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**“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 mailed 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 heavily-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 considered,
 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.