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To *Hamlet* or Not to *Hamlet*: Notes on an Arts Secondary School Students' *Hamlet*

Abstract: This article discusses a 2018 theatrical production of *Hamlet* with Romanian teenage arts students, directed by one of the article's authors, actress and academic Dana Trifan Enache. As an artist, she believes that the art of theatre spectacle depends pre-eminently on the actors' enactment, and hones her students' acting skills and technique accordingly. The other voice in the article comes from an academic in a cognate discipline within the broad field of arts and humanities. As a feminist and medievalist, the latter has investigated the political underside of representations of the body in religious drama, amongst others. The analytic duo reflects as much the authors' different professional formation and academic interests as their asymmetrical positioning vis-à-vis the show as respectively the play's director and one of its spectators. Their shared occupational investment, teaching to form and hone highly specialized professional skills, and shared object of professional interest (broadly conceived), text interpretation, account nevertheless for the possibility of fruitful interdisciplinary reflection on the 2018 *Hamlet*. This in-depth analysis of the circumstances of the performance and technical solutions it sought challenges stereotyped dismissals of a students' *Hamlet* as superannuated, flimsy or gratuitously provocative. Furthermore, a gender-aware examination of the adaptation's original handling of characters and scenes indicates unexpected cross-cultural and diachronic commonalities between the dramatic world of the 2018 Romanian production of *Hamlet* and socio-cultural developments emergent in pre-Shakespearean England.

Keywords: *Hamlet* (Romanian theatrical production, 2018), student actors, role doubling, collective character, gender identity, cross-cultural echoes.

It is not unusual for consummate actors to start directing as well. We would go no further than mentioning a few of Romania's celebrated actors turned stage and/or film directors such as Horațiu Mălăele, Ion Caramitru, Mihai Mălaimare,

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Nae Caranfil, Dan Puric and, last but not least, the late Liviu Ciulei. However, some others do so in response to professional contingency, as is the case of one of this article's authors, actress Dana Trifan Enache, in her capacity as an academic and also, however briefly, as an acting instructor in the Queen Mary Secondary School of Arts, Constanța. This article analyzes the Queen Mary student actors' *Hamlet* she directed in 2018, which premiered on 3 April at the National Contest of Secondary School Student Actors, held that year in Constanța. A brief overview of the circumstances leading to the decision to stage Shakespeare's tragedy with secondary school student actors will shed light on the aesthetic and practical solutions adopted on the stage, which this article discusses at length with respect to dramatic and theatrical precedents and attuned to gender issues.

The idea of mounting *Hamlet* presented itself on seeing the results of the early, local stage of the National Contest of Secondary School Student Actors, as decided by a jury formed of actors of the State Theatre of Constanța, many of them also academics. Looking at the fifteen students elected to participate in the National Contest of Secondary School Student Actors, it dawned on the actress-academic that they could form the cast to mount Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Anyway, two of them were clearly to be cast as Hamlet (Ionuț Roșu) and Ophelia (Nicoleta Zghibartă¹). Decision once made, Iulian Enache² started adapting Shakespeare's text: he used two recent Romanian translations of *Hamlet* to rewrite the script for a predominantly female cast, as the student actors mostly were, to perform in a sixty-minute show, as the national contest rules required.³ Yet no one—director, script writer or cast—ever envisaged

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² An actor and stage director of the State Theatre of Constanța, and Dana Trifan Enache's husband.

³ Adaptation is notoriously difficult to define, let alone assess, non-controversially; see Hutcheon, Sanders, and Kidnie. We use the term adaptation with regard to the 2018 *Hamlet* to refer to the text's redaction—constrained primarily by production circumstances—through substantial line/character cutting, line rearrangement and character addition. This is Ruby Cohn's definition of adaptation in contradistinction to both "reduction/emendation" and innovative "transformation" (3-4; see also Kidnie 3; Sanders 22-23). Margaret Jane Kidnie (3) rightly wonders: "at what point does theatrical production become adaptive" and, moreover, how can one "distinguish[] between Shakespeare and new drama 'based on' Shakespeare"? One crucial difficulty arises from defining Shakespeare's plays, given both their collaborative writing and performance and their early redacted publication. For Kidnie, although a play "carries the rhetorical and ideological force of an enduring stability, [it] is not an object at all, but rather a dynamic process that evolves over time in response to the needs and sensibilities of its users" (2). Shakespeare's drama owes such dynamic, non-reified existence also to the retroactive effect of adaptations (Huang and Rivlin 8), with their

a *Hamlet* to speak pre-eminently to the interests and biases of twenty-first century teenagers. Everyone in the cast was thrilled to perform in a challenging play “for adults”, not “for kids”, whose characters, they were to discover, were haunted by dreams of power, love or revenge and occasionally by conscience pangs, and whose actions were awash with blood.

The rehearsal turned out to have two stages. In the first four days before the script adaptation had been completed, the cast practised assiduously speaking voice, improvisation on set topics and group improvisation for team-building.⁴ Meanwhile, Bianca Manta was designing the choreography for the show and Adrian Mihai was adapting the music. The script proper, however, was rehearsed in the following ten days as two or three new scenes a day were being fed to the student actors by Iulian Enache. Yet barely within six days the crew realized their performance would last more than the sixty minutes required by contest regulations. Difficult and dispiriting though it was, in the following four days the student actors had, therefore, to un-memorize a little bit from each of the adaptation's eighteen scenes. No one in the audiences of *Hamlet*, whether at the premiere, when it earned standing ovations from the contestants filling half the auditorium (viz., the *Hamlet* actors' “rivals”), or at subsequent performances, would have envisaged the effort behind the show.

Hamlet struck many⁵ as at once a consummate performance by very young actors working under the dual pressure of stage and competition, and theatre at its purest in terms of minimalism and visual/aural effectiveness. By minimalism we do not mean a literally “empty space”: the director did not “take any *empty* space and call it a bare *stage*”, in Peter Brook's (9) famous definition of the basics of theatre-making. The student actors had the stage of the State Theatre of Constanța, with its paraphernalia, for the premiere (Figure 1), if not on a daily basis for the ten-day rehearsals, and the full support of the theatre crew during dress rehearsals.

“active potential” (2) and an openness of form which ranges from “discrete works” to “cultural deployments” (2). Accordingly, “Shakespeare can best be understood as the sum of the critical and creative responses elicited by his work” (Massai 6); furthermore, post-Cold War staging of Shakespeare has embarked on a “quest for cosmopolitanism” through “cross-media and cross-cultural citations” whereby adaptations “refer to one another across cultures and genres in addition to the Shakespearian pretext” (Joubin 144).

⁴ The cast included ninth-, tenth- and eleventh-grade students, some of whom barely knew each other.

⁵ Although *Hamlet* won only the Jury's Award at the time, subsequently it was awarded the first prize in the student competition affixed to the “Fortress' Myths” International Theatre Festival of Constanța in the same year.



Figure 1. *Hamlet* (2018), directed by Dana Trifan Enache: final scene
Photo credits: Iulian Enache

Brook continues: “A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (9). Indeed, *Hamlet* fully met the etymological definition of *theatre*, which concerns the deliberate act of *seeing*. A *spectacle* (in a literal sense) for the eye, in terms of aesthetic pleasure, *Hamlet* also posed some of its intellectual challenges in visual terms. One particularly effective scene, in this connection, was the dumb play within the play. Under Hamlet’s stage direction, as it were, the itinerant actors visiting Elsinore used stroboscopic lighting for the Gonzago play wherein Shakespeare’s Hamlet planned to “catch the conscience of the king” (2:2:558). In doing so, however, they offered but freeze-frame highlights of the pantomime devised to expose Claudius. The deliberately intermittent light worked metatheatrically: by goading the actual spectators to regard (in both senses) the making of vision—and the transmission of knowledge—onstage, it elicited their (re)consideration of the spectatorial position, complicities and all. What the spectators saw “reflected” onstage when the Elsinore court watched the pantomime and responded to it unfolded as an *us* versus *them* mirroring: the actual offstage audience versus the onstage participants in a political—and theatrical—plot. With this realization may have come the further one that the offstage spectators were not total strangers to the political manoeuvres of *Hamlet*: they only watched—viz., became privy to—what they were permitted to

see, and engaged in guesswork to fill in the rest, whether motivation or means to achieve one's goal. A sobering reminder indeed that we are never fully outside the socio-political game, even when we protest our innocent (or coerced) disengagement.

In more general terms, all the spectators' eyes were riveted on the student actors, visible and invisible by turns, albeit always present on the stage, as if ready to haunt it alongside the dead king. This was, in fact, *Hamlet's* overall theatrical image, borne out particularly effectively by the unassuming grey mantles covering up the actors when idle and facing the wings, and off-white Victorian-style linen shirts and black tights for everyone (Figure 2). The simple costume formula evolved from the director's wish to teach her student actors to rely on their artistic skills, not costume, insignia and props, to create meaning. Not the costume was used here to indicate the character's position, as in professional theatre; rather, the director sought a visually neutral effect. Where necessary, accessories were added—as in Queen Gertrude's case—as royal insignia, yet by and large everyone looked like everyone else sartorially. By levelling out the characters' appearance, the stylized black-and-white costumes allowed the actors' interpretation to identify the character socially and emotionally. The spectators, therefore, could not but focus on enactment.

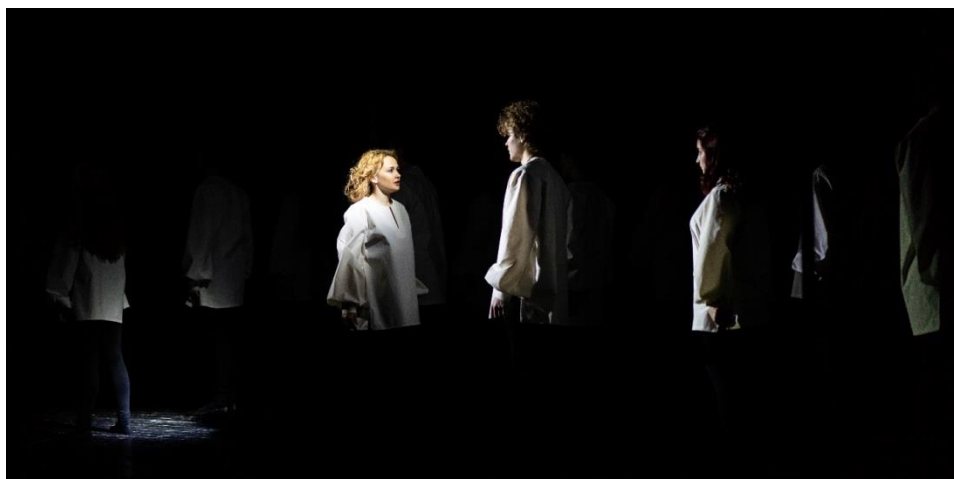


Figure 2. *Hamlet* (2018), directed by Dana Trifan Enache: Ophelia (Nicoleta Zghibarță) and Hamlet (Ionuț Roșu)
Photo credits: Iulian Enache

As with other artistic choices in this show, the actors' permanent presence on the stage had professional as well as symbolic reasons. On the one hand, the director made a versatile show, viz., one easily adaptable to various

performance venues, conventional and unconventional alike.⁶ On the other, the characters' absence/invisibility—signalled by donning their mantles and turning sidewise to face the wings—pointed to a social dimension that was part and parcel of the collective character enacted by the women: we are all part of society even when we do not actively participate in particular events and civic actions.

In what follows, we look at artistic choices concerning the 2018 adaptation of the complex, lengthy Shakespearean play so as to meet both the specific requirements of the student actors' contest and the actors' memorization capacity and acting stamina. A factor we examine alongside the former regards the urgency of living up to the artistic imperative for a memorable theatrical event, lest the production be dismissed as a student actor show that merely pays lip-service to the page and/or where the student actors learn artistic complacency. With respect to the latter, one question relates, unavoidably, if loosely, to what Harold Bloom (1973/1997) has famously called "the anxiety of influence"⁷: how much of the western history of interpreting *Hamlet* may influence an adaptation without making the latter an old hat? Whether as direct indebtedness to or abiding influence of a particular modern rendition, especially a screen production, of Shakespeare's plays, the issue has yielded itself to hot debate by theatre critics and scholars. In the case of *Hamlet*, one could only think of the tremendous influence of Laurence Olivier's film (1948) on subsequent versions such as Franco Zeffirelli's (1990) and Kenneth Branagh's (1996). Yet, in the 2018 *Hamlet*'s case, the director did her best to let Shakespeare's *play*, not its interpretations, speak to her young actors, to start from scratch, as it were, lest they be overwhelmed by the critical or stage "pronouncements" on Shakespeare's play.

The issue of influence may be more complex than statements about it indicate, though. When playwrights, novelists or poets write, they allude to, quote or paraphrase other texts, in part or even wholly, as the case may be. Such intertextuality (in Julia Kristeva's terms) may be furthered, in shows of any kinds, through complex references to other shows and artists as well as to discourses in diverse other media; intermediality is regarded as the signature of

⁶ The first challenge, in this respect, occurred in June 2018, when *Hamlet* was invited to perform in broad daylight in an ordinary classroom at Ovidius University during a conference at the Faculty of Letters.

⁷ Influence, if not anxiety too, is an appropriate notion with respect to *Hamlet*. Bloom quotes Horatio's evocation of "the world of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*" (xi), with the stars' *influence* on human destiny, one different from ordinary *influence qua inspiration*, as Shakespeare uses the term elsewhere in his plays as well as in his sonnets (xii).

British director Peter Greenaway, for instance.⁸ The necessary abridgement of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in performance may be of interest with respect to "influence" too, for the 2018 adaptation was done by an actor and stage director, Iulian Enache, who abridged the text—as virtually everyone does, save Kenneth Branagh on screen—in this case also in connection with non-dramatic strictures (viz., contest regulations). Yet there is an illustrious dramatic precedent for extra-dramatically motivated abridgement, Tom Stoppard's omnibus play *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* (1979), if not also his *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (performed in 1966). Stoppard's double feature furnishes a challenging term of comparison, even as we are interested here primarily in *The Dogg's Troupe 15-Minute Hamlet* part (written in 1972; published and performed separately in 1976) of *Dogg's Hamlet*.⁹ In *Dogg's Hamlet*, the students who mount a thirteen-minute performance of Shakespeare's text transform the tragedy into a burlesque fast-paced routine; their two-minute encore only further reduces it to a farcically absurd assortment of half-lines and speeded entries and exits. Framed as it is within the activity of building a platform (viz., theatre stage), with its metadramatic deployment of linguistic building blocks framed as Wittgensteinian language game, the *15-Minute Hamlet* has expunged virtually all of Hamlet's famous cogitation and procrastination. Stoppard's characters' is *drama*, however farcical, in its etymological sense: *action*. There are certain similarities between Stoppard's fifteen-minute *Hamlet* adaptation and the 2018 Romanian production: the former's character-actors, like the latter's actors, are young students; in both cases, moreover, the adaptation is drastically time-bound. Stoppard's "adaptation" of Shakespeare, however, cannot have influenced the Romanian director and script writer due to their unfamiliarity with the Stoppard play. In retrospect, it may be argued that if Stoppard's characters could produce both a thirteen-minute *Hamlet* adaptation and a two-minute encore in the socio-cultural void of the *Dogg's Hamlet* script, then so—or even more so—could teenage student actors enact a sixty-minute *Hamlet* in the real world, or anyway not one scripted to be mounted on a makeshift stage. As already stated, the artistic wager was not to cross-reference other *Hamlet* interpretations, but to

⁸ Theorized extensively especially by German and Canadian theorists (Rajewsky 43-46), the concept of *intermedial* "designates those configurations which have to do with a crossing of borders between media, and which thereby can be differentiated from intramedial phenomena as well as from transmedial phenomena (i.e., the appearance of a certain motif, aesthetic, or discourse across a variety of different media)" (Rajewsky 46). See also Yvonne Spielmann's distinction, in *Intermedialität. Das System Peter Greenaway*, between intermediality and diverse mixed forms such as hybridization, hypertext, hypermedium or multimedia.

⁹ For historical details, see Stoppard's Introduction (141), Gianakaris (226-228) and Vareschi (126-127).

encourage the student actors to *respond* to Shakespeare's *play*. Fortunately, the short time they had for rehearsals colluded with the director's plans of devised ignorance with respect to the original play's fortunes in the theatre and on the screen.

A comparative study of Shakespeare's Ghost episode in the first act and its 2018 adaptation suggests a cross-culturally rich re-working of the script from a man-to-man and man-to-ghost dialogue to a woman-to-woman choral dialogue about the fateful human-ghost encounter. Shakespeare's first scene features Barnardo and Francisco as sentinels, soon joined by Horatio and Marcellus, Hamlet's Wittenberg friends. Their conversation is literally haunted by King Hamlet's ghost, whose genuine apparition, nevertheless, Horatio doubts on rational grounds:

MARCELLUS

Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,

And will not let belief take hold of him

Touching this dreaded sight, twice seen of us. (1:1:23-25)

No sooner has Barnardo started to describe the previous night's apparition (1:1:35-39) than the Ghost—"like the king that's dead" (1:1:41)—enters, which "harrow[s]" Horatio "with fear and wonder" (1:1:44). Twice does Horatio entreat the Ghost to speak to him, and twice does the latter vanish, the second time due to the approaching daybreak. The best they can do, Horatio argues, is to "impart what we have seen tonight / Unto young Hamlet" (1:1:169-170) for assuredly "[t]his spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him" (1:1:171). Indeed, in the second scene, the strange news persuades Hamlet to try to talk to the Ghost. In the fourth scene, Hamlet joins Horatio and Marcellus on the castle battlements at nightfall, and before late Horatio spots the Ghost (1:4:38). "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" (1:4:39), Hamlet prays before mustering up the courage to interpellate the apparition: "I'll call thee Hamlet, / King, father, royal Dane. Oh answer me" (1:4:44-45). The Ghost beckons Hamlet towards a private spot and the prince consents to follow him, despite Horatio's misgivings and warnings to the contrary. Horatio and Marcellus decide, accordingly, to watch over the prince from a distance. Horatio fears that Hamlet "waxes desperate with imagination" (1:4:87) at a time when, as Marcellus famously puts it, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1:4:90). Indeed it is: in the fifth scene, the Ghost describes King Hamlet's poisoning by his very brother, Claudius, eager to wrest both crown and queen for himself. The ninety lines are but briefly punctuated by Hamlet's protests of disbelief, before the Ghost takes his farewell and exits: "Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me" (1:5:91). Only now does the prince regain enough poise to become articulate and rage against Claudius's infamy, just as his two friends burst onstage. Try though they may, Horatio and

Marcellus learn nothing from Hamlet about his private conversation. Instead, they are sworn to secrecy and silence, for Hamlet decides “[t]o put an antic disposition on” (1:5:172) and feign lunacy in order to pursue his plans unencumbered. So much for Shakespeare on page. But on stage in the 2018 adaptation? To begin with, the Ghost’s part appeared to have been edited out: no Ghost appeared anywhere in sight; nor were his words directly audible to the audience. Yet, it may be argued, whoever did not see the Ghost onstage simply did not believe it existed at all. Those who believed or came to believe in it—the female characters—did testify to its presence through their wonder response (Figure 3). Indeed, had there been an “actual” ghost walking across the stage, would the spectators have believed in its ontological reality all the eager?



Figure 3. *Hamlet* (2018), directed by Dana Trifan Enache: Glennis (Ada Rusu) and the other women see the Ghost
Photo credits: Iulian Enache

Yet there is more to the encounter with the Ghost. In Shakespeare, giving Hamlet literal space, as he requests Horatio and Marcellus in compliance with the Ghost’s request, impacts on *audibility*. The physical distance frustrates Horatio and Marcellus: wish as they may to eavesdrop on the conversation between ghostly father and frightened, if forward, son, they cannot—and thus cannot intervene promptly, should any danger to Hamlet arise. This very distance allowed the 2018 adaptation to substitute for the Ghost’s confession to

Hamlet something akin to what grammar dubs “reported speech” and literary theory “indirect style” in fiction. The women as remote witnesses described Hamlet’s and the Ghost’s stage movement, gestures and whatever facial expression may have been plausibly visible to them from a distance, as well as reporting the remote exchange as best they, the women, could hear it. The female witnesses, however, articulated their fright-tainted perceptions in a dramatically different fashion from what readers of Shakespeare’s play or its spectators would have expected. Save individual names,¹⁰ as well as particularized line allotment and responses, these women acted much like the chorus in ancient Greek tragedy: they mediated the remote scene to each other and, vicariously, to the spectators.¹¹ Their reporting of the first part of

¹⁰ This collective character was fashioned from Shakespeare’s Barnardo turned Bernarda (Daria Panaite) and Francesco turned Francesca (Beatrice Marciuc), alongside the non-Shakespearean Glennis (Ada Rusu), Clare (Sinziana Mocanu), Valeria (Andreea Ciurea), Maggi (Rebeca Chiriac) and Georgia (Alexandra Ciinaru).

¹¹ See Csapo (85-107) on ancient Greek actors—originally the poets themselves, then (also) their hired male relatives—and the professionalization of acting. Ancient Greek tragedy used the chorus to participate in or comment on the action, as in Aeschylus and Sophocles, respectively, and also to infuse a lyric element in it, as in Euripides (Cuddon 123). Exclusively enacted by men, the chorus could, nevertheless, be represented as female, as in Aeschylus’s *Choephoroi* (*The Libation Bearers*), the second play of the *Oresteia*. Pictorially too, the chorus was represented as either male or female. An Attic red-figured column krater in Basel (500-490 BCE), probably the earliest extant pictorial evidence of tragedy, depicts synecdochically the twelve men forming the tragic chorus. Costumed as soldiers, the choreuts, nevertheless, do not enact soldiers proper: wearing diadems and presumably also masks rather than carrying weapons, they dance and sing (Csapo 6-8, Fig. 1.2). However, the choreuts may also impersonate female characters. Thus, an Attic red-figured column krater fragment (430-420 BCE; Kiev, Museum of the Academy of Sciences) shows two tragic choreuts dancing on either side of a piper and his assistant; the *faces* of the choreuts’ *masks* “are overpainted with added white in an effort to contrast the (conventionally white) female flesh of the characters with the darker skin of the nape and neck of the male performer under the female mask” (Csapo 8, Fig. 1.3). Furthermore, a scene from Menander’s *Theophroroumene*, depicted in Dioskourides’s mosaic fragment (125-100 BCE; Naples, Museo Nazionale), with its “unprecedented theatre realism in Attic art”, shows that “the tragedy had a chorus of young women”, like “the majority of tragedies at this date” (Csapo 9; Fig. 5.7, 151).

Adopted by the Romans, the idea of a chorus passed from them, over a millennium later, to medieval and early modern English (and generally European) drama; nonetheless, not a full-scale chorus, but a one-person choric character—the “presenter” figure—was typically used (Cuddon 122-123). Such are the Expositors in late medieval biblical and moral drama, the Fool in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* or the Presenter in Greenaway’s film *The Baby of Mâcon* (1993).

See also Zeitlin (esp. 64-67, 80-81) on the implications of the all-male cast of the ancient Greek civic theatre for construing power relations, and primarily for teaching

Shakespeare's Act 1, scene 5 frustrated the spectators' seeing (and hearing) of the unseemly, if enthralling, apparition. Like the ancient chorus, whose task it was to bridge the dramatic and extra-dramatic worlds, the collective character became the (over)seer of Hamlet's congress with the Ghost. It was hardly a whimsical theatrical guise for Shakespeare's soldier-courtiers: female and choral, however clearly individualized, rather than male and self-standing, characters. Nevertheless, our ancient chorus analogy is of rather limited import. The ancient chorus developed a unitary view of events; although multiple in membership, it acted in unison—it was one person really. By contrast, the 2018 *Hamlet*'s collective character did not truly take after the ancient chorus for it aimed to somehow “hold the mirror [. . .] up to nature” (2:2:18-19), as Hamlet says (though not in the adaptation too). It acted collectively to suggest that our everyday existence is part of a collective person: society. Yet any homogeneity of both rationalization of events and expression was shunned. The members of the collective character retained individuality of opinion, emotion and response to what they saw at the Danish court, even as they acted as an aggregate mass disapproving of the court's boisterous entertainment or worried about Hamlet's strange deportment. Furthermore, while the choice of female characters was motivated by the gender of the student actors, it was also symbolically consistent with empirical knowledge of gendered psycho-social motivations and conduct: women are much harder to convince of anything and more inquisitive than men are. Persuade women and you have persuaded everyone else. One of the female characters, Glennis, moreover, was tipsy; drinking, she believed, would quell her fright. She knew she might encounter the Ghost any time, for its story had been circulating for a while, after all. The other women expressed their fear—or wonder—differently, as we shall see soon.

On the other hand, the female soldier-sentinels turned frightened witnesses not fully protected, in Glennis's case, by spirits against the Spirit haunting Elsinore, had yet another dramatic flavour. Before we spell that out, let us examine the function(s) of role doubling in the 2018 *Hamlet*.

One practical function of role doubling related to what professional theatre has virtually always been concerned with: to manage the mismatch between the small number of actors and the relatively large number of parts in certain productions. However, a comparison of the original text with that in the director's copy may reveal interesting instances of role doubling and also of something else altogether. We will start with two fairly straightforward cases in Scene 18 of the 2018 *Hamlet* (corresponding to Shakespeare's Act 5, scene 2) before proceeding to more complex, symbolically charged cases. In Scene 18,

men how to “achiev[e] male identity” (66), through a particular representation of femininity by men (as enacted onstage by cross-dressed men).

Osric's two lines¹² were reassigned to Marcellus, for Osric was one of the characters edited out of the adaptation, as were Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the various lords at Claudius's court, or Fortinbras. Similarly, since the script retained Fortinbras's "O proud death, / What feast is toward in thine eternal cell / That thou so many princes at a shot / So bloodily hast struck?" (5:2:343-346), but not the character, his lines had to be reassigned, and they were prefixed to Horatio's farewell speech.

Yet line reassignment did not always work that neatly. On the one hand, there were instances when a male character was edited out of a particular scene, but not of the overall adaptation. Such was Scene 15 (corresponding to Shakespeare's Act 4, scene 5), where what was retained of Horatio's lines was fully reassigned to Valeria and Georgia. The two women informed Queen Gertrude about Ophelia's strange conduct (soon to appear as sheer madness), and the overall exchange unfolded as women's talk about an absent woman's erratic ways—gossip at its most classic. On the other hand, there was role doubling proper, mostly entrusted to the collective character. For instance, in Scene 17 (corresponding to Shakespeare's Act 5, scene 1), Glennis doubled as one of the gravediggers (the first Clown) and Maggie as the other. Nonetheless, one-to-one matching was rather infrequent. In Scene 9 (corresponding to Shakespeare's Act 2, scene 2), Bernarda doubled fairly consistently as the First Player of the itinerant troupe visiting Elsinore. However, when the First Player recited to Hamlet Virgil's *Aeneid*'s description of Pyrrhus and Priam clashing, the lines were partially shared with Glennis, Clare, Maggie and Francisca.

Such "erratic" line sharing, whether or not in role doubling proper, was unlikely to alert any but *Hamlet* connoisseurs in the audience to the likely symbolic burden of line or even role reassignment. Readers of the director's copy, however, can get amazing insights simply by placing the two scripts side by side. Let us examine the case of the soldier-courtiers, particularly in what corresponds, in the adaptation, to Shakespeare's first act. Granted that the 2018 *Hamlet* edited out Barnardo and Francisco altogether, or rather feminized them, yet also redistributed some half of their retained lines, such line reassignment begs comparison with that concerning Marcellus and Horatio, two characters whom the adaptation retained. Bernarda, whose name suggests she replaced Shakespeare's male character, shared some of Barnardo's lines with Glennis, Clare, Valeria or Maggie throughout the scenes that drew on Shakespeare's first act; Francisca (Francisco's female replacement), with Clare. Conversely, Horatio, although retained, lost most of his lines in the Ghost episode. Thus, in Scenes 2, 3 and 6 (roughly corresponding to Shakespeare's Act 1, scenes 1, 3, 4 and 5), Horatio's *emotional identity* was adopted by Georgia (his a priori disbelief, yet also his radical change thereof), as well as by Valeria and Glennis

¹² "Look to the queen there, ho!" (5:2:283) and "How is't Laertes?" (5:2:285).

(his post-factum wonder and terror). Likewise, some of Horatio's lines were reassigned to the aforementioned characters, and others to Maggie. (It may be instructive to recall that Maggie shared some of the lines of Shakespeare's First Player with Bernarda, his most consistent, but not exclusive, impersonator in the adaptation.) Marcellus, also edited out here, was impersonated by Glennis, Maggie, Valeria and Clare.

By contrast, Scene 4 (corresponding in part to Shakespeare's Act 1, scene 2) introduced Horatio and Marcellus, Hamlet's Wittenberg fellows, a preposterous position for female characters. Returned to Denmark for King Hamlet's funerals, Horatio and Marcellus had witnessed the apparition themselves—presumably from another vantage point than the women's in Scene 3—and confessed their dumb terror. Yet their "reported speech" here rewrote, in definitely dignified terms, the women's "direct speech" in Scene 3. It sounded as if the entire issue, in Shakespeare, but especially in the 2018 adaptation, concerned re-establishing the dignity of masculinity through vaunting the manliness of courtiers confessedly frightened by an apparition. We do not wish to argue that the 2018 *Hamlet* embarked on a deliberate male- (and masculine-) assertive project. Rather, the adaptation's reworking of the early encounter with the Ghost in female terms also affected the diction of the respective parts, due to the unconscious desire for culturally sanctioned gender verisimilitude.

Consider, in this respect, the previous scene's inebriated Glennis, whose terror was, at script level, the legacy of brave Horatio in Shakespeare's Act 1, scene 2. When she first appeared, in Scene 3, Glennis answered Bernarda's identity-related query "Ce, e și Glennis?"—a rewriting of Barnardo's "What, is Horatio there?" (1:1:19) to match names—with a pronominal emendation of Shakespeare's Horatio's "A piece of him" (1:1:19): "Ce-a mai rămas din ea" (roughly, "A piece of her"). Indeed, unlike in Shakespeare, where there is no intimation that Horatio (or anyone else) might be inebriated, here Glennis uttered her line with such a poise as to show unambiguously that she had let the spirits get the best of her. The other women, too, sounded precipitate in their rendition of the lines describing their encounter with—or, as the case may be, incredulity towards the existence of—the Ghost. To this contributed two additions to Shakespeare's text: the women hushed each other in Scene 6 (corresponding to Shakespeare's Act 1, scene 4), when they saw the Ghost approaching Hamlet; and a terror-stricken Glennis interpellated the Ghost, in Scene 3, by a surprising onomatopoeia. Glennis's twice uttered "Pst!" (the Romanian onomatopoeia for "hey you!") was ludicrously inappropriate stylistically for its recipient—the spirit of a king. *Terror sacrum* (or something akin) she may have been feeling, but words failed her pitifully, as they do drunkards. All in all, in the adapted Ghost episode, the female group's performance as a collective character—however distinct, in many respects, from the ancient chorus—would recall the (medieval) gossips. Allegedly gossipy (in

the modern sense), the latter group was, due to the category's simultaneously abstract generalizing scope and largely libellous branding, a larger-than-life character both on- and offstage. Let us elaborate on this a little.

In her *Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England*, Susan E. Phillips has analyzed the late medieval construal of the disenfranchised, first and foremost women, as subversive to the hegemony. Their real or imaginary counter-discourse resulted in the collective label *gossips* (for women alone) and the branding of unsanctioned speech, to this day, as gossip. The feminization of the marginals taking liberties with discursive agency, at a time of consistent religious and secular silencing of women, alongside (mis)representation of gossip as unbecoming conduct often fuelled by inebriation, rendered unruliness women's premier *social sin*.

Thus suggest especially the *damnation plays* of Chester's late medieval biblical drama. Chester's is, arguably, a "non-coincidental bias towards the damnation of women" (Ciobanu 275-276): in *Noah's Flood*, of the Good Gossips (C3/201¹³); in *The Harrowing of Hell*, of Mulier (i.e., Woman), the "gentle gossippe" (C17/286); and in *The Last Judgement*, of high-rank women for their feminine "lapses". Yet the gossips' conviviality in the Chester *Noah's Flood* is worth examining here. Unlike any other Middle English Flood play, Chester's features a collective character, the Good Gossips, Noah's wife's female friends. The nameless Good Gossips invite the equally nameless Noah's Wife (manuscript speech-heading) to drink together strong "malnesaye" (C3/233)¹⁴ right when Noah and sons struggle to get her aboard the ark.¹⁵ Yet, not for the sake of good old times do the women prepare to drink heartily (231-232) to "rejoyse both harte and tonge" (234), but actually so as to ward off their fear of the fast-sweeping Flood (225-236):

THE GOOD GOSSIPS

The fludd comes fleetinge in full faste,
one everye syde that spredeth full farre.

*For fere of drowninge I am agaste;
good gossippe, lett us drawe nere.* (C3/225-228, emphasis added)

¹³ The notation identifies respectively the Chester collection, the position within it of the individual play and the line (range).

¹⁴ Malmsey is a sweet wine traditionally served on special occasions such as weddings.

¹⁵ Chester's Gossips embody, therefore, the incriminating response mounted by an anxiety-ridden patriarchy to the advent of all-female social practices based on, and fuelling, female bonding, regarded as disruptive of the patriarchal civic fabric.

Unlike Noah,¹⁶ his ostensibly gregarious wife can think of—and, in Chester, also extend empathetic, if short-lived, support to—her disenfranchised community of gossips when faced with the deluge.¹⁷ The *tipsy* women of the Chester *Noah's Flood* confirm the overarching patriarchal discrediting of women,¹⁸ lest they rightfully claim access to positions of power and the right to legitimate self-representation. Here, however, the gossips (wherein Noah's wife may be included temporarily) are savvy women who can, by implication, feel for themselves what the Flood accomplishes: the obliteration of human empathy (as demonstrated by Noah).

To revert to the 2018 *Hamlet*, we would argue that the gossipy female soldier-courtiers who watched Hamlet's congress with the Ghost and reported it to each other, and thereby to the audience, showed the mechanics of rumour-mongering (as well as vision-making). However, their consubstantiality with the medieval gossips, inebriation and all, drew upon the patriarchal incrimination of women as prone to drinking, debauchery and generally unruliness, but especially as untrustworthy and weak in all respects. Of course, such appraisal of the collective character as quasi-gossips in the medieval sense, sans counter-hegemonic discursive burden, may sound rather biased. Indeed, we cannot presume other spectators would necessarily have felt the same about Glennis (and her fellows), had they been well acquainted with medieval England.

Gossips or not, the collective character could not but elicit reconsidering the question of role doubling in the 2018 *Hamlet*, *beyond* staging practicalities. Role doubling revealed intellectual, symbolic and emotional functions.

To tease out the further implications of role doubling, we should first consider one basic assumption of the artistic profession. The actor is the “artistic instrument” that can, indeed must, “give life” to characters, that is to say, to “other people”; s/he behaves and lives offstage other than s/he does onstage. Yet the actor could be her-/himself living in the very way s/he impersonates the character as doing, had the elements which make up her/his life course occurred in a different succession. (This could also mean that s/he may not have become

¹⁶ The seemingly solitary patriarch has found favour with God for his singular righteousness, consistently named in all the Middle English biblical plays, on veterotestamentary template, God-fearing conduct.

¹⁷ Nonetheless, Chester's is not an anticipation of the modern psychodrama of gender identity and roles, which describes men as independent and competitive and women as other-related, viz., engaged in a network of relationships in the service of the other rather than intent on advancing one's personal interests.

¹⁸ The discrediting of women—whether Eve or Mary Magdalene—in Judaeo-Christianity suggests a pattern which most people barely discern. See Schaberg (75-78) on the *harlotization* of Mary Magdalene as the most successful technology for disempowering women.

an actor at all.) What our remark entails is, ultimately, the human “manyness” to which an actor is committed professionally and emotionally.

One step further, let us try to imagine what a stage play could have looked like in the age represented by Shakespeare in any one of his plays. Willy-nilly, at some point we cannot but regard the show as rather the narration of the dramatic world’s events, a “gossip” (in the modern, not medieval, sense) shared by the actors and spectators, in which some city notabilities also took part. What mattered, therefore, was *the story*, its novelty, which aimed to quench the characters’—and, at one remove, the spectators’—thirst for something new by offering a certain kind of information. Such shared gossiping could only be undertaken by an “informant”—that person or persons who had *watched* things. In the 2018 *Hamlet*, those who had “watched” were the women, or perhaps *Women!* Beyond contingencies such as the gender of most of the young student actors, of paramount importance appears to have also been a psychological gender trait as honed or perhaps merely stereotyped under patriarchy: women can accommodate to a certain topic remarkably well, especially insofar as it concerns rumour-mongering and generally gossiping. Simply stated, women are credited as always already able to get an informational update seemingly effortlessly. In this connection, empirical observation may suggest that when women gossip, the one who is talking never appears *not* to wish to “enact” that about which she gossips.¹⁹ This may be indicative of women’s deep-seated wish to be actresses—and made the young women particularly verisimilar “actors” in the 2018 show, hence the observer/witness–actor doubling. Role doubling in this case catered for this human wish for doubling as someone else when we take our distance from the story we narrate.

* * *

Analyzing *Dogg’s Hamlet*, *Cahoot’s Macbeth* as an adaptation of *Hamlet*, Gianakaris rightly observes that Stoppard’s “utilitarian approach” to borrowing and adapting from his predecessor “cannibaliz[es] literary masterpieces—a trait [Stoppard] shares with Shakespeare” (225). *Mutatis mutandis*, we would argue, so did the 2018 *Hamlet* adaptation. Whilst the adapted script drew upon Shakespeare’s text fairly accurately, save reassignment of lines to other, sometimes invented, characters, as we have seen, its staging capitalized on an individualized collective character (*sic*) that “cannibalized” theatrical and non-theatrical tradition alike. Not drastic text condensation would strike the 2018 *Hamlet* spectators, but the theatrical complexity and psychological verisimilitude

¹⁹ From our modest familiarity with men’s gossip, men appear to take their distance from the person(s) whom they talk about. Such difference in impersonation proclivities may owe to the differential gender identity with respect to the other-relation.

of marginal characters such as the witnesses of the Ghost, with their humanizing touch on the encounter. Understanding the Romanian adaptation could benefit tremendously from having the opportunity to read its script—as does understanding Stoppard's play from reading the playwright's explanatory notes in the Introduction. On the other hand, the 2018 *Hamlet* resembled in its earnest sobriety not the burlesque *Dogg's Hamlet* but the relatively restrained *Cahoot's Macbeth* (at least before the anti-totalitarian farce starts through recourse to the same Dogg language of *Dogg's Hamlet*). Could this have been one of those “energies” Stephen Greenblatt has teased out in the cultural fabric of the Renaissance, which in this case crossed cultures and ages, dramatic and non-dramatic texts, as well as mature and very young minds, without owing to any particularly circumscribable elective affinities?

Ours has been here an argument regarding the many-faceted complexity of the 2018 stage adaptation of *Hamlet*. In a cultural and spatiotemporal context far removed from Shakespeare's, the student production nevertheless echoed cross-culturally attitudes, discourses and texts, some of which preceded the Elizabethan Age, whether in England or in ancient Greece. The director testifies that the 2018 adaptation did not consciously deploy any such echoes to boost its characters' appeal to contemporary audiences, but especially to create such characters in the first place. Nor did the production aspire to participate in the contemporary Global Shakespeare adaptation phenomenon, specifically by challenging the centre (*Hamlet*, the Shakespeare canon and/or the western cultural canon) from the socio-cultural and/or gender margins.²⁰ It would not be far-fetched, therefore, to argue that the cross-cultural echoes occurred, in the 2018 *Hamlet*, in part due to shared assumptions about people's character and

²⁰ Shakespeare adaptation/appropriation within the Global Shakespeare phenomenon, itself “fuelled by the myth of the canon's utilitarian value” (Joubin and Mancewicz 2), has become an arena for playing up both global cultural, ideological and/or political issues and technological prowess. Some critics decry such output as hardly relevant to either Shakespearean drama or adaptation practices, whether it regards technological enhancement (see Kidnie 89-101 on Robert Lepage's *Elsinore*'s reception) or the increasing *decentring* of Shakespeare in diasporic and minority productions (see Huang 283; Fischlin 5-6), for “Shakespeare is a site (and sign) of political struggle as well as the name of an author” (Albanese 1). Simply stated, Shakespeare has stepped down from the traditional position of power-related cultural privilege to be relocated in the public culture outside the academia (Albanese 4-6). See also Huang's overview of controversies over the progressive or reactionary politics of global Shakespeares, and the contributions to Massai's *World-Wide Shakespeares*. Some critics praise Global Shakespeare as “transnational cultural flow” (Huang 282) and an empowering resource for minoritized communities and the culturally disenfranchised (see essays in Desmet, Iyengar and Jacobson); others decry it as symptomatic of globalization and/or commodification of western cultural capital as universal value (Huang 274, 278; Joubin and Mancewicz 6-7), with Shakespeare commodified as a brand name (Massai 4).

personality and in part unwittingly, if through immersion in a shared European culture.

We would suggest that even without striving for originality at any cost such as shocking the spectators out of their cultural and theatrical comfort zone, yet without being unoriginal either, the 2018 Romanian *Hamlet* indicated that there is still room for a “new” *Hamlet* on the stage without rewriting it unrecognizable. Besides, the performance’s bold choices from female witnesses (including invented characters) to half-visible and half-invisible dumb Gonzago play brought together contemporary metatheatrical concerns and issues of knowledge-/visuality-making with traditional patriarchal views of women’s sociality. If, in present-day Romania (as elsewhere), women’s speech²¹ or interests may be still derided in certain social contexts, the 2018 *Hamlet* raised women’s “gossip” to an unexpected position of authority—a position of knowledgeability spliced with empathy. These women were the ones who both mediated ghost(ly) knowledge to the audience and could recite the canonical texts of the past to the prince schooled at Wittenberg. *Hamlet* was a performance that bowed neither to political correctness nor to politics. It shunned political correctness with respect to both gender identity or roles and (misguided) reverence for the “sanctity” of Shakespeare’s text. If it was political at all, it was through its choice not to ignore our implicit—perhaps complicit—participation in all things socio-political, whether we consciously attend to them or not. And Shakespeare might have given the latter a knowledgeable nod.

Appendix

Hamlet by William Shakespeare – adaptation Student production, 2018²²

Cast

Hamlet: Ionuț Roșu
Ophelia: Nicoleta Zghibartă
Gertrude: Ioana Chesoi
Claudius: Vlad Boloagă
Polonius: Gabriel Roșu

²¹ See Cixous (52) in more general terms on the issue of women’s silencing through derision of their speech.

²² The video recording of the performance (*Hamlet – Colegiul Național de Arte “Regina Maria” Constanța*) was published on YouTube on 5 May 2020 by the Faculty of Arts of Ovidius University of Constanța, as part of the #StayHome campaign.

Laertes: Roberto Savu
Glennis: Ada Rusu
Bernarda: Daria Panaite
Clare: Sînziana Mocanu
Francesca: Beatrice Marciuc
Georgia: Alexandra Cîinaru
Valeria: Andreea Ciurea
Maggi: Rebeca Chiriac
Horatio: Gabriel Sandu
Marcellus: Andrei Calu

Directed by Dana Trifan Enache

Text adaptation: Iulian Enache

Project assistant: Alexandru Siclitaru

Choreography: Bianca Manta

Musical adaptation: Adrian Mihai

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