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Playing Hamlet without *Hamlet*:  
Repurposing fidelity in theatrical adaptation

Fidelity continues to mediate the way that people create and consume adaptations, despite being thoroughly problematised by adaptation scholars since the 1950s. While scholarship has examined how fidelity impacts upon processes of reception, little attention has been given to the way that fidelity can influence creative processes when adapting early modern drama. In this paper I will examine this process, using a production that I adapted and directed in 2017 entitled *Ophelia's Shadow* (based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) as a case study. An interview with performer Luke Middlebrook demonstrates how fidelity can inform actor processes. Middlebrook experienced multiple "fidelities" to various aspects of the source text's dramaturgical layers. In one example, Middlebrook experienced fidelity to the narrative dramaturgy of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In another, fidelity emerged in response to a psychological, rather than a farcical reading of the character. Considering these "fidelities", it is possible to reframe the concept from a singular desire to "be loyal" to a text, to multiple *involuntary* and indeed *unconscious* investments that mediate processes of adaptation. These investments are valuable as they allow us, as theatre makers, to clearly reflect on the kind of story we wish to tell, and why.

Hannah Elizabeth Bowling  
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From Stage to Page:  
How Faithful and Unfaithful Adaptations Reshape Encounters with Shakespeare

Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603) has been codified in the over four hundred years of performance, adaptation, and scholarship as a "race" play. Take for instance Djanet Sears' interview with Valentina Rapetti, where Sears states that while the play might involve religion, "it is mainly about race" (299). As a result, adapters of *Othello* center interracial love, particularly within the context of Black/white relationships; however, artists' unique takes on *Othello* differ widely across the global North and South. This essay attends to "faithful" and "unfaithful" adaptations to Shakespeare's original texts, surveying whether a text's fidelity impacts its ability to generate moments of intimacy between the text and reader. Murray Carlin's dramatic text *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona* (1969), written in the height of apartheid, reflects the anxieties of an interracial couple facing the knowledge that their relationship is as socially taboo as it was in the 1620s. In stark contrast, Elysabeth Grace's erotic novella *A Tangled Web* (2022), written over five decades after the national end of anti-miscegenation in the US, prominently features interracial love as not only normative but celebratory. Borrowing on Carolyn Jess Cooke's interpretive framework of fast-food ethics and the "McShakespeare," I engage with notions of fidelity within the broader cultural dynamics of globalization, particularly focusing on theatrical adaptations in contrast to novelized adaptations of Shakespeare's works. The "McShakespeare" framework, I argue, allows for exploration of how the novel's inherently playful relationship with fidelity refracts and generates moments of embodied collectivity akin to those of dramatic performance.

Sarah Bradshaw  
University of Delaware

Both a Borrower and Lender Be:  
Rethinking a “Complete” *Hamlet*

The language of fidelity creates an aura surrounding Kenneth Branagh’s 1996 *Hamlet*, uniquely labelled as “complete” for presenting an unabridged compendium of both quarto and folio versions of this play text. But what if Branagh’s film is just as faithful to the cinematic tradition as it is to Shakespeare? While this film is deeply self-conscious, foregrounding its place in both British and Hollywood cinemas, its incredible use of filmic cues seems to be treated as secondary to the similarity it bears to the *Hamlet(s)* that we read. So, how might we revise our discussions of fidelity to better account for the layers at work in such a text? Adaptation scholarship at this stage shuns the language of fidelity altogether, yet we seem unable to exorcise it from our conversations. I encourage us to move beyond using fidelity as a value judgment—and even more so, the gatekeeping practice of forbidding discussions of fidelity that this limited view of the concept inspires—and consider it rather as a way to critically assess foundational source texts within an adaptation, which can then apply to both Shakespeare and his later adapters. Through this shift we should be able to consider fidelity to various things at once, such as Branagh’s deep connection to cinematic techniques in addition to Shakespeare’s language. After all, as Hamlet says, “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so”—perhaps we are long past due for *thinking* fidelity from one to the other.

Allison Duque  
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“‘Demand that Demi-Devil Why He Hath Thus Ensnared My Soul and Body’:  
Race in *Othello* Iago/Othello Fanfiction”

In my essay called “‘Demand that Demi-Devil Why He Hath Thus Ensnared My Soul and Body’: Race in *Othello* Iago/Othello Fanfiction” I work to consider how fan writers treat race in Shakespeare’s *Othello*—whether they write about it outright or attempt to hide it. Fanfiction authors tend to interpret and perceive the racism of the play (both explicitly stated and potentially hidden) within their own twenty-first century framework. This understanding materializes in fanfiction in two ways: some fans erase Othello’s race, and some highlight it—albeit sometimes unconsciously. These fan writers may not often address the racism in the play directly, but the racial undertones come through the sex and romance in the fanfiction just as they do in the original play. Through the intersection of love, sex, race, and sometimes the absence of these elements, fanfiction authors prove that they perceive the racism present in Shakespeare’s *Othello* through the contemporary racial framework of American slavery and racial prejudice, which does not feature in the same way in Shakespeare’s play. In recent fanfiction centering on an Iago/Othello relationship, writers place a heavy emphasis on slavery, ownership, and how those elements are eroticized. Looking at Shakespeare’s *Othello* through these adaptations allows us to think about elements of the play and its contemporary relevance that historicist scholarship, by definition, does not pay attention to. To make my point, I look at racialized and erotic instances in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, in the professional 2001 Geoffrey Sax adaptation film of the same name, and in several works of modern fanfiction. Finally, I conclude that while the plot of Shakespeare’s *Othello* revolves around race, the fanfiction instead focuses on love and sex. Even though these fanfiction authors may not mention race explicitly—whether white or black—they engage in race-making intersectionally through the discussion of Othello and Iago’s sexual and romantic relationship. These fans recognize the racism present in Shakespeare’s work in contemporary race-making terms. Even if their imaginative work does not center on race, the fan authors unconsciously echo themes that may be present in the play by exploring race through slash fiction.

Laurie Ellinghausen,  
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Unsettling Work:  
Borderlands Shakespeare and the Postcolonial Uncanny

This paper explores the “postcolonial uncanny” in Borderlands Shakespeare appropriations, with a focus on Jamie Seres Mangaña's *The Tragic Corrido of Romeo and Lupe* (2018). Building on recent scholarship in Shakespeare adaptation and appropriation, especially within Latinx contexts, I argue that *Tragic Corrido*—like other Borderlands adaptations—challenges conventional expectations of Shakespearean production and the idea of cultural ownership. By incorporating Chicana languages, accents, and cultural elements into Shakespeare's works, these adaptations unsettle Shakespeare's status as “white property” and reveal implicit biases about who may rightfully claim Shakespeare. I propose the term “postcolonial uncanny” to describe this collective unveiling, expanding on Freud's discussion of the *Unheimlich* to account for the discovery of a familiar but often hidden set of assumptions. Specifically, *Tragic Corrido* shows how themes of property, theft, and dispossession in both Shakespearean texts and global colonialism evoke this shared awareness of Shakespeare's historical role in upholding Anglo-American cultural hegemony. This analysis aims to enrich current debates about fidelity, cultural exchange, and the politics of adaptation in Shakespeare studies, particularly within the context of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

Katherine Gillen  
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### Queering Fidelity in Borderlands Shakespeare Adaptations

Gregg Barrios's *I-DJ* and Andrew Sianez-De La O's *Rough Magic* belong to a growing body of what Adrianna M. Santos, Kathryn Vomero Santos, and I call Borderlands Shakespeare—translations, adaptations, and appropriations that reimagine Shakespeare within the unique histories, cultures, and artistic traditions of La Frontera. These plays—the first a performance piece that uses *Hamlet* to explore queer Chicana selfhood during the AIDS crisis, and the second a *Tempest*-inspired queer love story set during Hurricane Harvey—take inspiration from Shakespeare. However, like many works of Borderlands Shakespeare, they are irreverently unfaithful to their Shakespearean sources, as they are often more concerned with telling Borderlands stories that express the richness of the region's cultures, languages, and artforms than with honoring Shakespeare. Embracing the Chicana spirit of *rasquachismo*, or “making do with what's at hand,” they take what they need from Shakespeare, integrating his work with countless other influences and refusing to cede epistemological authority to him.

My colleagues and I have argued elsewhere that, by rejecting the imperative of faithful adaptation, Borderlands playwrights critique the colonial legacies of the early modern period and disrupt dominant and often whitewashed narratives. Both *I-DJ* and *Rough Magic*, I suggest, also connect these issues of textual fidelity to their thematic treatment of sexual fidelity and infidelity, ultimately enacting queer Chicana modes of relating both to canonical white European texts and to heteropatriarchal structures. While *I-DJ* emphatically rejects the idea of fidelity as a product of colonial heteropatriarchy, *Rough Magic* suggests that there may be less oppressive ways to remain faithful while also being open to growth, change, and a multiplicity of influences and desires. Both plays thus offer generative approaches to queering and decolonizing discourses of fidelity—in adaptation studies and in the realm of sexual politics.

Matthew Kozusko  
Ursinus College

### The Dearth of the Author

This essay uses emerging discomfort with the threat posed to traditional authors by generative AI in order to suggest that the author function, which continues to govern conceptions of fidelity despite a great wealth of academic critique of “Shakespeare,” may finally be giving way to new modes of reading and of writing. But as authorship becomes more contested and more uncertain, we are, at least initially, moving back toward, not further from, Barthes’s Author.

Laura Levine  
New York University

Stones Known to Move:  
Statuary and Devotion in Christopher Wheeldon's *The Winter's Tale*

In the moments leading up to Mamillius' death in Christopher Wheeldon's ballet *The Winter's Tale*, characters do a number of things that could be construed as "unfaithful" to Shakespeare's play. I argue that what looks like a deviation or infidelity to Shakespeare's text is in fact often a way of dramatizing a fissure or tension within it. The deaths of Mamillius and Hermione offer a case in point.



Jonah Kent Richards  
Lawrence Academy

### Adapting Shakespeare on Screen for the Classroom

Broadcast from 1978 to 1985, the British Broadcasting Company's *The Shakespeare Plays* was the first complete television series of 37 of Shakespeare's plays. While the series founder and producer Cedric Messina claims the series was designed primarily as a form of entertainment, everything about the series appears targeted at the American educational market. The BBC adapted the 1951 Peter Alexander Editions of the plays as their source material because of its widespread use amongst British and American educators (Messina 9). Each episode was required to be set either during Shakespeare's lifetime or the historical period of the play to resemble the historical dramas that enjoyed commercial success in the United States. The plays were also mandated to be no longer than two and a half hours in length to fit on a videocassette (Willis 11 – 12). In an advertisement for the series, the BBC explained that they produced the series in the plainest terms possible without any sort of stylization, gimmicks, or embellishments that might risk confusing their student audiences (Banham 34). At the same time, the BBC published a series of single-play text editions. The printed editions and the television productions effectively function as a single complete works. The series' American cooperate backers launched a nationwide educational outreach campaign to advocate for the use of the series in American secondary schools, colleges, and universities. These collective efforts on both sides of the Atlantic resulted in more conservative adaptations of the plays that American teachers would find easier to teach the texts along with. They also would be traditional enough that American schoolboards wouldn't object to them.

Scholars and critics quickly identified the limitations of the series' strict textual fidelity. British Theatre scholar Martin Banham panned the episodes of the second season as dull. He argued the BBC's attempt to produce a definitive production of the plays without any of the usual stylization or gimmicks resulted in adaptations that felt lifeless (Banham 34 – 35). The BBC appeared to listen to the criticism because for the remaining five seasons they partially reversed some of the strictest textual fidelity requirements. They hired the producers Jonathan Miller and Shaun Sutton who gave their directors greater interpretive freedom. In her 1985 *Titus Andronicus*, director Jane Howell reimagines the play from the perspective of the boy Young Lucas. She reorganizes the scenes of the episode to include the boy even though he doesn't appear in the original play until Act 3 Scene 2. She explains that she wanted her viewers to constantly ask themselves, "What are we doing to the children?" (Willis 172). Howell's closing shot of a weeping Young Lucius as his Uncle Marcus closes the box containing Aaron's baby gives the ending scene an ambiguity that feels beautifully distinct from the directors of seasons 1 and 2 who wouldn't have dared stray so far from Shakespeare's original text.

My paper proposes to treat the BBC The Shakespeare Plays as an example of how adapters use textual fidelity as a selling point for their product. The BBC wanted students to watch and listen to the episodes as they read the printed text. It was therefore essential that the series remained as close to the printed text as possible. Scholars like Banham had to remind the BBC that true fidelity however requires adapters to remain true to the spirit of the medium of the source text as well. In the case of *The Shakespeare Plays* that meant preserving the theatrical elements of the play as well.