

*THE REAL THING?*¹ ADAPTATIONS, TRANSFORMATIONS
AND BURLESQUES OF SHAKESPEARE,
HISTORIC AND POST-MODERN

Manfred Draudt
University of Austria

The practice of adapting great authors to fit current requirements is not just a recent phenomenon. The first great wave of adaptations of Shakespeare came after the period of the closing of theatres in 1642, with the advent of the Restoration in 1660. Political change was accompanied by a radical change in tastes, ideals and conditions: theatres were roofed in and artificially illuminated (like the earlier private theatres); there was also elaborate changeable scenery; and for the first time female roles were taken by professional actresses. Most importantly, French neo-classicism was adopted as the fashionable theory that shaped both the form and the language of plays. These currents of change motivated playwrights and managers to “improve on” Shakespeare by rewriting and staging his plays in accordance with the spirit of the new times.

Of the hundreds of adaptations written between 1660 and the end of the eighteenth century² I want to recall here just a few: William Davenant, born in 1606 and claiming to be Shakespeare’s “natural” or illegitimate son, appears to have started the trend in 1662 with his play

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The Law Against Lovers, in which he combined *Much Ado About Nothing* with a purified *Measure for Measure*. Even more popular was his spectacular operatic version of a tragedy: *Macbeth. With all the Alterations, Amendments, Additions, and New Songs* (1663), followed in 1667 by *The Tempest, or the Enchanted Island*, in which a male counterpart to Miranda, sisters to her and to Caliban, as well as a female companion to Ariel are added. Davenant collaborated on this play with John Dryden, who in 1677 transformed *Antony and Cleopatra* into the neo-classical *All for Love*, which concentrates the action of Shakespeare's great panoramic tragedy into a single day. The most notorious of these adaptations is Nahum Tate's *The History of King Lear* of 1681, in which both the Fool and the King of France are cut and Cordelia and Edgar are united in love before the play ends happily with Lear restored to power and Kent and Gloucester peacefully retired.

To modern tastes these adaptations may well appear absurd, even preposterous. Nevertheless, it may be argued that in some instances Shakespeare's own method of rewriting well-known stories is not fundamentally dissimilar from that of his later adapters.³ What Tate did was, in one respect, to restore the happy ending to a chronicle history that—before him—Shakespeare had radically altered to suit his own tragic purposes. In the anonymous *True Chronicle History of King LEIR* (1605), which served as Shakespeare's primary source, the king is restored to his throne by his daughter Cordella after Gonorill and Ragan, together with their husbands, have been defeated.

Even the tragedy generally regarded as Shakespeare's greatest, *Hamlet*, seems to be basically an adaptation of an earlier play, Thomas Kyd's *Ur-Hamlet*. The most recent editor, G. R. Hibbard, argues that "Shakespeare's genius was his ability to take an old-fashioned drama and utterly transform it" (Introduction, 13). Furthermore, adaptation is even made an issue in the staging of the play within the play, *The Mousetrap*, when Hamlet requests the Players: "You could, for a need, study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines which I would set down and insert in't?" (2.2.528-30). *Hamlet* is by no means Shakespeare's only play based upon an earlier one. *Henry IV*, Parts 1 and 2, and

Henry V too can be considered—at least in parts—as free re-workings of the anonymous chronicle *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (c.1586), and it is widely agreed that *King John* is a transformation of another chronicle, *The Troublesome Reign of King John* (1591). The same practice can be found in comedy, when Shakespeare adapted and complicated the plot of Plautus's *Menaechmi* to fashion *The Comedy of Errors*.

Not only his use of dramatic sources ought to be considered in a discussion of adaptations; there are also examples in the transmission of some of his plays. One of the three texts of *Hamlet* has come down to us as an adaptation or acting version: the First Quarto of the tragedy is, according to Hibbard, probably “a very imperfect [...] memorial reconstruction of an abridged version of the Folio text” (377). When a company went on tour, for example to escape the plague, the plays in its repertoire would be adapted to suit the smaller number of actors in the touring troupe. The First Quarto version produced for a small acting company was in turn adapted by a troupe of English actors who took the tragedy to Germany. It has come down to us as *Der bestrafte Brudermord oder: Prinz Hamlet aus Dännemark*.⁴

Another Shakespearean tragedy, *Macbeth*, which is extant only in the Folio text of 1623, is generally regarded as a revised or cut acting version because of its exceptional shortness.⁵ However, at least Act 3, Scene 5, and Act 4, Scene 1, possibly also Act 1, Scene 2, show distinctive signs of revision by a later dramatist, Thomas Middleton. Hecate's appearance is the result of this reworking, as are the two songs in the central scenes, of which only the first lines are given in *Macbeth* and whose full text is in Middleton's *The Witch*.⁶ While a collaboration between Shakespeare and Middleton cannot be ruled out, Brooke concludes that “Middleton was responsible” for this revision or adaptation.

King Lear is another tragedy which is believed to have been substantially revised (albeit by Shakespeare himself). This view has been current since the late 1970s. Wells's and Taylor's *Complete Oxford Shakespeare* (1986) prints the Quarto and the Folio versions as if they

were two completely different plays, and in his New Cambridge edition (1992) Jay L. Halio argues that “F represents a revised text of the play” (288). Only R. A. Foakes’s recent Arden edition (1997) adopts a more sceptical stance, arguing that “*King Lear* (is ...) a single work that is extant in two versions” and that “by no means all the changes made in F are likely to be revisions” (129). Indeed it remains to be demonstrated whether an average playgoer would recognize much difference between the two versions were they performed on two consecutive evenings. To judge by the numerous pleas for silence in the plays of the period, Elizabethan audiences were no more attentive than modern ones, so that they would probably not have noted any change either. Like the numerous inconsistencies and loose ends in Shakespeare’s plays, the “revisions” or variants reflected in the Quarto and the Folio versions of *King Lear* would, I believe, largely pass unnoticed in the theatre.

In contrast to revision or adaptation, travesty or burlesque⁷ draws attention to dissimilarities with the original.⁸ Whereas adaptations were generally regarded by contemporaries as improvements upon Shakespeare, burlesques were often emphatically rejected by critics in the past. For example, the reviewer of Mathews’s *Othello, the Moor of Fleet Street* (1833), in *The Morning Post* “confess[es] to be among the number, who cannot reconcile themselves to a low burlesque of the noble conceptions of SHAKSPEARE, and who regard such an attempt as a species of sacrilege” (29 Jan. 1833, 3), and the critic in *The Town*, though admitting that “Poole’s *Hamlet* [*Travestie*] is ably done”, qualifies his statement: “but even in his case, where there is nothing to offend, we are still such ardent worshippers of Shakspeare’s, as scarcely to refrain from exclaiming—“Hence, avaunt! ‘tis holy ground.”⁹

Nevertheless, “travesty, or burlesque, was a favourite form in the nineteenth-century theatre”, as Stanley Wells observes (i, vii). All kinds of drama, including classical plays and opera, were burlesqued at that time, and not only in London. In England, John Poole set the fashion for parodistic treatment of Shakespeare’s plays with his *Hamlet Travestie* of 1810. That the thriving popular stages should have turned to Shakespeare and exploited his popularity is not surprising: numerous

acting editions of his plays were being published at that time,¹⁰ theatres competed with each other in staging his works with star actors such as David Garrick, John Kemble and Edmund Kean appealing to large audiences.¹¹ *Hamlet* in particular caught everybody's attention, so that Poole argues in the Preface to his travesty: "no tragedy in the English language [is] better adapted to receive a burlesque than "HAMLET [...] from its being so frequently before the public, so very generally read, and so continually quoted" (ed. Wells, i, 6). And it also became "the most frequently burlesqued Shakespearean play" (Schoch 10) in nineteenth-century England.

However, Shakespeare's plays, and *Hamlet* in particular, were equally popular on the continent, and by the late eighteenth century they were already not only translated, adapted¹² and performed but also frequently transformed into burlesques. As early as 1781 we find evidence of a "*Hamlet fever*" in Germany:

Never has any English tragedy—I except *The London Merchant*—been accepted in Germany with more acclaim, never has any [play] been devoured so eagerly by audiences and actors alike, than this *Hamlet*. [...] Now every nook of Germany has its Garrick.¹³

This comment comes from Johann Friedrich Schink, the author of one of the first German *Hamlet* travesties, the burlesque "puppet play" *Prinz Hamlet von Dännemark* (1799). In this, Old Hamlet is a ludicrous fat ghost in a nightcap, the Queen is grey, wrinkly and toothless, and the "To be or not to be" soliloquy is transformed into a satirical attack on critics and the theatre, beginning with the line "To be printed or not to be printed? That is the question".¹⁴ A happy ending is secured by drastic changes: Oldenholm, the Polonius counterpart, is merely thrown out of a window by Hamlet, and the King is saved by an antidote. Schink's burlesque was preceded by Karl Ludwig Giesecke's *Der travestirte Hamlet, Eine Burleske in deutschen Knittelversen mit Arien und Chören* (a burlesque in German doggerel with arias and choruses), first

performed in Vienna in 1794, in which the action is transferred to a lower-middle-class setting and the elevated language of the original is translated into the local vernacular—Hamlet being also metaphorically reduced in stature to “Prince of Liliput”. But by far the best of the *Hamlet* burlesques in German is Joachim Perinet’s Viennese *Hamlet. Eine Karrikatur* (1807), which is based on Schröder’s adaptation of the tragedy.¹⁵

Not only *Hamlet* travesties appeared considerably earlier on the continent than they did in England; burlesques of other plays, particularly of *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, also tended to precede their English counterparts. One Viennese box-office success, *Othello, der Mohr in Wien* by Ferdinand Kringsteiner, dates from 1806, whereas the earliest English *Othello Travestie*, an anonymous piece from the year 1813, was never performed, the first to reach the stage being Mathews’s *Othello, the Moor of Fleet Street* (1833). Kringsteiner’s Viennese *Romeo und Julie* of 1808 also preceded Richard Gurney’s London *Romeo and Juliet Travesty* by four years. A similar phenomenon can be observed in Paris, where full-length French burlesques of *Othello*, *Richard III*, *King Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet* appeared during the final two decades of the eighteenth century.¹⁶

It is important not to overlook Spain in the discussion of nineteenth-century burlesques, and since the Spanish examples have received hardly any scholarly attention,¹⁷ I shall discuss them in greater detail than the English burlesques, which are readily available in Wells’s edition. By far the most popular Shakespearean tragedy in Spain was *Othello*, which was first performed with great success at the Teatro Principe, Madrid, in 1802. Heavily indebted to the French version by Jean François Ducis, also with regard to language, the Spanish play reduces the number of characters to seven and replaces Cassio with a new character, the Duke’s son, who is in love with the Desdemona figure, so that a Spanish poet of the time remarked that this translation was “a Shakespearean parody in God knows what language”. Frequent successful revivals of this *Othello*, also in Barcelona, prepared the way for burlesque versions. The first of these, *El Caliche, o la parodia de Otelo* by J. M. Carnerero, was first staged in Madrid at a popular minor

theatre, the Cruz, in 1828 and proved to be as successful as the tragedy (*Caliche*, a term suggesting “white”, is a mocking allusion to Othello’s blackness). Set in the poor quarters of Granada among drunkards and rascals, the parody is full of local slang. The Othello counterpart is a bully and thief, the name of the Desdemona character is suggestive of stealing, and that of Emilia of a clever harlot. In the final scene, which features a straw mattress instead of a bed, the Desdemona figure checks her raging husband with the words: “Wait a second. I’ll get closer to the mattress so that I won’t hurt myself when I fall”. The performance of the tragedy by Rossi’s Italian company in Barcelona in 1866 inspired a burlesque in macaronic Italian (a mixture of Italian and Catalan) staged at the Tivoli Theatre, Barcelona, in 1873: *Otello, il moro de Valencia* (playing on Venezia), *parodia scritta in versi per Abelardo Coma*. The action of Shakespeare’s play is concentrated into the final scene of the burlesque, in which Desdemona is stabbed with a puff pastry dagger and Othello starts eating its handle before he collapses. Like the English and Austrian travesties, it contains various songs. Another burlesque, *Otello, o il moro di Sarrià*, by Antonio Ferrer y Codina, performed at the same theatre in 1883, trivializes Othello by referring to the excellent food that will make him lick his beard. Eventually the hero strangles a hunchback whom he suspects of being his wife’s lover but who in fact has been having an affair with Iago’s niece (the Emilia counterpart). In the end the frenzied Othello plucks out the hairs of his beard until he pretends to be dead. A “zarzuela” (Spanish operetta), *El Otelo del barrio* (*The Backstreet Othello*), performed as late as 1921 in Madrid, belongs to the same tradition. *Romeo and Juliet*, too, was turned into a burlesque “zarzuela”: *Julieta y Romeo*, performed at the Cruz Theatre, Madrid, in 1805, has Julieta fainting in the end because instead of the sleeping potion she has drunk merely water. Believing her dead, Romeo sings for a while before she opens her eyes again to a happy ending.¹⁸

In addition to simplifying and condensing the plots of the original, all parodists traditionally adopt strategies of localization and debasement, transferring the action, language and setting to a period, milieu and place with which the popular audiences were intimately

familiar and could identify. As a result we meet a good deal of topicality and localization, of which the various *Othello* burlesques provide illustrative examples: in Austria he is “*der Mohr in Wien*” (the Moor in Vienna), in England “*the Moor of Fleet Street*”, in Spain “*il moro de Valencia*” (the Moor of Valencia). This approach involves the vulgarisation of the characters: all figures are generally lowered in their social standing and their language, characters who in the original are complex are simplified so that they become stock types whose actions and reactions are predictable, and there is crude exaggeration or caricature of some features, coupled with a lack of convincing motivation.¹⁹ Furthermore the moral extremes of virtue and vice are toned down so that all the characters appear ordinary and crude, are given to physical violence and primarily concerned with trivial and material matters: domestic affairs, eating, drinking, money, and amusement.

Songs, into which soliloquies are frequently transformed, and music are further characteristic features of many travesties. In London, songs were a necessary qualification for performance in the popular theatres, where only “burlettas”, i.e., pieces with a maximum of three acts and at least five or six songs, were allowed before the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 (see Nicoll, iv, 138-39).

As I have argued elsewhere, burlesques of Shakespeare function in accordance with basically similar principles in different cultural traditions.²⁰ In each country, popular playwrights working for commercial theatres wrote simultaneously for middle-class audiences and for the less educated, and these mixed audiences shared similar tastes: a liking for melodrama, for low comedy and entertainment, for spectacular scenic effects, for popular tunes and music, for topicality and novelty—and last but not least for parody. But the travesties also served as an important link between the popular and the more elevated theatres. They not only exploited successes in the court or privileged theatres and parodied particular performances and individual actors but also served to popularise serious drama.²¹ Travesties thus document the assimilation of Shakespeare’s plays—in particular the tragedies—

by other theatrical traditions and provide evidence of the continued success and timeless appeal of his work. As Poole points out in his Preface,

[...] to derive entertainment from a burlesque, but more particularly to be enabled to decide whether it be ill or well executed, a familiar acquaintance with the original is indispensable. (6)

Since burlesque induces comparison,²² it makes us reconsider what the essential qualities of Shakespearean tragedy are: its complexities of plot and characters, its wide range of styles, its moral and emotional dimensions, and the universal appeal of its issues.²³

Although frequently attacked by contemporary reviewers and critics, burlesques are by no means a primitive or low form of entertainment. In their capacity to appeal simultaneously both to the less educated members of the audience (who were unfamiliar with the originals) and to those who had seen or read Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or *Othello* (and could therefore appreciate the travesties on a different level),²⁴ they mirror the Elizabethan originals they parody, which were enjoyed by groundlings and aristocrats alike. Being based on a subtle relationship with the original, burlesques not only constantly challenge us to compare the original text with its comic counterpart²⁵ but also reflect this complex inter-textual relationship both in their form and in their content, frequently alluding satirically to the contemporary theatrical scene and to actors and their performances. "Parody [therefore] is one of the major forms of [...] self-reflexivity" (Hutcheon 2)—or of self-conscious theatricality.

In the wake of the social upheavals in Europe in the late 1960s, particularly German directors—though claiming to perform Shakespeare—began to treat the plays in a way that strongly recalls the old burlesques, turning comedy into tragedy and tragedy into farce. Because fidelity to the original was regarded as "hidebound conservatism", Shakespeare and the classical heritage were deliberately "deconstruct[ed]" by dramaturgs in this theatre of "anti-bourgeois"

agitation (Hortmann 223, 244). According to Hortmann's *Shakespeare on the German Stage*, Peter Zadek, for example, in his production of *Measure for Measure* (Bremen, 1967) radically altered the play's text: Vincentio was turned into a sadist who was eventually killed by the people, and his place was taken by Mistress Overdone, who had Escalus, Angelo and Mariana executed and Isabella sent to a brothel (cf. 217). Similarly, in his production of *Othello* (Hamburg, 1976) the hero was reduced from a noble Moor to a stupid booby who commanded neither the respect of the senators nor the obedience of his officers, and Bianca solicited the front rows of the audience with a sad question which can be translated as "Wanna fuck, wanna fuck?". The bedroom scene was turned into outright farce and climaxed, after the brutal murder, in Othello's exposure of Desdemona's bare posterior to a laughing audience (cf. 263-6).

Compared to these "chaotic tale[s]",²⁶ Claus Peymann's productions at the Burgtheater in Vienna appear relatively traditional in spite of the fact that his *Richard III* (1987) featured a huge gully or cesspit, in which Richard deposited the corpse of Henry VI after his wooing of Lady Anne, as well as several other corpses, and from which in the end all the victims rose again. Nevertheless, close examination of the translation of Scene One of this production reveals that in a quarter of the text the meaning of the original is misrepresented and that in several instances complete nonsense is made of it. Throughout, a tendency towards exaggeration, coarsening or vulgarisation can be observed, for example in the consistent replacing of "villain" by "shit" ("*Dreckskerl*") so that the set focussing on the gully proves suggestive of a propensity throughout to debase both action and characters.²⁷ That textual distortions are by no means exceptional but rather the rule in modern German acting versions is confirmed by another Burgtheater production, *The Tempest* (1988), in which Peymann cooperated with Vera Sturm on the translation. Prospero's speech to Ariel,

[...] for thou wast a spirit too delicate
To act her earthy and abhorred commands (1.2.272-3)

is given an unexpected reference to lewdness (because of a misunderstanding of “earthy”) and absurdly misrepresents Ariel’s nature. Its German rendering can be translated back into English as:

Because you, a delicious spirit, refused
To fulfil unchaste commands.²⁸

Peymann’s tampering with the text may occasionally be trivial, his translations may in parts be careless or sloppy and his productions may be characterised by a tendency towards coarsening and politicisation that consciously appeals to younger audiences; but this is vulgarisation, not outright vulgarity.

That kind of deliberate offensiveness coupled with a conscious disregard or “deconstruction” of Shakespeare’s text and intention,²⁹ which was initiated by the so-called “director’s theatre” in the mid 1960s, re-surfaces in a post-modern Belgian adaptation of Shakespeare’s histories. Tom Lanoye and Luc Perceval’s “sledge hammer” and “chain saw”³⁰ adaptation of Shakespeare’s two tetralogies dealing with the War of the Roses entitled *Ten Oorlog* or, in English, *To War/ Into Battle* (1997), has been praised as the “creative act of destroying [... Shakespeare’s] work” (Hoenselaars 254). Richard III, who is re-named “Dirty Rich (or Risjaar) Modderfocker der Dritte”, devours the princes’ corpses on stage, Hal kills his sick father, and Richard II is turned into a bisexual abuser of children. According to a sympathetic reviewer of the Salzburg production of 1999 entitled *Schlachten! (Battles/ Slaughter!)*, Maik Hamburger, “naked sex in the most sensational exhibitionist mode runs through the production from beginning to end:”³¹ Henry VI, still a minor, watches Margaretha, stark naked, having sexual intercourse with Lord Suffolk, who is also beheaded while copulating with her; Richard II’s queen is turned into an infant bride, with whom Richard is eager to sleep on the eve of his departure for Ireland; and the climax of the supposedly politically relevant sexual scenes is one in which “Edward IV, in a manner meant to recall the Clinton/ Lewinski scandal, was given an onstage blow job”.³²

Not all Shakespeare adaptations are as radical or outrageous as that of Tom Lanoye and Luc Perceval, even if Heiner Müller's *Macbeth - after Shakespeare*, "a model of (gruesome) explicitness" in the style of the theatre of cruelty had "stoked the trendy desire for debunking and radicalization" (Hortmann 237) as early as 1971. With his later deconstructionist *Hamletmaschine* (1977) he "attempted to destroy Hamlet". It is a "baffling piece of meta-theatre which combines parody and travesty" (Hortmann 236), containing a mixture of allusions not only to *Hamlet*, *Richard III* and *Macbeth* but also to the Bible, T. S. Eliot, e. e. cummings, Lessing, Hölderlin, Sartre, and many others. At the time of Müller's *Macbeth*, Friedrich Dürrenmatt's anti-illusionist and anti-war adaptation *König Johann* (1970)³³ provoked no scandal and yet enjoyed triumphant success in the theatre because it captured the spirit of the time. He sensitively follows up the issues and ideas suggested in Shakespeare's play, the cynicism and amorality of those in power, and adapts them to his own times, stressing the utter frustration and disillusionment with politics.

Exactly the same kind of spirit informs Dürrenmatt's bitter or tragic farce, *Titus Andronicus*, ironically subtitled *A Comedy after Shakespeare (Eine Komödie nach Shakespeare)* (1970). Although it shares a few characteristics with burlesques—condensation of the action, (slight) debasement of characters and language (modernised at times), addition of new characters³⁴—it certainly does not qualify as one, since there are even more deaths than in the tragedy and because it lacks the distinguishing features of burlesques such as localization and trivializing. Dürrenmatt also emphasises in his *Notes to the play (Notizen zu "Titus Andronicus")* that his goal is not a new translation or travesty of the play, but an adaptation or new stage version that aims at fidelity to Shakespeare rather than at "improving" on him.³⁵ Dürrenmatt is indeed true to the spirit of Shakespeare, in spite of his changes in the action (which, he argues, are determined by linguistic changes) and a highlighting of political aspects. He uncompromisingly draws the action to its logical, bitter conclusion³⁶ by debasing Bassianus as an irresponsible seducer and turning Marcus Andronicus into a

despicable sycophant of Saturninus who has Titus's sons executed yet does not escape execution himself. The play ends with the seemingly dumb fool Alarich outwitting Lucius, taking power and devastating Rome, though his epilogue in the vein of the Theatre of the Absurd makes it clear that he is just one in a series of rulers greedy to control the globe, which is rolling towards the meaningless death that will be the fate of all of us.³⁷

[...] nach uns
Sind andere an der Reihe, uns drohn Hunnen,

Even if Müller-Schwefe's inclusion of Dürrenmatt's "comedy" of *Titus Andronicus* among the burlesques is unwarranted, it may provide a transition to modern travesties, which still are flourishing, mostly in German-speaking countries. Ephraim Kishon's *It was the Lark* (1973),³⁸ an unromantic continuation of *Romeo and Juliet*, has proved a great theatrical success in Israel, Zürich and on various stages in Germany. The protagonists survive to become a bickering elderly couple; in the end they pretend to poison each other, deceiving William Shakespeare and spoiling (again) his original plan to have them killed. The appearance of the character of the angry Shakespeare is reminiscent of Halliday's *Romeo and Juliet Travestie*. Transference into the "present time", metadramatic features as well as quotations from and allusions to various plays by Shakespeare and also to other works such as *Tosca* and *My Fair Lady* characterise this burlesque.

In the 1980s and early 90s Bernd Lafrenz created "free-comic" versions of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Hamlet frei-komisch* (1983),³⁹ also *Macbeth* and *Othello* (1990 and 1991), radically condensing the tragedies so that a single actor in *commedia dell'arte*-style can take all the major roles. In addition to performances in Germany, these abbreviated comic versions were also staged in France.

In recent years fully-fledged travesties of Shakespeare have been created again for a popular Viennese stage, the Wiener Lustspielhaus, which shows that the Austrian popular theatre not only had a pioneering

role in the nineteenth century (when Viennese burlesques of some tragedies preceded their London counterparts) but also maintains a tradition that is still very much alive today (even if with the help of municipal government subsidies): from July to September 2004 “A Viennese Midsummer Night’s Dream” (“Ein Wiener Sommernachtstraum”) was staged, which was revived in summer 2005 and will be staged again in summer 2006. In 2005 “What You Will” (“Was Ihr Wollt’s”) was also performed there. Both travesties written in the Viennese vernacular and featuring all the traditional characteristics of the genre were created by a young author, Susanne Wolf, who was born in Mainz (Germany) and came to Austria in 1992 to study at the drama department of Vienna University.⁴⁰

In two more respects Wolf’s plays are remarkable: first, because they are rare examples of travesties of comedies;⁴¹ and secondly, because they transfer the action not to the present day but to the recent past, the end of the Habsburg monarchy. Her travesty may also appear old-fashioned at first sight, because, in the manner of the Restoration adaptations, particularly those of Davenant, she supplies a counterpart to Puck, Naseweis (“Jackanapes”), a fairy attending on Hippolyta, who assists her mistress in her revenge by mischievously casting a spell on Oberon that gives him hiccups, and with whom Puck eventually falls in love. Theseus, characteristically lowered in his social standing,⁴² is a civil servant of the monarchy, a municipal clerk (“k. und k. Amtsrat”) with the outmoded comic Christian name Thaddädl.⁴³ His beadle (“Amtsdiener”) is Bottom (“Zettel”), who secretly supports the eloping lovers. In spite of the setting in a remote period (which helps to maintain the basic hierarchical structure of the original) there are numerous topical allusion to the present day: to political parties, the present mayor of Vienna, and current slogans of Vienna tourism. In at least one further respect—in addition to its timeless spoofing of bureaucracy and civil service—the travesty satirises topical issues: feminism and emancipation. Titania (doubled with Hippolyta), insisting on being a self-reliant fairy (“eine selbständige Fee”) who for many years has been involved in the fairies’ movement and fought for the fairies’ emancipation,⁴⁴

*Wozu hab ich mich jahrelang in der
Feenbewegung*

wonders how she can ever have agreed to become dependent on Oberon (doubled with Theseus) and describes her marriage to him (for 300 years!) as her biggest mistake. Feminism and gender issues are taken up again in the Lysander - Hermia relationship, in which the original gender relations are reversed, Hermia being the audacious one who looks forward to the adventures (also erotic ones) in the Vienna Woods and boldly starts kissing Lysander when they are alone, whereas he proves cowardly and timid, afraid of the noise of birds (which he mistakes for vultures) and dropping off to sleep while she is fondling him.⁴⁵ Hermia's rigorous order that Lysander should instantly sit down close to her provokes Puck to compare her to Xanthippe (in a comic coining: "Xanthyperin"). To Shakespeare's happy ending *Wolf* at least adds a question mark. The spell that Naseweis has cast on Oberon is not removed from him in the end, which means that he still gets hiccups whenever he secretly fancies a woman, for example when looking at Helena. Similarly Titania, when she has been released from her spell and is reconciled with Oberon, regrets in an aside that her husband is not a bit more animal-like⁴⁶ and, recalling her adventure with the "ass" (Zettel), in the final scene confesses that she would fancy a little donkey.

Was Ihr Wollt's is in principle quite similar: again set in the late nineteenth century, as particularly the forms of address suggest, the travesty is located in Nußdorf, then an outlying district of Vienna situated on the Danube (in which Viola and Sebastian are almost drowned) and well-noted for its vineyards and wine-gardens. Olivia is transformed into the owner of one of these vineyards with a winery ("Weingutsbesitzerin") and Orsino into a high-class shoemaker ("Nobelschuster") from Alsergrund, one of the inner districts of Vienna. Both professions become the origin of original metaphors and wordplay, the wine-cellar a suitable place for Rülp (Sir Toby Belch) and his friend Christoph von Bleichenwang (Sir Andrew Aguecheek), a master glazier from Ottakring (another suburb), who derives his claim on Olivia from

the fact that wine and glasses go together. As in “Ein Wiener Sommernachtstraum”, where, apart from Zettel, the other mechanicals have been cut, Feste, Fabian, Antonio, etc. are omitted, but new counterparts to other characters are created: not only Viola is disguised as a man, Vickerl, but also Sebastian, who gets stranded with only one stray suitcase containing women’s clothes, is disguised as a woman, Seraphine, and becomes a companion reading literature to Olivia. Seraphine’s confession, “Shakespeare is very close to me” (“*Shakespeare ist mir sehr nahe*”), in fact has a deeper meaning and correctly suggests that these burlesques are close to Shakespeare, much closer than many post-modern productions, translations or acting versions which all claim to represent Shakespeare but in fact turn out to be radical adaptations sailing under false colours.

The practice of rewriting or transforming earlier works that was extensively exercised by Shakespeare and his contemporaries is probably as old as drama itself, and there is nothing to object to it in principle. It is a matter of changing literary taste (and cultural fashion) whether one regards Shakespeare’s reshaping of *King John* as artistically superior to his (anonymous) model, whether one prefers Davenant’s and Tate’s adaptations to their originals, or even Lanoye and Perceval’s *To War/ Into Battle* to Shakespeare’s histories. Yet the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, the so-called post-modern period, has seen an ever-increasing blurring of boundaries (not least regarding traditional taboos) and a blending of genres, so that they resist classification according to traditional criteria. Travesties and burlesques, once categorically rejected by critics, have become a well-established genre, particularly in Austria,⁴⁷ and are distinguished from adaptations and acting versions, if at all, only by the greater degree of localization and topicality,⁴⁸ the greater prominence of trivial activities such as eating or drinking, and a creative use of language; what was once an intrinsic feature of burlesques, the reversal of genre, can nowadays be found also in adaptations and “productions” of Shakespeare.⁴⁹ Müller’s *Hamletmaschine*, too, with its meta-theatrical and parodic allusions to

a wide range of drama and literature takes up elements originally characteristic of burlesque. Post-modern adaptations, travesties and acting versions (including translations) share one feature above all, debasement: the action is less elevated than that of the original, characters are lowered in social levels, and the language is transferred to the present, to a slangy, coarse or even vulgar contemporary idiom with which audiences can easily identify. The distinguishing features of some of these adaptations and acting versions (in contrast to the burlesques or travesties) seem to be not just crass vulgarity and deliberate offensiveness but also a pandering to sensationalism. Gross exaggeration and scandalous effects of any kind seem to be intended to attract the attention of the public away from the small screen, with which the theatre has to compete.⁵⁰ Furthermore, developments in politics and literary theory since the 1960s, particularly deconstructive theory (Derrida) and post-structuralism (Barthes), which has postulated "The Death of the Author" and hence freed the interpreter to read a text in whatever way he or she chooses, have "decentred" and "displaced" literature. Many, particularly German, directors therefore have felt free to undermine and subvert Shakespeare's plays, and the works of adaptors such as Heiner Müller and Lanoye and Perceval explicitly or implicitly even aim at "destroying" Shakespeare. However, the very fact that they have chosen the "bard" as their target and not his contemporaries such as Marlowe, Jonson, or Beaumont, who have also received some attention in recent decades not only in England but also in German-speaking theatres in Europe,⁵¹ provides evidence that Shakespeare is still very much alive today, and so do the various acting versions and travesties of his plays. Even if "the real thing" appears to have become more elusive in recent years, the critical debates these transformations have elicited have become more lively and complex. "Displacing" Shakespeare's own Sonnet 116, one might apply two of its lines to the dramatist himself, who nowadays appears as

[...] an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken. (5-6)

Notes

1. Title of a play by Tom Stoppard (Faber and Faber, 1982).
2. The vogue for staging Shakespeare in adapted form continued well into the nineteenth century.
3. See Joughin and Malpas, 147: 'Shakespeare was ... first and foremost an adaptor, a notorious Jack-of-all-trades, an "Upstart crow" who fleeced his competitors and lifted and reworked his best plots from the templates provided by English chronicles and Italian romance'.
4. See Appendix C in Hibbard's edition, where he arrives at the conclusion that "the German play is an adaptation of the abridged version of *Hamlet* that lies behind the first Quarto" (378).
5. In his Oxford edition, Nicholas Brooke maintains that "it derives from a version cut for performance" (55, see also 49). It is not only the shortest of the tragedies but also, with *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Tempest*, one of the three shortest plays in the entire canon.
6. See Brooke 51-9. Hecate's verse, the use of "function words" such as but, by, for, etc., and anomalous stage-directions support this attribution.
7. Burlesque and travesty have been variously defined. In the *Spectator*, Joseph Addison observed that burlesque "describes great Persons acting and speaking like the basest among the People" (15 Dec. 1711), but modern critics rather argue that "a low treatment of high subjects is better termed a "travesty" (or "low" burlesque)" (Schoch 17-18). Since the terms "burlesque", "burletta", "travesty" and "extravaganza" were used interchangeably by nineteenth-century playwrights and critics, I am using the terms loosely.
8. For the following arguments on travesty and burlesque see my edition of Charles Mathews, *Othello, the Moor of Fleet Street*, as well as my articles, "'Committing outrage against the Bard'", "Lokalkolorit in den Shakespeare-Parodien", and "Nineteenth-Century Burlesques of *Hamlet*".
9. ii, no. 58, incorporated with *The Sunday Herald*; 3 Feb. 1833, 38.
10. John Bell's, dedicated to Garrick (1773-74); Garrick's (1779); John Philip Kemble's (1789-1815); Mrs Inchbald's (1808); Oxberry's (1818-24), and Dolby's (1823-25),

partly identical with Cumberland's edition (1826-61). According to Kimberley, "Bell's Shakespeare [...] was the prototype of the succeeding acting editions, [which] are chiefly derived from the acting arrangements of J. P. Kemble" (16).

11. John Philip Kemble acted in *Hamlet* from 1783 to 1817; Edmund Kean made his début in the role of Hamlet at Drury Lane in 1783 and also played it at Covent Garden.
12. In 1772 Karl Heufeld adapted *Hamlet* for the stage, changing the names of Polonius and Horatio to Oldenholm and Gustav and, partly for censorship reasons, cutting Ophelia's madness, the figure of Laertes, and the graveyard scene. Friedrich Ludwig Schröder restored the cut scenes, and his *Hamlet* version was then performed at the Hofburgtheater in Vienna from 1778 onwards (see Hein 5).
13. "Nie ist wol irgend ein englisches Trauerspiel - ich neme den Kaufmann von London etwa aus - mit dem allgemeinen Beifall in Teutschland aufgenommen, nie nirgend eins mit einem solchen Heishunger von Zuschauer und Schauspieler verschlungen worden, als dieser Hamlet. [...] Jetzt hatte jeder Winkel Teutschlands seinen Garrik" (Johann Friedrich Schink, *Dramaturgische Fragmente*, (Graz, 1781) i, 153ff., quoted in Müller-Schwefe, *Shakespeare im Narrenhaus* xii-xiii).
14. "Mich drucken lassen oder nicht? Das ist die Frage!" (Müller-Schwefe, *Shakespeare im Narrenhaus* 232).
15. I have discussed this play in "Nineteenth-Century Burlesques of *Hamlet*".
16. Parisau's *Richard, parodie de Richard III, en vaudevilles* (1781), Desprès's *Le Roi Lu parodie du roi Lir ou Léar* (1783), the anonymous *Romeo et Paquette, traduction amphigouri-criticomique de Romeo et Juliette* (1788), and *Arlequin Cruello* (1792), an *Othello* travesty (see Roche, i, 80).
17. My summary of the situation in Spain is based on two unpublished conference papers of my Spanish colleagues Rafael Portillo and Mercedes Salvador Bello of the University of Seville, to whom I am greatly indebted. They kindly provided me with a copy of their paper "Spanish Productions of *Hamlet* in the Twentieth Century", which was delivered at the conference "400 Years of Shakespeare" (Murcia, 1999), and Mercedes Salvador Bello also allowed me to make use of her paper "Portuguese and Spanish Burlesques of Shakespeare's Play: From the 18th Century to Our Days", which she gave together with Maria João da Rocha Afonso of the University Nova de Lisboa at a conference in Lisbon in May 2001.

18. There was also a Catalan *Hamlet* for the "Catholic stage" by Angel Guerra (pseudonym for Father Gaietà Soler) in which, instead of killing his uncle, the Prince forgives Claudius his crime so that he can repent in the end.
19. Compare Schoch: "Their [the burlesques'] language, characters and situations do not appear complex. Still less do they invite a compelling range of interpretation" (20).
20. See "'Committing outrage against the Bard'" and "Nineteenth-century burlesques of *Hamlet*".
21. On Vienna, see Hüttner 99-139.
22. Poole also maintained that "only (...) a (...) contrast with its subject work (...) give[s] to burlesque its full effect" (Preface 6).
23. Compare Jonathan Bate's point that travesties are "mean and limited" when "set beside the magnanimity and breadth of vision" of Shakespeare's originals (126).
24. Schochs repeated emphasis that "readers [or spectators] *always* (my emphasis) understand a parody by reference to its original (...) because parody comically distorts both an original text and readers' expectations of that text" (19) is surely incorrect. Performances of travesties I have attended were enjoyed immensely also by spectators who did not know the originals, just as one can get pleasure from reading Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* without knowing Richardson's *Pamela*. But an awareness of the original adds yet another dimension to the enjoyment.
25. As early as 1853 the *Morning Advertiser* contended that the "mighty original (...) only rises to memory with greater force, as it is recollected through the (...) nonsense of its merry parody" (5 July).
26. From a review of Zadek's *Othello* quoted in Hortmann 267.
27. For a close analysis of Peymann's production of *Richard III* see my recent article "Shakespeare's English Histories at the Vienna Burgtheater".
28. *Weil du, ein delikater Geist, dich weigertest Unzüchtige Befehle zu erfüllen* (quoted from the textbook in the *Programme* of the *Burgtheater*. William Shakespeare: *Der Sturm*, 26 (1987/88): 53). In German the primary meaning of "*delikat*" is "delicious".

29. It is, of course, impossible to know what Shakespeare's intention was, and we should never restrict the complexity of possible meaningful responses to his plays; nevertheless, it seems to be clear what he did not intend or write: for example, the execution of Escalus, Angelo and Mariana ordered by Mistress Overdone.
30. Jozef de Vos quoted in Hoenselaars 255.
31. "Der nackte Sex in eklatantestem Vorzeigemodus durchzieht die Aufführung von Anfang bis Ende" (211).
32. Hoenselaars 260. For details of this adaptation see his article, particularly 248-60. See also my own forthcoming article, "Aesthetics vs. Politics or Aesthetics and Politics in Shakespeare's Plays", in *Proceedings of the International Conference Thessaloniki - Veliko Turnovo: "Politics and/ in Aesthetics"*, June 2005, ed. Ludmilla Kostova et.al.
33. For a detailed analysis see Rudolf Stamm's article.
34. He transforms the kinsmen of the Andronici into crippled soldiers, one-eyed, one-legged and legless victims of the senseless wars who become choric commentators. His most radical addition is the introduction of Alarich, Prince of the Goths, who escaped the initial slaughter and who, like Aufidius in *Coriolanus*, becomes the avenger's (Lucius's) ally.
35. The play and Dürrenmatt's *Notes* are contained in Müller-Schwefe's collected edition, *Was haben die aus Shakespeare gemacht!*, 175-230: "(...) meine Bühnenfassung (... soll) nicht (...) Shakespeare (...) "verbessern". [...] Ich schlug einen andern Weg ein, nicht den der Übersetzung oder der Pe[r]siflage, sondern den der Bearbeitung: Bearbeitung aus Treue Shakespeare gegenüber" (226).
36. "ich [war] gezwungen, die Handlung unerbittlicher zu Ende zu denken" (227).
37. [...] nach uns Sind andere an der Reihe, uns drohn Hunnen, Den Hunnen Türken, diesen die Mongolen; Sie alle gierig nach der Weltherrschaft, Die eine kurze Weltsekunde unser. [...] Der Weltenball, er rollt dahin im Leeren Und stirbt so sinnlos, wie wir alle sterben (225).
38. Available in Müller-Schwefe's collected edition, *Shakespeare im Narrenhaus* 63-121.

39. Available in *Shakespeare im Narrenhaus* 419-33.
40. The apparently paradoxical phenomenon that authors from Germany should write Viennese Shakespeare travesties or have their burlesques performed in popular Viennese theatres can be traced back as far as the eighteenth century when the German Schink had his *Shakespeare in Trouble (Shakespeare in the Klemme)*, a send-up of the French Shakespeare translator and adaptor Ducis, staged at the Vienna Kärntnertheater (1780) and when Karl Ludwig Giesecke (born as Johann Georg Metzler in Augsburg) made his theatrical career with Emanuel Schikaneder (the librettist of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*), in whose Freihaustheater auf der Wieden his *Hamlet Travesty* was premiered in 1794. In fact he concluded his career holding the chair of mineralogy at the Dublin Society (1814-33).
41. Only comedies with a tragic potential such as *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale* "held any appeal as a burlesque [in nineteenth-century England]. [...] Shakespeare's other comedies were seldom, if ever, parodied" (Schoch 11). Tragedies were the natural target of burlesque transformations, which were usually defined by avoiding the sombre endings and restoring dead characters to life. Conversely, Wolf's travesty questions the happy ending of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
42. Hippolyta, supplied with an absurd surname, "Xavereckel", is a master baker. Her profession is the source of comic wordplay. Quotations are from the as yet unpublished acting versions kindly supplied to me by Mag. Susanne Wolf. The travesties will be published in 2006 by Kaiser Verlag, Vienna.
43. Originally a stock comic figure in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century popular Viennese comedy.
44. *Wozu hab ich mich jahrelang in der Feenbewegung engagiert, für die Feemanzipation gekämpft* (the satire is underlined by the wordplay in the comic German coining "Feemanzipation").
45. Wolf skilfully elaborates issues suggested in Shakespeare's comedy such as the "proud" and independent spirit of Titania, who has "forsoven ... [Oberon's] bed and company" (2.1.62) and refuses to obey her "lord" ("Not for thy fairy kingdom", 2.1.144); furthermore, she transfers Shakespeare's reversal of conventional gender roles (Helena's pursuit of Demetrius) also to the Hermia-Lysander relationship.
46. "Wenn er nur a bisserl was animalisches hätt [...] Ein bisserl was animalisches [...]"

47. *Othello* burlesques have been enjoying a unique theatrical success in Vienna that has lasted for almost 200 years and challenges the idea that their popularity rests largely on topicality and novelty. Kringsteiner's travesty, originally staged between 1806 and 1823, was performed again in 1964/65 (by the Burgtheater company) and in 1988. Meisl's adaptation of it, originally staged between 1829 and 1844, saw a more recent production in 1982/83 which was also televised. The play was performed at the Burgtheater between 1990 and 1992 and produced again in 1998. In addition to the recent performances of the travesties of Shakespeare's comedies at the Wiener Lustspielhaus, a *Tannhäuser* burlesque is just being staged at the Burgtheater with great acclaim (season 2005/ 2006). Furthermore, puppet plays of *Much Ado About Nothing* ("Viel Lärm um Nichts") and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ("Ein Sommernachtstraum") have been performed by a Viennese amateur group in 2005 and 2006. Even though adaptations of Shakespeare, such as John Barton's *The Hollow Crown*, played by the RSC in Stratford-upon-Avon in 2005, are not uncommon in Britain, burlesques have not performed there in recent years. Schoch confirms that "these plays are now little read [...] and never performed" (3).
48. Localization (as well as topicality) is particularly prominent in Lanoye and Perceval's adaptation *To War/ Into Battle*, which refers to Flemish history, the recent Dutroux affair, Belgian politics, and the Lewinski affair.
49. See Zadek's *Measure for Measure* and Lanoye and Perceval's *To War/ Into Battle*. Surprisingly Wolf's travesty of *What You Will* does not question the genre.
50. This idea was put to me privately by a Viennese theatre critic.
51. In Vienna Jonson's *The Alchemist*, a Young Vic production with popular Austrian music and songs, was performed in 1972. The following Viennese productions were all in German: Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* in 1994, Jonson's *Volpone* in 1989/90 and Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* in 2001/2002; furthermore, in Germany Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* was staged in 1999 and the anonymous *Arden of Faversham* in 1978-79.

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