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**DEMYTHOLOGIZING THE BARD:  
APPROPRIATION OF SHAKESPEARE IN TOM STOPPARD'S  
DOGG'S HAMLET, CAHOOT'S MACBETH**

**Abstract:** *One of the most entrenched myths that dramatic authors need to contest and adjust to is the Shakespeare myth, a long-lasting and all-pervasive influence that Shakespeare's name and texts have exerted since the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, being perceived as "represent[ing] truths that transcend particular circumstances" (Sinfield, 1998: 129). In order to be actively involved in the "making of culture" (Sinfield, 1998: 128) and for the purpose of establishing and (re)defining one's own position within and against the canonical (trans)national texts, many British dramatists, including Tom Stoppard, have alluded to, quoted, or incorporated portions of Shakespeare's plays within their own, or even reconstituted them completely. This paper discusses the manner in which Stoppard appropriates Shakespeare's Hamlet and Macbeth – probably his best known and most frequently staged and adapted tragedies – in order to question the importance of both the author and his work within the context of contemporary culture and society.*

**Key words:** *British drama, William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Macbeth, Tom Stoppard, Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth, pastiche, parody*

## **Introduction**

The author whose work is subjected to the inspection and analyses of this paper does not need much introduction. Best known for his most frequently performed play that was also his debut, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), Tom Stoppard has come a long way from that young dramatist who was first disparaged by critics, among them Robert Brustein, who considered his work to be plagiarism and referred to him as "a

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theatrical parasite” (Abbotson, 1998: 171; Draudt, 2002: 348). In the 1960s, when Stoppard was struggling to make a significant break and launch his career as a creative author either in the dramatic or narrative genre, British theatres were saturated with new and old dramatists and impresarios. These individuals worked within established traditions and canon, yet to take them a step further, make something new and inventively go beyond the drama and literature typical of the canon. Thus, Stoppard was working alongside and against such authors as Noel Coward, Samuel Beckett, John Osborne, John Arden, Joe Orton, Harold Pinter and Edward Bond, to mention just a few.

The sixties were also the time of an increased number of attempts to re-examine Shakespeare’s plays, from those in line with William Poel<sup>2</sup>’s efforts to get the Bard’s work back to its original dramaturgy, to those endeavouring to “modernise” Shakespeare for a twentieth century audience<sup>3</sup>, to those striving to debunk the myth and notion of Shakespeare as “a man for all time” (Scott, 1993: 10), and finally to directors and playwrights wanting to deconstruct Shakespeare and re-align his work within Artaudian and postcolonial and postmodernist theories<sup>4</sup>. To that purpose, many of these attempts, including Stoppard’s, have fed

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<sup>2</sup> William Poel, an actor, theatre director and a dramatist, spent his lifetime attempting to find the best way to stage Shakespeare, and in 1895 he established the Elizabethan Stage Society which brought productions of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher’s dramas closer to their original dramatic composition and theatric representation. Granville-Barker, Nigel Playfair and Peter Hall are among the modern stage directors who followed this lead (Styan, 1977: 47-121).

<sup>3</sup> Such attempts are obvious in the work of Barry Jackson and many other twentieth century stage and screen directors of Shakespeare’s plays (Styan, 1977: 122-159).

<sup>4</sup> One of the more prominent impresarios approaching Shakespeare with such an agenda was Charles Marowitz, whose series of Shakespearean reconsiderations dealt with political and social issues, re-reading Shakespeare from a postmodernist perspective so as to untangle the knots of latent and obvious chauvinism. Marowitz’s work emerged over a number of years from 1962 to 1976/7: in 1962 he co-staged the play *King Lear* for RSC with Peter Brook, and then offered his own version of *Macbeth*, in order to present *Collage Hamlet* in 1969, *An Othello* in 1972 and *Variations on the Merchant of Venice* in 1976/7 (Scott, 1993: 103-120).

off Shakespeare, re-writing the original texts, quoting, alluding to, paraphrasing and commenting on the Swan of Avon's plays, and assuming the form and strategies of a pastiche, parody or travesty. *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* are two such plays in which Stoppard appropriates the tragedies of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* in order to question the relevance of Shakespeare and his work within the context of (post)modern culture and society.

### ***Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth***

These two one-act plays which are the core texts of this paper were first composed and performed independently, as is evident from the comma in the title. However, as the author explains, even though the plays were composed singly and at different times<sup>5</sup>, they should be read and assessed jointly because the comma unites rather than separates them (Stoppard, 1993: 141-143). Additionally, the first of the two title plays is a conflation of two earlier pieces, written for Ed Berman's Inter-Action Trust and Dogg's Troupe: *Dogg's Hamlet* is a blend of *Dogg's Our Pet* and *The Dogg's Troupe 15-Minute Hamlet* (Stoppard, 1993: 141; Croft and Higgs, 2010: n. pag.) Moreover, the dramatic situation of *Dogg's Hamlet* draws its concept as much from Wittgenstein's and Derrida's philosophical treatises on language games as from the lines of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

*Cahoot's Macbeth* was inspired by a series of events arising from state control and the 1977 political prosecution of signees of Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia. The signees, many of whom were actors and dramatists, had fallen out with the authorities, and were subsequently banned from any form of public work and/or organised assemblies. This deprived them of some of their human rights, such as the right to work and/or freedom of speech. Finding a loophole, Pavel Kohout, a dissident novelist, playwright and poet, formed "Living-Room Theatre", in a

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<sup>5</sup> *Dogg's Hamlet* was first performed in 1971, whereas *Cahoot's Macbeth* dates from 1978/9.



joint effort with actress Vlasta Chramostova, actor Pavel Landovsky, singer and actor Vlastimil Treshnjak and his own daughter Tereza Bouchkova. The Living Room Theatre presented an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in the flats and living rooms of their Prague audience (Stoppard, 1993: 142-143; Holland in Shaughnessy, 2007: 40-41). Stoppard's *Cahoot's Macbeth* is thus a mixture of both the appropriation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as well as an imaginative recreation of Kohout's adaptation of the play.

The two one-act plays (later made diptych) are a bridge between Stoppard's early playfulness and his calmer and sombre dramas of the 1980s and 1990s. While they continue pursuing and exhibiting the carnivalesque extravaganza of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, *The Real Inspector Hound*, *After Magritte*, *Jumpers* and *Travesties*<sup>6</sup>, they simultaneously point towards the more serious themes and satirical tone of *The Real Thing*, *Hapgood*, *Arcadia*, and *Indian Ink*<sup>7</sup>. More importantly, both of them approach, examine and transform their source text from a profoundly expressed critical position. This is in contrast to Stoppard's debut play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, in which *Hamlet* is not parodied but rather pastiched. Stoppard's selection of the dramas *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, as is shown in the analysis, is not random. *Hamlet* is, alongside *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's most staged and adapted tragedy, and holds a privileged, canonized, position within (trans)national curricula, while *Macbeth* is generally considered the best example of a dramatic text with political implications. Thus, this selection could imply that Shakespeare is timeless, and that his reputation as the preeminent Bard of the English drama is unsurpassable.

### ***Dogg's Hamlet and 15-Minute Hamlet***

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<sup>6</sup> The plays listed were composed/performed as follows: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), *After Magritte* (1970), *Jumpers* (1972), and *Travesties* (1974).

<sup>7</sup> The given dramas were first performed in the following order: *The Real Thing* in 1982, *Hapgood* in 1988, *Arcadia* 1993, and *Indian Ink* in 1995.

*Dogg's Hamlet* opens with a group of schoolboys headed by their Principal Dogg, speaking in a made-up version of English in which the lexical and semantic units of the standard are inverted, or used without obvious logic or traditional meaning. At times, Abel, Baker and Charlie<sup>8</sup> are, with a perceptible disinterest and clear incomprehension, mechanically uttering lines from the opening scene of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Their dislocated and strenuous memorisation is interrupted by the arrival of Easy, who is there to build a stage for the school pageant, and needs assistance to unload the building materials from a lorry. Easy speaks a variant of standard English and therefore any verbal communication between him and the boys is impossible. Much of the comedy and physical humour arise from the confusion and frustration of the characters failing to establish meaningful communication. At one point, Baker goes so far as to quote a poorly understood and executed line from Shakespeare: "*By heaven I charge thee speak!*" (Stoppard, 1993: 152), but Easy fails to grasp the intention and responds by questioning the authority of the boy using Elizabethan English. Finally, Principle Dogg intervenes and through the use of gestures and props (non-verbal language), a fragile communication is achieved and order seemingly restored. In the process of unloading the material from the lorry and the consequent building and rebuilding of the stage, Easy, along with Stoppard's audience, begins to understand more and more of the schoolboys' English and by the end of the scene he has "picked up" the idiom to be able to introduce the pageant in Dogg's English. Easy's "Hamlet bedsocks Denmark. Yeti William Shakespeare"<sup>9</sup> announce the "Doggs Ham Let" (Stoppard, 1993: 163), in which the fragmented name of the title character,

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<sup>8</sup> Curiously enough if the names of the characters are lined up and then made into an acronym, one ends up with: A(bel)B(aker)C(harlie)D(ogg)E(asy), hence it appears as if Stoppard is playing a practical joke on his audience, offering them "ABCs" of both Wittgenstein and Shakespeare.

<sup>9</sup> Hamlet, the prince of Denmark. By William Shakespeare' (Stoppard, 1993: 163).

previously jumbled and anagrammed<sup>10</sup>, signals the ensuing travesty of Shakespeare's original. What follows is the significantly abridged and frenetically paced *15-Minute Hamlet*, introduced by a dramatic representation of the Bard himself who declaims a collage of lines snatched from *Hamlet's* soliloquies, dialogues, and asides which are pasted together. In this hilarious travesty of *Hamlet*, a 5-hour performance of Shakespeare's most frequently read, staged and adapted mature tragedy is cut to fit the drastically shortened frame, yet is successfully summarised: all the scenes and dialogues relevant to the understanding of the plot are reworked, and their gist presented. Most of the protagonist's soliloquies are cut, and the mousetrap of *Hamlet* is alluded to with the projection of puppets and puppeteers "left screen" (Stoppard, 1993: 167). As if this were not frantic enough, Stoppard introduces an encore, within which *15-Minute Hamlet* is further condensed into a recitation by the main characters of one or two notable lines from certain speeches (thus echoing and repeating the original *Hamlet's* story and plot).

The Prologue of *15-Minute Hamlet* begins when a dramatic representation of author William Shakespeare takes the stage and declaims a monologue, presented here in full and contrasted to the authentic lines (in the Appendix):

For this relief, much thanks.  
Though I am native here, and to the manner born  
It is a custom more honored in the breach  
Than in the observance  
Well.  
Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.  
To be or not to be, that is the question.  
There are more things in heaven and earth  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy—  
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,

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<sup>10</sup> From "Math's Old Egg", to "Meg Shot Glad", to "God Slag Them" the motto finally turns into "Doggs Ham Let" (Stoppard, 1993: 158, 159, 161, 163).

Rough hew them how we will  
Though this be madness, yet there is method in it.  
I must be cruel only to be kind;  
Hold, as t'were, the mirror up to nature.  
A countenance more in sorrow than in anger.  
(*LADY in audience shouts 'Marmalade'.*)  
The lady doth protest too much.  
Cat will mew, and Dogg will have his day!  
(Stoppard, 1993: 163-164)

The cited speech is a pastiche of near-verbatim and overt quotations from the original text; lines are appropriated from various characters of the authentic *Hamlet*, re-arranged and given new meaning, and re-uttered later in *15-Minute Hamlet*. The Prologue's Bard appears to be addressing a much wider audience suggesting, among other things, that – due to the postmodernist lack of a strong centre, which can no longer provide a singular and homogenous interpretation, as well as to the absence of presence and the metaphoric and literal death of the author – it is possible to appropriate a text from its expected and familiar context and reposition it, thus making it fresh. In such a manner, new interpretations are fostered, and new meaning(s) attached to the original. Simultaneously, an implication that crops up from Stoppard's play, the implication that is particularly accentuated by *15-Minute Hamlet*, is that this monologue is to provoke the audience into reassessing “the universality” and relevance of Shakespeare (and canon in general) from the perspective and context of the contemporary audience. Since they are far removed from the cultural milieu of both Renaissance England and its drama, this audience cannot understand Shakespeare with clarity or ease. Simply put, Shakespeare to the contemporary audience makes as much sense as Dogg's English does to Easy; or, as Jill L. Levenson declares, “Shakespeare has become a cliché in British culture, virtually meaningless (that is, a foreign language)” (2001: 165).

### ***Cahoot's Macbeth***

The second part of the diptych begins with a performance of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* within a *mise-en-scene* made quite strange: the well-known yet reduced action of the source text, along with the famous lines "fair is foul, and foul is fair" (cf. Stoppard 1993: 179), is performed in a private living room. The production is further de-familiarised by the sounds of voices, sirens, the knocking of police officers Boris and Maurice backstage, and the arrival of the Inspector, who interrupts the enactment. The ensuing exchanges between the Inspector, the hostess and the actors reveal that, having been found subversive by the state, the latter are now forced to make a living as floor-cleaners, paper-boys, messengers, waitresses and the like. The performance continues at the Inspector's command and he assumes the position of an observer, a member of audience, yet – unlike the rest of the fictional audience – he never ceases with his obtrusive remarks and repressive interaction with the actors. Hence the staging of *Macbeth* is hindered and halted once more. Suddenly, a performer cast as Banquo impersonating the writer Cahoot, howls in the manner of a dog, and when asked to make a statement delivers lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The Inspector's attempts to intimidate Cahoot-cum-Banquo do not yield success as the latter responds to the Inspector's bullying either by growling and howling, or muttering lines from Shakespeare. As is explained by a "Macbeth", the years of oppression and prosecution have made Cahoot a "non-person" (Stoppard, 1993: 194) – a man who is still a human being, yet is denied freedom of speech and work, and can express himself only by citing other author's words.

When the Inspector leaves, the staging continues for a short time, only to be disrupted again by the arrival of Easy from *Dogg's Hamlet*. The character addresses the actors in Dogg's English, having by now forgotten standard English, and eventually begins mechanically parroting their sentences in an attempt to establish meaningful communication. The confusion is amplified with the return of the Inspector, who has previously

shown a complete lack of knowledge not only of the cultural text but also of Elizabethan English (revealed through his inappropriate yet hilarious reactions to the lines from *Macbeth*), and fails to understand Easy's jargon. Moreover, the translation offered by the hostess is ineffective, as it bears the signs of linguistic interference of the jargon. The jargon cannot be learnt; as Cahoot explains to the Inspector, one merely "catch[es] it" (Stoppard, 1993: 206). The audience listens to a medley of Elizabethan English, contemporary English and Dogg's English as the actors transform/translate Shakespeare's lines into Easy's jargon for the final act of *Macbeth*, thus surpassing and successfully vanquishing the tyranny of the Inspector. Meanwhile, in an evocation of the characters and action of the first part of the diptych, the actors begin unloading the building materials. This time, however, Maurice and Boris take over and build a wall that encloses the actors. Finally, Easy is given the honour of the words that should close both the one-act and the diptych but surprisingly, breaking character, he first rephrases Macbeth's witches' lines: "Double, double, toil and trouble" (Stoppard, 1993: 211). He then proclaims "Shakespeare" (Stoppard, 1993: 211), and at last, speaking in standard English, admits that it was "a funny sort of week" and promises to "be back by Tuesday" (Stoppard, 1993: 211).

The comedy that in *Dogg's Hamlet* flows from the schoolboys' responses to both Elizabethan and modern English, as well as Easy's reaction to Dogg's and Shakespeare's English, is similar to the scenes that induce most laughter in *Cahoot's Macbeth*, albeit with a tinge of bitterness. These scenes revolve around the character of the Inspector, and his inappropriate reactions to Shakespearean text. When by coincidence the Inspector utters a cue for an actor cast as Macduff, who comes onstage quoting "Oh horror, horror, horror/Confusion now hath made his masterpiece" – which seems less part of the Shakespearean original and more a mirror to and a comment on the circumstances – the Inspector asks "What's *your* problem, sunshine?" (Stoppard, 1993: 187). Likewise, when Cahoot in the

role of Banquo quotes: "Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all/ as the weird sisters promised...", the Inspector responds with: "Kindly leave my wife's family out of this" (Stoppard, 1993: 193). These instances, along with his claim that "You've only got one *Macbeth*" (Stoppard, 1993: 188) and that *Macbeth* is "a play with a happy ending" (Stoppard, 1993: 190), much in the vein of *15-Minute Hamlet* and the collaged monologue of its Bard, prompt a reassessment of the "universality" of Shakespeare. Moreover, because the last act of *Macbeth*, which highlights the fall of a tyrant, can only be performed in fragments and in coded language not understood by the perpetrators of state control, *Cahoot's Macbeth* suggests that Shakespeare's texts can only achieve their latent subversiveness if fragmented, rearranged, appropriated and updated. Realigning Shakespeare within contemporary geopolitics and history exemplifies the fact that the myth of Shakespeare as a "man for all time" (Scott, 1993: 10) no longer holds water. It also implies that postmodernist re-readings of Shakespeare suggest

Shakespearean text is no longer sacrosanct: instead it is invaded by heteroglossia, or multiplicity of styles and forms in the Bakhtinian sense, that disrupt the cultural authority of the official English Shakespeare (Singh in Stegh Camati, 2005: 339).

## **Conclusion**

Tom Stoppard is nowadays recognised as a dramatist whose defining stylistic feature is the appropriation and critical re-evaluation of literary and cultural texts of the past. However, this has not always been the case. As can be observed from the first reviews of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in the 1960s, Stoppard first had to respond to the charge of plagiarism, yet in due time his plays became closely associated with the concept of intertextuality. Stoppard has never denied or hidden his appreciation of many of his predecessors, such as John

Osborne<sup>11</sup> or Samuel Beckett<sup>12</sup>, and therefore his researchers have frequently endeavoured to establish the cultural pool from which Stoppard has drawn. Osborne, Beckett, T. S. Eliot, Joyce, O'Neill, Albee, Xenon, Wittgenstein, Derrida and Kipling are only a few of the authors whom Stoppard's researchers and audience have revisited. Nevertheless, Oscar Wilde and William Shakespeare have been his enduring inspiration, as theirs are the texts and figures Stoppard has repeatedly returned to<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, by incorporating smaller or larger portions of dramatic, non-dramatic and para-literary texts by different authors into his own works, Stoppard has joined a long list of modern dramatists who have had to contest many other canonical figures as well as Shakespeare, and who have worked against the myth of the "universality" and "all-pervasiveness" of the Bard's influence.

The diptych *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* (1979) is a specimen of Stoppard's dramatic text that engages in a dialogue with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. It snatches the canonical tragedies from their original contexts, taking their stories, characters, lines and plot elements to the purpose of re-aligning them with contemporary (post)modern history and culture. Through the use of overt quotations, allusions, and parodic reworking or humorous collage of the "authentic" Shakespearean texts, Stoppard makes his audience question whether *Hamlet* is universally understood in this day and age,

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<sup>11</sup> In an interview with Mel Gussow, Stoppard openly stated that after Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* all aspiring authors expressed a desire to become dramatists (1996: 20).

<sup>12</sup> "Wham, bam, thank you Sam," reads a line from Stoppard's play *Jumpers* (Stoppard, 1972: 87).

<sup>13</sup> Stoppard seems to have been overwhelmingly fascinated with *The Importance of Being Earnest*, whose dialogues he has cited and alluded to repeatedly in many of his dramas. In 1974 he finally reached the point of composing a travesty of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in his *Travesties*. On the other hand, numerous of Shakespeare's dramatic and poetic texts have been "plundered" and then inserted into Stoppard's oeuvre. Additionally, *Dogg's Hamlet* includes a dramatization of Shakespeare, much like Stoppard's *The Invention of Love* (1997), which presents its audience with a dramatic recreation of Wilde.



and whether *Macbeth* can still reach its full potential as a political and subversive text. The ultimate impression gained from such an appropriation of Shakespeare as executed by Stoppard's *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* is an awareness that Shakespeare's reputation as "a man of all time" may not indeed be unsurpassable.

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**Appendix**

Line(s) of the Prologue spoken by character „William Shakespeare“ (Stoppard, 1993: 163-164)	Character(s), occasion, position in <i>Hamlet</i> (Shakespeare, 1976: 1-147; Wright, Louis and LaMar, Virginia, eds.)
For this relief, much thanks.	Francisco to Bernardo, Act 1, Scene 1
Though I am native here, and to the manner born/It is a custom more honored in the breach /Than in the observance	Hamlet to Horatio, Act 1, Scene 4 (On marriage customs and Gertrude remarrying Claudius soon after Hamlet's father's death)
Well.	-new element-
Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.	Marcellus to Horatio, Act 1, Scene 4 (prior to the Apparition)
To be or not to be, that is the question.	Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1
There are more things in heaven and earth/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy—	Hamlet to Horatio, Act 1, Scene 5 (commenting on Horatio's amazement with the Ghost)
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/Rough hew them how we will	Hamlet to Horatio, Act 5, Scene 2 (on his „miraculous“ return to Denmark)
Though this be madness, yet there is method in it.	Polonius (an aside on Hamlet), Act 2, Scene 2
I must be cruel only to be kind;	Hamlet to Gertrude, Act 3, Scene 4 (having killed Polonius)
Hold, as t'were, the mirror up to nature.	Hamlet to the Players, Act 3, Scene 2 (instructing them on how to perform the Mousetrap)
A countenance more in sorrow than in anger.	Horatio to Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 2 (describing Ghost's 'facial' expression)
<i>(LADY in audience shouts 'Marmalade'.)</i>	-new element-; In the made up language connotes approval and satisfaction (cf. Stoppard, 1993: 156).
The lady doth protest too much.	Gertrude to Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 2 (when asked what she thought about the Mousetrap)
Cat will mew, and Dogg will have his day!	Hamlet to Leartes, Act V, Scene 1 (after the funeral of Ophelia and before the final duel)