

**“Shakespeare and Science Fiction” Seminar**  
**SAA 2024 Abstracts**

**Strange Bedfellows: Shakespeare, *Star Trek*, and Afrofuturism**

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This paper looks at Shakespeare references in *Star Trek* and speculates about reasons that recent versions of the franchise contain fewer of them. *Star Trek* series have appeared in bursts, beginning with the original series in 1966-9 and concluding with prequels such as *Lower Decks*, *Discovery*, and *Strange New Worlds*. Paramount also made a series of movies featuring the original cast and the Next Generation cast, as well as some movies featuring the original characters in an alternate reality (these seldom use Shakespeare references). Shakespeare references culminated in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, directed by Nicholas Meyer, and since then have appeared mainly as titles formed with Shakespeare quotes—a trend that persists both in episodes and in non-canonical stories (games, comics, and novels, including a series of eleven novels whose titles come from *Hamlet*’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy). Though many factors could have caused this change, I will focus here on how decreasing allusiveness coincides with the increasing diversity of the cast. I’ll end with suggestions about how to make Shakespeare relevant to new generations of *Star Trek* fans. In particular, I will discuss how Afrofuturism not only allows *Star Trek* to create BIPOC characters who resist the federation’s dominant narratives but also frees Shakespearean actors of color from the prison of bit parts and “black” parts like Othello. I suggest that the common concerns of new series and new Shakespeare productions may allow the two to re-converge in fascinating ways.

**Shakespeare in Space: Revisiting *Forbidden Planet* as an Adaptation of *The Tempest***

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At the climax of the 1956 MGM classic *Forbidden Planet*, Commander Adams (Leslie Nielsen) tells Dr. Morbius (Walter Pidgeon) that the fearsome creature threatening them is actually a “Monster from the id,” created from Morbius’ own subconscious, through a great machine built by the long-extinct race known as the Krell. In the years since the film’s release, critics have described the film as a loose adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, with Dr. Morbius fulfilling the roles of both Prospero and Caliban. This essay will reevaluate that claim through the lens of current adaptation theory, noting how Dr. Morbius’ subconscious Caliban-substitute provides an apt analogy for SF adaptations of Shakespeare’s play. Just as Dr. Morbius’ id-monster is not exactly the same as Dr. Morbius himself (it is at once him and not-him), so is *Forbidden Planet* not exactly the same as *The Tempest*. Yet the film highlights many of the secret fears and desires of the original text, revealing what the creators of the film saw as essential to the early modern play and arrogating the cultural authority of Shakespeare. Like Umberto Eco’s “Absolute Fake,” or Jean Baudrillard’s simulacra, or Jacques Derrida’s spectrogenic ghost, this “Fakespeare” has supplanted the “real” Shakespeare and becomes more real than the real in the mind of the modern film-goer. The ultimate effect is the relocation of the original play to a position outside the text and into a hyperreality that nonetheless haunts the adaptation like the id-monster from *Forbidden Planet* haunts Dr. Morbius.

## **Race ‘divided from’ itself: Tokenized Multicultural Casting in *Star Wars*’ Third Trilogy and Claire McCarthy’s *Ophelia***

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*Star Wars*’ third trilogy and Claire McCarthy have two common elements: Daisy Ridley and their films’ reductive colorblind casting of her black co-stars, John Boyega and newcomer Devon Terrell. Both actors of color are terrific in their roles, but neither is presented with the narrative opportunity to meaningfully explore their characters racial/ethnic identity. With particular attention to the canceled romantic relationship of Ophelia and Horatio (at the end of Kline’s novel the two characters become committed lovers), and fan uproar of both Boyega’s casting and then the franchise’s sidelining of his *Star Wars* character, my SAA seminar paper explores the ways black masculinity is tokenized in mainstream films that attempt to address racial diversity through colorblind casting, generating fictional worlds where race is ostensibly non-existent and non-consequential, until, of course, it is. The essay demonstrates that due to white feminism and investors’ economic imperatives, McCarthy’s film missed an opportunity to ethically address blackness in the Danish early modern court through Terrell’s casting of Horatio.

## **Shakespeare, Adaptation, and Fidelity in *Station Eleven***

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*Station Eleven*, creator Patrick Somerville’s HBO Max adaptation of Emily St. John Mandel’s science-fiction novel of the same name, qualifies as a “meta-adaptation” because it foregrounds the adaptive processes between media, texts, and genres. Somerville’s post-apocalyptic television series adapts a novel which has itself been viewed as an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, and both versions of *Station Eleven* display some level of fidelity to the essential spirit of the work from which they draw their inspiration. However, Somerville’s show diverges from the nostalgic essence of Mandel’s work, which displays a profound reverence for the lost technological features of modernity and looks backward to the age of Shakespeare as a model for survival in a post-pandemic world. By contrast, only one of the three major communities in Somerville’s series, the Museum of Civilization, seeks to preserve the relics of a time before a flu epidemic killed off 99.99% of the earth’s population. At the other end of the spectrum, the Undersea, a collection of “post-pan” children led by a grown man, Tyler, aims to destroy the Museum of Civilization and initiate the dawn of a new society free from the evils of the past. The third community, the Travelling Symphony, a troupe of actors and musicians touring the Great Lakes Region performing Shakespeare’s plays, incorporates and attempts to reconcile the positions taken by both of the other two groups. Thus, the viewpoint of Somerville’s series is not essentially nostalgic, but rather coincides with the outlook of the Travelling Symphony, which is that adaptation (of Shakespeare, specifically) is the method by which a reverence for the past may be reconfigured within the changed circumstances of the present.

## **Foul Conspiracy: *The X-Files*, *The Tempest*, and Wanting to Believe**

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Season 4, episode 7 (“Musings of a Cigarette-Smoking Man”) of the sci-fi/conspiracy theory series

*The X-Files* begins with a quotation from *I Henry IV*: “For nothing can seem foul to those that win” (5.1.7). In this passage extracted from the eve of battle, the king muses upon the portents a blood-red sun and pale sky might signify, then calms his own fears with the acknowledgment that should he be victorious, these potentially troubling signs retroactively will no longer “seem foul,” but rather, will “sympathize” with “the losers” (6). It’s a fitting invocation for an episode, and series, centered on intersections of conspiracy culture and science fiction, as it demonstrates the inverse thought paradigms that govern each—one the intuitive “from the gut” thinking that seeks signs and “wants to believe,” and the other the rational thought that logically dismantles such perceptions and propels science-based speculations.

Building off Sharon Yang’s analysis of *The X-Files* as paratextual *Hamlet*, with Mulder and Scully reconceiving Hamlet and Horatio respectively, this paper explores the series’ paratextual engagement with *The Tempest*, both for its similar positioning at the intersection of magical thinking and rationalism and particularly through its shadowy villain, The Cigarette-Smoking Man. As a paratextual Prospero for whom all the world’s his island and all the entities—terrestrial and extra-terrestrial alike—merely pawns in his intricate tapestry of manipulation, the CSM is imagined to have orchestrated events ranging from alien cover-ups to JFK’s assassination. Like Prospero, his most prized instrument of power is his book, he manipulates otherworldly beings to maintain control, and he swats down conspirators that would topple him. Guided by conspiracism studies and sci-fi theory, this paper will also examine the parallels of Prospero’s metatheatrical playmaking and CSM’s novelist aspirations, thus examining each as a storyteller and the role of storytelling in negotiations of thought and belief.

## Prospero’s Hybrids

Erin Minear

William & Mary

In H.G. Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), the doctor has no daughter. The only female in the book is a puma that is horribly tortured by Moreau in his attempts to transform it into a human woman. Though Wells’ Moreau meets his death at the claws of his failed experiment, movie directors inspired by his novel found much greater success in turning a cat into a woman. *Island of Lost Souls* (1932), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1977), and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1996) all include a role for an actress who—in a shocking twist—turns out to be part-feline. In *Island of Lost Souls*, Moreau sets up the panther-woman, here named “Lota,” with the shipwrecked protagonist to see if she can produce human children. In the infamous 1996 movie version, the cat-woman is introduced as Moreau’s daughter before her experimental identity is revealed, but the relationship between the two is not a central part of the film (Moreau has a human-seeming “son” as well.)

In Silva Moreno-Garcia’s 2022 novel, however, both the character and her filial identity are central to the story, as the title indicates: *The Daughter of Doctor Moreau*. This reimagining of the story explores the experience of Carlota Moreau, who shares an isolated estate with her beloved father and his hybrid creations. As Carlota begins to question her father’s choices, she finds that she cannot draw clear line between herself and the “creatures” that have been her friends since childhood. Moreno-Garcia’s novel not only offers a feminist take on the original, but brings into sharper relief the existing connections between Wells’s story and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.

## Reverse the Prosperolarity: The Literary Technobabble of Shakespearean Soundbites in

## ***Return to the Forbidden Planet***

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Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's 1956 CinemaScope classic *Forbidden Planet* is heralded as a foundational bedrock in science-fiction film history, holding accolades for being the first of the techno-horror genre, the first to feature a fully electronic score, and the first example of faster-than-light space travel on film. It is also unofficially understood to be an obvious adaptation of *The Tempest*.

Although its themes of isolation, conquest, and possessive paternal aggression set in a realm of technological "magic" build an undeniable case for the film to be considered a Shakespearean adaptation, *Forbidden Planet* never quite acknowledges its early modern roots. Nearly 30 years after the film's premiere, Bob Carlton penned the long-awaited *Return to Forbidden Planet*, a jukebox musical which brings the story to an unabashedly Shakespearean stage. Aided by the inherent excess of the musical genre, Captain Tempest and Doctor Prospero star in an adaptation so overt that it seems to satirize not only its sources but the inter-medium adaptive mode altogether.

Rather than retracing the paths numerous and variously taken between *The Tempest* and *Forbidden Planet*, this study examines the massively hypertextual and transmedial palimpsest that is *Return to the Forbidden Planet* as an adaptation, not of any singular hypotextual narrative, but of Shakespearean cultural capital in a transcultural landscape. The science-fiction standby turned literary trope of Polarity Reversal serves as a pseudo-technical framework for conceptualizing this relationship between the multitudinous Shakespearean texts of *Return to the Forbidden Planet* and the relative success of their often arbitrary deployments. Building on Linda Hutcheon's "adaptation audience" as a critical participant in post-fidelity adaptation theory, this analysis of *Return to the Forbidden Planet* suggests that the smashcuts between the approximately 12 different Shakespearean texts prioritize audience signaling and recognition over precise narrative logic. As such, the chaotic musical delivers Shakespearean soundbites to much the same effect as Jon Pertwee delivered his all-purpose problem solver: "Reverse the polarity."

## **"The name thou owest": Shakespeare and Coloniality in *Firefly* and *Serenity***

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Cult classic space western *Firefly* and the spin-off film *Serenity* are not overtly Shakespearean in its plots or characters. However, two planets and a moon are named after characters from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: Ariel, Miranda, and Caliban. Ariel is a "Core planet" near the center of the universe, rich, luxurious, beautiful. Miranda is an outlier planet on which the government performed experiments on the inhabiting population. Caliban, a moon, orbits Miranda.

These names exist on two levels. Of course, the planets have been named by Joss Whedon and the other show writers. However, in the universe of the show, these celestial bodies have been named by the humans who were adapting these planets for human life and colonizing them. In that light, it is noteworthy that, in a television show that has invited so much post-colonial criticism and commentary, the most overt Shakespeare references are to the Shakespeare play that has most often invited post-colonial criticism, and that these references appear with respect to colonizing territory.

This reading examines the presentation of Ariel, Miranda, and Caliban in *Firefly* and *Serenity*, looking at both how the in-universe colonizers who would have named these planets felt about the figures they invoked and what the names suggest about how the show writers felt about the Shakespearean characters they have alluded to and the play from which those characters come.

In particular, it considers that the use of these names returns to ideas of Ariel as a signifier for intellectualism and subservience, Miranda as a beautiful tool for Prospero to exploit, and Caliban as a lesser creature obsessed with Miranda. It will also argue that these views of the characters, reminiscent of the views of the colonizer Prospero, are revealing of the colonizer attitudes of the humans terraforming these planets for human colonization.

### ***Star Wars* for an Elizabethan Audience?**

Elise Robbins

Ohio State University

Shakespeare's plays have been translated out of their early modern originals into numerous languages, forms, and media, which is not a surprising phenomenon, as translation facilitates the legibility of Shakespeare in new locations, for different cultures and generations, beyond the page and stage. In his *William Shakespeare's Star Wars*, Ian Doescher does the opposite. Rather than render the early modern English of Shakespeare into a new language, form, or medium, he chooses to take the modern science fiction of *Star Wars* and translate each episode into an early modern play.

In this paper, I will use Doescher's first play, *Verily, a New Hope*, alongside modern translation theory from Translation Studies scholars like Lawrence Venuti and Susan Bassnett to explore how Doescher's methods and practices "work" as translation. Is the early modern English of the translation more a playful novelty, akin to the numerous "Shakespearean English Generators" you can find with a simple Google search? Or is Doescher attuned to differences between source and target texts in a way that seeks to bridge linguistic, generic, and cultural gaps between the two? What is gained (or lost) in translating across language and media in this way? Further, how is the translation uniquely "Shakespearean" as opposed to a translation into early modern drama more broadly? And finally, would it have been at all legible to an early modern audience, the unspoken target audience? More simply, who is supposed to be legible to? My preliminary thesis is that Doescher's works translate from the fantasy of *Star Wars* (as source text) to a different fantasy, that of Shakespeare and early modern England in the modern imagination (as target text). In presenting it as "Shakespeare's English," interspersed with cheeky allusions like "star-crossed galaxy," Doescher contributes to both the myth of Shakespeare and his world as well as the myth of translation as a direct conduit to understanding the linguistic, paralinguistic, and cultural signs of a removed Other.

### ***Titus Andronicus* as Dystopian Film**

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Dystopian literature and film have surged to popularity over the last few decades. No longer the province of a limited niche audience of science fiction / fantasy aficionados, the dystopian has entered the mainstream, with offerings from renowned writers of literary fiction, such as Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, as well as their adaptations to film, alongside popular film dystopias such as *The Matrix* (1999), *Dark City* (1998), and the recent series *Severance* (2022). The darkness of these prophetic visions suggests a certain collective pessimism about the future, but they have even more to say about our present moment, functioning as a form of social critique.

I will suggest that contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* at times participate in the genre by alluding to dystopian film or evoking dystopian political history; for example, that of the Seoul Shakespeare Company in 2015, which featured "Romans" wearing vaguely fascist uniforms or the production directed by Silviu Purcarete for the National Theater in Craiova, Romania in 1992, which took the post-Communist Balkan conflict as its setting. In particular, I will examine Julie Taymor's well-known film adaptation (1999), along with the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2017 filmed performance, focusing on how these films evoke the aesthetics and visual conventions of the dystopia.

While these films are quite different, both artistically and in terms of intended audience, they participate in a similar locus of intertextuality that situates them at the intersection between the realms: the Shakespeare adaptation and the dystopian film. In doing so, these films open out a multiplicity of space-time moments that are simultaneously available: the ancient Roman past, the mediating Elizabethan present of the playwright, the visible recording / viewing "now" of the film, and the future implied by the evocation of science fiction tropes. In transcending genre, these films perform a critique of Western culture that sweeps through history.

### **"One Bloody Tear": Shakespeare, Blood, and Science Fiction**

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For this conference paper, I'll be looking at *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* to explore the ways that the film uses Shakespeare to familiarize /divide the human from the alien, particularly by encouraging a sense that the human resonates *within* the alien. As part of a longer research project called *Biologies in Text and Film*, I am primarily interested in moments when texts simultaneously mobilize convergent ways of understanding to create new meaning or subvert that meaning, and I plan to explore how scientific knowledge, Shakespeare, and blood encourage us to accept a messy human/alien divide. Couched in post-Cold War allegory and bubbling with references to various Shakespeare plays, *Undiscovered Country* explores the convergence of three mutually informative areas that the science fiction genre greatly invests in: political commentary, speculative science, and literary allusions. It's my working thesis that one of the key components that captures our humanness, blood, exemplifies this convergence. In the film, blood depicts the slippery way by which we understand ourselves through various lenses, including politics (assassination) but also science (medicine) and literature (various repurposing of Shakespeare). I pay particular attention to the assassination scene—with its floating, pink Klingon blood—and General Chang's misquoting of the problematic passage from *The Merchant of Venice* III.i: "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" (ll. 46-9). In this brief paper, I explore how blood and the shedding of blood centralizes questions of who we are and who we aren't, including the ways that both 'Shakespeare' and 'science' hope to frame these questions.

### **Leviathan in Name: Early Modern Skepticism and the Mythic Allusions of *The Expanse***

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Space opera has often turned to mythology and classic literature for epic plots, cosmic themes, and names that have cultural gravitas. The first novel of *The Expanse* series—*Leviathan Wakes* (2011)—

follows the titular convention of books like *Babel-17* (1966) or *Hyperion* (1989), invoking a larger-than-life image from a well-established tradition in order to make a claim about the scope of the science fiction narrative and its meaning. The pseudonymous James S.A. Corey has adhered to that formula throughout the run of their nine-book series, following the first novel with titles like *Caliban's War* (2012), *Abaddon's Gate* (2013), *Cibola Burn* (2014), and *Tiamat's Wrath* (2019). The mythopoetic grandeur of this set of allusions, though, is at odds with the sociological realism of *The Expanse*. Depicting a universe in which humanity's conflicts have spread across the solar system, the novels do not feature great men heroically shaping history, but rather a diverse collection of characters who fitfully participate in the toil of competing political and economic systems. Yet, the title of the first novel (which is echoed in the final volume, *Leviathan Falls* (2022)) hints at this tension. Referring to the gargantuan biblical sea-creature, this image also recalls the metaphorical figure at the center of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, a seventeenth-century text that emphasizes the artifice of such representations in order to expose the complexity of social power structures. *Leviathan Wakes*, I argue, deploys a strategic set of allusions to the writings of Hobbes and Cervantes that encourages a skeptical approach to the kind of myth-making that the other books' titles would seem to indulge in. In addition to the leviathan image, the core protagonists of the series pursue their quixotic interplanetary adventures aboard a ship they have dubbed the Rocinante, named for Don Quixote's horse. Setting up an interpretive approach that informs the rest of the series, from the Shakespearean *Caliban's War* onward, *The Expanse* taps into the skepticism of early modern literature. Conscious or not of their investment in this particular period in intellectual history, the novels manage to recast the aesthetic of their titles, revising space opera's conception of social history, and challenging the myth-making impulse that has left its mark in the very names that we have given to the planets and stars around us.

### **“There's nothing serious in mortality”: Re-visioning Reproductive Futurity in Kurt Vonnegut's “Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow”**

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How can it be so much easier to kill a king than it is to beget one? This is the private conundrum Macbeth must confront in *Macbeth*, a tragedy of infertility that externalizes the emotional, psychic, and social consequences of his inability to produce an heir. Macbeth's inability to accept he represents the end of his family's line inspires a series of bloody actions that lead to his tragic demise, but the play evades exploring alternatives to reproductive futurity by inviting audiences to mourn the loss of children or their absence. Vonnegut's science fiction short story, “Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow,” propels us into a future where the injunction to reproduce is absent due to the problem of overpopulation. In a comic reversal of Macbeth's conundrum, Vonnegut's story centers a patriarch named Gramps Ford who is plagued with too many heirs, thanks to the anti-aging elixir anti-gerasone, and not enough square footage to house them. Vonnegut re-visions Macbeth's reproductive futurism by creating a world where no one ages or dies except by choice, annihilating the human experience of time and, relatedly, tragic time.

The ease with which Macbeth kills Duncan, an act that disrupts generational time and commences tragic time, destroys his relationship to pleasure and play. In his attempt to look like the innocent flower, Macbeth, upon “discovering” Duncan's slain body, exclaims, “Had I but died an hour before this chance,/ I had lived a blessed time; for, from this instant,/There's nothing serious in mortality”

(2.3.99-101).<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, due to the annihilation of mortal time, Vonnegut's characters are powerless to take anything seriously. While life without the threat of death or the imperative to reproduce initially appears futile and tedious, Vonnegut ultimately presents theater and play, activities that are both child-like but unproductive, as compelling alternatives to reproductive futurity.

### **Caliban in the Moon**

Erin Webster

William & Mary

This paper considers the Moon as one of *The Tempest's* 'new world' contexts, alongside and in connection with the Americas. Inspired by Galileo's telescopic observations of what he described as an "earth-like" Moon in the 1610 treatise *Sidereal Messenger*, early seventeenth-century English writers produced a wealth of speculative accounts of life on the Moon. While these works vary in genre and intention, they share in common the fact that adopt the story of the European discovery, conquest, and settlement of the Americas as the precedent and imaginative analogue for the projected discovery of life on the Moon. From near-routine references to Galileo as the next Columbus to more detailed examples such as John Donne's ironic suggestion that Lucifer send Jesuits to the Moon where they might repeat their missionary 'successes' in "the Indies," the Moon and the Americas were so closely associated in the early modern European literary imagination as to serve as a kind of shorthand for one another. At the same time, the possibility of an inhabited Moon confronted European Christians with a similar set of philosophical and theological problems to those presented by the extrabiblical populations of the Americas, whose genealogical origins and soteriological status proved difficult to determine. My study of what is often considered to be Shakespeare's New World play takes these connections into consideration when examining the treatment of Caliban as a "mooncalf"—a creature whose origins and status are the focus of considerable curiosity and debate amongst the European castaways. Recognizing the play's engagement of an inhabited/inhabitable Moon as part of its thematic interest in the idea of new worlds can help us better to understand the political and philosophical dynamics of the island, as well as to recognize *The Tempest's* influence on subsequent imaginings of extraterrestrial worlds.

### **Toil and Trouble: The Speculative Fiction Legacy of *Macbeth* in *Ahsoka***

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The 2023 Disney+ Series *Ahsoka* is not the first *Star Wars* project to draw a line between itself and Shakespearean drama. Fathers and sons, empires and noble warriors, the genre of the revenge tragedy are all features which lend themselves naturally to comparison. However, the elements of *Macbeth* that *Ahsoka* chooses to most closely align itself with are the mythic and the fantastical: witches, prophecies, visions, and destinies. Much like Tolkien's Ents, a literalization of Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane, *Ahsoka* takes advantage of the explicit unreality of its setting to adapt these fantastical elements to the uniquely *Star Wars* setting and genre. In doing so, however, *Ahsoka* reveals one of *Star Wars's* many inherent tensions: is this Galaxy one of logical, consistent worldbuilding? Or, is it a fantastical storytelling playground? Is it science fiction, or is it fantasy?

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*. Eds. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen. New York: The Modern Library, 2007.



Can it be both, and how are fans expected to handle such dissonance? Therefore, this paper will analyze what *Ahsoka* is using its relationship with *Macbeth* for, and what that relationship suggests about the past, present, and future of storytelling in a galaxy far, far away with specific focus placed on audience expectations of genre fidelity.