUY TO SONG | CONCLUSION  
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#### ABSTRACT

While Toni Morrison famously rejects the idea that Western authors have influenced her work, *The Bluest Eye* mentions Ophelia in a way that suggests parallels between Shakespeare's victim and Pecola Breedlove. Opposing song, as a form of collective sharing of information that heals the individual, to what this essay identifies as an isolating "soliloquy sense of self," Morrison uses *Hamlet* as a foil in order to critique Western tragedy. In the process, however, she raises questions about the limitations of Shakespearean drama and of the novel as her own artistic medium. The essay also considers, by extension, Morrison's indictment of readers as selectively appropriating African American culture when they pursue traces of *Hamlet* in *The Bluest Eye*. Vernacular African American culture, in particular the blues, emerges as a powerful alternative to the alienation imposed by Hamlet's "soliloquy sense" of the self.

*And I, at least, do not intend to live without Aeschylus or William Shakespeare, or James, or Twain or Hawthorne, or Melville . . . — Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken"*

Toni Morrison, describing Sethe, Beloved, and Denver from *Beloved*, remarks, "But when they say it, and hear it, and look at it, and share it, they are not only one, they're two and three, and four, you know? The collective sharing of information heals the individual — and the collective" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 248).<sup>1</sup> Morrison's writing examines this collective sharing as well as the repeated motif in African American folklore and literature that traces a movement from isolation to community. In this light, the following essay will argue that *The Bluest Eye* enacts a complex journey from soliloquy to song, from an isolation that characterizes the modern and postmodern subject and narrative voice to song, especially jazz and the blues.<sup>2</sup> I will also suggest that, while Morrison's writing avoids overt literary references, there are significant connections between *The Bluest Eye* and Shakespearean tragedy, especially *Hamlet*.<sup>3</sup> Morrison alludes to Shakespeare twice in her novels. One of those instances is in *The Bluest Eye*, where Ophelia is mentioned, suggesting parallels between her and Pecola Breedlove. Examining parallels between characters in *The Bluest Eye* and Shakespeare's characters who share similar traits, especially as we focus also on differences between these characters and Shakespeare's, is a useful way to consider how Morrison's novels offer a critique of Western tragedy. Morrison writes against what I will term a "soliloquy sense of self."<sup>4</sup> In doing so, she raises questions about the limitations of Shakespeare's work and the limits of her own medium.

It is not new to say that Toni Morrison's novels overtly challenge racism and that her works question Western concepts of reality. Like the music of John Coltrane, Morrison's corpus sets out to debunk certain Western assumptions while striving for more complex, in-depth, and useful insights into the plural human condition. It is another question, though, to ask how far her work goes toward critiquing Western aesthetics and in what ways Morrison is revising certain dominant images, techniques, and values of the novel. I will argue that *The Bluest Eye* attacks hierarchal structures associated with Western aesthetics and challenges the concept of the isolated hero/artist, as epitomized by Hamlet, while at the same time wrestling with just how valid this critique might be. More important, I will also suggest that by thinking about the Shakespearean aspects of Morrison's work, we see in sharper relief the African American, or better, vernacular-based, aspects of her writing, "the specific culture that interests [Morrison]," as well as how her work is both part of yet distinct from the Western tradition (Morrison 1984a, 387).

Morrison has expressed her difficulties with critics who evaluate her

work based on Western assumptions that can obscure a novel's "anchors" in the African American community:<sup>5</sup>

If someone says I write like Joyce, that's giving me a kind of credibility I find offensive. It has nothing to do with my liking Joyce. I do, but the comparison has to do with nothing out of which I write. I find such criticism dishonest because it never goes into the work on its own terms. It comes from some other place and finds content outside of the work and wholly irrelevant to it to support the work. (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 160-61)

Yet sensitivity to how Morrison's work mediates between what can be called Western culture — for our purposes, Shakespeare — and African American culture can help us understand more thoroughly the assumptions behind both. I submit, in other words, that this is one way to go "into a work on its own terms." Not only does Ophelia's presence in the *The Bluest Eye* suggest parallels between her and Pecola Breedlove, but in the same passage we also learn that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been a part of Soaphead Church's education (Morrison 1994a, 169). Soaphead Church will be examined too, since his Western education has, in part, trapped him in soliloquy. An analysis of Pecola and Soaphead demonstrates that from the start of Morrison's career she has been concerned with developing a more plural sense of what it means to be human, an alternative to Western aesthetics that eventually leads to "the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words" in *Beloved*, that moment when Sethe is rescued from her isolation by communal song (Morrison 1987, 261).

There are now many varied and thought-provoking studies that help us understand how intertextuality expands and complicates the relationship between texts. Novy's study of women writers who "engage" with Shakespeare stresses the transformative nature of these appropriations, and also of feminist rereadings of Shakespeare. Similarly, for Whitney *Hamlet* can accommodate "a range of desires, needs, and purposes of its audience, and supplies equipment for living"; thus the play encourages a pluralist agenda with significant ethical implications (Whitney 2006, 7). Likewise, as Juvan writes, intertextuality helps us question the assumption that someone or something owns meaning, and that meaning flows in one direction: "in place of . . . unidirectional streams [we now have] multidirectional interweavings of threads . . . plurality and anarchy, but especially interaction — not only connection of the text with authorial masterpieces of the past but also with contemporary and anonymous discourses" (Juvan 2008, 3).<sup>6</sup> For my purposes, just as Morrison's

novels argue that significant meaning exists primarily between characters and is not possessed by any one character (hence the resistance to soliloquy and the focus on music's potentially communal nature in *The Bluest Eye*), so plural meaning also exists between texts, authors, and cultures in ever-shifting relationships to each other, as Bakhtin argues.<sup>7</sup> Morrison's novels are many-voiced, hybrid products of hybrid culture. Morrison's relationship to Shakespeare, as I will present it, is a dialogue; part of her text is "talking back to Shakespeare," as Christy Desmet describes the process of appropriation (Desmet 1999, 11). Part of this talking back is a critique of the solipsistic and hierarchal elements of Western tragedy from the perspective of vernacular culture, which is perhaps a semi-anonymous discourse. Thinking about *Hamlet* and *The Bluest Eye* together helps us see from a different perspective the power of African American vernacular culture as it appears in references to music in the novel.<sup>8</sup> *Hamlet* is not central to understanding *The Bluest Eye*, but instead emerges as a kind of foil to help us think about elements of *The Bluest Eye* that emerge primarily from African American culture.

Following the notion that this essay is itself an appropriation, I also want to keep in mind the baggage I bring to this process. I prefer reading multiple works by one author against each other and quoting copiously from the texts in question. On one level, I assume that Morrison's novels are about the process of their own creation, and also about the author's relationship to her reading audience. In a kind of call and response between me and *The Bluest Eye*, my aim is to stay open to what that text may be saying even as I, as all interpreters do, also impose various meanings on the novel. I will return to this problem later, and suggest that in this respect *The Bluest Eye* anticipates problems with its audience, an audience that includes its interpreters.

### LOSING VOICE IN SHAKESPEARE AND MORRISON

A number of Shakespeare's tragic heroines, including Lavinia, Portia, Ophelia, Desdemona, and finally Cordelia, are victims. Most of these women are tortured or die in ways that suggest suppression of their voices. Lavinia's tongue is cut out, Ophelia drowns, Desdemona is strangled, and Cordelia is hanged. Lavinia's and Portia's deaths, earlier figures in Shakespeare's development, are treated almost as afterthoughts by the male characters, while Desdemona's and Cordelia's deaths force Othello and Lear into various levels of insight or recognition. Likewise, Lady Macbeth's death, arguably, leads to Macbeth's final soliloquy. Feminist criticism has helped us examine this

pattern, and, indeed, Guitar Baines in *Song of Solomon* offers a definition of tragedy that describes such works reflecting something "unnatural" in Western culture: "They know they are unnatural. Their writers and artists have been saying it for years. Telling them they are unnatural, telling them they are depraved. They call it tragedy. In the movies they call it adventure. It's just depravity they try to make glorious, natural" (Morrison 1977, 157). Later, I will discuss what might be "unnatural" about Shakespearean tragedy. For now, I will note a similar pattern in Toni Morrison's novels, which examine the deaths of a number of young women while also showing how that loss provokes recognition by the characters and insight into themselves and their pasts.<sup>9</sup> This is one result of Hagar's death in *Song of Solomon*, the death of Beloved, and the death of Dorcas in *Jazz*. Sula's death, partially caused by Ajax's rejection, and Jadine's flight back to Europe in *Tar Baby* are more complex examples of this pattern. Sula's death leads to Nel's recognition of their bond in the book's last passage, apparently long after Sula has died.<sup>10</sup> Jadine does not die, but does leave, and Son ends pursuing his "ancient properties" (Morrison 1977, 308). *Paradise* begins with another variation — "They shot the white girl first" (Morrison 1998a, 3) — and ends with a profound recognition on the part of one brother, Deacon, and an equally profound denial on the part of the other, Steward. The first and perhaps most direct example of this pattern is Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. Though she does not die, Pecola, like Ophelia, goes mad, overwhelmed by forces beyond her control, including sexual assault.<sup>11</sup> Ophelia's precursor in Shakespeare is the raped, mutilated, and silenced Lavinia in Shakespeare's early and perhaps first tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*; in Morrison's work, similarly, the most sustained violence is done to a young girl in her first novel.

Pecola does not complete the journey from isolated soliloquy to communal song, as Milkman Dead will in *Song of Solomon*, but *The Bluest Eye* points the way for such transcendence, albeit complicated and qualified by conflicting forces, in Morrison's later novels. In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison also examines her role as a novelist writing from a position both inside and outside of the Western tradition, working with what Richard Wright, and more recently Henry Louis Gates and John Edgar Wideman, define as an empowering rather than debilitating double-consciousness.<sup>12</sup> Morrison's creative process necessarily involves self-examination, especially of the values inherent in narrative strategies that situate the reader in a character's isolated thoughts, and how these moments might reflect the writer's and narrator's isolation and resulting attempts to connect to others when creating a story. On

the one hand, Morrison strives to make a space so that the reader can be a cocreator with the writer, as she remarks:

. . . two people are busy making the story. One is me and one is you and together we do that, we invent it together and I just hold your hand while you're in the process of going there and hearing it and sharing it. . . . An artist, for me, a black artist for me, is not a solitary person who has no responsibility to the community. It's a totally communal experience. (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 231)

On the other hand, Morrison's work often explores the discrete consciousness and thoughts of characters outside of their contact with others. Again, Morrison is not concerned with drawing phrases, images, or details from Shakespeare's plays. Rather, in *The Bluest Eye* we find elements of *Hamlet* that function as a necessary step towards developing her version of African American song, a musical understanding of the self that resists skepticism and seeks to redefine love.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Western literature is part of the life and problems of Soaphead Church. His development is described in terms that offer a range of references unique in Morrison's work:

Little Elihue learned everything he needed to know well, particularly the fine art of self-deception. He read greedily but understood selectively, choosing bits and pieces of other men's ideas that supported whatever predilection he had at that moment. Thus he chose to remember Hamlet's abuse of Ophelia, but not Christ's love of Mary Magdalene; Hamlet's frivolous politics but not Christ's serious anarchy. He noticed Gibbon's acidity, but not his tolerance, Othello's love for the fair Desdemona, but not Iago's perverted love for Othello. The works he admired the most were Dante's; those he despised the most were Dostoyevsky's. For all his exposure to the best minds of the Western world, he allowed only the narrowest interpretations to touch him. He responded to his father's controlled violence by developing hard habits and a soft imagination. A hatred of, and fascination with, any hint of decay. (Morrison 1994a, 169)

Ophelia, Hamlet, Iago, Othello, Desdemona, and Caliban are the only Shakespearean characters mentioned in Morrison's novels published thus far. All but Caliban (*Tar Baby*, Morrison 1982b, 106) are mentioned in this passage, where Soaphead's education emerges as one source of the madness and decay that shape him. The "fine art of self-deception" is cultivated by his family's distrust of their lineal African

blood, and a need to think superiorly comes from Western culture. Soaphead (a name that literally describes his tight pomaded curls but also suggests a whitewashed brain) sees himself as better than other blacks because he is derived from "a Sir Whitcomb, some decaying British nobleman" (167), a name that also links whiteness ("whit" as white) and Western culture to decay. The name "Soaphead," understood from a folk perspective, also suggests someone who has rubbed his head against too many books and lost common sense. The emphasis here is on those attitudes that establish false hierarchies and pernicious differences; from Soaphead's perspective Hamlet can abuse Ophelia because men are better than women, and Othello is made better by loving a white woman. But Soaphead misses how Christ's anarchy, Iago's love for Othello, or Dostoyevsky's work complicates or breaks down fallacious racial and gender distinctions.

In Soaphead's mind, Dante's levels of hell uphold the distinctions between good and ill that he craves, providing his madness with a rigorous order: "But his neatness, the neatness of Dante, was the orderly sectioning and segregating of all levels of evil and decay" (Morrison 1994a, 172-73). Soaphead's life is described in terms that suggest baroque music: "his personality was an arabesque: intricate, symmetrical, balanced, tightly constructed — except for one flaw. The careful design was marred occasionally by a rare but keen sexual craving" (166). This tight pattern has damaged Soaphead because it separates him from others and prevents self-confrontation, but also provides an order in which he can survive. Western culture is presented as a way to arrange his decay, or rather, as offering an order for Soaphead's life that covers the decay that occasionally peeks out. Soaphead's education sees beauty associated with Western culture as the primary value, but paradoxically these ideas also lead to an unhealthy fascination with filth. Here Morrison engages a question that will be taken up in her later works: apart from the fear and self-loathing that contribute to racism, is there something in the hierarchal nature of Western aesthetics itself that, directly and indirectly, seeks to justify racist behavior? If Western culture is disturbed by an Africanist presence, does it compensate by a need for overt symmetry in artistic forms that, depending upon the interpretation, can support false racial distinctions?<sup>13</sup> As in Morrison's later works, *The Bluest Eye* attacks ordering systems that are based on a need to assert superiority and suggests that these systems lead to isolation and decay, both significant problems in the world of *Hamlet*. Could the soliloquy itself, if it helps us to romanticize a character thinking and struggling alone, signal a need to try to make beautiful and "natural" attitudes that increase our

sense of isolation and alienation, paralleling Guitar Baines's suggestions about Western tragedy? To the degree that Morrison's novels try to capture the workings of individual consciousness outside of interaction with others, could her medium also risk solipsism, decay, and a tendency toward problematic hierarchal thinking? Since the novel developed in Western culture and springs from the isolated consciousness suggested by soliloquy, to what degree does Shakespearean soliloquy set in motion and make "natural" the kind of isolation that Morrison simultaneously deploys and questions with a character like Soaphead Church?<sup>14</sup> Are Soaphead's struggles, on one level, an allegory that suggests problems with Morrison's own medium?

These questions are raised but not answered by *The Bluest Eye*. We can, however, be more certain about the specifics of Soaphead's problems and his links to Western culture. A combination of Western aesthetics, racism as unconscious self-hatred, and a father who enforced such ideas and impulses help make Soaphead Church into an isolated Prospero figure, trading in magic based upon his self-created superiority. Thus, Soaphead becomes a suitable figure to grant Pecola blue eyes; he believes in the beauty, order, and superiority of Western culture, while remaining, for the most part, blinded by what might be described as a Western hubris regarding what is awry in his own life.<sup>15</sup> His criticism of God's inability to sympathize with Pecola and give her blue eyes is another example of Soaphead Church's hubris (Morrison 1994a, 180), and also plays on our own desire to avoid any implication in her abuse by placing blame elsewhere. Soaphead is a self-named "misanthrope" (164), repulsed by signs of bodily decay but equally fascinated with worn objects. Such objects serve as his substitute for human relationships, "as though his disdain of human contact had converted itself into a craving for things humans had touched" (165). His occasional sexual energy is channeled toward fondling small girls, since they remind him least of his possible homosexuality and have few hints of decay. The activity is "associated in his mind with cleanliness. Soaphead was what one might call a very clean old man" (167).

But such a harsh reading of Soaphead Church is only one side of the story. As is typical of Morrison's work, the temptation to judge a character harshly is complicated by that character's past. It is also complicated by this paradox: judging Soaphead means applying hierarchal values or thinking that resembles, through the need to establish differences that oversimplify and thus misunderstand a figure, his own racism. Instead of simply leaning on dichotomies that pit Western culture starkly against non-Western or vernacular cultures,

Morrison's writing complicates dichotomies and thus our position as interpreters.<sup>16</sup> Morrison writes:

In exploring the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to literally fall apart, I mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous, all the while trying hard to avoid the complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to. That is, I did not want to dehumanize the characters who trashed Pecola and contributed to her collapse. ("Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison 1994a, 211)

On the one hand, as the earlier passage notes, Soaphead "chose" problematic aspects of Western culture that support racist hierarchies; on the other hand, he had been trained to believe these things from an early age, been victimized himself by a violent, partially crazed, disciplinarian father, and endured the absence of a mother who died at his birth.<sup>17</sup> Cholly's mother is also absent, and Pecola's rape at his hands is partly the result of what is in effect Cholly's rape by white men (Morrison 1994a, 147-48). For Soaphead, a combination of conditioning and choice lead to the hubris, isolation, and madness that hold his life together.

In other words, while Soaphead Church's character invites a critique of Western aesthetics, his complex character makes it hard to tell how far that critique extends. Is it Western culture itself that is rotting and the source of the disease that contributes to Pecola's destruction, as the description of Sir Whitcomb, Soaphead's ancestor and a "decaying British nobleman," argues? Or is the problem more how Soaphead, as well as the black and white communities, choose to deploy and order their lives through these influences? The question is not easy to answer, nor is it easy to tell the degree of choice a character such as Soaphead has for his actions. For our purposes, we can also ask if it is Shakespeare's works themselves, rather, that are a problem, or is it more how that work is reinterpreted, appropriated, and used by subsequent cultures?<sup>18</sup> Who can tell the dancer from the dance? Soaphead's harsh judgment of God for failing to give Pecola blue eyes (Morrison 1994a, 178-82) exposes the baseless fabric of judgments that grow from fear and abuse, showing that judgment can be a mask for creating false hierarchies and shifting blame. This is Lear's painful insight as he speaks to the blind Gloucester (*King Lear*, 4.6.148-170; Shakespeare 1997). In plain terms, our attempts to judge Soaphead and Western culture are complicated by a counter-attitude in *The Bluest Eye* that makes us constantly question the grounds upon which we try to make such distinctions.

## JUDGING IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

Judgment is a preeminent issue in *The Bluest Eye*, especially if we consider where Shakespeare's work might fit in this process of creating or supporting an aesthetics partially based on hierarchies that can exclude or demonize others. The accepted contemporary argument, made with Caliban in *The Tempest*, is that Shakespeare, through Prospero, betrays anxiety about racial distinctions, but finally, accepts such differences (Baker 1986; Nixon 1987). There is a parallel anxiety in *The Bluest Eye*. In the paragraph quoted above, the narrative voice is uncertain about how to judge Soaphead. When the narrator notes that Soaphead chose to remember Hamlet's "abuse" of Ophelia and his "frivolous" politics, do these two words refer to Soaphead's judgment of Hamlet's behavior or to the narrator's judgment of Soaphead's misconstrued view of white culture? Syntactically, the narrator's attitude toward Soaphead seems to be mixed with Soaphead's own misconstrued choices. Thus, judging Soaphead's behavior is no easy task. We cannot tell how far the narrator goes toward subjecting Soaphead to a version of what Soaphead inflicts on others.

The act of judging in *The Bluest Eye* is complicated further by the idea that the narrator here is not, or does not seem to be, Claudia MacTeer. We can also ask if the ambiguity regarding the narrator's judgment of Soaphead is related to the book's conclusion. As Duvall points out, Soaphead's harsh judgment against God for not noticing Pecola connects to the now mature Claudia MacTeer's indictment of all for Pecola's destruction (Duvall 1997, 250): "All of us — all who knew her — felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her . . . Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent" (Morrison 1994a, 205). The cleaning relates both audience and narrator back to Soaphead's own mad obsessions with cleanliness and decay. Does this also mean that the narrator and the reader might, like Soaphead, embrace a version of Western aesthetics that depends on damaging hierarchal thinking? The phrase "all who knew her" implicates Claudia, the novel's black and white communities, the eloquent writer of the story ("Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent"), and readers of *The Bluest Eye* in Pecola's destruction. How much is this destructive behavior toward others based on Western aesthetics that can contribute to self-deception by imposing a false order on the world?

In a similar sense, is Shakespeare the "all-knowing master" of Western culture "who had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear" (Morrison 1994a, 39), a master that Morrison must refuse or at least question? Or,

again, is the problem more that Shakespeare has been constructed by others to serve racist ends? Like Hamlet in his soliloquies, the narrative voice of *The Bluest Eye* moves by turns between self-indictment and the indictment of others. We see an attack on those who create racial and cultural hierarchies, but an attack that itself risks setting up its own set of problematic distinctions.<sup>19</sup> Just as Soaphead is full of casual and quick judgments based on prejudice, the narrative voice that locates us in his mind thinks similarly. It is an articulate voice that, like Soaphead himself, relies upon judgments that are too neat and clean. There are similar problems with the isolated narrator's perceptions and judgments of others in *Jazz*.

In general terms, "Hamlet's abuse of Ophelia" (Morrison 1994a, 169) plots a relationship to, rather than shows a direct or clean identification with, Pecola who, like Ophelia, is abused by those who love her. Similar to Ophelia, Pecola is rejected for reasons she cannot understand. Ophelia's mad songs and Polonius' cryptic remarks suggest incest and possible pregnancy as a cause for her madness and death, a death that the gravedigger, and apparently others, see as a suicide (*Hamlet*, 5.1.1-29).<sup>20</sup> There is little doubt that her madness is caused partially by sexual abuse, though who might have inflicted it remains unclear, leaving the sense that many figures are directly and indirectly implicated in Ophelia's death. Similarly, in *The Bluest Eye* Morrison, as her comment in the "Afterword" noted above suggests, is careful to distribute responsibility for Pecola's madness and destruction among Cholly, Pauline, Yacobowski the storekeeper, and Geraldine, as well as the entire community and the readers of her book: "All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed" (Morrison 1994a, 205).<sup>21</sup>

The depictions of Ophelia and Pecola center upon natural and seasonal images, especially flowers, which reflect, among other things, the cycles of nature unnaturally interrupted. Pecola's demise is connected to flower imagery by Claudia MacTeer:

Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did. Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year. (Morrison 1994a, 5)

And also:

For years I thought my sister was right; it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that of all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too. (5-6)

Claudia's narration places blame first upon herself and then upon the whole community, the soil in which Pecola's life could not grow. Though it stretches the limits of interpretation, might Pecola be, among other things, a figure for oral culture, where meaning might reside between herself and others in an oral exchange, and thus she, like oral culture, is a seed that cannot grow in a form like the novel? Female characters were rarely the central figure in a tragedy in 1600 (though this soon changed), and *Hamlet* follows this pattern to the extent that Gertrude and Ophelia are marginalized. In a literal sense Pecola grows into a mad and abused figure, but could she stand for Morrison's novel in the sense that a written narrative culture built on soliloquy is not the soil in which a character like Pecola, and a novel as Morrison imagined *The Bluest Eye* could be, can take root and grow?

### TRAPPED IN SOLILOQUY

I think that through her struggle to depict Pecola, Morrison begins to discover the limitations of "soliloquy narrative." In its initial publication, *The Bluest Eye* was "dismissed, trivialized, and misread" ("Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison 1994a, 216) not just because it treated a subject matter that others did not want to recognize (as those in the book dismiss and refuse to recognize Pecola), but also because the book was Morrison's first attempt to "break the back of words," to turn written narrative that values soliloquy and interiority into written narrative that captures the unstable location of meaning between characters. Indeed, Pecola ends the book trapped in her own tortured consciousness, but this is figured as a mad conversation with a "friend" about her blue eyes (194-204). Similarly, Claudia does not end the book delivering a soliloquy, but rather by offering a sermon in the "we" voice. Morrison's choice to have two young girls, Claudia and Frieda, as a counterpoint to Pecola also speaks to her desire to locate meaning between figures. Of course, in Morrison's later works, primarily *Sula*,

*Beloved*, and *Love*, working out the precarious meaning that exists between two female figures is, arguably, the central aim.

In madness, Ophelia indirectly scatters blame for her abuse toward others, suggesting that the diseased community of Denmark is at fault: "There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me. We may call it herb of grace o' Sundays. O, you must wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died. They say 'a made a good end" (*Hamlet*, 4.5.179-84). Here, fennel suggests flattery, columbines thanklessness, rue repentance, and daisies dissembling.<sup>22</sup> Ophelia's imagery repeatedly mixes together four notions: her father's buried body, her own deflowering, accusations toward others, and (for Ophelia as for Morrison's Claudia) self-accusation. As Pecola is infected with self-hatred, expressed through flower imagery when she identifies with and rejects dandelions (Morrison 1994a, 47, 51), so Ophelia is identified with natural images to suggest her own misplaced culpability in her demise: "There's rue for you and here's some for me." Natural images also suggest memory's confused role in this process and, ironically, unnatural/incestuous relationships for Ophelia and Pecola. The narrative choice of an older Claudia interpreting Pecola's madness at the close of *The Bluest Eye* parallels Laertes' interpretations of Ophelia's remarks. Claudia documents Pecola's madness, fitting thought and remembrance to the abuse she has suffered, as Laertes and others do for Ophelia (*Hamlet*, 4.5.176-77). Pecola's final dialogue about her blue eyes with an imagined other attempts to turn "thoughts and affliction, passion, hell itself" to "favor and prettiness," as Laertes describes Ophelia's madness (4.5.186-87).

The irony is that Pecola, desperate and isolated, admires that which destroys her, and like Ophelia, gains an assertive voice only when she is trapped in her own madness. For Morrison and Shakespeare, the initial silencing of both characters is crucial to their destruction. Both figures break their silence with a madness that exposes their suffering to others (though Pecola is exposed to readers only), while at the same moment the madness closes them off from a human exchange that could help them to heal. In this respect, both characters are trapped in soliloquy. Ophelia resorts to songs, and Pecola to an imagined other. In both cases, their "nothing is more than matter" (*Hamlet*, 4.5.173): meaning is placed between Ophelia and others, and again, between the character of Pecola and the reader. Yet this meaning cannot effect healing or much understanding, as it primarily transmits grief and confusion. Pecola's madness, presented as a conversation, suggests both the possibilities in

oral culture for a healing exchange and the impossibility of such an exchange taking place in this instance, in explicit contrast with the healing that seems to take place among Beloved, Sethe, and Denver (Morrison 1994a, 214-17).

Ophelia literally drowns, as witnessed by Gertrude. In *The Bluest Eye*, Mrs. MacTeer symbolically stabs Pecola with a "fussing soliloquy" (Morrison 1994a, 24) for drinking too much milk, which presumably is Pecola's way of making herself white. As Mrs. MacTeer takes Pecola into the bathroom following her first menstruation, Claudia asks, "You think she is going to drown her?" (31). Pauline, Pecola's mother, is also connected to drowning through her club foot. She has "a way of lifting the bad foot as though she were extracting it from little whirlpools that threatened to pull it under" (110). Pecola's part as a seed suffocating in bad soil reinforces the novel's drowning imagery. Gertrude reports in detail Ophelia's drowning, yet strangely takes no action as she watches her die (*Hamlet*, 4.7.165-82), and her position as passive witness to Ophelia's death connects Gertrude to the audience, implicating us in the drowning. Similarly, Morrison, discussing *The Bluest Eye's* opening passage, writes: "If the conspiracy that the opening words announce is entered into by the reader, then the book can be seen to open with its close: a speculation on the disruption of 'nature' as being a social disruption with tragic individual consequences in which the reader, as part of the population of the text, is implicated" ("Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison 1994a, 214). Shakespeare, of course, sometimes marks tragic destruction with disruptions in nature, and relates those in madness to nature; thus Ophelia (like Lear in madness) is draped in nature, "fantastic garlands" that signal her desperation. Ophelia's drowning death is also marked by song:

She chanted snatches of old lauds,  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and indued  
Unto that element.

We do not hear these songs because the scene is, again, narrated through Gertrude (4.7.176-79). Likewise, our last look at Pecola is mediated through the now-mature voice of Claudia, who now understands her own implication in Pecola's destruction.

Both Morrison and Shakespeare foreground a passive audience's perspective toward death so that we, like Gertrude, are as fascinated by the details of these two drownings. It is clear here and in Morrison's later works, especially *Jazz*, that she is acutely aware of what it means

to write what might be termed a "killing novel," as Shakespeare, arguably, was aware of his implication in writing a "killing play." As Sigurd Burkhardt writes about Shakespeare, "A tragedy — to define it very simply — is a *killing poem*; it is designed toward the end of bringing a man to some sort of destruction. And the killer is, quite literally, the poet; it is he, and no one else, who devises the deadly plot; it is he, and no one else, who must in some sense accept responsibility for it" (1968, 15). Burkhardt suggests further that a writer of such works asks, "What am I doing when I invent, or reinvent, a mechanism designed to bring about a man's destruction. In the name of what, for the sake of what, do I do this? And even assuming the necessity of doing it, how well do I do it?" (16). Morrison's works repeatedly engage similar questions, and in *The Bluest Eye*, the narrator is the focal figure for wrestling with these issues. In this sense, the writer does not just present death but also accepts responsibility for it, while still questioning its larger meaning, the "why" of Pecola's destruction that must follow an analysis of the "how" (Morrison 1994a, 7). So while *The Bluest Eye* questions the hierarchal, individualistic, and male hero-centered thrust of Shakespearean tragedy, at the same time, like those plays, the novel also interrogates the causes of the main character's destruction.

A crucial difference is that while Shakespeare's play implicates the audience by indirection, Claudia directly indicts the audience. In this sense, *The Bluest Eye* comments upon Shakespearean tragedy, and Morrison's novel offers a more powerful critique than *Hamlet* does of a society that destroys women. Indeed, in some respects *The Bluest Eye* is less about the character destroyed and more about the society and culture that permits and encourages such violence, especially as others erect their identity upon such vulnerable figures, as Claudia's final indictment makes clear. Similarly, though any answer is highly speculative, critics have asked whether or not Shakespeare created Ophelia to make Hamlet look stronger (Showalter 1994, 220).<sup>23</sup> Reconsidering *Hamlet* from the perspective of *The Bluest Eye*, we can ask to what degree Hamlet's identity, in part, is built upon Ophelia's demise. Hamlet declares his name, "This is I, Hamlet, the Dane" (*Hamlet*, 5.1.244-245), at her funeral, as though from that point on, when he has no more soliloquies, he knows who he is and what he must do. Morrison points the finger more directly at both herself as a writer and at the reader: "We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength" (Morrison 1994a, 205). Hamlet's powerful remark in his first soliloquy — "frailty thy name is woman" — is, in part, a projection of his own frailty and

insecurity. Morrison makes it clear that our strength reveals itself as weakness to the extent that it participates in abusing Pecola and invites us to consider how writing about Pecola may itself be a problematic appropriation. Both Ophelia and Pecola offer others the possibility of a "comfortable evil to prevent [our] knowing what we could not bear to know" (180). Morrison's novel shows what Shakespeare's play hints: we hide from our limitations and mask our insecurities by abusing others. This is a concern that will receive more attention when in *Beloved*, Morrison examines racism in the context of antebellum slavery.

### FROM SOLILOQUY TO SONG

While some of Morrison's female characters, especially Pecola, resemble Shakespeare's heroines as they struggle with forces beyond their control, *The Bluest Eye* also suggests a possible solution to Pecola's madness, a solution that gestures toward Morrison's development as a writer and that helps us begin to understand how song and the influence of African American culture substantially differentiate her work from Shakespearean tragedy. In *The Bluest Eye*, we see the search for an as yet unrealized idiom that will transform a character's isolation and unexpressed suffering into a song that might make life coherent by reconnecting that character to others. Claudia describes her mother thus:

My mother's fussing soliloquies always irritated and depressed us. They were interminable, insulting, and although indirect (Mama never named anybody, just talked about folks and *some* people) extremely painful in their thrust. She would go on like that for hours, connecting one offense to another until all of the things that chagrined her were spewed out. Then, having told everybody and everything off, she would burst into song and sing the rest of the day. But it was such a long time before the singing part came. In the meantime, our stomachs jellying and our necks burning, we listened, avoided each other's eyes, and picked toe jam or whatever. (Morrison 1994a, 24)

In this passage, an evolution that begins with soliloquy, perfected as a form of private complaint by Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, and ends in song is analogous to both Morrison's own development as a writer and the possible salvation of her characters in some of her later works. *The Bluest Eye* is, on one level, a private complaint with an extremely painful thrust, a soliloquy that, similar to Hamlet's own vacillation between self-attack and his attacks on others, by turns indicts both the

audience and the writer.<sup>24</sup> Like Shakespearean soliloquy delivered to an audience in the theater, these private complaints are also public utterances; they are concerned with moving away from isolation and locating meaning between an individual and an audience.

The novel ends with Claudia MacTeer's final accusation, in which she, like her mother, "told everybody and everything off." But *The Bluest Eye* is also searching for a song that heals the anger expressed through and the damage resulting from acts of violent, frustrated, or misdirected love: "Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all the grief out of the words and left me with the conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (Morrison 1994a, 24).<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Pecola drowns in madness at the end of the novel, but in the first chapter, after Claudia's mother discovers that Pecola has had her first menstruation and fills a tub to wash both her and her stained clothes, the tension is relieved when "The water gushed, and over its gushing we could here the music of my mother's laughter" (32). The shock of Pecola's first period and the isolation and pain that it brings her is perhaps cured by musical laughter, even while Claudia's description suggests the drowning and emotional death Pecola will eventually experience.

Later in the novel, when describing Cholly, Pecola's father, Morrison writes:

The pieces of Cholly's life could become coherent only in the head of a musician. Only those who talk their talk through the gold curved metal, or in the touch of black and white rectangles and taut skins and strings echoing from wooden corridors, could give true form to his life. Only they would know how to connect the heart of a red watermelon to the asafetida bag to the muscadine to the flashlight on his behind to the fists of money to the lemonade in a Mason jar to a man called Blue and come up with what all of that meant in joy, in pain, in anger, in love, and give it its final and pervading ache of freedom. (Morrison 1994a, 159)

The pieces of Cholly's life are best understood in a song that connects his joy and his pain. But in the overt acknowledgment that his life "could *only* become coherent in the head of a musician" and the implicit recognition that a novel cannot describe Cholly's life, Morrison paradoxically does make that life more coherent to readers. It is as though by recognizing what a novel cannot do, one can begin to do it. Morrison describes the writing of *The Bluest Eye* with a similar paradox, saying it was the effort to "shape a silence while breaking it"

("Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison 1994a, 215). Pecola, like Ophelia, is left trapped in a madness in which she speaks only to herself — trapped, if you will, in a mad soliloquy that nonetheless attempts to establish meaning between herself and another. If characters can be saved in Morrison's works, however, perhaps their private anger and pain must be shaped into the prose equivalent of music, a personal song that leads to an exchange with others without diminishment of a character's private complaint. Meaning that was trapped within is remade between characters as Morrison explores that complex, fragile, intersubjective space that, often enough, we encounter as we experience music.

Just as Cholly's life "could only become coherent in the head of a musician," Pauline listens in church to "a woman named Ivy who seemed to hold in her mouth all the sounds of Pauline's soul. Standing apart from the choir, Ivy sang the dark sweetness that Pauline could not name, she sang the death-defying death Pauline yearned for" (Morrison 1994a, 115). Here song functions according to the paradox familiar from soliloquy. At the same moment that it connects Pauline to Ivy, putting meaning between them, that connection in Pauline's mind reinforces her self-absorption; indeed, she becomes something like an isolated, self-absorbed tragic hero: "the death defying death Pauline yearned for." The song that Cholly sings to Pauline when they first meet is different. It is described as "a kind of city-street music where laughter belies anxiety, and joy is short and straight as the blade of a pocketknife" (114-15). Cholly's blues break through Pauline's soliloquy-like isolation and become the basis for their attraction to one another. In these different senses of song, Morrison's works are not like those of Joyce or Shakespeare, but "like something that has probably only been fully expressed perhaps in music, or in some other culture-gen that survives almost in isolation because the community manages to hold onto it" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 152). The blues are as complex as one of Morrison's novels; this music inspires her project because the blues, like her novels, self-consciously mediates between Western and African aesthetics.<sup>26</sup> Morrison's novels explore the communal, collective aspects of human experience that come from the blues and other forms of African American music, and that grow from Africa, where music is crucial to developing a plural sense of what it means to be human. As Christopher Smalls writes, "the reciprocal relationship between individual and community [in African culture] finds expression in a system of rites and passage; nature may bring a child into the world but only the community can make him fully human" (1987, 20). Smalls, Thompson, and others have shown how music and

art connect an individual to both family and community in many African cultures, and how these values are retained in African American culture.<sup>27</sup> Here, the lack of music and art in Pecola's experience speaks to her lack of connection to others, though Morrison's writing also reaches toward these communal African undercurrents even while it examines the cost of their loss.

As I noted previously, *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's first step in her efforts to transform soliloquy into song, to make private consciousness public in a realm where understanding and resolution reside between characters rather than within a character. This is a movement similarly characterized by a jazz solo, in which an individual musician partially separates from the other musicians and in some instances works through a private vision, a vision that can grow from a dialogue with the other musicians, before rejoining the others. Indeed, like Morrison's novels, in some of its manifestations jazz engages with but also breaks from Western forms as it seeks to reconstitute a new communal idiom, an idiom that, again, has African roots. Morrison more fully realizes what both Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison also sought. This communal idiom insists that substantial meaning must lie between individuals instead of within a single figure, and must be musical, in many senses of the word. All three writers are skilled at rendering particular versions of the highly interior modern or postmodern voice. But they are not satisfied with what is, in effect, the novel as an heir to Shakespearean soliloquy that risks solipsism.

Of course, in a live musical performance Monk and Coltrane, for example, could play with both a private sense of self (to the extent a solo can engage this) and a communal or a plural sense of the self in terms of playing *with* others, and at the same time mix these things, opening up new spaces in the transitions between them. Morrison's narratives are also concerned with meaning as it shifts between private and communal spaces, in how these realms mix and how we move between them. As she writes of *The Bluest Eye*, "It is a secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us. The conspiracy is both held and withheld, exposed and sustained. In some sense it was precisely what the act of writing the book was: the public exposure of a private confidence" ("Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison 1994a, 213). This, in effect, describes the paradox of a stage soliloquy, which similarly invites the audience into a conspiracy with the speaker as a private confidence is offered but at the same time withheld from the other characters.<sup>28</sup> In both, there is great concern with how expression that requires a degree of detachment from others must also be located

between actor and audience, or between a figure in a novel and a reader.

James Baldwin's remark, "Love takes off the masks we fear we cannot live without, and know we cannot live within" (Baldwin 1962, 128), describes the confessional and conflicted nature of American culture, but alludes to similar problems that occur when African American culture (or folk cultures in general) are transferred to print. A similar powerfully confessional urge, layered with the paradox that the confession also desires to remain private, is a consistent quality of Shakespeare's soliloquies. The introductory primer material on the first pages of *The Bluest Eye* mocks the Western master narrative. It makes sense that the italicized first words of *The Bluest Eye* present a counter-narrative that, as Morrison describes, introduces an "intimacy" between reader and the subject matter that her future work will construct, over and over again in a variety of ways.

Similar to the music of John Coltrane, revising the high modern interior voice of the novel toward a more plural sense for what it means to be human involves offering a critique of Western culture.<sup>29</sup> A jazz solo can be a response to, among other things, the isolation that has increasingly characterized some forms of Western art and culture. This isolation exists in one strain of the development of the novel from the Renaissance onward. Hamlet's soliloquies via Montaigne's essays and the growing skepticism inherent in these types of expression signal one beginning of Cartesian separation, while the jazz solo offers an attempt to engage and heal this separation, the chance for an individual's reconciliation to community by locating meaning squarely between the two.<sup>30</sup> Mrs. MacTeer's "blues and greens" may be the "only" way to grasp Cholly's life and struggle (Morrison 1994a, 159), though by playing with images and ideas from jazz *The Bluest Eye* offers a fuller version of Cholly's life than could be realized otherwise. Yet no soliloquy in *The Bluest Eye* is transformed into song in a manner that allows the character to rejoin a community or reconnect to others and be healed. Thus Claudia, to the extent that she is related to the narrative voice that knows Cholly's life needs song, feels culpable for Pecola's destruction at the book's close, though she does have a plural sense of this destruction, accusing us all. But Claudia also has the example of her mother's ability to move from soliloquy to song.

An interpreter of *The Bluest Eye* is trapped in a culpability similar to that of the book's narrator and resembling Soaphead's dilemma: I read greedily and understand selectively (Morrison 1994a, 169), developing what eloquence I might have upon the ruined subject of the work,

Pecola, or upon the misunderstood work itself, as Morrison suggests ("Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison 1994a, 169, 209). Like Soaphead, who misses his implication in her destruction, my writing about (and Morrison's writing of) Pecola implicates the writer and the reading audience regardless of how we came to those attitudes and behaviors, regardless of whether the ideas and attitudes that insist on racist hierarchies are a product of Western culture. Perhaps reading Pecola partially as Ophelia and seeing *The Bluest Eye* as an attempt to modify the novel tradition that grows from Hamlet's soliloquies risks obliterating the cultural differences that Morrison herself remarks are the key to the novel ("Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison 1994a, 215). Yet in the process of reading the novel in terms of various images and ideas from Shakespeare, appropriating it in this respect, we can see more clearly how elements of African American music and vernacular culture might change the novel, powering Morrison's critique of Western culture.<sup>31</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Soaphead's judgmental order, linked as it is to Dante, exposes the madness of an order that privileges white, Western society. But the narrator's indictment of all reveals the paradox Morrison works within: in the process of critiquing racist judgment, the writer works with a form, the novel, that evolved primarily in Western society, as she herself has acknowledged in "Rootedness" (Morrison 1984b, 340). In this sense, Morrison's task is either to set up a new order upon which to base judgment, a new kind of "fussing soliloquy" (to the extent that the novel insists on echoing soliloquy) that moves us toward more objective judgment, or have the novel evolve into something that supersedes judgment, attempting to break down hierarchies without erecting pernicious new distinctions in their place. This new order is based on song that at once displays the particularities of a specific culture while making gestures that locate meaning between different cultures, where such meaning must reside in any art that can speak to our current need to understand and work through, or better, work with cultural differences that divide us.

If *The Bluest Eye* is implicated in the destruction of the character it presents, Morrison's novel also suggests a way out through soliloquies that evolve into spontaneous music, a song that does not so much judge as present the "greens and blues" of experience, making a character's pain "sweet" so that he or she might refrain from inflicting that pain on others. Yet this is only suggested in *The Bluest Eye*, a book in which

isolation and soliloquy defeat song. In *Song of Solomon* the evolution from soliloquy and tragedy to song and community is more completely, though not entirely, achieved. In the meantime, Pecola remains, perhaps like the singing Ophelia, trapped with imaginary blue eyes but no blues, no music, or a written approximation of music, to express her predicament in a manner where such writing breaks the back of her mad soliloquy, Pecola's final conversation with an imagined other (Morrison 1994a, 193-204).<sup>32</sup> This conversation shows Pecola's need to locate meaning between herself and another, but also highlights that she has no medium with which to do so. This moment in the novel, I suggest, is Morrison's admission that someone who has suffered like Pecola cannot be healed in this story because the book itself cannot express her madness in terms that can be shared with others in a manner that allows her to be heard, responded to, and loved.

Curiously, Soaphead Church is the only character in the novel who writes, yet he is also the least likely to remember Pecola, as though his writing is a way of forgetting, an evasion and rationalization of his pain and responsibility as surely as the letter he writes to God helps him to evade his part in her pain. *The Bluest Eye* turns on paradoxes about Morrison's position as a writer and her relationship to literary influences that are a form of "dominion and surrender," of confrontation in the effort to conquer problems and the admission that some problems cannot, at this point, be resolved (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 74-76). *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's first step in her effort to transform soliloquy into song, beginning as a critique of Western aesthetics that points to not only the inherent destructiveness of certain hierarchies and the problems with isolation, but also Morrison's growing sense that elements of African American music may offer a way out of such destruction. The need for an individual to find and speak to a larger communal element, and, just as important, to hear how that community responds, links Morrison's novels to Shakespearean drama, to the interchange between performer and audience, and to jazz and the blues, even as the novel explores the damaging isolation that may be one legacy of Hamlet's soliloquies.

As expressions founded in the isolation of soliloquy move toward the community of song, healing may be possible. Working through this process, Morrison has the rare ability to study how her own writing may be as much an evasion of what is needed as it could be a potential source of healing. A significant connection between Morrison and Shakespeare is that they share a similar awareness regarding the limits of their respective mediums, a similar sense that words might be both a

source of healing and a destructive evasion. This essay also offers as many opportunities for evasion as it does for what I hope may be significant understanding; it is an attempt to respond to the call of the novel in a manner that tries to be aware of the problematic dynamics of appropriation as interpretation. Morrison retains a sense of unease about the limits of her medium that critics of her work, regarding their own medium, would do well to imitate. As she remarks in an interview, for her this disturbance is connected to African American music and jazz:

We can tell it the way it is. We have come through the worst, and we are still here. I think about what black writers do as having a quality of hunger and disturbance that never ends. Classical music satisfies and closes. Black music does not do that. Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. There may be a long chord, but no final chord. And it agitates you. Spirituals agitate you, no matter what they are saying about how it is all going to be. There is something underneath them that is incomplete. There is always something else that you want from the music. I want my books to be like that — because I want that feeling of something held in reserve and the sense that there is more — that you can't have it all right now. (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 55)

What may be held in reserve in *The Bluest Eye* is a more developed sense of how the musical influences of African American culture can help us to reimagine the novel, of how healing and coherence based on music that agitates enables us to call forth our plural selves.

## NOTES

1. See also Lester (Lester 2000, 125-26).
2. One aspect of this journey frequently mentioned in interviews are Morrison's attempts to make the novel, much like African American music, a participatory medium between her and the reader: "I want to break away from certain assumptions that are inherent in the conception of the novel form to make a truly aural novel, in which there are so many places and spaces for the reader to participate . . . I try to provide every opportunity for that kind of stimulation, so that the narrative is only one part of what happens, in the same way as what happens when you're listening to music, what happens when you look at a painting" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 108-109). Terms such as "jazz" and "blues" need

to be approached with some care, since they resist classification. Smalls writes of African American music: "it is this persistently anarchistic resistance to classification of both the musicians and their music that is one of the enduring delights of Afro-American music; I have therefore no wish to tidy it up, but rather hope I can convey something of the anarchistic delight, which is, I am sure, part of the profoundly pluralistic inheritance that black people carry around with them still, not as a set of beliefs but as a style of thinking, feeling, perceiving — and of playing, listening, dancing" (Smalls 1987, 5). This pluralistic sense that resists classification could also describe Morrison's novels, their heteroglossic strength of centrifugal over centripetal forces.

3. Morrison writes, "This deliberate avoidance of literary references has become a firm if boring habit with me, not only because they lead to poses, not only because I refuse the credentials they bestow, but also because they are inappropriate to the kind of literature I wish to write, the aims of that literature, and the discipline of the specific culture that interests me" (Morrison 1984a, 387). She also remarks, in an interview, that "I may be influenced by what I read, but I am not aware of it" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 47). It is difficult to say the degree to which Morrison's novel consciously appropriates Shakespeare. Ophelia is mentioned in *The Bluest Eye* in a context that recalls Pecola, and I will argue there are significant connections between these two figures. C. L. Barber writes this of Shakespeare's relationship to social custom and his analysis of that relationship: "He did not need to discriminate consciously, in our way, underlying configurations which came to him with his themes and materials" (Barber 1959, 194-95). Morrison's "dead girl" (see note 9) certainly connects to an Ophelia archetype, but Morrison is not directly appropriating or rewriting Shakespeare, as, for example, Naylor does in *Mama Day*. In contrast, Walters argues that Morrison "appropriates the Persephone and Demeter myth to discuss the sexual and psychological victimization of women" (Walters 2007, 112-32) in *The Bluest Eye*.
4. In this sense, Morrison's relationship to Shakespeare is similar to Marianne Novy's description of women writers of the last forty or so years who engage Shakespeare: "all these novels engage with Shakespeare in a way that questions dominant cultural traditions' use of him" (Novy 1994, 164). Novy's focus here, though, is on contemporary women writers (Carter, Naylor, Gordimer, Smiley, Drabble) who more overtly allude to and rewrite Shakespeare.
5. "Critics of my work have often left something to be desired, in my mind, because they don't always evolve out of the culture, the world, the given quality out of which I write. Other kinds of structures are

imposed on my works, and therefore they are either praised or dismissed on the basis of something I have no interest in whatever, which is writing a novel according to some structure that comes out of a different culture" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 151).

6. Juvan also writes, "Beside this, no text is primary and original because it is always a mosaic of citations" (Juvan 2008, 3). As Zora Neale Hurston remarked in *Sanctified Church*, "The most ardent admirer of the great Shakespeare cannot claim first source even for him. It is his treatment of the borrowed material" (Hurston 1981, 58).
7. Desmet usefully sums up Bakhtin's relationship to the other pioneering writers regarding intertextuality: "Bakhtin's concept of dialogism contains within it the paradoxical intersection between conflict and community that was implicit in Rich's reworking of Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' and in Burke's rhetoric of identification." In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin writes that "The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object" (Bakhtin 1981, 279). The larger political import of this dialogic interaction for an African American text like *The Bluest Eye* is nicely summarized by Dyson: "The cultures of white and black America are intimately joined, forged into a sometimes reluctant symbiosis that mocks the rigid lines of language and identity that set them apart. But the complexity at the heart of the many cultures that make up the black diaspora is often ignored in favor of a narrow vision of racial identity . . . In truth, the hybrid textures of the American grain are the most powerful argument for relinquishing belief in American orthodoxies and celebrating the edifying impurity behind democratic experiments in culture and identity" (1996, 124).
8. Juvan quotes Baxandall, who describes the rich variety of this relationship as it focuses more on the receiving work's actions: "If we think of Y rather than X as the agent, the vocabulary is much richer and more attractively diversified: draw on, resort to, avail oneself of, appropriate from, have recourse to, adapt, misunderstand . . . differentiate oneself from, assimilate oneself to . . . copy, address, paraphrase, absorb, make a variation on, revive, continue, remodel, ape, emulate, travesty, parody . . . subvert, perpetuate, reduce, promote, respond to, transform, tackle . . . Most of these relations cannot be stated the other way around — in terms of X acting on Y rather than Y acting on X" (Baxandall 1985, 83 as quoted in Juvan 2008, 5).
9. Of course, if we suggest that these women must die in order for some characters to grow, we can also say that Morrison's project has been to rescue "the dead girl." This subject comes up a number of times in her

conversation with Gloria Naylor (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 198-199, 208), and Morrison concludes with this remark that reinforces the necessity of locating meaning between herself and Naylor: "It was a conversation. I can tell, because I said something I didn't know I knew. About the 'dead girl.' That bit by bit I had been rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention. Her fingernails may be in the first book; face and legs, perhaps, the second time. Little by little bringing her back into living life" (217). Based on this description, *Beloved* is also such a figure.

10. One could argue that Nel has this recognition not after she meets Eva years later, but after Sula's funeral. Most assume the book ends in the present (1965), but it is difficult to tell when the last moment of the book takes place; whether, after the flashback to Sula's funeral in 1940 after Nel leaves Eva, the narrative returns to the present with the paragraph that begins "Sadly, heavily . . ." (Morrison 1982a, 173).
11. It is not clear that Ophelia is sexually assaulted, but evidence from her songs suggests her loss of virginity and possible victimization by assault: "By Gis and by Saint Charity, / Alack, and fie for shame! / Young men will do't if they come to't. / By cock, they are to blame. / Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me, / You promised me to wed'" (*Hamlet*, 4.5.58-63).
12. See Gates ("Both Sides Now," Gates 2003, 31), Richard Wright ("The Outsider," Wright 1953, 119), and John Wideman ("Architectonics," Wideman 1990, 43). Stephen Greenblatt writes that "Shakespeare was a master of double consciousness. He was a man who spent much of his money on a coat of arms but who mocked the pretentiousness of such a claim; a man who invested in real estate but who ridiculed in *Hamlet* precisely such an entrepreneur as he himself was; a man who spent his life and his deepest energies on the theater but who laughed at the theater and regretted making himself a show. Though Shakespeare seems to have recycled every word he ever encountered, every person he ever met, every experience he ever had — it is difficult otherwise to explain the enormous richness of his work — he contrived at the same time to hide himself from view, to ward off vulnerability, to forswear intimacy" (Greenblatt 2004, 155).
13. Morrison discusses how an Africanist presence functions in works by white authors in *Playing in the Dark*, especially in the third chapter (Morrison, 1993b).
14. Benjamin writes: "What differentiates the novel from all other forms of literature — the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella — is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience — his own and that reported by others.

And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounselled, and cannot counsel others" (Benjamin 1999, 87). Part of Morrison's project is to refute Benjamin's view.

15. Duvall argues that Soaphead Church has the ability to be self-critical of his relationship to Western culture, quoting a section of the letter to God in which Soaphead states that those of African descent took on the worst qualities of whites (Duvall 1997, 245). But this seems to be more a form of self-hatred manifested as praise of white culture by Soaphead, since he is implicitly arguing that blacks failed to imitate what he would see as the positive aspects of Western culture.
16. See Fuston for a discussion of how hierarchy is broken down in *Beloved* (Fuston 2002, 471). Sanders, in her extensive study of contemporary appropriations of Shakespeare by female novelists, writes, "A linking theme in all the chapters in this study is the refusal and positive deconstruction of moral and literary absolutes by these woman writers" (Sanders 2001, 11).
17. It is no surprise that in Morrison's works, figures who lack mothers or strong mother figures nearly always struggle. Pilate in *Song of Solomon* is an exception, but perhaps the short story "Recitatif" best sums up the difficulties such characters can experience. Of course, the potential damage that living mothers can cause is also one of Morrison's chief subjects.
18. See Erickson's discussion of various contemporary writers and visual artists who interpret *Othello* as a racist text (Erickson 2007, 103-49).
19. See Tirrell's argument that at the end of *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia is a "first person justified" narrator who "would make self-conscious use of these methods of justification without giving up responsibility for the tale and without giving up the 'truth in timber' of the unjustified vision" (Tirrell 1997, 19). In other words, Tirrell is more certain than I am of the narrator's ability to render judgment at the close of the novel.
20. Any case for incest in *Hamlet* remains tenuous. Polonius concedes his "jealousy" toward Hamlet's sexual desire ("I feared he did but trifle / And meant to wrack thee; but bestrew my jealousy" [2.1.112-13]), and Ophelia's references in madness to Polonius' dead body are tinged with phallic images: "He never will come again. His beard was as white as snow, / All flaxen was his poll" [4.5.193-94]). Her most direct references to sexuality, though, seem to be aimed at Hamlet (see note 11).

21. See Gillian 2002 for how *The Bluest Eye* also indicts American culture through a number of subtle, historically specific references and images.
22. See Lyons 1977 for an examination of the iconography associated with Ophelia, and Neely 2004 for a discussion of Ophelia's madness in the context of early modern understandings of such behavior.
23. Showalter studies how Ophelia has been appropriated post Hamlet; she writes that "(w)hile all these approaches have much to recommend them, each also presents critical problems. To liberate Ophelia from the text, or to make her its tragic center, is to reappropriate her for our own ends; to dissolve her into female symbolism of absence is to endorse our own marginality; to make her Hamlet's *anima* is to reduce her to a metaphor of male experience" (Showalter 1994, 223). Yet by self-consciously studying the history of her representation, the problematic ideologies behind those representations can begin to be understood, even as Showalter strives to understand the limits of her perspective. Her comments make me think about the problem of this essay — in what ways I appropriate Ophelia and Pecola for ideological purposes. Yet one hopes, when writing about Morrison's work, that a "degree of critical humility in an age of critical hubris can be our greatest strength" (238).
24. For another view of *The Bluest Eye* as a form of self-critique, see Duvall 1997. Morrison describes the isolation she felt when writing *The Bluest Eye* (Taylor-Guthrie 1984, 44-45), suggesting aspects of a soliloquy in the creative process.
25. "Sweet" is a loaded term in the *The Bluest Eye* and in many of Morrison's novels, since it connects to a pattern of references to sugar and also allusions to its production by slaves.
26. Houston Baker writes that "the task of adequately describing the blues is equivalent to the labor of describing a world class athlete's awesome gymnastics" (Baker 1986, 4).
27. As Webber writes, "[a]s it [African music] flowed and deepened through its new land it both adapted to the contours of the American landscape and reshaped each bank it touched. It never lost its African undercurrents" (Webber 1978, 60).
28. In the introduction to *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, Taylor-Guthrie writes that one aspect of African American writing consistently identified by Morrison is "a participatory quality between a book and reader" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, x). As noted, Morrison frequently refers to this in interviews; much has been written, furthermore, about African American literature in terms of call and response. See especially *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* (Gates,

- 1990). Morrison's most thorough comments on the contrast between private and communal locations of meaning are in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," where she writes: "If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams" (Morrison 1984b, 344).
29. For one view of how Coltrane's music can function as a critique of received ideas, see MacDonald 1995.
  30. For a description of flexible meanings located between Morrison and her readers, see Martha Cutter's analysis of how the intertextuality of *Beloved* and *Jazz* effects a bridge between the novels that encourages our readings to remain open-ended (Cutter 2000).
  31. The power of the vernacular culture is summed up by Wideman: "In spite of and because of its marginal status, a powerful, indigenous vernacular tradition has survived, not unbroken, but unbowed, a magnet, a focused energy, something with its own logic, rules, integrity connecting current developments to the past. An articulate, syncretizing force our best artists have drawn upon, a force sustaining both individual talent and tradition" (Wideman 1990, 43).
  32. Holloway writes, "If language and speech do offer retribution and salvation, then Pecola's silence indicates the hopelessness of the child" (Holloway 1994, 210).

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# Introduction

**MATT KOZUSKO, URSINUS COLLEGE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

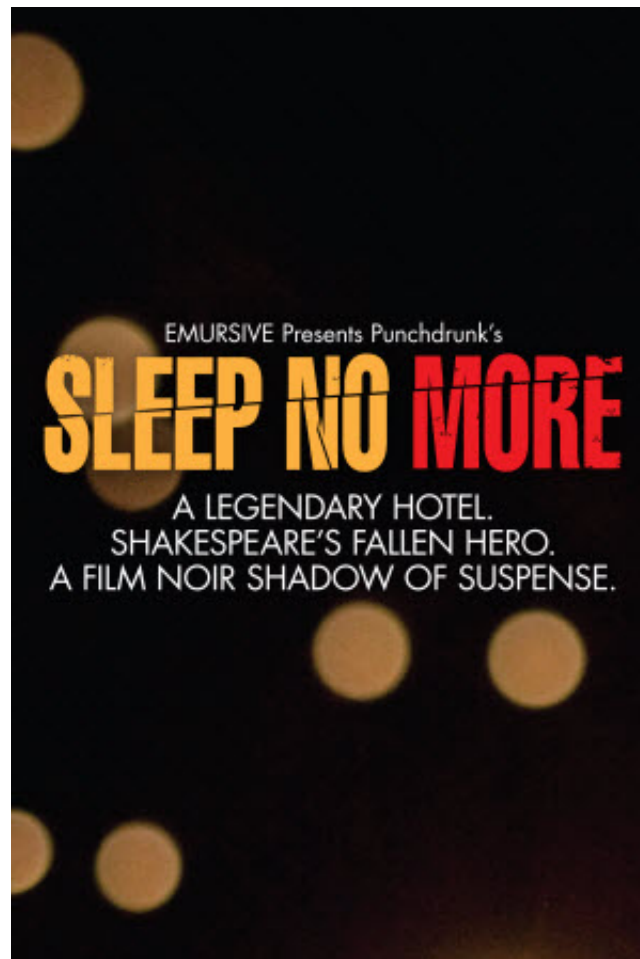
This introduction to the cluster of essays analyzing and assessing *Sleep No More* as theatrical experience focuses on the centrality of place to the New York production.

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*This short promotional video suggests SNM's mood and atmosphere.*

Punchdrunk first staged *Sleep No More* in London in 2003, and a second production

was mounted in 2009 in Brookline, Mass., where it ran for three months. The current iteration opened in New York City in March of 2011 and has been extended indefinitely. Whether it's fair to refer to these distinct productions by the same name isn't quite clear; while the performance principles and the general subject matter have carried over, the cast, the script, and of course the venue itself have changed from iteration to iteration. Site is especially important to Punchdrunk's work — as Artistic Director Felix Barrett has repeatedly noted, "it's the space that builds the show" ("Felix Barrett" 2007).<sup>1</sup> But to say that *Sleep No More* is site specific is merely to touch on the matter, since it might be argued that the site *is* the performance. On my first visit to *SNM*, I spent half an hour exploring the set before I happened upon a cast member. Because performers follow a carefully planned and timed circuit as they enact the storyline in three cycles during the course of each night's performance, a visitor could, conceivably, see *SNM* without ever encountering an actor.



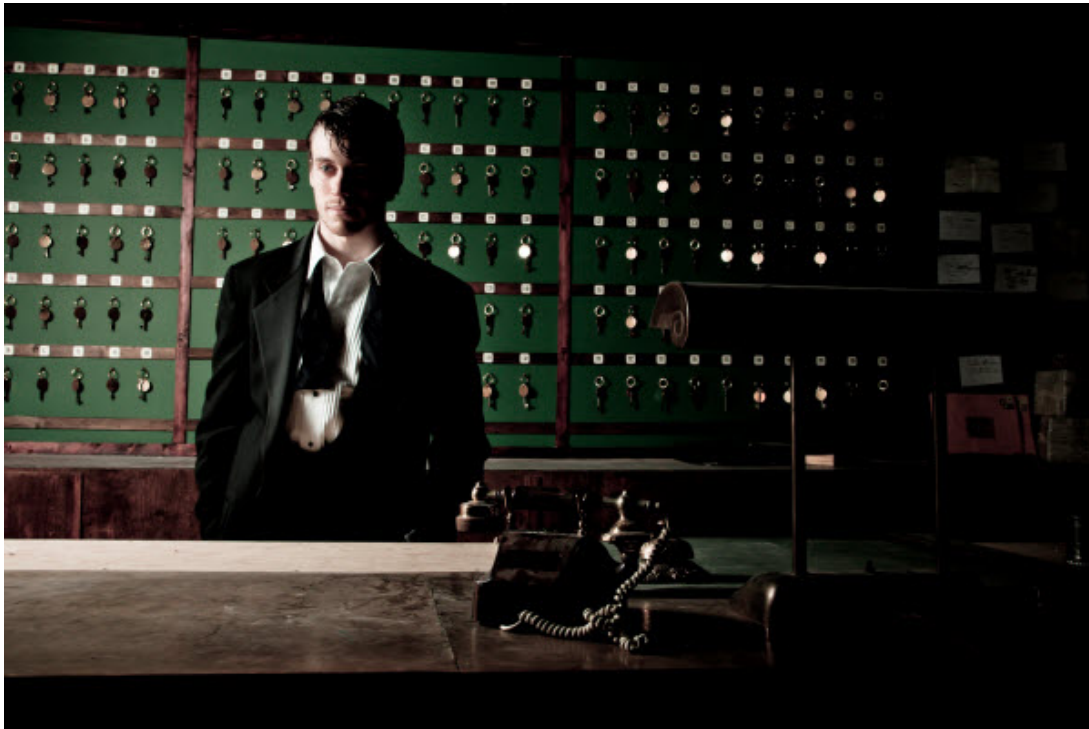
*Figure 1*

The relationship between the performance and the space it inhabits also involves the surrounding community, beginning with the building's recent history as a venue. As part of the widespread and often elaborate marketing initiative surrounding *Sleep No*

*More*, the company has developed an alternative history of the location as a luxury hotel that was built in 1939 but closed almost immediately, on the eve of World War II — and this history, which is central to the project's psychological geography and *mise en scène*, circulates well beyond the company's immediate web presence and promotional material.<sup>2</sup>



*Figure 2*



*Figure 3*

The site's actual history is more fraught, at least in recent years. Beginning in the late 1990s, the building served as the central address in a decade-long run of mega-clubs that operated along West 27th street, before momentum wound down amidst a string of overdoses and deaths. The current popularity of *Sleep No More* recalls the building's past as a nightlife location with a full social and cultural profile, generated in part by cameo appearances, celebrity audience members, and references across popular media and television. The show is not merely theater or immersive theater; it is also a destination and a marker of social orientation, which highlights its specific relationship to cultural space and the cultural trends that have sustained it. Ticket sales have been so strong that a limited engagement has become semi-permanent, and the site is also developing a life of its own beyond the play. The McKittrick Hotel now routinely hosts holiday events — meals and parties — independent of the performance itself.

Adding to the production's presumably unanticipated (d)evolution into a kind of nightclub is an accidental resonance with New York City's frontrunner role in nightlife locations that celebrate and fetishize the recovered past. The world of the play, from the Manderley bar to the candy shop and taxidermist, is of a piece with the speakeasy aesthetic of bars like Little Branch and Death + Company, and with the entrenched hipster fascination with sleeve garters, mustachios, and apothecaries. Though hardly more predictable than its critique, this fascination is the hallmark of a generation whose patronage of *Sleep No More* has made it profitable.<sup>3</sup>



*Figure 4*



*Figure 5*

The production's engagement with the past reflects and performs a defining cultural interest and anxiety in which the past, imagined as a familiar, stable alternative to the present, turns out to be alien and frail. It is a past that is both recovered, in the sense that it is revisited in progress, but also recovered *as* past, marked already with the passage of time that has rendered it yellowed and dusty. Although we can realize the fantasy of returning to the past in *Sleep No More's* elaborate and exquisite reproduction, where we can explore it and exist in it, we cannot be fully present there: the distance between the spectators and the performers, as many of the essays here will argue, turns out to be unbridgeable. The production is populated by ghosts, either ours or theirs.



*Figure 6*

The site transforms the text of the play into a physical space, where it is further abstracted and remediated, construed in the production's material expressions of *Macbeth's* anxious psychologies: a sanitarium, specimen jars, patient charts, studies, and notes, all part of a world familiar from popular imagination (Hitchcock) but, as Glenn Ricci discusses in his contribution to this cluster, alien in its sounds and hues. As an appropriation, *Sleep No More* is fascinating for its vision, and for the confidence its designers have in the production as a reading of the play.



*Figure 7*

Paul Stacey, assistant director of the 2009 production, notes that "every line of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is embedded in the multiple languages — sound, light, design, and dance — of *Sleep No More*" (Stacey 2009). As Sophia Richardson and Lauren Shohet argue, issues of presence and absence in *Macbeth* register richly and variously in Punchdrunk's rendering, visible or implied in everything from masks to stage space to the souvenir program's binding and margins.

As a theater experience, however, *Sleep No More* is notable more for its immersive design and for its increasing prominence as an event that transcends theater: *Macbeth*, as Alice Dailey and Tom Cartelli observe, turns out to be a Macguffin. Popular response to the production has inclined toward exuberance, if not veneration, and audiences tend to recognize a defining shift in *Sleep No More*'s "immersive" staging: standing, walking, and actively choosing rather than sitting passively, spectators are integrated with performance in a stage space that sometimes mingles different theater locations and sometimes dissolves altogether the boundaries that separate them: *locus*, *platea*, and audience space are the same. The specifically academic response, by contrast, tends to challenge or doubt the production's radical pretensions, especially its claims to immersive experience. As Pamela Rader and Sivan Grunfeld discuss, the elaborate, even ritualized process by which visitors are introduced to the space can be both over- and under-whelming. And as Colette Gordon, J. D. Oxblood, and Sean Bartley argue, the rules and boundaries that distinguish and separate performer from audience member and audience space from performance space, though disguised, are intact.



*Figure 8*

Visitors are free to explore, but only as far as stewards and locked doors — or the unwritten but understood conventions of theater itself — will allow. For popular audiences, the shift is fundamental and defining; for academics, it is a powerful gesture that turns out to be a pulled punch.

The essays gathered here offer several takes, sometimes overlapping but each unique, on the production and on the site, and on how audiences and performers inhabit both. Sivan Grunfeld and Pamela Rader frame the discussion with general overviews. Colette Gordon, J. D. Oxblood, and Thomas Cartelli explore and theorize the erotics of *Sleep No More*, with a focus on the one-on-one encounters that have come to define the experience among the production's more serious followers. Alice Dailey, Sean Bartley, Glenn Ricci, and Sophia Richardson and Lauren Shohet consider *Sleep No More's* various methods of producing and maintaining meaning within and across its source texts, from *Macbeth* to Hitchcock to popular music from the 1930s to today. In theorizing Punchdrunk's immersive intertext, these essays offer a range of critical responses to a theatrical phenomenon that is currently positioned to redefine what is possible for and expected by popular audiences.

## NOTES

1. Barrett has offered many similar observations. See for instance, a piece published at [broadway.com](http://broadway.com) in November 2011 (Barrett 2011).

2. The production's website offers a "hotel history": "completed in 1939, the McKittrick Hotel was intended to be New York City's finest and most decadent luxury hotel of its time. Six weeks before opening, and two days after the outbreak of World War II, the legendary hotel was condemned and left locked, permanently sealed from the public. Until now . . ." (<http://sleepnomorenyc.com/hotel.htm>) (<http://sleepnomorenyc.com/hotel.htm>). Elaborations are also available elsewhere; see, for instance, [scoutingny.com](http://www.scoutingny.com/?p=3816)'s photo shoot, which goes to great lengths to substantiate the pseudo-history: <http://www.scoutingny.com/?p=3816> (<http://www.scoutingny.com/?p=3816>) [accessed 23 December 2012].
3. See Mark Greif's 2010 *New York Magazine* article, "What Was the Hipster?" (Greif 2010); a monograph also appeared that year under the same title.

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## PERMISSIONS

Figure 1. *Sleep No More* poster. Press release info at <http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/> (<http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/>) (requires login).

Figure 3. © Thomas Kaine. Press release info at <http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/> (<http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/>) (requires login).

Figure 4. (l-r) Nicholas Bruder as Macbeth and Sophie Bortolussi as Lady Macbeth with audience member © Yaniv Schulman. Press release info at <http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/> (<http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/>) (requires login).

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Figure 6. Matthew Oaks (center) with audience members © Yaniv Schulman. Press release info at <http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/> (<http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/>) (requires login).

Figure 7. © Yaniv Schulman. Press release info at <http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/> (<http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/>) (requires login).

Figure 8. (l-r) Nicholas Bruder and Sophie Bortolussi with audience members © Robin Roemer Photography. Press release info at <http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/> (<http://www.oandmco.com/clients/sleep-no-more/>) (requires login).

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# Fractured Realities: A Receptive Review of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*

SIVAN GRUNFELD, CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK GRADUATE  
CENTER

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ABSTRACT | SINKING IN | WALKING A HAUNTED LANDSCAPE | PERFORMING  
BODIES | EMERGING | NOTES | REFERENCES

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## ABSTRACT

Branding itself as an immersive production, *Sleep No More* proposes a certain blurring of the distinction between audience and performers. On the surface, permission to explore the space is key, but the disconnection from performers prevents any sense of collaboration; an alternative sense of collaboration is available if the audience are understood as performers.

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They told me not to wear my glasses. A week before I attended Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* at the abandoned McKittrick Hotel in lower Manhattan, I received an email recommending that "given the choice," I should wear contacts.<sup>1</sup> I do not wear contacts, and my inability to comply with the directions led to a state of mixed anticipation and anxiety that came to define my entire experience with the deconstructed, immersive amalgamation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Alfred Hitchcock's film noir classic *Rebecca*. Punchdrunk is known for productions that draw the audience in, surrounding them with and occasionally weaving them into the performance, and I took their instructions seriously, spending quite some time wondering whether I

really needed to see. In the end, I left my glasses on, but, to make up for my disobedience, I arrived at the McKittrick Hotel determined to surrender to whatever experience awaited. However, that surrender proved more elusive than expected. Although I was certainly impressed by the craftsmanship of the show and emotionally sapped by its eerie, haunted atmosphere, at the end of the evening I left feeling curiously cold and detached, frustratingly unable, despite my willingness, to connect to the production. This may have been in part due to my aforementioned anxiety, but a theatrical relationship, especially one so closely involving the audience, should run both ways, and my inability fully to engage pointed not only to my shortcomings as spectator, but also to *Sleep No More's* limitations as theater. Despite its best efforts and much-touted reputation as *the* immersive experience, the show failed to create any sense of unity with the audience.

### SINKING IN

Of course, my personal lack of connection to *Sleep No More* in no way defines a collective audience response (immersive theater is, by its nature, a highly individual experience, and I have it on good authority that several people had far more intimate experiences than I did). For better or for worse, my attitude was heavily colored by my prior knowledge of Punchdrunk and their theatrical style; however, although I had a rudimentary idea of what I was getting into, my horizon of expectations did not prepare me for the stressful actuality of entering the McKittrick hotel or for the split in my brain as it strained to comprehend the experience on two levels at once. Half of my mind was busy analyzing the neighborhood, the bouncers, and the imposing double doors. The remainder of my consciousness was struggling (against a significant amount of internal resistance) simply to ease into the reality unfolding around me. To their credit, Punchdrunk must have anticipated that ceding one's control to an unfamiliar party would make it difficult to relax, because they structured the introduction to *Sleep No More* in tiers, providing a process that, to borrow Victor Turner's succinct description of ritual, theoretically "separated specified members of a group from everyday life, *placed them in a limbo* that was not any place they were in before, and not yet any place that they would be in, then *returned* them, changed in some way, to mundane life" (Turner 1988, 25, emphasis in original). The multi-step immersion eased my transition between the everyday life of a busy New York night and the (not quite mundane) life that existed only within the confines of the hotel.

My descent began with a separation, as, entering the murky lobby — flustered and off balance from having gotten lost three times on the way — I divested myself of outside trappings and became acclimatized to the sudden cessation of city sounds. This served to clear and prepare my brain for the journey to come. From the lobby, I was pointed in the direction of a dark stairway, at the top of which was a pitch-black maze, possibly the most frightening, yet importantly transitional segment of my experience. It was a truly terrifying, liminal conduit, a corridor of sensory deprivation that symbolically erased my identification with the reality I was leaving behind. Out of it I stumbled, blinking, into a cocoon-like, red velvet limbo, not yet the new world, merely another threshold where I was able to gather my thoughts and prepare, along with the rest of the unnerved audience members, for the final return into Punchdrunk's new world.

This return commenced as we were herded towards the elevators, where two rules were clearly laid out, both effectively scotching any attempt at a communal experience. First, everyone was to wear a white, Dottore-like mask, completely concealing all facial expression. Second, there was to be silence throughout the installation. We were encouraged, although not required, to experience the production individually. "Fortune favors the bold," the elevator operator grinned. Then he pushed us out, several on each floor, and rode away, leaving us firmly in the grip of a new reality, struggling, at least in my case, both to understand and to lose myself in a coherent narrative.

### WALKING A HAUNTED LANDSCAPE

Finding a cohesive story within the maelstrom of *Sleep No More* was impossible, yet a straightforward meaning was something that I craved. I knew that the production was based on a combination of *Macbeth* and *Rebecca*, so I simply assumed that somewhere a linear plot was unfolding. However, although I caught a few recognizable scenes (Macbeth post-murder in the bathtub and a beautifully lit slow motion banquet stick out in my mind), the nature of the production prevented me from following them in the generally accepted sequence. Eventually, I simply stopped trying and began to create my own narrative. I am quite sure that some of the significations I assigned were not the ones originally intended — why were there eggs everywhere? — but there was a certain amount of freedom in letting go of my accustomed assumption that someone else was going to explain what was going on and taking upon myself the responsibility for meaning and plot.

The idea that meaning resides not only in the production of a work, but also in its interpretation is well established; however, the *interaction* between the two sides of the theatrical relationship is a third and central component of interpretation, and it was frustratingly lacking from my experience.<sup>2</sup> Intriguing as it was, at first, to create a plot all on my own, it quickly grew tiresome not to be given any sort of direction. I was unable to surrender to the experience because I was unsure what the experience was supposed to be, and I grew increasingly uncomfortable, spending most of my two and a half hours at the McKittrick Hotel in a state of uneasiness shading into distress. In part, my anxiety had to do with my dislike of haunted houses, but the sense of disquiet was also profoundly influenced by Punchdrunk's oppositional manipulation of distance.

Distance, as an aesthetic concept, heavily affects spectator response. It is tied to an "awareness of fiction" that "fundamentally determines the viewer's experience" (Ben Chaim 1984, 73). Daphna Ben Chaim places that awareness on a spectrum. If a theatrical production employs a significant amount of distance, the spectator is more apt to intellectualize his or her experience, focusing on ideas and principles rather than getting lost in the fiction. If, conversely, the distance between the production and the spectator is reduced, the line between fiction and reality blurs, and the spectator is more likely to become engrossed in a moment-to-moment experience than to enjoy a broader perception of the production. In *Sleep No More*, Punchdrunk managed to hit both ends of the distance spectrum at once.

Physically, my distance from the production was almost non-existent. I could go anywhere (within designated boundaries), touch everything, take as much time as I needed. In essence, I could get lost in the new reality. My ability to do so was aided, in large part, by my reciprocal relationship to the gorgeous space surrounding me. "Any space we occupy," writes Dennis Kennedy, "deeply affects how we perceive events inside it. We are bodies which occupy space and are occupied by it" (Kennedy 2009, 133). Punchdrunk's space was exquisite, incorporating sight and sound, smell, and temperature. Each floor comprised a series of interconnected rooms, differently themed and decorated: a genteel parlor, a graveyard full of empty baby carriages that smelled of dirt, an abandoned psychiatric ward, a detective agency, Birnam Wood. I occupied them each wholeheartedly, allowing each of them, in turn, to seep into my psyche. The rooms were each mini-realities within the larger world of the production. There were multiple nooks and crannies to explore, and I took a trespasser's delight in

riffling through papers and opening jewelry boxes, getting to know the space. Interesting as each proved to be, however, eventually it was time to move on to the next reality. Curiously, I found myself incredibly reluctant to make the transitions. Most of the rooms were separated by heavy curtains, which I have always felt to be an unstable barrier, vulnerable, an indefinite threshold that refuses to define spaces clearly. Every time I came across one, I felt myself tense up for a jarring shift, uncertain of what was to come next and suddenly reminded that despite my seeming freedom, someone else was manipulating my experience.

These abrupt reminders that I was not in a real world increased my awareness of *Sleep No More* as fiction and compromised the semi-surrendered state into which I had been lulled in between transitions. I found myself assessing the production rather than living it, an experience that was echoed every time I came across one of the small pockets of actual performers. They reinforced the message that this world was *not* my world. As far as the characters (and possibly the actors) were concerned, I was not there, and I nervously began to believe them, echoing Herbert Blau's troubling assertion that "if the audience is not altogether an absence, it is by no means a reliable presence" (Blau 1990, 1). My own presence as a spectator felt increasingly doubtful. I was a ghost that Lady Macbeth brushed past on her predetermined route. *I* was the always pursued other, clearly not a body that actually belonged, and perhaps one that did not actually exist. My distance from the other performers felt unbridgeable, a jarring discrepancy with my lack of distance from the space. Negotiating the two extremes left me isolated, alienated, and confused. Was I meant to be immersed in the experience, or was I meant to maintain a critical distance? There was no clear answer, and my attempts at finding a balance were, frankly, exhausting. Eventually I lost interest in both the space and the performers and focused on the most intriguing part of the whole evening: the audience itself.

### PERFORMING BODIES

Intra-audience relationships are a crucial component of reception. In a traditional auditorium, despite individual interpretations it is easy to feel the crackle of collective response. In an immersive production such as *Sleep No More*, forging a community is slightly more difficult, but spectator connections are still highly influential on individual interpretations and experiences. As I wandered from abandoned restaurant to cluttered bedroom, I was increasingly aware of the spectators surrounding me, not least because of the enforced limitations

of our social interaction. The masks and the silence ensured that there was no easy discourse amongst us: no gauging facial expressions, no whispered critique to the person standing beside me, just a mass of blank bodies surrounding me. The possibility of a "homogenous group reaction" was remote; we were all following our own path (Coppieters 1981, 47).

And yet, there *was* a certain collective feeling to the crowd. Our lack of communication as an audience led to our loss of definition as one, and, incrementally, we became a part of the production. Not in the originally intended narrative, perhaps (nowhere in *Macbeth* is there a blank-faced mob), but in what was, to my mind, a far more effective and absorbing performance. The closest I came to feeling fully immersed in *Sleep No More* was following the banquet scene, when the previously empty floor of the sizable basement where it was held suddenly filled with moving trees. Birnam Wood was coming to Dunsinane, and I was instantly lost in the pine needles. No sooner had I regained my equilibrium when, out of nowhere an actor came whirling by us, bloodied and intent on escape. True to form, he completely ignored my scramble to get out of his way, but as I slowly turned away from his retreating back I was suddenly surrounded by a thousand streaming white masks, all determined to catch him and all completely silent. I froze as they rushed past me with a distinct and collective momentum; I forgot the actor, intent only on surrendering myself to the enticing energy of the audience following him.

Knowing that it was going to be an immersive production, I had gone into *Sleep No More* expecting a certain blurring of the distinction between audience and performers. I expected to be made welcome, drawn into a "collaborative mode of performance," wherein the idea is "to break down the distance between actor and audience and to give the spectator something more than a passive role in the theater exchange" (States 1985, 170). On the surface it seemed as if my permission to wander around the hotel was the key, but the disconnection that I felt from the performers negated any feeling of collaboration that tentatively developed. However, once I re-created my experience by interpreting the *audience* as performers, I was able to access an alternative collaborative mode. Because I too was a spectator, which meant that I too was a performer. The distinction between the two sides of the theatrical relationship was successfully blurred. It was with the audience, not the production, that I truly felt immersed.

## EMERGING

My emergence from *Sleep No More*, despite involving the same terrifying tunnel as the descent, was far less ritualistic than my journey in, as if, now that I had entered into their world, Punchdrunk could not be bothered with properly escorting me out again. This was a miscalculation on their part; I felt rushed and unwanted, alienated where I should have felt a lingering reluctance to emerge from my immersion in the dreamlike landscape. There was no lingering of any kind, reluctant or otherwise. On the street, I was immediately caught up in prosaic concerns such as the frigid temperature, the length of my journey home, and the suitcase I had to pack when I got there. If *Sleep No More* had fulfilled its promise of a completely immersive experience, these concerns would have been distant, fighting to reach me through a haze of visceral awe and defamiliarization. As it was, my conflicting experiences within the hotel left me feeling nothing. The production was skillfully put together, professional, and beautiful. But its beauty did not suffice to create a consistent connection with the audience. This inadequacy is not entirely Punchdrunk's fault. They were victims of the paradox of theater, which "reminds us somehow of the original unity even as it implicates us in the common experience of fracture" (Blau 1990, 10). Before, during, and after my experience at the McKittrick Hotel, I searched in vain for the unifying connection that I felt sure was lurking amidst its myriad realities. Despite my conscious efforts, however, I was unable to access that connection, and with my anticipation unfulfilled and my anxiety unappeased, I abandoned the search and resigned myself to my own fractured life.

## NOTES

1. Performance of *Sleep No More*, directed by Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle, a Punchdrunk production.
2. Iser 1978; see especially part four.

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### ABSTRACT

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A review of one spectator's experiences in the role of a silenced voyeur and an explorer of intricate installations, this essay reads *Sleep No More* as a "literary lite" phenomenon.

"An event" and "an experience." I would have to agree with these two succinct descriptions of Punchdrunk's extended production of *Sleep No More* at the McKittrick Hotel, which reminded me in a way of the final lines from the Eagles' eponymous song, "Hotel California" — "You can check out any time you like / but you can never leave" — more than it did the oft-referenced Manderley of *Rebecca*. One acquaintance suggested that I re-read *Macbeth* before going. True, the production's title originates from act 2, scene 2 of *Macbeth* when, after committing regicide, the eponymous murderer relays the bloody deed and his own horror to his wife: "Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murder sleep' — the innocent sleep" (*Macbeth*, 2.2.33-34; Shakespeare 1997). Just because the production gives a titular nod to the bard's work (as does Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, for instance), it is neither a contemporary post-mortem nor postmodern staging of *Macbeth*.

If you've read the reviews and scanned the internet for its textual buzz, then you know that *Sleep No More* is not your traditional theater-going experience. Confined (a choice word!) to five or six floors of an old

building or two, the spectators roam and prowl with their plague doctor-esque masks, choosing to investigate the rooms on any of the floors, follow "actors," and remain silent all the while. (We got busted for our utterances in the stairwell by one of the shadow-enforcers when I failed to understand my companion's finger-spelling through the mask.) To say the hallways and rooms are dimly lit would be an understatement. Hallways are marked only by candles in the corners to show the contours of your path, which was not as disorienting as it could have been (although a twenty year old on some kind of chemically altering substance might beg to differ). With the music industry's chalky-scented smoke, the graveyard and the dead-tree-forest gave an impression of fog. In the crafted room-sets, sometimes the only light one has are those flameless tea lights, which make snooping in drawers, poking in boxes, or reading book spines more of a tactile than visual experience. Event-goers are encouraged to engage the senses, particularly touch, even as the meager lighting and compulsory soundtracks of electronic and swing interfere with other senses. As for taste? Behind a reception desk/bar, I confess to staying true to Onkel Emile's name for me — *Spitzbübe*, or rascal — by opening a decanter and pouring myself a glass of its contents. Secretly hoping for bourbon or scotch, I tasted discolored, tainted water. (No, I did not down that first swig, and my antics went unnoticed.) Moments later, performers came on the scene, followed by a predictable swarm of voyeurs.

The theatrics of setting and design appealed to my interest in art installations and use of space. The collages and wall art that involved book pages and egg imagery particularly appealed to me. There was an interesting "witch's" herb-drying room whose contents emitted their earthy and musty odors; for some spectators, the witch motif may be adequate for drawing sophomoric parallels to *Macbeth*. In another space, an odd mobile of dozens of headless dolls loomed over an empty crib. The aforementioned hotel reception area was replete with the front desk, faux bar, room keys (bolted!) on their hooks, the telephone booths, a lobby, and a valise storage area. Predictably, this space became the site for more wordless drama between the "actors," whose main genre of action revolved around the bodily magnetism of attraction and repulsion — both with one another and with the paying viewers.

I keep putting the term "actors" in quotation marks because I likened them, with their athleticism and interpretive movements, to a modern dance troupe. There was a meant-to-be intriguing dance between two actors and a door. We commiserated later on (adhering to the rules of silence) that we were more worried about the door. An actor feigned

sleep in a large bed, while another one gyrated and rolled around her bed for the masked peeping masses. The former scene required patience from the ticket-holding spectators; one had to watch and wait for change, emphasizing the importance of voyeurism in the *Sleep No More* experience. While "drama" and action are contrived, as in the reality show phenomenon, McKittrick guests lack the editorial aids of elapsed time and must suffer the waiting with the watching. The transparency of the "boudoir demonic possession" scene counts on gathering a large, lingering audience to watch a woman perform self-pleasure, an event that culminates for her not in orgasm, but in becoming the object of so many anonymous gazes. There was another scene that mirrors what I call the "rape shower" of film: a nude male performer huddled in the corner of a shower stall as one lone male onlooker provided him with not only an audience of one, but a towel. Such scenes are typically uncomfortable on film and invite compassion; this one, however, was disquieting in its quiddity as a performance to be observed and its absence of humility or sympathy. One of the most well-executed scenes was at the ballroom banquet table, where the diners moved in slow, fluid motion as if in some 1940s tableau vivant rendition of Leonardo da Vinci's iconic *Last Supper*. Were there more scenes like that? We could not know: we have not perfected the art of occupying multiple sites at once. Otherwise, these "actors" simulated what they naively perceived to be "sexy" behavior; when they weren't stroking (or suffocating a lover in a tent), they did quite a bit of running and stomping to entice the mob of masked sheep to follow them. As tempting as it was to mimic woolly farm creatures when they passed, I kept silent. (After all, I had been scolded into silence once before.) Nothing shocks me in the realm of art, fiction, or theater anymore, especially when the obvious goal is to shock. Perhaps the production merely borrowed its high-brow reference to imagine disjointed hauntings and sleeplessness and to skip out on cohesion. Moreover, Punchdrunk's mise en scène courts an audience familiar with impressionistic, punk-styled lyrics in which words and their haphazard arrangement might have more in common with Dadaist chant; instead of speech acts, deliberate, yet meaningless gestures and actions are the lingua franca of these performers. Their movements and gaze *require* that we watch them. Their bodies silently command, "Watch me. Watch us." We all stalk silently through the McKittrick.

*Sleep No More* is an event for those who participate daily in the voyeur-exhibitionist dyad: I'm watching you, and I hope someone is watching me. The generation that comes of age in the era of social media, tweets, foursquare, texts, etc. willingly shares its mundane

details of day-to-day living as if it were a reality show we're expected to follow. Depending on privacy settings, one can browse anonymously through a friend's posts and photos as well as one's friends' friends' posts and photos. Tweets and wall-posts about one's current mood and rant are made public, soliciting "likes," comments, or other acknowledgments. Today's technology facilitates peeping and unannounced gazing with tools to alert you (or not) of your following. The paradox of social media and technologically enhanced interpersonal interactions enables us to prowl anonymously and to celebrate ours and others' navel-gazing practices.

What would be considered annoying behavior, bordering on stalking, out on the streets and in the workplace is integral to the "interactive" elements of the event. The spectacle of looking down from a balcony into the ballroom of masked visitors proved more interesting than watching "actors" from the troupe. If interaction is what you seek, you can be one of those spectators who hover around an "actor," waiting to be pulled in to some kind of drama. As herds stampeded by, we watched a few masked voyeurs do just that. Watching other masked goers interact was part of the experience. I found myself drawn into this world of watching and seeing: what else could one do? However, I could choose what I would watch and see. Choosing not to follow the techno music and the swarm around the performers, I nosed around odd office spaces and watched other aimless masked wanderers. *Sleep No More* says something about desire. Many of the masked spectators desired communion with the silent actors through the gaze and even the body — but an elusive one at that. Lone "actors" fostered that desire with a nudge and a hand to follow him or her for a private moment. Voyeurism often cultivates expectations to be noticed and selected from the crowd: "I have been watching you; now, notice me." Finally, scanning the internet, we discover that, after the event, there is a desire to interpret and understand *Sleep No More*: to talk and post about it.

Conceptually, the success of the phenomenon that is *Sleep No More* results from its manipulation of space and time. Without knowing the precise square footage of the production, I would say that the troupe's business and social acumen acknowledges the antsy, attention deficient nature of its pleasure-seeking-mobile-voyeurist-audience and offers an illusion that there is just "not enough time" to see everything. There is no narrative, but instead a collage of scenes (human and inanimate) to experience. Experience is the key here because it celebrates the self and its affective navel-gazing tendencies. The repeating taxidermy, the repetition of beds and tubs, the variations on altars, the abandoned

offices, the maze of thin branches, and other elements of design create a dreamscape in which each room presents itself as a new landscape for exploration, rather than the respite of sleep. Design, combined with the "actors'" anguished interactions, serve the mood, engage the senses, and trick the naïve mind into thinking it all must mean something. That's the gimmick of *Sleep No More*: reviewers and goers want to believe that there are "real" parallels to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, so they return to the McKittrick (with their wallets!) to figure it all out. An audience that rejects didacticism *can* be at the center of *Sleep No More's* experience because the experience will mean what the spectator makes it mean. Such a production counts on individual narcissism. But these days, performances and spectacles do not have to mean anything. Isn't it just another "tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (*Macbeth*, 5.5.25-27)?

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# Touching the Spectator: Intimacy, Immersion, and the Theater of the Velvet Rope

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## ABSTRACT

Immersive media is a hot topic, especially in the United States. The novelty value of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, which became New York's hottest ticket in 2011 and 2012, has positioned the British company's trademark brand of "immersive theater" at the front of debate about new media and the future of storytelling. This work is supposed to "shatter" the fourth wall of traditional non-immersive theater, and spectators describe the experience as "mind-blowing." For audiences, the ability to interact physically with objects and the actors' bodies is the core of this hardcore theater experience. But it can be argued that Punchdrunk does very little to engage the fourth wall and that its commodification of the one-on-one encounter bypasses an opportunity to break down the distinction between audience and performer, the radical boundary crossing that immersive media is supposed to achieve. Both media pundits and performance scholars have been remiss in praising this sexy new theater. Comparing scope for theatrically significant audience-actor interaction here and in théâtre érotique, I propose that sex shows, while acknowledging their foundation in sex and voyeurism, may in fact produce a theater less compromised by voyeurism and audience neediness than Punchdrunk's theater of intimacy. The argument is not that *SNM* isn't serious theater because it's too much like a skin show, but that the skin show might do more as theater.



*Figure 1*

## **I. CLUB RULES**

For all the discourse of immediacy and uniqueness in the immersive experience of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* — the freshness of the individual encounter that the greater part of the essays in this volume do well to describe — the immersed spectator is still a theatergoer, bringing an archive of seen performance and performance expectations to the experience. For myself, the incomparable event called to mind several comparisons.

As I have spent the greater part of the last decade immersed in London theater, Punchdrunk's North American flagship reminded me immediately of other work by the company: *Faust* (2006) and especially *Masque of the Red Death* (2007). Indeed, it was the strange familiarity of this show's *mise en scène* that struck me most forcibly. *SNM*'s vaguely 1940s Hitchcock-noir looks and feels remarkably like the company's 1840s-styled adventures with Poe.<sup>1</sup> The faded gothic aesthetic that has led the press to describe the "painstakingly detailed" McKittrick Hotel

variously as a 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s establishment strongly recalled for me the period style mashups of London's retro clubbing scene, which emerged in the mainstream around the same time and which has followed a similar trajectory (from underground happenings to partnership with major drinks sponsors).<sup>2</sup> The two scenes merged visibly in 2007, when *Masque*, designed to culminate in a masquerade ball, offered a separate sale of weekend tickets for the show's "afterparty," attracting crowds of London's casual weekend revellers and theatrical costume partiers. In the Manhattan warehouse, the more socially atomized and goal-oriented audience, aggressively rifling through drawers and papers, recalled rather more the solitary activities of computer gamers playing alone in the dark.<sup>3</sup> And yet, the spectacle of these especially game gamers suggested some kinship with ongoing work at London South Bank's "sandpit," where resident company Hide&Seek creates "social games" and "playful experiences," with an emphasis on liveness, experimentation, and social improvisation.<sup>4</sup> At other moments, *SNM*'s large performance set pieces, in contrast to the ethos of environmental exploration and play, triggered memories of formal dance theater. The slow motion choreography of *SNM*'s banquet scene invited a (rather weak) comparison with Jirí Kylián and Michael Schumacher's breathtaking gestural ballet *Last Touch First*, or with the searing slow motion work of New York based performers Eiko and Komo, whose *Naked* premiered in Manhattan around the time of *SNM*'s New York opening. A particular and personal archive frames my response to *SNM*'s transatlantic iteration, though it seems striking how little has been made of any of these contiguous contexts in critical writing about the show.

Academics have been particularly slow, or unwilling, to qualify the theatrical effects of Punchdrunk's "sexy" brand of "immersive theatre" with reference to those effects achieved in "erotic theatre"<sup>5</sup> — although the large and growing record of audience commentary frames the "mind-blowing," "mindfucking" experience of *SNM* in terms that point insistently and overwhelmingly to the physical as an index of value. These accounts highlight the "sexiness" of scenes and scenarios, the desirability of performers, and especially the "one-on-ones" — prized moments of privileged access to performers, voyeuristically simulated in discussion, where levels of intimacy (and "hotness") are evaluated and assigned value according to the spectators' sense of privilege.<sup>6</sup>

For some, this produces dissonance. In an email to W. B. Worthen, Todd Barnes describes his epiphany at *SNM*, where a moment's association suddenly bridged two performance worlds: "I've never been to a 'gentleman's club,' but I suddenly became aware of the rules that govern that space: be touched but do not touch" (Worthen 2012, 97). Of course, in a traditional gentlemen's club, the rules, at least the most important rules, are not laid down. The point is to alienate and exclude those men who do not already know the rules of the club, and thereby

confirm that they are not "gentlemen" (the gentlemen decide who are ladies). By contrast, in "gentlemen's clubs," aka strip clubs (the ambiguity implying a democratizing euphemism), things are made much easier for visitors. These spaces of titillation and voyeurism are policed aggressively, and in almost every case the rules are made as explicit as the performances. Barnes's sudden realization of the rule-bound nature of *SNM*'s performance space is suggestive and deserves closer examination, particularly given the prominence of audience policing in this production (see Gordon 2012).

It should be noted that Barnes does not say that *SNM* is like a strip club. To my knowledge, no one has claimed this. In making the connection, he displays, if anything, a certain confidence regarding the clear boundary between theater and erotic performance — what lies on either side of the divide (despite having "never been in a 'gentleman's club'"). On one side is the barren transactive experience: insignificant, non-immersive, consumerist, quickly grasped (and dismissed) in a single rule of thumb. On the other side is the "game-changing" immersive theater experience that must be *seen* (and, apparently, seen over and over again), to be appreciated.<sup>7</sup> Barnes's professed ignorance of the "gentlemen's club" displays a certain knowingness, a knowledge of theater and of what is *not* theater (the spectacle of a striptease, or the "one-on-one" of a private dancer). This stands to be questioned. I would not aim to argue that *SNM* isn't real theater because it is (merely) erotic spectacle — far from it. Instead, I intend to examine both sides and to consider the possibility that "sex shows," while acknowledging their foundation in sex and voyeurism, may in fact produce theater *less* compromised by voyeurism and audience neediness.

Entering Théâtre Érotique Chochotte, 34, rue Saint-André-des-Arts, Paris, where patrons are welcome to enter any time after noon and may stay until midnight — allowing for twelve hours of uninterrupted immersion in the space — no one tells you the rules that govern your stay. This makes a strong contrast with entry into Punchdrunk's New York show, where a vampish club hostess with a camp S&M manner straight out of *Rocky Horror* pushes into the waiting area and warms up the crowd by reading them the rules: no taking off your mask, no talking, no cell phones [chuckles], no holding hands [giggles]. Along with the show's finale, this induction marks a signal difference between *SNM* and *Masque* (which otherwise show overlap in their mechanics, aesthetics, and major setpieces). In *SNM*, the collective wait at the bar and the reading of the rules replaces *Masque*'s properly Macbethian encounter with a guide who beckons, lays a finger on her choppy lips, and then vanishes. There, the gesture, inviting imitation, is enough. To play along with the performers (not simply to stay in the space), it says, you will need to be silent. In *SNM*, this framing disappears. Where the inclusive gesture of *Masque*'s induction establishes a connection between audience and performer (as well as the powerful disorientation of

*Macbeth's* opening), the reading of the rules in *SNM* implies rights in the space. Audience members duly proceed as if issued with a search warrant.<sup>8</sup>

In Chochotte, certain audience behaviors are observed, without being prescribed. There is no talking, during or between the performances; here, as in the induction to *Masque*, the spectators follow the performers (you don't speak, not being spoken to). However, only a few minutes are needed to understand that the rule Barnes cites — "be touched, but do not touch" — does not hold here. The performers move into the audience, where they may spend variable amounts of time, and may be touched, very intimately. On a regular day, any number of norms might be inferred (members of the audience will touch but not be touched, touch but not kiss, remain in the audience), but none of these appears to hold *as a rule*.

If any rule exists here, it is that no one moves from their seat to make contact with the performers (unless invited), though when the performance moves from dance to sex acts, voyeurs unable to see the action may shift to get a better view, hanging over the performer much as *SNM's* masked spectators hover over *Macbeth* and Lady *Macbeth's* moment of intimacy in the bathtub.



*Figure 2*

What enforces this unspoken contract among Chochotte's audience, the promise to remain immobile and apparently passive in a given scene, is presumably the same thing that regulates the level of contact: the risk of the performers' withdrawal. Acutely aware of being seen (and felt), constrained spectators work to engage the Chochotte performers without approaching them, through their body language. The atmosphere is charged. *SNM* audiences do the same, though perhaps more mechanically: Punchdrunk aficionados claim to have discovered a

formula of "positive body language" to unlock one-on-ones and encourage selection: stand close, lean in, plant the feet squarely, cock the head curiously.<sup>9</sup> Now, on any night of the show, one can see masks tilting furiously in an effort to attract the performers. Such behavior, of course, lacks the charge, and the responsiveness, that comes with being highly visible, where any exchange with the performers is open to view, where the spectator is thus always on stage.

To say that there are no rules in Chochotte is not to say that there are no limits. When a performer takes one's hand and whispers "you can do anything you want," this brings up a series of questions that audiences at *SNM* will never have to face. No doubt, as in *Sleep No More*, everything that happens in Chochotte has been rehearsed, which is as much as to say it's all been seen before. The difference is the sense of uncertainty that is essential to Chochotte's théâtre érotique. When or how audience members may make contact with the dancers is a question that is constantly negotiated and renegotiated. On any given night, there *are* rules, but they are forged in a unique encounter between audience and performer.

## II. THE FOURTH WALL, THE SIXTH FLOOR, AND A VELVET ROPE

The parallels drawn here rest mainly on audience behavior and expectations, not on performance style. *The New York Times* paints a sympathetic portrait of the vulnerable Punchdrunk performer, a description that at once evokes and defuses sexual allure, here attributed to a specific, Shakespearean role:

As Lady Macbeth, Ms. Sparks [Tori Sparks] invests her performance with a rawness that is by turns volatile, sexual and, ultimately, vulnerable. It's the kind of role that has also attracted undesirable elements: while women in the audience have been known to touch her inappropriately, some men have done worse. (Kourlas 2011)

While Punchdrunk's performers deplore and distance themselves from the inappropriate behavior of ogling, groping audiences, it seems salient that the company keeps staging work in which modes of contact and relation drift inevitably towards the sexual. *SNM*'s dance idiom ("language" is an exaggeration) works in an oppositional mode, as described by choreographer Maxine Doyle — an Aristotelian physics of attraction and repulsion for which the confrontation between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth offers the perfect model, but which I found at work in multiple scenes of seduction around the hotel. Doyle's exploration of coupling and uncoupling — as much a cliché in modern dance as in duet-oriented classical ballet — ensures that at times the whole cast appears to be doing a version of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Whenever three or more are gathered together an orgy seems to be the likely outcome, indeed the promise for the audiences that gather to watch. The different banquets in *Masque*

of the *Red Death* and *SNM* both end in sexual choreography. The bloody ghost of Banquo arrives to trouble *SNM*'s feast, but, like much else, is quickly absorbed in the orgy. This has been a perennial feature of Punchdrunk productions: *Masque*, *SNM*, and *Faust*. In *SNM*, the witches' second meeting with Macbeth takes the form of an orgiastic dance under strobe lights, with maximal (male) nudity and simulated sex. The bloody baby, the armed head, the tree of their prophecies, the ghost of Banquo at Macbeth's table — all make their appearance. But among fans and hopefuls seeking out the experience, the sequence is identified as "the orgy."

Audiences trying to play along with the actors might emulate their ostentatious performance of polymorphous perversity and indulge in a general spirit of self-absorbed erotomania: here, to be recognized is to be desired, *to exist is to be loved*. It may also be that they reach out to touch in good earnest. Punchdrunk invites its audience to break the fourth wall (a term thoroughly mangled in media coverage and interviews) by crossing into the performance space and moving freely inside it; the company congratulates audiences on their daring in opening doors, drawers, and seeking the most intimate contact possible with objects and performers. By issuing masks to spectators, the company introduces, as it understands, a fourth wall stand-in.<sup>10</sup> Really, the mask is a fetish of the fourth wall that invests its wearer with magical invisibility and anonymity within the performance and promises, if removed by a performer in the situation of a one-on-one, privileged access beyond the limitations of the (fetishized) fourth wall — contact that also typically exceeds the bounds of permissible contact outside of the theater's walls.

The mask may in any case be a red herring. I would venture to suggest that Punchdrunk has effectively reinstalled the fourth wall, the invisible wall, with *SNM*'s sixth floor, a conspicuous, locked door barring audiences from its performance space. Barrett's masks represent the fourth wall as something that can be donned and doffed for a plunge into full immersion (surely wishful thinking). But with the sixth floor, the structure of the proscenium is preserved (revealed) essentially intact — except that the sixth floor show, inside its closed sixth floor box, is for others to watch. As in the ostentatiously performed privacy of the one-on-ones, where the withdrawal behind closed doors is a key element, what is concealed matters as much as what is shown. The special visibility of the sixth floor's open secret creates a new kind of *visible* invisible wall, the theater of the velvet rope.<sup>11</sup>

Audiences and media seem equally confused by Punchdrunk's treatment of the fourth wall, a meaningful construct in the context of proscenium theater that becomes in the discourse of immersive theater a moving boundary line that we are never really sure we've crossed, a line immersive theater is supposed

somehow to "shatter" (the line, perhaps, between theater and reality?).<sup>12</sup> Spectators' behavior and their framing of the experience in online discussion strongly suggest that, having crossed onto the stage, they perceive the space between their own bodies and the actors' as the next boundary that immersive theater invites or challenges them to cross, the one-on-one being the privileged platform for this.

Although it is the removal of the mask (Barrett's "fourth wall") that sets the one-on-one apart, every one-on-one encounter appears to involve, and highlight, touch.<sup>13</sup> Whether gentle or rough, sexual or simply intimate, the contact is evidently sexualized in its reception by the audience. Audience accounts cited in this issue describe a "stroke" or a "caress," where they cannot claim a kiss. Another example, a report of "getting tucked in and closely examined" by the nurse, might evoke the complex intimacy of Zecora Ura's *Hotel Medea*, simultaneously reassuring and disturbing, in which each member of the audience, framed as Medea's children, is individually tucked in and read a bedtime story.<sup>14</sup> But the meeting with the nurse is framed as the first of several erotic encounters: "getting tucked in and examined closely . . . I was so stoked." Even when the contact is not manifestly erotic, the response *is*. The same spectator describes supporting Hecate as she ate and concludes, "She retreated with a new love, so I moved on."<sup>15</sup> The manifest erotomania (who loves whom here?) is palpable and becomes the normal tone in these discussions.

The specific details of *SNM*'s abundant one-on-ones — the "dirty details" traded by spectators — are really less interesting than the essential *sameness* of these patented encounters, nicely broken down by Tom Cartelli's essay in this cluster. The immersive theater company's use of one-to-one dynamics appears strangely limited. One-on-one situations in the theater have a special capacity to dismantle, or trouble, the distinction between audience and performer by making the audience aware of the actor as observer. Although, as Robert Shaughnessy notes, the rhetoric of "active participation" may be as much overextended in the service of original practices as in immersive theater, one can observe this in what the actor playing the Porter does (what any comedian can do) when he looks down from the thrust stage and singles out a face in the audience (Shaughnessy 2012). There is little of interest that can be said about my experiences of one-on-ones in *Sleep No More*. The encounters follow a typical format: a character takes you by the hand, leads you into a room, takes off your mask, and tells you a story. This formula combines the adrenal thrill of touch with the thrill of personalized narrative, but does little to engage, let alone "shatter," the "fourth wall."

This brings to mind another Punchdrunk production in which a one-on-one actor-audience encounter occurred outside the formula of the one-on-one. In *Masque* in 2007, pursuit of an escaping murderer found me at some point alone with the

actor in a dark, narrow walkway. Crossing the walkway, the actor stopped and wheeled around, stood frozen for a moment, staring wildly, then lurched forward, scything his arms through the air just in front of me. Startled, then puzzled as I watched him groping in the darkness in front of me, I realized what was happening: the performance contract — my privileged invisibility — was in this moment being renegotiated. The murderer could not see me (the actor was saying); but perhaps he could hear me, perhaps he could feel me . . . I crouched and hid — in full view. In that moment, alone in the dark, the actor was able to make me feel *his* fear — his vulnerability as well as my own — making it possible to question and shift our relationship. The actor's response might have been programmed, a distinct possibility given the company's dependence on timed precision. But certainly the effect achieved was distinct from anything audiences find in Punchdrunk's programmatic "one-on-ones."

A second moment of solo actor-audience contact in *Masque* seemed to hold out equal promise. Squeezing through a "secret passageway," I encountered a woman muttering madly to herself, in whose distracted speech, "frantic mad with ever more unrest," I recognized the shape of sonnet 147. This performer was vulnerable in a different way. The use of familiar lines from the Shakespearean canon, or any known script, instantiates (and reveals) the standard actor audience contract of traditional theater that requires its silent spectator to listen as though the actor were speaking, not reciting (it is bad manners, at a play or a film, to talk along with the actors). But while the actor's reading off a known script exposed cracks in the immersive fiction, what I sensed here was an opening to transform that disavowed audience knowledge that separates actor-character and spectator and turn it into something that might support the actor and join both in performance. First with words, then phrases, I added my voice — blending with hers, bending, but not quite breaking, the rule of silence. Confirming the liveness of her speech, this voice said not "I know what you're quoting," but "I know what you're *thinking*," a supernatural sympathy that could be embraced within the diegesis of the show.<sup>16</sup> This scene ended with a kiss.

Unfortunately, there are many stories of kisses in *SNM*, and few of radical encounters between audience and actor that do not involve kissing or touching. The intimacy of Punchdrunk's carefully timed and controlled signature one-on-ones is designed to feed the audience's desire for touch and recognition, the *desire* being fed regardless of whether you are the one on the inside or the hundreds on the outside (the logic of the exclusive sixth floor). It is unsurprising that audiences exhorted to be adventurous in a theater environment where "anything can happen" lean in for the kiss (the sign of privileged access in *SNM* as at the Paris brothel), still less surprising when the performers seem to engage each other primarily through sexualized contact, or a choreography premised on attraction — in short, where the banquet table is always set for an orgy. While

*SNM* drifts predictably toward intimate contact with the actors — the kissing and touching that is highlighted in the "one-on-ones," but visible throughout the performance, and a favored technique of the company — and while physical contact with performers' bodies surely represents the weakest form of breaking down the barrier between audience and actor after the "fourth wall" has been removed, it is not audience voyeurism nor the desire for physical contact that makes this uninteresting theater. Rather, it is the loss of an apparently open and fluid negotiation of rules that could make Punchdrunk's earlier work powerful and challenging. In a *game*, both sides are playing.

## NOTES

1. *SNM* cannot sustain the complex interplay between nineteenth- and twentieth-century styles achieved by its Hitchcockian source, *Vertigo*, in which the blurring of period even in crudest form (the portrait of Midge as Carlotta) is a function of (feminine) performance, and the film a sustained meditation on this problem.
2. Victor Wynd and Suzanne Field's events are sponsored by Hendrick's Gin; Barrett and Doyle's company has partnered to create promotional immersive events for Stella Artois.
3. The reference to Infogrames' first-person, 3D adventure game series of the 1990s, the H. P. Lovecraft-inspired *Alone in the Dark*, is anachronistic; but so are the fundamental elements of Punchdrunk's work. I argue that the company is indebted to, and still shares much with, the limited logic of these early video game experiments in first person immersion. Thanks to Liam Kruger for this and other timely observations.
4. In his essay for this cluster, Tom Cartelli puts his thumb on the basic "logic of role-playing scenarios derived from established texts" that *SNM* shares with alternate reality games (ARGs). With Arts Council funding for Digital Humanities, Punchdrunk is partnering with MIT media to "merge theater and gaming into an online platform, that will partner live audiences with online participants," game logic thus linking onsite and online experience (which uses as its platform a text based ARG). But it is significant that the classic adventure/quest games that are the closest model for Punchdrunk's immersive environments are typically *not* played as networked multiple player games. The behavior of other players in these frameworks is distracting and incongruous (unlike in first person shoot 'em ups) precisely because, unless the game is simulating a search-and-ransack, the behavior of players (trying every door and drawer) clearly denies immersion. Modeled on this type of game, Punchdrunk's website reinforces an immersion in task, rather than environment. Its experiments in virtual reality do the same. See <http://digitalcapacity.artscouncil.org.uk/digital-rd-projects/>

- (<http://digitalcapacity.artscouncil.org.uk/digital-rd-projects/>) and <http://www.punchdrunk.org.uk/> (<http://www.punchdrunk.org.uk/>).
5. Michael Coveney reminds us of the happenings of the 1960s and the performances of the Living Theater of America, in which actors and audience copulated on stage together (Coveney 2010).
  6. One spectator joins this discussion offering to reproduce the experience of charged, exclusive intimacy: "I'm not going to go into EXTREME detail about the events of the 1 on 1s but if you want to know the dirty details message me . . ."; <http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/sleep-no-more?before=1340371565> [accessed 20 December 2012; page no longer available].
  7. "Since 2000, UK theater company Punchdrunk has been pioneering a game-changing form of immersive theater in which roaming audiences experience epic storytelling inside sensory theatrical worlds" (<http://www.punchdrunk.org.uk> (<http://www.punchdrunk.org.uk>)).
  8. "You could say that this show is absolutely made for the New York audience . . . In *Sleep No More*, there are secrets in every single room and audiences here seem to make it a mission to solve the riddle of the show, to leave no stone unturned" ("Director Felix Barrett" 2011).
  9. "*Sleep No More* Tips and Tricks" (<http://ask.metafilter.com/211607/Sleep-No-More-tips-and-tricks> (<http://ask.metafilter.com/211607/Sleep-No-More-tips-and-tricks>)); "We Can Never Go Back" (<http://tomanderleyagain.tumblr.com/post/28340750608/how-to-connect-with-the-performers-a-study-of-body> (<http://tomanderleyagain.tumblr.com/post/28340750608/how-to-connect-with-the-performers-a-study-of-body>)).
  10. "[H]anding out the masks is like assigning seats in an auditorium. It establishes each individual as part of an audience, and creates a boundary between them and the action. The masks create a sense of anonymity; they make the rest of the audience dissolve into generic, ghostly presences, so that each person can explore the space alone" (Souvenir Program 2011, 24).
  11. The mask may yet evolve into the show's sixth floor through digital "enrichment." For a *New York Times* journalist trying the pilot, real active immersion becomes the exclusive property of the wearer: "on a given night there are already several story lines to be witnessed en masse. But I was supposed to be getting a narrative that was new and unique and, above all, exclusive to me. I was the 1 percent" (Itzoff 2012).
  12. "Punchdrunk takes the fourth wall and shatters it to pieces" (<http://www.thebubble.org.uk/drama/fortune-favours-the-bold-punchdrunk/3> (<http://www.thebubble.org.uk/drama/fortune-favours-the-bold-punchdrunk/3>)); "The 4th Wall No More, A Review of *Sleep No More* in New York City," 19 July 2012 (<http://laughingsquid.com/the-4th-wall-no-more-a-review-of-sleep-no-more-in-new-york-city> ([<http://borrowers.uga.edu/472/show>](http://laughingsquid.com/the-4th-wall-no-more-a-</a></li>
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- review-of-sleep-no-more-in-new-york-city)/).
13. This is the case for all those I have read, and all those cited in this volume.
  14. *Hotel Medea*, directed by Jorge Lopes Ramos & Persis-Jade Maravala for Zecora Ura, Edinburgh Fringe Festival, 2011.
  15. Before this, the spectator describes dancing with Hecate to gain entry to her one-on-one, then being sent out on an errand with "a kiss on the mask (\*squeal\*)" (<http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/punchdrunk?before=1340764221> [link no longer functional]).
  16. Punchdrunk's masked player differs significantly from Augusto Boal's "spect-actor."

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### PERMISSIONS

Figure 1. Photo credit "dmoldovan." <http://bloodwillhavebloodtheysay.tumblr.com/> (<http://bloodwillhavebloodtheysay.tumblr.com/>).

Figure 2. Sophie Bortolussi as Lady Macbeth and Nicholas Bruder as Macbeth in this site-specific show on West 27th Street. In the masks are audience members. Photo credit Sara Krulwich/The New York Times (see <http://theater.nytimes.com/2011/04/14/theater/reviews/sleep-no-more-is-a-macbeth-in-a-hotel-review.html> (<http://theater.nytimes.com/2011/04/14/theater/reviews/sleep-no-more-is-a-macbeth-in-a-hotel-review.html>)).

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## Crossing the Line: Liminality and Lies in *Sleep No More*

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### ABSTRACT

Focusing on the author's experience in "the hut" during a New York performance of *Sleep No More*, this essay discusses the way in which boundaries are crossed, not only those distinguishing Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the Tom Waits version of "The Children's Story," but also those separating performer and audience.

I pull in resolution; and begin  
To doubt the equivocation of the fiend  
That lies like truth. — William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, act 5, scene 5

Of everything I could say about *Sleep No More*, I would primarily concur that it's more of a haunted house than a theatrical production. The performers — who only barely qualify as characters — are themselves an extension of a moody *mise en scène*, an environment in which the audience is truly embedded. Employing one of the oldest theatrical conventions, the mask, the production mutes the audience. Masked in a white void, the audience becomes part of the background — and a cyclorama is still a part of the production. By sublimating the audience while including it as a distinct aspect, the production makes the audience an extension of the performance, or better yet, another incarnation of the non-Macguffin posited by Alice Dailey in her contribution to this cluster. The McKittrick needs patrons, just as a film needs spectators, or a murder needs witnesses. And no viewing experience of Hitchcock's *Psycho* is quite complete without the shrieking jump of the woman seated in front of you. The macabre and horrific requires a group experience; the reactions of others set us off, making disturbing sensations both more palatable and more incendiary.

On a much more basic level, any performance, by definition, requires an audience. A grandmother alone in a room reading in silence is not a performance; that same grandmother reading aloud to her grandchildren is — in every pause for effect. The audience shapes the performance, even as the performer shapes the audience's reaction. Yet even in live theater, we as an audience have been conditioned to ignore the other observers between us and the proscenium; we look over their heads and focus on the stage. An immersion experience such as *Sleep No More* allows no such denial and even offers the rare opportunity for closer contact, for communion at the fragile liminality between performer and observer.

My private experience happened in "the hut," in the back of the forest labyrinth on the fifth floor. As I approached through the wire-and-bramble fence, I saw a window open in the hut, through which I could see a young woman rocking in a chair. I came around to the steps leading up to the hut and noticed two or three other masked audience members watching. As the door opened, the woman stepped out onto the staircase. As usual, I had a notebook in one hand and a pen the other, and so I probably stood out. The woman came straight down to me and took my hand. Leading me into the hut as the other masked ciphers watched, she closed the door behind me, took off my mask, and looked into my eyes, saying, "That's better." She had me sit and served me a cup of tepid tea, asking if I wanted sugar or milk. I nodded to the sugar. She handed me the tea, but then bent over me and spooned the tea into my mouth, serving me like an invalid, an experience I found extremely disconcerting and discomfiting. After a few spoonfuls, she took the tea away, sat, and told me a story taken from Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*:

Once upon a time there was a poor child  
with no father and no mother  
and everything was dead  
and no one was left in the whole world  
everything was dead  
  
and the child went on search day and night  
and since nobody was left on the earth  
he wanted to go up into the heavens  
and the moon was looking at him so friendly  
and when he finally got to the moon  
the moon was a piece of rotten wood  
  
and then he went to the sun  
and when he got there  
the sun was a wilted sunflower  
and when he got to the stars  
they were little golden flies  
stuck up there like the shrike  
sticks 'em on a blackthorn  
  
And when he wanted to go back down to earth

the earth was an overturned piss pot  
 And he was all alone  
 he sat down and he cried  
 and he is there till this day  
 all alone. (Büchner 2000-2001)<sup>1</sup>

Even in the source material, this is a story within a story, told by a grandmother to children at bedtime. Büchner's unfinished work, "completed" by multiple posthumous collaborators, has become one of the most-produced German plays. Americans generally get introduced to stories from older cultures through adaptation, and *Woyzeck* surfaced most recently in a production by Robert Wilson and Tom Waits. I suspect that the producers found this text via the recorded Waits version, since so much of *Sleep No More* is a club sandwich of stacked allusions.

*Woyzeck* has little in common with *Macbeth*; to say that both stories involve a murder is to say that both *Donnie Darko* and *Mean Girls* are about high school. Yet *Sleep No More* borrows from both, understanding that appropriation is popularization — casting an ever-widening net, reaching devotees of the source while developing fanatics for the new. Shakespeare took Romeo from Ovid centuries before *West Side Story*. Academics might disdain teenagers who miss the *Taming of the Shrew* latticework behind *10 Things I Hate About You*, but the kids aren't really missing anything. A five year old isn't wrong to laugh at "What's Opera, Doc?" just because he's never heard of Wagner. The indoctrinated just get to experience an additional level. Perhaps the insistence that *Sleep No More* is a *Macbeth* derivation is the ultimate Macguffin, a stratagem to get an audience in the door.

Here, the *Woyzeck*/Waits mashup is what I would like to call a double Macguffin with cheese. The mashup doesn't matter, but it leads us to Waits, which itself isn't included, yet melts into the experience of the environment, like a fog machine that you smell without seeing smoke. Remember, this is a haunted house, and we're being led down the forest path to receive a communion only tangentially related to text. The most memorable *Macbeth* I've seen was in Malta, performed in Maltese, a language equal parts Arabic and Italian. I couldn't understand a word of it, and it was absolutely terrifying.

The Waits allusion feeds the *Sleep No More* aesthetic. The tone and timbre of Waits's version of "Children's Story" is trash-can-lid clanky and world-wearily desultory, playing perfectly to the tone of the McKittrick Hotel. If Hitchcock were alive today, he'd be hiring Waits and Brennan to score his films.

In the hut, as the lone woman performed for me alone, she was accompanied by a different music — a dark, brooding, wordless score that was played through a sound system and could be heard throughout the floor. While only I could hear her voice, the crowd gathered outside the hut could hear the building violent intensity of the music. As she began, the woman was smiling, but as the music brooded, her smile faded and she intensified her gaze without raising her voice. Upon reaching the end of the story — the soundtrack breaking with a visceral crack

— she quickly clutched the back of my neck with a crooked arm, pulling herself into me as if for a violent kiss, and whispered bleakly into my ear: "Blood will have blood, they say."

Bone-chilling.

She pulled away, looked at me, and stroked my face tenderly. She put my mask back on and we stood. She opened the door, and a crowd of masked figures watched as I descended the steps alone.

"Blood will have blood, they say," is of course a misquotation of *Macbeth*, act 2, scene 4: "It will have blood, they say; blood will have blood," but I'm less interested in the text — *Woyzeck* by way of Waits, smashed up against *Macbeth*— than in the liminal experience. Crossing the threshold into the hut, I also crossed the line from audience to performer. Others saw me enter and waited for my exit, imagining what they were missing. My audience continued to grow as they waited outside. Our isolation could be interpreted in a number of story-honored archetypes: a crone takes in a weary traveler for a meal; a witch takes in a drifter to eat him; a courtesan takes a man inside and draws the curtain.

On an even deeper level, inside the hut I was also performing for an audience of one. Even as she performed for me, I was being asked for more: she had a text and a set of prescribed behaviors, but I was on alien ground, unable to act naturally, following the "audience" rule of silence. At first, I swallowed a laugh, a natural human reaction when faced with nervousness. After she neutered me with her tea-spooning, I sat still for her story, yet as it progressed I felt her drawing a performance out of me. As a trained performer myself, I tend to rise to the occasion when asked, and as an overly-trained audience member, I'm far less reactive to the in-your-face bizarre than, I suspect, this young performer's average nightly victim. I found myself returning her gaze, her intensity, and could feel the collective energy in the room congeal as if we were conducting a séance. We were working the scene together, listening to the rise in the music, painfully aware of the spectators just outside the door.

Here we are at the door together, standing at the threshold, each of us performer and audience at once, and alternating, like subatomic particles and waves. It is this give-and-take, this elusive truce that illuminates the shifting balance of power between opposites and that proves their mutual reliance, what Buddhists call dependent co-arising.

This intensity of performance is uncommon today. We lack the personal encounter in film, television, and online viewing, all of which remove even the social construct of the audience. Watching TV alone becomes as solitary and unfulfilling — albeit momentarily titillating — as masturbation. If watching TV alone is a hamburger and a live performance in a traditional theater is a lavish steak dinner with friends, what was happening to me in the hut was something akin to eating carpaccio off the nude body of a lover: extremely intimate, overwhelmingly satisfying, and tinged with the possibility for revulsion. It's more than most are accustomed to.

In *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook speaks of the audience this way:

The actor's work is never for an audience, yet always is for one. The onlooker is a partner who must be forgotten and still constantly kept in mind: a gesture is statement, expression, communication and a private manifestation of loneliness — it is always what Artaud calls a signal through the flames — yet this implies a sharing of experience, once contact is made. (Brook 1968, 51)

If performance is a shared experience, the onlooker's prejudice and limitations shape that experience, even for the performer herself. Peter Brook has another observation, far more cutting: "If good theatre depends on a good audience, then every audience has the theatre it deserves" (Brook 1968, 21).

In thinking of the seam, that imaginary line on which performance hinges, I'm reminded of the mythologist Lewis Hyde's work in *Trickster Makes This World*, a book that compares convincingly the role of the trickster in mythology across cultures with the attitudes and motivations of art in the modern era. Hyde states, "There is a long tradition that locates art in that trickster shadowland where truth and falsity are not well differentiated" (Hyde 1998, 78).

It is an illusion that I am the audience; it is an illusion that this woman is performing for me. The truth is something more simple — we are a man and a woman alone in a room together. She has her script, and I have mine — the convention that I should act a certain way, stick to the rules, keep quiet, and play along. It is an illusion that has become truth through repetition and cultural conditioning.

Or, as Nietzsche said, "Truths are illusions about which it has been forgotten that they are illusions" (Nietzsche 1977, 47).

"Blood will have blood, they say," she whispered in my ear, full of breath. She caught me by surprise as she pulled close to me, a thrill of equal parts fright and sexual tension. As she looked at me, I truly thought she would kiss me. She didn't, and the following caress felt awkward and restrained. Was the wedding ring on my hand itself a performance? Or, for us both, did the rules of society dictate our behavior, even in that isolated room? And yet the sexual charge was unmistakable. When does a stranger ever caress you as such? On the subway? A waitress at a restaurant? At a strip club? In no strip club have I ever shared such intimacy as the two of us did, alone, locked in dual performance.

As I left the hut, I slowly crossed the disintegrating threshold, descended the steps under the watchful eyes of the other audience members, then slowly receded into anonymity as their eyes were drawn back to the woman. I also looked back at her, through my mask, from the void I'd rejoined, and she stood on the porch and looked after me, or perhaps just blankly into the distance. I couldn't help it: I stood still and returned her gaze, until — doubtless following a musical cue— she went back into her hut and closed the door.

Blood *will* have blood. Or so they say.

## NOTES

1. The text of the story provided here is Waits's version, not a word-for-word transcription of the text used in *Sleep No More*; see [http://www.tomwaits.com/songs/song/299/Childrens\\_Story/](http://www.tomwaits.com/songs/song/299/Childrens_Story/) ([http://www.tomwaits.com/songs/song/299/Childrens\\_Story/](http://www.tomwaits.com/songs/song/299/Childrens_Story/)).

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# Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*: Masks, Unmaskings, One-on-Ones

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines *Sleep No More* in the context of interactive entertainment in contemporary culture, with a focus on the production's much discussed "one-on-one" encounters between performers and audience members.

Oddly enough, given its painstakingly detailed physical setting, in which one moves along with other bodies and occasionally finds oneself not only in close, unbounded proximity to the actors themselves but also engaged in brief encounters with them, *Sleep No More* resembles nothing so much as an opened up, interactive digital environment or alternate reality game (ARG), drawing on some of the same logic of role-playing scenarios derived from established texts/plays/films — as, in this instance, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, du Maurier's novel *Rebecca*, and Hitchcock's film version of the same (see Grant 2011). It also draws, of course, on the broader cultural vogue for what used to be called "audience participation," which has its avant-garde roots in theater events such as *Dionysus 69*, but which has heretofore been superseded by the ever-proliferating range of/rage for reality TV programming. Indeed, though *Sleep No More*'s British creators, Punchdrunk, erstwhile fabricators of immersive theatrical versions of texts like Poe's "Masque of the Red Death," may have initially seen themselves as postmodern avatars of groundbreaking avant-gardists like The Performance Group, they now find themselves purveyors of

the hottest off-Broadway ticket in New York and the preferred focus of largely twenty-something audiences competing to experience (and testify online to) *SNM*'s notorious "one-on-ones." Punchdunk's sponsor, Emursive, has in turn mastered an insider-internet marketing strategy that arguably has closer ties to the commercially and celebrity-driven NYC club-scene — and of branding practices of shows that have become semi-permanent fixtures in New York (BlueMan Group, for example) — than to anything traditionally associated with experimental theater. The tripartite leadership of Emursive — Jonathan Hochwald and Arthur Karpati, whose backgrounds include real estate development and touring concert promotion, and Randy Weiner, managing partner of "The Box," a late-night club with outposts in NYC and London's Soho whose website shares both the same format and pitch-perfect pretensions as the *Sleep No More*/McKittrick Hotel website — claims to have formed Emursive "to create immersive experiences in extraordinary places" and further claims that their first production, *Sleep No More*, is "the most monumental immersive installation ever presented in New York" (Souvenir Program 2011, 6).<sup>1</sup> No doubt it is. It also promises to be the most permanent. With its origins traceable to London 2003, and its revival to Boston 2009, *Sleep No More* opened in New York City on 7 March 2011, and so long as it continues to be all-but-sold-out one month in advance of current performances, the production shows no sign of closing any time soon. Indeed, a call has gone out on the date of this writing (10 July 2012) for Male/Female Professional Dancers for auditions to be held 18-19 July 2012, a sure sign that we are in for a very *longue duree*.

Why, then, my apparent sarcasm? Shouldn't we celebrate the success and longevity of so innovative and interactive a project/production? Although I found my own experience of *Sleep No More* almost always intriguing and at times deeply compelling, I cannot summon up the kind of enthusiasm for the project of *SNM*'s online acolytes, which informs even W. B. Worthen's remarkably generous recent essay on the subject in *Theatre Journal* (Worthen 2012). Possibly because it seems to me too gimmicky. Possibly because of my aversion to role-playing elevator operators, nightclub hostesses, and bartenders who insist on pretending that I'm a guest at a 1930s hotel. Possibly because I feel baited into believing that there is more in the project's intense but elusive performances than meets the eye. (I *know* there's much more than my eye will ever meet in *Sleep No More*'s inspired and richly-detailed physical sets and settings.) And possibly because I see *Macbeth* serving only as an occasion around which so much that is decidedly not *Macbeth* circulates, so overwhelmed is the Scottish play in this oblique retelling by film noir-ish understandings and pretensions, imagery drawn from Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) and Kubrick's earlier haunted hotel sh(1)ocker, *The Shining* (1980), and Hitchcockian plots, miasmas, mysteries, minutiae, and soundtracks

drawn from *Rebecca* (1940) and (as Worthen notes), *Vertigo* (1958). Fan as I am of the collisions of high and low, the esoteric and the vulgar, A-grade theater and B-level movies orchestrated by New York's Wooster Group, it isn't *Sleep No More's* mixing and mashing and merging that underwhelms me as much as its variable melodramatizing, literalizing, and sentimentalizing of *Macbeth*.<sup>2</sup> (Is staining the bedclothes of the Macduff children with the semblance of blood so decidedly "cool" in today's cultural register that it doesn't also register as maudlin, melodramatic, and sentimental?) I also admittedly recoil at the overwhelming *youthiness* of the enterprise, which seems to be made by, for, and about people too young, hip, and good-looking ever to venture far from Williamsburg, the Lower East Side, or London's East End. (Compared to *Sleep No More's* Macbeths, Macduffs, Banquo, and nubile cast of extras, the youthiness of Francesca Annis and Jon Finch in Polanski's 1971 film of *Macbeth* seems positively old-fashioned.) Indeed, *Sleep No More* corresponds to *Macbeth* in some of the same ways that HBO's trendy *True Blood* corresponds to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. That said, I have found enough that is inventive and even intoxicating in *Sleep No More* to want to take the production seriously in what follows, and will concentrate on the promenading audience's required wearing of masks and the *noli me tangere* ethic hovering over, if not always inhibiting, audience/actor interaction, particularly with respect to those notorious "one-on-ones," in all of which I will often be drawing more on the impressions and experiences of other auditors than on my own.

No one who has seen Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* will fail to register the connection between the wearing of masks and the invitation to participate anonymously in forbidden sensual delights. But this being immersive theater undertaken in the arguably decadent but legalistic institutional confines of 2012 USA, the only participation audiences are officially (or publicly) allowed in *Sleep No More* is vicarious, with the "one-on-ones" officially imposing the same constraints on "clients" officially prescribed for lap-dance transactions — which they resemble in more ways than one, particularly with respect to the private rooms to which auditors are invited and where these intensely sought-for encounters take place. (See Sean Bartley's observations, in his contribution to this issue, on the limitations *SNM's* creators have imposed on the experiences of "narrator-visitors," despite their comments to the contrary.) That the one-on-ones promise — and occasionally deliver — more erotically charged experiences to consumers/clients/audiences than are on offer in the more public spaces of the McKittrick Hotel is richly attested to by the abundant comments and anecdotes that may be harvested from online blogs and the like.<sup>3</sup>

Given the many accounts of one-on-ones I have reviewed, the following is far from normative, but it supplies a fairly complete inventory of what audiences are looking for in such encounters and what the "luckiest" among them receive:

I remembered feeling slighted my first visit that I didn't get any 1 on 1 time with the actors but shit. This time I got FIVE. I was ecstatic for my first one and then they kept coming so I was euphoric!!!

. . .

My first was with the Nurse (I believe played by Marla Phelan) getting tucked in and closely examined. I was so stoked.

I wandered around and found the Bartender (Sal) and we had a nice moment and he escorted me to the prophecy rave (one of my all time favorites). I then found the incredibly talented Careena Melia and fell in LOVE with her performance. Then was so lucky to get a 1 on 1 with her as well!! We danced back and forth and she eventually let me into her lair. She removed my mask and we shared potions. She sent me to find the Porter with a message and I hurried off after receiving a kiss on my mask (\*squeal\*).

I found the Porter (played by Paul Zivcovich) and gave him his letter and received a ring to deliver to Hecate upstairs. He looked at me, held up four fingers, pointed up, and retreated (gave me chills).

Running up stairs I found Hecate and delivered the ring. She smiled, kicked out her chair in the bar, and sat me down next to her supporting her as she eats. She then performed her lip sync which was flawless. She retreated with a new love so I moved on.

After a little wandering around I stumbled upon William Popp as Malcolm and fell in love with his performance. I followed him intently as he then led me to an interrogation room and had a VERY intimate, homoerotic, sexual, hot experience with him, some eggs, and some close encounters in the dark. I walked out a little flustered after he fled, put my mask back on, and continued.

After the banquet I decided to follow Matthew Oaks (?) as Macduff even though he sprinted around many times. Thought I may pass out but kept up well. So was right in the lobby of the McKittrick with him as he discovered deceased Lady Macduff and he pushed past many onlookers to let me hold her with him. It was a beautiful and intimate moment that I loved. (dmoldovan 2012)

Among the many things on display in dmoldovan's account is his craving for intimacy, which seems conjoined, in some respect, to his transforming the hard-to-distinguish, and, for most auditors, anonymous actors into local celebrities. The blogger falls in love with two performances, considers others "flawless" and chilling, but reserves his most heated language for the "VERY intimate,

homoerotic, sexual, hot experience" and "close encounters in the dark" sans mask he claims to have had with "William Popp as Malcolm." Given dmoldovan's full narrative, it's clear that he got even more than he came for, and that what he came for was more of a direct and interactive, as opposed to a performative, intimacy, a sense of sustained personal connection with named actors who also seem to have delegated him smallish roles to play in what could be called the more informal plays-within-the-formal-production.

Another account — which in this case comes from one of the most talented students and student-actors I have ever taught (let's call her Rosalind) — takes a rather different approach to the quest for one-on-ones, but confirms dmoldovan's representation of their erotic potential and, in some cases, content:

A fellow actor friend, who had already seen the show, urged me to chase after the characters that enticed me. At the performance, taking my friend's advice, I found myself dressing the part. I wore tennis shoes, comfortable clothing, secured my long hair in a ponytail, ate protein for energy. I was ready to win. I sprinted up staircases, pushed past other attendees, and dodged crowds, knowing some actor might take me into a closet. The New York theatre community swaps anecdotes of their time at *Sleep No More* like war stories. I had heard of people being kissed and lured into dark places. Sure enough, the actor (who I think played Banquo) pulled me into a small closet, sat me down, took my mask off, handed me an extremely heavy sword from a coffin, looked me in the eyes, shared some Shakespeare text about a queen and a king, showed me three playing cards, kissed my forehead, put my mask back on, and pushed me out of the closet. I got what I wanted. I left the performance reflecting on my competitive spirit and on my desire to connect with actors in this intimate, performative way. ("Rosalind" 2012)

This account of Rosalind's comparatively more chaste encounter conflates what one would normally assume are two very different forms of *connection*, one defined in terms of intimacy, the other in terms of performativity. A seeming condition for the intimacy of the performative transaction seems to be the removal of the auditor's mask, which, at least on one level, temporarily makes the auditor feel co-equal with the actor, though never to the extent that the actor lets down his own mask by surrendering or suspending the role he is playing in *Sleep No More*. In this sense, one might say that the auditor is experiencing the illusion of an intimacy that is not in fact reciprocal, indeed, that is decidedly one-sided. Oddly enough, this one-sidedness would seem to be enhanced by the temporary loss of the mask itself, which, though it identifies Rosalind as only one of many "faceless" auditors, also allowed her to "act" with an anonymity that could be said to match the actor's effacement by the role he is scripted to play. Once that mask is surrendered, Rosalind's "real face" is exposed to the

actor, who, given his dominant role in the transaction (he is, after all, not only pre-scripted but positioned as the sought-for, desired party), may respond to it as he chooses, *in* character or out, with a chaste kiss on the forehead or more passionate embrace.<sup>4</sup> Yet Rosalind's comment on having gotten the desired confirmation of her "competitive spirit" in this exchange may well indicate how one-on-ones become more of a two-way street when their performative gamesmanship is registered or acknowledged.

Worthen has called "the masking of the spectators" in *SNM* "the most provocative element of the production," but claims that "unlike the masks in Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* [. . .] in *Sleep No More* our masks provide a familiar theatrical anonymity, underwriting the agency to watch though not to act, at least not to act with the legitimate performers [. . .] The mask performs the work of the darkened auditorium and the theatre seat, separating, individualizing, and interiorizing us as a group of spectators" (Worthen 2012, 94-95). But what happens when the masks that initially supply "a familiar theatrical anonymity" begin to underwrite the agency not just to watch but to *act* when the actors themselves remove them, and, as it were, invite auditors to participate in the dance, as they do in the two accounts we have just reviewed? Indeed, the desire to be *unmasked*, to be recognized or acknowledged, if not exactly known, seems to be one of the primary informing motives behind the craving of *SNM*'s fan-base for one-on-ones.

Alternatively, I would submit that the mask may be construed as the defining condition of the audience's participation in a process of role-playing that begins as soon as the masks are handed out. Felix Barrett, co-director (with Maxine Doyle) of *SNM*, claims that "handing out the masks is like assigning seats in an auditorium. It establishes each individual as part of an audience, and creates a boundary between them and the action. The masks create a sense of anonymity; they make the rest of the audience dissolve into generic, ghostly presences, so that each person can explore the space alone." But in also claiming that the masks "allow people to be more selfish and more voyeuristic than they might normally be," and that "[h]idden behind a fictional layer, [auditors] lose some of their inhibitions" (Souvenir Program 2011, 24), Barrett allows for a different range of possibilities to emerge that auditors have shown little reluctance to experience. In this respect, I'd argue that the masks often operate as a license or permit for auditors to see themselves as active participants in *SNM*, and that the much bruted anonymity they enforce is actually the enabling medium of their vicarious experience as unscripted actors or extras in the production itself.<sup>5</sup>

In a brilliant recent essay that has more to say about the interactive claims of promoters of Shakespeare's Globe reconstruction than about *SNM*, Robert Shaughnessy notes that

Interactive performance, particularly in its more media-savvy formats, may be the corollary of a blogging, texting and twittering culture in which everyone has to have their say and in which no-one can ever really be left alone; but it is born of the desire to restore to, to retrieve within, performance an experience of the immediate, of the authentic, that has within mainstream culture been lost. In conjunction with this runs the desire, at least in theory, to re-empower the spectator so that she is free, or at least freer, to interact with the work as she chooses, no longer its consumer but its co-creator. (Shaughnessy 2012)

Shaughnessy cautionarily adds that "in practice, the rigorous and sometimes coercive stewarding, or policing, of the behaviour of participants in immersive performances means that their freedom of manoeuvre can be quite severely restricted, their range of interactive possibilities relatively limited, and their freedoms more rhetorical than real" (Shaughnessy 2012), a qualification that may apply to the monitoring and shepherding of even the most meandering auditors in *SNM*. However, where the surveillance strategies of the materially based *SNM* — which coordinate the staging of three performance cycles each evening — may imaginably restrict one's ability to explore all that is on offer in the one hundred rooms of the McKittrick Hotel, *Sleep No More* offers its fan-base an unlimited range of digital afterlives in which the generative potential of its auditors may continue to thrive. For if *SNM*, as noted at the start, is an opened up, materialized version of an internet-based ARG, its interactive potential is maximized when its auditors/fan-base choose to repurpose it in terms of its online/gaming source-inspirations. As *Salon.com*'s Drew Grant wrote retrospectively after finding himself unprepared to appreciate fully his physical engagement with *SNM*, "in order to get the full experience of the play I would have had to spend hours unlocking hidden Internet websites and swapping clues on Facebook with other devotees," only somewhat exaggeratedly concluding that "*Sleep No More* is an interactive play that's also a community-sourced Internet game that requires a working knowledge of Greek gods and JavaScript in order to solve it" (Grant 2011).

For my part, I wonder whether conventional binaries such as audience/play really pertain to the immediate experience of *SNM*, and whether the best way to appreciate the project isn't to take Punchdrunk's promotional pretensions literally and accept outright their invitation to "rediscover the childlike excitement and anticipation of exploring the unknown" (Souvenir Program 2011, 7). That, after all, seems to be what AndrewAndrew have done (AndrewAndrewTubeTube 2011) — and who could possibly argue against such exuberance?

## NOTES

1. See the official websites at <http://www.theboxsoho.com> (<http://www.theboxsoho.com>) and <http://www.theboxnyc.com> (<http://www.theboxnyc.com>). The Box Soho has been called London's "seediest VIP club," while one of its owners, Simon Hammerstein, describes it as a place of "mystique, mystery and sexual openness." See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1365849/The-Box-Soho-inside-Britains-seediest-club-enjoyed-Prince-Harry.html> (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1365849/The-Box-Soho-inside-Britains-seediest-club-enjoyed-Prince-Harry.html>). The Box NYC was voted the best club for remaining anonymous in a *Village Voice* "Best of New York Poll." "Tracy" calls it "a variation of a nightclub & dinner theatre with the most amazing acts I've ever seen. The vibe is voyeuristic, sexy, & usually something that you can't explain unless you've seen it" (<https://foursquare.com/v/the-box/4593be73f964a5204e401fe3> (<https://foursquare.com/v/the-box/4593be73f964a5204e401fe3>)). Like *Sleep No More*, both Box sites are renowned for their abundant instances of celebrity-sightings.
2. Worthen offers an acute assessment of how "surprisingly conventional" *Sleep No More's* "view of dramatic performance" is, one in which "the stage reveals fully formed, organic, psychologically knowable and responsive 'characters' to whom the audience [. . .] respond much as they do to human beings in the social world off the stage" (Worthen 2012, 83).
3. The most exhaustive website devoted to the archiving of responses to, information about, and commentary on *Sleep No More* is "They Have Scorched the Snake" (<http://scorchedthesnake.tumblr.com/archive> (<http://scorchedthesnake.tumblr.com/archive>)).
4. The inequality of what begins to seem a clear-cut power relation is elsewhere evinced in the passivity of unmasked auditors in response to the sexually provocative cues and prompts of *SNM* actors. In the one-on-one experiences of Alex Shaw and Todd Barnes, as recorded and recounted by Bill Worthen, for example, we witness the peculiar awkwardness of auditors who seem to be invited to respond to specific provocations but whose awareness of the passivity conventionally enjoined on auditors prevents them from actively responding (see Worthen 2012, 93-94).
5. See Meg Paradise, "The Aesthetics of Sleep No More" (2011), who writes that "A peculiar thing happens when you dress a group of strangers in identical, expressionless masks. By essentially inviting the audience onto the stage, the masks form a kind of fourth wall, and help maintain a division between performer and viewer. But by stripping you of your identity while maintaining such close proximity to the actors, you take on more of a voyeuristic role in an extremely intimate setting. After all, the story you're watching unfold is rife

with violence, nakedness, and all manner of sexual activity" (Paradise 2011).

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## Last Night I Dreamt I Went to *Sleep No More*

### Again: Intertextuality and Indeterminacy at

### Punchdrunk's McKittrick Hotel

ALICE DAILEY, VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY

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#### ABSTRACT

This essay examines *Sleep No More's* citationality to consider which of its many intertextual references are mere Macguffins and which, by contrast, open up substantive interpretive potential. The essay focuses on the production's appropriation of Hitchcock and of early modern Scottish witch trials, concluding that its most suggestive citation is of *Vertigo's* McKittrick Hotel, a site which, like the McKittrick frame-fiction of *Sleep No More*, decidedly frustrates hermeneutic closure.

The opening line of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again," posits a ruined English estate as encoded dream content. The line is spoken in voiceover by the unnamed protagonist of the film, the second wife of Maxim de Winter. From guileless young ingénue, Mrs. de Winter develops across the film's narrative first into knowledge, then selfish satisfaction, and finally complicity as she becomes an accessory-after-the-fact in her husband's disposal of his first wife, the eponymous Rebecca. When she returns in her dream to the burnt-out shell of the estate, it is a feral Manderley that has been reforested by wild surrounds, its former civilized beauty and

"perfect symmetry" flickering elusively through the thick of nature's "long tenacious fingers," which have "encroached upon the drive" that leads to the house. At once dreamer and analyst, the speaker enters the past by moving beyond the boundary of consciousness to transgress the iron gates of the estate and follow the once-distinct, but now "poor thread" that winds back to the great house: "Like all dreamers," she says, "I was possessed of a sudden with supernatural powers and passed like a spirit through the barrier before me" (Hitchcock 1940). As the flashback narrative of the film unfolds, we come to understand the Manderley of her dream as the architectural expression of lost innocence entangled in a thorny overgrowth of homicidal violence, erotic transgression, and guilt.

*Sleep No More* likewise takes Manderley for its starting point. From the check-in counter and coatroom, guests of the McKittrick Hotel follow a winding, nearly pitch-dark hallway to the Manderley Bar, where they're greeted by a maître d' whose mannered welcome announces their entrance into the alternative world of the production. The hallway itself proves a crucial transition, like a fall into the fog of sleep or down the rabbit hole. It forces a new way of seeing that will be imperative for the experience to come, dilating the pupils to enable visitors to penetrate the dark and peer into the dimly-lit corners, cubbies, cabinets, and curiosities of the circuitous McKittrick. Unlike *Rebecca*, however, *Sleep No More* does not unfold a linear narrative that discloses the latent content of its Manderley dream. It gestures toward narratives, but its immersive, individualized, largely nonlinear, entirely nonverbal, and disorientingly labyrinthine qualities reproduce the dreamscape itself rather than delivering its coherent analysis. The blackened hallway takes us not into the story of *Rebecca*, but into something more like the unreal abstraction of John Ballantyne's dream in *Spellbound* — that is, the dream before Dr. Petersen's rudimentary psychoanalysis strips it of its wonderful Daliesque obscurity and renders it a conventional, neatly solved murder mystery.

On the first of my two experiences of *Sleep No More*, I knew nothing about *Rebecca* but had a casual viewer's familiarity with many of Hitchcock's later films. I felt confident that this and my knowledge of *Macbeth* would furnish me with what I needed ably to interpret *Sleep No More*. Despite the reductive silliness of Dr. Petersen's dream analysis, I was determined to have *Sleep No More* on the couch in an analytic search for latent content, and I approached the McKittrick's many rooms and artifacts with a meticulous reader's eye. At one point, the performer whom I later understood to be the second Mrs. de Winter took my hand, led me into a lady's prim boudoir, placed a locket around my neck, and said, "Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again." She took off my

standard-issue mask and kissed me on the cheek, then shoved me through a wardrobe into a red-lit hallway that led me back into the regular flow of the production. My unexpected and, I later learned, somewhat rare "one-on-one" had ended almost as soon as it had begun, and my ignorance of *Rebecca* left me unable to make meaning of it.

Like a guilty thing, I assumed that my hermeneutic failure was the result of shoddy preparation and determined to do my homework for the second visit. I saw *Rebecca* and *Vertigo* (the source of the McKittrick Hotel and of much of *Sleep No More's* music), as well as eight other Hitchcock films. Despite *Sleep No More's* explicit citation of *Rebecca* and *Vertigo*, neither film provided the interpretive key that made meaning of my step through the wardrobe or of the production's other content: its noir mashup of characters from Hitchcock and *Macbeth*; its shopfronts for taxidermist, tailor, confectioner, undertaker, and private eye; its sanatorium, cemetery, witches' den, and speakeasy. Neither film offers parallels to *Macbeth* in plot or character, nor much in the way of imagery that might create clear intertextual meaning. In most respects, *Rebecca* and *Vertigo* seem to be red herrings, or more aptly, Macguffins, Hitchcock's term for seemingly crucial plot devices that turn out to have no real significance.

If *Sleep No More* has a Hitchcockian unconscious, it is *Psycho* that coincidentally shares a number of topoi with *Macbeth*. Here are just a few points at which *Sleep No More*, *Macbeth*, and *Psycho* converge:

- When he's not disposing of dead women or changing motel sheets, Norman Bates practices taxidermy, preferring birds to other animals. "Only birds look well stuffed," he explains, "because they're rather passive to begin with, most of them." Ironically, the most memorable image from this scene (the conversation in his parlor with the ill-fated Marion Crane) is a low-angle shot looking up at a menacing Norman, a stuffed owl posed over his shoulder with wings spread as though swooping down to snatch its prey. In addition to its taxidermy shop, *Sleep No More* features dozens of stuffed birds, a dominant motif of the production. A page in the program includes three photographs of these birds with a caption from bird-rich *Macbeth*: "all my pretty chickens and their dam / At one fell swoop" (*Macbeth*, 4.3.218-19; Shakespeare 1997). Macduff's metaphor for the murder of his family invokes both the passive birds Norman describes and the fell, swooping chicken-hawk he has repressed.
- Although Marion is murdered in *Psycho's* famous "shower scene," her dead body ends up slumped over the side of the bathtub, which Norman Bates later swabs with a mop as we watch her watery

blood swirl down the drain. Like birds, bathtubs feature prominently in *Sleep No More*, some empty and others full of bloodied water. At least two of these "incarnadine" bathtubs function as sites of failed ablution from the *Macbeth* murders, ablution that is fulfilled — at least visually — in *Psycho*. In a shot over his shoulder looking down into the bathroom sink, Norman washes his hands of Marion's blood with an efficacy that Lady Macbeth and her *Sleep No More doppelgangers* would envy.

- One of the largest, most fully realized spaces in *Sleep No More* is the King James Sanitorium (to whose name I will return later), the mental hospital in which many of the bathtubs appear. In addition to its bathing room, the sanitorium includes a reception office, dental/torture/interrogation room, infirmary, laundry, sleeping quarters, and padded cell with straightjacket. (Macbeth's wet pajamas, washed in a bathtub by a sanitorium orderly, were hung up like a dark, headless scarecrow among the white sheets of the laundry, and at one point during my first visit a nude Lady Macbeth sat scrubbing herself feverishly in another tub of the asylum.) The specter of the madhouse lingers over *Psycho*. Marion Crane's suggestion that Norman might fare better if he put his mother "someplace" provokes an angered and revealing response: "An institution? A madhouse? People always refer to a madhouse as 'someplace' [ . . . ] Have you ever seen one of those places? Inside? Laughing and tears and cruel eyes studying you." Norman's response suggests that he has been cruelly studied in just such a place, and it is to just such a place that he seems destined at the end of the film — or in which he already images himself as he intones in the voice of his now-dominant mother, "They're probably watching me."
- The plot of *Psycho* is driven by Norman's guilt. He is not merely trying to keep his mother alive; he is trying to keep her alive because he feels guilty about having murdered her. However, Norman does not experience on a conscious level either this guilt or the guilt for his subsequent murders of troublingly desirable women. As the psychiatrist explains at the end of the film, Norman projects his guilt onto the figure of his mother, who has become a component of himself. In his essay on *Macbeth*, Freud argues that Lady Macbeth is best understood as a component of Macbeth, the component who bears the signs of guilt that he, despite his qualms after murdering Duncan, does not in fact experience. Both *Psycho* and Freud's reading of *Macbeth* imagine the murderer's guilt expressing itself through the refraction of personality into

individually named and seemingly autonomous people (although there are important ways in which the two are not analogous: one murder is a matricide, the other a symbolic parricide; one split in character is a psychotic break and the other a playwright's representational idiom). As the madhouse and bathtubs suggest, *Sleep No More* is similarly interested in the psychology of guilt, representing at simultaneous moments in the performance multiple Macbeths and Lady Macbeths who encounter one another in the surreal banquet scene that is the culmination of the production's "plot."

- The splitting of personality in both *Psycho* and *Macbeth* (at least by Freud's reading) divides the guilty party into both genders, and each text explores the relationship between gender and homicidal violence. In his layered expressions of guilt and jealousy, Norman Bates imagines that his dead mother is as jealous of him as he is of her, and it is the fantasy of her jealousy that drives him (as her) to kill Marion Crane. Homicide is a feminine domain; in contrast to his murderous mother, Norman is the dutiful son and mild-mannered, domesticated swabber and sheet changer, though this gendered division of labors is ultimately collapsed by Norman's sole responsibility. More ambiguously, *Macbeth* locates prophetic power in the bearded-lady witches, locates political and dynastic violence in brutal masculine warfare, and locates the instigation for regicide in an unsexed, maternal, and barren Lady Macbeth. *Sleep No More* picks up these gender questions through one of its most seductive figures, a bare-breasted actress/dancer with a shaved head and androgynous features who seems at times to represent Hecate, Lady Macbeth, both, or possibly someone else altogether, depending on what snippets of her performance cycle the viewer happens to catch.

I could go on.

What does such an explication of intertextual echoes yield? Not very much, it turns out, particularly since much of what I've mapped here is merely the common representational vocabulary for a psychoanalytic understanding of guilt, gender, identity, and desire — an understanding anticipated by *Macbeth*, articulated by Freud, literalized by *Psycho*, and deployed by *Sleep No More*. While it may offer more precise analogues than *Rebecca* or *Vertigo*, for the project of interpreting or describing what happens in *Sleep No More*, *Psycho* is for the most part another Macguffin.

But wait; there's more. *Sleep No More* now offers a \$20 souvenir program

for purchase as one exits the McKittrick Hotel. Surely this will explain everything, I thought. And indeed, the program does suggest interpretive frames for *Sleep No More* that are not available to the more frugally minded visitor. Among its standard cast photos and interviews with the production team, the program reprints the Confession of Agnes Sampson (the "Wise Wife of Keith") from the 1591 *Newes from Scotland*. The Confession describes the demonically led efforts of a coven of Scottish witches to obstruct King James's marriage to Anne of Denmark by creating a tempest at sea (Souvenir Program 2011). Perhaps inspired by Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World* chapter on *Macbeth*, the program suggests a subtext for *Sleep No More* by invoking historical events roughly contemporary with the composition of *Macbeth*: the attempted obstruction by demonic women of Scottish regal power, the personal oversight of the North Berwick witch trials by King James, and the publication of the King's 1597 tract on witchcraft, *Daemonologie*. Unlike Greenblatt's book, however, the *Sleep No More* program makes no claims about what Shakespeare saw, knew, thought, or felt about these events as he wrote *Macbeth*. In fact, it makes no claims at all about the relationship of the North Berwick witch trials to the play, merely reprinting the Confession with two brief, explanatory footnotes about King James's interests in the trial. The only observable trace of this material in the production itself is the name of its fictitious King James Sanitorium.

By contrast, the program's Relationship Diagram, a sketchy sort of character map, claims explicit connections between *Sleep No More* and Scottish witches. But it is the Paisley witch trials of 1697, not the North Berwick trials of 1591, that the Relationship Diagram invokes. Ending in the condemnation and death of seven men and women, the Paisley witch trials were set off by the complaint of eleven-year-old Christian Shaw, who accused several townspeople of harassing her through witchcraft. She appears in *Sleep No More* as an adult, Nurse Christian Shaw of the King James Sanitorium, "former prior [*sic*] patient now running the sanitorium." Gallow Green, the spot in Paisley where six of the convicted seven were hanged and burned (the seventh committed suicide in prison), is represented in *Sleep No More* as a street in Glamis comprising the shopfronts mentioned above. The final page of the program features ads for these shops: M. Fulton Tailors is at 16 Gallow Green, Glamis; Bargarran Taxidermy is 15 Gallow Green, and so on. The program's Relationship Diagram tells us that Mr. Fulton, the tailor, is a "cunning man," his name suggesting kinship to Margaret Fulton, one of the accused witches. The taxidermist, Bargarran, also points to a figure in the Paisley trials, the father of the young Christian Shaw. Two of the Paisley witches are themselves characters in *Sleep No More*: Catherine Campbell is

"housekeeper at the McKittrick Hotel," and Agnes Naismith "has come to Gallow Green to look for her sister," a wink perhaps at Marion Crane's sister in *Psycho*, who crucially shows up in the vicinity of the Bates Motel attempting to trace Marion's whereabouts (Souvenir Program 2011).

While the Scottish witch lore referenced in the Relationship Diagram would seem to suggest an affinity with elements of *Macbeth*, the production itself links the Paisley witches to Hitchcock. Without purchasing the program, visitors would infer from their appearances and actions that the characters named as Catherine Campbell and Agnes Naismith are *Rebecca*'s second Mrs. de Winter and the creepy Manderley housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers. I found only one hint of the Paisley witches within the production itself (though admittedly there may be many others). On a desk in what appeared to be Duncan's study was an opened letter from Lady Macbeth thanking him for a necklace he had given her as a hostess gift. The envelope was addressed to Duncan Mac Crínáin, The McKittrick Hotel, Gallow Green, Glamis.

This address constellates Hitchcock, *Macbeth*, and the Paisley witches more explicitly than anything else I encountered apart from the program, which I think must be bracketed as a footnote to the production rather than an element of it. While not only *Rebecca* and *Psycho* but the Paisley witches, the North Berwick witches, and even *Macbeth* itself prove to be red herrings, I wish to suggest that the McKittrick is no Macguffin. Unlike its other citations of people, places, and narratives, *Sleep No More*'s invocation of the McKittrick Hotel articulates something fundamental about what it means to experience this production.

The McKittrick appears in only one scene of *Vertigo*. After following her to the florist, graveyard, and art museum, John Ferguson tails Madeleine to a grand Victorian mansion-turned-hotel. He watches her get out of her car and enter the front door, then sees her a few seconds later looking out from a second-story window. Ferguson then proceeds into the hotel, stopping briefly at the front desk to question the proprietress about the occupant of the room above. She tells him that the room is rented under the name Carlotta Valdes (the woman with whose spirit Madeleine seems to be possessed) but that Carlotta has not been to the hotel in several days. When Ferguson demands to inspect the room from which he has just seen Madeleine looking out, he finds it empty. He looks down to the street from the window in which she had appeared and sees that her car is gone. Was Madeleine/Carlotta really there? Where has she disappeared to, and how? In a film that ultimately explains its supernatural-seeming events through the murder scheme, Ferguson's mysterious visit to the McKittrick

resists resolution, leaving an opening for the occult in the film's tidy plot — a haunted house in the middle of an otherwise rationalist San Francisco.

John Ferguson later learns from a keeper of local legend that the McKittrick building was once the home of a tragic figure, the jilted Carlotta Valdes, who went mad with heartbreak and committed suicide. While this origin story of the McKittrick seems at first to be a crucial element of the plot, the story gradually reveals itself to be a Macguffin. What is important to *Vertigo* about the McKittrick Hotel is not its function in the film's narrative or its connection to the narrative of Carlotta but its resistance altogether to narrative — its irreconcilability to the machinery of the film's logical plot.

*Sleep No More's* McKittrick Hotel is as mysterious as its namesake, leaving its visitors not with an understanding but a haunting. The Hotel is thus more than simply another Hitchcock allusion or a tantalizing invitation to intertextual analysis. It is the place where analysis becomes frustrated, where image and event refuse to constitute plot or allusion. It is where *Vertigo* resists the neatness of *Spellbound* and instead opens into the terrifying opacity of *The Birds*. *Sleep No More's* setting in the McKittrick is an invitation to enter not into specific stories, characters, moods, or even psychological states but into an epistemological mode — a way of seeing more than we expect but less than all that's there.

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## What's Missing in *Sleep No More*

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ABSTRACT | ABSENCE-PRESENCE ON THE PAGE AND STAGE | ABSENCE-PRESENCE  
IN ADAPTATION AND RE-MEDIATION | NOTES | REFERENCES

### ABSTRACT

This essay explores dialectics of absence and presence in *Sleep No More*, considering how the production plays with fullness and vacancy in its source, its audience, its theatrical space, and its program book. Inverting the tradition of masked performers by instead masking the audience, *Sleep No More* thematizes the obscuring and revealing inherent to performance and particularly to adaptive performances. Insofar as *Macbeth* itself is a play haunted by absence, *Sleep No More* multiplies the resonant echoes of what is not quite there in ways that illuminate larger operations of adaptation and of drama.

The Punchdrunk *Sleep No More* unfolds as a continuous game of absence and presence. Theater-goers are invited to wander through a vast maze of rooms where the real is insistently present, every nook and cranny meticulously filled with period objects. Shelves are littered with kerosene lamps and candles, the dining room is furnished with antique chairs and china, and the doctor's waiting room displays a collection of old magazines fanned out on the table. Yet these rooms also emphasize at their edges gaps and absences: a corridor opens into a skeletal forest swirling with blue fog; a ballroom vanishes as trees roll in. The sets

have no contiguity, so the spectator moves from indoor to outdoor, domestic to commercial, effecting transitions by displacing her own body through empty corridors or stairwells, unescorted by the narrative or theatrical machinery that sequences scenes in more conventional forms. Often the visitor finds herself alone, in a gap between staged spectacles, unnerved by the demand to choose her own next step. At other times, caught up with one of the bands of theater-goers that collect around actors rushing to execute different scenes in different rooms, quite the opposite ensues. The experience is at once isolating and communal, at once meta-theatrical and immersive.

*Macbeth* itself is a play haunted by absence. The ambiguous status of the witches' prophecy — prediction? description? instigation? — and Macbeth's strategic mystification of his own agency in regard to the sisters' weird words render what is not there, or may not be there, the engine of the plot. Discussing *Sleep No More* in a journal of "Shakespeare and Appropriation," whose contributors largely agree that *Macbeth* is not centrally present in the Punchdrunk production, is thus intriguingly consonant with the play itself. *Sleep No More's* wordless scenes of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth washing away their deeds, for example, may import elements into the Macbeth story that are not fully underwritten by the Shakespearean script. But the Shakespearean Macbeth homologously appropriates the "scripts" of the witches' words, expeditiously arriving at the "horrid image" of becoming a murderer within twenty lines of hearing he has been named Cawdor (*Macbeth*, 1.3.125) and claiming that the spectral dagger "marshals" him "the way that [he] was going" already (2.1.42). Protracted engagement with *Macbeth* may be missing from *Sleep No More*, but both *Sleep No More* and *Macbeth* invite, and repay, examination of what's missing.

### ABSENCE-PRESENCE ON THE PAGE AND STAGE

The printed program booklet for *Sleep No More* locates generative absence-presence in spaces that readers cannot quite plumb, in its sewn bindings and unopenable double pages. The booklet offers a "Relationship Diagram" of its characters, spread over facing pages (Souvenir Program 2011, 15-16), with human characters taken from *Macbeth* on the left-hand page, the witches plus the non-Shakespearean personnel (ostensibly historical figures, McKittrick Hotel "staff," and staff of the "King James Sanatorium") on the right. The lineation that should lead to the issue of Malcolm and of Duncan, like the line that should connect back to forebearers of Nurse Christian Shaw, provocatively disappears into the bound gutter, pointing toward but not

connecting with the genealogy on the facing page. This places the links that we can't quite see — stitched into the binding that holds things together, but blocks the readerly gaze — in the center, provocatively resonating with the relationship between adaptation and source, between *Sleep No More* and *Macbeth*, Hitchcock, du Maurier, and *The Newes from Scotland*.<sup>1</sup> The distinctive physical structure of the booklet also lures its users into a codicological counterpart of theatrical voyeurism, both hiding and revealing what's inside. The booklet doubles many of its pages, conventionally folding them, then cutting the doubled pages at top and bottom but leaving them uncut, unusually, on the side. This yields paired sheets that we cannot open out, but into whose facing versos we can peer. These versos are inked blood-red. Hereby the booklet visibly saturates its hidden pages, and, with its doubled leaves, produces a tactile density that lets us feel the extra pages, despite their absence of words and refusal of full access.

In performance, the actors' elusiveness, as they rush about in a perpetual game of hide-and-seek, depends on a congruent dialectic of presence and absence, the expectation of one inflecting the momentary experience of the other. The performances foreground physical presence: actors' bodies, their interactions, and their limits. The performers dress and undress, caress blood-streaked skin, press up against one another, and reach out toward audience members. The performance is overwhelmingly physical, with hardly any speech. Instead, the performers kinetically explore their own bodies (Lady Macbeth gazes perplexed at her hands, grasping at her extremities as she repeatedly washes them) and engage one another's physical presence (coming together and pulling apart, lifting and spinning and fighting). And yet the actors are also *not* there. They run away, they disappear through doors or behind the crowd of white-masked voyeurs. Audiences' struggles to find and keep up with performers can make the actors' threatened absence the defining feature of their presence. And some of the production's characters are *most* present when they are absent: the personalized artifacts left in uninhabited rooms index some of the characters more definitively than do their wordless and fleeting appearances.

The performance sets up as well a disquieting experience of presence-absence for spectators, as it plays with our sense of our own embodiment. The experience of *Sleep No More* vacates the expected environments that allow quotidian navigation of space. As theater-goers step past the ticket collector into a twisting, nearly lightless corridor, they become dramatically aware of somatic conditions. Almost entirely

deprived of sight, we grope about, reaching out to locate ourselves in space, running hands along fabric-lined walls to keep our clumsy bodies in line. Without normal cues to guide proprioception, we blind spectators (this paradoxical phrase captures the experience rather well) find ourselves spatially dislocated. Defamiliarizing the relationship between spectator and environment continues in the disorienting elevator journey that brings audiences from the speakeasy to the primary performance spaces. Lacking floor-selection buttons, the elevator seems to move of its own accord, eventually opening onto an unnumbered, unlabeled floor. An empty box in an empty shaft, the elevator removes the indicators that usually tell us where we are. Once discharged from the elevator, we continue to find our navigational tools disrupted by the unpredictable blocking and unblocking of doorways throughout the night, which rearrange and transform space.

Spectators' disorientation and heightened awareness of somatic presence also come with a certain alienation from the body. The obligatory white plastic masks distance us from ourselves and also make us more aware of the body's boundaries. The sweaty piece of plastic pressing up against the face constricts peripheral vision, affecting perception and navigation. Furthermore, the physical barrier of the mask separates the spectator's body from the exterior world, and the production's injunction that prohibits us from intruding audibly on the performance removes us from full presence in the scenes. Finally, the actors' ignoring of the throngs of surrounding spectators, while carefully not bumping into them, further erases the audience's somatic immediacy. The performance allows us to be everywhere — we can poke about in private bedchambers and hospital wards, we can move through space and time in physically impossible ways — yet our presence is also denied.

### **ABSENCE-PRESENCE IN ADAPTATION AND RE-MEDIATION**

A banquet disrupted by a ghost: a provocative figure for the absence-presence that is adaptation. In *Macbeth's* banquet scene, Banquo's ghost is discomfiting and generative, inviting response to a source that is not quite there, visible to none of the guests at the communal feast that the ghost disrupts. Locating the banquet hall on the ground floor of the "McKittrick Hotel," *Sleep No More* makes the banquet scene foundational, at least spatially, to this production. In *Macbeth*, the spectral masque of Banquo's heirs, "a show of eight Kings and Banquo, the last with a glass in his hand" (4.1.111), stages a multiplication of royal progeny, images made infinite in a mirror. Like the banquet

scene, this offers both an example of adaptive re-mediation and a figure for it.

Congruent with the inset and self-multiplying iterations produced by Macbeth's deploying a mirror within a dumb-show, within what may be a vision, within a play, the banquet in *Sleep No More* multiplies the forms and media it invokes. Performed in slow motion, lit by strobes, the *Sleep No More* banquet codes as cinematic: slow motion renders live action as if it were filmed, and the intermittently illuminated scenes look like film stills, or perhaps zootropic machinery run at an off-speed. This spectacle of re-mediation, film minus celluloid, stimulates our consideration of relationships among the genres contributing to the production: Shakespearean drama, Hitchcockian film, gothic novel, museum collection. The cinematic spectacle embodied in the room affects spectators' sense of time, continuity, and how these play out in different media re-mediations. Temporally, adaptations locate us in both the time of the source text and of the adapted text; *Sleep No More's* slow motion puts us in the two different time frames of our own somatic experience, which unrolls at its accustomed pace, and of the staged action before us. The discontinuity created by strobe flashes likewise suggests a mode of interaction between sources and appropriations. Discontinuity evokes the inherent gaps between call and response, and the intermittent illumination makes perceptible those moments when action and light intersect (and emphasizes the gaps between those intersections), just as we perceive in distinctive ways the intermittent moments when source and adaptation closely coincide (and notice when they don't). When the *Sleep No More* banquet transforms from feast to orgy, it emphasizes the promiscuous, generative response of richly, perhaps transgressively, dynamic adaptation.

Inverting the tradition of masked performers by masking the audience instead, *Sleep No More* thematizes the obscuring and revealing, the absence and presence that are inherent to performance and particularly to adaptive performances. In the dramatic banquet that is *Sleep No More*, we are the ghosts — unreliably present, partially detached from space, time, and our own bodies. In *Macbeth*, the strange semi-presence of Banquo's ghost makes him a pivotal figure motivating much of the play. Is that not what audiences always do, offering as we do the pretext for the night's work to unfold?

## NOTES

1. This last is a 1591 publication proposed in the program booklet as a source for *Sleep No More*. From it, the program takes an account of the witchcraft trial of Agnes Sampson (Souvenir Program 2011, 30, 39), as well as proper names of persons and places used in the production and its para-texts.

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Souvenir Program. 2011. *Sleep No More*.

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# Punchdrunk: Performance, Permission, Paradox

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## ABSTRACT

This essay explores the techniques that Punchdrunk uses to generate a sense of freedom and empowerment for the individual audience member. Second, it analyzes the fiscal, spatial, and conceptual restrictions of this system of empowerment. Finally, it examines the material nature of the production and the commercial realities of its current iteration.

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Punchdrunk's theatrical installation pieces have significantly influenced both contemporary installation art and theatrical practice. Though Punchdrunk has been well known for nearly a decade in Europe (tickets to a Punchdrunk piece sell faster than many rock concerts in London, where the group is based), U.S. artists and audiences have connected with Punchdrunk's work through *Sleep No More*, which currently runs in three disused warehouses in New York City and previously played in abandoned elementary schools in suburbs of Boston and London. Based loosely on the plot of *Macbeth* and invoking the visual rhetoric of Alfred Hitchcock films, notably *Vertigo* and *Rebecca*, *Sleep No More* is a vast art installation populated by nearly silent actors. Audience members don masks and choose their own route through the performance space.

Punchdrunk frames their work in a rhetoric of audience empowerment and emphasizes the role of each audience member's individual choice in their pieces. Punchdrunk argues that their work disrupts the traditional role of the spectator, which Punchdrunk sees as intellectual rather than emotional or instinctual (Machon 2009, 89). The first part of this essay will explore the techniques used to generate this sense of freedom. *Sleep No More* and other Punchdrunk pieces create an extremely intricate system for the integration of audience members into the world of the installation. Inside the piece, performers often directly avoid audience members, refusing to provide a single linear narrative and encouraging individualized plot experiences.

Second, I will explore restrictions on this system of empowerment. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, Punchdrunk installations limit, guide, and often directly control the audience's gaze and narrative experience. The performance spaces of pieces such as *Sleep No More* are themselves full of physical barriers and spatial divides. Finally, this essay will explore the profoundly object-based nature of Punchdrunk installations. Full of a wildly intricate series of props and detailed set adornments, *Sleep No More* often presents a clearer narrative through stationary objects than through performers. The commercial nature of *Sleep No More*'s current New York run also poses challenges to the rhetoric of empowerment, further limiting who can enter the installation and the kinds of experiences visitors can create.

Writing about Punchdrunk's work poses the significant challenge of describing countless events occurring simultaneously across dozens of performance spaces within the piece. *Sleep No More* presents an additional obstacle: the different spaces of the Boston, New York, and London productions necessarily produce different interactions and narratives. I will confine my study to the two American productions I have experienced in person and stipulate which production I am referring to when differences arise. While many of the interactions and visual settings I describe were witnessed repeatedly in my six visits to *Sleep No More*, I hope to remind the reader that my own interpretations are guided by a necessarily incomplete experience of the performance.

When drawing generalizations about the different versions of *Sleep No More*, it is important to note that when the piece was first created in 2003, founder Felix Barrett had not yet envisioned the way in which his company would remount it. In an interview with Josephine Machon following the London version, he claimed that "we approach each project as 'one building builds the show'; it is 'specific' but it's sympathetic in the

way it's devised. The thought of transferring . . . to a different space, different country, different cultural references is daunting" (Machon 2009, 93). Increased exposure to new audiences, aesthetic expansion of the original London production, and the opportunity for profit all may have shifted Barrett's thinking about the site-specificity of *Sleep No More* and other Punchdrunk pieces. The possible economic motivation for these remounts will be discussed in the final part of this essay.

Though Barrett and other Punchdrunk artists use the common term "audience" to describe the paying attendants of their performances, I will offer an alternative terminology. Audience members have been given a myriad of names in the aftermath of performance studies' shakeup of theatrical scholarship. Borrowing from Louis Marin's dubbing of Disneyland customers in *Utopics: Spatial Play*, I will henceforth refer to Punchdrunk attendees as "narrator-visitors," emphasizing the role that the personal interpretations of these narrator-visitors play in the creation of the theatrical event. Marin stresses the foregrounding the narrator-visitor has received before arriving at Disneyland: "The coming back of reality as a fantasy, as a hallucinatory wish-fulfillment, is in fact mediated by a complete system of representations designed by Walt Disney and constituting a rhetorical and iconic code and vocabulary that have been perfectly mastered by the narrator-visitor" (Marin 1984, 246). In *Sleep No More*, this vocabulary includes Shakespeare's play, Hitchcock's sights and sounds, and prior knowledge of Punchdrunk's techniques and approaches.

Since Shakespeare's tragedies and Hitchcock's films may lack the pervasive influence of Disney's movies, television shows, resorts, cruise lines, toys, and theme parks,<sup>1</sup> Punchdrunk often draws on our generalized understandings and misconceptions of their specific content. *Sleep No More* divorces the plot of *Macbeth* altogether from Shakespeare's language, often eliding characters and events for the sake of a streamlined narrative. Similarly, characters culled from Hitchcock's canon (The Second Mrs. de Winter and Mrs. Danvers from *Rebecca*, for example) are often imbued with narrative details and costume pieces drawn from other Hitchcock figures. Just as characters from different Disney films play alongside one another at Disneyland, the characters in *Sleep No More* present a form of intertextuality to the narrator-visitor. Upon meeting an actor in a dark hallway, a narrator-visitor is often unsure whether the character is drawn from *Macbeth*, a Hitchcock film, or some amalgamation of the two.

To introduce the range and scope of *Sleep No More's* installations, let me

describe the barrage of imagery that accompanied my first hour inside the Massachusetts performance space. As I walked from floor to floor and room to room, hoping to create some sort of outline of the space and its limits, every new door seemed to open into a self-contained world with little or no relationship to what came before it. One room was filled with twelve claw-footed bathtubs, one of which contained a live eel. Another room was covered with cardboard boxes and carpeted with straw. An ornithological laboratory was teeming with preserved birds and handwritten field notes. A dark lounge transformed into a strobe-lit, techno-fueled orgy of stage blood, naked bodies, and a lifelike goat head. A ballroom became a forest, filled with the sights, sounds, and smells of actual evergreens. Some narrator-visitors attempt to experience the breadth of the physical space, as I did, but many prefer to follow a character on his or her individual journey. By choosing to follow Lady Macbeth or Hecate, for example, a narrator-visitor would experience only a small percentage of the performance space.

Punchdrunk views this freedom of choice as fundamentally empowering. Barrett argues that "empowerment of the audience" is "central" to Punchdrunk's work (Machon 2009, 89). The company's website expands this sense of agency beyond Barrett's understanding of the narrator-visitor's empowerment: "audiences are invited to rediscover the childlike excitement and anticipation of exploring the unknown and experience a real sense of adventure" (About 2012).<sup>2</sup> Josephine Machon offers a valuable theoretical model for Punchdrunk's work alongside her interview of Barrett in *(Syn)aesthetics*. Defining the term (syn)aesthetics (which she draws from a neurological disorder of sensory stimulation) as "a fused sensory perceptual experience and a fused and sensate approach to artistic practice and analysis," Machon also focuses on the link with childhood and youthful play: "interestingly, the majority of current research in the area presents strong arguments for synesthesia being present and active in all human perception from birth but, whereas the majority of humans filter this out and learn to separate sensual experience, only a minority retain this unusual perceptual ability" (Machon 2009, 14-15). How might this majority of non-synaesthetic adults transition from everyday life into the role of a Punchdrunk narrator-visitor?

Marin's study of the transition into the decidedly childish Disneyland space in *Utopics: Spatial Play* again provides a helpful point of comparison. He describes a three-part transition into the world of Disneyland, including "the outer limit of the parking area, the intermediary limit of ticket booths, and the inner limit of the route made

by the Santa Fe Railroad" (Marin 1984, 242). As customers leave behind their cars, a vestigial link to the world outside the park, they are gradually immersed in a world of childlike adventure. Even after these three limits, customers are guided along Main Street U.S.A. until the full breadth of the park's districts and choices for movement become visible and viable options.

*Sleep No More* utilizes a system of integration similar to the three-part threshold theorized by Marin. In both Massachusetts and New York, narrator-visitors wait on the street before waiting again inside a large gate, gradually being introduced into the space in small groups. In a move perhaps taken from the marketing of trendy nightclubs, the visibility of a long line outside the performance space nightly also contributes to the publicity effort. Like the plays of Shakespeare and the films of Hitchcock, the presence of a line of people on a city street has a shared vocabulary. If a long line has formed, something interesting *must* be happening. The "cool factor" of the performance is reinforced by the willingness of New Yorkers and Bostonians to wait in inclement weather for a chance to enter the space.

The intermediary limit, to use Marin's term, is the most jarring of the three. As strains of Bernard Herrmann's moody scores for Hitchcock films swell, narrator-visitors enter a dimly lit maze of black velvet walls. In my own first visit, I found this to be the most uncomfortable and frightening aspect of the performance. Disoriented and squinting, I was forced to grope along the maze's walls and begin the ambulatory and sensorial tasks that would comprise my journey throughout the performance. Barrett notes that Punchdrunk pieces always contain such an "entrance point to the world we create, which is like entering a decompression chamber, to acclimate to the world before being set free in it" (Machon 2009, 90-91).

After escaping the maze, I entered the third, most elaborate limit. One by one, the other narrator-visitors and I entered the Manderley Bar, a lounge — complete with a live jazz trio — that draws its name from Hitchcock's 1940 film *Rebecca*. Small groups were called forward and handed plastic carnival masks by a friendly guide and told the two most important rules governing their visit to *Sleep No More*: narrator-visitors may not speak and may not, when inside, remove their masks. I was also encouraged to explore on my own.<sup>3</sup> By this point, the limits had raised exponentially my anticipation of the performance. As I started to enter the child-like state that Punchdrunk and Machon have described, I desperately longed to see the installation, to move freely, and to play.

Though I personally accepted and was invested in the empowerment that the mask provided me as a narrator-visitor, many others around me were resistant to *Sleep No More's* insistence upon mask-wearing. Punchdrunk choreographer Maxine Doyle picks up on Barrett's idea of empowerment, arguing that the mask is "the one thing that removed that sense of trepidation, whatever baggage you're bringing in, it's neutralized by the mask. So you can be a timid person, but be crazy in the show world" (Machon 2009). The trepidation Doyle describes is explored at length by Nicholas Ridout in *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* as an immense feeling of embarrassment. He stresses the ways in which face-to-face encounters put pressure on the audience member: "If it is not clear what the rules are . . . then we don't know what responses to engage when the encounter comes" (Ridout 2006, 79). The mask is a central tool for Punchdrunk to take the fear of embarrassment off the mind of the narrator-visitor. When narrator-visitors remove their masks, which are often uncomfortable and hot to wear for the three-hour performance, actors may walk up to them and silently put them back on. While I did feel liberated by the mask as I wandered the installation, others seemed to find a new form of embarrassment in the cumbersome mask and the sweat generated by wearing it.

After donning their masks, narrator-visitors were herded into an elevator by a deranged bellhop. As he hummed the bars of Cole Porter's "Let's Misbehave," the bellhop began to drop narrator-visitors off on various floors.<sup>4</sup> They were not given a choice of destination, and although the narrator-visitors were divided in a seemingly arbitrary way, the bellhop often deliberately separated couples and small groups by blocking a narrator-visitor's exit with his arm. The first stop was always the same in my repeated visits to *Sleep No More*: the bellhop allowed one narrator-visitor off, then barred the rest of the group from leaving, smirking at the stranded narrator-visitor's confusion as the elevator doors shut.

The elevator is one example of the central paradox of *Sleep No More*. While Barrett, Doyle, and the Punchdrunk website consistently frame the experience of the narrator-visitor with terms like "empowerment" and "possibility," the space and the movements of the actors in it are constantly limiting and constraining; they prevent the narrator-visitor from exploring the full range of choices. Just as Marin highlighted the forced narratives of Disneyland as he mapped the ways each element contributed to the overarching story, *Sleep No More* offers a fundamentally limited range of options to the narrator-visitor. The outer walls of the installations themselves serve as a powerful physical reminder of the various restrictions inside them.

The entryways to many of the rooms in the installation themselves are further manipulated to limit the activities of the narrator-visitors. Many rooms are locked and unlocked periodically throughout the performance in order to facilitate a set or costume change. I often found the unpredictable nature of these closures frustrating in my *Sleep No More* visits. Making a mental note to revisit a room often proved futile when a previously open door became locked. At times, fellow audience members, newly encountered performers, and other physical limitations within the space made continuing to follow a character impossible.

Occasionally, actors bring narrator-visitors into private spaces with them. In order to facilitate a one-on-one exchange, actors will take a narrator-visitor by the hand, lead her into a closet or small room, produce a key, and lock the door.<sup>5</sup> When a close friend was brought into a small room for a one-on-one, I again found myself frustrated when I attempted to follow him and the door was shut in my face. In the several online forums created by fans of *Sleep No More*, these one-on-ones are revered and described in great depth. Repeat narrator-visitors often boast about how many one-on-ones they can experience in a single performance.

In perhaps the most interesting technique for audience manipulation, Punchdrunk employs rotary telephones in many rooms of the *Sleep No More* installation. A narrator-visitor brave enough to pick up a ringing phone may be instructed by an actor to leave the room, to meet the actor in another room, or to engage or avoid another actor. A shy narrator-visitor may have the receiver handed to her by an actor. Once again, choice and personal empowerment are paradoxically limited and constructed. Even if a narrator-visitor "chooses" to answer the phone, she is simply responding in one of two predictable ways to a stimulus provided by Punchdrunk. The tail cannot wag the dog, and the narrator-visitor cannot escape the influence of Punchdrunk's restraints.

The most pervasive form of limitation imposed on narrator-visitors in *Sleep No More* is the presence of Stewards. Silent throughout the performance, Stewards are extensions of the house management staff and stage crew, kept abreast of the performance's progress by radio headsets. Whereas narrator-visitors wear large white masks, Stewards don black masks and dark clothing. Though the bellhop is quick to point out that they exist to help narrator-visitors, their masked stares are often profoundly nerve-wracking, or, to use Ridout's term, embarrassing. Their presence deeply complicates the supposed empowerment the mask provides, adding a third layer to the face-to-face exchange between performers and audiences that Ridout describes. They also add an

element of fright to the performance in the style of a haunted house. I often found myself gasping when I discovered a black-masked face lurking in the corners of a room that I previously thought was empty.

The Stewards serve primarily to protect the props and set pieces rather than the performers.<sup>6</sup> Architecture, set design, and props are the fundamental building blocks of Punchdrunk's pieces. Though Barrett and Doyle frame their work with rhetoric of interpersonal exchange, *Sleep No More* is fundamentally object-based and space-based rather than performer-based. Rehearsals with actors comprise a small chunk of the painstakingly slow process of developing a Punchdrunk piece. Barrett notes that because actor routes and exchanges are intrinsically derived from the space, rehearsals cannot begin until the installation has been nearly completed:

The space is all-important and the way we build the work is about our instinctual response to it . . . The most crucial part of the process in terms of building the show is the first time the team walks around it . . . All we're doing is just harnessing the power of the space, making the building work to its potential. When we plan shows, I deliberately step back from doing too much research on it until the space is fixed because it would completely change the sense, the feeling, the narrative implications of my response. (Machon 2009, 92)

The process of moving from this first walkthrough to rehearsal leads to an even more overwhelming need for detail. The ornithological laboratory, for example, is filled with dozens of handwritten notebooks. Each of these books is filled with hundreds of pages of field notes, handwritten in ink on antique paper that would make photocopying impossible. This relatively minor scenic element of just one room inside the installation required countless hours of labor. And this pattern of detail expands exponentially through the dozens of rooms in *Sleep No More*. Each and every drawer in every desk, dresser, and cupboard in the installation, of which there are hundreds, must be filled with furnishings appropriate to period, character, and situation. Ink must be refilled in pens and typewriters. Perishables must be replenished when narrator-visitors eat or drink them. The trinkets and playing cards given to narrator-visitors must be replaced nightly. The rabbit hole of detail in *Sleep No More's* prop-centered reality goes deep.

This discussion of the piece's labor costs leads to a consideration of how it is funded. When *Sleep No More* appeared for its limited Massachusetts run, funded partially by a Mellon Foundation grant won by the American

Repertory Theatre (which programmed the piece), tickets sold for twenty-five dollars. Word-of-mouth led to sold-out performances after the first week. Extensions were added as the reputation Punchdrunk enjoys in Europe began to spread in American theatrical circles. Tickets for the open-ended New York run now sell for one hundred and five dollars and disappear almost as soon as they are made available. Monday performances and late-night showings have been added to meet growing demand.

One final Punchdrunk paradox must now be examined. The company is a registered charity in the United Kingdom, receiving tax exemption and significant yearly subsidies from the Arts Council and The Paul Hamlyn Foundation (About 2012). A base of individual donors, dubbed the Friends of Punchdrunk,<sup>7</sup> functions in the same manner as at a non-profit institutional theater such as A.R.T., which used similar tax-exempt status and Mellon Foundation dollars to develop the Massachusetts version of *Sleep No More*. And yet, the New York production runs on a commercial pricing structure with an open-ended run. Though overwhelmingly derived from the Boston and London productions, New York's *Sleep No More* technically is produced by a private organization known as Emursive rather than by Punchdrunk or A.R.T. Presumably, this makes revenues from tickets, concessions, and merchandise subject to taxation, though the substantial development costs of the massive show were incurred by nonprofits.<sup>8</sup>

Punchdrunk's work will likely become even more paradoxical as its sphere of influence grows. Once a small company known only to the British avant-garde, Punchdrunk now extends its broad reach in Europe to the United States. And interest is not waning: recent episodes of *Gossip Girl* and *Law and Order: SVU* have been set within *Sleep No More*. Pseudo-celebrity gossip blogger Perez Hilton offers frequent updates about the visits of famous narrator-visitors: when recounting the visit of Kim Kardashian and Kanye West to the production, for instance, the website Gawker described *Sleep No More* as a "Sexy Naked Theater Thing." Far from avoiding such exposure, Punchdrunk has invited it, earning cries of "selling out" from longtime fans (myself included) much as a musical group might on the route to superstardom. As someone highly attracted to the piece since it opened in Massachusetts three years ago, I find myself in a situation analogous to that of the die-hard fan of a previously unknown band.<sup>9</sup> As much as I want to decry the watering down of *Sleep No More* for commercial consumption in New York, the piece still thrills and attracts me. The spectacle may have grown too large, but the concepts behind it still deserve the considerable attention it

receives from scholars, practitioners, and audience members.

## NOTES

1. Particularly among narrator-visitors under age forty, who comprise the majority of ticket-buyers.
2. Like their productions, Punchdrunk's website is designed as a confusing visual landscape. The page that describes the company's work cannot be linked to directly and can be found only by wandering the landscape of fields and isolated buildings to its outer limits. To me, the site evokes *Myst* and other early graphic adventure video games, which also play out the contrast between user freedom and scripted outcomes.
3. In my six visits to *Sleep No More*, five in Boston and one in New York, the actual text spoken by the guide varied, but always contained these three elements.
4. Three floors in Boston, six in New York. Once inside the installation, the narrators use stairwells to access the other floors.
5. I experienced two of these "one-on-ones" and had several others described to me by colleagues and fellow narrator-visitors. While the actual content of the encounters vary widely, they always end with the actor bestowing a small gift on the narrator-visitor: an inexpensive necklace, a shot of alcohol labeled as absinthe, etc.
6. However, actors can communicate remotely with the Stewards from different rooms. When a friend and fellow narrator-visitor unwittingly blocked an actor's route, the actor picked up a nearby phone and called a Stewart to remove the narrator-visitor.
7. Donors are given an increased number of "keys" to the Punchdrunk website based upon the size of their gifts. Certain keys unlock sections of the website that reveal details of forthcoming work.
8. In addition to their self-imagined productions, Punchdrunk has taken on commercial projects designed for private corporations, including Sony, Stella Artois, and Louis Vuitton.
9. The narrative of the disenfranchised fan I have described is constantly repeated on the production's fan blogs, notably the "*Sleep No More* Crossover Fanfiction Blog": there are complaints that the Massachusetts production was vastly superior to the Manhattan staging, that the increased attention and publicity have made the performances too crowded, and that the cost prevents die-hard fans from returning and exploring further.

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# Tracking the Scottish Play: The Sounds of *Sleep No More*

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## ABSTRACT

Music is crucial to the experience of *Sleep No More*. The production features popular gongs from the 1930s and early 1940s; film soundtracks from the 1950s and 1960s; and a few contemporary works. Providing more than simply background sound, this music engages viewers actively in interpretive exercises with no decisive solution. *SNM*'s music helps to create both atmosphere and an elusive subtext to its many-layered dreamscape.

The creators of *Sleep No More* (*SNM*) describe their production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as an "experience" rather than a show, a play, or anything that might suggest passive consumption. In fact, they prefer not to talk about it at all, fearing that doing so will harm the unique, real-time experience one has when visiting the McKittrick Hotel. When forced to describe the production, however, they often use filmic terms.<sup>1</sup> Sound is crucial to any movie production, and it is given clear prominence and respect in *SNM*. In the interview section of the show's program, Punchdrunk Founder and Artistic Director, Felix Barrett, begins by citing the soundtrack:

Q. Where did the idea for *Sleep No More* come from?

FELIX: As with most of our work, *Sleep No More* started with the score. I found an old recording of a film noir soundtrack that felt wonderfully emotive; I loved its frisson of danger and I could see an epic theatrical world within it. Our sound designer Stephen Dobbie and I then started exploring other soundtracks and began to collect musical fragments to create a sonic palette for the show. (Emursive 2011, 23)

In a lecture delivered at a StoryCode event in New York, Punchdrunk Producer Peter Higgin also emphasized just how central music was to the development of *SNM* and how he and sound designer Stephen Dobbie were both ex-DJs.<sup>2</sup>

Sixteen separate running tracks of music and sound are piped into every corner of the McKittrick Hotel (Sekules, 2011), and the results of their influence are evident. As the core inspiration for the experience, the music is very much a conspirator — with the extraordinarily detailed set design, choreography, and costuming — in the unsettling dream world *SNM* conjures up.

The music heard during the show falls into three basic categories: popular songs from the late 1930s and early 40s; film soundtracks from the 1950s and 60s; and a handful of more contemporary works.<sup>3</sup> Each is used to create distinctly different effects. Combined, they create the atmosphere and subtext to a many-layered dreamscape. If it is true that the experience of *SNM* is like walking through someone else's dream, the music offers guidance, clues, and misdirection as to what the dream could mean, and who the dreamer might be.

The music one hears most frequently in the show is a selection of popular tunes that cluster strongly in the early 1940s. The music is at once familiar and otherworldly, as it tugs the visitor back to a nostalgic early-WWII period in U.S. and U.K. history. Glenn Miller, Al Bowly, Billie Holiday, Vera Lynn, The Ink Spots, Benny Goodman, and Tommy Dorsey (see below, clip of "I'll Never Smile Again"), among others, all make sonic appearances.

mp3

If listened to on its own, this set of songs is not particularly unsettling. Quite the opposite, in fact. However, the songs are not presented as simple background music, played to add historical context. Instead, the songs are meticulously assembled, along with the other elements of the soundtrack, into a pastiche that integrates deeply with the show's design and action. To understand better the intentionality of the choices made to shape *SMN*'s sound design, a brief discussion of sound engineering techniques is in order.

Depending on the desired effect, when a sound designer assembles any set of songs, a number of techniques can be employed to shape the sound. At the very least, the relative volume levels for each song are evened out to provide consistent loudness between all the tracks. In the case of *SMN*, this prevents the sound from being overly loud at times and completely inaudible at others. It is also common to employ some amount of equalization, so that the songs present an even set of frequencies to the listener's ear and so that one track does not contrast too greatly with another and interfere with the effect of the recording. These elements of sound "mastering" are as much an art as an engineering process. If one were only attempting to preserve the integrity of the original recording, one would use these techniques very lightly or not at all. If one were attempting to restore a recording to a more pristine condition, one might take further steps to remove the pops, crackles, and other artifacts that have accumulated since the original recording.

Punchdrunk does not present the music as either preserved or restored to its original glory. Rather, it is enhanced. For example, the scratches and pops of well-worn vinyl are prominent and emphasized elements in the sound, as are the weathered and muffled qualities that immediately cue our minds to the fact that we are listening to music from over fifty years ago. Sometimes all that is heard is the repetitive scrape of a needle that has reached the innermost groove of a vinyl platter. The lighting has a similar mediating effect. Dark and often softened by a thin sheet of fog, the lighting places our surroundings in soft focus, requiring us to concentrate in order to verify what we are seeing. The

masks worn by all guests eliminate some peripheral vision, heightening and enhancing the remaining senses. Pupils dilate as we adjust to the darkness and latch on to other familiar aspects of the show's design. A hotel lobby with period-appropriate furniture (antique to us) looks comfortable, lived-in, and familiar enough. A dining room with place settings looks like a quaint spot for morning coffee . . . but wait. At one end stands a full-sized, taxidermied deer emerging from a mountain of salt.



This does not compute as "normal" in any historical sense, but by itself it can be dispatched as a singular oddity. A turn to the left reveals more such oddities in the form of a series of evenly-spaced crucifixes made out of forks set decoratively upon their own piles of salt. At this moment, the music may be punctuated by a clap of distant thunder.

A sonic analogue to the deer standing in salt can be heard when some tracks are manipulated to elevate their dream-like qualities. For instance, touches of reverse echo added to the vocal range creates a ghostly ambience in some tracks.<sup>4</sup> Although today, this technique can be created digitally with relative ease, it was used only beginning in the late 1960s, at which time it required a high degree of physical manipulation of the magnetic recording tape. The effect results in the playing of the reverb or echo of a sound before the origin of the echo arrives. Producer/guitarist Jimmy Page employed the reverse echo in a number of Led Zeppelin tracks, but a strong dramatic example can be found in the movie *Poltergeist* (1982). The effect is used on Carol Anne's voice when the girl is first heard speaking to her parents from the spirit world.

mp3

In a modern recording, we hear the reverse echo as an intentional effect, adding an ominous and

unnatural coloration to the sound. When applied to an older recording that predates the technique, by contrast, the results can be disconcerting. This doctored sound, combined with abundant visual clues, works to create the gradual impression that this world is not a historical recreation at all: it is a dream set in a familiar construction of the past.

Most of the characters' paths lead to a large ballroom for the scene in which Lady Macbeth throws a party to honor Duncan. A large share of the audience also finds its way there, making the scene a major set piece. Once again, at first glance, all is well. The performers all look attractive and well turned out in era-appropriate dress. The swingin' sounds of Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman bring an air of lightness and cheer as they animate the dancing couples.<sup>5</sup> More characters are smiling in this scene than in any other, and some performers pull audience members into the dance. Times are good. But as the music remains upbeat, one starts to notice more sinister activities. Macbeth looks on angrily from the mezzanine as his wife dances with Duncan. Macduff is becoming intimate with a seductive witch. Helpless to respond, Lady Macduff is slowly being drugged by the housekeeper until she faints. In its original historical context, big band music in the 1940s gave comfort and respite to citizens during wartime. In *SNM*, that comfort turns cold as we see it provide counterpoint to the malicious behavior that we fear will only worsen.

mp3

The ballroom scene may seem a straightforward use of music providing counterpoint to the action. Taken by itself, however, the scene sets the stage as a production of *Macbeth* reset in a historically accurate 1939. Over time, one notices enough surreal details that the historical account gives way to a dreamworld whose narrator is by default unreliable. Punchdrunk cleverly constructs an unreliable narrator by becoming unreliable curators. In Macbeth's quarters, for instance, antique furniture is stacked up in ways you would never find in a history museum. Throughout *SNM*, music also serves to heighten the dream-like qualities of the experience by dislocating us from time. While most of the songs date to circa 1940, not all of the songs played are from the same year or even the same era. The result is a certain amount of time slippage as if the dreamer is shifting between years. Three of four songs sung by Peggy Lee, for instance, extend into the 1950s and 60s.<sup>6</sup> Jo Stafford's "Blue Moon" mimics the stylings of the earlier songs, but was actually released in 1952.

Contrasting with these popular music selections are the film scores used during key moments of action and drama. These scores are borrowed primarily from three movies by Alfred Hitchcock: *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956). All three are composed by Bernard Herrmann and feature a familiar symphonic instrumentation. Herrmann's work on those soundtracks was highly influential, and a similar instrumentation and style is often used in modern films. Many audience members may simply perceive that the movie music is playing at a higher volume accompanied by unique lighting cues to focus their attention on the action at hand. The fact that the films were released between 1956 and 1960 adds to the time slippage for anyone attempting to make meaning out of the dream-like events they are witnessing. Is it possible that the dreamer is sleeping in the 1960s and dreaming back to an earlier time? The production does borrow a great deal from the movie *Rebecca*, which is told as a flashback: "We can never go back to Manderley again. But sometimes, in my dreams, I do go back to those strange days" (Hitchcock 1940), the narrator begins, and each night a few select visitors to the McKittrick may hear those very words as they

begin their journey.<sup>7</sup> Every single visitor enters the hotel after feeling her way through two dark hallways while she hears a clip from the soundtrack to *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. This passageway, filled with Herrmann's music, marks the transition between our present reality and the 1939 McKittrick bar that awaits when you emerge from the darkness.<sup>8</sup>

Integrating the *Vertigo* soundtrack so thoroughly and naming our hotel the McKittrick evokes one of the more curious scenes in the film. As Alice Dailey discusses in her contribution to this cluster, the protagonist in *Vertigo* sees a woman he is following enter the McKittrick hotel and then spots her in the window on the second floor. Upon entering the hotel, he discovers that she has vanished from the building and her car outside is gone. The movie never explains how she disappeared, and no ready explanation is available. It is fitting that the space containing the undefinable experience of *SNM* takes this unusual and unexplained scene as its namesake.

[mp3](#)

The third category of music — a few contemporary pieces used during pivotal sequences — adds yet another layer of time dislocation and sonic contrast. The soundtrack to David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (Angelo Badalamenti, 2001) and a mix of two pieces of electronica from 2005 and 2009 are used in two pivotal scenes in the production.<sup>9</sup>

David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* also contains a great deal of dream imagery and slippage in time. Most of Lynch's films go in and out of dreamspace (or from dreamspace-to-dreamspace) with complete fluidity. As in the case of *SNM*, you may ask yourself whether it was only partly, or completely a dream. The soundtrack to *Mulholland Drive* borrows genres from a variety of the decades between 1940 and 1970, with some modern synthesizer and sound effects added to skew things further. The banquet scene in *SNM* uses a melding of three tracks from *Mulholland Drive* (mostly a track called "Diner") as the lighting and action slowly shift from dream to nightmare. Macbeth envisions Banquo's ghost as his guests move literally out of time (in slow motion) and point accusatory fingers in his direction. The track is largely an ambient drone of low strings and other sound effects, accented with cymbals and a slide of violins. The symphonic instruments we heard in Herrmann's work for Hitchcock are deconstructed and reconstructed into layers of sound that give the track a much more contemporary feel. At best, the track occupies a place outside of recognizable time periods.

The electronica comes in at the most arresting scene of show: a series of visions presented to Macbeth by the witches. The music cuts through the scene like a tear in the temporal fabric. Strobe lights, nudity, sex, a man wearing a goat's head, a bloody newborn child, and frenetic dancing provide visuals to a track that pulses and clatters along at a breathless 180 beats per minute. The synthetic pulse of the kick drum and the prominent, distorted synth bass makes clear that the track is from our current era and no other.

[mp3](#)

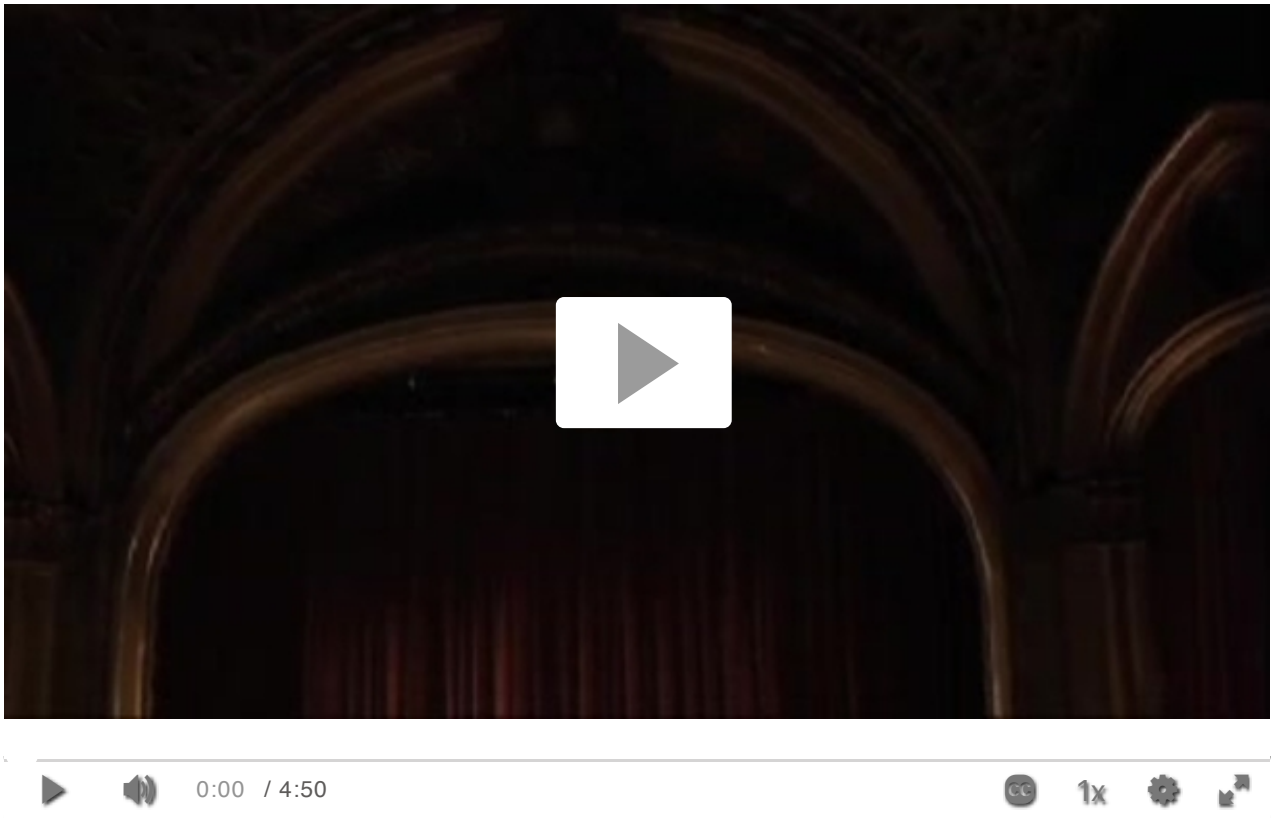
Where is our dreamer now? During the two scenes mentioned above that are the most removed from any extant, temporally specific reality, the soundtrack is pulling us into the present. Could we be in a dream that begins in the 60s and reaches back to the 40s while the dreamer lies in the present day?

*SNM* gives us no easy answers, but there are clues. In *Rebecca*, we have a narrator/dreamer from the present (contemporary to the film) looking back through a gauzy lens of memory and dream. *Mulholland Drive* could very well be completely a dream, or a series of dreams. Also telling is the importance of the two scenes above to Shakespeare's work. One sets in motion Macbeth's string of killings and the other marks his unraveling. At the very least, the contemporary music suggests that the dreamer herself is working through some weighty thoughts of her own.

From where is the music coming? There is a large radio visible in the speakeasy bar that has a fondness for the Ink Spots,<sup>10</sup> and some smaller, period-appropriate radios can be found in other rooms. You can sometimes hear the sound of the dial flitting between stations, as if it were being moved by an unseen hand. At other times, the radio music is subsumed completely by ominous drones that could not possibly be a product of any era. In fact, much of the sound could be considered non-diegetic, or at best ambiguous as to its source. In the graveyard, you can hear crickets and in the forest, wind. The performers themselves emit sounds, and some distant thunder can be heard now and then, but that is about it for in-world sound.

Even in the two scenes in *SNM* that feature characters lip-syncing, the source of the music is notably absent; the performers are conspicuously alone on stage, positioned near musician-less instruments. In both cases, they are lip-syncing a voice of the opposite gender. This adds to the haunting quality of their performances. Are we hearing the music in their heads? In the mezzanine overlooking a ballroom dance, a piano and record player also remain inanimate as several characters dance to the music of an unseen band. If *SNM* were simply following the rules of a musical, in which the source of musical accompaniment need not be justified, the inanimate instruments near the performers are making that leap difficult. In most other cases, it is unclear at best whether the characters can hear the music, even as they move to it with great synchronicity.

In *Mulholland Drive*, there is a scene in which the two female leads attend a show at "Club Silencio." There, as the announcer on stage tells us, "There is no band. And yet we hear a band . . . It is all an illusion." A woman comes on stage and appears to sing, a cappella and in Spanish, Roy Orbison's "Crying," then faints and is carried off as the music continues without her. (If you have seen *SNM*, you may draw several parallels between that scene and a number of moments in the production.) Lynch — a director who personally labors over the details of his soundtracks — is overtly toying with the formal aspects of the typical film soundtrack. What is the source of the sound? Who is controlling it? Why is the music familiar yet foreign? Why are we hearing thunder inside a theater? Could it all be dream?



If so, *SNM* is no typical night of dreaming, but one in which the dreamer may fear waking life as much as the dream we are sharing. When the final loop ends with the hanging of Macbeth, we are escorted out of the hotel with the sweetest song of the night: 1939's "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square." Following the death of our tragic hero, the sentiments expressed in this song seem disjunctive, unless a certain freedom is achieved in his death. Some guests are escorted back to the bar by members of the cast, relieved of their masks, and given a sincere kiss on the cheek before the cast finally leaves the stage. The Glenn Miller arrangement we hear throws the melody to the instruments during what would be the biggest lyrical giveaway:

When dawn came stealing up  
 All gold and blue  
 To interrupt our rendezvous  
 I still remember how you smiled and said  
 "Was that a dream or was it true?" ("Nightingale" 1940)

Deprived of this verse, we are given, in a more surreal *SNM* style, these indicators:

That certain night, the night we met  
 There was magic abroad in the air  
 There were angels dining at the Ritz  
 And a nightingale sang in Berkeley Square. ("Nightingale" 1940)

Whether or not you believe in angels, you are unlikely to see them dining at fancy hotel restaurants,

and wild birds are not likely to respond to our emotional states any more than the woodland nightingale would be found serenading couples in a city square. The singer is dreaming, but at this moment it is an unabashedly happy dream.

The hopeful read is that the dark dream has resolved into revelatory clarity and happiness. The cynical read is that the dreamer is dwelling in a saccharine state of denial as she wakes or, worse, a state of serious mental illness. A tragically poetic read could have our dreamer dying in her sleep, but feeling a sense of nostalgia and relief as she cuts her worldly ties.

It is easy enough to construct the most cynical interpretation possible — with all the murder, corruption, film noir darkness, and with the looming onset of WWII in the air — that a more hopeful read could be easily overlooked. "The Nightingale" (1843) by Hans Christian Anderson may point the way. Anderson's fable ends with an emperor on his deathbed, tormented by visions of all the good and bad he has done, as well as by the specter of death itself. A particular nightingale, who thankfully holds no grudge, sings a song beautiful enough to ward off death, and the emperor emerges from the dream wiser and happier than ever. Malcolm, the new King of Scotland by *Macbeth's* end, clearly has an obsession with birds, and bird imagery can be found throughout the show. Are we then allowed to believe that the dreamer will emerge from her inner struggle renewed by this hopeful "bird song" that leads us out of the dream world?

mp3

The above exercise in interpretation is just that — an exercise — and Punchdrunk wishes us to keep exercising. In providing no simple answers or resolution, Punchdrunk forces us to focus on the moment. The experience of moving from room to room, chasing after each character's story and piecing together events, is heightened by the fact that we know, on some level, that the mystery will never fully be resolved. If it were, would we be so tempted to return? Would we continue turning it over in our heads, discussing it with friends, sharing stories on the internet, if the answers were laid out for us so clearly? Rather than force an ending, Punchdrunk wants us to dwell in the experience. As of this writing, they are designing experiences that can extend for days, weeks or longer.<sup>11</sup> In the meantime, *SNM* provides that extension by living on in our heads.

Each evening plays out in three one-hour cycles, which begin and end loosely, with two witches in separate locations lip-syncing to the existential pop song "Is That All There is?" The Boy Witch character sings to the 1969 Peggy Lee version that made the song famous. One floor up, Hecate syncs to a heavily doctored male vocal of the same song. The aforementioned reverse-echo effects, pitch shifting, and layering of sound make for a deeply affecting soundscape. Hecate appears to be channeling another prophecy, except this time it is for us. The dreamer is stirring, questioning the very meaning of existence and experience, just before settling into another sleep cycle:

And I stood there shivering  
 And watched the whole world go up in flames  
 And when it was all over  
 I said to myself  
 Is that all there is to a fire? ("Is That All There Is?" 1968)

If this song did not exist, Punchdrunk would have had to invent it.

mp3

"Is That All There Is?" The answer is embedded deep within the experience that is *Sleep No More*. As the musical question lingers, the show enters another loop, allowing you to watch again the same events (or new ones) and have a completely different experience. The sequence continues to reveal new layers of complexity, so that your appreciation grows. A song that, upon first listen, comforted you with nostalgic historicity becomes foreboding once you witness subsequent events. After enough time in the unsettling dream world of *Sleep No More*, you realize the reason you are there: to pay attention. Pay attention to what is happening right now because your experience will not ever be the same again, just as if your life was looped over and over, and you would see it differently each time. Just pay attention right now, and you will reap the rewards. If not, it just might all vanish, as if it were nothing more than a dream.

## NOTES

1. "Punchdrunk members talk the language of film. Long shots, wide shots, close-ups" (Sekules 2011).
2. "The sound is a very, very important level within our shows. The history of *Sleep No More* as a project— it actually came from sound, it came from old classic film noir soundtracks that actually was a birth for a lot of ideas originally. As a company, we're very much led — I'm kind of an ex-DJ and Steve [Dobbie] who does our sound design is an ex-DJ and an amazing sound designer. I think we all have a huge appreciation for music as company" ([http://www.livestream.com/transmedianewyorkcity/video?clipId=pla\\_120e0804-8c47-4695-953c-b7cc8c7534b5](http://www.livestream.com/transmedianewyorkcity/video?clipId=pla_120e0804-8c47-4695-953c-b7cc8c7534b5) ([http://www.livestream.com/transmedianewyorkcity/video?clipId=pla\\_120e0804-8c47-4695-953c-b7cc8c7534b5](http://www.livestream.com/transmedianewyorkcity/video?clipId=pla_120e0804-8c47-4695-953c-b7cc8c7534b5)); comment is at 02:14:55); video no longer available.
3. The tracks referenced here have been identified by several attendees of the show who posted their findings on the internet. The author has cross-checked these lists and attempted to verify them as best he can during his own visits. Special thanks to Kathryn Yu, Evan Matthew Cobb, and others (who wished to remain unnamed) for their contributions to the knowledge pool.
4. Hecate sings a version of "Is That All There Is?" that makes heavy use of reverse echo, and Banquo dances to a version of "I'll Never Smile again" that uses the effect as it ends and segues to the next scene.
5. "Boulder Bluff" and "Tuxedo Junction," by Glenn Miller, mixed with "Sandman" by Benny Goodman.
6. "My Man" (1959), "Hallelujah I Love Him So" (1959), and "Is That All There Is?" (1969).
7. Only a few guests per night begin their experience with the sixth floor performance, which works to frame their journey with the opening monologue to *Rebecca*. Other guests are introduced to the sixth floor at some point after they have entered the show.
8. The program cover states that the McKittrick was "EST. 1939," and the release dates for the music also point to that year.
9. "Reece" by Ed Rush + Optical (2005) and "Mute" by The Brash (2009).
10. "When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano" (1940), and four others between 1940 and 1942.

11. Punchdrunk producer Colin Nightingale outlined plans for Punchdrunk Travel, in which "people have no idea what they're doing, it heightens the real world for them. They have no idea what's part of the story and what's not" (Rose 2012).

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# Callie Kimball's *The Rape of Lucrece* (2007): A Woman's Creative Response to Shakespeare's Poem

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## ABSTRACT

Though from their inception Shakespeare's works have been re-written, re-structured, and re-created in countless adaptations and appropriations, *The Rape of Lucrece* has rarely been recently included in this practice. After a brief survey of reasons why *The Rape of Lucrece* is generally excluded from contemporary critical discourse and has rarely been treated as an inspiration for interpreting one's own national history and literature, the main part of the essay presents Callie Kimball's creative response to Shakespeare's poem. The dramaturgical adaptation of this young American playwright, theater director, and actor was staged by the Washington Shakespeare Company, Washington, D.C., as a part of the 2007 annual Shakespeare Festival. Though this first ever woman's rendition of the poem was not of a feminist character, Kimball's appropriation attempted to establish Lucrece in the context of her time and world, while making her choices not just understandable, but inevitable to a modern audience. Both the text and the production suggest women's growing immunity to men's attempts to subject and objectify them in literary texts, culture, politics, and daily life.

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Though from their inception Shakespeare's works have been re-written, re-structured, and re-created in various adaptations, his poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* have rarely been so.<sup>1</sup> Even a cursory survey of the various appropriations of Shakespeare's work across the world indicates that for a number of reasons — prominence, cultural and political relevance, controversy, historical taste, and circumstances — it is mainly Shakespeare's plays that generate "the desire," as Jacques Derrida calls this phenomenon in a different context, "to launch" the already written texts in as many different forms as possible (1985, 157-58). In other words, his non-dramatic texts somehow escape the interest of writers who capitalize on the potential of variability, openness, and plurality present in Shakespeare's work, which triggers their desire to respond to and frequently "perfect" him in an adaptive process.

Since in Elizabethan times the popularity of *The Rape of Lucrece* contributed greatly to Shakespeare's reputation and fame,<sup>2</sup> the current marginal status of the poem is disconcerting. First published in 1594, it went through eight editions before 1640 (Halliday 1964, 402), and Patrick Cheney, presenting the enthusiastic response of the poem's first readers, convincingly argues that *The Rape of Lucrece* must have helped Shakespeare to forge his identity as a publishing author and poet. After the poem's publication, Shakespeare suddenly became a "national poet-playwright" whose name sold books (Cheney 2004, 142).

*Lucrece's* popularity in the 1600s and the number of critical and interpretative works devoted to it helped to contemporize the poem's text for early modern readers.<sup>3</sup> Countless creative responses to the poem entered into dialogue with Shakespeare's original, altering, and even implicitly correcting

his reflective and rhetorical treatment of the story. It is enough to compare Shakespeare's version with Thomas Middleton's poem *The Ghost of Lucrece* (1600), Thomas Heywood's play *The Rape of Lucrece* (printed 1608), and John Fletcher's *Valentinian* (1610-1614). Concentrating on the two main themes of Shakespeare's original — rape and politics — these adaptations/analogues revealed more about their own culture and values, both social and literary, than about the Shakespearean text.<sup>4</sup>

These themes, unfortunately, very seldom attract the interest of modern playwrights, who seem to share George Wyndham's opinion, delivered at the end of the nineteenth century:

Excepting in the last speech and in the death of Lucrece, the Poem is nowhere dramatic. It tells a story, but at each situation the Poet pauses to survey and to illustrate the romantic and emotional values of the relation between his characters, or to analyze the moral passions and the mental debates in any one of them, or even the physiological perturbations responding to these storms and tremors of the mind and soul. (Wyndham 1898, xvi)

Characterized as lacking dramaturgical qualities, *The Rape of Lucrece* is generally regarded as a terse and clear-cut tale that presents in lyrical and descriptive form a series of suggestions for a full-scale exercise; theatrical renditions are usually limited to dramatic readings of Shakespeare's text.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in light of the twentieth century's critical response to *The Rape of Lucrece*, it is indeed amazing that the poem is generally beyond the scope of modern playwrights' interest. After all, no one can deny that from the structural point of view, *Lucrece* possesses a well-defined "conflict and an intriguing central idea: a sick symbiosis between victim and criminal that hand-wringing can't ignore but that a higher moral ground could address" (Koehler 1991, 16). The poem demonstrates that sexual atrocities against women create or forestall the possibility of a certain kind of political response: in a way, *Lucrece* reminds us that in most cases, the sexualization of violence can create a political bond among some men. In addition, the poem reveals that the treatment of rape victims by society has not changed over the centuries, and today, as in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*, it is often a woman's body that seems to ignite political action, though its materiality is neglected and forgotten.

Though Shakespeare's works — especially his plays — are generally regarded as a source of commentary on universal values and concerns, this generalization does not apply to *The Rape of Lucrece*. Consequently, no one found it inspirational when, in the 1990s, international attention frequently focused on the use of rape as an element of political upheavals, which brought the change of political systems in many countries all over the world.<sup>6</sup> The United Nations commission and various human rights groups revealed, for example, that ethnic Serb paramilitary groups had systematically tolerated or even encouraged the raping of Bosnian Muslim women. Rape was employed frequently by Hutu troops against Tutsi women in the genocide campaign Hutu leaders conducted in Rwanda in 1994. In 1998, women who identified with secular culture in Algeria accused desperate rebels fighting in the name of the Islamic revolution of kidnapping them and making them sex slaves. In Indonesia, reports were surfacing that suggested that members of the security forces might have been among the men who raped ethnic Chinese women during rioting in May 1998 (Crossette 1998). The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have brought the issue of rape and its political dimension again into focus; it is beyond the scope of this work to register the violent cases of women's victimization, treated usually as a "by-product" of warfare reported on daily by the international press and Internet. In times of peace, rape charges connected with politics are a

frequent phenomenon. For example, in Poland they contributed to the dissolution of the political coalition in power in 2007. The *Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc* [Law and Justice] party dissolved its political alliance with the *Samoobrona* [Self-Defense] party, whose leader was accused of rape. Consequently, an earlier parliamentary election took place, and the Polish political scene was radically changed.<sup>7</sup> In 2011, Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian Prime Minister who appears to have turned one of his residences into a brothel, and the recent event connected with Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the head of the International Monetary Fund who allegedly raped a chambermaid, are other examples of this behavioral pattern among men in high positions. Assuming vicariously Tarquin's identity, these men, as the new masters of the universe — politicians, bankers, industrialists, and media tycoons — appear to believe that they have the right to anything they want, including rape and brutal assaults upon women.

One explanation for a lack of interest in *The Rape of Lucrece* on the part of creative writers is probably the poem's current unpopularity and lack of familiarity for Shakespeare's readers, who see Shakespeare chiefly as a playwright. The ideas conveyed in an exciting array of critical works, as well as responses to the poem, do not reach the general public because they are not "translated" into theatrical form. Because contemporary playwrights do not use *The Rape of Lucrece* as a vehicle to present local concerns, the poem becomes marginalized as material for appropriation. Twentieth-century attempts at turning the poem into a play so far have not established themselves as sufficiently engaging to be revived, or even remembered. One took place in 1931 when Andre Obey (1892-1975), who worked closely with Jacques Copeau (1879-1949) and his theatrical *Compaigne des Quize* (est. 1929), presented his *Le Viol de Lucrece (The Rape of Lucretia)*.<sup>8</sup> The play was translated into English by Thornton Wilder and produced in Cleveland and New York in 1932, unfortunately without much success.<sup>9</sup> This work highlights the female perspective through the innovative addition of two "Greek" choristers, one male and one female, who describe the action, comment on events as they unfold in the drama, and confront the audience regarding Lucrece's decision to commit suicide. Through the dialogue of these two choristers, the audience is presented with the starkly different points of view of the men and of the single woman in the play. The other creative adaptation was presented at the London Almeida Theatre in 1988. Its author Bardy Thomas paired *Lucrece* with *Venus and Adonis*, heavily cut the originals, and converted them, according to Katherine Duncan-Jones's short review, into aggressive feminist tracts on the theme of "we hate men," which made *Lucrece* lose further its nuanced political dimension (Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen 2007, 81). Since feminist projects of transforming power relations are deeply implicated in the processes of speaking for and representing women, it is surprising that though Shakespeare's poem has benefited greatly from the emergence of feminist criticism, *The Rape of Lucrece* has not become a creative inspiration for women playwrights. This fact was noted by Germaine Greer, who stated that we have been waiting for centuries for a feminist/woman's creative response to Shakespeare's original (Greer 2002).

### ADAPTING SHAKESPEARE'S POEM FOR THE STAGE

Now Callie Kimball, a contemporary American playwright and actor, has answered Greer's call. In 2007, the first and so far only fully-fledged dramatic version of *The Rape of Lucrece* written by a woman was staged by the Washington Shakespeare Company in Washington, D.C. as part of the

2007 annual Shakespeare Festival (see Kimball 2007).<sup>10</sup> The play was commissioned as a last-minute replacement for a production of *King Lear* that was cancelled because of an actor's illness.

As Kimball reveals in our interview, she had three weeks to write her adaptation and produce the play, but the project did not overwhelm her since she usually feels "fairly confident in knowing what direction to go in when building a play, what to explore that will be stage-worthy." She said:

Since the Washington Shakespeare Company had a last-minute cancellation of a production of *King Lear*, the Artistic Director, Christopher Henley, called me and asked if I could adapt *Lucrece* for the stage as a replacement production. It was very meaningful to be a part of the Festival, so I wrote the first draft in three days, while we were having auditions, then I revised it over two more days, rehearsals began, and [the play] opened two weeks later. (Kimball 2009-2010)

This was not Kimball's first encounter with Shakespeare's texts: she had also adapted *The Comedy of Errors* into a fifteen-minute play for young people that she directed for the same theater company. Though Kimball had had experience working with long-form, formal verse before — she once wrote a two-hundred-odd line poem in ballad stanzas from the point of view of pre-Raphaelite subject Elizabeth Siddal — in the case of *The Rape of Lucrece*, the ultimate challenge was the creative transformation of narrative text into drama:

I think the main thing is to know that indeed, you are writing for a different medium, so it's a whole different set of rules. I felt no obligation to be faithful to the original text. I felt an obligation to try and build a worthwhile evening of theater for the audience, while doing Lucrece herself justice in trying to understand her decision without modernizing it in an anachronistic way. (Kimball 2009-2010)

In his review, Tim Treanor stressed that in her adaption, Kimball "contributed good sturdy Elizabethan prose" that complemented "the Shakespearean verse with vigorous and witty lines." She was also praised for her mastery of iambic pentameter, which "insinuate[d] internal rhyme to help the narrative flow" (Treanor 2007).

Another challenge was the poem's political dimension. Although she does not regard herself as a political writer, Kimball is interested, as she admits, in putting characters in personal or domestic situations that usually evoke political responses or consequences. "I love writing plays," she confessed enthusiastically, "that require the audience to question their own assumptions. I don't like to write political plays that tell people what to think" (Kimball 2009-2010). Yet as she maintained in "A Note from the Playwright" included in the program of the production, Kimball "was surprised to see that he [Shakespeare] did not place the rape in much of a historical, social, or political context — he limited the action to Lucrece's rape and suicide" (*Rape of Lucrece* 2007).

In her adaptation of *The Rape of Lucrece*, Kimball did not set out specifically to write a feminist response to the original. She was drawn, instead, to the idea of trying to bring to life theatrically this very real woman, Lucrece, in a way that would establish her in the context of her time and world and make her choice not just understandable, but even inevitable to a modern audience. Because this was an educational project, Kimball regarded the female dimension of her story as significant: "a lot of

the sexism women face today is not so much organized and malicious as it is born out of ignorance". Furthering her argument on the gender problematics of Lucrece's story, Kimball stated: "Great social and political change often demands violence, and violence requires victims. Lucrece could have kept living, if she'd kept quiet. She chose to speak and to act for reasons that are slippery and elusive. Apparently, to her, the worst sort of violence would have been silence." Consequently, in her work Kimball tried to present female characters and their struggles in a new light because the questions of "why women are often complicit in their own subjection, and why some women will undermine other women" fascinated her (Kimball 2009-2010).

Working with Shakespeare's original, Kimball concentrated on passages that "struck her as very theatrical and dramaturgically engaging" (Kimball 2009-2010). Reading and re-reading *The Rape of Lucrece* helped her to establish relationships between characters, especially the ways "they worked on each other." It was not surprising that the original text dominated Scenes 4-6 of Kimball's play (dramatizing the rape and its aftermath), while in the other scenes Shakespeare's lines were used sparingly. Kimball's most significant innovation was the introduction of additional female characters. Besides Lucrece (Betsy Rosen), they were: Augusta and Maia, Lucrece's maids, Sabina (who was a ghostly representative of the Sabine women), and Sylvia, personifying the spirit of Rhea Silvia, the raped and murdered mother of Romulus and Remus. There were also two narrators, called Janus 1 and 2.

As indicated in the "Production History" of an unpublished text of the play, the work was commissioned on 12 January, while its world premiere took place on 9 February 2007. In her interview, Kimball commented on her choice of cast:

There were a handful of actors I inherited from the cancelled *King Lear*, and it was exciting to know who I was writing for. Knowing the actors who played the Januses meant I could see and hear them in my mind as I wrote their lines. They are both very beautiful, petite, and physical actors, and I knew they could bring to life this duality I was exploring. Janus 1, played by a man, personified the "God of Fate and Beginnings." As the more aggressive of the two gods, his character was "more yangy than yingy"; he was "the representative of the corrupt, selfish monarchy." Janus 2, played by a woman, was a "God of Doorways and Endings," who had "a slightly softer take on things" and was "a kinder, gentler Janus, representing the New Republic." Augusta, Sabina, and Janus 1 were played by the same male actor (Denman C. Anderson), while Maia, Silvia, and Janus 2 were performed by the same woman (Abby Wood). The Januses did not fulfill the role of commentators on Tarquin's or Lucrece's psychological states; rather, they explicated the action (Prologue), illustrated the mood of the scene (Scene 2), described Lucrece's body, and by their actions and shouts, intensified the horror of rape (Scene 4). The other characters "saw" the action only once, when they were assisting Lucrece in narrating the rape to men: they not only narrated, but also reenacted physically the tragic event and incited the Romans to revenge. (Scene 6; Kimball 2009-2010)



*The Female Janus*



*The Male Janus with Lucrece*



### *Lucrece Playing with the Januses*

Kimball's *The Rape of Lucrece* was divided into seven scenes, preceded by a Prologue in which all cast members appeared. The seventh scene exemplifies the play's structural principle; the seven actors who had opened the play now talked about the seven years that had passed since Lucrece's rape and the deposition of Tarquin, the seventh king of Rome. The seven actors, standing in a circle on set designer Lea Umberger's elegant flagstone flooring, delivered their lines to the sound of dripping bathwater, which created an acoustic effect that echoed the opening scene. The lines from the Prologue, "How shines the morning silver-melting dew / Against the rising splendor of the sun" (*Rape of Lucrece*, lines 24-25; Kimball n.d.),<sup>11</sup> which in Shakespeare's poem comment on the transitory nature of happiness, were repeated several times by various characters, linking the story to the lives of Silvia and Sabina, "the raped mothers of Rome." Additionally, the characters highlighted the connection between Lucrece as a symbol of violation and the imminent formation of the Roman republic. Another significant function of the Prologue was purely dramaturgical in that Kimball used it to show through postures and costumes how Augusta (a man) and Maia (a woman) would play themselves, then the Januses, and finally, Silvia and Sabina.

### **LUCRECE AS HEROINE AND VICTIM**

From a dramatic point of view, Scene 1 of Kimball's *Rape of Lucrece* was a masterpiece. The action moved between two settings, which simultaneously staged the world of war at Ardea and Lucrece's home and hearth in Rome to contrast deftly male and female values. The conversations at Tarquin's tent revealed the fraudulence of politics, male self-aggrandizing, and egoism. Tarquin (Colin Smith)

and Collatinus (Theo Hadjimichael) engaged in a wrestling match, demonstrating their fascination with violence, physical prowess, and masculinity. Their exchange of comments about their wives document that women were at that time treated as the possessions of fathers and husbands who sanctioned and verified their honor.



*Lucrece with her Father*



*Lucrece with Collatine*



*Tarquin*

At the same time, with their small talk about love, sexuality, men, and the role of chastity in female lives, Lucrece and her maids introduced the theme of domesticity.



*Lucrece with her Women*

Since her devotion to the role of a patriarchal wife defined her virtue, Lucrece was regarded as chaste: that was part of being a proper wife, as was her occupation with a female job (spinning and sewing) late at night when her husband was away. The atmosphere of security and contentment was interrupted, however, in Lucrece's absence, by the stories told by Augusta and Maia about the suffering of

Silvia, mother of Rome, [who] in shame  
 And sorrow at her rape lived yet nine months  
 To be at long-last safely torn through pain  
 From mighty Romulus and Remus. (Kimball n.d.)

In Shakespeare's poem, Lucrece endures a confined solitude that was the lot of many high-born ladies in the Elizabethan period. Because her copious soliloquizing in the original would be unbearable in the theater, for most of the time in Kimball's adaptation Lucrece was surrounded by other women, her maids, with whom she talked freely about her emotions and psychological state of mind. Her close contact with Augusta and Maia turned her into an energetically modern woman who enjoyed physical freedom. At one point, Lucrece confessed that as a teenager, she had loved playing the harpasta; but because she had prioritized music over weaving, the high priest had found her "immodest" and unfit to be a vestal virgin (Scene 1).

In Kimball's play, by contrast, Lucrece was never bashful or awkward in her speech in company. Shakespeare's heroine shows pleasure silently — "with heaved-up hand" (*Rape of Lucrece*, line 111;

Shakespeare 2007) — at Tarquin's report on her husband's military success, while in Kimball's adaptation she actively pressured Tarquin to tell her the news" about Collatine: "I cannot sit for fear of news. Pray hold / My hand and tell me how my husband fareth / Well or ill?" Learning that he was fine, Lucrece energetically proposed a toast: "Praise Jove. / Let us drink to his health" (Scene 4; Kimball n.d.). She was also bold enough to share with Tarquin the story of Collatine's courting, which Kimball modeled on Othello and Desdemona's story.



*Tarquin's Visit to Lucrece*













When during his late night visit, Kimball's Tarquin told the women that his own mother, who in her youth had been an "excellent horsewoman," had to forsake this activity on her husband's orders, Lucrece undermined his conclusion of the story. Freely expressing, as she did many times, a strong emotional bond between women, she condemned the patriarchal custom that Roman, and unfortunately many modern, women had to follow, "choos[ing], suppress[ing], and chang[ing] / A natural loyalty of blood for the one of the bed."

In the rape scene (Scene 4), the Januses' eroticized descriptions of Lucrece's beauty, repeated twice, and their enactment of her physical molestation intensified Tarquin's sexual desire. Here, Kimball used Shakespeare's lines depicting Lucrece's stray strands of hair, which played with her breath in a dance that mingled innocence and sexuality, and the description of "her breasts," which "like ivory globes circled with blue" were "a pair of maiden worlds unconquered" (*Rape of Lucrece*, lines 6407-408, Shakespeare 2007). In a way, the Januses offered both the verbal and visual projection of Tarquin's mind, though Kimball's Tarquin was far from Shakespeare's character, who is haunted by

the immorality of his planned abuse. Further, Kimball's Lucrece referred to Tarquin's social position only once: "Good prince, you do forget yourself" (Kimball n.d). she admonishes him, while in Shakespeare's poem Lucrece continually refers to Tarquin as both a prince and a king, insisting that heroic nobility should stem from self-control rather than from a quest for the unattainable. She even tries to divide Tarquin's baseness from his royalty, facetiously questioning whether Tarquin is really himself:

In Tarquin's likeness I did entertain thee.  
 Hast thou put on this shape to do him shame?  
 To all the host of heaven I complain me.  
 Thou wrong'st his honour, wound'st his princely name.  
 Thou art not what thou seem'd, and if the same,  
 Thou seem'st not what thou art, a god, a king;  
 For kings like gods should govern everything. (*Rape of Lucrece*, lines 596-603;  
 Shakespeare 2007)

Just before the rape, the Lucrece of Kimball was provided not only with a voice, but also with some physical energy, while in Shakespeare's original her speeches are imbued with patriarchal precepts, especially in their passivity: both versions reinforce her acceptance of the rightness of male power and the inevitability of female victimization (lines 683-84). In the theatrical version, however, Lucrece argued with the attacker by appealing to his reason, and at one point Tarquin had to chase her off the stage. In her stage directions, Kimball says: "I don't really care where they go as long as they are not seen clearly and the action of the rape is inscrutable" (Kimball n.d.).

Director Sarah Denhard staged Kimball's play in a round, empty space with just a few stage props (a table, bed, chairs, burning coal in a see-through cauldron, and veils), but made use of resourceful lighting, which not only played with colors and shadows but also illustrated and amplified the atmosphere of each scene. Just before the rape, Tarquin's gigantic shadow, cast upon the veils surrounding Lucrece's bed, made him look like a menacing spider, ready to catch its innocent prey. At the moment of the rape, a kaleidoscopic play of sinister blue rays of light suddenly ceased, leaving the stage in total darkness, broken with the blaring sounds of struggle, desperate shouts, and cries.

















Next, a blinding white light illuminated both the stage and the audience, who saw clearly Lucrece's suffering reflected in her posture — she was lying curled up on an empty bed — while the disarrayed white veils, ripped from their mooring by Tarquin and scattered all over the stage, testified to the brutal violence inflicted on her body. Kimball recalled:

It was such a horrifying scene in the dark, and I didn't want to stare at people as the lights came up, but you could see that some people had been really frightened or disturbed [. . .] I think staging [the rape] in the dark meant they could imagine the scene more powerfully than anything we could have shown. Considering the rape statistics, there was a more than reasonable chance that at least one rape victim was in the audience each performance. (Kimball 2009-2010)

Although Shakespeare's narrator recounts the flow of Lucrece's thoughts rather than her physical actions, Kimball's heroine both expressed those thoughts through her behavior and commented on her changing states of mind. For example, the original Lucrece's conversation with her maid on the morning after the rape (*Rape of Lucrece*, lines 1219-95; Shakespeare 2007) alludes only to the urgent need to send a letter post-haste to her husband, and when Collatine returns home on the morning

after the rape, he "finds his Lucrece clad in mourning black" (line 1585). In Kimball's adaptation (Scene 5), by contrast, the audience experienced Lucrece's trauma through both physical and verbal expression: as is typical for rape victims, the crying and sobbing Lucrece felt an urgent need to discard her disordered nightgown, bathe her soiled body, and dress in new, white clothes to symbolize her innocence.

And Lucrece was not alone in her distraught state. She did not confide to her maids the previous night's abuse, yet Augusta and Maia not only helped Lucrece to cleanse herself physically, but also reinforced her emotional solidarity with other raped women in Roman history. Delivering her nocturnal lamentation, Lucrece created a bond with her faithful maids and with her "legendary/Sisters, poor Silvia and Sabina". Augusta, who transformed herself into Sabina, and Maia, who assumed the role of Silvia, made reference to "Philomel / That sing'st ravishment." In this highly poignant scene, the women, located in both the past and present, promised to seek revenge upon Tarquin and, by extension, upon all the Tarquins in the world: "when life is shame," they proclaimed, we "need not fear" (Kimball n.d.).

While in the presence of all the Roman lords, Shakespeare's Lucrece identifies her assailant with stammering hesitancy, unable to speak his name — "He, he, fair lords, 'tis he" (*Rape of Lucrece*, line 1721; Shakespeare 2007) — in Kimball's rendition, she seemed to be in complete verbal control of the situation.

It was Lucrece who actively incited the "somewhat impassive" Brutus to revenge:

How may this forced stain be wiped hence?  
May my pure mind with this foul act dispense,  
My low declined honour to advance?  
May any terms acquit me from this chance? (Scene 5; Kimball n.d.)

Later in the play, when Lucretius, Collatine and Brutus, as seasoned politicians, delivered their political speeches to a gathered Roman crowd, Brutus repeated her words verbatim, without, however, crediting Lucrece for her rhetoric.

In Shakespeare's poem, the portrayal of Lucrece, who is completely disempowered by the rape, has its spectacular conclusion in the description of her suicide. Lucrece retains her "pure mind" (*Rape of Lucrece*, line 1704; Shakespeare 2007), but she also feels that her body is permanently stained. Consequently, despite the assurances of her husband and his lords that she is guiltless, she claims repeatedly that the attack has eternally sullied her body (lines 1656-59). In the play, the audience could *see* that Lucrece's body, like the bodies of many rape victims, was literally soiled and badly bruised. Here, Lucrece killed herself because the traumatic experience corrupted and destabilized her body and mind.

At the end of Scene 5, she joined her wronged sisters, and they "arranged themselves in statuary formation" (Kimball n.d.).

Shakespeare not only glosses over some of the moral complexities of Lucrece's situation, but also emphasizes the moral deficiencies of her husband. Collatine's boast that his beautiful young wife's virtue exceeded that of the wives of all his fellow soldiers is introduced only in the Argument. Early in the poem, a rhetorical question is posed that indicates a definite disapproval of Collatine's boast: "Or why is Collatine the publisher / Of that rich jewel he should keep unknown / From thievish ears, because it is his own" (*Rape of Lucrece*, lines 33-35; Shakespeare 2007). The narrator goes on to say that Collatine's boast may have "suggested" the sexual assault to Tarquin (lines 36-37). Kimball, by contrast, makes the problem systemic by darkening the character of Lucrece's father. While Collatinus treats his wife as a bauble, he also is clearly enamored of her, and their relationship seems to be based more on partnership than on a typical patriarchal dependency. In Kimball's play, it is Lucrece's father Lucretius (Robert Lavery), rather than Collatine, who introduces Lucrece as "the finest prize [. . .] beyond compare" (Kimball n.d.), demonstrating an outmoded, patriarchal attitude toward women; Lucretius not only boasted of his daughter's chastity, but also admitted openly to beating his own wife.

### *LUCRECE'S ALTERNATE ENDINGS*

At the end of the play, when attended by Collatinus and Lucretius, Brutus (Parker Dixon) swore to a cheering crowd that he would avenge Lucrece's death by killing Tarquin, the female characters were pointedly absent.

#### *Brutus in his Final Speech*

By reducing her to a symbol in history, the men used Lucrece as an excuse for a war, which was to be commemorated by a monument. The Epilogue, however, concluded the play by striking a chord that resonated with the now largely repressed feminine point of view. The Januses reminded the audience that Lucrece — who was still present on stage — was not "a poor stricken deer," but a strong woman whose

brave and selfless action did divide  
 A brightened earth from sorrow-gloomed divine  
 And so the deeds of fair Lucrece hath set  
 Majestic Rome on greater glory yet. (Kimball n.d.)

The play thus concluded by making Lucrece and the other founding mothers who had been raped equal to Rome itself — the Rome that had been "cruelly wronged" and that would become immortalized as the Republic.

Though the play did not become the subject of longer critical evaluations, theater reviews appreciated Kimball and the Washington Shakespeare Company for their project, stressing the difficulty of adapting Shakespeare's lesser-read narrative text for a dramatic venture. The playwright was praised for "her ingenious appropriation of the most stirring lines from Shakespeare's poem, redistributing them among the characters" and "turning narration to speech and vice versa" (Wren 2007). While some reviewers concluded that the production was not "flawless," the general consensus was that it was a "bold and provocative enterprise" (*The Washington Post*, 14 February 2007).

When in the nineteenth century the great Russian poet Alexander Pushkin read Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*, he wondered what would have happened if Lucrece, instead of killing herself, had simply slapped Tarquin's face? Pushkin's answer was that "if she had done that, the whole history of the world would have been changed" (quoted in O'Neill 2003, 139). Pushkin's callous comment represents one extreme of masculine response to Lucrece's plight, since he was both amused and indignant that what he considered to be a relatively trivial event had such a great impact on the history of the Western world.

Reading Shakespeare's poem *The Rape of Lucrece*, it is difficult to forget that it demonstrates a valuable insight into ethical issues as well as the possible motivations of the characters involved. But Shakespeare's gendered perspective, although fascinating and compelling, is limited, while Callie Kimball's adaptation attempted to give voice to a feminine perspective on Lucrece's story. It pointedly drew attention to women's victimization by not only strangers, but also the men who dominate their lives at home. The play was indeed successful in showing women's solidarity in the face of their abuse throughout world history. By rejecting some elements of Shakespeare's fairly traditional story of an unfortunate woman, Kimball presented Lucrece as much more than a doe-like victim. Beyond the performance itself was the play's recognition that the themes of innocence, victimization, revenge, and war have relevance in current times, when women, empowered by their own perspective, can remember their own history and rather than giving up submissively, create support networks that allow them to come forward and speak against their attackers. As is always the case in adaptations of Shakespeare's works, the polyphonic structure of *The Rape of Lucrece* allowed Kimball to create a version of his poem that answered the needs of our times: it suggested women's growing immunity to men's attempts to subject them and objectify them not only in literary works, but also in culture, politics, and daily life. Callie Kimball's adaptation showed both the dramaturgical and dramatic potential of Shakespeare's poem and hopefully might inspire other adaptations in the future.

## NOTES

1. I use the word "adaptation" here to designate all of the kinds of cultural appropriations that Ruby Cohn, in her classic book *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots*, has listed alphabetically (e.g., "abridgement," "appropriation," "emendation," "offshoot," "reduction," "spinoff," and "transformation"; Cohn 1976, 3-4).

2. Ian Donaldson says that Elizabethan interest in Shakespeare's poem was intensified by the popularity of Lucrece's story, recorded originally by Titus Livy in *Ab Urbe Condita* (Chapters 57-60) and by Ovid in *Fasti* (2:721-852). In the story/myth, which for centuries had been disseminated in various versions all over Europe, Lucrece or Lucretia was a watch-word for fifteenth and sixteenth-century Europe (Donaldson 1982, 19). Shakespeare initially published his version as *Lucrece*; the extended title *The Rape of Lucrece* first appeared in the "newly revised" quarto edition of 1616. It is impossible to say whether or not Shakespeare himself changed the title, since this was the year of his premature death.
3. Appropriations of the poem in Shakespeare's times show that *Lucrece* was not read only for pleasure, but also for education and life wisdom. For example, the poem was drawn upon heavily by *Englands Parnassus; or, The choices Flowers of our Modern Poets*, an anthology published in 1600. This dictionary of quotations, whose title-page proclaimed it to be both "pleasant and profitable," is filled with admonitory examples for persons in private and public life. *Englands Parnassus* was so popular that it called for three re-editions in 1600, the year when the third and fourth editions of *Lucrece* were published. The compiler "R. A." ("Robert Allott") took it for granted that *Lucrece* contained political maxims of conduct (Allott 1600).
4. For a comprehensive analysis of Elizabethan and Jacobean appropriations of Lucrece's story, see Baines 2003, especially 101-234.
5. As the *World Shakespeare Bibliography* (online) indicates, dramatic readings of *The Rape of Lucrece* are especially appealing to audiences in Austria, Germany, Britain, the U.S., and France. A reading of selected scenes, as translated by Theresa Robinson, took place at the Theatre der Kreis, Vienna, 27 March, 1989 (Austria). The text of the whole poem was creatively interpreted by Marlene Achterman, who was the director at the the Oldenburgisches Staatstheatre, Oldenburg, 1996, and by Markus Fennert at the Bremer Shakespeare Company, Bremen, 1999 (Germany). In Britain, the AANDBC Theatre Company presented their theatrical reading of the poem at the Turtle Key Theatre, London (1995). *The Rape of Lucrece* was produced three times by The Royal Shakespeare Company. In 1966 at the Shakespeare Globe Theatre in Southwark, the Royal Shakespeare Company presented its reading versions of the story; in 2006, ten years later, Gregory Doran, who also adapted and edited with John Barton the poem's text, directed *The Rape of Lucrece's* reading by the RSC at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. In 2011, the poem was presented as a monodrama, performed by Camille O'Sullivan in the Swan Theatre. In 1990, the Shakespeare Society of America's Globe Playhouse in West Hollywood, Los Angeles produced the poem as a part of its three-and-one half-year project to stage all thirty-nine plays of the canon (Stodder 1992, 86-89). In December 1990-January 1991, Theresa Shiban, who was both the director and the adapter of the text, presented her dramaturgical reading of the poem at the Globe Playhouse, West Hollywood, USA (*Los Angeles Times*, 4 January 1991). Eight years later (February 1999), her revised production of the poem was staged by the Union Theatre at the London Fringe Festival. In 1992, Brian Bedford read the poem at the Chicago Associates of the Stratford Festival at Remains Theatre (Smith 1992, 16). In 2006, a theatrical version of the poem was staged in France. Its director, Marie-Louise Bischofberger, used a translation of the poem prepared especially for the event by Yves Bonnefoy. The play was produced by the MC93 Bibigney, the Theatre National du Luxembourg and the Theatre im Pfalzbau Ludwigshafen at the Oden-Theatre de l'Europe in Paris, where it was presented in summer (Rivière de Carles 2007, 122-26).

6. The connection between *The Rape of Lucrece* and modern warfare rapes of women was, however, noticed by Catherine Bennett, who quoted Lucrece's reaction after her rape by Tarquin: "O opportunity, thy guilt is great / . . . Thou sets the wolf where he the lamb may get" to express her opinion on the systematic rape of women in Bosnia (Bennett 1993).
7. Though after its first translation in 1922 by Jan Kasprowicz, other Polish versions of *The Rape of Lucrece* have appeared, none has located the poem in the context of politics. See also the first Polish work devoted to Lucrece (Dyboski 1914).
8. For a detailed description of the play, see Smith 2000, 120-39. I would like to thank here the participants of the seminar "Womanhood Denies My Tongue: *Lucrece* Revisited," which Sheila Cavanagh and I were kindly invited to conduct by the SAA at its conference in 2008, for their inspiring work in the area, and for their invaluable responses to my own efforts. I am especially grateful to Nicholas Jones and Lauren McConnell for their essays, respectively, on Britten's and Obey's creative renditions of the poem in the context of World War II.
9. Benjamin Britten's opera *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946), with a libretto by Ronald Duncan, was based on Obey's play and first performed in 1945.
10. The citywide, six-month "Shakespeare in Washington Festival" also celebrated Shakespeare's 443rd birthday and the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Folger Shakespeare Library Foundation. As indicated in the "Production History" in an unpublished text of the play, the work was commissioned on January 12, while its world premiere took place on February 9, 2007. I would like to thank here Ms. Callie Kimball, who generously answered my questions concerning her work on the play and shared with me the unpublished manuscript of the play's text; my quotations from Kimball's play come from this text. I am also grateful to Mr. Ray Gniewek, who granted me the right to use the production pictures and CD in my publication.
11. All quotations from Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* come from Katherine Duncan-Jones and H. R. Woudhuysen's edition (Shakespeare 2007).

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## NIAMH J. O'LEARY, XAVIER UNIVERSITY

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*Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange*, by Alexander C. Y. Huang. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 350 pp. ISBN-10: 0231148496; ISBN-13: 978-0231148498. \$84.50 (cloth); \$26.50 (paper).

About

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As I state in my commentary on the book in a recent state-of-the-field essay, Alexander Huang's *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* hinges on plurals. It is about Chinese Shakespeares, and not Shakespeare in China; performance idioms, rather than a single tradition; and localities, rather than a single site or cultural identity. It is this central, fundamental emphasis on plurality that is the book's richest contribution to the currently booming scholarly field of global Shakespeare.

Huang sets out to familiarize his audience with more than two centuries of Chinese adaptation of and engagement with the Shakespeare canon, beginning his history with the first opium war in 1839 and continuing through the first decade of the twenty-first century, as Asian Shakespeare films have become increasingly popular internationally. In presenting this considerable history, Huang differentiates between mainland China and other parts of the Chinese-speaking world, emphasizing that "China" is a large and diverse set of geocultural localities. The book looks at traditional Chinese opera performances, Chinese interpretations of theater productions, and Chinese cinema that engages Shakespeare. Huang's book is a sweeping recounting of Chinese Shakespeares, not just in China, but globally. These performances either defamiliarize Shakespeare by presenting him to Western audiences through a foreign performance, or familiarize Western audiences with different theater traditions and practices through the familiar lens/catalyst of Shakespeare.

*Chinese Shakespeares* is both a helpful primer and an impressive scholarly critique. Huang provides a very helpful outline of performance history in China, laying out the differences between performance traditions in different regions of the vast country. He claims there are three different ways of "engaging ideas of China and Shakespeare": to 'universalize' Shakespeare through more traditional, Westernized performances; to localize the plot and performance, making Shakespeare local; and to truncate and rewrite Shakespeare's plays so as to relate them to images of China" (16-17). The book undertakes to study all three types of performance in relation to locality criticism, which Huang defines as emphasizing "the physical and geocultural dimensions of the processes of rewriting" (28). Thus, the book is comprised of a series of case studies of representative performances from throughout the Chinese world and across each of the three modes of engagement mentioned above. These case studies "examine the interplay between the locality where authenticity and intentionality is derived and the locality where differences emerge" (17-18). The first chapter lays out the book's underlying theoretical grounding; Chapter 2 undertakes a history of Shakespeare in China prior to the twentieth century; the third chapter looks at translation in the twentieth century as it "turned into ethical acts of interpretation"; Chapter 4 looks at silent films of the 1930s and 1940s; Chapter 5 examines three specific performances in terms of "the intricate interplay between presentism and historicism" and their emphasis on locality; Chapter 6 focuses on Chinese opera in the 1980s; Chapter 7 "delineates the theoretical and political consequences of disowning 'Shakespeare' and 'China' in the present time" (18-19). Finally, an epilogue considers twenty-first century Chinese Shakespeare cinema and theater. As one can see from this brief recounting, Huang's book is a work of staggering scope.

To best examine a book of such massive depth and breadth, I will focus on a representative chapter: Chapter 5, which provides an excellent example of how this locality-criticism works. Huang begins the chapter by pointing out that what is at stake is "the dynamics between the locality where various conventions of authenticity is derived and the locality where the performance or reading takes place" (125). The chapter addresses a 1942 production of and a labor-camp reading of *Hamlet*, and a Soviet-Chinese production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, which premiered in 1957 and was revived in 1961. These productions resist what Huang calls the "new internationalism" that has defined theater since the middle of the twentieth century. Unlike productions that can be exported easily or tour widely outside of their original performance spaces, these productions "are defined by their local specificities, specificities that would be lost on a different audience in a different performance venue or context" (127).

Discussing a June 1942 performance of *Hamlet* directed by Jiao Juyin and staged in a Confucian temple in the Sichuan province, then revived during December of 1942 in Chongqing, Huang analyzes the performance's many unique, locality-driven aspects. First, this was a wartime production, performed during the Sino-Japanese War. Second, it was the first time that *Hamlet* was staged in a Confucian temple. As wartime theater, in part the production's goal was to showcase the resilience and cultural prestige and legitimacy of the Chinese people. But beyond entertaining and demonstrating dignity, the production also sought to teach a lesson about the Chinese national character. Thus, Huang claims that the production's "ideological purposes — although at times self-contradictory — were to uphold Hamlet's moral integrity as a positive model and to use Hamlet's hesitation as a negative lesson" (134). Huang's analysis here makes clear how a locality can possess exigencies, and how a performance can respond to these exigencies in enlightening and original ways. Huang then discusses Wu Ningkun, a Chinese intellectual, who writes in his memoir about his experience of reading *Hamlet* while incarcerated in a labor camp. Ningkun's memoir speaks of how the context of this reading changed his interpretation of his favorite Shakespeare play, and Huang argues that Wu's memoir reflects the interaction between Chinese settings and history and Shakespeare.

Moving on to discuss a 1957 Soviet-Chinese production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Huang notes the production's unique claims to be "apolitical" during a highly politicized time in China's history. Discussing this production of *Much Ado*, Huang provides a history of how Soviet understandings of Shakespeare influenced mid-century Chinese Shakespeares, attending in particular to how a unique melding of historicism and presentism helped to make this particular production apolitical and therefore "safe." The production of *Much Ado* was revived twice, in 1967 and 1979, indicating its popularity and underscoring and enriching its local nature. With each revival, the play took on an enhanced nostalgic quality — now nostalgic not just for a Shakespeare-imagined, far-off Italy, but also for the original production, which was staged just before the most brutal of Maoist restrictions were imposed. Huang explains how each of the revivals was affected by the locality of its particular performance.

According to Huang, the idea of locality, although central to sociological theory, is only now beginning to assert a presence in literary and cultural theory. We need an awareness of locality theory, however, because "[w]hile it has now been recognized that Shakespeare has occupied an international space for centuries, the theoretical implications of this

international space remain unclear" (27). Particularly in China, the concept of the local vs. the global takes on an unusual meaning. At times, the global is seen as "a potential space for liberation," while the local can be "coercive and oppressive" (28). Thus, Chinese engagements with Shakespeare interpret locality differently than we may expect.

Huang is in good company in calling for a theory of intercultural performance. Both Dennis Kennedy and Yong Li Lan's *Shakespeare in Asia* (Cambridge 2010) and Poonam Trivedi and Minami Ryuta's *Replaying Shakespeare in Asia* (Routledge 2010) echo this call. All three volumes speak in response to Patrice Pavis's concern that it was as yet "too soon to propose a global theory of intercultural theatre," claiming that now is the time to do so.<sup>1</sup> Each of these three volumes does an excellent job of paving the way for just such a theory. Huang's book does not present this theory fully-formed, and that is one of its strengths. Instead, through detailed case studies, excellent theater and translation history, and compelling questions, Huang provides the Western scholar with a body of evidence not easily or immediately available before now. In the wake of these three excellent recent publications, it will be fascinating to see how this properly plural, locality-aware theory of intercultural performance takes shape, and to what extent it is influenced by this most rich field of global Shakespeare: Asian Shakespeare(s).

One reason why we have not yet formed an agile and effective theory of intercultural performance is that we lack "in-depth critical histories of these events" (29). Huang's book seeks to rectify lack. Because of what Huang calls "the ephemeral nature of live theater," it has been difficult to combat "the marginalization of non-Anglophone Shakespeares" (35). The evidence we have of these ephemeral performances tends to be "reports" rather than critical engagement and "theoretical reflection" (36). These reports emphasize the exoticism of the performances without rigorous critical consideration. According to Huang, Asian theater is even marginalized within American theater studies departments. So, too, is Chinese film, which is studied far less than Japanese film and almost never studied in terms of cinematic Shakespeare.

Huang's call for attention to this set of performances is timely, as the field of global Shakespeare continues to grow, aided by materials made available through the expansion of digital archives. Huang himself has been involved in developing these archives. His work on *Global Shakespeares* and *Shakespeare Performance in Asia* has made many materials newly available and accessible. And in *Chinese Shakespeares*, he includes a very helpful appendix consisting of a chronology of selected

historical events, worldwide Shakespeare performances, and Chinese engagements with Shakespeare. In combination with the richly detailed descriptions of performances throughout the book and his digital humanities work, these tools show Huang to be a major figure in promoting and supporting an academic turn toward nonwestern engagements with Shakespeare. This book offers a wonderfully balanced and rigorously theorized approach to the question of Shakespeare in China, a question that grows ever more urgent, for, as Huang argues, considering China's ascension to the global elite, in our cultural moment we *ought* to be learning more about China, in all contexts.

## NOTES

1. Patrice Pavis, "Introduction: Towards a Theory of Interculturalism in Theatre?" (1996), 1; quoted in Huang 2009, 29.

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Current  
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## SONYA FREEMAN LOFTIS, MOREHOUSE COLLEGE

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*Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*, edited by Scott L. Newstok and Ayanna Thompson. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 308 pp. ISBN 13: 978-0-230-61642-4 (cloth), ISBN-10: 0230616429 (paper).

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The essays in this collection examine the role of race in various productions (and appropriations) of *Macbeth*. *Weyward Macbeth* seeks to "position performances of the 'Scottish Play' in American racial constructions" — a thesis proven in no small part by the thorough appendix documenting over one hundred productions of *Macbeth* that have featured non-traditional casting (8). The contributors include Ayanna Thompson, Celia R. Daileader, Heather S. Nathans, John C. Briggs, Bernth Lindfors, Joyce Green MacDonald, Nick Moschovakis, Lisa N. Simmons, Marguerite Rippey, Scott L. Newstok, Lenwood Sloan, Harry J. Lennix, Alexander C. Y. Huang, Anita Maynard-Losh, José A. Esquea, William C. Carroll, Wallace McClain Cheatham, Douglas Lanier, Todd Landon Barnes, Francesca Royster, Courtney Lehmann, Amy Scott-Douglass, Charita Gainey-O'Toole, Elizabeth Alexander, Philip C. Kolin, Peter Erickson, Richard Burt, and Brent Butgereit. It is a collection of extraordinary scope. While one might expect a volume on race and *Othello* or *The Tempest*, this collection draws attention to a frequently overlooked intersection between *Macbeth* and the construction of race in America. Ayanna Thompson's introduction, "What is a 'Weyward' *Macbeth*?" makes a compelling case for the importance of race to the play. The book includes discussion of productions by African-American, Asian-American, Native American, and Latino theater companies to show how *Macbeth* has been used to express various identities throughout the history of the American stage.

Thompson argues that *Macbeth* appeals to directors as a play about race partially because the history of the play's intersections with race have been obscured and overlooked. Divided into seven sections, the book traces the connection between race and Shakespeare's "Scottish play" from Jacobean England to film adaptations. The earliest chapters focus on the intersection of *Macbeth* and race in Jacobean England and Antebellum America. The middle two sections examine the federal theater project and modern stage performance. The book's last three sections deal with the play's appropriation in various modern genres (music, film, and literature). The individual chapters present remarkable variety in topic and critical approaches. This extremely wide range in topics is mirrored by an extremely diverse group of contributors — from graduate student to professor emeritus, from actor to scholar, from Shakespearean to Americanist. These varied responses no doubt reflect Gary Taylor's stated purpose in the preface — to provide an "interdisciplinary perspective" on the "cross-cultural performance of race" (xiii). The collection as a whole offers a conglomeration of various topics that open up a new approach to *Macbeth*.

Heather S. Nathans's look at Antebellum appropriations of *Macbeth*, in "'Blood will have Blood': Violence, Slavery, and *Macbeth* in the Antebellum American Imagination," offers an excellent example of the fresh and unique readings that populate this eclectic collection. Nathans argues that *Macbeth* was a popular choice for allusions in both pro-slavery and abolitionist tracts because of the play's focus on "destiny and individual agency," as well as a fear of being haunted by past violence (25). As forces on both sides of the civil war appropriated *Macbeth* into discourses about slavery and abolition, Banquo's ghost came to stand in for dead Africans who haunt slave owners, while violence in the abolitionist movement was sometimes compared to the actions of Lady Macbeth or the witches. The essay as a whole is laudable for its thorough research and fresh insights.

Bernth Lindfors's chapter on Ira Aldridge's performance as Macbeth offers a fascinating study of one of Aldridge's lesser known roles and places it in the context of his larger acting career. Marguerite Rippey's examination of Orson Welles's famous "Voodoo *Macbeth*" explores the combination of "racially progressive politics and racially insensitive opportunism" that defined the production, arguing that theater historians have failed to acknowledge "the production's more disturbing aspects" (83, 89). Francesca Royster's contribution, "Riddling Whiteness, Riddling Certainty: Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*,"

offers the same practical application of literary theory and nuanced reading of film as her earlier *Becoming Cleopatra*.

Like Royster's critically challenging examination of tropes of whiteness, Todd Landon Barnes's reading of hip-hop's integration into literature curriculum at the secondary level offers a unique perspective on *Macbeth* and race. Barnes argues that when teachers use hip-hop to teach Shakespeare they often overemphasize potential connections between different cultures and media instead of emphasizing differences. Such an approach oversimplifies the cultural contexts of hip-hop while presenting Shakespeare to students as an artistic "universal" (164). Encouraging educators "to focus on performance's ability to register and rehearse historical change and cultural difference," Barnes points out that using hip-hop to explore Shakespeare offers teachers a chance to emphasize historical and cultural differences instead of a "universal" homogeneity that ultimately prioritizes the works of Shakespeare (164). In other words, Barnes argues that hip-hop in the classroom has to be used to give information back to students, to show the conflicts created when Shakespeare and hip-hop collide. A unique approach to "innovative" Shakespeare pedagogy, Barnes's essay reveals both the benefits and limitations of current classroom practices.

Amy Scott-Douglass's essay, which examines audience responses to interracial couples in *Macbeth* productions using colorblind casting, finds that some of these performances inadvertently forward racist stereotypes. Like the collection as a whole, this chapter focuses on diverse source texts to draw larger connections (including performances from *Macbeth in Manhattan*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Prison Macbeth*). Charita Gainey-O'Toole and Elizabeth Alexander examine African-American female poets' use of the Weyward Sisters through appropriation, allusion, and metaphor. Pointing out that female poets seem strangely drawn to Shakespeare's witches, they ultimately argue that "African-American artists . . . adopt conjure, haunting, and possession as a means of *enacting agency* in their own writing processes" (207).

While the diverse topics and perspectives of necessity cause the collection as a whole to lean toward breadth rather than depth, the infinite variety of perspectives and topics opens up many points of inquiry for later studies. The diversity of perspectives here is rich and provocative and will no doubt encourage further studies of *Macbeth* and race. Of equal interest to Shakespeareans, Americanists, cultural

historians, teachers, and theater professionals, the collection as a whole is notable for its thorough and strikingly original readings of a largely overlooked topic.

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*Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Performance and Race*. 2010. Edited by Scott L. Newstok and Ayanna Thompson. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

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## Contributors

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*Thomas Cartelli* (Muhlenberg College) is the author of *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations* (Routledge, 1999) and of *Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the Economy of Theatrical Experience* (Pennsylvania, 1991). He is co-author, with Katherine Rowe, of *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen*, a study of filmic appropriations of Shakespeare (Polity, 2006), and is currently at work on a book-length study of experimental Shakespeare performance and production.

*Krystyna Kujawinska Courtney* is Associate Professor at the University of Lodz, Poland, where she chairs the British and Commonwealth Studies Department and serves as Vice-Dean at the Faculty of International and Politological Studies. Her research interests focus mainly, but not exclusively, on literary theory, especially gender and New Historicist studies: she initiated and edited a translation of Stephen Greenblatt's essays, introducing his concepts in Poland (2006). She has published, internationally and locally, numerous articles and essays on the long-term global authority of Shakespeare's plays and on his dramatic works in relation to theater and early

modern culture. Her selected books include: *Shakespeare's Local Habitations* (with R. S. White), 2007; *The Globalization of Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century* (with John Mercer), 2003; *On Page and Stage : Shakespeare in Polish and World Culture*, 2000; *The Kingdom on Stage: Shakespeare's History Plays in the Theatre* (in Polish), 1997; *"Th'Interpretation of the Time": The Dramaturgy of Shakespeare's Roman Plays*, 1993. She is a member of the World Shakespeare Bibliography and has edited an annotated *Polish Bibliography of Shakespeare, 1980-2000* (2005); she also co-edits (with Yoshiko Kawachi) an international periodical, *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation, and Performance* (<http://versita.metapress.com/content/122365> (<http://versita.metapress.com/content/122365>)). Her latest monographs (in Polish and in English) are devoted to Ira Aldridge (2009) and to European culture in diversity (2011).

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*Colette Gordon* is a Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of the Witwatersrand. She has taught at Queen Mary, Goldsmiths, Royal Holloway, Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, and The University of Cape Town. Her articles on economic criticism and early modern drama, intercultural and contemporary performance, and Shakespeare in Africa have appeared in *Shakespeare, Cahiers Élisabéthains*, and *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, with work on Shakespeare in prison forthcoming. She is working on a book-length study of the interaction

between early modern credit culture and stage performance entitled *Shakespeare's Play of Credit*.

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*Sonya Freeman Loftis* is an Assistant Professor of English at Morehouse College. Her work on modern adaptations of Shakespeare has appeared in *Shakespeare Bulletin*, *The Brecht Yearbook*, *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, *Text & Presentation*, and *Renaissance Papers*. She is currently working on a book that examines the central role that Renaissance drama played in the creation of modern dramatists' canons, exploring how the reactions of authors such as Shaw, Brecht, and Müller to Shakespeare and his contemporaries worked to create their public personae and to inform their theoretical writings.

*Adam Meyer* is Associate Professor of Jewish Studies and Associate Director of the Program in Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. In addition to the full-length work *Black-Jewish Relations in African American and Jewish American Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography*

(Scarecrow, 2002), he has published articles on this subject in such journals as *MELUS*, *African American Review*, *Prospects*, and *Studies in Short Fiction*. His essay "'The Gesture Was Never Enough': Harlem as a Problematic Proving Ground for Jewish Reformers in the Post World War II Period" appears in the recent collection, *Black Harlem and the Jewish Lower East Side: Narratives Out of Time* (SUNY).

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of essays titled *The Politics of Female Alliance in Early Modern Europe*.

*J. D. Oxblood* is co-founder and Editor-in-Tease of BurlesqueBeat.com and an occasional contributor. His burlesque writing has also been seen in *Burlesque Magazine*, *21st Century Burlesque*, and *Zelda*.

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*Glenn Ricci* is a video producer for the Library of Congress and sound designer for The Scarehouse, a nationally recognized haunted attraction in Pittsburgh. He has composed and produced several albums of music, the most recent being *Fever Brain Battery*, under the name Delirium Dog (2011). His master's thesis, "Tomb of the Unknown Pilgrim: Vonnegut's Manuscript Revisions of *Slaughterhouse-Five*," is available at the University of Georgetown.

*Sophia Richardson* studies comparative literature (English, French, and German) at Oberlin College and has done coursework in literature and sociolinguistics at Swarthmore College and the Albrecht-Ludwigs Universität in Freiburg, Germany. She is particularly interested in questions of gender, literature and related art forms, and literature and science. She has studied opera — including with the Washington National Opera's Young Artist summer program — and has written about *Madama Butterfly* and *Eugene Onegin*.

*Chris Roark*, Associate Professor of English at John Carroll University, published essays about Shakespeare, Zora Neale Hurston, and John Edgar Wideman. Chris passed away unexpectedly this June, at the age of 51; at the time of his death he was close to completing a monograph about Shakespeare and contemporary African American writers. His "original," "strong," "provocative" and "convincing" essay on Toni Morrison and Shakespeare (to quote our anonymous reviewers) appears in this issue of *Borrowers and Lenders*. John Carroll University maintains a memorial page (<http://sites.jcu.edu/english/home/remembering-dr-christopher-roark/> (<http://sites.jcu.edu/english/home/remembering-dr-christopher-roark/>)) and

has established a scholarship fund in Chris's name.

*Lauren Shohet* is Luckow Family Professor of English at Villanova University (USA). The recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment of the Humanities, the Shakespeare Association of America, the Folger Library, the Huntington Library, the German Academic Exchange Service, the Fulbright Foundation, and the Bogliasco Foundation, she is the author of *Reading Masques: The English Masque and Public Culture in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2010) and numerous articles on Renaissance poetry and drama, adaptation, and genre studies. Her recent work on adaptation and/of early-modern texts include contributions to *Milton and Popular Culture*, edited by Knoppers and Semenza (Palgrave, 2006); "Medusa's Shield: Adaptation and the Lightness of History" (*Western Humanities Review*, 2011); "Teaching *Paradise Lost* through Adaptation," for *Approaches to Teaching Paradise Lost*, edited by Herman (MLA, 2012); and "*Macbeth*: The State of the Art," for the Continuum Renaissance Drama *Macbeth*, edited by Drakakis and Townshend (Arden, forthcoming 2013). She is currently editing an *Othello* iPad app for the Luminary Shakespeare.

*Pamela Swanigan* is a Ph.D candidate at the University of Connecticut. Her dissertation research analyzes depictions of immortality in children's fantasy, including the works of Ursula K. Le Guin, Natalie Babbitt, and Diana Wynne Jones, through the lenses of sociobiology and descriptive evolutionary ethics. Her essay "Much the Same on the Other Side: The *Boondocks* and the Symbolic Frontier" won the 2010 Children's Literature Association Graduate Student Essay Award, Ph.D. level and was published in the 2012 *Children's Literature Annual*. As a magazine writer, she has won two Canadian National Magazine Awards and twice been a finalist for Western Magazine Awards. Several of her articles have been anthologized in college readers. She also writes poetry, romances, and screenplays.

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