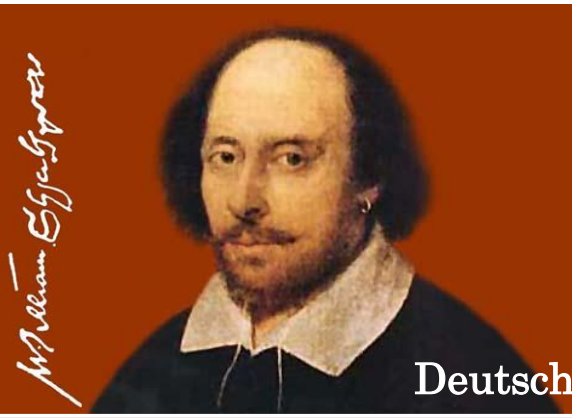
Shakespeare Seminar



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INTRODUCTION

MARLENE DIRSCHAUER AND JONAS KELLERMANN

Shakespeare and Popular Cultures

> If you find Hamlet difficult, ask him to tea. He is a highbrow. Ask Ophelia to meet him. She is a lowbrow. Talk to them, as you talk to me, and you will know more about Shakespeare than all the middlebrows in the world can teach you.
>
> Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays II* (201)

Like Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare "hath songs for man or woman, of all sizes. No milliner can so fit his customers with gloves" (4.4.190–191). This quality to cater to the diverse audience demographics of early modern England – from 'highbrow' nobility to 'lowbrow' groundlings – may have been one of the reasons why the Bard proved so popular already during his lifetime. As suggested by Woolf, Shakespeare's ability to speak to multiple audiences all at once might also explain why his works continue to resonate with contemporary popular cultures across various media: Shakespearean references are ingrained in popular idiom; iconic plots like *Romeo and Juliet* and characters like Lady Macbeth, Richard III or Hamlet have provided templates to countless films and shows; and while there are Harvard classes given on Taylor Swift and Shakespeare, there are also numerous podcasts designed to make Shakespeare's works more accessible to contemporary listeners, readers, and spectators. In light of Shakespeare's enduring presence in 20th- and 21st-century popular cultures, substantial research has emerged in the past two decades on what Douglas Lanier has called "Shakespop" (5) – that is, Shakespeare's role across a range of popular mass media.

This issue of *SSO* is devoted to "Popular Shakespeare" and explores why Shakespeare seems to "never go out of style", to borrow Taylor Swift's phrase from her eponymous song. Mindful of Paul Prescott's assessment that "There is a two-way relationship between popular culture and Shakespeare: popular culture shaped Shakespeare's art, but Shakespeare's art continues to shape popular culture" (271) this issue gathers four papers that explore this reciprocal dynamic from intriguingly varied angles.

Allison Lemley opens this issue of *Shakespeare Seminar Online* (*SSO*) with a reassessment of popularity in Shakespeare's own lifetime. More specifically, her article challenges the widespread idea that history plays declined after Elizabeth I, arguing that *When You See Me, You Know Me* and *King Henry VIII* demonstrate their continued popularity in the Jacobean era. Through a comparative analysis of selected scenes, Lemley contends that these plays respond to a changing political landscape by employing episodic structures and hybrid genres while activating audiences' memories of the recent past; the enduring, near-contemporary recollection of the Tudor era among Jacobean spectators, rooted in lived or inherited experience, emerges as a crucial yet often overlooked source of their appeal.

Moving from early modern England to quasi-early modern Italy, Lara Stich discusses how *Romeo and Juliet* has transformed Verona into a "Shakespearean" tourist space where fiction reshapes urban identity. She traces the many ways in which the play's imaginative power has inscribed itself on the city, effectively recasting it, both locally and globally, as a symbol of love, passion, and tragic youth. Through sites, media, and visitor practices, Shakespeare's narrative becomes participatory, with tourists helping to reproduce and sustain the myth. At the same time, Stich remains attentive to the ethical implications of this popularity, showing how commercialisation often reduces the play's complex dimensions to a simplified, marketable romance.

Marie Menzel's essay returns us to Shakespeare's histories by reading Abigail Thorn's *The Prince*, a queer-feminist reworking of *Henry IV, Part 1*, and asking how the adaptation engages with its source material in light of its origins as a LeftTube product. Menzel argues that *Henry IV, Part 1* offer a productive lens for Thorn to examine modern concerns in ethics and queer feminism, such as self-determination. Through close analysis of *The Prince*'s language, particularly its Shakespearean pastiche, Menzel presents Thorn's adaptation as an example of a popular Shakespeare: a work emerging from an alternative, independent creative sphere that allows considerable artistic freedom while also reaching a broad, diverse, and culturally significant audience.

Closing this issue of *SSO* with the most commercially popular singer on the planet right now, Lorraine Rumson's essay, "'You were Romeo, I was a scarlet letter' Taylor Swift, Shakespeare and the Control of Female Sexuality", examines the recent tendency in popular criticism to compare Taylor Swift with Shakespeare, moving beyond claims of artistic equivalence to explore thematic resonances between their works. Focusing on Swift's songs "Love Story" and "But Daddy I Love Him," the article charts their intertextual engagement with *Romeo and Juliet*, showing how these references not only amplify romantic expression but also foreground issues of patriarchal control over young women's sexuality and the challenges of resisting it.

By exploring both the configurations of the popular in Shakespeare's own time and the ways in which Shakespeare is mobilised within contemporary popular culture, the four papers contribute to lively critical debates of his reception and lasting impact.

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A Different Kind of Popular History: Shakespeare and the Tudor Monarch Plays

by

Allison Lemley

Scholarship has long considered the history play's heyday to have been largely limited to the 1580s and 1590s, with its popularity waning after James I succeeded Elizabeth I. This perception has been based, in part, on definitions of history plays as tragedies about post-Norman English kings. Recent scholarship, such as Amy Lidster's *Publishing the History Play in the Time of Shakespeare: Stationers Shaping a Genre*, has demonstrated the long-lasting influence of Shakespeare's First Folio as originating this impression of history plays. Lidster's work not only deconstructs the definition of the genre and establishes the need for further generic description and expansion. In this article, I turn to two Jacobean history plays about Henry VIII to exemplify that history plays not only remained popular after Elizabeth I's reign, but also that the playwrights' experimentation with the form portrays new types of histories and audience engagement with their own recollections of the past.

James I's reign allowed for the portrayal of Tudor monarchs, a trend that Teresa Grant and Barbara Ravelhofer have discussed in *English Historical Drama, 1550–1660: Forms Outside the Canon*. They identify six "Tudor monarch plays" which experiment with various genres, including Samuel Rowley's *When You See Me, You Know Me* (1605), William Shakespeare and John Fletcher's *King Henry VIII* or *All Is True* (1613), both about Henry VIII, and Thomas Heywood's two-part *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody* (1605/1606), covering events from Elizabeth I's reign. This article will discuss Rowley's *When You See Me, You Know Me* (henceforth *WYSM*) and William Shakespeare and John Fletcher's *All Is True* (1613), later retitled *King Henry VIII* in the First Folio.[1] The Tudor monarch plays discussed by Grant and Ravelhofer establish the playwrights' interest in blending other genre conventions with the history play. Tudor monarch plays, besides featuring either Henry VIII or Elizabeth I, share other similarities. They are often episodic in structure and have providential endings, which celebrate the monarch as blessed by Fortune and the fulfiller of God's divine plan. Some plays might portray this message in a straightforward way, such as *WYSM*, while others, such as *All Is True*, use contemporary trends to subvert broadly affirming themes. By considering the ways in which these plays recall history, I assert the flexibility of the

[1] Throughout this article, I will continue to use *All Is True* for the 1613 context of the play. I have made this decision to emphasise the original context of both plays, including the similarity in titling conventions. I also follow both play's spelling conventions when referring to the character based on the historical person (i.e. Anne Bullen for Anne Boleyn in *All Is True*) and modern accepted spelling of a historical person's when discussing the historical person (i.e. Catherine Parr, who is called Catherine Parry in *WYSM*).

history play as a genre and its enduring popularity from the Elizabethan into the Jacobean period.

WYSM was first printed in 1605 and again in 1613, the same year that performances of Shakespeare and Fletcher's *All Is True* first appear in records. *WYSM*'s popularity in print, along with other providential histories, meant that interest in this genre and Tudor histories would have been topically relevant when Shakespeare and Fletcher began work on *All Is True*. Both *WYSM* and *All Is True* experiment with the role of providence in structuring their narratives. Providence, broadly understood as the fulfilment of God's divine plan, was one part of the wheel of fortune, a cycle in which great men rose or fell from power: the virtuous are rewarded while the sinful are punished. Early modern audiences would have been familiar with this through the proliferation of Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*, a collection of poetry in which select great men of history give fictionalised speeches about the sins which led to their falls. Boccaccio's work and other similar collections, such as the *Mirror for Magistrates*, had long-standing popularity in English print culture which also influenced English drama.

Scholars have noted such influence on Shakespeare's other history plays, which often question the ways in which the powerful construct their rise in providential terms. Isabel Karremann's analysis of *Henry V* in *The Drama of Memory in Shakespeare's History Plays* explores such framings. In one significant example, she details how Act One, Scene One's praise of Henry V is partially "a narrated memory picture… that prospectively prepares for his new image as 'mirror of all Christian kings'" (Karremann 130). For early modern audiences, the "mirror of all Christian kings" would have recalled the *Mirror for Magistrates*. The purpose of this "mirror" is to provide an example of how men should behave, either through avoiding vice or emulating virtue through recollection of historical figures. In framing the titular Henry V as this "mirror", the "memory picture" that emerges validates his rule as an exemplar. History plays are ultimately recollections of the past. They remediate historical sources, such as Holinshed's *Chronicles*, but further, they remediate memory. Similarly, Lukas Lammers' *Shakespearean Temporalities* examines a selection of history plays that discuss the ways in which history plays intertwine different temporalities. History plays portray the past and characters frequently make future-oriented statements. For the audience, this imagined future is in their past. The "future-past", in Lammers' terms, highlights the role of recollection in reception of history plays (Lammers 67). In Karremann's example, she points out voices within the text that undermine those in power. This is a feature that appears in *All Is True* as well, but the effects of the "future-past" function differently for audiences within – at most – three generations of the play's events. As a result of this temporal proximity, there are different ways in which *WYSM* and *All Is True* anticipate potential audience recollections.

As I will demonstrate in comparing *WYSM* and *All Is True*, the plays' respective playwrights were aware that audiences would recall events or historical persons from Henry's reign, but embedded memories of these within the text to different ends. In the first section of this article, I will demonstrate how *WYSM* uses recollection as a part of its order of events to create a heroic picture of Henry as king over the course of the play. The second section will examine an example from *All Is True* in which both the order of its episodes and audience recollection unmoor any sense of 'truth'. In the final section

of this article, I will examine how the use of providence in *WYSM* affirms Tudor and Stuart monarchs in contrast with *All Is True*'s ironic usage of providence.

Samuel Rowley's Henry VIII: Didactic Comedy

Rowley's *WYSM*, written for the Prince's Men and performed around 1604, instigated a Jacobean trend for history plays about Tudor monarchs. It was written at an early stage in James's reign, ostensibly for the young Henry Frederick, James's heir. *WYSM* portrays a series of events that allows a proto-Protestant Henry VIII and Prince Edward to overcome the usurping designs of Cardinal Wolsey, who plans to gain the papacy and with it, earthly power above the king's divine rights. Its concern with English sovereignty in opposition to Catholic usurpers, embodied by the play's Cardinal Wolsey, both glorifies and advises the new Stuart rulers of England. *WYSM* is not wholly uncritical of Henry VIII or its Stuart audience; for example, Henry's fool, Will Sommers, openly critiques Henry's reliance on poor advisors and his sexual appetites. *WYSM*'s criticisms are subsumed into the use of romance conventions, however, which reconcile Henry with his queen Catherine Parry, his son Edward, and his country.[2] This reconciliation allows Henry to overcome Catholic schemes against his rightful rule and English sovereignty. In the final scene, a visit from the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, serves to affirm the achievement of these political goals. *WYSM*'s conclusion illustrates what good English kingship should be, ostensibly to show Henry Frederick the future leadership wished for by his subjects. *WYSM* experiments with providence to comedic ends, which ultimately affirms Tudor and Stuart monarchy; in recalling Henry's reign, the play uses genre conventions from comedy and romance to contain potentially disruptive memories.

WYSM's events are episodic but ultimately create an arc for Henry and his son Edward to develop as kings of England who reject foreign Catholic influence. The play opens with Wolsey scheming with French ambassadors to gain the papacy and to become more powerful than Henry. The next scenes include the death of Jane Seymour and the birth of Edward, as well as the start of a subplot concerning the marriage of Henry's sister to the King of France. What can be considered the first act largely establishes Henry's melancholy after Jane Seymour's death.[3] The rest of the play's events show Henry shaking off this melancholy and taking back control over his kingdom from false advisors. Henry's night walk through London, dramatised from Stowe's account, reveals the corruption of his court and is part of Henry's discovery of false advisors. Edward's arc in the play corresponds to his father's experiences as Henry learns who can be trusted, while Edward proves himself to be a trustworthy advisor and heir to Henry. *WYSM* uses historical events or figures in whichever way best suits its narrative

[2] The names of historical figures within the plays will use the play's spelling of their names, while references to the historical person will use the modern standardised spelling of names. For example, Catherine Parr is called Catherine Parry in *WYSM*.

[3] My references to *WYSM* are taken from the 1604 quarto edition printed by Nathaniel Butters available on EEBO, although Joanna Howe in her publicly available doctoral dissertation edited *WYSM* to create a critical edition. As the EEBO edition does not have act or scene divisions, my references will be to the abbreviated title only. I have lightly modernised spelling and grammar conventions.

purposes, a common feature of history plays. Rowley reimagines Tudor history to show Henry and Edward's rejection of 'popish' influence.

Dialogue helps to orient the audience within the play's arrangement of temporal events and also confirms Henry's position as the centre of order. This can be seen during Henry's night walk, which takes place at approximately the midpoint of *WYSM*. This episode shows Henry's test of London's watch. As Henry walks through the city in disguise, he meets the murderer Black Will. They fight, are both arrested by the watch, and Henry spends most of the night in the counter, a debtor's prison. While held with the other prisoners, Henry hears the plight of one prisoner who has been falsely accused by one of Wolsey's servants. Henry, incensed that someone would abuse their power in this way, promises that the falsely accused prisoner "shall have remedy" (*WYSM*). Henry also judges correctly that other prisoners are lying and actually guilty of the crimes of which they are accused. Eventually Henry is rescued by his advisors who reveal his identity. After paying the jailor for his release, Henry asks one of his rescuers, "what further news?" (*WYSM*). This signals a turn in the final part of the scene, as the last lines begin the transition to the king's conflict with Wolsey. The men are still passing through London when Henry hears that the King of France has died, leaving his sister widowed, and he sends Brandon to bring her back to England. Henry next adds:

HENRY. Commend me to the Lady Catherine Parry,
Give her this ring, tell her on Sunday next
She shall be queen, and crowned at Westminster.
And Anne of Cleaves shall be sent home again.
Come sirs, we'll leave the City, and the counter now.
The day begins to break, let's hie to court,
And once a quarter we desire such sport. (*WYSM*)

Henry's lines, which end this scene, serve multiple functions. They orient the audience temporally within historical events they can recall and help them anticipate upcoming episodes. Henry's words quickly summarise a historically complex series of events to keep the action focused on his struggle against Wolsey. These lines also quickly gloss events that have happened and establish Henry's upcoming marriage so that the next scene can then show Wolsey's reaction to the King of France's death.

The dialogue further anticipates the audience's recollection of the "future-past" and attempts to create a narrative of Henry's marriages through the inclusion and exclusion of his wives. In this case, the audience is prepared to see Henry's final wife, Catherine Parr, and are reminded of Anne of Cleves. The lines omit Catherine Howard, who directly preceded Catherine Parr, but the reference to Anne of Cleves may have prompted the audience to recall Henry's comparatively generous attitude towards Anne of Cleves. Within the play, Henry asks for Anne of Cleves to be "sent home". This is an ambiguous reference to her divorce from Henry, which prevented her from returning to her brother's court in her native Cleves, but it also works as a reminder of Henry's magnanimity in naming her "the king's sister" and providing a settlement that allowed for her relative independence. The dialogue here establishes time within the play, as Jane Seymour was succeeded by Anne of Cleves. However, by skipping Catherine Howard, the play only references wives Henry did not unpopularly divorce, such as Catherine of Aragon, or behead, such as Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard. The play prompts

recollection of Jane Seymour, who died giving birth to Henry's longed-for male heir, or Anne of Cleves and Catherine Parr, who outlived Henry. In choosing to portray Henry's marriage to his final queen, Henry's "future-past" from that point is free from the complications of divorce and execution.

These references work in connection with Henry's final reflection on the night's "sport" in testing the watch, which further characterises him as a benevolent, heroic figure. The overall effect of the scene, especially Henry's promises to the prisoners, establishes Henry as a monarch concerned for his people. The events in this section are fast-paced and comedic, demonstrating Henry's fighting prowess against Black Will. The swordplay and later, wordplay, with Black Will show Henry actively reclaiming his duties as monarch, which he had let lapse after Jane Seymour's death. These scenes are also moments of comedy – Henry is portrayed as a swashbuckling hero who can both fight and be merciful to his subjects. Henry's encounters with the prisoners illustrates his discernment in meeting out justice, which also sets up a later scene in which Henry punishes high-placed servants at court who abuse their power to falsely imprison others. This scene combines generic conventions of comedy but also romance conventions, as Henry takes steps to reassume his proper political authority.

The next scene reinforces the contrast between a selfless Henry and a self-interested Wolsey who is plotting to open English sovereignty to dangerous foreign influence. It begins with Wolsey and one of his bishops, Bonner, receiving the same news regarding the King of France. Where Henry expressed concern for his sister in the wake of a broken political alliance, Wolsey laments that "[o]ur trusty friend, the king of France is dead, / And in his death, our hopes are hind'red" (*WYSM*). The play asserts a close connection between Catholic beliefs and loyalty to foreign powers above the English sovereign as a central tension that Henry must resolve. Henry's recollections of some of his marriages and anticipation of his marriage to Catherine Parry acknowledge historical events that audiences may recall while meaningfully excluding others. This moment is further significant as it embeds these references within a particular sequence of events to rehabilitate Henry's melancholy after Jane Seymour's death. This rehabilitation turns Henry away from his bad advisors, including Cardinal Wolsey, and towards the good Protestant advisors he finds in his heir Edward and wife Catherine Parry. As a result, the tension for the audience is focused on whether or not Henry will discover the plots against him and throw off Catholic influence. The Henry in *WYSM* is not completely without flaws or unchallenged, but since the source of *this* Henry's troubles is externalised as a fight against Catholic – and foreign – interference, the play recalls the historical Henry's imposition of religious reformation as part of a benevolent, proto-Protestant monarchy.

The play's final scene stages Henry's political and personal reconciliations, conventions of romance anticipated in his night walk through London. The ending brings together Henry, his sixth wife, and son Edward as a family unit, resolving turmoil sown by Wolsey. Besides affirming Henry's rule as divinely blessed, this resolution also affirms Edward as Henry's heir. This providential ending culminates in a visit from the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The Holy Roman Emperor, Henry's nephew through his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, could certainly have been an evocative figure. The

emperor's role is to affirm Tudor rule and English sovereignty, as he exclaims to Edward:

> CHARLES. Thou dost amaze me, and d[o]st [m]ake me wish
> I were a second son to Englan[d's] Lord,
> In interchange of my imperial seats
> To live with thee… (*WYSM*)

As with other moments or figures of recollection within the play that could counter the narrative of Tudor and Stuart ascension, Charles is used to voice unequivocal wonder at Prince Edward, King Henry, and English superiority. Charles V's presence helps to further uncover the schemes against Henry, as the emperor questions the break in their alliance. Wolsey's secret plot to align England with France and break with Charles V to advance his papal ambitions is fully revealed. The picture painted by *WYSM*'s providential ending is one of completeness, which can be continued or destroyed if only Stuart monarchs heed Catholic interference on English rule, a position voiced in the final act by Charles V.

WYSM's dramatic tension lies in the audience's awareness of the schemes of Henry's bad advisors. When Wolsey and his bishops plot against Catherine Parry, the audience knows about their self-interested schemes. They further hope that Edward's intercession with Henry will work, resolving both a familial and political problem. The conflict allows for comic relief of this tension in various ways, including slapstick-style comedy provided by Will Sommers. Will Sommers uses his rights as a court fool to criticise Henry's reliance on self-interested Catholic advisors throughout the play. Sommers has his own role in helping young Prince Edward become his father's best advisor and heir. By including episodes which show Wolsey and his bishops openly planning treason alongside Will Sommers' comedic undermining of Henry's bad advisors, the play conveys a clear message that any turmoil during Henry's reign was the result of bad-faith actors. The play attempts to keep tight control over audience recollection of the "future-past" through careful selection of references and a central conflict that revolves around Henry's defence of English sovereignty. Once Henry clears his court of foreign interference, he is finally able to rule England properly. The hopefulness of such an ending is achieved with the play's blending of history and romance.

Shakespeare and Fletcher's Henry VIII: A Network of Events

The similarities between *WYSM* and *All Is True* in their uses of episodic structures and Henry VIII's reign underscore different kinds of experimentation with the history play as a genre. The tonal differences in both plays' handling of Tudor history lies in part within their own initial performance contexts. The first recorded performance of *All Is True* was in 1613, in the immediate aftermath of James I's policies of uniting England and Scotland, his search for a Spanish match for Henry Frederick, and Henry Frederick's death in late 1612. While there are, of course, further events that shaped the intervening years between 1604 and 1613, these examples demonstrate differences in political climate from Rowley's hopefulness early in James' English reign by 1613. The Henry of *All Is True* has proclaimed 'truths' that attempt to assert his authority as king. As the

play sequences events or commentary to destabilise Henry's reframing of the past, Henry's 'truths' are not safe from his own conflicting desires, from observations by his courtiers, or from audience recollection. The audience is meant to recall events alongside the play's episodes and take note of inconsistencies in how Henry and others attempt to control the 'truth.' As a result, the episodes in the play become a network of events that audience members recall in later scenes. These moments of recollection from within the play also anticipate early modern audiences' varied memories of the Tudor past. The play includes moments of recollection for the characters, but also the "future-past" as a mode that directly prompts audience recollection. *All Is True* portrays events within two to three generations of its 1613 audience, and potentially closer in time with uses of the "future-past".

Henry's desires in the play include Anne Bullen, whom he meets at Wolsey's banquet in Act One, Scene Four. They dance together as a part of masked revels, and Henry declares that Anne's "[t]he fairest hand I ever touched. O Beauty, / Till now I never knew thee" (*Henry VIII* 1.4.75–76). In Act Two, Scene Three, the audience watches the Lord Chamberlain elevate Anne Bullen, as Henry bestows on her the title of the Marchioness of Pembroke. Act Two, Scene Four stages the legatine court at Blackfriars, a historical event that was part of Henry's attempts to divorce Katherine of Aragon, which confirms the unreliable reports in Act Two, Scene One. At the start of the scene, Katherine is given priority. Eschewing legal formalities, she kneels before Henry and pleads her case for their marriage, stating her loyalty to him: "… I have been your wife in this obedience / Upward of twenty years, and have been blessed / With many children by you…" (*Henry VIII* 2.4.33–35). Ivo Kamps has discussed Katherine's legal arguments in detail, summarising the differences as "the authority of history and custom" besides her "convincing case for having been the perfect Queen and wife" (203). After Katherine leaves, Henry opines at length at how his "conscious" was troubled by concerns about the legitimacy of his marriage, despite Katherine's loyalty to him as his queen. Kamps usefully describes Henry's argument as "an intangible appeal to consciences, providence, and manufactured 'evidence'" (203). While "manufactured" is a loaded term, Henry uses the clergymen as witnesses to his "conscience," externalising an internal processing of personal sin, which has profound political ramifications: "My consciousness first received a tenderness, / Scruple and prick on certain speeches uttered / By th'… French ambassador" (*Henry VIII* 2.4.167–169). The ambassador questions whether Mary is legitimate, as Henry had married his brother's widow. Despite the pope's special dispensation for his marriage, Henry's lack of a male heir has led him to consider this divine judgement against him (*Henry VIII* 2.4.190–196). He asks the assembled clergy to:

> HENRY. Prove but our marriage lawful, by my life
> And kingly dignity, we are contented
> To wear our mortal state to come with her,
> Katherine, our Queen, before the primest creature
> That's paragoned o'th'world. (*Henry VIII* 2.4.223–227)

His speech is cut off by Campeius, a cardinal sent from Rome to oversee this trial, who ends the court due to Katherine's absence. After Campeius's attempt to end the court proceedings, Henry's magnanimous mood sours. In an aside, he complains about

"dilatory… tricks of Rome" and anticipates the return of his "learned and well-beloved servant, Cranmer... / With thy approach I know / My comfort comes along" (*Henry VIII* 2.4. 234–237).

The legatine trial at Blackfriars is a complex episode. Kamps has thoughtfully analysed Katherine and Henry's arguments in an early modern legal context. Setting aside the precise legal workings of their arguments, their respective recollections of the past create meaningful narratives in themselves. Katherine's appeals are to the previous decisions handed down by both secular and religious authorities that allowed them to marry. She further argues for her loyalty to Henry and the children they have had together. Henry's "conscious" as the source of trouble is his attempt to turn his private confessions to the gathered clergy into public testimony. In this reframing, Henry turns Katherine's general reference to their shared children into a specific reference to Mary, their only surviving child, and alludes to the political ramifications of this sole daughter as his heir. From Katherine's "many children," Henry attempts to use recollection to turn his insecurities regarding succession into a personal rift with God, exemplified by potential divine punishment. It is notable that Henry only begins this argument once Katherine has left. Both Katherine and Henry focused their speech on recollecting a shared past, but Henry's anger in being delayed in his efforts to divorce Katherine shifts him into hoping for a better result with Cranmer. The scene ends in the "future-past", without any attempt to assert what that future may look like.

The revelation in these lines directly reveals the stagecraft behind Henry's public relation of private confessions. As the first reference to Henry's rising favourite Cranmer, his lines imply that Cranmer will grant Henry "comfort" in the form of the longed-for divorce. Unlike Henry's long speeches about his "conscious" that reframe Katherine's arguments, this reference to Cranmer relies on the audience's recollection of the historical Cranmer's role in Henry's divorce. This reference is open-ended, since the exact "comfort" Cranmer will provide is ambiguous within the text itself, but a pointed reference for audiences to recall events relating to Henry's divorce. His own recollections may still be challenged by Katherine's previous speeches or audience memory, which Henry's own appeals to memory within the scene encourage. The audience, however, can recall events within the play's narrative itself as well. The sequence of events between scenes undermines Henry's declaration that Katherine is the "primest creature / … paragoned o'th'world" clashes with his declaration of Anne as the "fairest" at their first meeting (*Henry VIII* 2.4.226–227; *Henry VIII* 1.4.75). Henry's insistence at Blackfriars that he wants the gathered clergy to "[p]rove… our marriage lawful" so he can clear his conscience and remain married to Katherine feels hollow. Henry's public claims clash further with Henry's continued private pursuit of Anne. The play's narrative unsettles Henry's attempts to control recollection and achieve his will. His public framing of his desires is further contradicted by his desire for Cranmer in the "future-past." Audience recollection additionally contains the potential to complicate his hoped-for future. After all, Henry's newest rising favourite, Anne, would someday fall. The play's deployment of the "future-past" anticipates audience recollection to further its exploration of overreaching power, allowing audiences to compare what is hoped for within the play to events within relatively close memory.

Providential Structures and *All Is True*'s Irony

Where *WYSM* used providence to affirm Tudor, and by extension Stuart, monarchy, *All Is True* experimented with providence to question the construction of historical narratives. This is largely due to the ways in which each narrative structure anticipates audience recollection. In *WYSM*, the narrative portrays Henry as altruistic throughout its episodes build to a resolution which shows Henry as the true master of his realm. The play relies on dramatic irony to produce tension, as the audience is concerned with whether or not Henry will discover Wolsey's plots and believe Edward's advice. *WYSM* constructs its narrative and attempts to tie up the 'loose threads' of audience memories to lead to its providential ending in which Henry is reconciled with Catherine Parry, at Edward's urging. This ending glorifies Henry's providential rule, affirming Tudor and Stuart dynasties, but warns Stuart monarchs to beware of false advisors – particularly Catholics. Future-oriented statements in *WYSM*, such as Henry's calls for his marriage to Catherine Parry, may be meaningful to audiences as a point of recollection, but the moment serves to establish a later episode. The providential fulfilment of Henry's reign occurs within the play, as Henry and Edward are shown banishing Catholic influence and asserting English sovereignty. Future-oriented references therefore remain contained within the play's narrative. By contrast, *All Is True* structures events within its narrative to produce ambiguities. *All Is True*'s Henry consistently attempts to assert his authority and 'truth' publicly; however, there is a notable division between what Henry publicly asserts on the one hand, and what he privately thinks on the other, as shown in Henry's aside in Act Two, Scene Four. The play's events and references to the "future-past" orient the audience in relation to its events, but future falls from Henry's favour are left unaddressed. Its tension is constructed through the differences between what characters hope for and what audiences anticipate, often beyond the events of the play's narrative.

The providential ending of *All Is True* is Elizabeth's christening, with Cranmer's prophecy over the infant Elizabeth foretelling a peaceful and prosperous reign for her and her Stuart heirs. This ending seems to signal providence and resolution, but as the final scene of a play that has been ambivalent about future-oriented hopes, there is more to Cranmer's speech than simple propaganda. In isolation, Cranmer's rhetoric aligns with Elizabeth's and James's self-fashioning as monarchs. This includes images of Elizabeth as the "maiden phoenix" and how "her ashes new create another heir / As great in admiration as herself" (*Henry VIII* 5.4.40–42). James is "a mountain cedar" that "make[s] new nations" (*Henry VIII* 5.4.52–53). Cranmer heaps effusive praise on Elizabeth as "the happiness of England" and "[a] most unspotted lily" (*Henry VIII* 5.4.56, 61). These images seem to affirm Tudor and Stuart rule, completing the providential picture Cranmer forms in his prophecy. Henry, in front of the gathered nobles, declares to Cranmer:

> HENRY. Thou hast made me now a man. Never before
> This happy child did I get anything.
> This oracle of comfort has so pleased me
> That when I am in heave I shall desire
> To see what this child does… (*Henry VIII* 5.4.63–67)

Lee Bliss comments that Cranmer's prophecy "provid[es] a suggestion of resolution and finality to counterpoint the sense of fruitless repetition" that "pointedly corrects every moral fault… in Henry and the court he dominates" (20). For some audience members, it is possible that the ending did sweep away the uncertainty of previous episodes. The play's own scepticism towards future-oriented assertions suggests a variety of audience responses from this context alone. This is not the only prophecy in the play, after all. In Act One, Henry executes the Duke of Buckingham for the accusations brought against the duke that he heard and encouraged a prophecy that if Henry died without a male heir, Buckingham would succeed the throne. Gordon McMullan notes this "awkward context" for Cranmer's later prophecy over Elizabeth at her baptism (242). Henry's awe at Cranmer's prophecy contrasts with the disbelief and fear with which he viewed the prophecy that proclaimed Buckingham's ascendence to his throne, spurring Henry's concern for a male heir. Henry's speech at Blackfriars detailed his worries about God's displeasure at marrying his brother's wife, citing the deaths of all of his and Katherine's male children. The recollection of past events within the play complicate Henry's moment of contented royal fatherhood.

The play text encourages a more sceptical reading of this final prophecy as the audience would have also been encouraged to recall events outside the play's narrative. Scholars have, in large part, considered this prophecy to be unironically affirming due to where in time they locate the fulfilment of Cranmer's assertions regarding the Stuarts as Elizabeth's heirs. Bliss' 1975 article posits such an argument, which continues to be echoed in current work, such as Lauren Robertson's 2023 monograph, *Entertaining Uncertainty in the Early Modern Theatre: Stage Spectacle and Audience Response*. Audiences in 1613 could be reasonably sure that James' rule and succession would continue – thus extending the range of the prophecy – but the majority of the prophecy concerns Elizabeth's reign and the years preceding her rule. As at the end of Act Two, Scene Four, the play returns to the "future-past" to complicate Henry's attempt to legitimise his divorce. In Cranmer's providential framing of Elizabeth as Henry's heir, it excludes the tumultuous years of religious and political upheaval at every level of society as the English Reformation began as well as the trial and execution of Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth's mother. It leaves out Henry's further marriages and the birth of the longed-for male heir, Edward, and the following succession crisis. It further excludes disillusionment with Elizabeth's government, including economic instability, as well as an unclear line of succession.

Its framing of James is also potentially ironic. Jacobean audiences may have been particularly attuned to the portrayal of James as a "make[r of] new nations" in 1613 (*Henry VIII* 5.4.53). James' policy of "conjugal diplomacy" was a part of his plans for peace between Catholics and Protestants, as he sought a Catholic match for his heir, first Henry Frederick, but also in his efforts to fully unite England and Scotland (Britland 73). James' English subjects were not wholly supportive of their king's efforts (Finkelpearl *passim*). At the start of this article, I mentioned Henry Frederick's death in 1612; James' less popular son Charles, the 'spare', was now heir to the throne (Sutton; Kishlansky and Morrill). *WYSM* excludes details in its framing of Henry, but *All Is True* has used the "future-past" to evoke more questions than answers with its providential ending. *All Is True*'s shifting between the past, the future-past, and the political 'now' at

its conclusion enabled the play to comment on Henry's 'truth' and recent events with ambivalent irony. This ironic position to 'truth' pilloried monarchical attempts to use historical events to assert a coherent narrative that affirmed Stuart power.

Conclusion

The recollection of not-so-distant Tudor monarchs was, for early modern audiences, part of the appeal of these history plays. *WYSM*'s first performance to Prince Henry Frederick suggests a particular context for the play, as does its regular early modern reprinting by the stationer Nathaniel Butters over a forty-year period. The play's association with Henry Frederick may have influenced its print popularity, even in the years after the prince's death. *Henry VIII* is connected to the King's Men, their playing company, the burning of the Globe theatre, and Shakespeare's First Folio. As a result, the play is often treated as 'the one which burned down the Globe' and the last history play which completes the First Folio. The King's Men's ownership of the Blackfriars, which is the site for the legatine court in *Henry VIII*'s Act Two, Scene Four, frequently becomes the focus of speculation on the play as a site-specific performance. Gordon McMullan and Sarah Dustagheer offer interesting views of scenes from the play in this context, which exemplifies the ways *All Is True* is discussed in pieces, generally considered unworthy of deeper exploration. In this article, I have established that these plays are rich with generic exploration and engagement with contemporary memory.

The 1613 audiences' relative temporal closeness to the Tudor history portrayed within these plays influenced their reception, an aspect that has gone largely unexplored. In this regard, both plays are worth further consideration as part of the popular culture of their time. I have shown some ways in which both plays explore history-making and recollection, to different conclusions. *WYSM* reframes possible recollections to create an affirming narrative for Henry, while *All Is True* anticipates and uses a variety of audience responses as a part of its narrative to produce a sense of instability. The context of *WYSM*'s ending, while not wholly simplistic in its providential affirmation of Tudor and Stuart succession, is certainly more straightforward than *All Is True*. *WYSM*'s generic experimentations include fewer challenges to the ways in which those in power construct the past, but its use of some romance conventions in the play's familial and political resolution is perhaps an early example of the Jacobean trend for mixed-mode drama. I would like to suggest that in these short examples, there are wider ramifications for how early modern audiences may have understood these plays and why the history play form remained popular for audiences. These reasons have little to do with the grand sweep of English history with which modern scholars and theatre practitioners alike often view history plays. Instead, Tudor monarch plays reveal how early modern playwrights engaged audience memory in their genre experiments, often to speak to new political concerns during James's early reign.

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Zusammenfassung

Shakespeares Historiendramen galten zu ihrer Zeit als sehr populär. In der Forschung wird gemeinhin die Annahme getroffen, dass die Zeit der Historiendramen hauptsächlich auf die Regierungszeit Elisabeth I. begrenzt war und die Form mit der Thronbesteigung von Jakob I. aus der Mode kam. Dieser Artikel überprüft diese Annahme und untersucht dazu zwei Beispiele für „Tudor monarch plays“ (Grant and Ravelhofer) aus der frühen jakobinischen Zeit. Anhand einer Analyse von William Shakespeares und John Fletchers *König Heinrich VIII* (or *All Is True*, 1613) und Samuel Rowleys früherem Werk *When You See Me, You Know Me* (1605) wird diskutiert, inwiefern diese Stücke als Reaktionen auf einen veränderten politischen Kontext verstanden werden können und neue episodische Erzählstrukturen und Konventionen anderer Genres aufweisen und dabei die Erinnerungen des Publikums an Ereignisse der jüngeren Geschichte einbinden. Die lebendige Erinnerung eines jakobinischen Publikums an die Vergangenheit unter der Tudorzeit als ein Teil erlebter oder nacherzählter Erfahrungen innerhalb weniger Generationen ist ein bis heute unterschätzter Aspekt der Popularität dieser Stücke.

FROM TRAGEDY TO TOURISM: SHAKESPEARE'S VERONA AND THE INTERPLAY OF LITERARY HERITAGE AND CULTURAL COMMODIFICATION

by

LARA STICH

"In fair Verona, where we lay our scene" (*Romeo and Juliet*, Prologue.2).[1] The opening of *Romeo and Juliet* is arguably one of the most recognisable and most frequently quoted passages in world drama. Shakespeare's prologue not only introduces a spatial setting but inaugurates a myth that has come to define the city of Verona itself. What was once a line framing a theatrical fiction has become an urban geography organised around the *Romeo and Juliet* myth, shaped by the movements, practices, and explanations of residents and visitors alike. Verona now performs a recurring role in the mythologised afterlife of the tragedy, transformed from a historical city into a Shakespearean stage. *Romeo and Juliet* survives not only as a dramatic text but as a site-specific cultural experience. Dennis Kennedy, in his broader discussion of Shakespeare and cultural tourism, characterises spectators as "consumers of cultural product" and "visitors to another realm" (181). Applied to Verona, this framework suggests that the city is constructed as the touristic lens through which the play is mediated. When literature migrates from page to place, it reshapes not only imagination but geography, turning fiction into experience and narrative into space.

Few figures exemplify this dynamic more than William Shakespeare, whose reach extends far beyond the theatre. As Robert Ormsby and Valerie Pye observe, "Shakespearean tourism" encompasses festivals, souvenirs, exhibitions, and digital practices, raising questions about how such diverse activities connect and in what ways they are touristic (2). While Shakespeare studies have traditionally focused on performance, adaptation, interpretation, and canonisation, tourism studies turn instead to questions of heritage and authenticity. They examine cross-cultural encounters and the ways in which travellers and operators jointly produce experiences that render destinations meaningful (Ormsby & Pye 3). Bringing these critical perspectives together allows for an exploration of how Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* functions not only as a work of drama but also as a cultural economy that reshapes urban identity. Nowhere is this global phenomenon more visible than in Verona itself, where the play's imaginative power has permanently inscribed itself upon the city. Shakespeare's tragedy has become so culturally potent that it has overwritten the city's identity in both local and global consciousness. Once simply a northern Italian city with a layered Roman and medieval past, Verona has come to stand as a symbol of love, passion, and tragic youth

[1] All following Shakespeare quotes will refer to: Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet.* Ed. Jill L. Levenson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1599] 2000.

– qualities not historically endemic to its civic character, but now essential to its touristic brand.

Shakespeare's fascination with Italy, a recurring setting for his plays, is evident in *Romeo and Juliet*. Although he almost certainly never left England to acquire first-hand knowledge, Shakespeare's construction of an Italian imaginary was mediated through Italian literary texts and treatises circulating in early modern London, works whose reception materially informed and conditioned contemporary English writing about Italy (Cartwright 156–57). Through these textually constructed visions of place, his imaginative portrayal of Italian locales nonetheless contributed to shaping global perception of them, none more so than Verona. The city, imbued with history and romance, has become synonymous with the story of Romeo and Juliet, attracting countless visitors seeking to experience the tangible essence of Shakespeare's most famous love story. Literary tourism often functions through mythmaking, allowing travellers to project personal beliefs and identities onto a place. In this sense, *Romeo and Juliet* in Verona influences not only the tourists who engage with the story but the city itself, which has actively reshaped its image around this literary myth (Tessari 299). In contemporary Verona, the legacy of Shakespeare and *Romeo and Juliet* is palpable in numerous facets of the city's life. From the bustling tourism at Juliet's balcony, a site of pilgrimage for those entranced by the love story, to delicious biscotti called *Baci di Giulietta* sold in Veronese bakeries and cafes, Verona has skilfully woven Shakespeare and his play into its urban and cultural fabric.

However, the commercialisation of this Shakespearean legacy raises critical questions about authenticity and the commodification of literary heritage. Verona's transformation into a 'Shakespearean city' underscores the delicate balance between preserving cultural memory and exploiting it for economic gain. This tension between claims of authenticity and the logics of commodification constitutes the central concern of this article. Under such conditions, authenticity becomes largely irrelevant. The lovers' story is received not as a document of the past but as a flexible mythic script that can be mapped onto contemporary desires. This process is governed by a logic of selective adaptation: from the complexity of Shakespeare's tragedy, those elements that support a marketable narrative of romantic fulfilment are amplified, while more disruptive dimensions, such as its critique of patriarchy, generational conflict, and systemic violence, fade into the background. At the centre is the narrative's symbolic utility within twenty-first-century consumer culture. These developments demonstrate how literature can influence and even redefine real-world spaces, highlighting the perennial power of storytelling to bridge past and present. Verona's reinvention as 'Shakespeare's Verona' thus exemplifies both the cultural potency of literature and the ethical dilemmas of its commodification.

In this paper, I argue that Verona's transformation reflects a complex interplay between literature, urban space, and cultural practice. The city's geography, monuments, and rituals are not merely shaped by Shakespeare's tragedy but actively appropriate and continue to reshape it, producing a form of spatial storytelling that enables visitors to inhabit, perform, and continually renegotiate the *Romeo and Juliet* myth within the material fabric of the city. At the same time, the analysis considers how participatory culture – through interaction, tourism, and media engagement – enables audiences to

co-produce the ongoing cultural life of the play. Drawing on adaptation studies, cultural heritage theory, and literary analysis, I trace how a work of fiction can become a lived, material, and commercial reality, while I also reflect on the ethical and interpretive questions this transformation raises.

Shakespearean Branding, Urban Identity and the Juliet Industry

Shakespeare's works, and the long history of their translation, adaptation, and circulation, position him not simply as a playwright but as a global cultural phenomenon. His plays function as a form of cultural capital, conferring status and economic value wherever they are invoked. Verona's city officials and business community have readily recognised this and adopted a strategy that aligns Shakespearean heritage with urban branding. According to Eleonora Oggiano, Verona has explicitly developed the "Shakespeare brand", a symbolic and commercial resource that merges cultural heritage with tourism economies (110). Through this strategy, Shakespeare is not only preserved as cultural memory but also transformed into a marketing tool that secures Verona's place in global circuits of cultural consumption. Official tourism websites, municipal signage, and commercial enterprises repeatedly invoke the language of love while Verona's spatial semiotics are saturated with Shakespearean symbolism, from the naming of streets such as Via Shakespeare to the proliferation of heart-shaped merchandise. Tourists are encouraged not simply to observe but to perform their own role in the myth of the "star-crossed lovers" (Prologue.6). The city becomes a living stage for the tragedy, hence "it can be safely argued that Verona itself is the most successful adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*" (Bassi 145).

As Shaul Bassi further observes, this reciprocal process – Shakespeare's appropriation of Italian settings mirrored by Verona's appropriation of Shakespeare – creates a dynamic cultural exchange (140). It is most visible in the way *Romeo and Juliet* permeates the city's tourist industry. The myth has been elaborated into a variety of formats catering to tourism, thereby amplifying the story far beyond its literary origins (Oggiano 109). These adaptations range from guided tours and museum displays to food, merchandise, and festivals, demonstrating how Shakespeare's text has been continuously reimagined for new audiences and consumers. In this way, Shakespeare shifts from a figure of high art to a commodified icon, whose symbolic capital enhances Verona's allure and whose myth underwrites the city's fortune (Oggiano 111). What was originally a fictional tale set in Verona has been transformed into a site of cultural imagination that now extends into transnational tourism networks, where visitors expect to encounter Shakespeare and his play not only in theatres but also in streets, shops, and souvenirs. *Romeo and Juliet* thus circulates less as a complex dramatic text than as a reservoir of images and emotions that can be endlessly repackaged. The famous lovers' presence is ubiquitous, underscoring how Juliet and Romeo have become inseparable from Verona's urban landscape. In this process, early modern popular culture is reconfigured as twenty-first-century popular culture, with Shakespeare's tragedy functioning as a renewable resource for contemporary touristic and media economies.

Central to this civic narrative is the figure of Juliet, who emerges not only as a literary heroine but also as a symbolic persona functioning in multiple registers: muse,

counsellor, icon, and brand. Her image, detached from Shakespeare's text, circulates across various media, from bronze statues and souvenir items to Hollywood films and Instagram posts. Alessandra Tessari notes that in recent decades, Juliet has become "a mass media phenomenon" and that "the cult of Juliet has never been stronger" (303). As a brand representative for the city, Juliet is both an object and a medium: she is the figure visitors come to see and the one through whom they perform their own romantic aspirations. Strikingly, this intense visual and commercial circulation attaches almost exclusively to Juliet; Romeo, by contrast, rarely appears as an equivalent icon of Veronese heritage. This asymmetry suggests that it is the female lover who is rendered most available for commodification, her body and affect functioning as the primary surface for touristic projection. Juliet is celebrated as a muse of love and longing, while her function as a figure of resistance to parental control and to the violence of arranged marriage is sidelined. Such selective adaptation enables the tourist economy to privilege a feminised ideal of romantic availability over the play's more disruptive politics of limited female agency.

This transformation of Juliet into a mythical figure resonates globally, blurring the lines between fiction and perceived historical reality. By the late 1980s, Juliet had been reimagined as the symbolic ambassador of Verona and firmly integrated into the city's branding. At the same time, Verona's identity as the 'City of Love' was consolidated as a central pillar of its tourism strategy (Tessari 302). The city's promotion of Juliet thus marks a decisive shift: from a Shakespearean character embedded in a sixteenth-century tragedy to an enduring cultural asset whose symbolic, romantic capital fuels Verona's global visibility and tourist economy. Through such engagement, Verona not only honours this legendary character but also reinforces her place within the urban and cultural landscape, inviting a worldwide audience to partake in the lore of her fictional life and love story.

Juliet's House: Fabricating Authenticity

The exemplification of Verona's strategic utilisation of Shakespeare's legacy is best seen in Juliet's House, known locally as *Casa di Giulietta*. Transformed into a significant tourist attraction, this site was crafted by the city to capitalise on the play's romantic allure, showcasing the city's adeptness at blending historical myth with actual experience. Within this configuration, questions of historical authenticity are largely displaced: the site's function is less to document a verifiable past than to generate a recognisably Shakespearean affective and visual experience for visitors. The house greets visitors with the Italian inscription: "Queste furono le case dei Capuleti d'onde uscì la Giulietta per cui tanto piansero i cuori e i poeti cantarono"[2] (Municipality of Verona). This framing immediately blurs the line between history and fiction. By presenting Juliet's residence as a historical fact, it constructs a narrative that elevates a literary character into the realm of cultural memory. The wording invites visitors to suspend critical awareness and to accept the conflation of Shakespeare's fiction with

[2] "This was the house of the Capulets from which Juliet emerged for whom many hearts wept and the poets sang" (own translation)

Verona's material heritage, setting the tone for the hybrid experience that follows within the site. Ironically, while the entrance enshrines this narrative, the municipality's own website reveals the building's actual historical background. This information, however, is presented separately from the interactive tourist experience and requires deliberate inquiry, reinforcing a marketing strategy that emphasises the myth, while the historical reality occupies a more peripheral role.

The iconic location of Juliet's House has a multifaceted history that can be traced back to the medieval period, with documents dating its existence to as early as 1351. Originally functioning as an inn named *del Cappello*, it was owned by the heirs of Antonio Cappello. Despite popular lore and the similarity of their name, there is no historical link between the Veronese Cappello family and the Capulets of Shakespeare's play (Oggiano 111). However, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a romantic and cultural transformation began to take shape. The building was increasingly identified as Juliet's House, drawing European travellers who embarked on a romantic pilgrimage inspired by Shakespeare's tragic tale. As Keir Elam highlights, "one of the more familiar tropes in Shakespeare's plays is the fiction of tourism in Italy", a trope that became reality when Grand Tourists and Romantic travellers folded Verona into their itineraries, seeking the city not only for its Roman past but as the stage of *Romeo and Juliet* (59). Travel diaries from this period, including those of notable figures like Charles Dickens, provide vivid descriptions of the site. In his work *Pictures from Italy*, Dickens noted the stark contrast between the idyllic love story and the site he encountered, describing it as "degenerated into a most miserable little inn", animated by daily commerce and far removed from romance (57).

Although Dickens appeared unimpressed, the house's appeal continues to be profoundly evident in the present day. Today, Juliet's House, a fourteenth-century townhouse with its enclosed courtyard, protruding balcony, and walls densely covered in graffiti, love notes, and padlocks, continues to function as a testament to the lasting power of literature to shape physical spaces and cultural narratives. It embodies the unique phenomenon in which a fictional narrative profoundly shapes the perception and reality of a physical location. In this case, a former inn has been transformed into a pilgrimage site for those drawn to the story of *Romeo and Juliet*. The residence transitioned into her family home in the collective imagination, thereby significantly enhancing Verona's tourism sector. Visitor statistics underline the site's prominence: Juliet's House is now "the most visited site in Verona after the Arena. More than 300,000 paying visitors materialise yearly and some 2 million stop in the courtyard to catch a glimpse of the famous lovers' balcony" (Tessari 300).

Such numbers reflect not only spontaneous tourist interest but also careful planning. This immense popularity has not been accidental but deliberately cultivated, as Verona has consciously fashioned the Shakespeare brand, turning Juliet into a symbolic and commercial resource that fuses cultural heritage with tourism economies (Oggiano 111). The city has capitalised on this brand, making intentional changes to its infrastructure to align with the expectations and desires of *Romeo and Juliet* enthusiasts and aspirants. In 1905, Antonio Avena, the director of the Verona Museums, installed a balcony within the courtyard of the tower-house to create a physical space that resonates with the iconic scene from the play where Juliet "enter[s] above" (2.1.44sd) and professes her love for

Romeo. Yet the romantic emblem is steeped in irony, for as Bassi notes, it is "a medieval sarcophagus repurposed […] to meet the expectations of literary pilgrims" (146). What now functions as a symbol of love was once a tomb, an inversion that exposes how Verona manufactures an aura of authenticity, even at the cost of morbid incongruity. By recoding a funerary object as a romantic shrine, the city stages a simulacrum of loss for lovers who never existed, allowing visitors to consume the frisson of tragedy within an apparently affirmative cult of love. Through such interventions, the imaginative demands of Shakespearean tourism are met through a mode of heritage that is performative and constructed, underscoring that what passes as Shakespearean authenticity in Verona is fundamentally the outcome of curatorial labour.

In the same spirit of shaping the site for visitors, the municipal council subsequently resolved to convert the building into a museum (Oggiano 111). Even director Franco Zeffirelli recognised this dynamic, proposing to turn Juliet's "fake house" into a "museum of feelings" that could guide tourists into the "magic world of enduring love" (Tessari 312). Although his 1968 adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* was filmed mostly in other Italian locations, its material traces have been strategically anchored in Verona: costumes and set pieces from the production are exhibited in Juliet's House, where they function as quasi-relics that confer an aura of authenticity by visually aligning the site with a globally familiar cinematic imaginary. This interweaving of cinema and heritage continues inside the house, where the fusion of fact and fiction is sustained through carefully curated exhibits that blend theatrical props with vaguely Renaissance-style furnishings.

Yet the house does not confine itself to curated display; it actively scripts visitor participation. They may leave letters, purchase themed merchandise, or take photos re-enacting the balcony scene, a strikingly modern label, since *Romeo and Juliet* never actually uses the word balcony, even as Verona's tourism economy treats it as the play's signature object. As Kennedy argues in his discussion of the reconstructed Globe, such practices align heritage sites with the logic of interactive museums, where audiences are invited to participate actively and to carry away narratives of their experience (185). The tourist encounter at Juliet's House functions in much the same way, generating stories, photographs, and souvenirs that circulate well beyond the site itself. These practices embody a form of playful spectatorship in which visitors willingly suspend disbelief, "perfectly aware that the enterprise is not strictly genuine but willing to comport themselves as if it were" (Kennedy 186). In this sense, the *Casa di Giulietta* can neither claim to preserve a verifiable past – for a story that is itself fictional – nor to offer a faithful engagement with Shakespeare's text. Instead, it operates as an interactive stage on which visitors are invited to enact a simplified, touristic version of Verona's most marketable fiction.

Each photograph or letter thus adds a layer to the ever-evolving cultural script of Juliet, a script that no longer resides solely in Shakespeare's playtext, but circulates through what Douglas Lanier terms a 'Shakespearean rhizome': a sprawling, non-hierarchical network of reproductions, appropriations, and practices that continually remake Shakespeare in new sites and media (29). In this rhizomatic economy, visitor rituals and urban branding do not merely respond to the drama; they become generative nodes within it. Juliet's house makes the love myth tangible: walking the balcony,

inscribing messages on the courtyard wall, or simply gazing up at the façade become essential gestures that ensure visitors feel they have stepped into the world of Shakespearean drama (Tessari 305).

This sense of participation begins the moment one enters the site, with the open courtyard, accessible to all and free of charge, serving as the initial threshold into Shakespeare's Verona. Strategically positioned within this space, the gift shop efficiently channels the site's emotional resonance into consumable form. Souvenirs ranging from trinkets to books allow visitors to carry away tangible fragments of their encounter, reinforcing the Shakespeare brand (Oggiano 112). These commodities are not mere keepsakes but tokens of engagement, objects that transform a brief encounter with the site into lasting memory.

Standing in the courtyard alongside the fabricated balcony is another focal point of tourist ritual: the bronze statue of Juliet, installed in 1969 by sculptor Nereo Costantini. Today, visitors encounter a replica in the courtyard, while the original statue has been moved inside the museum for preservation (Municipality of Verona). This display echoes the play itself, where Montague vows at the end of the tragedy:

> MONTAGUE. For I will ray her statue in pure gold,
> That whiles Verona by that name is known,
> There shall no figure at such rate be set
> As that of true and faithful Juliet. (5.3.299–302)

What Shakespeare imagined as a noble act of commemoration has here been transformed into a ritualised, commodified, and questionable gesture of tourist affection, converting his literary gold into physical bronze and rendering it available for mass consumption. Over time, the statue has become the object of a tactile ritual in which visitors touch Juliet's right breast for luck in love, leaving the surface visibly worn by countless hands. That this ritual centres on the breast of a statue representing a young woman renders the practice particularly troubling: it normalises intimate contact with a feminised body as harmless touristic play and evacuates the gesture of moral complexity. The gendered asymmetry is telling: it is Juliet's body, not Romeo's, that is made available for tactile appropriation, as if the materialisation of the myth of romantic love necessarily requires the eroticised exposure of the female lover.

In participating in this ritual, each visitor stages a symbolic re-enactment of the lovers' anticipated intimacy: the courtyard, the balcony, and the statue together create a space where narrative, object, and audience intersect. The statue exemplifies the logic of kitsch, collapsing the critical distance between art and audience, while simultaneously feeding into the broader circuits of tourism, social media, and merchandise that sustain the city's Shakespearean brand (Bassi 147).

If the statue ritual demonstrates how tourists physically inscribe themselves into Verona's Shakespearean myth, the house itself reflects the broader cultural logic that sustains these practices. It embodies a quintessentially postmodern representation of Shakespeare's play, characterised by a fluid juxtaposition of artefacts from varying epochs and genres. Rather than offering a linear or historically coherent narrative, the site assembles fragments from different temporal and cultural registers into a deliberately stylised environment that privileges recognisability and affect over

historical continuity. The result is a hybrid space where history and myth overlap, and where objects function less as authentic remnants than as symbolic tokens circulating within global consumer culture. The signs and symbols associated with *Romeo and Juliet* have become detached from their original contexts, taking on new, often commercialised meanings within the tourist economy (Bassi 149). This impression of a fragmented, almost theatrical assemblage, combining Renaissance-style décor, Shakespearean references, and marketing displays, underscores the tension between preservation and commodification. Verona has deliberately leaned into this dynamic, a strategy that is central to the construction of the Verona brand, in which Juliet's story is mobilised as both heritage and a promotional asset. Much as Dickens once observed, the residence, far from preserving any idyllic allure, appears instead as a site overwhelmed by tourism and marketing, its romance mediated as much – perhaps even more – by commerce as by Shakespeare's text.

Juliet's Tomb: Invented Memorials and Tourist Rituals

Dickens not only commented on Juliet's house but also on the next stage of the Shakespearean itinerary, the so-called *Tomba di Giulietta*. As he observed: "From Juliet's home to Juliet's tomb, is a transition as natural to the visitor, as to fair Juliet herself" (Dickens 57). His comment highlights the perceived continuity between the two locations, a link that Verona continues to reinforce through the sale of a combination ticket issued by the Municipality of Verona (Municipality of Verona). Sold at a discount, this combined ticket symbolically unites Juliet's imagined home with her final resting place, inviting visitors to follow the arc of the tragic narrative across the city's geography. This blending of literary journey and marketing strategy underscores the commodification of cultural heritage, turning Shakespeare's play into both an imaginative and an economic itinerary.

The physical site standing in for Juliet's fictional tomb is conveniently located just a short walk from her legendary residence, outside the historical city walls. Directly outside the crypt, a marble plaque displays the contemplative words of Romeo:

> ROMEO. A grave? O, no; a lantern […]
> For here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes
> This vault a feasting presence full of light. (5.3.84–86)

This inscription effectively bridges Shakespeare's textual world with the physical environment, inviting visitors into a more interactive engagement with the play. The tomb itself, a plain marble sarcophagus, lies in the crypt of a former Franciscan monastery. In the late nineteenth century, the site was converted into a museum, showcasing Renaissance frescoes and other works of art alongside the supposed resting place of Juliet (Oggiano 112). As a consequence of the damage caused by the former tourist custom of removing fragments as keepsakes, the sarcophagus is today exhibited under protective conditions, allowing it to be seen but no longer touched. Among the most famous to engage in this ritual was Lord Byron, who simultaneously mocked the tomb's claim to authenticity while boasting of having pocketed pieces of stone for his daughter. Paola Pugliatti thus characterised him as "infected by Veronese idolatry"

(396), her phrase suggests a localised, Verona-specific variant of what later critics have termed Bardolatry. Byron's contradictory behaviour illustrates a form of secular relic worship, reflecting the tension between irony and sentiment that often characterises literary tourism. In this sense, the tomb functions less as a historical site than as a space of narrative desire. If Juliet's house provides an entry into the story of youthful passion, the tomb offers the counterpoint of mourning and loss. Both sites together extend the emotional arc of *Romeo and Juliet* into the physical city and allow visitors to participate in a performative geography where text, space, and ritual converge.

The Epistolatory Juliet: Letters and Participation

Just as the tomb promoted physical rituals of remembrance, a practice of epistolary devotion emerged in the 1930s, allowing visitors to engage with Juliet not through stone but through words. Ettore Solimani, then guardian of the tomb, encouraged couples to inscribe their feelings and even to leave letters addressed to Shakespeare's heroine. What began as a spontaneous gesture of devotion soon developed into a ritual practice, with visitors sending letters not only in person but also by post, often addressed simply to 'Juliet, Verona' (Oggiano 114–15). This epistolary tradition demonstrates the enduring power of the Shakespearean tale to inspire affective participation, which transforms a fictional heroine into a confidante for real-world longings. Since 1985, the responsibility for answering these letters has been assumed by the Juliet Club, an association founded by Giulio Tamassia and sustained by volunteers from around the world. The Club meticulously replies to each letter, maintaining an archive of thousands of personal stories in dozens of languages (Juliet Club). In this way, Juliet transforms from a tragic heroine into a supposedly therapeutic icon, embodying a symbolic role for those in search of emotional counsel. The Juliet Club enables visitors and correspondents alike to co-author the ongoing narrative of Shakespeare's heroine. At the same time, the practice is ethically fraught: letter-writers from around the world assume the authority to address – and to ventriloquise – a fictional thirteen-year-old girl, thereby reinscribing asymmetrical dynamics of age and gendered address.

Yet through this ambivalent epistolary tradition and the work of the Juliet Club, visitors are transformed from passive spectators into active participants in Verona's Shakespearean myth. As Tessari observes, such initiatives deliberately offer the myth not merely to be observed but to be enacted (312–13). Beyond its epistolary function, the Club also serves as an archive of affect, safeguarding thousands of letters as a form of intangible heritage. The archive itself adds another dimension to this phenomenon. Unlike Shakespeare's fixed text, the collection of letters is open-ended, continually expanding with each new message. It functions as a living repository of global affect, where the myth of Juliet is rewritten daily by correspondents across cultures and generations. In this way, the Club not only sustains Juliet's symbolic life but also transforms her into the centre of a collective narrative, a cultural script co-authored by thousands of voices worldwide. The romantic allure of the letter-writing tradition has not gone unnoticed by popular media. Gary Winick's *Letters to Juliet* (2010) dramatises the practice and weaves it into a narrative that reimagines Verona as a space where personal longing and Shakespearean heritage unite. The film amplifies the epistolary

ritual while projecting it to global audiences, feeding back into the tourist imaginary that sustains the city's brand as the 'City of Love'.

The Role of Media in Shaping Tourist Expectations

Film and television adaptations have played a decisive role in shaping popular perceptions of Shakespeare's Verona. Romantic comedies such as *Letters to Juliet* (2010) and *Love in the Villa* (2022) have not only updated the narrative but also cast Verona itself as an active character. These visual texts provide audiences with concrete, consumable images of love in an Italian setting, reinforcing the city's romantic brand. Unlike earlier adaptations that often detached the story from its Italian geography, such as *West Side Story* (1961) or Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), these modern films incorporate Verona as a central figure in the drama. *Letters to Juliet* is especially revealing because it frames Verona's tourist economy within its central plot: the protagonist discovers one of the letters left at Juliet's House and embarks on a quest structured by the city's emotional and spatial geography (*Letters to Juliet*). As Charles Forker argues, the film functions as a Shakespearean adaptation "in a more radical sense" since, while borrowing motifs of characterisation, emotional resonance, and setting, it reverses the tragic trajectory of *Romeo and Juliet* into a "sentimentalised, feel-good comedy" (105). This reconfiguration softens the tragedy into consumable romance, perfectly suited to Verona's branding. At the same time, the film embeds Shakespearean consciousness throughout its settings, visual details, and tone so pervasively that it seems almost steeped in the memory of the tragedy. It draws on its substance in subtle and half-remembered ways, for instance, in the recurrent balcony framings, the verbal echoes of "star-crossed" lovers, and the staging of chance encounters as faintly comic reworkings of fatal coincidence (Forker 106). The result is a cinematic itinerary in which Verona itself functions as a performative setting, inviting viewers to experience the city as both stage and story.

The cinematic Verona provides templates of action that visitors then enact in their own performances, posing on the balcony, retracing filmic camera movements, or seeking out locations that appear to match the play's imagined spaces. Oggiano extends this perspective by showing how media and tourism can mutually reinforce each other: Films such as *Letters to Juliet* not only represent Verona but also sustain its consumption, perpetuating the circular relationship between cultural narrative and economic practice (113). In other words, the cinematic itineraries imagined on screen are the very ones that visitors reproduce in practice, collapsing the boundary between fiction and lived experience.

Social media has further democratised this process. With the rise of Instagram, TikTok, and travel vlogs, tourists themselves become both performers and documentarians of the Shakespearean stage, active participants in the 'Shakespearean rhizome', the proliferating network through which Shakespearean meaning is continuously redistributed across media, sites, and practices. The internet's distributed, non-hierarchical configuration exemplifies the dynamics of a rhizomatic structure. (Lanier 29). Hashtags such as #JulietsHouse or #VeronaLoveStory compile thousands of user-generated images, creating a collective narrative in which visitors continually

re-enact, reproduce and appropriate the spatial story of *Romeo and Juliet*. Each image is not simply a record but a re-performance. In Kennedy's terms, the value of a touristic site lies less in the physical object than in the imaginative response it provokes in the visitor, much like theatrical meaning arises in the spectator's mind (175). Social media amplifies this dynamic: the balcony or tomb becomes not just a backdrop but a catalyst for personal storytelling, with users' images and captions transforming private imaginings into public performances. The accessibility of these practices lowers the threshold for engaging with Shakespeare: tourists need not read the play or attend a performance in order to take part. A photograph, hashtag, or short video suffices to insert them into the Shakespearean narrative. These visual citations feed back into the city's narrative economy and ensure that Shakespeare's Verona remains perpetually staged for a global audience.

The Ethics of Commodification and the Loss of Tragedy

This cinematic and touristic staging of *Romeo and Juliet* demonstrates how Shakespeare's Verona is continuously repackaged for global consumption. Yet this very success raises pressing ethical questions. At its core, *Romeo and Juliet* is not simply a celebration of youthful passion but a drama of systemic failure. It critiques entrenched social structures, patriarchy, honour codes, and generational authority that conspire to destroy the lovers. When these complexities are reduced to a generic tale of true love, the play's tragic weight risks being displaced by sentimental spectacle. The tourist encounter often ends up aestheticising love, turning it into a surface spectacle that obscures the play's darker political and social dimensions (Bassi 147).

This tension between heritage and consumption is particularly visible in Verona. By branding itself as the 'City of Love', the municipality has ensured its place in global tourist circuits, but often at the cost of literary nuance. The Shakespeare brand has been consciously developed as a strategic tool to merge culture and commerce, shaping the city's global image (Oggiano 111). What emerges is a form of selective adaptation: Juliet is elevated as a romantic muse while her defiance of patriarchal control, her critique of forced marriage, and her resistance to familial authority are silenced. In the tourist economy, her image has shifted from a figure of tragedy and resistance into an emblem of romance, marketed as an accessible icon of love and longing that supports Verona's cultural brand. As Kennedy puts it, tourism often creates "history as theme park" (178), privileging spectacle over depth. Theatricality becomes part of the attraction: Verona's Shakespearean sites are curated to deliver immediate emotional recognition rather than sustained engagement with the play's tragic critique. The illusion of authenticity is crucial here. Visitors "seek certified sites, verified objects, confirmed auras" (Kennedy 180), even when these are fabrications designed to simulate Shakespeare's world. This interplay of desire and illusion shows how heritage industries cultivate a hunger for the 'genuine' experience, even in contexts where the original never existed.

The paradox here is that the promise of authenticity offered by sites such as Juliet's House or Tomb rests precisely on a consciously fabricated fiction. From a postmodern, poststructuralist perspective, however, this is not an aberration but an exemplary case: authenticity appears less as access to an originary past than as an effect of discourse and

staging, and Verona's Shakespearean heritage lays bare the extent to which the past is produced rather than simply preserved. The fake balcony, the curated interiors, and the reimagined tomb all demonstrate how Verona has long blurred the line between historical reality and narrative invention. Verona has become "a city where fact and fiction […] blend most interestingly" (Bassi 140), a quality that underpins both the appeal and the artificiality of its Shakespearean heritage. What is offered is less an encounter with a recoverable past than a mediated performance of it, tailored not only to the expectations of literary pilgrims but also to a contemporary culture of digital self-staging. In the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, this past is inherently fictional, yet it is staged under the guise of pseudo-historicity, inviting visitors to experience the play's invented world as if it were part of Verona's historical memory. This dynamic illustrates a broader cultural tendency: in an age of global consumerism, heritage sites are increasingly designed to provide immediate affective accessibility rather than sustained textual or historical engagement. As Ormsby and Pye observe, both Shakespearean tourism and theatre rely on the imaginative participation of audiences, who move between fiction and reality in ways that transport them beyond everyday life (15). This interplay between invention and experience is precisely what sustains the Shakespeare industry in Verona, where the appeal depends on the productive tension between artifice and authenticity.

According to Elam, Shakespeare's Italian settings "are utopian 'emplacements', idealised sites of Renaissance culture, rather than real places" (72). The term utopian is crucial here: etymologically a 'no-place', it denotes a location that does not and cannot exist in empirical terms. Read in this light, Shakespeare's Verona is structurally imaginary, a textual elsewhere rather than a mappable somewhere. Any attempt to stabilise it as a historically authentic site in the present is therefore inevitably fallible, producing staged surrogates that simulate, rather than recover, a verifiable past. This stylisation finds a striking parallel in today's Shakespearean heritage industry: sites such as Juliet's House or Tomb similarly present idealised versions of Verona, shaped less by historical accuracy than by the imperatives of storytelling and tourist expectation. Just as Shakespeare's Verona functioned as a symbolic landscape rather than a faithful geography, the modern city continues to blur fact and fiction in ways that sustain its cultural allure.

This blurring of fact and fiction has long sustained the Veronese cult: a "common confusion between historical fact and fiction where the Romeo and Juliet tale is concerned" (Pugliatti 395) explains why tourists continue to visit Juliet's balcony and tomb as if they were authentic historical sites. Significantly, this confusion is not limited to visitors from abroad; even some locals have internalised the myth, treating these invented spaces as part of Verona's historical reality (Pugliatti 395). In this context, authenticity itself becomes irrelevant. Romeo and Juliet now function as myths representing ideals and dreams, while questions of historical accuracy have little impact on their appeal (Tessari 299). This shift from history to myth is not unique to Verona but mirrors a wider pattern in heritage tourism. As Ormsby and Pye remark, marketability often outweighs historical precision (3). The house, tomb, and letters function not as prompts for critical reflection but as icons of a romantic narrative distilled to its most marketable form. The resulting experience risks trivialising Shakespeare's legacy by privileging surface over substance, sentiment over critique. Yet it also demonstrates how

literature, once absorbed into cultural heritage, becomes a living force that exceeds the text itself. Verona's Shakespearean spaces are both commodified and sacralised, simultaneously trivial and profound. Ultimately, the ethical question is not whether Shakespeare should be appropriated for tourism – that process is irreversible – but how such appropriations frame, simplify, or silence the play's themes. The ease with which tragedy is converted into romance, critique into commodity, demonstrates the malleability of cultural memory.

Conclusion: Literature as Living Space

In Verona, the exploration of spaces that promise the most authentic encounters with Romeo and Juliet unveils a paradox: the most genuine experience is often the most consciously crafted fiction. The allure of passing into Shakespeare's play rests precisely in this fabricated essence. These sites aim to offer visitors an immediate passage into the lovers' constructed world, granting the illusion of having lived their romance without engaging with the play itself. This reflects a wider cultural tendency to interact with classical literature through simplified, sensorially rich experiences that privilege emotional immediacy over sustained textual engagement (Bassi 147). The fact that many visitors have never read the play underscores how these spaces function less as gateways to literary engagement than as symbolic embodiments of the narrative, through which visitors are invited to read *Romeo and Juliet* in spatial and experiential terms that can be highly selective, if not actively misleading. A visit to Juliet's house or tomb becomes more than a journey to a fictional site: it is a layered encounter with a cultural artefact situated at the intersection of history, invention, and commerce. Through strategic urban planning, cultural storytelling, media amplification, and participatory performance, Verona has evolved from Shakespeare's setting into a tourist reality. In Verona, *Romeo and Juliet* is embedded not only in monuments but also in everyday consumption, turning the myth into a lived presence frequently confused with historical reality.

What emerges is a city that is simultaneously stage and text, a hybrid of fiction and commerce, narrative and spectacle, mourning and marketing. Verona demonstrates that storytelling does not end at the last sentence, a play does not conclude at the curtain call: it continues in architecture, rituals, selfies, and souvenirs. Taken together, these dynamics reveal how literature transcends the boundaries of the page to become a living, breathing entity – embodied, performed, and monetised in the spaces people inhabit. Elam highlights that even in *Romeo and Juliet*, the city appears as a bounded utopia, enclosed by its walls and imagined by Romeo as an entire world beyond which nothing of value exists (69). That textual vision now reverberates in the tourist city, where Juliet's house, tomb, and associated rituals form a similarly self-contained world of romance, detached from wider historical realities. It confirms the enduring significance of Shakespeare's contributions to cultural imagination and the environments through which that imagination is staged. As Romeo himself declares, "There is no world without Verona walls" (3.3.17). Within those walls, the world of *Romeo and Juliet* continually unfolds as an ever-evolving monument to literature and a mirror of cultural desire.

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Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Verflechtung von Literatur, kulturellem Gedächtnis und touristischer Praxis anhand der Art und Weise, in der William Shakespeares *Romeo and Juliet* die Stadt Verona kulturell und urban prägt. An ausgewählten Schauplätzen wird aufgezeigt, wie aus einem fiktionalen Stoff ein urbanes Narrativ entsteht, das durch Rituale, Medienrepräsentationen und kommerzielle Strategien stetig neu belebt wird. Filmische Adaptionen und soziale Medien verstärken diese Dynamik und ermöglichen eine partizipative Kultur, in der Touristen zu Mitautor*innen des Shakespeare-Mythos werden. Zugleich wirft die Kommerzialisierung ethische Fragen auf, da die tragischen Dimensionen des Dramas häufig zugunsten einer konsumierbaren Romantik ausgeblendet werden.

"ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE", STILL. ABIGAIL THORN'S *THE PRINCE* (2022)

by

MARIE MENZEL

Introduction

For some time now, the commonplace idea that Shakespeare's theatre was historically written for and attended by members of all social classes has been employed to legitimise as well as advertise popular and pop-cultural Shakespeares of all kinds. Following the Bard's arrival at the cinema as material for high-value literary adaptations, a series of films with varying types of relationship to the source texts and aimed primarily at teen audiences and the pop-cultural market appeared between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s: *Romeo+Juliet* (1996), *10 Things I Hate about You* (1999), *Hamlet* (2000), *She's the Man* (2006). These interpretations introduced contemporary pop-feminist themes and pop-aesthetics to the genre of Shakespeare adaptations and became cult classics for the generations growing up with them.

In the following decades, the rise of the consumer internet, Web 2.0, and social media facilitated the development of alternative public spheres and provided independent content creation with a wider reach. This includes, for instance, pop-culture related online spaces like transformative fandom communities as well as those of grassroots-style 'fourth-wave' feminist and progressive activism that harness the web's unprecedented opportunities for representation and for audible artistic and political expression by marginalised groups (Chamberlain 3,8; Loney-Howes 33–34). One of these spaces is the content creator scene, mainly active on YouTube, that is sometimes referred to as "LeftTube". Despite their radical left-wing politics, these channels and their content are in a strong but also ambivalent relationship with mainstream popular culture, fandom, and pop-feminism. Ideology critiques of cultural debates, of representational politics in media (including literary adaptations), and of the pop-cultural marketplace are dominant practices. At the same time, there is much affection for the products of pop culture as well as the fandom cultures it inspires. The popular Shakespeare under discussion in this paper – *The Prince* by Abigail Thorn, a 2022 rewriting of *Henry IV Part 1* – emerged out of these online activist spaces and can be seen as representational of their activist strategy. But instead of critiquing the representational and ideological politics of existing media products, in this case, Thorn presents her own and creates a topical queer feminist popular Shakespeare.

In this paper, I want to explore how *The Prince* relates to its source material in the context of its origins as a "LeftTube" product. How important are the early modern play, its plot, characters, and historical context as a source for the resulting product? What is the rewriting's attitude towards Shakespeare and Shakespeare theatre and their sometime reputation as 'elite'? What about this rewriting makes it a 'popular' Shakespeare?

The Prince: A "LeftTube" Shakespeare

The Prince is a theatrical play written by Abigail Thorn, creator of the YouTube channel *Philosophy Tube.* It premiered in the fall of 2022 with a three-week run at the fringe venue Southwark Playhouse, London, starring Thorn in the lead. The playtext is available from Bloomsbury (Methuen Drama, Modern Plays) and a professional theatrical recording of the live production can be streamed exclusively from the content-creator-focused platform Nebula.[1] Accessible via a comparatively low-priced subscription, Nebula mainly features content by already established YouTubers, such as Thorn herself, and other independent creators who value some autonomy from Google, for instance when it comes to issues of censorship or the promotion of their own brands. In the words of Nebula's founder, the platform more recently aims to "bridg[e] the gap between 'YouTuber' and traditional media and entertainment" (Wiskus "2023"). In fact, the original production of *The Prince* at Southwark Playhouse and its theatrical recording were financed and creatively produced by Nebula itself, one of the platform's first forays into active production. Judging by their enthusiasm over future "Nebula Originals", it was a financial success (Wiskus "Nebula"). On this platform, *The Prince* is presented to a different demographic than Shakespeare theatre commonly is. While there is some YouTube-style content in the form of video essays and discussions *about* theatre, literature, and Shakespeare, there are (at the time of writing) no other performances of plays or theatre available. Consequently, *The Prince* also has a format-based chance to attract viewers from other contexts and introduce them to Shakespeare and theatre.

Thorn's successful YouTube channel *Philosophy Tube* is often associated with the content creator scene sometimes referred to as "LeftTube" or "BreadTube", which emerged around 2015 in response to the growing online presence of alt-right activism, hoping to capture some of that viewership and redirecting it towards left and progressive takes on the same topics (Lee).[2] There is no single style of LeftTube video, but they are typically presented as long-format video essays, use witty, acerbic humour and make copious use of internet culture. Thorn's videos – like those of her colleague Natalie Wynn (YouTube channel *ContraPoints*) – often fall into the style of high theatricality and visual lavishness where indulgence in costumes, make-up, sets, cinematic technique, and the development of amusing recurring characters sometimes threaten to overpower the message, but at the same time create memorability. Thorn's stated aim with her channel is to "giv[e] away a philosophy degree for free" (*Philosophy Tube*), in other words, to enable access to knowledge that reading for a philosophy degree at university would provide to anyone who, in the face of ever-rising tuition costs, is unable to afford it. Some videos present core ideas from classic philosophy (e.g. social constructs, phenomenological intention, master/slave morality). Others focus on breaking down and commenting on contentious pop-cultural topics, debates, and

[1] More recently, the film can also be purchased on Blu-ray disc exclusively from Nebula's web shop (Wiskus "Let's").

[2] These terms have, in part, originated as labels applied from outside perspectives, are sometimes meant to convey irony or deprecation, and remain contested within the community. I am using them for convenience.

personalities such as Jordan Peterson and J. K. Rowling, or they explore social issues such as the housing crisis, police brutality, or islamophobia from a leftist and/or philosophical perspective. Despite being presented in a completely different medium and format than YouTube videos, *The Prince* falls into the same educational programme as Thorn's YouTube channel: It uses a (meta)fictional setting that features costumes, pop-cultural references and a good dose of dark humour to stage ideas central to, in this case, current (queer) feminism: the importance of self-determination and the destructive power of 'toxic masculinity'. This rewriting is also upfront about its political and cultural stance: The original production features a majority trans* cast, is diverse across the board, and indeed, as stipulated in the playtext edition's paratext, "Hotspur, Jen and Sam must always be played by trans women. The play should never be performed by an all-white cast" (Thorn 2). The choice of a Shakespearean history play such as *Henry IV Part 1* as an intertext and a point of reference for a transformative work in the LeftTube context may not seem immediately obvious since classic literature itself is not a major topic on this type of channel, and especially on *Philosophy Tube*. However, Thorn had previously engaged with Shakespeare for the purpose of a charity drive, and the close relationship between literature and philosophy is clear.

The blurb for the live recording describes *The Prince* as "[a] transformative play that has everything: sword fighting, lesbianism, Hamlet, and disappointed parents" (*The Prince*). More specifically, it is, in the main, a rewriting of *Henry IV Part 1*, centring those moments that drive constructions of gender in the early modern play. In particular, the focus is on the military masculinity prescribed for and performed by the characters Hotspur and Hal as a hegemonic form of masculinity within the world of the play. In Shakespeare, the two are initially juxtaposed in opposition as one successful (Hotspur) and one unsuccessful (Prince Hal) performance of military masculinity. Over the course of the play, Hotspur develops from a role model and foil for Hal into the major obstacle to overcome in the latter's rite of passage towards becoming an adult leader, a military hero, and a worthy pretender to the throne in the expected tradition. *The Prince* adopts the original set-up of these characters and the focus on military success and bravery as a central value within the world of the aristocratic male characters, but with an explicit question mark and very different outcomes, as we shall see.

Adaptational Features of *The Prince*: Metadrama, Fantasy, Plot, and Characters

One obvious influence on *The Prince* is the metadrama of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), especially in the way Shakespearean characters break the fourth wall by discovering their status as dramatic characters and by existing outside of the scenes of the original play. However, *The Prince* is not absurdist, and the characters' relationship with the world of the play and with spaces outside the Shakespearean text is different. While Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover the absurdity of their existence as characters in a closed inevitable world, Thorn's Hotspur and Hal encounter two modern characters, introduced via a fantasy device, who provide glimpses of other possibilities and models for alternative lives and facilitate emancipation. Sam and Jen are two modern day trans women who – for reasons left unexplained on the level of the plot – have for some time been trapped in a

Shakespearean multiverse that consists of all (or at least several) Shakespeare plays progressing in an endless loop with no obvious means of escape. Only a magical mapping device, stolen from *The Tempest*'s Prospero, enables them to strategically jump through portal points between the plays and potentially reach an exit, located at the end of *Henry IV Part 1*. In order to navigate their journey, they take on different small roles, such as messengers, and try to blend in by adhering to iambic pentameter when interacting with other characters. Jen, however, also befriends the characters and drives them to reflect on the roles they play, eventually changing the plot and the characters' fates. At the beginning of *The Prince*, the two have just joined the opening scene of *Henry IV Part 1* after Sam took Jen away from *Julius Caesar*, where she – at the time unconscious of her real modern identity – was performing the role of Portia, Brutus' wife. The other prominent glimpse of the properties of the multiverse shown to the audience is an extensive section from *Hamlet*, in which the characters from *Henry IV Part 1* perform those other roles for a couple of key scenes, the significance of which will be explored later in this paper. These metadramatic features of *The Prince* not only allow the characters to become aware of the constructed qualities of their social roles but also enable them to imagine and implement choice on their own terms.

Despite these fantastical shenanigans, *The Prince* retains as scaffolding from Shakespeare's play the overall plot progression of the Percy rebellion against King Henry, Prince Hal's decision to step into his role as future monarch, and his defeat of Hotspur on the battlefield. However, the play's arguably best-known character, John Falstaff, and the world of Hal's delinquent companions are entirely absent. Falstaff is not even mentioned, and the only remaining reference to this aspect of the play can be found in Henry's deprecation of Hal's "inordinate and low desires, / […] Such barren pleasures, rude society / As thou art matched withal and grafted to" (*Henry IV Part 1* 3.2.12–15; Thorn 43). With Prince Hal's reconceptualisation as a gay man, the primary meaning of the king's disapproval shifts towards gender, sexuality, and homophobia, while issues of class, succession, and political leadership recede into the background. This rewriting focuses on Hotspur as the central character, with Hal, Lady Percy, and the two patriarchs, King Henry and Northumberland, experiencing individual character development. The presence of the two modern trans women, Jen and Sam, in the world of the play causes the early modern characters to question the inevitability of the roles they have been performing – in some cases enthusiastically, in others more reluctantly – as well as the inevitability of the play's laws and logic. Especially Jen's tendency to engage the characters in critical discussion of the gender roles assigned to them, using her own modern perspective and language, causes a growing critical awareness among them. Specifically, Hotspur and Hal discover alternative gender identities and sexualities for themselves, while Lady Percy questions the limitations imposed on historical women's lives. Eventually, the patriarchs even abandon the conditionality of their love for their children on performances of masculinity. In this process, which can be read as a representation of the activist strategy of 'consciousness raising', language emerges as *The Prince's* dominant allegory and dramatic device, as I will show in the following.[3]

[3] Loney-Howes has a chapter on the resurgence of 'consciousness raising' in the context of current networked online anti-rape activism (33–60).

Linguistic Registers: Shakespeare's Original Verse, Pastiche, Modern Vernacular

The linguistic structure of *The Prince* reveals four distinguishable layers: sections of original Shakespearean text, often heavily edited; faux-Shakespearean pastiche-style verse that supplements the original lines and often introduces subtle or more significant semantic shifts; modern vernacular, introduced to the world of the play by the new characters; and unconvincing attempts at imitating Shakespearean verse by the modern characters.

The play opens with the first scene from Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 1:* King Henry's plans for a redemptive crusade to Jerusalem are thwarted by the news of violent rebellion in Wales and Scotland. The text of this scene is presented with only minor textual edits and cuts, similar to what is commonly done in most productions of Shakespeare. Entirely expositional, the scene begins with a long monologue by King Henry, followed by an exchange of strategic information with a messenger character. This is a rather inaccessible start, playing into the common notion that Shakespeare is dry, boring, and difficult to follow, a circumstance immediately acknowledged by Jen's first line: "I didn't understand a bloody word of that!" (Thorn 6) This quite true-to-the-text beginning not only underlines *The Prince's* status as a Shakespeare adaptation; the scene also introduces the one theme of Shakespeare's complex and multi-faceted play that will become the focus of *The Prince*: military masculinity as a central value within the world of the play. In this opening scene, King Henry famously complains that he wishes 'Hotspur' Harry Percy, valiant young hero of those recent battles, was his son instead of Prince Hal, the future King Henry V, who is absent from court and battlefield, preferring to spend his time in inappropriately public association with commoners, and is thus lacking maturity and masculinity in his father's opinion (1.1.77– 89). With its complex portrayals of compulsive generationally reiterated gender roles, the choice of *Henry IV Part 1* as the basis for this queer feminist rewriting is far from accidental. It provides a set of relevant themes that scaffold *The Prince's* concern with the topical concept of self-determination.[4]

Moving forward, *The Prince* repeatedly returns to sequences from *Henry IV Part 1*, including the conversation between Hotspur and Lady Percy (2.3.), the confrontation between Henry and Hal (3.2.), some conspiracy and strategy related dialogue (from 1.3, 4.1., 4.3, 5.1.), and the final dialogue between Hotspur and Hal on the battlefield (5.4.), albeit much more heavily edited than the opening scene. When the action on stage switches the setting to *Hamlet* for a couple of scenes, original verse (from 1.2. and 3.1.) dominates. It is clear that *The Prince* does not aim to simplify, avoid or translate the verse in order to make the original plot more accessible, despite acknowledging its

[4] Gender and masculinity in Shakespeare's English histories have been explored widely, for instance by Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin in their seminal 1997 analysis *Engendering a Nation*. Furthermore, *Henry IV Part 1* has recently been the object of feminist and queer treatments, both before and since Thorn's *The Prince*, which illustrates the play's resonance with these topics: It was part of Phyllida Lloyd's acclaimed all-female Shakespeare trilogy at Donmar Warehouse (premiere in 2014). The 2024 novel *Henry Henry* by Allen Bratton is a narrative adaptation that also reimagines Hal as a gay man, albeit in an entirely modern setting.

archaism. In fact, the early modern poetry plays an essential role in the meaning of this rewriting in more than one way.

In addition to significant sections taken directly from Shakespeare, much of the playtext of *The Prince* consists of faux-Shakespearean verse, nudging the early modern history's plot either subtly or more forcibly into new directions. These lines, kept overall in blank verse, constitute entire sections or alternate with Shakespearean text in a kind of seamless collage. Elegantly composed and drawing on turns of phrase and vocabulary found elsewhere in Shakespeare and early modern drama, many of these sections challenge any viewer or reader who is not completely and intimately familiar with the exact lines of Shakespeare's original play to clearly distinguish them, especially during the fast-paced experience of a performance. Even the opening scene of *The Prince*, which, as described above, consists predominantly of original Shakespearean text, turns the spotlight onto the issue of military masculinity already present in the original scene by introducing a first set of additional lines. The scene is supplemented with a visual on-stage enactment of Hotspur's valiant victory against the Scottish rebels, which in Shakespeare is communicated only descriptively in the form of a messenger report. Hal – who, as attentive readers of the Henriad will be aware, does not originally partake in this particular battle – and Hotspur exchange some lines of early modern pastiche (highlighted here in bold) on the battlefield that are intercut with Henry's critique of Hal:

KING HENRY IV. Yea, there thou mak'st me sad, and mak'st me sin
In envy that my Lord Northumberland
Should be the father to so blest a son,
A son who is the theme of Honor's tongue.
Hotspur beats Douglas into retreating offstage.
Enter an out of breath and out of his depth Prince Hal, who stops to pant.
KING HENRY IV. Whilst I, by looking on the praise of him,
See riot and dishonor stain the brow
Of my young Harry.
HOTSPUR. **On your feet, Prince Hal.**
These wars make men of us. Are you a man?
PRINCE HAL. **A spent one! O, I cannot match thy pace,**
My lungs will burst! Would I had never come
From cosy London to this damnèd place!
HOTSPUR. **Then get thee to thy tent, I say, go to!**
We have no use for women on the field!
KING HENRY IV. O, that it could be proved
That some night-tripping fairy had exchanged
Northumberland's child with mine when they were born
Then would I have his Harry, and he mine. (Thorn 4–5, my emphasis)

At other occasions, faux-Shakespearean verse in *The Prince* constitutes entire speeches and passages. The following entirely new monologue again serves to highlight the patriarchal appreciation of Hotspur's military masculinity, creating an even more direct foil for the deprecation of Hal's masculinity:

NORTHUMBERLAND.
Watching from my horse I saw thee fight,

All glinting in the sun like mailèd Mars
Thy voice like thunder shook the startled birds
From every tree! The rabbits hereabout
Did dive into their burrows as in fear
That they beheld a second Hercules!
A knight who rode beside me did exclaim
The courage of, 'That warrior who strides
Into a battle like the foaming sea
And parts it with defiant manly will!'
I, swelling in my chest, with laughter turned
And proudly cried to all, 'He is my son!' (Thorn 10)

These two examples showcase how the play treats the original text throughout: As a constitutive source for plot, themes, and form that are then further emphasised with pastiche elements. Both categories of verse are seamlessly integrated with each other and appear rather homogenous. There is no noticeable rupture between the pastiche elements and the lines taken from Shakespeare and no indication is made to differentiate them. However, a clear divide between registers is created via juxtaposition of all of the verse (Shakespearean and pastiche) against the modern characters' twenty-first-century vernacular. In the case of Jen this includes noticeable localisation (Suffolk), which further removes her speech from Shakespearean poetry, at least implicitly, by evoking class. The modern and historic characters mutually struggle to understand each other's conversation while modern characters make amusing but unsuccessful attempts at imitating iambic pentameter: "In fact I see him coming already, so, / We'll see thee later, alligato-or!" (35) The opposition of the two idiomatic sets – historic/pastiche vs. modern – further blurs the line between original Shakespeare and pastiche and allows the new passages to narrow *The Prince's* focus explicitly to themes of gender and sexuality. Blank verse as a linguistic pattern becomes the signifier for discursively determined patterns of thinking and *The Prince*'s central conceptual device for the illustration of its political agenda.

The Constitutive and Transformative Power of Language

The play centres on a transformative plot device: the restrictive and constitutive power of language. The historically fictional world of the Shakespearean multiverse and its characters is presented as being determined by seemingly unchallengeable rules, values, and narratives, held together and constantly reiterated by a language register governed by one principle: iambic pentameter. It is exposed as the limiting element on the early modern characters' ability to speak, think, and imagine outside of convention, functioning as an allegory for discursive constraint. The confrontation with the modern characters' everyday language and the progressive ideas about self-determination and ideological critique expressed in it enables the Shakespearean characters to become conscious of their ability to interrogate social structures and to envision alternatives for themselves. Although the term 'linguistic construction of reality' is not explicitly named in the play (as it would be in one of Thorn's YouTube videos), the following dialogue heavy-handedly illustrates and discusses the core idea that language is constitutive of lived reality:

JEN. Can I ask a question? Why do you talk like that?
Hotspur apparently doesn't understand, so Jen demonstrates:
(*'Shakespearean'*) Each syllable and word considerèd,
All very grand, all very much controlled,
Oh, 'thee' and 'thou' and so on and so forth.
HOTSPUR. I speak but as I think. My passions are
All regimented, so my thoughts, my words –
JEN. Do you speak that way because it's genuinely how you think, or do you think that way because it's how you were taught to speak?
HOTSPUR. I … (*Struggling to not speak in verse*.) I've always spoken this way: it is hard … It's difficult to not … do that.
They share a bit of a laugh.
In Framlingham, they do not talk like this
But let their thoughts spill out undisciplined?
JEN. Yeah, I mean … I guess. (Thorn 20)

The modern register functions as a carrier of highly contagious progressive ideas that quickly take hold of the characters. For instance, instead of continuing to plot their rebellion, Douglas and Worcester at one point suddenly start questioning the very foundations of their endeavour:

WORCESTER. I've just had a thought. Here we are, planning to overthrow Henry Bolingbroke and install Edmund Mortimer as King – but have either of you ever stopped to ask like … why we even have a hereditary monarchy in the first place?
DOUGLAS: […] I think I'd have more success pursuing a cooperative and peaceful foreign policy rather than one requiring constant military victory and which relies so heavily on projecting an image of toxic masculinity. (Thorn 62)

Similarly, in conversation with Jen, Lady Percy is empowered to express her emancipatory outrage over the devaluation of and limited options for women in the Middle Ages and they agree that the situation is "a bit of a fucking shitter" (54).

Not only is the modern register shown to differ from early modern verse, carrying different social constructions. It is also conceptualised as less "regimented" and as "undisciplined" (20), freer, placing fewer constraints on expression and the ideas carried by it. The reason for this is identified as the absence of the limiting element of iambic pentameter. The linguistic allegory is supplemented by the metatheatrical element: The early modern characters' recognition of their world as taking place on a stage, with an audience, with stage machinery, and theatrical practices like doubling (61) reveals their identity performances as 'fake', as less real than those of the modern trans women, who are free to live more aligned with their true identities. In an attempt to convince Hotspur to leave behind the battlefield, certain death, and the role as warrior, son, and husband and instead join them in their modern-day reality, Jen insistently states that "It's just a performance. […] It's just. A performance" (89–90). This sense of alienation and not only dissatisfaction but inauthenticity is directly representative of a queer trans experience in cis-heteronormative society and thus one of the major topics of fourth-wave feminism, while also introducing more broadly applicable theoretical concepts in linguistic constructionism and performativity. The clash between two sets of linguistic forms becomes the method by which the conflict between patriarchal expectations of

traditional masculinity and succession is negotiated against progressive concepts of self-determination and freedom of choice.

Despite all the glitches and interrogations, *The Prince's* Hotspur initially remains firmly attached to the familiar identity as a masculine warrior and, as prescribed by Shakespeare's play, is eventually killed in battle by Hal, who makes his father "proud of [him] at last" (91). But when the endless cycle of performances of *Henry IV Part 1* in the multiverse continues and the play restarts, it becomes obvious that Jen and Sam's presence has sustainably eroded iambic pentameter's hold on the characters' thinking. The patriarchs emerge from their discourse-determined performance, express unconditional love for their children, recognise Hotspur's gender identity, and eventually abandon the plot of *Henry IV Part 1* entirely (93–94). We can see reflected here the utopian desire of younger queer generations to not only escape the restrictive bonds of conservatism and the parent generation's values but to change all of society for the better by bringing about fundamental and lasting paradigmatic change.

Why Shakespeare, How Much Shakespeare and Does It Matter?

Henry IV Part 1 is a historical play set in a historical period, featuring historical discourses. For these reasons alone, it constitutes a fitting background against which to exercise a critique of patriarchal discourse concerned with conservatism, lineage, and the gender politics enmeshed therein. However, the early modern play itself is also already concerned explicitly with questions of performativity, especially regarding masculine leadership qualities and anxieties over their dependence on the maintenance of authority in public opinion (e.g. 3.2.29–91). *The Prince* heavily underscores this aspect with additional verse and gives it a modern emphasis but does not need to invent it. The title of Thorn's play is another way in which the importance of the substantive content of the early modern source is acknowledged. As a piece of Renaissance political philosophy with an influential relationship to Shakespeare's writing that details strategies for successful leadership and authority, Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (1532) – *The Prince* in English translation – is, essentially, a philosophy of performance, not least of the performance of masculinity.[5] Choosing Machiavelli's famous work as the title for a queer feminist Shakespeare rewriting spotlights the topic of gendered social performance as an essential element of Shakespeare's play and draws a direct line from early modern thought to Thorn's concerns.

The particular significance of Shakespeare for Thorn's work continues with excerpts from *Hamlet.* Especially the two included soliloquies, "O that this too too sallied flesh" (1.2.) and "To be, or not to be" (3.1.), represent the speaker's painful experience of questioning social reality and of becoming aware of its inauthentic qualities. The world-weariness, alienation, and suicidal ideation expressed in these lines resonate deeply with prominent narratives of queer – and especially trans* – experience in a way that is not supported by any passages in *Henry IV Part 1* alone. As Hotspur starts to question the

[5] The aspect of masculinity and its performance in Machiavelli is a well-established field, see e.g. Pitkin or Milligan. Roe has explored the traces of Machiavelli's thought and rhetoric in Shakespeare's writing.

necessity of embodying the role of heroic male warrior and essentially has a coming-out as a trans woman, a clear line is drawn to these prominent narratives.[6]

The original Shakespeare play and its early modern verse fulfil two seemingly opposing but ultimately conjunctive representational functions in *The Prince*: On the one hand, 'Shakespeare' represents powerful discourses and social structures that are in need of deconstruction and would ideally not apply to modern lives. This is expressed in Jen's dismissive judgment of Shakespeare as outdated and overvalued when she can't "understand a bloody word of that!" (6) and proclaims that she "hate[s] Shakespeare" (26), a sentiment probably shared by some members of the audience of this rewriting and one of the major sources of humour in *The Prince*. On the other hand, the specifics of the Shakespearean text chosen to appear in the play are carefully selected to support its political concerns. The themes of the early modern plays *Henry IV Part 1* and *Hamlet* provide a useful foundation for the exploration of current topics in ethical philosophy and queer feminism, and not just as an archaic foil against which to exercise critique. The complexity of Shakespeare's rendition of social structures, individual experience, and psychological turmoil already does much of the work for the feminist rewriting. On top of that, the Shakespearean pastiche elements channel these themes into a focus on concrete contemporary concerns of queer and trans* feminism, thus illuminating Shakespeare's timeliness and continuing relevance.

The Prince, despite obvious differences in format, follows an approach analogous to LeftTube content: It uses a creative, visual, entertaining, narrativised, and intertextually informed presentation to illustrate and make accessible core philosophical concepts and political issues. It is a popular Shakespeare in the sense that it is the product of an alternative and independent scene in which individual creators enjoy unusual freedoms, while also reaching audiences of notable size, diversity, and cultural significance. At the latest with the rise of popular Shakespeares, the idea that Shakespeare has something to offer to everyone has become commonplace, and *The Prince* embraces this fully. The play arguably works for any level of Shakespeare knowledge: It is just as enjoyable to trace and analyse the intricacies and details of this rewriting through the lens of scholarship as it is to just enjoy the many excellent puns and raunchy jokes, the comic timing of the performers, and the likeable characters. In any case, the audience leaves the theatre with some food for thought regarding social pressures to conform and the potential of making oneself free of them. Of course, after the characters have ended their adventure and escaped to the safe haven of modern Brighton, Jen must leave us with Shakespeare's most famous line on the topic of performance: "All the world's a stage" (*As You Like It* 2.7.140; Thorn 100). And so it is, still.

[6] With its themes and storyline, *The Prince* also connects to prominent content from the LGBTQAI+ online community, specifically the genre of the 'coming-out video', of which Thorn has posted her own on *Philosophy Tube*. O'Gara provides an analysis of the coming-out video as performance, including a discussion of Thorn's. Certain fan fiction tropes such as 'self-insertion' may also be an influence from online fandom spaces on Thorn's treatment of Shakespeare in *The Prince*.

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Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag analysiert Abigail Thorns Theaterstück *The Prince* (2022), eine Überschreibung von Shakespeares *Henry IV Part 1*, als populäre Shakespeare-Verarbeitung aus dem onlineaktivistischen „LeftTube“-Kontext. Durch eine text- und aufführungsnahe Analyse wird gezeigt, wie Thorn durch das Hinzufügen von verschiedenen Elementen, aber auch durch Wertschätzung der frühneuzeitlichen Vorlage, einen Populärshakespeare schafft, der sich im Kern um eine Kritik an traditionellen männlichen Herrschaftsritualen und vor allem an der Weitergabe von gegenderten Erwartungen an folgende Generationen dreht. So werden in dem Stück zentrale Ideen hinter theoretischen Konzepten, wie dem der sprachlichen Konstruktion von Realität und der Performanz von gesellschaftlich zugewiesenen Rollen, als auch Themen aus dem Umfeld des queerfeministischen Aktivismus, wie die Bedeutung der Freiheit zur Selbstbestimmung, illustriert und anhand einer neuen Plotentwicklung erlebbar gemacht. Dabei wird Shakespeares Potential für solche aktuellen Interpretationen sichtbar.

"YOU WERE ROMEO, I WAS A SCARLET LETTER": TAYLOR SWIFT, SHAKESPEARE, AND THE CONTROL OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

by

LORRAINE RUMSON

"I'm Only Cryptic and Machiavellian 'Cause I Care": Taylor Swift as a Poet

At the height of the media cycle for Taylor Swift's Eras Tour, her record-breaking album *The Tortured Poets Department*, and her general pop cultural dominance, a trend emerged of articles that compared Taylor Swift to Shakespeare. "Taylor Swift is a literary giant," wrote Jonathan Swift in 2023. "Should Taylor Swift be taught alongside Shakespeare? A professor of literature says yes," read a headline in *The Conversation* in 2024. As the article in *The Conversation* notes, Swift herself is a Shakespeare enthusiast, and Semler quotes an interview in which she claimed she "love[s] Shakespeare as much as the next girl" (Semler). This rhetorical move of comparing Swift to Shakespeare is generally positioned as being about Taylor Swift's songwriting skill and her talent as a poet. Semler describes teaching her album *Midnights* in relation to Shakespeare's sonnets, due to their overlapping methods – self-reflective writing and use of thematic clusters (Semler). Swift's writing style has even made it possible for a Buzzfeed community member to make a Buzzfeed quiz asking "Who said it – Taylor Swift or Shakespeare?" When instructors pose such comparisons or headlines ask such questions, they challenge their audiences' expectations about both Taylor Swift and Shakespeare. What if she really were a Shakespeare-level poet? Could it be that the blonde girly pop singer's words are indistinguishable from the Bard's, when context is removed? Conversely, is it possible that Shakespeare could be as delightfully emotional and personal as Taylor Swift?

When articles compare Taylor Swift with Shakespeare, they are not just suggesting their stylistic similarity. They are also commenting on their shared artistic relevance or validity. No Buzzfeed quiz asks the question "Who said it – Shakespeare or Marlowe?" or "Who said it – Taylor Swift or Charli XCX?" The concept behind a Shakespeare/Swift comparison is generally to express Swift's poetic skill (suggesting she is at least close to being a Shakespeare-level poet), but they still reaffirm the fundamental divide between the two artists. The comparison is only provocative because one would not expect Swift and Shakespeare to be on the same level. After all, Taylor Swift is just a pop star. By asking about Swift and Shakespeare, these comparisons draw attention to the split between high and low art, or canonical and popular art, and they assert Swift's transgression of that boundary, her capacity to create high poetry in a low art form. These headlines also assert the authors' own understanding, even ownership, of Shakespeare: they express a confidence with his work so complete that they are ready to make a claim about his relationship to Swift.

An element of the comparison between Swift and Shakespeare, often implicit but only spelt out by Semler when he writes about *Midnights,* is the thematic overlap between Swift's work and Shakespeare's, and her use of literary references to enhance those themes. Swift frequently alludes to literary figures, texts, and touchstones in her lyrics, such as in her reference to Wordsworth, the Lake Poets, and the Windermere peaks in the song "The Lakes," or when she describes careless and dissociative extravagance as "feeling so Gatsby" in "This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things". In her 2025 album *The Life of a Showgirl*, she returns to an extended allusion to Shakespeare in the lead single "The Fate of Ophelia". This song celebrates the speaker being "saved […] from the fate of Ophelia" by a lover who "dug [her] out of her grave," alluding to the postmortem scene of Hamlet and Laertes jumping into Ophelia's grave, but suggesting that, in this case, her lover arrived sufficiently early to prevent the tragedy of having her "sanity stolen." Swift's new approach to Shakespeare in "The Fate of Ophelia" will be discussed at the end of this article, yet even including "The Fate of Ophelia", none of Swift's literary references to date is quite so explicit and protracted as her use of *Romeo and Juliet* in her early song (and music video) "Love Story." The relationship between *Romeo and Juliet* and "Love Story" has been the illustrative example of many people who comment on Swift's lowbrow status, her failure to understand the play's tragic ending. Yet, far from being the straightforward romance her critics accuse her of writing, "Love Story" explicates a sinister relationship between family and sexuality.

"Stay Away from Juliet": The Patriarchal Control of Sexuality

"Love Story" was released in 2008 on the album *Fearless*. Swift, in preparing to re-release the album in 2021, described *Fearless* as being "the diary of the adventures and explorations of a teenage girl who was learning tiny lessons with every new crack in the facade of the fairytale ending she'd been shown in the movies" (Swift 2021). In that description, Swift identifies a core theme of the album: a growing awareness of the problems with seeming happy endings. She indicates that the album is about questioning the concept of the "fairytale ending," perhaps even becoming disillusioned about it. The song "Love Story" has often, within the Swift fandom, been interpreted as her manifesto of youthful romanticism, starry-eyed and innocent, for "love-struck teens" (Price 2008). Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that it is in this very song that the cracks in the facade of the fairytale are most notable.

Swift sets the scene lyrically in the first verse "on a balcony in summer air," and entreats the listeners to "See the lights, see the party, the ball gowns" (Swift 2008). This situates her rewriting of *Romeo and Juliet* strictly in the early part of the play, in the period in between when Romeo and Juliet encounter each other at the ball (1.5) and the culturally iconic, though famously anachronistic 'balcony scene'[1] (2.2). The reference to *Romeo and Juliet*, only implied by the balcony and ball gowns, is made explicit in the

[1] The play text of *Romeo and Juliet* contains no reference to a balcony; Lois Leveen has suggested the first use of a balcony for 2.2 was not until the eighteenth century, but it has by now become a piece of visually recognisable *Romeo and Juliet* iconography.

pre-chorus of the song, when she sings, "You were Romeo, you were throwing pebbles, and my daddy said 'stay away from Juliet'" (Swift 2008). Here, however, at the introduction of the characters' names, Swift makes clear what her interpretation of the conflict of *Romeo and Juliet* is. The source of the conflict is the daddy saying "stay away."

It is hardly revolutionary to say that *Romeo and Juliet* is largely about the parents' conflicts, perhaps even more than it is about the lovers. Already the prologue of the play is more preoccupied with the family strife than it is with the star-crossed lovers who, in the end, take their lives. Nor is it an especially novel claim that the primary conflict of *Romeo and Juliet* is the families' rejection of the possibility of love between their families. By 1948, Robert Metcalf Smith already implied that this interpretation was outdated in the *Shakespeare Association Bulletin* (61). Coppélia Khan, in her analysis of the theme of adolescence in the play, identifies that "the play is particularly concerned with the social milieu in which these adolescent lovers grow up – a patriarchal milieu…" (171). "Patriarchal," in this case, is not used only in its colloquial sense of male-supremacist, but specifically and crucially used to mean "organised around the father". Khan points out the significance of the patriarch in the context of Romeo and Juliet's tragedy. It is indeed a story in which Juliet's daddy says, most emphatically, to stay away. However, despite describing her father's perspective as the reason why the lovers in "Love Story" cannot be together, Swift does not make any allusion to a family conflict beyond the individual dislike that Juliet's father has towards Romeo. There is no family feud: Romeo's family is not present. As a country singer, she could have easily swapped out the Montague/Capulet feud for discourses of class, or even race, to establish that her Romeo is being kept from Juliet for reasons of some sort of prejudice. Yet this is not how the song is organised. Juliet's father's order, "stay away from Juliet," is unprompted by anything specific about Romeo; it is, rather, entirely about Juliet herself. In this way, Swift rewrites the family's rejection of her lover from concepts of feud or prejudice, and towards the concept of paternal control over a daughter's sexuality.

The Capulet family does indeed control Juliet's sexuality, although when speaking to Paris early in the play, Juliet's father asserts that he does value his daughter's wishes as part of her marriage.

> CAPULET. My will to her consent is but a part;
> And she agreed, within her scope of choice
> Lies my consent and fair according voice. (1.2.287–289)

Furthermore, at this early stage of the play, Capulet does not even object to Romeo's general existence. He admonishes Tybalt,

> CAPULET. Content thee, gentle coz, let him alone;
> He bears him like a portly gentleman;
> And, to say truth, Verona brags of him
> To be a virtuous and well-govern'd youth (1.5.688–691)

At the point of the ball in which Swift's later "Love Story" is set, it is Romeo and Juliet's own self-perceptions, and not the intervention of parents, that lead them to recognise each other as dangerous. Only much later in the play (3.4), and occasioned in part by the "heightened sense of mortality" brought on by Tybalt's death (Khan 180) does

Capulet begin to assert his domination over his daughter's will. Furthermore, when he does, it is about whom she *should* marry – that is, insisting she marry Paris – and not whom she should *not*. There is, in *Romeo and Juliet*, not even a whisper of a thought in Capulet's mind that his daughter might have become enamoured of a Montague. This is quite the contrary in "Love Story," in which the father objects directly to Romeo's overture towards Juliet.

In the second rendition of "Love Story"'s pre-chorus, the lyrics change to "You were Romeo, I was a scarlet letter" (Swift 2008), with Swift using a different literary icon to make even clearer the threat of sexual corruption (and, moreover, the threat of social death as a result of sexual corruption) that is being projected onto Juliet. This danger is expressed even more pointedly when, in the chorus, she begs, "Romeo, save me" (Swift 2008). The experience of being kept from her romantic pursuits is not only frustrating but also dangerous, one from which she needs to be saved by the object of her romantic desire. As the narrative of the song progresses, Juliet becomes increasingly distraught and confused by the pressures of emotional control around her, and demands clarity from her Romeo, upon which he "knelt to the ground and pulled out a ring, and said 'marry me, Juliet'" (Swift 2008). Jonathan Bate, in his article "Why Taylor Swift is a literary giant", claimed that "Love Story" rewrote *Romeo and Juliet* to be "more palatable". Indeed, an engagement is a traditional signifier of a happy ending, and certainly preferable to death, but marriage neither protects Romeo and Juliet in Shakespeare's play, nor does it foreshadow a happy ending for Swift's Juliet. Tonally, Romeo's proposal is accompanied by a triumphant swell in the music, yet lyrically, the seemingly happy ending of the song is shot through with a disquieting undertone.

Immediately after saying "Marry me, Juliet," Romeo continues, "I talked to your dad, go pick out a white dress" (Swift 2008). The implication is that the conflict between Juliet's father and Romeo was simply sorted out with a conversation, and that the father's disdain of Romeo came only from a first impression that could be corrected. This is positive indeed, compared to a feud that ends in murder and suicide, where marriage, in fact, is the prelude to death. Yet the fundamental problem remains that the father's opinion of Romeo in "Love Story" is still the operative factor in the happiness of their prospective relationship. Thus, the father's control over sexuality, which so troubled Juliet in the pre-chorus, is still present. She has not been freed. Granted, Romeo has turned on his charm to convince her father that he is a worthwhile partner, but the discourse of paternal control of young women's sexuality remains unchallenged. In fact, Romeo has been talking with Juliet's father entirely without her input, and even without her knowledge. To celebrate their conclusion that she is to be married, she is given the minor freedom of "pick[ing] out" her own "white dress": while she is allowed to choose the aesthetic trappings of her marriage, she is still required to choose a dress in a color that symbolises virginity, and to participate in the ritual of marriage, in order to be with her beloved. At this time in the song, Juliet has not expressed a desire to marry Romeo, and, indeed, highlights that they are "both young," and thus possibly not sufficiently psychologically or practically prepared for marriage; yet the triumphant swell of the music assures the listener that this is an event to be celebrated. The control of Juliet's sexuality is passed, legally, from her father, on to Romeo.

Paul Kottman identifies the control of Juliet's sexuality as vital to Capulet's status in *Romeo and Juliet*. When "Capulet seeks fulfillment… in the relative mastery he might demonstrate by playing magnanimous host and deciding his daughter's worldly fate", he consolidates both ego and social power through his control of his daughter (Kottman 10). This is a highly literal expression of patriarchal power, which, in "Love Story," remains unchallenged and thus cannot lead to a happy ending. Juliet remains sexually controlled and legally bound by a man. While seemingly rescuing the characters from death, Swift's Juliet remains within the same patriarchal system that led to her death in the Shakespeare play. While "Love Story" does not explicitly present this as a cause for alarm, this ongoing patriarchal control demonstrates that the song is not just a key to Swift's view of youthful romantic idealism, but also to her later, cynical perspective about love. She uses Shakespeare not only as a point of reference for romance, but also as a point of reference for the way a father can control his daughter, drawing attention not only to the relationship between Juliet and Romeo, but also between Juliet and her father. Swift would become increasingly emphatic about the horrors of patriarchal sexual control in her later songwriting career and most seriously represent it in her 2024 album *The Tortured Poets Department*. In the album, and specifically the song "But Daddy I Love Him," which will be the subject of the next section, Swift returns to the relationship between patriarchal control and love.

"You'd Kill Yourself if I Ever Leave": Love as Social Rebellion

The Tortured Poets Department, released over fifteen years after the youthful adventures of *Fearless*, is full of brutally self-deprecating and confessional songs about codependent relationships. Whereas in *Fearless*, Swift explores early inklings of disillusionment with the "fairytale ending," her cynicism about romance is made highly explicit in *The Tortured Poets Department*. The song "But Daddy, I Love Him," returns to the themes of paternal sexual control from "Love Story," and addresses it with an even more acerbic tone and a more explicitly ambivalent ending. In "But Daddy I Love Him," the speaker involves herself with a man who is at odds with the values of her community, not only because she authentically loves him, but because she seeks the freedom and power represented by a man who upsets those values. She uses her lover to individuate from her community, but, in so doing, conveys that her individuation can only be afforded by her relationship to him. Swift characterises her partner specifically through the ways he creates separation from her father: "chaos," "revelry," a "remedy" to the sickness of her previous experiences (Swift 2024).

Like the father in "Love Story," the patriarchal figures in "But Daddy I Love Him" "slammed the door" on the speaker's "whole world" (Swift 2024), cutting her off from her desires. In "But Daddy I Love Him," the matter of the speaker's sexuality expands from just the "daddy" to the whole city, a matter of public debate among "elders" who are attempting to assert their authority, even their desire to actively sabotage the speaker's romantic life. The speaker identifies herself as a "dutiful daughter," but understands also that her position as a daughter is qualified by the control others will have over her: "these people only raise you to cage you" (Swift 2024). Khan asserts that the lack of authority in public is what leads the Montagues and (moreover) the Capulets

to assert domination over their children in the home (172), and, following this connection, Swift moves the conflict between private and public by making the matter of her romance a matter of public debate, in which "the elders… convened down at the city hall [to say] 'Stay away from her'" (Swift 2024). It is now not only the father saying "stay away from Juliet," but a whole collection of "elders." These elders are not only the speaker's family, and not only men (she is criticised also by "Sarahs and Hannahs in their Sunday best"), but their roles as political authorities ("at the city hall") indicate that they are representatives of a patriarchal order. In a further allusion to the Shakespearean conventions of her experience, Swift describes the way in which people try to control her as "sanctimoniously performing soliloquies I'll never see" (Swift 2024). This simultaneously dismisses their efforts as being invisible to her and alludes to stage conventions by which characters speak of conflicts for the benefit of an audience, rather than for the benefit of the other characters. It is not the speaker who is being dramatic, she implies, but *them*.

The speaker's desires are embodied in the figure of her love interest, but, thematically, they are her emotional and sexual autonomy. Alluding to the importance of names in *Romeo and Juliet* and Juliet's famous "what's in a name?" line (2.2), she asserts dominion over her name: "I'll tell you something 'bout my good name, it's mine alone to disgrace" (Swift 2024). Yet despite the triumphant tone of the song, and like in "Love Story," the ultimate impact of these assertions of agency is not genuine independence. In "But Daddy I Love Him," the speaker indicates that she is brought closer to her lover by the fact that she is faced with constant disapproval and attempts to control her ("you should see your faces," she sneers. "I'd rather burn my whole life down than listen to one more second of all this bitching and moaning"). Although she sings with enthusiasm of "her wild boy," she repeatedly acknowledges also that he is an unstable presence in her life – "he was chaos, he was revelry"; "he's crazy but he's the one I want." Like in "Love Story," the speaker of "But Daddy I Love Him" ultimately wins the approval of her parents, for "we came back when the heat died down, went to my parents, and they came around" (Swift 2024). "Scandal… brings lovers closer," she adds, pointing again to the way in which romantic bonds are reinforced by social pressures that attempt to end them. As the speaker of "Love Story" felt she needed Romeo to "save her," and as Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet were driven to the violence of their ends by the violence of their delights, the speaker of "But Daddy I Love Him" might not, Swift implies, be so driven to attach to her lover if not for the forces trying to keep them apart.

Considering that *The Tortured Poets Department* is filled with songs about codependent relationships, ranging from depressed and alienated ("I Can Fix Him (No Really I Can)," "The Prophecy") to murderous or suicidal ("The Tortured Poets Department," "Down Bad"), the impression is not that this desire to pursue a chaotic, "crazy" man is a healthy decision for the speaker to make, but rather that the speaker has pushed herself into a dangerous relationship in order to free herself from sexual control. The continuity between "Love Story" and "But Daddy I Love Him" centres Swift's use of *Romeo and Juliet* around the theme of patriarchal sexual control – that is, a father's control over his daughter's sexuality – and the way in which romantic desire can be a site of rebellion. They both demonstrate that rebellion does not necessarily lead to freedom. The songs are preoccupied with the impact of outside opinions on these

relationships, the ways in which being forbidden a relationship can drive one deeper into it, the dynamic which leads to death in *Romeo and Juliet,* although only to unhealthy romance in the Swift songs. The conclusion that Swift proposes, both in 2008 and 2024, is that sexual control will inevitably lead to passionate relationships (for both songs also conclude with the consummation of a romantic relationship by an implied upcoming wedding), but that the conditions of these relationships are not stable, nor are they entered into fully voluntarily.

"I Didn't Know Who I Was Supposed to Be at Fifteen": The Youth of *Romeo and Juliet*

Romeo and Juliet is a good point of allusion for Taylor Swift for two reasons. Firstly, as implied by the headlines of the thinkpiece industry, she can establish her poetic credentials by creating connection between herself and Shakespeare. But secondly and more importantly, *Romeo and Juliet* specifically shares Swift's recurring concerns of the relationship between love and social expectation. Swift is also engaged in an ongoing process of recontextualising her Shakespeare references and orienting them towards her interests, and despite the fact that she is periodically criticised for only writing about her boyfriends, Swift's interests are generally not so much the passion of a given relationship, but of the ways in which external controls on people's behaviour, emotions, and sexuality affect those relationships. She shares her central theme, therefore, with what Kottman describes as "the most common interpretation" of *Romeo and Juliet:* "a conflict between the lovers' individual desires and the reigning demands of family, civic, and social norms" (1). The tension between desire (generally romantic desire) and social norms, which her speakers feel acutely, is a concern throughout Swift's body of work: in the song "Lover", the speaker insists "*we* make the rules," and in "Delicate", the speaker's awareness that her "reputation's never been worse" drives her to anxiously and repeatedly question her partner's perception of her. In those songs, the figures who put pressure on the speakers are shadowy and ambiguous, perhaps friends or online commentators. In "Love Story" and "But Daddy I Love Him," as in *Romeo and Juliet*, the locus of control is specifically patriarchal.

Yet there is a further reason why *Romeo and Juliet*, rather than any other Shakespeare play that features a forbidden love, appears so frequently and to such great effect in Swift's writing. Her origins as a teenage songwriter, and her focus in both "Love Story" and "But Daddy I Love Him" on adolescent experiences, brings her into direct conversation with the theme of adolescence, and the control of adolescents. While Swift herself was no longer a teenager at the time of *The Tortured Poets Department*'s release, she returns consistently to adolescence both in conversation with the teenage portion of her fanbase, and also because she recognises adolescence as a particularly tense, even potentially traumatic period of negotiating emotions and expectation, and thus worthy of continued evaluation even long after she has left it behind. As Rachel Prusko has pointed out, in *Romeo and Juliet*, "Shakespeare raises the unsettling possibility of a private adolescent self" (113), a type of identity that was unusual at the time for the stage, but, in the twenty-first century, is the site of a vast store of media and much of Swift's songwriting. As a depiction of adolescent interiority, *Romeo and Juliet* acts as

an ur-text for Swift, not only in her vision of romance, but also in her vision of agency. Kottman has identified "a struggle for individual freedom" as the central conflict of *Romeo and Juliet* (6), and it is no coincidence that this struggle for freedom occurs between adolescents: a struggle to individuate from parents, authority figures, and social bonds. This includes, also, a need for the lovers to individuate from each other: the failure to do so is a central theme in *The Tortured Poets Department*'s representation of relationships in general (the song "The Black Dog," for example, chronicles the speaker compulsively watching her ex-partner's location on her phone). In "But Daddy I Love Him" the speaker specifically chooses to individuate from her community by enmeshing with her romantic partner: she demands he put them in dangerous circumstances ("telling him to floor it through the fences" [Swift 2024]) and uses the possibility of being impregnated by him exclusively for its power to shock ("I'm having his baby! No I'm not, but you should see your faces" (Swift 2024)). These are modes of self-expression that indicate less commitment to her partner and more desire to break free of patriarchal control. Unfortunately for the speaker of "But Daddy I Love Him," she is no more successful at this than her predecessor in "Love Story." While Shakespeare's Juliet ultimately expresses her autonomy through death, freeing herself of the worldly powers of her family, Swift's Juliet analogues both find a way to contain their romantic desire within the borders of what their respective fathers find acceptable.

It is a typical mark of adolescence that one must assert one's will against one's parents. The forms that this assertion of will can take are gendered. Khan, in "Coming of Age in Verona," argues that "girls in Verona are denied the adolescence that boys are allowed, in that girls have 'no sanctioned period of experiment with adult identities or activities'" (180; see also Prusko 118). Unlike Romeo or Tybalt, who, Khan argues, are able to express their experimentation with adult identities through romantic fantasy and violence, respectively, Juliet must shift immediately from being a girl, whose age and childishness are made much of by her parents, to being a married woman, with a married woman's duty to her husband. In "But Daddy I Love Him," Swift's speaker, too, is able to assert her will as something other than a "dutiful daughter" only by affiliating herself with a man, moving from daughter to wife. Khan identifies this too-rapid movement from childhood to adulthood as key to the tragedy: the feud between their families "makes Romeo and Juliet tragic figures because it denies their natural needs and desires as youth" (172). This connection of Romeo and Juliet's tragedy with their age finds resonance with Swift's interest in the unique pain of adolescence.

"Ophelia Lived in Fantasy": Avoiding Ophelia's Tragedy

In 2025, Taylor Swift released her to date most recent album, *The Life of a Showgirl*, with a lead single and flagship music video entitled "The Fate of Ophelia". The cover of *The Life of a Showgirl* depicts Swift partially submerged in water in a colour palette that evokes John Everett Millais's iconic 1851 *Ophelia*, and in the opening of the music video, she splays on the grass in a direct allusion to Friedrich Heyser's somewhat less famous 1900 painting, also called *Ophelia*. Swift demonstrates, with these allusions, an interest not only in Ophelia's role in *Hamlet*, but also an interest in the ongoing history of interpretations of her role.

As in 2008 with "Love Story," she was promptly met with a deluge of scornful comments suggesting that she doesn't understand Shakespeare, and, as with "Love Story", she does celebrate an ending in which the narrator is in a romantic relationship with a man, but there, the similarities end. In "Love Story," Swift collapses the ending of her story with the ending of Shakespeare's: while Swift's Juliet survives and Shakespeare's does not, the ending of "Love Story" is as tragic and as directly about the negative impact of patriarchal and family control as *Romeo and Juliet* is. In "The Fate of Ophelia", Swift explicitly differentiates the stories: the speaker is "*saved from* the fate of Ophelia" (2025; emphasis added). Ophelia's death, her experience of love as a "cold bed full of scorpions" that "stole her sanity," and her eventual confinement to a "grave", are all fates that Swift sees herself as having escaped – through the power of a man.

Swift notes the effect of a father figure on Ophelia when she sings, "The eldest daughter of a nobleman, Ophelia lived in fantasy" (2025): while it is seemingly true (assuming Ophelia and Laertes have no other siblings) that Ophelia is Polonius's eldest daughter, she is rarely described in this way. Swift, therefore, situates Ophelia in a tense position between authority ("eldest") and submission ("daughter"), which, Swift interprets, Ophelia finds intolerable, causing her to dissociate into a state of "fantasy". However, unlike the previous negotiations of patriarchal authority that Swift's Juliet attempts, Ophelia is unable to reconcile her individuality with her position under her father. Her attempt to escape into the "bed" of "love" proves unsuccessful for her. Not for the speaker however, who proudly declares that she has been saved from "linger[ing] in purgatory" by her lover "com[ing] for [her]" (Swift 2025). While "The Fate of Ophelia" engages with both the source and interpretive history of Ophelia, it, unlike Swift's interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* in "Love Story" and "But Daddy I Love Him," ultimately separates itself from Shakespeare. Ophelia's tragedy is one that Swift's speaker circumvents; Juliet's tragedy is one that her speaker find themselves still trapped inside.

Conclusion: "It's a Love Story, Baby"

It would be a misinterpretation to assume that Swift's use of Shakespeare's teenaged tragedy in "Love Story" is primarily drawing on the overwhelmingly intense romance of *Romeo and Juliet* to allude to the scale of emotion that she sings about, or that it is an attempt to borrow Shakespeare's cultural clout. While scale of emotion and poetic reputation are important features of her songs about love and her public image, respectively, they are not as important as the thematic resonance between *Romeo and Juliet* and specific features of the romance in "Love Story." It would be even more of a misinterpretation to assume that Swift has tacked a happy ending onto the story in order to make it more pleasant. The most significant resonance is not, as the title suggests, the love between Juliet and Romeo, but, rather, the way in which Juliet's sexuality is controlled by her father. To an even greater extent than Shakespeare's Juliet herself, Swift's Juliet experiences the direct rejection of her lover by her father, and, as "a scarlet letter," also experiences herself as marked and sexually shamed. It is the patriarchal control of sexuality, not the strength of love, that Swift finds in *Romeo and Juliet* and that she makes the cornerstone of her song.

This theme is made more explicit in "But Daddy I Love Him," in which the speaker conceives of her lover primarily through the lens of the offensive effect he has on the people around her. Not only does she love someone who is rejected by her father (and associated figures), but the very fact that he is rejected by her father is a crucial part of the reason she pursues him. His nature as "chaos", "revelry", is appealing to the speaker crucially because this means that, through him, she is able to commit a social rebellion – yet, like the speaker of "Love Story," she finds herself trapped, reaffirming the importance of patriarchal sexual control, conceding to it rather than escaping from it. A final notable feature of Swift's use of *Romeo and Juliet* is that it has a tragic ending. Although she does not end either of these songs in death, her albums are filled with unfortunate events. She primes her listeners for tragedy. Despite the seemingly happy endings of "Love Story" and "But Daddy I Love Him," Swift prepares her listeners to understand that, as variations on *Romeo and Juliet*, even these upbeat, happy songs contain elements of tragedy.

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Zusammenfassung

Ein gängiger Trend in der Thinkpiece-Branche der letzten Jahre war es, Taylor Swift mit Shakespeare zu vergleichen. Im Allgemeinen dienen diese Vergleiche als nachdrückliche Rechtfertigung für Swifts künstlerische Bedeutung, und literarische Intertextualität verbürgt ihr dichterischen Können. Ihre Songs haben jedoch auch eine spezifische thematische Resonanz mit Shakespeares Werk, die dieser Aufsatz näher untersuchen möchte. Anhand der Songs "Love Story" aus dem Album *Fearless* und "But Daddy I Love Him" aus dem Album *The Tortured Poets Department* zeige ich, wie Swift sich intertextuell mit *Romeo und Julia* auseinandersetzt, nicht nur, um das Ausmaß der Romantik in den Songs auszudrücken, sondern darüber hinaus, um auf die patriarchalische Kontrolle über die Sexualität jugendlicher Frauen und die Schwierigkeit der Versuche von Mädchen, dieser zu entkommen, hinzuweisen.

CALL FOR STATEMENTS – SHAKESPEARE SEMINAR 2026

"Truth is truth to the end of reck'ning"?: Shakespeare and Truth

At the end of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* – a play full of cunning disguises, performed righteousness, and hidden corruption – Isabella speaks her truth. While she was silenced before by Angelo's "Who will believe thee, Isabel?" (1.4.168), she now appeals to the Duke and the public to listen to her "true complaint" and give her "justice! Justice Justice! Justice!" (5.1.26–27) Panicking, the accused attempts to discredit Isabella: "she will speak most bitterly and strange" (5.1.41), Angelo proclaims, but in a move that anticipates Gisèle Pelicot's "shame must change sides", Isabella flips the narrative: She picks up on Angelo's word "strange", only to emphasise that the man's *behaviour*, and not her *speaking*, is what is strange: "Most strange: but yet most truly will I speak." (5.1.42) After listing Angelo's wrongdoings, Isabella reiterates how "this is all as true as it is strange", but then adds: "Nay, it is ten times true, for truth is truth / To th'e end of reck'nin". (5.1.50–52)

While this scene from Measure for Measure, with its almost eerily contemporary relevance, highlights the irreversible nature of certain facts, Shakespeare's plays also, again and again, dramatise the relativity and contingency of the concept of "truth". Truth is subject to individual perception ("'Seems,' madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.'" [*Hamlet* 1.2.79]), performance ("I am not what I am" [*Othello* 1.1.71]) and sometimes even denial and connivance ("When my love swears that she is made of truth, / I do believe her, though I know she lies" [Sonnet 138.1–2]). In light of the many resonances between Shakespeare's works and contemporary discourses on truth in our post-truth moment, this seminar seeks to explore the contested field of truth *in* and *through* Shakespeare's works. Therein, we follow John Drakakis's assertion that "to understand the poisonous implications of the world of 'post-truth' and 'post-fact' that now confronts us, we do not need more scientists, or more disseminators of information (a.k.a. spin doctors). What we need is a greater public exposure to the literature and drama that prefigure and comment critically upon the crises that they have historically generated. In short, we need to go back to Shakespeare." We therefore invite papers that engage with, but are in no way restricted to, the following topics:

- Judicial / racial / philosophical/ social / political / queer / ecological / theatrical / religious truth(s) in Shakespeare
- Truth-telling in Shakespeare
- Shifting concepts of truth: Shakespeare's time vs. the present day
- Shakespeare and fake news – now and then
- Shakespeare's relevance for contemporary post-truth discourses
- Political (mis)appropriations of Shakespeare for the sake of 'truth'
- Biographical (un)truths about Shakespeare
- Shakespeare and conspiracy theories

- Negotiating socio-political truths in the 21st century via Shakespearean performance and adaptation
- *Werktreue* / Negotiating fidelity as 'truth' in adaptation studies
- Whose Shakespeare – Whose truth?
- Dismantling canonical truths

Our seminar will address these issues with a panel of six papers during the annual conference of the German Shakespeare Association, *Shakespeare-Tage*, which will take place from **24–26 April 2026 in Bochum,** Germany. As critical input for the discussion, we invite papers of no more than 15 minutes that present concrete case studies, concise examples and strong views on the topic. Please send your proposals (abstracts of 300 words) and short bio notes by **15 December 2025** to the seminar convenors:

Dr. Marlene Dirschauer, University of Hamburg: marlene.dirschauer@uni-hamburg.de
Dr. Jonas Kellermann, University of Konstanz: jonas.kellermann@uni-konstanz.de

The Seminar provides a forum for established as well as young scholars to discuss texts and contexts. Participants of the seminar will subsequently be invited to submit extended versions of their papers for publication in *Shakespeare Seminar Online* (*SSO*). While we cannot offer travel bursaries, the association will arrange for the accommodation of all participants in a hotel close to the main venues. For more information, please contact Marlene Dirschauer and Jonas Kellermann. For more information about the events and publications also see: https://shakespeare-gesellschaft.de/.