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Pitching *Mad Boy*: How Paratextuality Mediates the Distance Between Spectators, Adaptations,
and Source Texts.

A popular anecdote used to introduce students and spectators to *King Lear* tells how, for 150 years, the stage was dominated by Nahum Tate's adaptation, in which Lear and Cordelia are happily reconciled, and Cordelia is married off to Edgar. Here is what N.H. Hudson had to say about Tate:

This shameless, this execrable piece of demendation. Tate improve *Lear*? Set a tailor at work, rather, to improve Niagara! Withered be the hand, palsied be the arm, that ever dares to touch one of Shakespeare's plays again. (quoted in Massai 247)

Of course, such sophisticated and erudite commentators as are assembled here today will be quick to point out a couple of ironies about Hudson's condemnation of Shakespeare adaptation.

First, Shakespeare himself was an adaptor. Most if not all of his plays are adapted from extant plays, renaissance romance novels, or even, as in the case I will be discussing today, old Norse sagas. *King Lear* was adapted from an earlier play, which was itself based on Holinshed's chronicles.

Second, popular adaptations by Tate and Colley Cibber, among others, by making Shakespeare accessible and tasteful to Restoration and Enlightenment audiences, played no small part in establishing Shakespeare at the centre of the literary canon (Massai 247). And as an afterthought, it might be worth noting that Tate's adaptation does not so much ruin the original *King Lear* as restore it – Tate's happy ending is more “faithful” than Shakespeare to Shakespeare's sources, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* and Holinshed's *Chronicles*.

I mention this by way of introducing Michael O'Brien's *Mad Boy Chronicle*, which, like Tate's *Lear*, takes on *Hamlet* by going back to Shakespeare's sources. Unlike Tate, however,

O'Brien has thus far escaped the scorn of Bardolaters, and when I last saw him, his arm appeared steady and his hand un-withered. How has *Mad Boy Chronicle* been able to avoid the kind of derision so often heaped on adaptations? Inspired by O'Brien's enlightened vandalism (or Vikingism?) and by Linda Hutcheon's recent address about the cultural prejudices against adaptation, I want to show how *Mad Boy Chronicle*, which was a Governor-General's Award finalist in 1996, has successfully avoided being targeted by these prejudices, and has even taken advantage of them.

In order to show how *Mad Boy Chronicle* negotiates anti-adaptation prejudices, I will focus on what Robert Stam, adapting Gérard Genette, calls "paratextuality." Genette, in *Palimpsestes* re-formulates intertextuality as several different categories of what he calls "transtextuality." Transtextuality is "all that which puts one text in relation, whether manifest or secret, with other texts" (Stam 27). The first and most obvious category identified by Genette is "intertextuality," or "the 'effective co-presence of two texts' in the form of quotation, plagiarism, and allusion" (Stam 27). Certainly there is plenty of this in *Mad Boy Chronicle*'s profane doggerel, which parodically demystifies *Hamlet*'s elegant verse by rendering it as crude commonsense. Before we read or hear such intertextual allusions, however, many or most of us will have already been alerted to their presence through *paratextual* references. Genette defines "paratextuality" as "the relation, within the totality of a literary work, between the text proper and its 'paratext' – titles, prefaces, postfaces, epigraphs, dedications, illustrations, and ... in short, all the accessory messages and commentaries which come to surround the text" (Stam 28). Stam, a film theorist, points out that "paratextuality" would also include posters, reviews, interviews with the director, and so on (28). In this presentation, I will show how such paratexts – which in the context of theatre include programs and publicity brochures, among other things – have been critical to *Mad Boy Chronicle*'s successful negotiation of anti-adaptation prejudices. First, I will

briefly summarize these prejudices, focusing especially on those that are invoked against Canadian authors who dare to meddle with classical plays. Then, after clarifying the relationship between *Mad Boy* and its intertexts – specifically *Hamlet* and *Gesta Danorum* – I will focus on its paratexts, particularly the reviews, forewords, and playwright’s notes which pre-form the reader/spectator’s horizon of expectations, to show how *Mad Boy Chronicle* evades, resists, and even inverts the terms of anti-adaptation prejudices.

In her keynote address to open this conference on Wednesday, Linda Hutcheon alluded to what is perhaps the most critical problem in the both the theory and practice of adaptation. Both those who adapt and those who study adaptation must work in a context of negative prejudices and assumptions about adaptation. The very language we use to describe and discuss adaptations, including the original vs. copy paradigm, is value-laden and morally charged, centered on the misleading ideal of “fidelity.” At their worst, as Stam points out, adaptations constitute unfaithful *betrayals, desecrations, bastardizations, vulgarizations, blasphemy* (Stam: 3); at their best, they are “faithful” to the original – that is, the best an adaptation can be is a good copy. The more prestigious the “original,” the more critical scrutiny the adaptation is likely to draw, and few originals are as jealously guarded as Shakespeare’s.

As Linda Hutcheon points out, adaptations must run a gauntlet of deeply ingrained cultural prejudices. Instead of talking about how adaptations *add* to our understanding of their intertexts, we frame adaptations in a “discourse of loss” – sure the Ringwraiths were awesome, but what happened to Tom Bombadil? Adaptations also suffer from what Stam calls our “*a priori* valorization of anteriority and seniority: the assumption that older arts are necessarily better arts” (4). I would argue that Canadians tend toward a similar *a priori* valorization of cultural proximity: because Shakespeare was English, and Canada was colonized by the English, Shakespeare comes to us through the English, and therefore when Canadians do Shakespeare, the

best they can hope to do is copy the “authentic” English Shakespeare. Such assumptions doubtless informs the Stratford Festival’s time-honoured tradition of hiring British Artistic Directors. Thus Canadian Shakespeare adaptations are penalized twice: first because the Shakespeare play is older and therefore better than adaptations, second because “real” Shakespeare must come from Britain. And yet, in Canada, Shakespeare adaptation is a flourishing trade. At last count, the Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare website’s database had 471 entries, and since 1989, three of these, including *Mad Boy Chronicle*, have been winners or finalists of the Governor-General’s Award. How, then, are playwrights like Michael O’Brien able to use Shakespearean texts to their advantage, exploiting the cultural capital and prestige associated with Shakespeare without being subjected to the kind of scorn applied to Nahum Tate?

Mad Boy Chronicle, which premiered at Alberta Theatre Projects’ *playRITES* ’95 new play festival, sets *Hamlet* in a somewhat caricatured Dark Age Denmark. That is, instead of moving the plot forward to the present, as many adaptors do, O’Brien moves it *back* to the final days of the first millennium, and changes *Hamlet*’s renaissance courtiers into cartoonishly grotesque Vikings. However, this choice is not *unfaithful* to *Hamlet*; rather it is ostensibly faithful to the ultimate source of both plays: *Gesta Danorum*, an anthology of Nordic sagas and oral literature recorded by a 13th century Christian monk, Saxo Grammaticus. Following *Gesta Danorum*, O’Brien changes Hamlet into a 14 year-old boy named Horvendal¹, who is relatively small and weak; Horvendal is also – and this is O’Brien’s choice – a Christian convert who has forsworn violence, which makes him the subject of ridicule and derision in the community and leaves him defenceless against his murderous Uncle Fengo, a vicious tyrant whose favourite prank is to hold people down and force them to look at his empty eyesocket. As in *Gesta*

¹ In Saxo, the protagonist is named Amleth and Horvendal is Amleth’s murdered father.

Danorum, Horvendal's only protection is the Norse code of honour, which protects "fools and cripples" from persecution; in contrast with Hamlet, Horvendal's "is-he-or-isn't-he-mad?" charade is less a detective strategy than a survival mechanism: Horvendal must feign dementia just to stay alive.

While the plot and characters of *Mad Boy* generally mimic and parody those of *Hamlet*, there are some critical departures. The most important of these is O'Brien's addition of a subplot involving religion. Midway through the play, Christian monks arrive in an apparent *deus ex machina*, and announce that the Vikings must convert to Christianity and embrace the "Godd of Peace" – or else be destroyed by crusading "Knights of the Purple Cross" (see act two, scene 14). At the very moment that appears to offer salvation to the Christian Horvendal, Fengo turns the tables by abruptly converting to Christianity and excommunicating Horvendal. With the Christians backing him, Fengo ruthlessly purges all opposition to his tyranny, prompting even Jesus Himself to appear on stage, begging Horvendal to murder Fengo. By the end of the play, all opposition to Fengo's reign of terror, including Horvendal, has been destroyed, and we find that Fengo enjoys even more power as a Christian lord than he did as a Viking chief.

O'Brien's illumination of this "lost" source of *Hamlet* reminds spectators that *Hamlet* is not really original, and by setting the play in Viking Denmark he even challenges the authenticity and fidelity of Shakespeare, whose renaissance setting is exposed as – gasp! – a mere adaptation. Furthermore, by repatriating Hamlet to his Danish roots, O'Brien effectively disintermediates the English colonial heritage through which we receive Shakespeare. *But* such claims can only be effective if readers and spectators are made aware of the lost source, and this awareness can only be spread through paratextuality: unless spectators are prepared by posters, reviews, program notes, or other publicity material, they will not realize the significance of the setting, and may dismiss the play as a trivial spoof: "Viking *Hamlet*."

Among the various paratexts, newspaper reviews are perhaps of primary importance because they are available to potential spectators even before they decide to see the play. Many, if not most spectators of the play will have read or heard a review of the play before they attend the theatre, and these reviews will dispose them to a specific type of reception or even influence their choice to attend the production – or not. Martin Morrow’s review of the premiere production in the *Calgary Herald*, for example prepares potential spectators for an irreverent parody of *Hamlet*, and even warns that “some will be offended” by the scene in which Jesus appears and impels Horvendal to murder his uncle. Readers of this review who know they will hate a blasphemous parody of *Hamlet* may decide not to see the play, and readers who might otherwise have been offended may instead respond to Morrow’s construction of the ideal spectator: “for those who can tell the difference between wanton blasphemy and a pointed look at the abuse of Christianity, O’Brien’s bold comedy is fresh, funny, fascinating, and one of the best to come out of this nine-year-old festival” (in O’Brien 154). In addition, for its original audience of *Calgary Herald* readers, this closing line in the review speaks to the reader’s sense of civic pride, urging Calgarians to make a strong showing (and thereby prevent the out-of-town reviewers from portraying Calgarians as puritanical rubes who can’t distinguish “blasphemy” from social critique). Finally, such reviews may actually encourage a positive reception of the play by causing those who choose to attend to anticipate a positive experience, while discouraging potentially negative spectators from attending at all.

The reviews of the Calgary and Los Angeles productions of *Mad Boy Chronicle* do the critical work of situating the play in the discourse of adaptation and anti-adaptation prejudices. Although *Mad Boy Chronicle* both closely follows and critically diverges from *Hamlet*, the reviews have seldom invoked issues of fidelity. Most critics address *Mad Boy Chronicle* as a

new play rather than an adaptation. Martin Morrow gave the play an overwhelmingly positive review:

A Viking free—for—all

There's method to the madness in this hilarious new play!

Imagine Hamlet, prince of Denmark, as a grungy teenage barbarian who pretends to be a dog. Think of his wicked uncle, King Claudius, as a slobbering, lecherous Viking lord who looks like Long John Silver crossed with a ... Hell's Angel. And ... Polonius ... as a fawning idiot whose sage advice to his son is, "Don't do anything stoopid, lad, it ain't wise" (in O'Brien 152).

Morrow's review is interesting because it deliberately invokes the aforementioned anti-adaptation prejudices specifically to dispel them. He continues, "Is this yet another misguided interpretation of Shakespeare? *Hamlet* for the *Dumb and Dumber* crowd?" Morrow only needs to use the phrase "yet another misguided interpretation" to invoke anti-adaptation prejudices: he is confident that his readers will know exactly what he means. And yet he quickly and unambiguously rescues *MBC* from this dreaded category: "No, it's *Mad Boy Chronicle*, an audacious hilarious new play making its debut in a wild and often exhilarating production" (152). For Morrow then, *MBC* crosses the line between adaptation and novelty, and in so doing it effectively lifts itself above the realm of mere interpretation. *Mad Boy*, that is, did *not* challenge Morrow to rethink his assumptions about adaptations: it actually plays into them. Conversely, LA Times critic Philip Brandes perceived the play as complicating the relationship between adaptations and adapted texts, and was clearly disturbed by a play which he was unable to classify as either copy or original:

But the uneasy question remains: What to do with the references once we get them? Echoing the original in couplets like "The baptism's the place/Where I'll rub Viking justice in his face" underscores the central problem here: The

conceit is too weirdly elaborate for parody, but not strong enough to extricate itself from the shadow of a greater play. (Brandes 2001).

Unlike Morrow, Brandes found that the play *did* trouble his assumptions about adaptation and, unable to resolve this “central” problem, he gave the play a comparatively lukewarm review. The play’s positive critical reception, then, does not rest in a challenge of the validity of the original/imitation dyad, but in the strategic negotiation thereof.

Morrow and other reviewers of *Mad Boy* pre-empt the prejudice against copies by emphasizing the play’s novelty; interestingly, they also defend the play from the *opposite* end of the spectrum, pointing out that *Mad Boy*’s pedigree predates even *Hamlet*. Martin Morrow explains it all for you: “Michael O’Brien’s rough, irreverent retelling of literature’s most famous tragedy owes less to Shakespeare than to the Bard’s ancient source: the tale of Amleth found in the “Gesta Danorum,” a 13th Century Latin collection of Danish history and legend by Saxo Grammaticus” (Morrow: 1995). Madeleine Shaner, who reviewed the Los Angeles production, also takes care to inform readers of *Mad Boy*’s complicated origins:

Combining some irreverent Norse history with a giant dollop of farce, a barrel of bathos, some worse-than-verse, some Viking urban legends, some crusading Christianity, and a giant dose of stick-this-in-your-ear puh-leaze!, this work purports *to tell the real story of Hamlet*, as extrapolated from the “Bad Quarto” of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*; [and] *Gesta Danorum*, the Medieval source for the *Hamlet* story (Shaner 2001, emphasis mine).

These reviews do the important work of telling their readers how to interpret the Viking setting, which they might otherwise find confusing or trivial. But these reviews also point to the importance of other paratexts, namely publicity materials disseminated by the theatre and supplemental information printed in the playtext. After all, how else do all these reviewers know about the ancient Danish lineage of *Hamlet* and *Mad Boy Chronicle*, which is not mentioned in the play’s dialogue? Critics, of course, are content to let their readers believe that they are

naturally acquainted with “the Bard’s ancient sources.” To paraphrase the King Arthur of Monty Python’s *Holy Grail*, who is asked how he just happens to know the average velocity of an unladen swallow, “well, when you’re a critic, you just have to know these things.” But the reality is that most critics, like other readers, will find this information in the press kit, the playtext, or the program. (And by way of a sidebar, there is no evidence that Shakespeare himself had access to *Gesta Danorum*; his direct source was probably either an earlier version of the play or a French novelization by Francois de Belleforest – when you’re a dramaturg, you just have to know these things.) Before critics write their reviews, or even see the play, they are influenced by such paratexts as press releases and press kits; or, especially in the case of premiere productions, direct contact with the playwright. The play’s program, too, is an important paratext. Even if a critic or casual spectator manages to attend the play without seeing or hearing any posters, reviews, previews, interviews, or advertising, they will have a program thrust into their hands as they are guided to a seat where they have little else to do but read it until the curtain. The program is the theatre company’s last, best hope of influencing their audience’s reception of the play, and in the case of *Mad Boy Chronicle*, the program will almost certainly invoke – if only to pre-empt – discourses about adaptations, by informing the spectators that they are about to see a Canadian play which retells *Hamlet*, yet which is really not based on Shakespeare but rather seeks to revive the long-forgotten source of Shakespeare’s text.

Paratexts also accumulate in the published edition of the play, which may be read by reviewers of subsequent productions. The published edition of *Mad Boy Chronicle* contains extensive paratext. The back jacket summary tells us that *Mad Boy Chronicle* “hauls the Hamlet story howling back to its origins,” a phrasing that inverts default assumptions that *Hamlet* is the “original”; the frontispiece identifies the play’s sources as *Gesta Danorum* and *Hamlet* – in that order; and the playwright’s notes also acknowledge such sources as *Gesta Danorum*, the “Bad

Quarto” of *Hamlet*, “the Icelandic Hrafnkel's Saga, Rosalind Miles' *The Rites of Man*; Robert McNeil's *The Story of English*, and Jane Goodall's *Life Among the Wild Chimpanzees*” (O'Brien). Madeleine Shaner's review, in fact, cites the same sources in the same order, which demonstrates the importance of paratext to later reviewers (Shaner 2001). The play also, unusually, reprints the full text of Martin Morrow's review as an “Afterword,” and follows this by noting that this review itself won a major award from the Canadian Theatre Critics Association! Thus appropriated and framed as an example to theatre critics everywhere, a review which could only have expected one day in circulation is now in an unusual position to influence other reviewers, whose reviews will in turn influence the horizons of expectations of future audiences.

Through the paratextuality of program notes, forewords, afterwords, publicity material, reviews, and the like, *Mad Boy* engages with anti-adaptation prejudices, but does not challenge their epistemological bases, seeking instead to negate or even take advantage of them. First, *Mad Boy* claims authority and authenticity from a source that is historically anterior to *Hamlet*, thereby negating *Hamlet*'s priority and seniority, and with them any question of “fidelity” to Shakespeare; second, by positioning itself as an adaptation not of Shakespeare but of Shakespeare's source, it exposes *Hamlet* too as just another adaptation, dispelling *Hamlet*'s presumed “originality”; finally, and perhaps most audaciously, *Mad Boy* not only negates the charge of “infidelity” to Shakespeare, but even turns the tables by claiming to be more a *more* faithful adaptation of their shared source than *Hamlet*. To paraphrase Sir Philip Sidney, who argues that poets are not liars because they never claim to tell the truth, *Mad Boy* never claims to be “of *Hamlet*,” and therefore cannot be unfaithful to it.

While an analysis of adaptation is obviously incomplete without taking in the *intertextual* level, it is also incomplete without an account of the *paratextual* level. This is an especially critical aspect of analyses of film and theatre, because they make extensive use of publicity

material, and of adaptations of Shakespeare or other classical texts, because these must always engage with the large volumes of paratext that accrue around canonical plays. In the case of *Mad Boy Chronicle*, paratexts are a critical part of the play's strategy for evading, challenging, and even taking advantage of anti-adaptation prejudices. If it is indeed possible or likely for readers to approach *Mad Boy Chronicle* not as a copy or adaptation but rather, as one review says, as a "multilevel attack on accepted concepts ... open to any and every interpretation" (Shaner 2001), this is in large part because the paratext is able to *make* it open, by pre-emptively negating prejudices which might otherwise tempt spectators to dismiss *Mad Boy Chronicle* as just "another misguided interpretation."

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