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### “LOOKA ME, I’M THE FORCE O’ WISDOM AND PROGRESS!”: UN-CROWNING THE CLASSIC TEXT THROUGH CARNIVALESQUE DRAMATURGY

Adaptation scholarship often laments the anti-adaptation biases that infuse what they call “fidelity discourse” (criticism based on the assumption that adaptations can and should be assessed only on the basis of their fidelity to the source). However, few scholars have acknowledged that since adaptors themselves are well-aware of fidelity discourse, they must somehow negotiate it; this can involve pre-empting, evading, or challenging it. This essay explores how playwright Michael O’Brien negotiates and even exploits commonplace prejudices about adaptation—especially comic adaptations—in *Mad Boy Chronicle*, his 1995 travesty of *Hamlet*. The essay examines both the carnivalesque dramaturgy of *Mad Boy Chronicle*, to illustrate how its ostensibly dumb comedy is really in pursuit of serious knowledge, and O’Brien’s paratextual strategies for guiding the audience’s reception of the play. While the play itself presents the generic conventions of a “stupid” parody, O’Brien takes pains to frame it in program notes, interviews, prefaces, and other publicity material, not as a comic desecration of a masterpiece, but as an earnest attempt to resurrect the original source of that so-called masterpiece. These framing tactics serve to destabilize the assumed superiority of the “original” by revealing that *Hamlet* itself is only an adaptation. Thus, while the adaptation relies on and confirms the prestige of the canonical source, it also forces us to reconsider it.

*La recherche sur les adaptations déplore souvent les préjugés contre l’adaptation qui alimentent le « discours de la fidélité » (la critique fondée sur l’idée qu’une adaptation ne doit être et ne peut être évaluée qu’en fonction de la fidélité au texte source). Pourtant, peu de chercheurs ont su reconnaître que les adaptateurs sont eux-mêmes très conscients de ce discours et doivent en tenir compte, soit en le prévenant, en s’y dérochant ou en le confrontant. Dans cet article, James McKinnon explore les stratégies qu’emploie le dramaturge Michael O’Brien pour négocier et parfois même exploiter les préjugés les plus communs à l’endroit de l’adaptation—et surtout l’adaptation humoristique—dans Mad Boy Chronicle, une parodie de Hamlet signée par O’Brien en 1995. McKinnon examine dans un premier temps les stratégies dramaturgiques de Mad Boy Chronicle qui relèvent du carnivalesque pour montrer que son humour sert en fait à obtenir des réponses sérieuses. Ensuite, il s’attarde aux stratégies paratextuelles dont se sert O’Brien pour guider le public dans la réception de son*

œuvre. Si *Mad Boy Chronicle* semble suivre toutes les conventions d'une parodie « sottie », O'Brien insiste pour la présenter dans le programme, lors d'entretiens et dans le matériel publicitaire non pas comme une profanation humoristique d'un chef-d'œuvre mais bien comme une tentative sérieuse de ressusciter la source première du soi-disant chef-d'œuvre. En imposant un tel cadre à sa pièce, O'Brien remet en question la supériorité présumée de l'œuvre « originale » en révélant que *Hamlet* n'est en fait qu'une adaptation. Ainsi, si l'adaptation s'appuie sur le prestige de la source canonique tout en le confirmant, elle nous oblige toutefois à la reconsidérer.



I seem to remember starting this as a student in Montreal: sitting on the floor with a pile of mangled scripts. Among them was the infamous “Bad Quarto” of Shakespeare’s “Hamlet”; another, *Gesta Danorum*, by Saxo Grammaticus, the Medieval source for the Hamlet story. With scissors and glue I put myself to work, trying to debase the greatest play of all time.

—O'Brien, “Playwright’s Foreword”

As Margaret Jane Kidnie shows in *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*, many scholars, critics, and spectators consider it part of their role to “bring [. . .] to notice and expos[e] as ‘fakes’” adaptations that “debase [. . .] the work’s artistic and cultural currency” (22-23). So it would not be surprising if Michael O’Brien’s explicit debasement of *Hamlet* provoked critical scepticism. Martin Morrow’s response to *Mad Boy Chronicle*’s 1995 premiere nearly fulfills this expectation:

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 [and] Polonius [. . .] as a fawning idiot whose sage advice to his son is, “Don’t do anything stoopid, lad, it ain’t wise.” Is this yet another misguided interpretation of Shakespeare? *Hamlet* for the *Dumb and Dumber* crowd? (152)

But rather than accuse O’Brien of degrading a revered English tragedy into a grotesque comedy, Morrow goes on to applaud the play enthusiastically, and most of his peers agreed with him. Reviews of *Mad Boy* have been mostly positive and occasionally exuberant (Morrow’s review was even published along with the play as an “afterword”), and *Mad Boy* was eventually nominated

for the Governor General's award. Several critics also followed Morrow's lead in stressing that the play has serious intentions, even though it might appear to be *Dumb and Dumber*-ing down a classic.<sup>1</sup>

Morrow's response, I suggest, shows how *Mad Boy Chronicle* lures spectators into expecting a "stupid" Hamlet, and delivers a "wise" one instead. This essay examines the strategies O'Brien uses to contest *Hamlet's* cultural authority and subvert spectators' assumptions about "misguided" comic adaptations. O'Brien's dramaturgy, far more complex than the scissors and tape process he alludes to above, involves using pre-show public discourses and paratexts to set up a specific horizon of expectations that both emphasizes and challenges *Hamlet's* exalted status. He mimics the plot of *Hamlet* to manipulate the audience's expectations of the plot trajectory and brings the exalted Shakespearean text back down to earth using the arsenal of carnivalesque tactics that Bakhtin describes in *Rabelais and His World*: particularly abusive language, grotesque imagery, and clownish misappropriations of authority—all of which are, ironically, among the preferred carnivalesque tactics of Shakespeare himself, as we will see. *Mad Boy's* dramaturgy, which disguises a vigorous political critique as lowbrow comedy, offers an example of carnivalesque dramaturgy, which I suspect has wider applications; in addition, its reception reveals how adaptors anticipate and negotiate common assumptions about the status and value of adaptations.

O'Brien's adaptive dramaturgy can be broken down into several distinct tactics, each of which I examine in turn. First, O'Brien manipulates the spectator's expectations using references to *Hamlet's* familiar plot; he opens *Mad Boy* with a sequence of scenes that explicitly parody the plot of *Hamlet*, creating the expectation of a familiar outcome. This familiar sequence of actions allows spectators to congratulate themselves for recognizing the references to *Hamlet*. Second, O'Brien, his producers, and often even his critics, encourage spectators to read the play "seriously" by explaining in public discourse and paratexts<sup>2</sup> that the play is not a dumb spoof of *Hamlet*, but an excavation of its source, an ancient Norse saga that was recorded by a Christian monk centuries before Shakespeare wrote his version. These paratexts attempt to usurp *Hamlet's* cultural legitimacy and authenticity by claiming to restore the "original" *Hamlet*. Finally, while maintaining this tension between "dumb" comedy and serious intentions, *Mad Boy* uses carnivalesque conventions to bring spectators into familiar contact with "the greatest play of all

time.” It translates Shakespearean and Biblical poetry into profane doggerel to suggest how fancy words conceal commonplace thoughts, it transforms Shakespeare’s Renaissance courtiers into grotesque Viking caricatures who mock elite ideals of beauty and aesthetic refinement, and it crowns the perverse and vile Fengo as a mock-king or “Lord of Misrule,” who appropriates and inverts symbols of official authority in order to strip them of their sacred nature and reveal how they legitimize tyranny, cruelty, and iniquity (Bristol 67). The result is as much an enrichment of *Hamlet* as a debasement: O’Brien’s comic critique provides spectators with fresh insight into Shakespeare and his role in contemporary culture.

### The Viking Hamlet? Intertextuality and Paratextuality

*Mad Boy Chronicle* opens in the village of “Helsingor” on the eve of the second millennium, with a scene in which a vengeful spirit appears before two old women, demanding to know the whereabouts of his son. Recognizing the ghost as their previous chieftain, Horvendal the Elder, the fearless fishwives drive it away with a barrage of snowballs and profanity, and then argue over what to do next. Spectators may already know what will happen next, having spotted the obvious parody of *Hamlet* 1.1. Spectators who recognize this reference will not be surprised to discover, in the subsequent scenes, that the current chieftain, Fengo, has married the widow of the aforementioned ghost, and that his step-son, Horvendal the Younger, has certain grievances about the situation. These spectators will also recognize Polonius’s family reconstituted in Fengo’s miserable yes-man, Matthus; his barbaric son, Ragnar; and his traumatized daughter, Lilja. By the time Horvendal the Elder’s ghost reappears and commands Horvendal to avenge him, many may feel confident that they already know how this plot will end.

Although the plot seems familiar, at first, the characters come to be distinguished from Shakespeare’s by their unfamiliar names, repulsive appearance, and crass behaviour—when we first meet “Lord Fengo,” for example, he is “*very huge and very drunk, covered with food,*” and gaily entertaining his “court” at the expense of thirteen-year-old Lilja, whom he humiliates by forcing her to gaze into his empty eye-socket and dousing her with beer (18). Throughout the first act of *Mad Boy Chronicle*, O’Brien’s grotesque Viking characters roughly re-enact the plot of *Hamlet*, creating an interplay between “the conservative comfort of familiarity [. . .] countered by the unpredictable pleasure in difference,”

which Linda Hutcheon describes as the fundamental pleasure of adaptation (173).

O'Brien's adherence to Shakespeare's plot distinguishes *Mad Boy Chronicle* from other Canadian Shakespeare adaptations of the 1990s, such as Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona/Good Morning Juliet*, Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet*, and Normand Chaurrette's *The Queens*. These plays use original plots, contemporary settings, and/or new protagonists to distance themselves from Shakespeare. By contrast, the first act of *Mad Boy Chronicle* clearly mimics the plot of *Hamlet*: Horvendal's odd behaviour—in this case, partly explained by his recent conversion to Christianity (22)—arouses Fengo's suspicion, Horvendal decides to feign madness in order to spy on Fengo, and Fengo and Matthius (Polonius), in turn, attempt to spy on him, using Lilja (Ophelia) as bait. Whereas the aforementioned plays explicitly signal their difference early in the plot, *Mad Boy Chronicle* closely follows the familiar plot specifically to encourage spectators to expect a familiar outcome.

The first half of the play encourages spectators to predict a comic twist on a familiar resolution, only to shatter the expectation of a predictable outcome in the second half. At first, O'Brien's subtle deviations from the familiar plot provide some signals about Fengo's presumably imminent demise: Horvendal is a recent Christian convert, and when Jesus Christ begins to appear to other characters in visions and dreams, Fengo's growing apprehension suggests that the arrival of Christian order will herald his demise. But in the second act of *Mad Boy*, the invasion of Helsingor by the forces of Christianity (both earthly and supernatural) does not produce the expected restoration of justice and order—in fact, things only get worse. Instead of uncrowning Fengo, the newly-arrived priests, first symbolically crown him (making him a vassal of the Christian empire to the south), and then find themselves un-crowned by him. Fengo's power continues to grow throughout the second act, while Horvendal loses his faith and his sense of purpose. This radical disruption of expectations forces the audience into an altogether different interpretive mode, forcing them to try to guess *what* will happen next, rather than *how*.

### Paratextuality and Public Discourse

Moreover, as mentioned above, *Mad Boy*'s reception is complicated by public discourses that encourage spectators to read it not as an adaptation of *Hamlet*, but of *Hamlet*'s source, an ancient

Norse saga first recorded by a medieval monk named Saxo Grammaticus. This intertextual genealogy is laid out in public discourse and paratexts surrounding the play, including its reviews, marketing material, and O'Brien's foreword, all of which emphasize that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is *not* the original "original." The play's title page graphically challenges Shakespeare's originality and authenticity:

*Mad Boy Chronicle*  
by Michael O'Brien  
from  
"Gesta Danorum"  
by Saxo Grammaticus c.1200 A.D.  
and  
"Hamlet, Prince of Denmark"  
by William Shakespeare c.1600 A.D.

Each production of *Mad Boy Chronicle* has used marketing material, print and web-based publicity, and, at the very least, program notes and posters to establish Saxo Grammaticus and *Gesta Danorum* in its audience's horizon of expectations. These paratexts posit Shakespeare as the belated adaptor, not the originator of *Hamlet*. O'Brien also adapts the names of Saxo's characters to provide a constant reminder of his antecedent source (although he changes "Amleth" to Horvendal, the name Saxo gives to Amleth's father).<sup>3</sup>

Although other adaptations also cite multiple sources, such as *Goodnight, Desdemona/Good Morning, Juliet* and *Harlem Duet*,<sup>4</sup> *Mad Boy* is unusual in that it pits its sources against each other. Spectators may have never heard of Saxo before, let alone read his work closely enough to verify *Mad Boy's* authenticity, but as Morrow writes in his review, "authenticity clearly isn't the point" (153). Saxo's main role in the reception of *Mad Boy Chronicle* is to prevent spectators from dismissing it as a "misguided interpretation" of *Hamlet*. Daniel Fischlin develops a useful image for thinking about how this works in "Nation and/as Adaptation," in which he describes adaptation as producing an "interpretive *frisson*" by interweaving "recognizable aspects of the source-text [. . .] into the new contexts, however defamiliarized, of the adaptation" (317). *Mad Boy* defamiliarizes *Hamlet* by suggesting that its "recognizable aspects" actually have an older, more authentic source than Shakespeare.

O'Brien's efforts to highlight *Mad Boy's* textual patrimony—and with it, *Hamlet's*—suggest a wariness of cultural prejudices against adaptation and a strategy for negating them.<sup>5</sup> By citing *Gesta Danorum* as a source, O'Brien implies that *Mad Boy* is not an inauthentic adaptation of Shakespeare, but a revenant text sent to avenge *Shakespeare's* infidelities by “haul[ing] the Hamlet story howling back to its origins,” as the play's back cover blurb puts it. Reviews of *Mad Boy* tacitly comply with O'Brien's attempt to dislodge Shakespeare's claim to authority by publicizing his methods and motives:

29-year-old Toronto dramatist Michael O'Brien is a bit of a scholar. To write *Mad Boy Chronicle*, he happily rooted back into medieval European literature to unearth the Danish saga that inspired the world's most famous tragedy. (Morrow, “Let the Plays Begin.”)

O'Brien's *Mad Boy Chronicle* [. . .] is not technically an adaptation of *Hamlet*. (Kirchhoff)

It would be a stretch to call *Mad Boy Chronicle* an adaptation of *Hamlet*. In fact O'Brien's advice to theatre-goers is to forget *Hamlet* altogether. (Burluk)

Shakespeare did not invent his plots but borrowed them from literary sources. The story of *Hamlet* appears in a medieval history of Denmark, and that is where O'Brien returns with *Mad Boy Chronicle*. (Taylor)

All of the reviews focus on O'Brien's sources, yet none questions O'Brien's fidelity to Shakespeare, which demonstrates both how ubiquitous fidelity discourse is and how effectively O'Brien counters it. None of these critics question cultural prejudices against adaptation; instead, they claim that *Mad Boy* is no mere adaptation—or if it is, then so is *Hamlet*. The critics thus implicitly endorse O'Brien's claim to “tell the *real* story of *Hamlet*” (Shaner, *emph. added*), and generally depict his play as both a bold challenge to the authority of “the world's most famous tragedy” and a noble attempt to salvage a lost classic.

The reviews also indicate that much of the play's “interpretive *frisson*” derives from its juxtaposition of low comedy and “serious intent” (Morrow, “Proud”). The critics' attitudes to *Mad Boy's* comic elements range from borderline contempt to expressions of

surprise that O'Brien's play is more than a trivial spoof. For example, H. J. Kirchhoff contends that although *Mad Boy* offers "a lot of gross fun [. . .] one is left with the thought that, no matter where O'Brien started his research, he has written an unsubtle comedy, with cartoon Christianity substituting for existential doubt, and coarse gags instead of poetry." Kate Taylor calls *Mad Boy* "very funny," but "very funny" only counts for two and a half stars. Whereas *Hamlet*, she claims, "endures [. . .] because Shakespeare took that story and turned it into a philosophical tragedy about the burden of conscience," *Mad Boy's* comedy, however effective, prevents it from reaching such lofty heights:

For a moment, you can glimpse a large drama debating the wisdom of a cult of mercy in a world where survival itself is a vicious struggle. But the moment is fleeting, and if one compares *Mad Boy Chronicle* to a play like *Seven Years*, an exalted contemporary drama [. . .], this show starts to look disappointingly lightweight.

Taylor implies that "unsubtle comedy" simply cannot match "philosophical tragedy." Even the more positive reviews try to reassure their readers that *Mad Boy* offers more than comedy, implying that comedy is somehow empty or frivolous. For example, having just noted its "Monty Python-type characters," Al Beeber warns, "[b]ut beware: the comedy balances on a knife edge and laughter opens up into the abyss" ("U of L Play"); Morrow promises that the play "grows" from a "spoof into something meatier" ("A Viking"); and the Kingston *Whig-Standard* describes the play as "sprawling, funny, brutal, thoughtful, [and] sad," sequencing the adjectives as if the latter three are required as ballast against excessive levity ("*Mad Boy's* a Full Show Piece").

*Mad Boy's* reviews generally assume that laughter is antithetical to "serious" rational discourse, an assumption that stems from the Platonic association of comedy and laughter with negative derision and irrational outbursts of bodily passion,<sup>6</sup> or as Hobbes defines it, a "sudden glory" caused "by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another" (125). *Mad Boy's* critics often echo Hobbes in their implication that the play's comic elements—however enjoyable—are "a signe [sic] of Pusillanimity," a weakness to be avoided at all costs (125-6). Bakhtin, however, argues that comedy should be considered a path *toward* knowledge, not away from it:



Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically. ("Epic and the Novel" 23)

This vision of laughter is central to Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, which "represents everything socially and spiritually exalted on the material, bodily level" (Bristol 22), enabling the "free investigation" that Bakhtin claim is the real objective of comedy: "laughter is [. . .] in some texts at least, a substantive philosophy in its own right, and one that presents itself as a full and genuine alternative to all serious world views" (*Rabelais* 129). Carnavalesque texts, Bakhtin argues, bring exalted symbols and discourses into crude contact to reveal how they consecrate as ideal or natural the boundaries between the poor and the powerful.

There is an irony in the critics' tendency to portray O'Brien's play as a comic debasement of a serious tragedy, because as several scholars have noted, Shakespeare is a carnivalesque author. Bakhtin himself applauds Shakespeare's carnivalesque dramaturgy numerous times, particularly the juxtaposition of the serious and the grotesque in his tragedies:

In world literature there are certain works in which [. . .] seriousness and laughter coexist and reflect each other and are [. . .] not separate [. . .] as in the usual modern drama. [. . .] But the most important works in this category are, of course, Shakespeare's tragedies. (*Rabelais* 122)

Moreover, although Bakhtin rarely discusses Shakespeare in depth, others have pointed out that *Hamlet* superbly exemplifies his carnivalesque dramaturgy. Phyllis Gorfain illustrates how *Hamlet* "merges [the] ludic carnivalesque mode"—characterized by self-reflexive wordplay, genre blending, metatheatre, and repetition—"with a strictly Aristotelian drive toward tragic finality" (155); Robert Barrie argues that Hamlet, playing "his own Fool," so

thoroughly subverts *Hamlet* “as to reduce to laughter the very idea of serious tragedy” (83); and Michael Bristol shows how Hamlet frequently draws our attention to dissonant juxtapositions of comedy and tragedy, seriousness and mirth. For example, Bristol argues that Hamlet’s description of the deceased Polonius as “at supper”— meaning, not as a diner but as dinner for worms “reinterprets the basic distinctions of social life: between food and corrupt, decaying flesh, between human and animal, between king and beggar” (187). Hamlet’s “extreme [*sic*] show of doltishness”— in refusing to treat Polonius’s death (or corpse) with due respect and reverence—turns “temporal authority and indeed all political structures of difference [. . .] inside out” (187). Death becomes laughing matter, but this mirth is profound, not trivial: the suggestion that even a king may transit through the guts of a beggar reveals the limits of a king’s supposedly divine political authority.

As Robert Barrie points out, however, although early modern audiences “might have collaborated” with a “subversive interpretation of the play,” contemporary audiences do not, insofar as “the major portion of such audiences is there largely to ‘get cultured’ and is thus extraordinarily submissive to the play’s function as a vehicle of official culture” (91). Barrie blames changing theatre conventions for suppressing the laughter in *Hamlet*, a point echoed by Bristol, who argues that contemporary theatre mostly exists as an apparatus of official culture, rather than in opposition to it (Bristol 4).<sup>7</sup> Thus, although O’Brien has spoken about *Mad Boy Chronicle* as an attempt to restore the story’s authentic “Viking voice,” it could also be seen as an attempt to restore *Hamlet*’s carnivalesque laughter—ironically by appropriating *Hamlet* itself as a symbol of official culture to be taken apart, turned upside down, and subjected to free investigation. By depicting *Hamlet* as “the world’s most famous tragedy” or “the greatest play of all time,” *Mad Boy*’s public discourses, cited above, amplify the carnivalesque effect of transforming *Hamlet*’s characters into grotesque barbarians who debase Shakespeare’s refined iambic pentameter and reduce its tragic gravitas to profane comic levity.

A number of Canadian Shakespeare adaptations use laughter to bring spectators into crude contact with Shakespeare, including the aforementioned *Goodnight Desdemona* and Jean-Pierre Ronfard’s *Lear* and *Vie et Mort du Roi Boiteux*, which, as Jennifer Drouin illustrates in “Daughters of the Carnivalized Nation,” “take *le grand Will* down a peg” and “expose the carnivalesque that has always been present in his ‘high culture’ plays” (22). Like Ronfard (and, I would argue, Ann-Marie Macdonald),

O'Brien "illustrates the artificiality of the signifier 'Shakespeare' as the embodiment of high culture, simultaneously appropriating and undercutting [Shakespeare's] claim to cultural authority" (Drouin 2). Unlike these plays, however, *Mad Boy* does not rely on a Canadian *setting* as a source of "interpretive *frisson*." MacDonald invokes "Shakespeare as the [artificial] embodiment of high culture" by setting her play in a parody of contemporary Canadian academe, while Ronfard uses a Quebecois setting, in which Shakespeare's cultural authority is always already somewhat defamiliarized.<sup>8</sup> As Drouin argues, Ronfard explicitly carnivalizes the notion of the Quebecois nation (4), and both MacDonald and Djanet Sears, also mentioned above, use dramatic space explicitly to query the relationship between "Canada" and "Shakespeare."<sup>9</sup> By contrast, *Mad Boy* does not refer to Canada, and although he uses his Viking setting to create stark contrasts with spectators' expectations of "Shakespearean" drama, he also relies on public discourses and paratexts—which ostensibly serve to justify that setting—to construct a notion of *Hamlet* as "the greatest play of all time" that clashes with the obscene comedy in his play.

### "Hie off you Fengo Fucker!": Abusive Language and Grotesque Imagery

*Mad Boy Chronicle* exhibits several of the conventions that Bakhtin identifies as central to carnivalesque literature, particularly abusive language, grotesque imagery, and the misappropriation of authority by a clown-king. In carnivalesque literature and drama, abusive language and grotesque imagery replace the language and symbols of official authority and high culture; by way of analogy, Bakhtin describes a parody of sacred ritual wherein excrement takes the place of incense at a mock service (*Rabelais* 147).<sup>10</sup> The obscene language and grotesque neologisms ("piddleprophet," "cockwhallop," "Fengo-fucker," etc.) that permeate *Mad Boy Chronicle*, similarly, constitute a profane parody of *Hamlet*. In addition—to the extent that contemporary theatre privileges the "appreciation of durable literary values" (Bristol 4), and, as Ric Knowles claims, often works, through its labour structures, representational apparatus, and viewing practices to "police the norms [. . .] of dominant cultures"—*Mad Boy*, through its implicit attack on literary values, carnivalizes theatre in general, as well as *Hamlet* in particular (Knowles, *Reading* 9-10).

O'Brien amplifies the coarseness of *Mad Boy's* dialogue by inventing a dialect, which Morrow describes as a "mongrel" accent "much less [like] Danish than a kind of bastard Irish" (153). As Morrow suggests, the dialect does not signify location so much as class: its rough, brutish sounds deliberately clash with the sounds of the "neutral" dialects taught in theatre schools (e.g., the hybrid dialect sometimes known as "North Atlantic") and typically associated with performances of the classics. O'Brien's language thereby constitutes an *acoustic* travesty of sorts, which critics found highly effective. Kate Taylor even claims that O'Brien's "chief achievement [. . .] is to create a silly yet plausible dialect for these medieval Danes that is part archaic English and part contemporary."<sup>11</sup>

There is also a *formal* travesty. Just as Rabelais and Shakespeare frequently parodied Latin and latinizers (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 465-69), *Mad Boy Chronicle* parodies iambic pentameter, which audiences recognize as "Shakespearean," by filling in the blank verse with obscene content. The obscenity, in and of itself, violates decorum; in conjunction with the elevated metre, it "amusingly debases the exquisite poetry of Shakespeare" (Morrow 153), especially when it explicitly alludes to *Hamlet*. For example, Matthus deflates Polonius's "To thine own self be true" speech to a moronic tautology: "don't do nothin' stupid will ye hey son? It int wise" (O'Brien 29). Later, Horvendal strips Hamlet's contemplation of death of its mystique by reducing it to doggerel. Beholding the skull of a dead dog which he has just tripped over, he says, not quite profoundly, "I nae knew yee. I can guess ye well./Where your doggish soul went, there should Horvendal. / Howso died ye, sure it served you right" (130). O'Brien's obscene and ludicrous "translations" bring *Hamlet* into crude contact and clear the way for what Bakhtin calls "free investigation," by implying that Shakespeare's poetry, which many people find elusive or intimidating, is merely common sense (or perhaps just "Viking sense") puffed up by ornate rhetoric.

The grotesque, greasy Helsingoreans are the corporeal equivalent of *Mad Boy's* abusive language. The Vikings' physical appearance exemplifies what Bakhtin calls "grotesque realism"—exaggerations of the flesh, scatological humour, and an emphasis on bodily functions that are normally hidden from polite discourse. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque transfers "high ceremonial gesture or ritual to the material sphere": "all [. . .] forms of grotesque realism degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh" (*Rabelais* 20). The grotesque, unsightly body is perpetually on display in *Mad Boy Chronicle*, because the

violent, slovenly Vikings are given to inappropriate bodily display and poor hygiene. Fengo, in particular, potently embodies the grotesque, and his predisposition to excess in all bodily matters — eating, drinking, sex, etc.—is a dominant motif in the play. When he forces Lilja to behold his eyesocket, Fengo’s graphic display of an unsightly body part (or in this case, the unsightly *absence* of a sightly body part) exemplifies how grotesque realism breaks decorum, both in the world of the play (as the other characters’ reactions indicate), and in that of the theatre: the scene is both comic and viscerally revolting. The effect is amplified by Fengo’s grotesque conflation of a human eye—conventionally privileged as a “window to the soul”—with the “lower bodily stratum” of an animal: “looks a bit like a rabbit’s bum, don’t it?” (19).

Grotesque realism permeates *Mad Boy Chronicle*, particularly in its representations of violence, which (in contrast to the aestheticized violence often seen in theatre) feature severed heads, undisciplined brutality, and awful, lingering suffering. After Gerutha is stabbed by her own son—accidentally, while trying to stab *him*—she refuses to die gracefully, and instead crawls around the stage, bleeding to death and begging for mercy, until finally expiring several scenes later. O’Brien’s characters are not allowed to glorify their own passages with poetic epigrams, and if their deaths are noticed by others, it is with grotesque fascination not awe or reverence. Fengo’s description of Gerutha’s funeral sums up *Mad Boy’s* attitude toward death and the rituals of passage:

Hah haaaaa!! Dint the ol’ girl flare up? Didn’t she flare up like a blob o’ fish-oil? Burn’d fer hours she. Brighter than a torch! ‘Spect it’s all the lard an’ blubber like, hey? All them pancakes she ett in her stupid life! Hey, Brother Paavo, hey? [. . .] Drink up! Tomorrow we burn the little girl. (142)

Recalling Hamlet’s irreverent mockery of Polonius’s death, Fengo utterly robs the ritual of dignity by focusing on the grotesque reality of the event rather than the solemnity of the ritual.

### “Looka me! I’m the Force of Wisdom and progress!”: The Lord of Misrule

*Mad Boy’s* carnivalesque spirit centres on Fengo’s role as a mocking or Lord of Misrule. Bristol points out that *Hamlet* actually dramatizes a competition between *two* mock-kings (207), and although *Mad Boy* may also be read this way, it is Fengo who most

potently embodies the carnivalesque, while Horvendal generally plays the straight man, the Auguste to Fengo's Joey. This dynamic is reinforced by Horvendal's relative youth (in keeping with Saxo, Horvendal is an adolescent), and his recent conversion to Christianity, which makes him a dour pacifist in comparison to the wily, violent Fengo. (Ironically, Horvendal's gesture of teenage rebellion is to reject Viking family values by renouncing the Norse gods in favour of Jesus Christ, prompting his a hysterical tirade from Fengo about this "Godd of Peace [. . .] what wrenches sonns away from their fathers, tearin families and kingdoms apart" [22].) In addition, Horvendal's "madness" is less a calculated act of play and trickery than a desperate attempt to stay alive, and O'Brien's plot—again, following Saxo's—omits the Moustetrap episode. Horvendal thus lacks many of Hamlet's trickster/clownish qualities, while Fengo is far more wily and clever than Claudius.

In the tradition of carnival clowns from Falstaff to Homer Simpson, Fengo is a rude, indecorous, and physically grotesque figure who demystifies authority by using and abusing it with a total lack of guile and subtlety. Instead of concealing his will to power in lofty rhetoric or diplomatic finesse, he wields power openly and liberally, exposing authority as essentially cruel and self-interested. Fengo's blatantly self-serving appropriations of the symbols and rituals of authority expose folly and transgression as "the covert reality of rational government" (Bristol 67), especially in act two, when the clown king is formally (mis)recognized as the real king by the recently arrived Christian priests. When the priests begin to explain Christianity to Fengo, he instantly translates their lofty sermons into plain language that reveals how the new ideology will serve to consolidate the power of the old regime:

PAAVO. Jesus said, love thine enemy as thyself.

FENGO. Aye, that'd throw'em!

PAAVO. He said, judge not, lest ye be judged.

FENGO. Aye, no judgin' Fengo!

.....  
 FENGO. Punishments! Punishments! Yuz gots t'have punishments boys. Whatve ye gott?

PETRI. Why?

PAAVO. Penances Fengo.

PETRI. Excommunication.

PAAVO. Depending on the Severity of the Sin.

FENGO. Dependin on the Severity—of Fengo. Ha haaaa!  
 (89-90)

Fengo's relentless degradation of exalted language and rituals is classic carnivalesque: his deliberate misappropriations of holy scripture and dogma reveal the material implications hidden in the elevated rhetoric. For example, Fengo is delighted by the concept of "hex-communication" (90)—and his mispronunciation both emphasizes its sinister, mysterious power and links it to the pagan "superstitions" that the Church abhors. Fengo's instant grasp of the concept of "hex-communication" displays an acute, almost Foucauldian perception of how discourse is the power of which it speaks, and his abuse of both the word and the ritual translates the priests' exalted language (and perhaps Foucault's) into crude common sense.

The moment Fengo perceives how the Christian system extends his tyranny from the temporal realm to the eternal, he embraces the new order and commences doling out hex-communications with relish and spite, beginning with the wife he no longer needs to legitimize his authority: "Well, good holymen, I likes yer words. [...] Don't want to stand i'the way of progress! [...] Tell yer Christian bosses Fengo wants aboard! Womann—yer the first heathen I'm hex-communicatin!" (90). Earlier in the play, Fengo acknowledges the status of women in the Viking world by introducing Gerutha as "Fengo's bride of seven years, [w]idowed wife of deadbrother lord; [and] lawful holder of deadbrother's lands" (20); but the Christians do not recognize women's claims to property, freeing Fengo to dispose of her. Later, when he sets about replacing her with a younger, less troublesome wife, Fengo uses hex-communication to barter eternal salvation for personal favours, exposing the sacred ritual as a form of extortion: Matthius eagerly offers his daughter in order to forestall his own hex-communication. But Fengo reminds them that the Church demands a certain propriety: "Whoa! Hold yer horses, prettygirl, hold yer horses! We'll get married, nae ye fear, soon as the Church okays it. Gots to flush out the pottie afore ye shitts in it again, right Matthius?" (96). Fengo's grotesque analogy between marriage and latrine protocol exposes how the new religion glorifies the exalted ritual of marriage to gloss over the ways it commodifies women as objects of exchange between men.

Whereas act one points toward a familiar conclusion involving Fengo's uncrowning and Horvendal's revenge, the arrival of the Church in act two consolidates Fengo's tyranny rather than concluding it. This and other departures from the familiar plot make the anticipated uncrowning increasingly uncertain. Familiar episodes from *Hamlet* still appear, but in decidedly warped

versions. For example, in *Mad Boy Chronicle*, the usurper *does* publicly disclose his crime: Fengo confesses to murdering his brother in front of the entire community as part of his ritual baptism. Fengo's comically lengthy confession—which he interrupts several times to chuckle in delighted reminiscence of various horrible crimes—finally concludes with the admission that Shakespeare's king never utters: "Oh yeh—plus I smashed me brother's brains" (105). This public confession prompts another departure from *Hamlet*, because it gives Horvendal the justification to seek bloody vengeance. But Horvendal's action turns out to be as futile as Hamlet's inaction, because, as the priests explain, Fengo's act of confession not only absolves him of guilt but earns him the laughable honorific, "Fengo the Confessor" (105). Baptism also gives Fengo the power to anoint his goon squad as "Christian soldiers" (117). O'Brien's religious subplot reduces sacred rituals and discourses to laughing matter to reveal how the new religion and its rituals—which ostensibly promote peace and equality—actually conceal the inherent self-interestedness of authority and sanction the crimes of the powerful.

The play's conclusion betrays expectations of both the familiar plot and the familiar genre conventions of carnivalesque comedy. Carnival festivities and plots—including *Hamlet*—typically begin by crowning a mock-king, and conclude with his overthrow, beating, and un-crowning, and the return of *de jure* authority. Thus, the spectators' familiarity with the structures of both *Hamlet* and carnival engender the expectation that *Mad Boy* will conclude with justice and restoration. But Fengo refuses to submit to the ritual de-crowning, and instead uses his carnivalesque logic to reveal that Christian order and its ideological apparatus are every bit as arbitrary and cruel as his own. Fengo's power grows, while the "true" Christians are either co-opted (like the priests) or, having been further disenfranchised by the regime change that was supposed to liberate them, resort to violence (like Lilja). In what may be the play's most bitter and blasphemous irony (and is certainly among the more daunting stage directions in dramatic history), "*the real JESUS*" appears to Horvendal, and desperately impels him to "Turn Ye Back - Save my Strangled Gospel. / [. . .] Slay thine Uncle! Go take thy Viking Vengeance! Stop him! Stop him! [...] Turn Back - and Slay that Mann!" (135). But Horvendal's final attack on Fengo, at Lilja's funeral, is thwarted—ironically, by agents of the Church, when the priest Petri impales him—with a huge cross. This shocking conclusion demonstrates how adaptation works to defamiliarize the original and thus



generate new insight into it. Fengo's unexpected triumph thwarts the spectators' expectation of a restoration of justice, suggesting instead that the conventional restoration of order also restores cruelty, injustice, and hegemony. Rather than celebrating the conventional triumph of rule over misrule, O'Brien's conclusion leaves spectators wondering whether there is even any difference.

Michael O'Brien's sophisticated, complex dramaturgy productively contradicts certain widely-held notions about adaptation, including the (often unspoken) assumption that adaptation is too "easy"—because it is only a form of copying or interpretation—to merit critical inquiry or be taken seriously as a creative endeavour.<sup>12</sup> If nothing else, I hope I have illustrated that O'Brien's adaptive dramaturgy is anything but easy. To transform *Hamlet* into a "stupid" comedy, O'Brien destabilizes the audiences' assumptions about Shakespeare's authorship and originality by citing Saxo in the paratexts that surround the play; manipulates their expectations by following and then diverging from the familiar plot; and uses carnivalesque comedy to bring *Hamlet* into crude contact and to invite a free investigation into the ways that exalted symbols and language serve the interests of authority by making it look more natural and rational than it really is. In addition, *Mad Boy's* reception invites further consideration of the strategies adaptors use to negotiate fidelity discourse. Contemporary adaptation scholars frequently lament the unfairness and illogic of fidelity discourse, but rarely acknowledge that adaptors themselves are at least as wary of it as they are, and may well take steps to deal with it. By explicitly citing *Gesta Danorum* as Shakespeare's source, O'Brien assures them of his own serious, scholarly, intentions—even as he uses the same source text to justify transforming Shakespeare's courtly Danes into vulgar Vikings. These efforts to manipulate the spectators' expectations reveal that he was not only *aware* of the existence of fidelity discourse, but took steps to disarm and even exploit it. O'Brien's carnivalesque dramaturgy provides a fascinating model for investigating adaptations—particularly those which may have been dismissed or overlooked as "misguided interpretation[s]" of the classics. ❁

## Notes

- 1 See Morrow and also reviews by Beeber, Brandes, Burliuk, Kirchhoff, Shaner, Taylor, and van Wyk. Not all are as positive as Morrow, but none accuse O'Brien of "betraying" Shakespeare. *Dumb and Dumber*

- (1994) was a hit film comedy directed by Peter Farrelly, starring Jim Carrey and Jeff Daniels.
- 2 “Paratextuality” is Gérard Genette’s term for the relationship between the “text proper” and all the “titles, prefaces, postfaces, epigraphs, dedications,” and so forth, that “come to surround the text and [. . .] become virtually indistinguishable from it” (Stam 28). Adaptation theorist Robert Stam argues that the paratexts of film and theatre include posters, reviews, and publicity material, which frames readings of “the text proper” (27-28). The paratexts of *Mad Boy Chronicle* differ from one production to the next, but include O’Brien’s foreword, program notes, posters, marketing material, and media coverage.
  - 3 *Hamlet*’s genealogy is actually more complicated than these paratexts imply: although it is possible that Shakespeare knew of *Gesta Danorum*, his proximate sources were more likely one or more earlier English dramatizations of the story, and/or Francois de Belleforest’s prose romance adaptation of Saxo’s story (1576), which adds the protagonist’s famous melancholy, the Ghost, and Gertrude’s adultery before the murder of Hamlet Senior. Although Saxo’s plot influenced O’Brien’s writing, it does not influence the play’s reception, because very few spectators are familiar with it. Therefore I will not compare the three plots closely here, but generally speaking, O’Brien sides with Saxo and against Shakespeare in these instances: 1) Horvendal is an adolescent, not an adult; 2) there is a longer gap between the old king’s murder and the beginning of the “mad boy” plot; 3) O’Brien omits most of the characters that Shakespeare adds to the play, such as Horatio, emphasizing the protagonist’s isolation; 4) the characters are (at first) pagan, not Christian. There is a complete translation of Saxo’s “Life of Amleth” in Hansen; for a summary of the similarities and differences between *Gesta Danorum*, *Hamlet*, and *Mad Boy Chronicle*, see McKinnon 40-41.
  - 4 *Goodnight Desdemona* is based on *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, but also Jungian psychology; *Harlem Duet*’s most prominent Shakespearean source is *Othello*, but as Kidnie points out it also alludes to *Pericles*, and Dickenson shows that it also engages in an intertextual dialogue with antecedents as diverse as *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Franz Fanon.
  - 5 Fidelity criticism—the tendency to judge adaptations on the basis of their perceived resemblance to the alleged original, and thus to reduce them to the status of a more or less accurate fraud—may be the *bête noir* of adaptation scholarship, but the lamentations of adaptation scholarship have not ended the practice. Indeed, JD Connor argues that fidelity criticism perseveres in spite of the efforts of adaptation

scholars, to the extent that adaptation scholarship is now dominated by “the fidelity reflex”; that is, “not the persistence of the discourse, but the persistent call for it to end.”

- 6 Plato advises censoring laughter from literature because of its negative, anti-social character (*Republic* 388e). His association of laughter with derision and abhorrent passions is central to Christian ideas about laughter. The Church Fathers “quoted with delight the words of the pessimistic Ecclesiastes, about laughter being foolish” (Gilhus 61). From their perspective, laughter is “wreaks violence on rational discourse,” and represents a base, bodily, emotional impulse to be avoided at all costs, ideas that persist in the writing of secular thinkers like Hobbes, and in the reviews mentioned here (61).
- 7 By contrast, Bristol points out, during Shakespeare’s lifetime, the very apparatus of theatre had a powerful debasing effect: its dubious social and legal status was such that anything performed there was automatically brought into crude contact with the spectators (110-113). For a powerful demonstration of how the conditions of the production and reception actively or accidentally limit Shakespeare’s transgressive potential, see Knowles’s *Reading the Material Theatre*, particularly chapters three and six. Secondary and post-secondary education also play a powerful role in constructing Shakespeare and *Hamlet* as revered symbols of literary achievement (Sinfield).
- 8 O’Brien’s enigmatic claim that “only in Canada could such a play get writ” might reward further investigation (“Playwright’s Foreword” 9).
- 9 Sears sets *Harlem Duet* outside Canada, but in a pointed and deliberate way that she highlights with various Canadian references (including a character named Canada). Scholarship on Shakespeare adaptation, too, often foregrounds or focuses on adaptive strategies related to setting and dramatic space. For example, see Knowles’s “*Othello* in Three Times,” Brydon and Makaryk’s *Shakespeare in Canada: A World Elsewhere?*, Massai’s *Worldwide Shakespeares*, which focuses on making Shakespeare local, and Joanne Tompkins’s brief but widely cited essay on “Re-citing Shakespeare in Post-Colonial Space.”
- 10 On abusive language and “the grotesque image of the body” in carnival and the carnivalesque, see *Rabelais and His World*, 145-95, and 303-436, or any of Bakhtin’s numerous commentators, such as Vice (152-60). Bristol also discusses these topics, and the clown-king or Lord of Misrule extensively throughout *Carnival and Theatre*.
- 11 O’Brien’s use of a devised dialect to evoke associations with the past is similar to Peter Barnes’s inventive “retro-Jacobean” dialect in *The Bewitched*, *Red Noses*, and other plays.
- 12 See Stam on “the myth of facility,” for example (7).

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