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OMG SHAKESPEARE: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Abstract

A collection of recent adaptations of four of Shakespeare's most famous plays (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*) was published by Penguin, in a series entitled OMG Shakespeare. The new titles are: *A Midsummer Night #nofilter* (2015) and *YOLO Juliet* (2016) by W. Shakespeare and Brett Wright, and *Macbeth #killingit* (2016) and *srsly Hamlet* (2015) by W. Shakespeare and Courtney Carbone. The plays are rewritten as text messages with abbreviations, emoticons, signs, photos, music, etc. The plot is also changed to fit this contemporary medium of transmission. According to the description, the OMG Penguin series (OMG Shakespeare and OMG Classics), is included in "teen and young adult fiction" and, indeed, though they appear readable to such audiences, these books are often rather difficult for more traditional readers, less skilled in using the new technology. The purpose of the analysis of these adaptations is to trace the manner in which identity and power are constructed by the presence in the social media space. Contemporary society gradually turns into a *network society*, which challenges the traditional views on center and periphery, identity and social adherence, power and hierarchies. In the middle of apparent fragmentation, equalization and informality, new identities and new forms of power and control are born. The choice of the specific layout for these adaptations, which resembles social media interaction, brings into the forefront the dilemmas of the modern world concerning control, surveillance, traceability, inclusion vs. isolation. Such adaptations may appear unsatisfactory for an avid reader of Shakespeare, but they provide meaningful insight into the new foundations of the modern world and mostly into the tremendous shifts in reading, literature consumption, or entertainment.

Keywords: Shakespeare, adaptation, remediation, social media, network society

Adaptation is an age-old process that has accompanied the creation of literature, as stories migrated along generations, across cultures and through various media of transmission. Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as both "process and product" (Hutcheon, 2006: 9), it is "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work" as well as a process of "(re-)interpretation and (re-)creation, involving an "extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (Hutcheon, 2006: 8). Clear delimitations of adaptation, however, may prove to be quite difficult, precisely because of the "phenomenon's variety and ubiquity" (Hutcheon, 2006: xii). The multiplication of technological devices further complicates the attempt to offer a unified approach. New fields of research have now re-interpreted and reconfigured the issue of adaptation, especially with the huge development and impact of digital media. Katherine Rowe asserts that: "as new media archives grow, new adaptation categories are formally recognized" (Rowe, 2010: 313). Therefore, instead of resorting to one-sided definitions and classifications, interdisciplinary approaches seem to be a more useful manner of understanding how adaptation works.

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As such, the relationship between literature and literary studies, media studies, book studies, reception theories, sociology and psychology look into the evolution of the media of transmission of texts, from book to digital formats, from the stage to the screen, also dwelling on the relationship of the audiences to the texts they receive through the various media and how these changes affect our understanding of culture and, ultimately, the world. In this context, Marshall McLuhan's assertion "medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1994: 9), does not lose its significance even more than half a century later. He considers that "it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action", and explains that "[t]his is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology" (McLuhan, 1994: 9, 7). The simple analysis of a text, therefore, is incomplete without considering the channel chosen for its transmission and contemporary digital media are nowadays believed to produce crucial changes not only in society but also at the level of human psychology, ultimately challenging the traditional notions of humanity, identity, society. The most recent research suggests (or warns) that under the pressure of technological advancements, education and entertainment seem to receive new dimensions that will considerably influence our way of thinking. According to Adriaan van der Weel: "[d]ifferent communications technologies, by enabling different forms of expression, are therefore bound to influence the way we perceive the world" (van der Weel 2011: 16). We are now living in a "network society" shaped on an "infrastructure of social and media networks" (van Dijk, 2006: 20), whose basic unit has become the "individual linked by networks" that replaces the mass society's reliance on "traditional local collectivities" (van Dijk, 2006: 35). All these transformations will, rather sooner than later, change the way individuals define themselves and their place in society. All aspects of life, from politics, law, education, entertainment, culture to psychology will definitely be influenced under the pressures of living inside networks.

With the emergence and fast introduction of new technologies, terms are coined in order to better grasp the complexities of the process of adaptation. One such term is *remediation*, mentioned by Hutcheon in her extensive study on adaptation and defined as intersemiotic translation:

In many cases, because adaptations are to a different medium, they are re-mediations, that is, specifically translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images). This is translation but in a very specific sense: as transmutation or transcoding, that is, as necessarily a recoding into a new set of conventions as well as signs (Hutcheon, 2006: 16).

Using the same term, *remediation*, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grushin consider that, though it is a very old process whose genealogy can be traced at least to the Renaissance, it has been reconceptualised in the light of the recent technological advancements and now, this "representation of one medium in another" becomes "a defining characteristic of the new digital media" (Bolter and Grushin, 1999: 23, 45). The passage from one medium to another can be seen as a dialogue between old, traditional forms and the continually emerging new forms:

In this last decade of the twentieth century, we are in an unusual position to appreciate remediation, because of the rapid development of new digital media and the nearly as rapid response by traditional media. Older electronic and print media are seeking to reaffirm their status within our culture as digital media challenge that status. Both new and old media are invoking the twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy in their efforts to remake themselves and each other (Bolter and Grushin, 1999: 5).

The dialogue between old and new forms emerging on the grounds of technological development is also stressed by Rowe who argues that: "newer technologies not only borrow from earlier ones but also compete to supply their social functions and gain their commercial positions by imitating their styles and formats" (Rowe, 2010: 308). Therefore, the discussion on new media and adaptation necessarily tackles not only the adaptation itself, or the relationship between the adapted work and the original, but also the medium of transmission, the display technologies as well as the social impact that they have on our understanding of culture, information or entertainment.

As a result of these recent outlooks, the issue of adaptation is revalued and reconsidered, the media representing a challenging aspect in the analysis of how new forms of adaptation are connected to the original. When the adapted work or writer are cultural landmarks, new provocations may arise. This is the case of Shakespeare, a cultural icon, whose authority often seems to be used (or abused) to legitimize various cultural artefacts. In this light, Rowe sees adaptation as “an act of interpretation and a primary means by which cultures around the globe revive and re-purpose earlier cultural matter,” while “Shakespeare has regularly been invoked, over the centuries, to authorize and validate new technologies of expression” (Rowe, 2010: 306). Maurizio Calbi talks about the “hauntological” status of “Shakespeare” and “its (uncanny) afterlife” as he refers to the “sheer multiplicity of this presence” prompted by the “increasingly digitized and globalized mediascape of the beginning of the twenty-first century” (Calbi, 2013: 1, 2).

On the other hand, even though Shakespeare often serves as a source of authority and legitimacy of newer forms of adaptation, they are “culturally specific rather than timeless” (Rowe, 2010: 306) and need to be appreciated in relation to the culture in which and the audience for which they are produced. By considering these theoretical difficulties in approaching the issue of Shakespearean adaptation, we intend to analyse a recent adaptation of four Shakespearean plays known as the *OMG Shakespeare* series. Our analysis will focus primarily on the changes of meaning from the original to the adapted work prompted by the specific choice of layout which resembles social media interaction and not a traditional play. More specifically, we will try to see how identity and power are constructed in the twenty-first century under the pressure of the apparently compulsory presence in the virtual space in comparison to the traditional, hierarchical society of Shakespeare’s times. Since “medium is the message” as previously mentioned, we argue that new relations and new pressures appear in the creation of individual identity and group hierarchy by living primarily in the virtual space and interacting with the others solely through social media.

The *OMG Shakespeare* series, published by Penguin Random House is part of a larger collection entitled *OMG Classics* that also includes *Greek Gods: #squadgoals*, *Darcy Swipes Left*, *Scrooge #worstgift ever*. The *OMG Shakespeare* collection, published in hardcover and e-book formats, contains adaptations of four plays: *A Midsummer Night #nofilter* (2015) and *YOLO Juliet* (2016) by William Shakespeare and Brett Wright, and *Macbeth #killingit* (2016) and *srsly Hamlet* (2015) by William Shakespeare and Courtney Carbone. The publishing house classified the books as “Teen and Young Adult fiction” and the description on the webpage is “tl;dr A Shakespeare play told through its characters texting with emojis, posting photos, checking in at locations, and updating their relationship statuses. The perfect gift for hip theater lovers and teens. A glossary and cast of characters are included for those who need it. For example: tl;dr means too long; didn’t read.”¹ The text retains most of the original characters, plot (though largely condensed and modernized), the division in scenes and acts of the original plays, but the layout resembles that of the social media applications and the lines of the plays are replaced by text messages with emoticons, abbreviations, photos, group conversations, links to music, activity and status, location, and everything else that these types of applications offer.

Several preliminary comments arise from the first contact with the books. Firstly, the four volumes are published in hardcover/ e-book format (only *YOLO Juliet* was printed also in paperback, though not cheaper than the other formats), with many colourful, high-quality images, fitting, thus, the web description of the series as “perfect gift.” The quality of these editions suggests the fact that they are envisaged either as a gift for adult book lovers and consumers of literature who know the plays and might be drawn to such an intriguing experiment, or as a useful tool disguised as an appealing present to children and teenagers to introduce them to the Bard’s plays. In fact, most of the reviews on the Amazon site are written by teachers of English or parents interested in finding ways to draw the young to reading and familiarizing them with the classics in a friendlier and funnier manner than the original text².

¹ The description is available on the Penguin Random House webpage: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/series/OGS/omg-shakespeare>. Retrieved on 10.06.2019.

² Ample lists of reviews are offered by the Amazon site (for instance <https://www.amazon.com/OMG-Shakespeare-Boxed-Set-William/dp/0399557377>). Overall, they can be divided in two categories: the favorable reviews that are mostly written by parents and teachers who want to motivate children to read, and the unfavorable or less favorable which consider them a blasphemy to Shakespeare and warn about the language that is

The other format used for the adaptations is the e-book, which seems to be a strategy of drawing the “screen audiences” to literature by facilitating the contact with the literary text on a digital device. The passage, however, from the printed book to the digital format draws its own problems and even if the text remains the same in both formats, the relationship between the text and the reader might be influenced by the specific medium of transmission. For younger audiences, in particular, electronic reading may seem more appealing with its instantaneous download into the device, a reading experience “limited only by the pace of the new technology,” adjustable, with dictionaries, links, note-taking and highlighting, freely navigating inside the text (Klebanoff, 2002: 6). In his praise of e-books, Arthur Klebanoff comments that this format is beneficial in the field of education, with lower prices and the possibility to change, update and customize materials (Klebanoff, 2002: 192). Beside the criticism that such an optimistic attitude might rightfully generate, it is undeniable that the younger generations are much more drawn to electronic reading and could be attracted to literature by using technology, especially in the midst of growing complaints about the fact that young people refuse to read as much as the older generations.

These details of marketing and presentation make it clear that the main target for this collection is the youth and, delving deeper into the text, this becomes even more obvious. The ample use of emoticons and abbreviations could make these adaptations a more difficult reading for those who do not spend their time on social media, or who stubbornly continue to use whole words and sentences and correct grammar. In fact, the inclusion of these books in “teen and young adult fiction” collections reinforces the idea that contemporary technological advancements have widened the generational gaps as never before. In order to address this issue, Mark Prensky coined the terms “digital natives” and “digital immigrants”, envisaging them as metaphors “for describing the differences that many people observed around the turn of the twenty-first century, between the attitudes of younger and older people regarding digital technology” (Prensky, 2011: 15). The “digital natives” are the generations born in the age of the Internet” and “native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet” (Prensky, 2001: 1). Like most of the characters of these books, the digital natives “live much of their lives online, without distinguishing between the online and the offline” (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008: 4), expressing themselves not only through words, but also through images, videos, music, emojis, abbreviations. They feel uneasy when they are disconnected, or cannot communicate. According to the marketing of the collection, this is the generation of readers targeted by these adaptations as they are the proficient readers of the digital language, which is reinforced by the fact that on the back cover of each book there is the advertising line: “[The play’s title] just got a whole lot more interesting👉”, that can be seen as a promise to these readers that the texts are appealing and in no way difficult or boring. However, these texts may be challenging for people who are not so proficient in the language of the social media. This is the case with the older generations, as Prensky argues, whom he calls “digital immigrants”, those who learn to adapt to the new language, some better than others, but who will never be “natives” of the digital space (Prensky, 2001: 1). These generational differences do not refer only to the proficiency in using technology, but affect all the layers of existence: learning habits, identity constructions, relationships and social identification, aspects that these adaptations will envisage. The authors (or Shakespeare’s co-authors, as they appear on the cover) seem to be aware of these generational differences and they included a glossary of abbreviations and emoticons to help readers decode the message more easily. The difference between “digital natives” and “digital immigrants” is often underlined in the texts, as some characters, like Egeus, Lady Capulet, Friar Laurence, do not seem to be quite at ease using this digital language, while the Nurse spends hours in the real world without communicating on the smartphone, a behaviour incomprehensible to Juliet. It is probably not at random that the plays chosen for these adaptations are not only among the most famous, but they also include many young characters (with the exception of *Macbeth*), highlighting these generational gaps in using technology.

All these adaptations are shaped in the form of dialogues in a social media application, with occasional insertions such as location, status, private reminders, shopping lists, music the characters listen, joining or leaving a group. This type of interaction is the closest to a play and in the case of

inappropriate for the targeted age-group. Though we keep in mind the fact that these reviews on a commercial site are part of marketing techniques, it reveals important clues in understanding the audiences of such texts and their response to this new form of adaptation.

Shakespeare's texts it is much easier to envisage the layout of a play on the page, than in the case of novels adapted to fit the social media dialogue. On the other hand, though, it is very hard to imagine any real interaction among the characters, everything being discussed or announced via text messages, even when they are supposed to be in the same physical space. The plays, therefore, are turned into social media dialogue and, instead of being immersed in a live performance, audiences (addressed as "you") are "invited" to join message groups.

The passage from play (seen in Shakespeare's times as performance rather than a text to be read) to text (most of us today, reading for pleasure, or teaching, are more involved with the written text) and then to social media applications offers a challenging perspective on how "remediation" works. According to Bolter and Grushin, older forms are refashioned using new technologies, being organized by two important principles: *immediacy* and *hypermediacy*. One of the first elements that is looked for in an adaptation is the impression of reality, which is defined as *immediacy*. It reflects the claims of newer media at originality and genuine reflection of reality, by trying to "erase all traces of mediation" as a response to the contemporary obsession to "make it real" (Bolter and Grushin, 1999: 5). One of the examples given by the two authors is that of virtual reality that is expected to come as close as possible to our daily visual experience capable to make us forget the existence of a mediated experience (Bolter and Grushin, 1999: 22). In the case of the OMG collection, the attempt to erase the traces of the medium and to uphold the promise that the experience is authentic appears to be one of the tenets of the books in the collection. Relying on older media (it is still a printed book) and on authoritative texts (four of Shakespeare's most famous plays), it appeals to the layout of social media applications with which the targeted readers are familiar and which are part of our daily activities and visual experiences. Reading the characters' online conversations gives us the feeling that we are part of their list of friends and we follow their posts as they occur, being in the middle of the action unfolding before our eyes. And yet, this is not true. These adaptations were published in book format. Even the e-book is closer to the book rather than to an application or hypertext that would give us the possibility to interfere and be real agents in the story. Social media was created to facilitate the instant communication between people or in groups in situations in which face-to-face communication is not possible due to various factors, but the book format is static, fixed and unchangeable. Thus, it becomes clear that *immediacy* cannot function alone and does not completely offer the impression of reality that it promises. In this case, Bolter and Grushin appeal to *hypermediacy*, arguing that: "[a]lthough each medium promises to reform its predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience, the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium. Thus, immediacy leads to hypermediacy" (Bolter and Grushin, 1999: 17). In the case of the OMG collection, it becomes clear that the social media layout is merely a convention because the book format does not allow us to interfere in the text (to "like" or "dislike" what has been said, as other characters often do, or even to press the "like" icon printed on the page), as happens in social media. On the other hand, the readers, unlike other characters in the text, have access to the inner thoughts of the characters (the traditional soliloquies or asides) presented here as "voice memos and notes." According to Bolter and Grushin, *hypermediacy* is a combination of media, implying fragmentation, multiplication, heterogeneity: "[w]here immediacy suggests a unified visual space, contemporary hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather as 'windowed' itself – with windows that open on to other representations or other media" (Bolter and Grushin, 1999: 36). In the OMG collection, the promise of social media authenticity is thwarted not only by the impossibility of interaction, but also by elements that pertain to other media of transmission: the list of characters, specific to plays, the glossaries at the end of the book, or the advertisement to another adapted play, similar to movie advertisements, not to mention the presence of photos, songs, shopping preferences, etc. The duality expressed by the roles of both immediacy and hypermediacy in remediation is not surprising and it is enhanced in digital media which:

oscillate between immediacy and hypermediacy, between transparency and opacity. This oscillation is the key to understanding how a medium fashions its predecessors and other contemporary media. Although each medium promises to reform its predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience, the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium. Thus, immediacy leads to hypermediacy. [...] New digital media are not external agents that come to disrupt an unsuspecting culture. They emerge from

within cultural contexts, and they refashion other media, which are embedded in the same or similar contexts (Bolter and Grushin, 1999: 21).

In fact, one important aspect in the discussion on these adaptations is not only how Shakespeare's texts are adapted, but also what these new forms mean for the readers. The readers who are familiar with Shakespeare's plays, or who prefer the traditional printed medium might be acutely aware of the multiplicity of media involved in the adaptation as well as of the possible shifts in meaning produced by the choice of the specific media. They might even be frustrated trying to find Shakespeare in the middle of emoticons and abbreviations. Younger audiences, on the other hand, could consider such a text amusing, even though some might ignore the fact that it is an adaptation of a famous text. Considering the young age of the targeted readers, it is possible that even those who might know about Shakespeare and his plays be less familiar with the original text. In fact, Bolter and Grushin remark the connection between immediacy and hypermediacy caused by the process of reception:

The appeal to authenticity of experience is what brings the logics of immediacy and hypermediacy together. This appeal is socially constructed, for it is clear that not only individuals, but also various social groups can vary in their definitions of the authentic. What seems immediate to one group is highly mediated to another. In our culture, children may interpret cartoons and picture books under the logic of transparent immediacy, while adults will not. Even among adults, more sophisticated groups may experience a media event as hypermediated, while a less sophisticated group still opts for immediacy (Bolter and Grushin, 1999: 71).

These subjective readings imply that the OMG Shakespeare collection might become a thought-provoking insight into the construction of identity in the digital world, reshaping the Shakespearean constructions of power. The four plays chosen for adaptation are not only among the most famous, but they also display complicated networks of human interaction, from political hierarchies, power relations, family ties and complications caused by love. As mentioned before, with the exception of *Macbeth*, most of the other protagonists and tragic heroes are young (Hamlet and all the other young characters of the play, Romeo and Juliet and their young friends and relatives, the young lovers of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) whose (mis)adventures may appeal more directly to younger readers and for whom the adaptation of the Shakespearean text to the new social media format and language seem more appropriate.

Many of the characters of these adaptations spend most of their time in the virtual space, much like the "digital natives" of our times, making little distinction between life in the physical space and life in the virtual world (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008: 4). Their presence in the real world is suggested only by their location (when they activate it on their smartphones). The language is changed, a pronounced level of informality pervading all the interactions, even those at the highest level of the society or among older characters. A very good example is offered by Duncan's interventions in *Macbeth #killingit* are very informal, opposing the affable, benevolent and gracious image of Shakespeare's king, whose behaviour contrasts with Macbeth's bloody rule. Thus, Duncan's first lines in the adaptation, at the sight of the photo posted by the soldier, are: "What's up w/the battle, Captain? * The pics pretty intense 🤩 – you must have been rite in the middle of everything 🍷" (Shakespeare and Carbone, 2016: 4). It is a direct question to the captain, opposed to the play's "What bloody man is that? He can report, / As seemth by his plight, of the revolt / The newest state" (Shakespeare, 1995: 3). In Shakespeare, the level of formality and the appropriate behaviour according to rank are preserved. The Captain speaks to the king only after being identified and introduced by Malcolm. In the adaptations, this level of informality leads to a general impression of blurring hierarchies and shaky authority. For instance, hearing about Cawdor's betrayal, Duncan reacts with a post which leads to a short conversation with Ross that does not have an equivalent in the play and which adds a different meaning to the power relations:

Duncan: WTF?!Really 🤔. That guy was great at parties. 🍷 Guess the only thing 2 do now is take away his title and give it to ... wait for it...

Ross: ME

Duncan: MACBETH

Ross: *MACBETH. #AutocorrectFail. 🤔

Duncan: Ha, riiight. 🍷 (Shakespeare and Carbone, 2016: 6)

Beside the fact that this level of informality is never present in Shakespeare's plays, the short dialogue also widens the discussions on ambition, suggesting that more of the king's noblemen might be tempted by power and the King knows it, but treats it rather lightly. In Shakespeare's play, there is no hesitation in giving Cawdor's title to Macbeth, and the relationship between Duncan and Ross is formal, hierarchical, official.

This type of interaction apparently changes the hierarchies that were so strict in Shakespeare's time and which controlled the relationships among the plays' characters, replacing them with other rules. Jan van Dijk argues that the power relationships are changed in a network society because:

[n]etworks usually do not have a single centre. They are polycentric, as some nodes are (much) more important than others. For this reason, the network society is less centralized in the sense of having single centres in the economy, politics, government, culture and community life. They are replaced by a multitude of centres cooperating and competing with each other (van Dijk, 2006: 36).

In this new type of social context, the focus falls on the individual who creates his/her own connections in the network outside the traditional family, class, community, etc. There is also danger in participating in the network society, because it may prove to be "less inclusive than the mass society," as van Dijk argues:

You may be a member of some part of the mass society by birth or ascription. In the individualized network society you have to fight for a particular place. You have to show your value for every network. Otherwise you will be isolated in, or even excluded from, the network. In the network society, you have to stand firm as an individual. You are not that easily taken along in solidarity by proximate people (van Dijk, 2006: 36).

Individuals, therefore, must know how to use the benefits of digital media to reach their goals, whatever they might be (power, control, revenge, love). In these adaptations, the characters are in the situation of most contemporary individuals: they must learn how to live in a digital space and, as such, the texts highlight the complicated relationships formed between the individual and the network society in the digital world. They are part of a network, leading their lives almost exclusively in the virtual space, announcing all the details of their existence to the others in the social media, creating connections, trying to control other people, or to avoid surveillance and punishment exclusively through their presence in, or absence from the social media. For a better understanding of how identity and identity construction, power and empowerment operate, we relied mainly on Couldry's analysis of social media and especially on concepts such as *media practices*, *presencing*, *media events* and *rituals*.

Couldry suggests that an effective way to approach "media" in its diversity is to see it as "a vast domain of practices", and he resorts to Theodor Schatzki's reference to practices as having an organizing role in making up social order (Couldry, 2012: 44, 40). Thus, these practices performed in the social media space have the role of connecting the individuals to a specific social order, of validating their presence (and hence, their identity) there, of allowing (or denying) their participation in the virtual space in which presence means existence. One of the main media-related practices described by Couldry and relevant for the OMG Shakespeare adaptations is *showing and being shown*, which means "to make something publicly available" (Couldry, 2012: 47). Communication in social media implies active participation in the virtual space with comments, photos and images, etc. This social practice is named *presencing* and is defined as: "a whole set of media-enhanced ways in which individuals, groups and institutions put into circulation information about, and representations of, themselves for the wider purpose of *sustaining a public presence*" (Couldry, 2012: 50). Identity is therefore constructed only if one becomes a participant in this public, virtual space, and, as such, it is "a necessity, not a choice" (Couldry, 2012: 51).

The first proof of the importance of being present in the social media is to be found in the list of characters presented in the first pages of each of the four adaptations. Though it includes all the characters in Shakespeare's plays, they are separated in two groups: one under the title "who's who", namely those who will be part of the conversations, and the other under the title "characters you won't meet in this book (aka people w/o smartphones)" referring to characters present in Shakespeare's plays,

but eliminated from these adaptations. With the list of characters, the play-format is kept, but it is made clear that the traditional stage is replaced by another type of space, the virtual space, access to which is granted according to different rules. Owning a smartphone, therefore, is the first rule of connection to the network, the lack of access to technology resulting in the exclusion from the digital world and, hence, from social life. van Dijk largely commented on the impact of access to technology in all the fields of existence, from material resources to temporal, mental, social and cultural resources and pointed out the fact that “those without access will be isolated in future society” (van Dijk, 2006: 178), further explaining that:

unequal participation in all these fields of society reinforces the existing personal and positional inequalities and unequal distribution of resources. The new media are important new tools (resources) that help people to obtain better positions in society and to improve their personal characteristics in relation to others, particularly in relationships of power (Van Dijk, 2006: 179).

What happens to those characters “we won’t meet in the book” is indicative of the importance of “being present” in social media in order to matter. They are real people living their lives entirely in the physical world with no access to the digital space and, as such, their existence does not seem to be important for anybody.

There is also another category of people: those who are not familiar with the new apps, or find it difficult to use them, but understand the importance of “being present” in the social media space. They fit perfectly into the category described by Prensky as “digital immigrants” who speak the new language of the internet with an “accent”. Prensky suggests that digital skills can be learned just as immigrants learn a new language but preserve the “accent” of their native language (Prensky, 2001: 2), which results in a combination of older forms of communication with the new forms. A clear presence of the “accent” is revealed by the mixture between the format of the older forms of communication (letters) and the messaging apps. Both Lady Capulet and Friar Laurence, all through the *Yolo Juliet* adaptation, sign each and every message, as if it were a separate letter, or note. Friar Laurence ends all his messages with FL. Lady Capulet adapts her signature to the recipient. Her messages to Juliet end with “Love, Mom”, while the messages to the Prince, Benvolio and Montague after finding out the news of Tybalt’s murder are signed with “Angrily, LC” (Shakespeare and Wright, 2015: 52). Signing the messages, remnant of traditional letters, is unnecessary in digital communication, where the sender is automatically identified, but it singles out the “digital immigrants” who do not seem to have fully adapted to the new requirements.

Another indicative example underlying the uneasiness with technology of the older characters is Egeus in *A Midsummer Night #nofilter* whose conversation with Theseus reveals his clumsiness with the new technology:

Egeus: ‘Good day, Theseus. Can you see this?’ 📱

Theseus: ‘Hey, pal. I can see this. Why the 📱?’

Egeus: ‘I don’t know. My daughter, Hermia, downloaded this app onto my 📱. I’m still learning!’
(Shakespeare and Wright, 2016: 4)

Beside the conversational tone that is unexpected among people of their rank, it is important to notice Egeus’ desire to be present in the social network. The irony that stems from this conversation (not present in Shakespeare’s text) is the role of Hermia, a digital native as well as a mediator, initiating her father into the social media, which will prove to be her doom. It is thus suggested that younger people might have more power because their use of technology is easier, but they lack the shrewdness to know this and fall into the traps of more experienced people. As a result, the traditional hierarchies and poles of power are preserved only if those in control learn how to master the new technologies. Therefore, the distinction between the young people who manipulate the technology with ease and intuition and the older people who need to learn and adapt lies not only in skills, but also in what Prensky calls “digital wisdom”, namely knowing not only how to use technology, but what to do with it: “the digitally wise realize that the ability to control digital technology, to bend it to their needs, is a key skill in the digital age” (Prensky, 2011: 26). Egeus learns not only how to use the smartphone’s new applications, but also how to take of advantage of them, while Hermia, more skilled, is naïve and gullible as she grants her father access into the digital space.

Entering the social media space is not influenced only by skills, but also by the technical vulnerabilities of technology that may prove to be serious impediments in sustaining a meaningful presence in the social media space, and characters are forced to resort to other possibilities of reconnecting to the others in the network. For instance, in the adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Demetrius has to use his “mom’s old flip phone #soancient,” then, Lysander runs low on daytime minutes and has to use the email (Shakespeare and Wright, 2016: 60-1). In both cases, communication is difficult, they do not recognize the number or the email address and fail to respond. The flip phone and the email are already regarded as obsolete by the young generation and both men find themselves temporarily stranded outside the social media space, just like the play’s characters who are lost in the woods.

In the cases where technology is no impediment for participation in the social media space, presencing is visible mainly through posts, likes and dislikes, sharing images and photos, or updating relationships. For example, the captain’s selfie in *Macbeth #killingit* (Shakespeare and Carbone, 2016: 4) prompts Duncan to ask about the outcomes of the battle, and Ophelia updates her status from “in a relationship” to “it’s complicated” (Shakespeare and Carbone, 2015: 21) and then to “single” (Shakespeare and Carbone, 2015: 45), helping the reader trace her relationship to Hamlet. Very often, the characters publicize the music they are listening to and which underlines their emotional or psychological state: for instance, before killing Duncan, Macbeth listens to Metallica’s *Enter Sandman* and, after the deed is done, he listens to Justin Bieber’s *Bad Day*; while Juliet listens to Taylor Swift’s *Love Story* on Renaissance FM and Ophelia chooses a “Men Suck Breakup Mix”. These characters use the public space of social media not only to comment on events, or to communicate with others, but also to display their private emotions. In Shakespeare’s plays, inner thoughts and emotions were usually rendered through soliloquies, or inferred by the characters’ behavior. The characters in the OMG adaptation continue typing even as they die, announcing their death through posts, texting or recording voice memos about their experiences and emotions during the last moments of their lives. Hamlet, for instance, types just before dying:

There’s not much 📄 . My hands are growing too weak to type. You are the only one who can tell my real 📖. My dad, Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, Polonius, and Ophelia. All dead and gone. #RIP. #ExceptClaudius. (Shakespeare and Carbone, 2015: 88)

Romeo and Juliet record their final thoughts and gestures as voice memos. Thus, the private moments of the Shakespearean plays become public posts on social media, challenging the traditional understanding of the public and private spheres. This blurring of borders between the public and private space is the direct result of the imperious need to be present in the social media, in order to avoid marginalization, isolation and even the state of “non-existence.” On the other hand, though, the obsessive presence in the social media destroys the idea of privacy. This is, in fact, an increasingly important problem in contemporary society. According to Dijk: “almost every place becomes a social space. It is becoming hard to avoid being accessible at any time and place” (van Dijk, 2006: 115). This leads to a reconstruction of the public and private spaces caused by the new types of communication. The overall impression is that the unity implied by these concepts of “private” and “public” spheres, clearly delimited in the past, is undermined and destroyed by social media. Indeed, researchers agree that new ways of understanding public participation and public life are necessary. For instance, in a discussion about Facebook, Daniel Miller suggests that the public dimension of this social medium is “an aggregate of private spheres” (Miller, 2012: 50), with people putting online most of their private lives and publicizing them. In a similar line of thought, Todd Gitlin introduces the term “public sphericules” instead of “private spheres”. He defines the “public sphere” as: “the ideal, the unmoved mover and sacred sphere against which standard violations and deviations are to be measured” (Gitlin, 2002: 168), but considers it weak in the face of emerging voices and opinions that are multiplying, defined as “public sphericules” that emerge due to the rapid advancements of technology that allow and “enrich the possibility of a plurality of publics” (Gitlin, 2002: 173). Once posted in the virtual space, private life disappears and everything becomes public. As a result, the borders between real and fake identities are hard to notice. Many resort to false digital identities, fabricated in order to suit their own purposes and to hide themselves and their real intentions. An example in this case is Claudius’ creation of a public image by constantly posting photos in his album. His effort to validate his legitimacy to the

throne, implied throughout Shakespeare's play, is replaced by an almost exaggerated presence in the social media space. For Claudius, this is the manner in which he chooses to use social media to validate and consolidate his power. Hamlet, on the other hand, comments that his uncle uses filters for his photos, underlining the fact that the image that the king wants to transmit on the internet is not his real identity. The dualities appearance/reality, lie/truth, spectacle/silence that shape the Shakespearean tragedy are transposed into the digital space through Claudius' sustained presence and Hamlet's attempts to undermine it. Therefore, the political aspects of Shakespeare's plays, and especially his discussions of power and freedom, control and rebellion, tyranny and dissent are transposed into the digital space, altered, but not eliminated, by the new medium. These adaptations carry the Shakespearean political discussions into the contemporary world, by tackling the effects of social media on political thought.

In the modern world, the development of technology (from the written press to the radio, television and Internet) have influenced politics and the manner in which political power was acquired, legitimized, enforced or challenged. In the past decades, the Internet has had a tremendous impact on politics, leading to discussions about its "democratizing potential" due to a rapid and cheaper access to information, inclusiveness, mobilization of a large number of people, which "reduce the persuasiveness of the traditional state-oriented media" (Tkatcheva et al, 2013: 17, 22). On the other hand, though, this optimism regarding the democratizing effects of the internet is often undermined by its vulnerabilities (technical problems, accessibility, privacy issues, surveillance, etc.), and by the capacities of the power structures to use them to their own advantage. In other words, as technology develops, political structures adapt and change with it, so that, we cannot speak of a dissolution of power in the contemporary, network society, only of a re-organization on the different methods and tools offered by recent technologies:

It is impossible to centrally register and control all individual activities of small-scale production and large-scale distribution across any border using these technologies. No traditional totalitarian regime can remain in power after the massive introduction of PCs, diskettes, faxes and all sorts of new audiovisual equipment. On the other hand, several new types of rule with a totalitarian flavour are conceivable using this new technology, as one of its capacities is to enable central management, surveillance and control (Van Dijk, 2006: 99).

Radio, television and, now, social media have affected the construction of power structures that tried to use the new channels to consolidate their control. One effective method of validating power and hierarchy is represented by "media events" largely analyzed by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz in connection to television. However, their theories can also be applied to events publicized on social media, radio and television being the first steps in the passage towards a network society. As mentioned before, the network society appears fragmented, dispersed around various centers (spheres, sphericules). According to Dayan and Katz, the role of the media events is to connect center and periphery:

not only through the experience of *communitas*, but through direct communion with central symbols and values, through the assumption of ritual roles in a ceremony conducted by establishment leaders, and through the presence of small groups of known and valued others. Linked by networks of long-reaching affinity, the mass audiences of television events partially overcome their dispersion and atomization (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 196).

They also argue that "in the eye of public opinion, media events confer status on the institutions with which they deal", and, in this way, they "sharpen hierarchies and represent moments of high concentration of power" (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 199, 214). Couldry follows a similar line of thought when he refers to "media rituals" seen as: "formalized, patterned actions relating to media that enact a particular way of organizing the world" (Couldry, 2012: 72). The existence of these media rituals is, in fact, directed towards supporting the idea of a mediated center, identified as a: "highly centralized system of symbolic production whose 'natural' role it is to represent or frame that 'centre'" (Couldry, 2012:72). The multiplicity of forms and public presences (sphericules) undermine the idea of such a center, but, we often underestimate "the active role of media institutions in framing the world *as if* it were a functioning whole and how such an idea gets embedded into everyday interpretation and action" (Couldry, 2012: 65). The interplay of institutionalized power that wants to legitimize itself as a valid, ordering center and the actions of various "sphericules", either complying with the actions of the center

or rebelling against it, are part of the interactions in the media space suggested by these adaptations. More precisely, there are many situations in which various characters want to validate their power by creating events and inviting others to participate. For instance, Lady Macbeth invites people to Macbeth's coronation, and while "Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and Ross are going", Macduff rejects this new center by disliking and creating a parallel event, at the same time (at noon): "King Duncan's Burial" (Shakespeare and Carbone, 2016: 37), but no one participates. Macbeth's temporary success in securing the throne, thus creating a temporary power center, is suggested by the others' lack of participation to Macduff's event. Macbeth's banquet and the appearance of Banquo's ghost in Shakespeare's play (Act III, scene 4) is transformed into "Macbeth's First Annual Thanksgiving", all the discussions being carried on in the "#Kingsgiving Chat Room". It is here that Banquo's ghost makes its appearance, by "checking into" the event.

"Macbeth: It looks like everyone has checked in, except for Banquo. Hopefully, he's just 🏃 late, and not in any kind of ⚠️ ! Did anyone save me a seat? #Kingsgiving.
 Lennox: Of course! Right at the head of the table. 🍷🍷🍷 #Kingsgiving
 Banquo's Ghost has checked into "Macbeth's First Annual Kingsgiving #Kingsgiving!"
 BANQUO'S GHOST: YEAH, MACBETH. I GOT YOUR SEAT RIGHT HERE. 🤖
 #KINGSGIVING" (Shakespeare and Carbone, 2016: 48)

Though the "space" is changed from Shakespeare's Scottish court to a modern chat room, Banquo's ghost is equally disturbing. However, if in the play the ghost never speaks, only showing itself to Macbeth, in the OMG Shakespeare adaptation, it has several comments, mocking Macbeth. The rest of its interferences with Macbeth's event being signaled by "checking into" or "out of" the chat room. In both texts, Shakespeare's play and this modern adaptation, the ghost, though seen only by Macbeth, disturbs a public event, undermining Macbeth's claims at legitimacy and disturbing the public event he created in order to validate his authority

In a similar manner, Hamlet's "Murder of Gonzago REMIX" is presented by the prince on "Elsinore Castle Chat Server" (Shakespeare and Carbone, 2015: 48) in the attempt to give it an aura of authority, as two centers of power, that of Claudius, the king, and that of Hamlet, the prince who should have been a king, compete in the virtual space, the competition being visible by their attempt to occupy the official "chat server".

There are also aberrant ways of participating to the public sphere. Ophelia, for instance, in her madness, communicates only through emoticons, giving up language altogether and, therefore, becoming an enigma to the others who urge her to talk.

"Gertrude: Hello, Ophelia.
 Ophelia: 🍷🍷🍷
 Gertrude: Ophelia, please, I don't understand!
 Ophelia: 🤖🤖🤖
 Gertrude: Ophelia. Please use your words." (Shakespeare and Carbone, 2015: 74)

It seems that she assumes a digital form, almost as if losing her humanity, and expresses herself through images that are possible only in digital communication and not in real life. The failure of communication is suggested by Gertrude urging Ophelia to speak. Ophelia retains a digital presence, however, even after she loses her mind, her madness apparently turning her into a "glitch", a computer error or malfunction. A more interesting case is the fact that the digital space allows the preservation of the presence even after the person disappears from the physical world. For instance, Romeo and Juliet maintain a digital presence even after they die, as their social media status (Romeo and Juliet are in a relationship forever) remains valid, still gathering comments and likes (140 likes) (Shakespeare and Wright, 2015: 95).

The issue of presencing leads us to consider the problem of power represented by agency as "a crucial and identity constructing capability of performing as influential beings in the world" (Eichner, 2014: 127). Since agency is not equally distributed in society (Eichner, 2014: 2), the participation/presencing in social media can give a sense of empowerment to people who lack power in the real world. van Dijk suggests that "mediated communication results in a sort of equalization of status and gender"

(van Dijk, 2006: 231) as psychological studies have shown that the mediated communication encourages people who are shy in real life (van Dijk, 2006: 231). Couldry also insists that social media is very important especially for young people when they cannot communicate personally (Couldry, 2012: 51). The digital space that they control more easily as well as the mediated communication (human-medium-human) gives a feeling of protection, safety and control (which may often be false).

Agency in the digital space, therefore, can be seen both as active participation and involvement (Eichner, 2014: 127) and as the choice not to participate (Eichner, 2014: 163). Both cases are represented in the posts of the characters of the OMG series where there are likes and favorable comments to various posts, as well as cases of refusal to participate such as not liking (for instance, Macduff dislikes Macbeth's coronation announcement), leaving the chat rooms, blocking people (Gertrude sends Polonius' messages to the spam folder and Hamlet blocks Polonius' calls). This is not only a form of discontent, but an act of power, trying to eliminate the undesirable ones from the virtual space.

If lack of presence in the social media space is dangerous, too much exposure might also be harmful. According to van Dijk, there are many dangers that come from the presence in the network and one that seems to worry people more and more is "traceability" (van Dijk, 2006: 115). While showing and publicizing one's presence in the digital world seems to be the main form of existence and identity construction, too much exposure is fraught with dangers. The mere presence in social media suggests that, at one point, we might lose control of what is shown and feel under the pressure of constant surveillance. Characters are aware of these dangers. The most prominent example is represented by the repeated reminders in the Macbeth family to delete the messages in which they discuss Duncan's murder. Lady Macbeth also considers restoring the phone to factory settings to try and eliminate all traces of their deeds.

To conclude, these particular adaptations of Shakespeare's plays try to tackle the same problems expressed by the English playwright such as understanding and constructing human identity, validating power and searching for means of individual empowerment, free will, agency, or restrictions, but they add contemporary anxieties related to the more and more extensive use of social media, mainly by the younger generations. Though we do not share the reviewers' enthusiasm about the success of using the books in class in order to convince younger readers to approach Shakespeare more easily, we cannot deny the challenging questions that they raise about such issues as the increasing use of electronic reading, the changes that the digital world brings to the manner in which we approach literature and the future of education. On the other hand, though, we could try to be more optimistic and take these changes as they occur, considering that humanity, in its evolution from orality to writing, from manuscript to print, from print to digital media, has already passed through several such revolutions in which we lost something, while also gaining something else in return. According to Alberto Manguel: "each technology has its own merits, and therefore it may be more useful to leave aside the crusading view of the electronic world vanquishing the printed one and explore instead each technology according to its particular merits" (Manguel, 2010: 283). Irrespective of the medium of reading, what should not disappear, as it is a crucial part of our humanity, is the pleasure of reading: "suddenly feeling that peculiar sense of wonder, recognition, chill, and warmth that for no discernible reason a certain strain of words sometimes evokes" (Manguel, 2010: x).

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