

From *Hamlet* to *15-Minute Hamlet* – Genre Shift Through Language Manipulation

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While Shakespeare's plays have been adapted and interpreted for many years now, and are being reshaped and refashioned as we speak, it is Tom Stoppard's 15-Minute Hamlet that will be the focus of this study. This particular retake on Shakespeare's Hamlet calls for attention since it is an open display of drastic linguistic and ideaistic change. We look into how the original tragedy turns into a parodic comedy, and how this genre switch is achieved by language manipulation, especially through lexical choice, syntactic compression and humorous hints, all of which contribute to subverting the original tragedy.

Keywords: *adaptation, linguistic manipulation, compression, Shakespeare, Stoppard*

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the literary canon has become increasingly fluid, shaped by shifting cultural values, expanded critical perspectives, and the inclusion of voices once marginalised or excluded. This evolution challenges the notion of a fixed hierarchy of “great” works and places new responsibility on readers as active participants in meaning-making. As audiences, we are confronted with a choice: to adapt our tastes and critical frameworks in response to this changing landscape, or to remain anchored to a rigid conception of literary value that resists transformation. As canonical cultural products are no longer intangible and sacred, they are more frequently challenged to suit public taste and changing sensibilities. Hence, the proliferation of adaptations, which, alongside their source texts, has produced a theoretical field marked by plurality rather than consensus. Through the choice of topic in this study (which will be detailed a bit later), we plead for envisaging adaptations as full-fledged, valuable cultural products.

In her seminal work *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon abruptly rejects the notion of adaptation as mere derivation, and borrowing from Gérard Genette's

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notion of textual *second degree* (Genette 1997), she insists that an adaptation is “a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary” (Hutcheon 2006, 9). The idea here is that the adapted work does not replace its source, nor does it exist solely in its shadow; instead, the source text remains present as a trace, a memory that “haunts” the adaptation (Hutcheon 2006, 6). In this way, adaptations function as palimpsests – layered works that assert their own aesthetic and cultural autonomy.

In the same line of thought, Walter Benjamin claims that “storytelling is always the art of repeated stories” (Benjamin, quoted in Hutcheon 2006, 2), suggesting that repetition is not stagnation but continuity through variation. This continuity can be ensured as long as the cultural product displays genetic features that empower it to survive, namely if it is fit to survive. Speaking in Darwinian metaphor, adaptation becomes a matter of fit: stories undergo evolution and survive by mutating in response to new cultural environments (Hutcheon 2006).

Resistance to this idea of change has historically crystallised around the concept of fidelity. For much of the twentieth century, adaptation – especially film adaptation, but not only – was evaluated according to its perceived “faithfulness” to a literary original. As James Naremore observes, mainstream approaches often characterise adaptations as “belated, middlebrow, or culturally inferior” (Naremore 2000). Fidelity thus became a mechanism for preserving the authority of canonical literature, particularly authors such as Shakespeare, Dickens, or Austen, whose works had been culturally sanctified. Lindiwe Dovey similarly critiques fidelity as a *fetishisation of representation* (Lindiwe 2012), in which the value of an adaptation is measured by proximity rather than purpose.

However, if we manage to move beyond fidelity, we might reconceptualise the concept of adaptation as “repetition without replication” (Hutcheon 2006, xvi). Dudley Andrew reinforces this perspective by arguing that “all art-making is fundamentally a process of remaking” (Dudley 1984, 127), a claim that situates adaptation within artistic practice more broadly rather than treating it as a secondary activity. From this vantage point, adaptation exposes the separability of form and content, challenging the assumption that meaning is inseparable from a single, privileged medium.

Where then does William Shakespeare lie within this framework?

Well, at the very core of it, we might say, since he has been perceived, for a good while now, as the quintessential connection between high and pop culture, fact which opens the door for this icon of Western literature to be adapted, re-adapted, visited, re-visited, translated and re-translated in a myriad ways. The necessity for adaptation is emphasised by Margaret Kidnie, and the reason would be that

Shakespeare's "work cannot remain exactly what it was four hundred years ago, or even twenty years ago, in part because the audiences who must discursively apprehend it by means of instances have been conditioned to 'see' differently" (Kidnie 2008, 126). So, since audiences have evolved or changed, what should be happening to Shakespeare's work? Should it be kept pristine and thus run the risk of being accessed just by elites who possess knowledge and would take the time and patience to really comprehend it? Or, should it be brought into modernity and made accessible and popular? The answer to such a question is never easy – if there is an answer at all – and it rather lies beyond the scope of this study.

What is of real interest to us here is that for a while now, William Shakespeare's work has been the subject and object of interpretation and reinterpretation. Actually, his work is being adapted and interpreted as we write. Among these reappropriations of Shakespeare's work, some stand out as different as they push limits in the direction of parody. More than any other sorts of adaptation, the parodic ones have a stronger rebellious component, they challenge not just the canonical status of the literary work *per se*, but also the institutions and practices associated with high culture:

These appropriations target the sorts of social and interpretive decorum that govern how high art is treated, as well as those who enforce that decorum, authority figures like teachers, intellectuals, antiquarians, actors, and bluebloods. Paradoxically, this sort of appropriation reinforces the high cultural image of Shakespeare at the same time as it critiques those who support that image. (Lanier 2010, 54)

In this context, from among the plethora of adaptations displaying a parodic twist, the focus of the present study is *15-Minute Hamlet*, a play written by Tom Stoppard.

The aim of this study is to detect and dissect the dramatic and linguistic strategies that underlie the passage from the original *Hamlet* to Stoppard's *Hamlet*, and therefore to prove that there is an almost mathematical precision in this parodic sort of adaptation which leaves nothing to chance. To this end, several strategies of linguistic and dramatic manipulation have been identified, all of which will be analysed below. Ultimately, we will try to draw some conclusions regarding the status of such a re-interpretation as art in its own right. The study also encloses an appendix comprising the synopsis of the original *Hamlet* and of its shrinking mirror image in Stoppard's *Hamlet* (a clear, almost shocking proof of what really happens in the process of compression and parodying).

2. *15–Minute Hamlet* or the anatomy of linguistic and staging manipulation

Tom Stoppard is a Czech-born British playwright and screenwriter whose work encapsulates elements belonging to the literary movement known as the Theatre of the Absurd. Generally speaking, Absurdist playwrights did away with most of the logical structures of traditional theatre. There is little dramatic action as conventionally understood; however frantically the characters perform, their busyness serves to underscore the fact that nothing happens to change their existence. The primary mode of most Absurdist plays is tragi-comedy, and from this angle, Shakespeare seems to have served as inspiration. From this perspective, we cannot but quote here Friedrich Dürrenmatt's memorable words:

Comedy alone is suitable for us ... But the tragic is still possible even if pure tragedy is not. We can achieve the tragic out of comedy. We can bring it forth as a frightening moment, as an abyss that opens suddenly; indeed, many of Shakespeare's tragedies are already really comedies out of which the tragic arises. (Dürrenmatt 1964, 19)

Stoppard himself seems to have been absolutely fascinated with the potential of Shakespeare's plays, more precisely with *Hamlet*. It is at least three times that he has experimented with adaptations of this play, and we are referring here to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, *Dogg's Hamlet*, *Cahoot's Macbeth*, and, obviously, our concern today *15-Minute Hamlet*.

15-Minute Hamlet is a short, playful adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, compressing nearly the entire five acts of the tragedy into a rapid-fire performance. The piece retains many of Hamlet's most famous lines, e.g. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," "To be or not to be...", "The lady doth protest too much, methinks," etc., while moving with farcical speed from one iconic moment to the next.

What the play does is to condense the original *Hamlet*, including all the iconic scenes, into approximately 13 minutes of on-stage action. This is followed by an *Encore*, which is an even more drastically reduced performance of the play, lasting 2 minutes from beginning to end, thus bringing the total running time up to 15 minutes.

In the passage from the original *Hamlet* to Stoppard's *15-Minute Hamlet*, the dramatic tone changes from tragic to comic and then to farcical which seems like an almost unbelievable transition, which is why this study concentrates on dissecting the linguistic and dramatic strategies underlying the manipulation of genre switch and of minds too.

To this end, we have identified the following strategies of linguistic and staging manipulations, which we shall briefly analyse in turns: radical compression and telescoping (2.1); line reassignment / speaker substitution (2.2); character reduction to archetypes (2.3); hyper-compressed, anti-realistic stage directions (2.4); juxtaposed cue pairs and antithetical mood-swings (2.5); *encore* as micro-palimpsest (2.6); *matryoshka* (picture-in-picture) cinematic technique (2.7).

2.1. Radical compression and telescoping

Let us say this may be Stoppard's primary "scalpel" since what compression does in this context is to shift the focus from psychological depth to the recognition cue itself; and, of course, laughter arises when the audience realises how tiny a shard can still signify an entire act. Compression translates into whole speeches, scenes, or actions being collapsed into a single word, clause or cue.

Thus, the 40-line ghost dialogue plus the positional stage directions in the original *Hamlet* are reduced in the first scene of Stoppard's play to just three rapid pointers: *[points & looks left] 'Tis here. / [looks centre] 'Tis there. / [looks right] 'Tis gone*. Or, astonishingly, Hamlet's 50-line "To be or not to be" soliloquy is reduced to *[Pause] To be, or not to be ...* plus a dagger gesture, in Scene 4.

An even more dramatic instance of Stoppard's telescoped technique occurs in the heavily shrunk episode of the original *Mousetrap* episode in Shakespeare – amounting to 220 lines – surgically cut to just two single lines: *The King rises! / Lights! Lights! Lights!*

2.2 Line reassignment / speaker substitution

Re-routing quotations signals that the authority of authorship is broken: dialogue becomes a communal toolbox anyone can wield. It also speeds the action (an on-stage crowd can chorus what one character once said at length).

Through this strategy which almost liquefies identity, making it fluid and comic, famous Shakespearean lines are put in different mouths. Thus, Hamlet, and not Marcellus (I, 4), says *Something is rotten in the state of Denmark* (Scene 3). Or, Polonius's *Lights! Lights! Lights!* (III, 2) is now yelled by Hamlet, while Polonius's *Give o'er the play* (III, 2) comes to be shouted by All (both in Scene 5). In scene 10, *They bleed on both sides* (V, 2), originally Horatio's line, is reassigned to Claudius, and in the same scene, Horatio's famous line representing the beginning of an equally famous farewell *Good night, sweet prince...* (V, 2) is given over to Fortinbras.

2.3. Character reduction to archetypes / mutually interchangeable tokens

Turning characters into reusable widgets underscores the parody's mechanic nature and slashes exposition time. Names are fused or discarded; any role seems to be diminished in value, and treated as any interchangeable guard or courtier.

Under this strategy, there are several techniques that can be identified: firstly, there is name fusion as in: (*Two guards, Bernardo/Marcellus and Francisco/Horatio enter.*) (Scene 1), where one line removes the need for four separate walk-ons. Secondly, role shorthand which implies that identity is irrelevant, hence a stage direction as *Bernardo/Marcellus (he points ...)* (Scene 1). Thirdly, instant replacements, a technique which follows naturally from the previous one, and highlights interchangeability. This makes it possible for Ophelia's funeral lines to be delivered by Gertrude and the gravedigger's riddle to be delivered by Hamlet (Scene 9).

2.4. Hyper-compressed, anti-realistic stage directions

In Stoppard's play, directions seem to be jumping gaze, time or place at impossible speed, they defy logic, generating absurd humour. The obvious impossibility of these transitions draws laughter and reminds viewers that the stage is an editing suite, not a natural space.

Let us consider one instance of abbreviated cue in Scene 5: [*Music stops, hubbub noise starts*]. In normal dramatic time, such a sound change would need tech fade, extras, and probably some kind of crowd choreography. As it is, though, it rather looks like the author presses the buttons on some remote control and perfectly executes a live channel-switch.

In another instance, the reader witnesses a sort of cartoon teleport since [*Claudius exits; re-enters at the side of Polonius*] (Scene 5). In normal stage time this would at least require cross-stage level, if not scene-change altogether.

An abbreviated cue which feels almost as if it were excerpted from a PowerPoint presentation, since the impression is that it slides pages, comes in Scene 8 and sounds like this: *Gravestone rises / is dropped*. In traditional theatre circumstances, such commotion would be possible only with crew assistance along with lighting cues.

An even deeper compression is operated at a crucial point in the original play: right at the end of the original play, in honour of Hamlet's death, there is indication of a series of shots being shot. In Stoppard's play, for lack of stage time, a number of mere four shots are mentioned. Furthermore, in the *Encore* of the play, the number is further reduced to two shots. The consequence of this metajoke – even sound

effects can be reduced and abridged – is that the feeling of grandeur incumbent in any state funeral is diluted to cheap reprise.

2.5. Juxtaposed cue pairs and antithetical mood-swings

Relying heavily on visual impact, this technique creates rhythmic whiplash, thus mimicking a film editor's jump-cut; furthermore, it overrides emotional grand climaxes conveying them as merely selectable options. One cue cancels another or flips mood instantly, giving a fast-forward filmmaking effect.

For instance, in scene 5, in the middle of the Mousetrap sequence, we suddenly encounter this cue: *Music stops, hubbub starts*; the effect is drastic as if a sharp knife sliced the coherence of the text and ideas. Just as well, when [*Claudius exits; re-enters at the side of Polonius*] with no narrative filler whatsoever, we feel assaulted by this instant change in mood.

The overall consequence of this technique follows the intended necessity for revealing the absurdity of life situations, and while audiences or readers are required to swiftly commute between emotional channels, the pathos of tragedy is downsized to farce.

2.6. *ENCORE* as micro-palimpsest (“compression inside compression”)

Far from being an appendix, the *Encore* demonstrates empirically that a recognisable “Hamlet file” can be zipped to < 1 % of its canonical word-count. So, yes, if anyone was wondering how small we can shrink Hamlet and still recognise it, the answer is straightforward: 0.7%. The mere idea of witnessing such text compression and still be aware of the original invites the audience to laugh at their own ability to supply missing context. In the passage from the initially compressed text to its mini-compressed version, we tend to feel that all the lines become mnemonic tags, and this stirs laughter.

Stoppard's play is full of such instances, but for the sake of exemplification, we have chosen two. The first, *Our sometime sister, now our Queen ... have we taken to wife*. – amounting to approximately 3% of Claudius' speech in Act 1 – is a rendition of Scene 2 (itself a mere 1/5th of the original speech); still, the reader/audience immediately connects to the flow of the play and gets the correct idea.

The most shocking example here might be the final death-cascade which in the original *Hamlet* expands over 70 lines, while in Stoppard's 10-scene play it takes one brief scene, and only one body per line in the *Encore*:

Gertrude: I am poisoned? (She dies)
Laertes: Hamlet, thou art slain (He dies)
Hamlet: Then venom to thy work! (He kills Claudius)
The rest is silence. (He dies)

2.7. “Matryoshka / picture-in-picture” dramaturgy

Although seemingly a metaphor, the Russian-doll dramaturgy technique affords Stoppard the ability to embed *Hamlet* inside itself twice, turning the canonical source into a set of nested performance miniatures. Despite the missing connective tissue, which traditionally might be said to be the very essence of dramaturgy, Stoppard’s hyper-cues and jump-cuts provide the necessary kinetic energy that moves everything forward and keeps the shells readable.

Even if dialogues are heavily reduced and comically reassigned, the 90% loss of dialogue is matched by a proportional gain in theatrical machinery. Stoppard proves that *Hamlet* can be encoded at wildly lower bit-rates and still play back, provided the audience owns the “decompression library” of cultural memory.

By running a quick script over the Samuel-French PDF in search of the Matryoshka effect, the results in Table 1 were obtained.

Table 1. Results of the script analysis in search of the Matryoshka effect

Metric	10-scene script	Encore recap
Total lines	≈ 240 separate speeches	≈ 30 ultra-short speeches
Total words (all content)	≈ 2,150	≈ 200
Stage-direction words ²	≈ 300	≈ 30
Stage direction density (% of its own length)	≈ 14 %	≈ 15 %
Spoken words	≈ 1,850	≈ 170
Compression factor vs 10-scene block	—	≈ 1 / 11 (words)

The counts are quite self-explanatory, so we will not insist here. However, let us notice, once again, the staggering fact that the *Encore* is eleven times shorter than the 10-scene script, while the direction density is virtually identical (≈ 14–15%), proving the recap preserves the same “cue-driven” style even while slicing away 90% of the dialogue.

This picture-in-picture discussion could be further expanded to include the original Shakespearean text. If we look through this 3-tiered lens, we will easily

notice that Stoppard's 2,000-word remix is nested inside Hamlet's 30,000-word play (which basically means that one word is kept for every 14 discarded), while it quotes it quasi-verbatim. The much smaller *Encore* is nested inside the 10-scene play, quoting the quotes, while discarding 11 words to keep just one from the 10-scene play. Stoppard's storyline is identical to the original (as apparent in the synopsis attached at the end), while all the canonical moments are preserved, even in the *Encore* where they come off as single punchlines, with similar effect, though. As far as stage directions are concerned, Shakespeare's 2% count makes a huge leap to 14% in the 10-scene play and to 15% in the *Encore*. It is here, apparently, that the comic and the parodic find their roots. Stage directions ultimately represent the author's chance to manipulate the readers, directors and audiences, and give the entire play the exact fragrance they strive for. Table 2 illustrates our account so far.

Table 2. Results of the analysis of stage directions

Category	W. Shakespeare's <i>Hamlet</i>		Tom Stoppard's <i>The Fifteen-Minute Hamlet</i>	
	Approx. words	Share of total	Approx. words	Share of total
Spoken dialogue	≈ 30,000 words	≈ 98%	≈ 1,850 words	≈ 86%
Stage directions	≈ 557 words	≈ 2%	≈ 300 words	≈ 14%
TOTAL (open source Shakespeare edition)	30,557 words	100%	≈ 2,150 words	100%

3. Conclusions

Instead of a conclusion, let us again, mathematically, bring proof by numbers: the total word-count drops dramatically from 30 k (Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) to 2 k (Stoppard's *15-Minute Hamlet*) to 0.2 k (Stoppard's *Encore*) as the cue-density dramatically rises from 2% (Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) to 14% (Stoppard's *15-Minute Hamlet*) to 15% (Stoppard's *Encore*). This certainly lends an empirical backbone to what is often argued qualitatively.

In this context, what then is the function of the double parodic compression? On the one hand, by playing the same narrative twice in two scales, Stoppard exposes classical tragedy as a reusable clip-library – anticipating meme culture and TikTok summaries decades early and this, let us admit, is genius. It also proves that *Hamlet* can be encoded at wildly lower bit-rates and still play back, provided the audience owns the “decompression library” of cultural memory. On the other hand, it answers the question “How small can we shrink *Hamlet* and still recognise it?” The final answer is given by the *Encore*: it includes $\approx 0.7\%$ of Shakespeare’s words. The result of the compression is the abrupt genre switch: from tragedy to comedy and then to utter farce. But it is never done in a grotesque, ridiculing manner; while disruptive, undermining and manifestly parodic, the compression proves that Shakespeare is more palatable than ever, and audiences of different taste might find or find again the pleasure to savour his work.

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Appendix

A. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* concise synopsis

Act 1

- 1.1 – Ghost of King Hamlet appears to guards at Elsinore.
- 1.2 – Claudius celebrates his marriage to Gertrude; Hamlet mourns. Horatio tells Hamlet about the ghost.
- 1.3 – Laertes and Polonius warn Ophelia about Hamlet.
- 1.4 – Hamlet sees the ghost.
- 1.5 – Ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius murdered him; Hamlet vows revenge.

Act 2

- 2.1 – Polonius sends a spy to observe Laertes; Ophelia reports Hamlet's strange behaviour.
- 2.2 – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive; players (actors) arrive; Hamlet plans "The Mousetrap" play to test Claudius.

Act 3

- 3.1 – "To be or not to be" soliloquy; Ophelia rejects Hamlet.
- 3.2 – Hamlet directs the players; Claudius reacts guiltily to the play.
- 3.3 – Claudius tries to pray; Hamlet spares him.
- 3.4 – Hamlet confronts Gertrude; kills Polonius hiding behind the arras.

Act 4

- 4.1 – Gertrude tells Claudius about Polonius's death.
- 4.2 – Hamlet hides the body.
- 4.3 – Claudius sends Hamlet to England (with secret orders to kill him).
- 4.4 – Hamlet reflects on action vs. inaction after seeing Fortinbras's army.
- 4.5 – Ophelia goes mad; Laertes returns angry.
- 4.6 – Hamlet's letter reveals he escaped the ship to England.
- 4.7 – Claudius and Laertes plot to kill Hamlet; Ophelia drowns.

Act 5

- 5.1 – Graveyard scene; Hamlet and Laertes fight in Ophelia's grave.
- 5.2 – Duel between Hamlet and Laertes; Gertrude drinks poison; Laertes, Claudius, and Hamlet die; Fortinbras arrives.

B. Stoppard's *15-Minute Hamlet* concise synopsis

Ghost appears to Hamlet – tells of Claudius's murder.

Hamlet swears revenge.

Polonius gives advice to Laertes and Ophelia.

Hamlet and Ophelia interact (madness / rejection).

“To be or not to be” soliloquy.

Play within the play exposes Claudius.

Hamlet kills Polonius.

Ophelia goes mad and dies.

Laertes returns – plots revenge with Claudius.

Graveyard scene – Yorick's skull

Duel – Gertrude drinks poison; all main characters die.

Fortinbras arrives – takes control.

After this, there is a rapid 45-second *Encore* that replays all of the above at lightning speed.