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In This Harsh World, We Continue to Draw Breath: Queer Persistence in Shakespeare and Hamlet

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Abstract

Hamlet is one of Shakespeare's most famous and most often (mis-)quoted works. The central and titular character has likewise been an endless source of academic and artistic inquiry and exploration since nearly the creation of the work itself. However, this paper argues that a crucial and enlightening piece of the puzzle has, until recently, been left unexplored for the most part, considered a frivolous or non-serious pursuit: Hamlet's and *Hamlet's* queerness. Using historical research and evidence, close readings of the text, and examples of recent productions that have taken this element seriously, this paper argues that to fully understand the depth of the play and the character, one must encounter the text through a queer lens. In addition, Shakespeare's status as a queer man in history, and the legacy of his work in the intervening centuries, are discussed and outlined as part of the *queertinum*, a term founded, outlined, and described within this paper.

Keywords: queer, Hamlet, Shakespeare, LGBTQ

In This Harsh World, We Continue to Draw Breath:
Queer Persistence in Shakespeare and *Hamlet*

Prologue

In 2014, Professor Thys Heydenrych of the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa staged a production of *Hamlet*. He and his co-director Peter Taljaard mostly used the first Quarto to construct their script and production, pulling in, for instance, a Q1 exclusive scene where Horatio shares with Gertrude the news about Hamlet's return and Claudius's plot. In so doing, the team aimed to foster within the existing narrative and subtext that of a coming out story for Hamlet and Horatio. This is not necessarily surprising or unexpected; in 2018, a group of University of Michigan students and faculty produced a modernized production of *Hamlet* that likewise included staging and direction to encourage a reading wherein a love triangle existed between Hamlet, Horatio, and Ophelia. Among their many interesting choices of script was perhaps the most striking: the famous "to be or not to be" soliloquy was instead gifted to Horatio's non-binary actor to deliver after Hamlet's death. Additionally, the 1921 German silent film *Hamlet: The Drama of Vengeance* played even more with the source material(s), casting Hamlet as a young girl who had been deliberately raised as a boy in hopes of becoming the King's heir. The difficulty with Claudius necessarily revolves around this confusion and deceit about Hamlet's sex and gender, yet this production also fosters a love triangle between Hamlet, Horatio, and Ophelia. When Hamlet dies, his "secret" revealed of his assigned sex, Horatio embraces and kisses him. Even the BBC production, *Hamlet at Elsinore*, starring Christopher Plummer and Michael Caine as Hamlet and Horatio, has received popular attention for the close relationship the two

portrayed onscreen. Michael Caine, in his memoir, even notes that “if what [he] was conveying on screen was ambiguous sexuality, [he] would go with it, rather than fighting it, and use the difficulty to bring out that aspect of Horatio's personality” (excerpt CBS News). There are endless other examples, including productions wherein there was no conscious intention to heighten the relationship between the two. What arises, then, is that the script very well lends itself to this reading. But to what purposes, and from what historical context?

Introduction

That Shakespeare was queer is a fact mostly taken for granted at this point in time. As Paul Edmondson puts it, “The language of sexuality in some of the sonnets, which are definitely addressed to a male subject, leaves us in no doubt that Shakespeare was bisexual. It’s become fashionable since the mid-1980s to think of Shakespeare as gay. But he was married and had children...To reclaim the term bisexual seems to be quite an original thing to be doing” (Alberge). Edmondson and Stanley Wells additionally quote Marjorie Garber on her own assessment of Shakespeare’s sonnets: “Why avoid the obvious [that he is bisexual]? *Because* it is obvious? Or because a bisexual Shakespeare fits no one’s erotic agenda?” (31). Though they use the word “bisexual,” the ambiguity of Shakespeare’s sexuality, due to both his historical distance from us and his own historical context, easily translates these sentiments into an understanding that Shakespeare was queer (defined here as the actual social, emotional, mental, and physical experience of queer sexualities and identities). This fact is, technically, enough to argue that there is something inherently queer within the text of *Hamlet* itself that these productions are identifying and

exploring. The purpose of this paper is to establish further evidence of the legitimacy and historicity of these productions and their readings by asserting that there is explicit queerness to be found in Shakespeare and his canon. I likewise assert that there is a common thread within each distinct culture (here exploring the one in “Western” culture, rooted in the history of British imperialism) that persists throughout time and history, that calls out to the queer experience, and that this common thread exists within Shakespeare’s work, including *Hamlet*. As such, these directors, actors, and producers, several of whom are queer themselves, are picking up on this common thread and carrying it forward, adapting it to today’s context. Here I would like to identify this thread and term it as the *queertinum*. Though the question of the ethics and legitimacy of claiming such a thing as a queer or trans heritage or history has been and is being thoroughly explored (Bychowski et al.; Pyle), I argue here that the queertinum exists in some fashion with or without those nuanced considerations, unique to each culture and interlocking threads of history. Not only does it exist, connecting the past to the present and future, but using this understanding provides much richer, fuller, and more profound readings of all of Shakespeare’s work—particularly, in this instance, *Hamlet*.

Hamlet’s [Queer] Evolution

The craze or presumption of bardolatry that follows Shakespeare and his works very much likes to focus on the so-called universality of his plays. While I would describe, in simplistic terms, most of his works as universal as a one-size-fits-all item of clothing, it is irrefutable that there is something within the writing and the stories that aid them in their persistence and existence today, 400 and some years after the fact. Due to imperialism and colonialism, the *concept* or *mythology* of Shakespeare has become

its own beast with its own lifeforce, such that actually being able to locate him as a historical figure becomes difficult without a determined effort. This is likewise the case for his plays, eager though most are to point to the source texts and contemporaries that he used as referents or inspiration. But Hamlet is a special case: the character has, to a lesser degree, also taken on a life of his own. As the verbose title character of Shakespeare's longest play, Hamlet has become his own societal and scholarly fixation. Heydenrych says as much in his article discussing his 2014 production with Taljaard, acknowledging the variety of ways that Hamlet the character has been interpreted, noting how the pair hoped to deviate from well-worn paths, particularly of the 19th and 20th centuries (46). Heydenrych cites the Freudian and Oedipal interpretation of Hamlet's indecision that was, and in some respects still is, quite popular, highlighting Laurence Olivier's 1947 film performance as foundational to it (47). He additionally discusses the more psychologizing interpretations of Hamlet, noting the preoccupation with surveillance and suicide in some more contemporary productions (47). These have been popular interpretations, the Oedipal interpretation in particular, purporting to get at something deeper within the text, thus revealing character desires and motivations. A challenge to this angle might be that if Hamlet merely desires his mother above all else, then his moral outrage about incestuous marriage, betrayal, the line of succession, and inconstant love become smokescreen. While the play explores performance and metatheater, given that a lot of Hamlet's outrage is stated while he is *alone* onstage when he is soliloquizing his innermost thoughts openly admitting to the false performances he elsewhere puts on, this interpretation doesn't seem to line up with the text. Were he solely focused on conquering and claiming his own mother, his father's

murder would be a boon, and the decision to kill Claudius less fraught. Indeed, even focusing on suicide or surveillance may limit elements of the text or add more contemporary ideas onto it that may not have much of a basis in the original. None of this is necessarily *bad* or *lesser*—all are capable of being exciting to explore, and every contemporary interpretation necessitates some editing of the available source texts—but claims that these get closer to the heart of the play seem somewhat inaccurate, overblown, or misplaced.

It is against this more mainstream legacy of Hamlet interpretations that Heydenrych's own production presses forward with his reading of a queer Hamlet. Forefront to this is his own personal identification with the "to be or not to be" soliloquy as a gay man (44, 45), additionally noting "queer cues" (48) throughout the script itself. In his production, Hamlet's central conflicts concern the issue of his father's murder and his revenge on Claudius, but also on his question of coming out and his right to the throne. The play-within-a-play "is now not only a scene where Claudius' guilt about the murder is revealed to Hamlet, but it is also the moment where Hamlet reveals his relationship with Horatio to the court and his parents" (52). From this point forward, Heydenrych and Taljaard staged events with the undercurrent that Claudius rejected Hamlet and Gertrude had accepted him and his relationship with Horatio (53). The scene from Q1 where Horatio shares news from Hamlet with Gertrude was meant to further demonstrate their newfound closeness, "[allowing] him to counsel her", and also provide an explanation for why Horatio would remain at court with Hamlet absent (53). These choices, though Heydenrych doesn't necessarily say so himself, explicitly frame Hamlet's queerness as a sympathetic and noble quality. Through the play, he moves

from hiding his relationship with Horatio (and Horatio himself, who is known only to the guard), contemplating the worth and cost of coming out, then coming out and finding acceptance—and rejection—on the other side. With Horatio *and* Gertrude both aware of Claudius's villainy, the subsequent deaths and tragedy of the end of the play are all the more impactful. They additionally are situated *counter* to Claudius's regicide, fratricide, usurpation of the throne, and incestuous marriage with his brother's wife. That is to say, Heydenrych's production positions queerness as a quality befitting only the most noble, honest, and loyal characters within the play. This narrative implicitly pushes back against the idea that queerness is what corrupts the family unit. Indeed, it is Claudius—aggressively heterosexual and homophobic—who is responsible for the destruction of the family in the end, responsible as he is for the deaths of everyone onstage. And not only is this a helpful interpretation and staging for the modern day and misconceptions about queerness, but it likewise amplifies the themes and struggles already present within the text itself. Questions about legitimacy, family, justified and unjustified violence, suicide, honor, trust and distrust, nobility, love—all are made *more* by the presence of Heydenrych's queer coming out plot.

The same can be said for Tarnas's production at the University of Michigan and the 1921 silent film, *Hamlet: The Drama of Vengeance*. The latter builds upon the existing themes in the text, despite adding copious changes and scenes to the story, veering somewhat drastically from the given plot. However, concerns about honesty, familial ties, destiny, manhood, betrayal, romantic and platonic love, all abound. Indeed, making Hamlet a would-be trans man, then "revealing" that he is a "woman" at the end, allowing Horatio to openly love him in a heteronormative fashion, not only gives

permission to the relationship between Hamlet and Horatio to become central to the plot and themes, but also explains why Hamlet and Ophelia end up falling out in a new and interesting way: Hamlet “couldn’t” love her due to the “reality” of cisheteronormativity. The film even encapsulates Sawyer Kemp’s argument about *Hamlet*’s suitedness for a queer or trans narrative, in that a queer or trans reading profoundly heightens the preexisting conflicts of the play (42). The changes to the story emphasize the animosity between Hamlet and Claudius in particular, making Claudius’s frustration with Ophelia (and even Horatio), the threats he makes against Hamlet’s life, his usurpation of the throne, and his ultimate treachery all the more violent—and his undoing all the more satisfying.

Along the same lines, the production by Tarnas at the University of Michigan, where Horatio was played by a non-binary actor and given the “to be or not to be” soliloquy, also achieves the same kind of amplification of the text’s given themes, but by making some choices that are directly counter to the other aforementioned productions. For instance, Gertrude is not included in the world of Hamlet and Horatio’s relationship as she is in Heydenrych’s show, but instead she inserts herself in the one between Hamlet and Ophelia. Ophelia is implied to be pregnant, and Gertrude, fearing the consequences of such a thing, particularly with Ophelia losing her mind and her family tearing itself apart, is implied to have killed Ophelia—either intentionally or incidentally—in order to keep it quiet. Given the often-conflicting narratives around what Gertrude knows about her new husband’s machinations, this reading slotted very nicely into the existing text, further troubling the relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude, while also adding yet another layer of concern around questions of succession, legitimacy, and

reputation. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern extend this line of thinking even further, readily embodying the frivolous and extravagant party atmosphere of Elsinore as they do. They not only betray Hamlet and eventually serve to demonstrate Hamlet's shift in narrative power in the final act of the play, but they also represent, through their flamboyance and presentation (as one man and one woman in the casting), everything he's not, everything he openly resents. In that these characters are an extension of the queer atmosphere of the production, as well, it also allows the subtext of the performance to begin to tackle questions around assimilation and class in a more contemporary context: Hamlet's ire can extend past the faults of Elsinore and to the system at large, particularly as it concerns his place within it, and his own queer identity and relationships.

This selection of *Hamlet* interpretations/productions serves to demonstrate the capacity of the text to accommodate, encourage, and benefit from queer (and trans) readings. They not only offer commentary and tales about their own contemporary attitudes, fears, and conceptions of gender and sexuality, but they do so with a 400-year-old text. Shakespeare's own queer sexuality explains a large part of this, but what do we make of the text in his own time? Given that Shakespeare's legacy through imperialism has enforced not only essentialist ideas about race, but about Western cisheteronormativity, how can we more fully understand him and his texts as part of the queertinium?

Historical Friendship and Queerness

Alan Bray notes that in the 16th century, "homosexuality" as we know it didn't technically exist as a concept or social category, and the legal designation of "sodomy"

instead covered “a whole range of sexual acts, of which sexual acts between people of the same sex were only a part. It was closer rather to an idea like debauchery” (3). Sodomy itself was also associated with and symbolized being “an enemy of society: a traitor and a man given to lawless violence against his enemies...an habitual liar, an atheist and a blasphemer” (3). Thus, accusations of sodomy at the time, or commentary that heavily implied the crime, were more concerned with the associated implications than they were about the potential sexual act itself. Indeed, the bed as a social sphere was more central to the concept of male friendship and the bedfellow, and was not the symbol of privacy that we would consider it (4). Accusations rather extrapolated from behavior that was plenty public, meant to insinuate the act in order to discredit the accused, and it was often fueled by a resentment having to do with the difference in class and born social status among the men (8, 10, 13-14). Lorna Hutson, further drawing from the work of Alan Bray and Eve Sedgwick, establishes an over-arching timeline and illustration of the changing attitudes surrounding male friendship and homosocial bonds, reaching from the Renaissance, through the 18th and 19th centuries, up to the present day. Through this we note the male friendship customs that were standard in the 16th century, including bedsharing, embracing, kissing, and effusive declarations of love, regardless of their emotional sincerity (Bray 5-6), as well as the complex interaction between changes in the private and public sphere, and the harsher condemnations of sodomitical acts (Hutson 1070). Working from Sedgwick, Hutson explains that, after the start of the 18th century, “homosocial relations became...structured by homophobia. Men were at once aware that intimacy with other men was desirable, culturally imperative, and, at the level of sex and speech about sex,

prohibited. The psychological consequences of this structure...[have recovered] the Renaissance as antedating the construction of the psychological closet” (1070). Given the customs and norms of male friendship that existed in the 16th century, and the fact that the metaphorical closet and homophobia as a modern conception didn’t exist at the time, Bray assuredly states that “[h]omosexual relationships did indeed occur within social contexts which an Elizabethan would have called friendship, between masters and servants included” (14).

In some ways, the social attitudes and customs during Shakespeare’s lifetime were thus more flexible and workable for queer people. It could even easily be said that it was the realization of the freedom that queer men found within the requirements and demands of homosocial relationships that led to the excessiveness of homophobia in the following centuries. Though women and trans people are noticeably absent, there are historical arguments to be made for their own limited and exceptioned freedoms at the time, as well, given the disregard for facets of women’s social lives, the capriciousness of norms about privacy and medicine, and the ever-changing attitudes around gender presentation. Here, though, it is specifically worth noting that applying a lens of presumed homophobia and queerphobia as we know it today onto the historical context that Shakespeare lived and worked within is anachronistic. Some would likewise claim that applying “new” concepts and words such as queer, bisexual, and gay to historical figures would fall under the same problem, but I reject that notion on the basis of the following: the experience of human sexuality and the general breadth of human romantic emotion predates the creation of words to categorize it and any social or moral interpretation of it. Therefore, the attitudes in *response* to the naturally varied

phenomena of human sexualities and emotions have been consistently inconsistent, in flux, and necessarily required a social concept of a behavior or experience (and a name for it) that could be subjected to further social constructs of morality. Put more simply, “queerness has been around longer than straightness. Straightness is MORE modern. No-one said they were ‘not like that’ until some people were identified as ‘like that’” (Wheeler, “You know...”). With this understanding, Shakespeare and his plays become more intelligible in a queer historical context. As Sedgwick says, there was no psychological or metaphorical closet in which queer people were placed or placed themselves; as Bray points out, the very public behaviors of male friendship accommodated for homoerotic feelings and interpretations; and as Hutson demonstrates, it is only over time that these became inherently problematic for those who dictated and upheld the changing social mores in the following centuries. As such, Bray’s explanation of Marlowe’s *Edward II* not only serves to complicate the implied sexualities of these characters and historical figures, but also demonstrates that interpreting queerness in these texts, particularly in the sometimes empty but effusive written exchanges between historical noblemen, is not so cut and dried (10, 12-13). To trust the word of accusers and only accusers, either real or fictional, as in Marlowe’s character Lightborne, is to support the idea that sodomy was inherently queer, that heterosexuals could easily spot it, that such accusations were never born out of resentment for cross-class and beyond-station interactions and advancement, and to further reify queerness as a set of sexual-only behaviors inherently associated with moral corruption. This likewise erases the very real romances and relationships that

were carried out under the banner of male friendship or *amicitia*. But, how can one tell apart these real romances from the appearance of social niceties?

Hamlet and Horatio as Queer “Friends”

In the case of Hamlet and Horatio, Sandra Young, Elizabeth Hanson, and Jonathan Crewe offer compelling interpretations. All three are to some degree preoccupied with the exchange between the two characters in Act 3 scene 2. When compared to Bray’s examples of perfunctory affection (5) and the ways in which it was the complicit and ostentatious flouting of other social conventions that implied moral corruption, and therefore ‘sodomy’ (3), the chosen scene and dialogue manage to not fit neatly into either category. Crewe chooses to pursue a close reading of the lines, “Horatio, thou art e’en as just a man / As e’er my conversation coped withal” (3.2.53-54). In this close reading, Crewe briefly mentions a colleague, Eric Rasmussen, who notes that both ‘conversation’ and ‘coped’ can have sexual meanings or interpretations (272). Though Crewe mentions this only once more on the following page, their situating early in the reading and within the context of establishing Hamlet as a character and defining the nuances of his speech still lends them some thematic weight. Further, Crewe’s own analysis pays particular attention to Hamlet’s own voiced antitheatricity throughout the play, and how those protestations lend context to his compliments to Horatio here, as a more “just” man (275-276). Using this understanding of Hamlet as a character, Crewe situates Horatio as “a bulwark against absorption into the theatricalized world of the court,” as well as an “alter ego and interlocutor” for Hamlet (275). In other words, by noting, focusing on, and espousing Horatio’s steady and reliable nature, Hamlet is additionally reminding himself to not be swayed by the theatricality—and thereby, deep

performativity and empty perfunctory social graces—of the court and the others around them. Crewe’s assessment is particularly interesting given Bray’s description of the ideal male friendship; since Hamlet so thoroughly denies the theatricality of those at court, including his rebuke of Gertrude and Claudius’s requests that he stop his “unmanly” grieving (1.2.94), and since Horatio is his only true accomplice and confidante, it follows that his exhortations of Horatio’s good qualities are as sincere as they can be. Additionally, they happen only in private moments, implying that these words are indeed not to “flatter” (3.2.49), and Hamlet only moves on (“Something too much of this” [3.2.67]) after extensive praise and reassurances of its sincerity, and when pressing matters move him to change the subject. This, recalling Bray, would imply something deeper and more sincere.

Hanson’s own assessment of this exchange notes and highlights the very same thing. Hamlet and Horatio’s status as fellow university students is Hanson’s focus, and as such, she examines the intricacies of the additional layer that the university/student context adds to their characterization and relationship. As part of Bray’s historical examination provided the significance of social status within male friendships and the social “appropriateness” of their closeness, Hanson’s discussion of the changing attitudes in and around the early modern university in England expands upon this. The implied social status within the university was still meant to reflect the values of society at large, but it was often the common man paying for or working his way through university, and not so much the nobleman attending school when his learning was meant to be done by private tutors (Hanson 210). There was indeed implied conflict in the schools’ housing, where those of higher birth would flaunt their rank in social

interactions, prompting the guidance that they should treat each other as scholarly equals (215). Shakespeare's choice, then, to give Hamlet many fellow students and distinguish between them by virtue of their morality, signals that Horatio is particular and significant (223). Horatio, given his lack of "determinate social position" (Crewe 274) and Hamlet's particular praise of him, especially when compared to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is meant to be seen as the traditional scholar, a more common man of a lower class (Hanson 223). If this is the case, then their statuses and Horatio's upright behavior and loyalty to Hamlet do indeed emulate the *amicitia* and the homosocial bonds that were prized at the time. Though, as Hanson says, "Horatio's deferential and Hamlet's ardently amicable addresses [still] demand the suppression of a social fact about the relationship" (222). Though Hanson argues that Hamlet's conflict and devotion to Horatio is perhaps part and parcel with his continued flouting of expectation, in much the way that Crewe sees it, he and Horatio never quite step out of the bounds of their roles insofar as their moral adroitness.

All of this is a clear demonstration of Sandra Young's examination and assertion of Hamlet as more than his interiority, as a character within a broader context in the play. Though she and others she quotes credit the psychologizing of Hamlet with making him memorable and significant in cultural and academic memory, it is this same fixation that, she purports, distracts from recognizing further historical and textual influence. Pulling from Margreta de Grazia, Young explains that this psychologizing "has made it hard to read Hamlet's behaviour as satire and harder still to recognise the play's critique of power and the social conditions which give rise to Hamlet's malaise" (17). Though she goes on to discuss the theatrical history of *Hamlet* productions that have

critiqued or been banned under authoritarian regimes, this point in particular is important. It very clearly calls to the same assessment that Crewe made of Hamlet's antitheatricality as it concerns the performativity of social obligations and roles, and Hanson's assessment of the social implications of Hamlet and Horatio's statuses with respect to each other. However, she adds the element of satire onto this. Here quoting from de Grazia, Hamlet demonstrates "signature stunts and riffs of the Clown, madman, Vice, and the devil: all stock figures of privation [in Elizabethan theatre practice] and therefore suitable role models for the dispossessed prince" (17). What is interesting about this addition is that it merely adds on to Crewe's analysis of Hamlet's meta- or extratheatrical, and ironic, position as being a theatric character that is staunchly antitheatrical in the matters of "real" life (275). With these parts to put on, take off, and mimic, Hamlet's vocal criticism of and musings on the performance and expression of human feeling takes on more sincerity, at the same time as there is a sense of irony or detachment. If we briefly turn to the more academic understanding of "queer" theory, Hamlet's characterization and the way he characterizes himself and others in the text of the play necessarily deconstructs notions of expression and theatricality. And, in this historical and textual context, this kind of "queering" is necessarily tied to actual queer experience and perspective. As people whose lives are inherently Other and outside the established norms, there is a careful observation of these said norms that we queer (and trans) people must engage in. Thus, in this way, Hamlet, and by extension, Shakespeare, are engaging in a true queering of and queer perspective on theatrical, social, and relational roles.

The Queertinum

As trans-medievalist M.W. Bychowski puts it in part of her contribution to the roundtable discussion, “Trans*historicités”:

Taking that first step across divisions of time and humanity takes a degree of courage—courage to be wrong, to be challenged, to be changed—but this is how we survive, and this is how we find liberation.... Genealogies are inroads that often cut across and depend on old paths, sites, and back roads. We connect them but learn from them. The transgender back roads have things to teach us about the ways trans life moved around and between the major charted thoroughfares. Some of these places and trails are hard to get to and require genealogies to bring us there, but once we arrive, the whole landscape will begin to seem different. On the way back, we begin to modify the genealogies that first carried us there or else create new ones that were not apparent until we accessed the perspective of these old trails and back roads. (660-661)

It is from this circular, symbiotic, ever-evolving idea of back roads and trails away from the “major charted thoroughfares” that I believe the queertinium arises. Much can be said about academic queer theory and the differences and difficulties between it and trans theory and theorists—but suffice to say that for the purposes and intentions of the queertinium, they are expansively overlapping. Though the queertinium may be a direct line connecting queer and trans consciousnesses across time, it is not linear in its workings or conception. It is, as Bychowski says above, a constant journey of discovery through byways and roads that are not only difficult to find, but that refuse to be cleanly categorized. As demonstrated in previous sections, the ways in which Hamlet and *Hamlet* can be understood as queer are multifarious, extensive, and do not easily fit

within prescribed roles, molds, or ideals. That, in itself, is part of the queer sensibility of it all. These productions are, then, more than just engaging in the changing social norms of the day, but they are also offering ways of documenting that change over the course of the text's history, thereby embodying the queertinium.

The goal is not necessarily to make new connections, but to encourage identifying those hard-to-see connections that were already there, and combining historical and modern language and sensibilities to discuss them. To revisit Sawyer Kemp, their piece on bringing transgender experiences and modes of thought into classrooms discussing Shakespeare notes Hamlet's particular suitedness to discussing and embodying the varied trans experience (42). Kemp urges a move beyond a cis-centric, transphobic, reductionist impulse to seeing only cross-dressing comedic characters as spaces for transgender performance and identity. Their example of Hamlet helps to further ground these notions: "Hamlet makes a nice touchstone...because he does act out a range of scenarios we can associate with contemporary transgender struggle. [He] is disallowed from inheriting his military position, prevented from attending school, deeply depressed, considering suicide, ejected from his home, and [anxious] about the task...of masculinity and patrilineage" (42). From that, we can likewise further understand the Heydenrych and Skyler Tarnas readings of the "to be or not to be" soliloquy as a site of queer struggle in each of their productions. And as we've seen, Svend Gade's 1921 *Hamlet: The Drama of Vengeance* spies the applicability of Hamlet's narrative to trans and queer experiences, casting Asta Nielsen as a "female" Hamlet in love with Horatio. Translated though it is into early 20th century understandings of gender and sexuality and the accepted variations of the time,

it nonetheless locates the exact same anxieties that Kemp names, that are both within the original text(s), and inherent to both queer and trans experiences. Kemp further calls for a “[shift] away from the interior/exterior rhetoric of truth and disguise, and toward a model developed with a perspective of experience and the self-in-context (which is to say, often either in community or in danger) ...” (43). This, too, calls back to the insistence by Young, Bray, and Hanson to understand Hamlet as a character within his situational context, in addition to the fixation on his interiority. This allowance for Hamlet’s textual context, as well as the broader historical situation of Shakespeare at the time of writing *Hamlet*, follows Bychowski’s discussion of trans*historicity, easily embodies Kemp’s summary of being “often either in community or in danger”, and thereby also exemplifies the queertinium. As observed in Bray’s and Hutson’s work, the line between *amicitia* and perceptions of sodomy was eroding over time, and Hamlet and Horatio walked a *very* fine line amidst their own social statuses, roles, and expectations, both in and out of the play.

This kind of line has existed in Western cultures (as well as others, though often at the hands of Western imperialism) in various forms in a continuous lineage from Shakespeare’s time to our contemporary era. Though the concepts of “homosexuality” and “homophobia” are, as previously established, historically recent, queer and trans identities and experiences predate the language that would name them, and the attitudes that would respond to them (see Pyle for an example of all the above). The line between “acceptable” and “not” forms a thread through our history, as does the erasure of whatever became seen as “not” (Wheeler “Anti-queer...”). Alexis Shotwell and Trevor Sangrey argue that the way we come to understand ourselves is relational and co-

constituted. In the context of gender, they say that “we are all subject to micro- and macro-practices of gender norming” but that “often it is trans and genderqueer people who serve as theoretical objects with which to think about gender: trans people stand in for gender relations as a whole” (57). This is a useful and functional naming of the phenomenon throughout history: norms are established not just by the affirmative demands placed upon bodies, but also through the negation and denial of what those bodies are not or cannot be. As we’ve seen, it is the *avoidance* of what was seen as inherent human sinfulness and corruption that is at the root of accusations of sodomy (Bray 2). This association between queerness and transness and the corruption of traditional values is likewise present in (usually as an argumentative negative) the previously explored productions. As time has gone on, these norms have shifted shape, but have become more narrow, adopting the frameworks of homophobia and cisheteronormativity, thus further restricting and defining these norms in opposition to the concepts of queerness and transness. In focusing only on the justification for queer and trans identity and experience, “real people's lives and struggles are abstracted and instrumentalized in ways that should worry us and in ways that continue to bolster individualized rather than relational models of selfhood” (Shotwell & Sangrey 57).

This argument, though crucial in contemporary discussions and interactions around transgender thought and experience, also deftly builds upon Kemp’s and others’ assertions. Queer and trans experience is not situated just as a theoretical Other or concept as a deviation from what is “natural” or presumed. Rather, it is an inherent part of the human experience that, due to and in spite of its treatment over time, has developed its own calling cards and modes of identification (recall Bychowski above).

With the given historical context above to justify—without the oft-demanded “proof” of sexual relations—the existence of queer historical figures and queer experiences within their writing, I emphasize again the significance of the queertinium. Though the documentation and discussion of historical fact is important for establishing a communal sense of place, identity, and history, the queertinium expands beyond those limitations. As Kemp identifies that trans experiences are not limited to the cisgender/cis-centric and transphobic understanding of cross-dressing, so too are all queer and trans experiences not limited by that which seeks to define itself in opposition to an Other. The conflict and presumption of the “interior/exterior” and the “truth” versus “disguise” that Kemp refers to is likewise applicable to popular conceptions of Hamlet: in focusing on and prioritizing his so-called interiority without giving thought to his context (both within and outside of the play), everything else falls away. Without the queertinium to aid in understanding and translating them, Hamlet’s diatribes against theatricality, his putting on and taking off of roles and guises, his central conflict, all become flattened and debatable.

Young’s article, musing on the reasons for Hamlet’s persistence in social and academic thought, concludes by saying that the “sense of recognition that Hamlet [inspires]... is...an opportunity to do with Shakespeare what we will, but to do so consciously, careful not to assume that Shakespeare and his cast of compelling characters can speak for all people and for all time... In that way we might continue to find new meanings and new pleasures in the interpretations offered by countless twenty-first century Hamlets across the globe...” (24). I would not disagree with her conclusion to “consciously” engage with the text and use contemporary perspectives to

continue finding and creating more meaning within the play and the character of Hamlet. Where I would differ is the idea that all of these Hamlets are “new” and thereby necessarily outside of the realm of historical and textual meaning, by nature of being mere interpretations. In his own writing, Heydenrych puts “queer interpretation” in quotation marks, something not done with the other instances of the word “interpretation” in the article (44). That sense of devaluation with the word “interpretation” is felt particularly strongly when joined with “queer”, it seems, and I would echo that feeling. Wherever it comes from or whatever it signifies for Heydenrych, the fact is that, even still today, as stated above, there is a burden of proof, a presumption that there must be justification for being “outside the norm”, for anything queer. Additionally, I posit that Hamlet’s persistence and the ways in which people continue to identify with Hamlet is for two key reasons: 1) he was intentionally a chameleon, embodying and mocking the very suits and roles expected of him and flouting them as was necessary, thereby providing many faces for people to see themselves in, and 2) the queertinium is responsible for the sense of contemporaneousness in this chameleonlike performance, and the inability of the majority cisgender and heterosexual scholars to comprehend that fact has prolonged the “puzzle” of this character.

I don’t take lightly the irony of this situation: Shakespeare’s legacy as a tool of colonialism and white cisheteropatriarchy is at least partly responsible for his preservation and lionization that continues to this day. The recurrent fascination marginalized folks have with him in spite of this, however, comes from his being situated and his participation within the queertinium. He and his works have been

straightwashed in the last couple of centuries, and used to then quash—and later revive—the queertinium at home and abroad. This is the wider and deeper historical context of every queer *Hamlet*. Heydenrych’s implicit understanding of the queertinium, as a gay man himself and from within the context of Western culture(s), is what helped to craft and inform his production and his performance of Hamlet, the play and the character. His production’s aims and the local conversations it engages in are the crucial details that put his *Hamlet* where and how it needs to be, but, as he put it himself, *Hamlet* is easily read and understood through “queer interpretation” (44). Thus, Heydenrych, Tarnas, and others are taking hold of the queertinium in their work, and as such embodying Kemp’s call for a broader understanding of queer and trans experience, and Shotwell and Sangrey’s call for a relational model and understanding of queer and trans identity: “to be or not to be” is exemplified as a queer struggle point, and Claudius’s villainy becomes defined through its interaction with Hamlet’s queerness. My work here is to claim—not appropriate, reappropriate, or interpret—the societal and literary history surrounding Shakespeare. By claim, I mean to refer once more to Bychowski: “We may share experiences, relics, traditions, ideas, and stories with the past, but we do not occupy their skin, feel their pain, witness history as they witness. There is ever contingency in our points of contact.... At this contingency, solidarity arises. Those in the past have power over us (we need them), and in encountering them they make demands of us” (679).

The work of Heydenrych, Tarnas, and Gade, among so many others, is a continuation and embodiment of this, and thus the queertinium. Not just in spite of, but

because of the insistent attempts to erase and deny it, our queer legacy persists. So long as we are here to read it and lend it breath, the legacy persists.

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

- *Sonnet 18, William Shakespeare*

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--. "You know what else is a modern invention? Straightness. In fact, queerness has been around longer than straightness. Straightness is MORE modern. No-one said they were "not like that" until some people were identified as "like that"." *Twitter*, 5 April, 2021, 2:11 pm., <https://twitter.com/Wheeler/status/1379179787869110277>

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