

girlswørk

At the core of *girlswørk*

AT THE CORE of *girlswørk* is the work that women do to make their stories and voices heard by surfacing the ideological structures, among others, messaged through Shakespeare, that continue to efface and (re)shape historic and present-day conditions.

girlswørk is an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and, in its meta-theatrics and adaptation-processes, the play examines the coupling of Shakespeare (British literature) with the writers of contemporary capitalism (Canadian advertising), a gesture that questions how literary production (as media) is a transaction of power, a power that continues to fortify a patriarchal hierarchy that determines place based on gender, race, class, and sexuality. *girlswørk* voices how the diverse cultures and histories in solitary lives are bound by and sown from a similar colonial and literary seed—Shakespeare. It is not until the architecture of the literary framework becomes visible that it can be confronted, dismantled, and turned to ash.

For the play's characters, the past informing the present and the present informing the past culminates with the *Shakespeare Women* gathering to become mobile and active agents by disrobing from the garments that bind them.

The images that accompany the following excerpt from *girlswørk* are part of the multimedia projections used during the play's performance.



girlswørk *an excerpt*

ROSALINE: “Mijn naam is Tryn, Tryn the Cupping Woman,” I kept telling them as they tied me to the pole, //

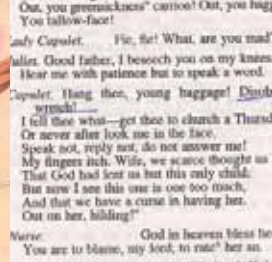
JULIET: I liked Smouch’s window. She turned her back to me and //

ROSALINE: as they tore my mother away. Jannetje Hendricx, her name coarsely etched, with a needle and black thread, into the palm of my hand. See these? Scars like veins. //

JULIET: I could see her ass as I threw down seeds to the Dam Square pidgins. Why should I have been there? Me, of all people. But I was there. I put my hand on her glass. She hated that. She hated what she saw in my eyes. //

ROSALINE: When I was small, my father combed my hair at night. I don’t know why he stopped? He’d hum and comb my hair and then he stopped. //

JULIET: Do you know that in Friesland they were shocked by women who embraced in public, counted family coins, skated with torches, feasted through the night at taverns and ale houses while the city gates locked? //



ROSALINE: In the Spinhuis, I spun their thread until my shoulder blades bled. They carved the words into my back. A monument of Fallen. Flogging me. Look! Branding me. Juliet. *(Louder)* Juliet, tell me, how do I turn my sewing needle into a navigator? They told me, I had fallen. I kept telling them ... //

JULIET: Here's to skating and torches. *(Lifts glass)*

ROSALINE: I kept telling them ... //

LADY CAPULET: What did you tell them?

ROSALINE: *(ROSALINE looks up.)* That I was pushed.

LADY CAPULET: Nurse, why so quiet? Let's have a toast: To the campaign. To the real authors!

JULIET: Where's the Apothecary?

NURSE: Here's to those who write about us, yet know nothing.

LADY CAPULET: It's not about us, dear. We're just being used to sell their ideas.

NURSE: And that's not a problem because ...?

ROSALINE: Hoeveel kost je per nacht?

JULIET: Here's to Sycorax. (*Raises her glass*)

ALL: To Sycorax!

ROSALINE: We should've invited her.

NURSE: She was invited. We're all invited.

ROSALINE: Are we?

NURSE: She's still digging her way out.

JULIET: Here's to Lavinia. (*Raises her glass*)

ALL: To Lavinia!

ROSALINE: Hmm? (*Putting hand to ear*) No answer from Lavinia.
(*Some laughter*)

JULIET: (*Dead serious*) I don't find that funny at all.

NURSE: *A pattern, precedent and lively warrant. A pattern, prec ... //*

LADY CAPULET: (*Interrupting*) Now girls, this has become far too serious. Rosaline, pass the wine and Nurse tell the story about the Queen's priest. //

NURSE: ... *edent*. I've grown tired of that story. Rosaline. (*Louder*)
Rosaline! Did you know that the word *boss* is Dutch? Means master.

LADY CAPULET: Humour me.

ROSALINE: I thought it was Romanian for *round knob*.

LADY CAPULET: Both apply.

(*The women laugh, pour more wine.*)

NURSE: I've another story. One about a girl who gathered broken shells from the North Sea; //

JULIET: I've been to the sea, but the water //

NURSE: she was happiest there, and she'd watch her brother and his friends swim until they were sky blue. //

JULIET: cut me and the noise //

NURSE: They'd chase me until I couldn't breathe, my pockets full of mute shells, //

JULIET: burned my hand.

NURSE: slowed me, felled me //

ROSALINE: All our shores touch. Plates we can eat from. Did you ever think of that?

NURSE: slathering like dogs. I could hear their feet as they dragged me over the hardened sand.

LADY CAPULET: Oh, please, just tell me the story of the Queen's priest. Wait, do you hear the ceiling rattle? What is that banging?

JULIET: Ophelia's power is in her madness, //

ROSALINE: Then Dr. Charcot posed her, gagged her, undressed her in the mouth of medicine, prescribing the swallowing of supplication.

JULIET: in her voice. She had to die. Like me, like us.

NURSE: A Father of neurology and a Father of literature. //

ROSALINE: Turned her into an owl. You know Ophelia's mad-songs, don't you? Taking //

NURSE: Bad combo, and //

ROSALINE: the bread, the baker's daughter wouldn't give to //

NURSE: enough to drive us mad. //

ROSALINE: Christ.

NURSE: *Lord, we know what we are.*

JULIET: I want to hear Augustine's voice. Ask her where Charcot scarred her, //

ROSALINE: Don't you see! They stole our bread.

LADY CAPULET: Because she's dangerous, disobedient, all of them, all of us.

JULIET: blaming her womb as he opened her thighs.

ROSALINE: Dr. Charcot Hysteria Show. His Ophelias, his Lady Macbeths. Hear them get unruly.

ALL: girlswork

LADY CAPULET: Ohhh, humour me. Please. Hands to ears! Stop banging cursed walls.

JULIET: I can hear them.

NURSE: (NURSE looks at LADY CAPULET and touches her hand.) The Queen's priest wore a dirty diamond in his navel and a flaming Jezebel, tattooed, on his butt.

(They all laugh and pass the meat and pudding. Doorbell. A message arrives.)

NURSE: It's from the Apothecary. It says: "Don't want to play any more."

JULIET: (Runs to the door. Takes the piece of paper.) Rosetta! My Romeo.

LADY CAPULET: Do you know what it's called when men get old and they hit the wall with their cane? //

JULIET: I like the way of her tongue, dipping, a loose taste, burning like glass //

LADY CAPULET: girlswork

JULIET: sand

NURSE: These costumes are so heavy //

JULIET: Mother, why are we here?

NURSE: so heavy.

LADY CAPULET: (Looking up at the ceiling, across the walls; she smooths down her costume with her hands.) To make them smell good.

NURSE: Liar.

On adaptation and *girlswørk*

JULIET (*energetically*) I'm not a slave just so they can pierce my breasts with scented punches, nor an oracle for those trembling with love at the edge of the cities. My whole dream had to do with the smell of the fig tree and the waist of the one who cuts the shoots of wheat. Nobody through me! I through all of you!

— Federico Garcia Lorca, from *El público* (*The Public*), an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

ADAPTATION IS PROCESS. Process is change and Lorca, like Lorca does, changes the way wheat shoots, waists bend, love *trembles*. For me, Lorca changed Shakespeare by *changing* Shakespeare. Shakespeare can be changed!

unbound undone undressed untexted understood other ways

Adaptation is disobedient. A cheeky beast. And more than anything, *girlswørk* is unruly, kicking cans against the stone walls of literary history—making some dents, some noise, some change.

As an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, the work of *girlswørk* is to resist the pattern and precedent of Shakespeare's play by resurfacing, in other ways, the oppressive domination of Capulet over his daughter Juliet. *girlswørk* sets out to denaturalize Shakespeare's patriarchal template, the superstructure that positioned—and continues to position—women and men in specific roles and to assigned places. Reconstructed and reinforced during Britain's early modern period, these roles have been manoeuvred and manipulated through history into the architecture of present-day Canadian theatrical/economic/social situations.

Adaptation can both destroy again and heal again.

Adaptation is blasphemous. Released from good behaviour, *girlswørk* takes the literary god's name in vain, happily defaming, reproaching, destabilizing embedded associations and relationships made normative, universal. Adaptation asks the painful questions, questions that

make mouths go dry, questions asked without asking but asking as directly as can be asked—without blinking. Adaptation is a beating heart. A living body

inhaling exhaling inhaling exhaling inhaling

Adaptation is meta-theatre. A process of examining itself and how Shakespeare's language, devices, directions, and tropes are organized and continue to be used to (re)shape who we are, how we stand next to each other on the bus, how our mouths touch, and how we fight with swords. The protagonists in *girlswørk* are bound to their present desires that are implicitly and explicitly linked to the past, a literary historic past they carry and manifest in how they live, work, love, and die with and without each other. *girlswørk* is about father and daughter, patriarchy and coffeemakers, boys and girls, skating and Dr. Charcot, madness and photocopiers, girls and girls, ad guys and buried bibles, chainsaws and bad ideas, stealing and Ophelia, Christ and daggers, Juliet and torches.

The process of *girlswørk* is not done and probably never will be as it continues to scrutinize Shakespearean frameworks, as well as its (re)configured ideologies, by activating agents to resist, to question, to change, to turn things to ash.

Unabashed, adaptation vandalizes (and doesn't even think about running away). It can be a literary intervention that breaks the tight-lipped nodding rhythm demanded by sacred institutions. *girlswørk* opens mouths and tombs, frightening the purists because they know, deep down, they will never, ever see Juliet the same way again: "Nobody through me! I through all of you!" Once changed, adaptation alters what is written in stone, and turns it into loose sand, tenacious voices, new meanings.

Adaptation is what we know—with a surprise. Tradition tidies up. Adaptation spills the milk. Turbulently. Quietly. Never soft. Always vocal. Sometimes silent. History must never ever be static. With *girlswørk*, I gladly drop the artifact to the floor and begin to chip away at the immovable Shakespearean granite until I can hold it in the palm of my hand. Look at each piece, each word, see how they collide, *hear how they tremble at the edge of the cities*. *girlswørk* is an adaptation-in-process (in change) that flexes imperfectly against the canon's skin, punctures its

SOROUJA MOLL

boundaries, clumsily breaks through, and comes out telling the work of girls that's always been done, spoken, and then effaced. Girls' work on the frontiers, the liminal spaces, the hands-on-hips-spaces—making strides without mincing oaths.

Shakespeare is dangerous—in its beauty. If I listen close,
it says “**language is power,**”

and Adaptation says back, “**here, have some.**”

I AM GRATEFUL to Daniel Fischlin, my faculty advisor at the University of Guelph, for supporting and encouraging my play writing (and its mischievous tangents). Through the processes of adaptation, I turned a three-page assignment into a forty-two-page play that questions the multiple ways Shakespeare's early modern literary relationship is ever-present in contemporary social situations.

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Sorouja Moll is a Guelph, Ontario, writer. Her work has been on CBC Radio and published in the *Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star*, *Carousel Literary Journal*, and *Today's Parent*. Moll's academic publications include her research writing for the Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project (CASP) website at the University of Guelph. Currently, she is co-creating and co-producing a short video documentary concerning Aboriginal Shakespearean adaptations in Canada. In 2003, she received first prize in the Eden Mills Writers' Festival Literary Contest. Moll has also participated in spoken word performances at the Hillside Festival, Eden Mills Writers' Festival, and other regional events.