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Recruiting Shakespeare: Ideological Revisions of *Coriolanus* and *Macbeth*

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Abstract

This paper examines the ideological reinventions of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus* through twentieth-century reinterpretations by Eugène Ionesco and Bertolt Brecht. Shakespeare's plays have long occupied a canonical status that invites continual adaptation. Their enduring quality feeds into the trajectory of an unceasing afterlife. Highly amenable, the reinterpretations re-accentuate their political and ethical concerns for new historical contexts. Ionesco's *Macbett* (1973) transforms Shakespeare's tragedy into a burlesque of totalitarian power, exposing the absurdity, permanence, and universal reach of political violence. Brecht's *Coriolanus* (1972), by contrast, reframes Shakespeare's narrative within a Marxist dramaturgy. He reinterprets class conflict and redefines the tragic hero as an anti-hero shaped by shifting socio-political structures. Through a comparative study, these adaptations reveal how modern dramatists with varying ideologies mobilize Shakespeare to interrogate tyranny, civic responsibility, and ideological manipulation. By situating both rewritings within their respective cultural contexts, the paper demonstrates how Shakespeare becomes a dynamic site of political critique rather than a static aesthetic monument.

Keywords: Shakespearean adaptation, ideological revision, political dramaturgy, tyranny and power, Brechtian interpretation, Ionesco's absurdism

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Introduction

Shakespeare today has become a cultural icon whose ubiquity crosses cultures, both in time and space. Despite his popularity, Shakespeare has become associated with a transcendental value whose durability has withstood the ever-changing cultural frameworks in which he has been appreciated. At the same time, Shakespeare's name is invoked successfully for aesthetic, political, institutional and commercial purposes. Amazingly, Shakespeare adulation walks the tight rope of popular consumption and aesthetic appreciation. What makes Shakespeare endure? Peter Brook, a Shakespearean dramaturge, succinctly explains Shakespeare's vitality:

> It's not Shakespeare's view of the world, it's something which resembles reality. A sign of this is that any single word, line, character or event has not only a large number of interpretations, but an unlimited number, which is characteristic of reality… What Shakespeare wrote carries that characteristic. What he wrote is not interpretation: it is the thing itself. (qtd. in Worthen 14)

Shakespeare's authority, as it can be asserted, lies in the protean character of his texts, which lend themselves to infinite possibilities of interpretation and reinterpretation. The collaborative nature of renaissance theatre also helped create the notion of a contingent and unstable status of printed Shakespearean texts.

Shakespearean texts, moreover, remain unfixed in meaning, due to the endless guises they appear in, so that there is no final ossification. While the canonical status of Shakespeare encourages ideological appropriation, this very process of appropriation re-instates and re-establishes him. Shakespeare's continuing authority thus is dependent on interpretations and adaptations which re-introduce Shakespeare to each age as a contemporary. As Michael D. Bristol observes:

> The afterlife of the great work of art is the work of turning social agents whose interpretations accomplish the re-accentuation of the author's utterance. Interpretation is thus a form of inquiry that reveals a "new intonation" that would not have been intelligible to the original public of the author ("Introduction" *Big-time Shakespeare* 13)

Versions and reinventions of Shakespeare fulfil the promises of his plays by leaving them open to adjustment to contemporary constructions, refusing to accept them as sealed and finished texts. As a modern cultural icon, Shakespeare's ideological meanings are constantly reworked and reassessed to suit the politics and value

systems of each dramatic adaptation. The multiple and contending perspectives on and of Shakespeare help counter any restrictive ideological imposition.

The fluid status of Shakespearean texts, thus, leaves them open to appropriation by different ideologies. This paper will consider two plays, Ionesco's *Macbett* and Brecht's *Coriolanus*, texts which are ideologically poles apart, and see how they repurpose the Shakespearean originals. *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus* are Shakespearean tragedies which have much in common. Both are historical plays and the eponymous heroes of both are warriors, who are moulded by an important female figure. Both texts treat of power and politics and end ambiguously, with the possibility of future hope obliquely qualified. Their protagonists are endowed in abundant measure with flaws and strengths and require no villains to bring about their downfall. The reinventions handle the parent texts differently. Brecht and Ionesco reinterpret Shakespeare's texts and appropriate them to their differing world views through their individual acts of re-vision.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Macbeth was first performed in 1606 and was published in the First Folio of 1623. It is believed to have been written after the trial of Father Garnet (23 March 1606) for complicity in the Gun Powder Plot, a topical event that informs the play. As S. L. Bethell puts it:

> The contemporary element gives current significance to a historical situation … The whole atmosphere of treason and distrust which informs *Macbeth* found a parallel in the England of the Gun Powder Plot, so that a passing reference serves to define an attribute both to the Macbeth regime and to contemporary affairs. (qtd. in "Introduction" *Macbeth*, xxvii)

Macbeth is a dark play which explores the nature of evil, ambition and kingship. The presence of witches in the play reflects the contemporary interest in evil spirits and witches, which had real meaning for Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences. *Macbeth* is a compelling psychological portrait of the conflict between nobility and depravity. But Macbeth's evil (and also Coriolanus') at least in part, stems from a society which breeds violence. Aggressiveness is approved behaviour for men, as long as it is in the service of the prevailing political order. Macbeth's combat with Macdonwald, gory to the last detail, is eulogised by Duncan as valiant and worthy of praise. The bleeding captain describes the sight:

> For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
> Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
> Which smok'd with bloody execution,
> Like Valour's minion, carv'd out his passage,
> Till he fac'd the slave;
> Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
> Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops.
> And fix'd his head upon our battlements. (1.2.16-23)

Jan Kott, putting his finger on the pulse of the play, declares "everyone in this play is steeped in blood; victims as well as murderers. The whole world is stained with blood" (76). Lady Macbeth who goads Macbeth on to the murder, challenges Macbeth's manhood. He replies "pr'ythee, peace. / I dare do all that may become a man/Who dares do more, is none" (1.7.45-47). But Lady Macbeth continues to mock Macbeth: "When you durst do it, then you were a man:/ And, to be more than what you were, you'd be so much more the man" (1.7. 49-51). Lady Macbeth is successful in the end precisely because the notions of valiant and aggressive manhood she presses upon Macbeth find currency in their society, a society where manhood is equated with military prowess, which in common parlance can be called the ability to kill.

Macbeth's tragedy lies in the reluctant and agonizing conflict that he feels even as he embarks on the treacherous path that his ambition leads. Kenneth Muir, in his introduction to the play, explains: "Macbeth is a noble and gifted man who chooses treachery and crime, not believing he has any justification for his deeds, but knowing them precisely for what they are" (xliv).

It is important to remember that neither Lady Macbeth nor the witches, who initially tempt him, can be held responsible for Macbeth's final decision. Macbeth is acutely aware of the "horrid deed" that he is contemplating. He also, characteristically, does not shrink away from acknowledging his own ready complicity, and acknowledges "I have no spur/ To prick the sides of my intent, but only/ vaulting ambition" (1.7.25-27).

But even as Macbeth embarks on a path of moral decline, he has the equivocal appeal of a hero-villain. Eventually the time arrives when Macbeth is no longer "unman'd infolio" (3.4.72). Macbeth, who once was troubled at not being able to pronounce "Amen", becomes the ruthless villain, who comforts himself by rationalising his restlessness: "my strange and self-abuse/ Is the initiate fear, that wants hard

use:/ We are but young in the deed" (3.5.141-43). And yet when Macbeth declares that "the very firstlings of my heart shall be/ The firstlings of my hand" (4.2.147-8) we are aware that his moral imagination is still alive and chides him: "But no more sights!" Indeed, what keeps our alternating sympathy alive is precisely his imagination, which is revealed to us through the numerous soliloquies Shakespeare allows him. As E. A. J. Honigmann states, "Macbeth alone engages the audience repeatedly in soliloquy, and in his inward-looking honesty, if not in his speech addressed to others, he represents the play's most sympathetic human value. He appeals to us as his own accuser, so that we can participate simultaneously with his moral and criminal nature" ("*Macbeth*" 138). While Macbeth seemingly deadens his sensibilities, it is remarkable that he should be so alert to his own insensitivity. Further, Macbeth's character is offset by characters who are by no means wholly virtuous. R.W. Desai, in a close character study of Duncan, reveals his duplicity in his treatment of Macbeth, as he confers his inexperienced son with the title of Prince of Cumberland even as the worthy Macbeth looks on. Similarly, he deliberately undermines Macbeth's achievements by "dividing the glory between him and Banquo" (Desai 24). Banquo's ethical position too is suspect for though he has reservations about Macbeth's innocence he chooses to remain silent. Macduff and Malcolm, as Honigmann notes, are full of "self-conscious eloquence that comes close to attitudinizing" (141). Macduff's character is indelibly blemished because he leaves his defenceless family to be slaughtered while he flees to safety in England. Also, his integrity is further questioned when he passes Malcolm's test. In Robert Ornstein's word, he "is finally revolted by Malcolm's self-portrait of vice; yet how much, how very much of vice will Macduff accept in a sovereign before his stomach turns" (qtd. in Horwich, "Birth of Macol" 366). Finally, Malcolm's claim to innocence, as Richard Horwich states, "has much the opposite effect - perhaps because that innocence sounds more like an avoidance of experience and knowledge than a freedom from guilt" ("Integrity in Macbeth" 370). His contemptuous dismissal of "this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen" (5.9.35) shows Malcolm incapable of understanding complex truths. Also, it is Banquo's issue that will ultimately prevail as the prophecy and Scottish history was to prove. This leaves open the prospect of at least one major upheaval to follow before Macduff's words "the time is free" (5.9.21) proves to be true.

Ionesco's Absurdist *Macbett*

Eugene Ionesco's *Macbett* was performed in 1972, possibly as a reaction to Roman Polanski's film version of *Macbeth* which appeared in 1971. By the time Ionesco

wrote the play, he was already recognized as a famous playwright of the Absurd. The term theatre of the Absurd was coined by Martin Esslin to characterize avant-garde plays all of which expressed the belief in a godless universe. These plays portrayed the futility of human existence, causing all communication to break down. Ionesco's reputation as a leading exponent of the theatre of the Absurd was established by his best-known play, *The Rhinoceros* (1958). *The Rhinoceros* demonstrates the playwright's discomfort with the totalitarian propensities in society by showing the population of a small town embracing their metamorphosis into rhinoceroses.

Macbett, according to Ruby Cohn, is the normal French pronunciation of the Scottish name. *Macbett* is an adaptation, not a radical transformation. In the main, it follows Shakespeare's storyline, but with a few twists in characterization and plot. Ionesco is conscious of being influenced by Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. In an interview he stated his *Macbett* "leans more... toward Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (than Shakespeare's *Macbeth)*. In any case there is none of Shakespeare's compassion" (qtd. in Ruby Cohn 86).

Ionesco's play opens during peace time instead of war. But Glamiss and Candor, with great discontent, reveal their seditious thoughts, echoing each other. In the civil war that ensues, Macbett and Banquo, "incorruptible" (9) generals defend an unbelievably cowardly Duncan. Once victory is accomplished Macbett and Banquo in identical soliloquies enumerate how many dozens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands and millions they have indiscriminately either killed or caused to die. Both wear the same costumes and sport identical beards – in short, they are replicas of each other. Macbett explains to Lady Duncan "People often take me for my twin brother. Or for Banquo's twin brother". (26) By making Banquo echo Macbett, Ionesco depersonalizes Macbett. He no longer remains the highly psychologized character of Shakespeare's play and his importance as the protagonist is greatly reduced. The interchangeability of roles also characterizes other characters in the play, Glamiss/Candor, Lady Duncan/Lady Macbett, Duncan and the Lady-in-waiting respectively. The first witch in the guise of Lady Duncan finally manages after much persuasion and seduction, to convince Macbett to rebel. The first witch also later becomes Lady Macbett and appears to be an interface between Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth and the weird sisters. The original play's Lady Macbeth, who invokes the spirits to unsex her, and hails Macbeth by his three titles just like the weird sisters have often been regarded as demonically possessed.

Macbett and Banquo repeat verbatim, Candor and Glamiss' opening dialogue, in keeping with Ionesco's depiction of characters stripped of individuality. Finally, Macbett and Macol confront each other in an unheroic imprecation match, which ends with Macol stabbing Macbett in the back. Macol, once installed on the throne repeats Malcolm's speech in Shakespears's play where he confesses his desire to "uproar the universal peace, confound / All unity on earth" (4.3.98-9). But in Macol's case, there is no subsequent retraction, so that the audience is left with the unmistakable conviction of Macol's intent to continue Macbett's tyranny.

The play ends where it began, leaving us witnesses to the cyclical nature of evil which appears indestructible. Macbett reflects Banquo, together they reflect Candor and Glamiss, and Macol reflects Macbeth. In Michael Scott's words, the decentring of the characters creates "a composite vision of evil at the centre of the stage which is an amalgam of all the characters" (82). The play is a metaphysical farce. Its ominous humour lies in the brutality and degradation of war, in a grotesque and pessimistic tone. The guillotine scenes are both farcically outrageous and extremely cruel at the same time. While in Shakespeare, the degraded Macbeth is offset against the earlier Macbeth who possesses "the milk of human kindness", Ionesco by stripping his Macbeth of individuality or psychological development offers no positive possibilities. Thus, the existential tone which creeps into Macbeth's speech once he has lost his former self, is one which defines the whole atmosphere of Ionesco's play:

> Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing. (5.5.24-28)

Shakespeare's text is anchored in a specific period in time. Though Ionesco contemporizes at times with the first witch appearing in a bikini, and Donalbain studying economics and navigation, the main thrust of the play is to universalize and "express the void by means of language, gestures, acting and props" (*Notes and Counter Notes* 199). But while an Absurdist like Beckett resorts to minimalism to express emptiness, in Ionesco sheer theatricality conveys the lack of meaning: "What is needed is plenty of gesture, almost pantomime, light, sound, moving objects, doors that open and close and open again, in order to create this emptiness, so that it grows and devours everything: absence can only be created in opposition to things present" (*Notes and Counter Notes* 196).

Ionesco called *Macbett* a comedy, the comic vision, according to him, being the only valid approach to existence: "The comic alone is able to give us the strength to bear the tragedy of existence. The authentic nature of things, the truth, can only be revealed to us through fancy, which is more realistic than all our realisms." (*Notes and Counter Notes* 149) Thus, Ionesco's play is not actually a generic disfiguration, but a new approach to the genre of tragedy via sinister and grotesque farce.

Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*

Coriolanus is a more overtly political play than *Macbeth*, owing to its safe distance from English politics. Most probably written in 1608, *Coriolanus*, the last of Shakespeare's tragedies, is derived from Plutarch whose *Lives* appeared in translation in 1579. In the years 1607-8, England experienced a bad harvest and rioting and saw the emergence of the politically radical commoners who opposed the enclosure laws which served the elite. Shakespeare adapts Plutarch's claim that the oppression of usurers was the principal complaint of the plebeians to contemporary problems in England. In Shakespeare's text instead the focus is on the shortage and high prices of grain, which caused socio-economic unrest during which the poor protested the enclosure of common land and the scarcity of corn.

Coriolanus is a tragedy of political and social conflict which is the result of Coriolanus' internalizing the ethic of aristocratic honour which in its extreme form becomes a destructive and anti-social force. The play itself shows the conflict between the patricians and the plebeians and the emergence of the latter as a powerful group which must be reckoned with. Volumnia, to a far greater degree than Lady Macbeth, is a destructive figure who succeeds in making her son a grotesque caricature of Roman manhood. She exults that "thy valiantness was mine, thou suck'dst it from me" (3.2.129). Programmed by his mother's indoctrination into a war machine, Coriolanus lacks an inner, developed personality. John Russell Brown notes that in *Coriolanus*, fighting is spectacularly present right from the first act whereas, "in Shakespeare's tragedies combat is usually reserved for the final Act, by which time an audience will know what is at stake and be able, in imagination, to enter into the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist" (345). Coriolanus instead, is ruthlessly and mindlessly engaged in slaughter, which leaves the audience free to associate with either side of the political divide. Coriolanus' sense of heroic self-sufficiency and self-worth causes him to despise dependency of any kind. In his aristocratic pride he cannot but be contemptuous and dismissive of the legitimate demands of the plebeians. Coriolanus' hatred is reciprocated in full measure by the

plebeians, and though irreconcilably at odds, both the plebeians and Coriolanus claim some of our respect. The plebeians claim to be the city –"the people are the city" (3.1.199), but refuse to defend it, not because they are cowards as Coriolanus thinks, but for political reasons.

The nobles expect the citizens to fight for Rome, but do not recognize that there are reciprocal obligations in society. Even Menenius whom the citizens in their political naivete consider "one that hath always loved the people" (1.1.50), reveals an underlying contempt for them when he declares that "Rome and her rats are at the point of battle" (1.1. 161). Menenius is the experienced politician who, for all his scorn for the tribunes and the plebeians, acts as a conciliator in times of civil disturbance, for the sake of political expediency despite his essential partisanship. Through the parable of the belly, he is able to diffuse the situation and pacify the plebeians temporarily. However, later it is revealed to have no basis in the socio-political realities of Rome. Class divisions within the state negate the patricians' vision of organic unity. Indeed, the metaphor of the body politic turns into a trope of disintegration. While the plebeians are depicted as fickle at times, liable to manipulation by the tribunes who are primarily interested in consolidating their own political power, they still possess native intelligence. The high percentage of prose spoken in the play indicates the representation of the citizen's point of view.

Though the citizens remain anonymous characters, they are not a monolithic group and present various opinions and thought processes. The astuteness of the first Citizen is apparent in his differing interpretation of the belly fable. He recognizes the parts of the body on the basis of their function rather than seeing the body as a single organ which distributes benefits "in which the belly only gives, and the other parts only receive" (Leggatt 196). Zvi Jagendorf also explains the first citizen's speech as "an interpretation that stresses function rather than subservience, action rather than dependence" (460). Naturally Menenius attempts to dismiss his interpretation and disparage him by calling him "the great toe of this assembly" (1.1.154).

Coriolanus may be said to be the most politically naive of characters, who finds war a respite from internal politics. The vote begging ceremony is repulsive to him not just because it is a transaction where his wounds are to be paraded in return of votes, "as if I had received them for hire" (2.2.147), but also because of his belief that "where two authorities are up./ Neither supreme, how soon confusion/ May enter 'twixt the gap of both" (3.1.109-11). Although he mentions two authorities, he

is conscious of only one. He is committed to an idea of how the state should run which serves the interest only of his own class. The ritual of begging for people's voices, therefore, means for him play acting and self-abnegation which is forced upon him by his domineering mother.

The unnatural role that societal codes and his mother have imposed upon Coriolanus leads to his isolation. His volte-face from Rome to Antium is explained well by Leggatt: "his sense of identity, his commitment to the meaning of his actions, even confidence that life itself has meaning seem all to have broken down" (204). It is indeed as Coppelia Kahn avers, "the cruellest and bloodiest separation from his emotional and social matrix" (170). His end is as unheroic as Macbeth's, his lifeless body humiliated by Aufidius's treading on it, just as Macbeth's head was impaled.

Brecht's *Coriolanus*

Brecht's version of *Coriolanus* almost entirely follows Shakespeare's play with only minor changes in dialogue which nevertheless ensures a significant shift in interpretation. Brecht, a Marxist was committed to a political theatre which aimed at not simply interpreting the world but also changing it. Not merely a playwright, Brecht was also a major twentieth century theoretician of drama. His epic theatre and later dialectic theatre departed from the bourgeois conventions of theatrical illusion and served as a social and ideological forum to awaken in the audience the desire to change society. His theatre which abounds in alienation-effects creates a critical distance between the spectator and the performance so as to encourage detachment. In his theatre, as Ronald Gray puts it, "the self-evident is made incomprehensible, although this only happens in order to make it all the more comprehensible" (71). Bourgeois theatre according to him instead drugs the spectator into an unconscious acceptance of what in reality should be intolerable.

In *Coriolanus* Brecht injects a Marxist class-consciousness; his Shakespearean appropriation, thus, is more of a critical practice than a creative one. Brecht's is a period-treatment of the play, which Shakespearean history plays, he felt, were particularly amenable to. Brecht, an inveterate adapter was interested in classical plays primarily as historical documents – i.e., as illustrations of a specific social experience. Brecht saw the Elizabethan theatre as a model for his own, which he appreciated for its spirit of experimentation, and fluidity:

> THE DRAMATURG: There's a manuscript of a play of 1601 containing various alternative readings and a note by the author in the margin saying, "choose which ever reading seems best to you" and "If this way of putting it

> is difficult to understand or unsuited to the audience, then use another." (Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues* 56).

Also, Brecht appreciated the pre-illusionist Elizabethan drama as a theatre of alienation effects. Brecht's *Coriolanus* thus was not so much a corrective to Shakespeare's text but an attempt to recover Shakespeare from the hegemonic Bourgeois theatre which as John Rouse explains "considered the classics as its property" (267). Shakespearean heroes in such theatres were painted in unduly romantic and uncritical terms, in which the spectator was forced to identify with the hero. It "had dangerous affinities with the cult of hero-worship" (Martin Scofield 322), which resulted in fascism. Indeed, Brecht believed that for a more enlightened proletariat Shakespeare's text could be left untouched.

While working on *Coriolanus* Brecht had started to consider his theatre dialectical. Brecht's reinvention explores class contradictions. Brecht, in his *Coriolanus*, plays up the class-war, and, in a reversal of sympathies, he idealizes the plebeians into an astutely class-conscious proletariat that is politically mature at the very beginning of the play. His plebeians, rather than being manipulated by demagogues, make the decision of withholding their voices themselves. They are carefully delineated individuals, who practise their crafts, as the shoemaker tells Coriolanus, "With a clearer conscience than certain noble lords can practice theirs" (97). The tribunes too, are converted into conscientious and genuine representatives of their people. Radically departing from Shakespeare, the citizens self-reliantly prepare to defend themselves against Coriolanus, instead of cowardly retracting from their earlier stance due to fear of his invasion. Brecht's revision aims at transforming the tragedy of pride into a tragedy of delusion. Coriolanus' belief in his indispensability is shattered when in a radical departure from the original family reunion, Volumnia speaks for the people, not pleadingly but with defiance:

> Don't expect
> To see submissive smoke. If you see smoke
> It will be rising from the smithies forging
> Weapons to fight you who, to subject your
> Own people, have submitted to your enemy. (142)

In a drastic reversal of roles, Coriolanus turns traitor, like the patricians who abandon Rome to its fate, while the plebeians emerge as the truly patriotic: "If the people who lived of Rome won't defend it, then we, whom Rome has lived off up to now, will defend it" (137).

Coriolanus, in his expansionist usurpation of Corioli is also seen as unnecessarily making enemies of the Volscians. In the last scene we see the tribunes in perfect command in the Senate as they return to civil affairs. The very first motion they pass is the return of Corioli land to its rightful owners. The final deflation of Coriolanus lies in the ignominy he faces in death, denied not only an epitaph, but also private mourning. Brecht and Ionesco, take similar Shakespearean texts, historical tragedies, and re-cast them in moulds that hold their views. Brecht is unabashedly didactic. He deliberately historicises to emphasize the Marxist idea that human nature is not definitive but over determined by historical conditions. Whereas Brecht emphasizes historical specificity, Ionesco insists that "any moment in history is valid when it transcends history; in the particular lies the universal" (*Notes and Counter Notes* 20). As against the 'elementary' and 'simplistic' Brechtian ideological drama, Ionesco posits his "abstract theatre. Pure drama. Anti-thematic, anti-ideological..." etc. (*Notes and Counter Notes* 188). Ionesco's claims to neutrality are nothing if not simplistic. His assertion of an art which is autonomous and universal is problematic and dangerous. The message that *Macbett* conveys, that evil is unchanging obliquely implies the futility of political action and thus aligns itself with the status quo. Brecht, however, utopian his thinking may be, at least asserts his political commitment openly in re-writing *Coriolanus*. Implicit or explicit, Shakespearean re-inventions share a one-dimensionality which only serves to emphasize the plurality of the original text they re-present. Shakespeare towers way above each metamorphosis of his texts, increasing the ever-widening gulf between him and his adapters.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the plays *Coriolanus* and *Macbeth* by Shakespeare in the light of their twentieth century reinventions *Coriolanus*, and *Macbett* by the modern European dramatists Brecht and Ionesco respectively. The existing complexities of the originals are borne out by the adaptations which turn the plays into explorations of existential angst as in the case of *Macbett*, and proletarian activism in Brecht's *Coriolanus*. These adaptations remarkably carry forward the politics of their respective playwrights with minimal interventions and modifications of the originals. Even as these reworkings uphold Shakespeare's dramatic structures they are able to respond to their historical moment. They serve to uphold the iconic status of Shakespeare and the ineffable nature of his dynamic writing which has endured beyond ages and places, unceasingly laying claim to the present.

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