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Introduction: “With Such Perfection:” Imagining Utopia through Shakespeare

It is a rare thing to think of Shakespeare and his plays without the utopian in mind, if only through a nostalgic idealization of literature, theatre, his stories and characters, or the author himself as the idol we may make of him. The utopian impulse for a better place, a better future or a better self is encapsulated in the comedies, while the tragedies may be regarded as hopeful in this respect as well. Retroactive hope is a recurrent motif and a source of resilience in a number of Shakespeare’s works: after all, to hope for justice, redemption or love against the imperfect, disillusioned reality is a profound act, one that is shared by many Shakespearean characters. It is through hopeful moments of self-reflection and self-forgiveness that they may inspire a striving for a better version of individual and collective selves, while potentially providing us as readers and spectators with the strength to endure hardship and pain. Shakespeare on stage in particular inspires yearnings for a sense of unity and communal belonging created through shared theatrical experience.

Utopia is a concept, whose definition, origins and long cultural history have been given much critical thought (Claeys; Eagleton; Gottlieb; Jameson). The word itself is based on the ambiguity inscribed in the pun contained within its form since the time Thomas More used it in his seminal work *Utopia* (1516): “u-” “topos” means a non-place, while the alternative spelling is “eu-” “topos,” a good place (Sargent 1-37). Thus, utopia is a notion caught up between the impossibility of, and the hope for, a better future: a social design for the

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betterment of humankind that remains elusive. As Fátima Vieira contends in “The Concept of Utopia,” however, it is “to be seen as a matter of attitude, as a kind of reaction to an undesirable present and an aspiration to overcome all difficulties by the imagination of possible alternatives” (7). Nowhere is this attitude more visible than in the sphere of human learning, perceived already in Plato’s proto-utopian *Republic* as a space, where human minds are formed, and moral values shaped. From the humanist perspective of the utopian politics of education and human betterment, this task is to be achieved predominantly through literature and especially the experience of the classics, with the notable example of Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s poetry and dramatic works have been seen as a potent tool in the formation of the human intellect since Matthew Arnold placed Shakespeare in “unquestioning preeminence” in his introduction to T. H. Ward’s influential *The English Poets* (1880), after which the Victorians carried it further, across disciplines and mediums, promoting the belief that “exposure to high culture like Shakespeare made you a better person” (Irish 2). The insistence on the pedagogical merits of including Shakespeare in the polysystem of translated literatures (Even-Zohar) has gradually led to the formation of literary canons around the world that included Shakespeare in the complex dynamics of intra- and interlingual, as well as intersemiotic translation (Jakobson). The utopian project of canonizing Shakespeare as a paragon of virtue (19th century) and a cultural icon (20th and 21st centuries), expressive of the universal human genius, has been undertaken by theatres as well, with bardolatry on the (translated) page and (adapted) stage sweeping all over the world since the 19th century.

With performance and enactment comes the desire to repeat oneself: to return, through recreation, to the utopia we may imagine once existed. With the commitment to authenticity in architecture and performance that embraces original practice, London’s Globe Theatre is perhaps the most venerable concretization of the utopian Shakespearean impulse: a living testament to the utopic desire to reclaim the idealized Elizabethan stage. Similarly, adaptations galore that recreate either Shakespeare as author-character, or follow Shakespearean characters beyond the confines of their *hometexts*, have exploded in popularity across mediums and forms mobilized by our utopic desire to meet and commune with the Shakespeare we have idealized, or to materialize yet again the characters we ache to know.

With utopia, the search for the ideal has always led to a specific place; whether it is a constructed island given a map, a ruler and a language as in Thomas More’s *Utopia*, or the theatrical stage, there must be a “there”—a location; after all, the *topos* of utopia requires spaces where it may manifest. Robert Appelbaum explores the details of Shakespeare’s most literal utopia in *The Tempest*, and argues that Gonzalo’s commonwealth relies, fundamentally,

on the perspective of the utopist and their interaction with the concept of utopia, writing in *Literature and Utopian Politics in Seventeenth-Century England*:

In order to want to occupy the position that Shakespeare shows Gonzalo wishing to occupy—one must first of all not be in possession of it. An ideal commonwealth can only come into existence—in the imagination, of nowhere else—because it is already not in existence. It is Not Here. It is Not Yet (48).

A utopist invents a utopia because of the absence of a space that is better than the real, and through the action of inventing that space the utopist “invents oneself, or at least re-invents oneself” by projecting outward the mastery of that ideal (48). Appelbaum notes, as Shakespeare suggests, that “the utopist inevitably confronts an insuperable gap between his creative practice and the object his practice has created” (48). The desire for transformation of the constructed ideal into a lived reality adds a temporal aspect to the striving for an ideal space. In *Utopia, Carnival, and Commonwealth in Renaissance England* Christopher Kendrick argues that the early modern was indeed a critical historical nexus of change through which playwrights, in particular, demonstrated a specific expression of social progress:

The situation of the playwright [...] accounts for the very forming presence of a utopian impulse, for the routing implication of basic questions of human happiness and the habitually strong sense of blocked possibilities, in plays that have little expressly utopian about them. The situation in its complex transitoriness helps to explain how Marlovian and Shakespearian dramaturgies could make the late Elizabethan stage itself into something of a utopian machine (199).

Utopia then has been a flexible tool of representation for the theatre; in a way, “the stage was set” to produce and reproduce the utopian. However, Shakespeare’s plays, as Kendrick suggests, at times feel more utopian than Utopia as a political project allows, because they were written polyphonically, so that a plurality of voices resounds in them, and therefore it is “easy to find what one wants in them” (199). Theatre as a “utopian machine” has continued to provide utopian hope through reinvention, adaptation, translation, operating on the particular utopic value of Shakespeare, whose works accomplished this more effectively and transcendently than most.

The presence of the utopian impulse in Shakespeare’s works has already been discussed in Shakespeare and early modern studies in the English-speaking context (Boesky; Bulger; Campbell; Knapp; Kendrick; Leslie), *inter alia* by Brevik, whose focus is a historically-minded analysis of *The Tempest* against the background of modern political thought, and Huebert, who explores the role of utopia in Shakespeare within the changing environment of the early modern.

The Tempest has been most thoroughly discussed in relation to utopia, given it is the one play that contains a conventional utopia and is set on a magical island (Vaughan and Vaughan), yet we do find utopian thought, themes, and spaces, across Shakespeare's work, most notably in the single-sex spaces of *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Measure for Measure*, the land found after a storm at sea of *Twelfth Night* as well as the pastoral idyll of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*. It is in the infinite variety of stage adaptations and productions of Shakespeare's plays where we find their utopian potential—in the adaptability of his texts.

The stage and the myriad ways we reinvent it, has progressed to allow for an enclosed space of boundless possibility in which one can see whatever one wishes to see and in which rigid binaries may blur, even if only for a moment, in the here and now to create a sense of transient unity. It is from this premise that Jill Dolan developed her concept of “utopian performatives” in *Utopia in Performance* (2010), to define the moments in theatre that open up the audience to “a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking and intersubjectively tense” (4) and “allow fleeting contact with a utopia not stabilized by its own finished perfection [...] but a utopia always in process, always only partially grasped, as it disappears before us around the corners of narrative and social experience”(6). A utopian performative in this context is a moment of empowerment that gestures towards a vision of a better reality and reveals an ethical dimension of the performance that has a potential transformative, if not political impact. The present volume tests out this proposition, to investigate the presence of the utopian impulse in Shakespeare's works in print and on stage in both English and non-English speaking contexts, to establish how Shakespearean “utopian impulse” is transmitted and transmuted in its diverse new forms.

The current special issue arose from this potentiality, and through the presentations and discussions that emerged at seminars held at the meetings of the European Shakespeare Research Association.¹ Over three conferences, we examined how Shakespeare's works contributed to the development of utopia as a genre, the ways in which Shakespeare's idealized presence as international, social, and cultural icon influences our contemporary understanding of utopian

¹ “Staging Utopias: Shakespeare in Print and Performance” Seminar, ESRA Conference: Shakespeare and European Theatrical Cultures: AnAtomizing Text and Stage, 27-30 July 2017, Gdańsk; “‘Something Rich and Strange’: Remapping Shakespeare's Utopia” Seminar ESRA Conference: Shakespeare and European Geographies: Centralities and Elsewheres, 9-12 July 2019, Rome; “Shakespeare and the Nature of Utopia/Utopian Nature” Seminar, ESRA Conference: “The Art Itself Is Nature: Shakespeare's Nature/Art/Politics,” 3-6 June 2021, Athens.

literature, and most vividly, the ways in which the utopian impulse has been created, staged, or critically engaged in theatrical productions of his works across centuries and continents; across cultures and languages; in print, on stage and in film. We further considered the impact of utopian literature and criticism on Shakespeare in performance. Investigating the utopian impulse in Shakespeare's works, we found how that presence emerged as the influence of classical ideal spaces and the burgeoning potential of the new world as a utopia.

The Authors collected here approach Shakespeare and utopia from diverse perspectives, yet all oscillate around common themes that are poignantly relevant to this historical moment. Shifting between cultures and languages, as well as spaces and places, the articles collected in this volume flicker between performance and text. They are as timely as they are timeless, introducing reflections of Shakespeare both in Anglophone and non-Anglophone contexts. Anne Nichole A. Alegre's article "To Make Dark Heaven Light: Transcending the Tragic in *Sintag Dalisay*" introduces us to a little discussed Asian adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*: Ricardo Abad's *Sintag Dalisay*. Alegre documents not only the multiple sources for the Filipino poetic text, but the transformation of that text for the "intercultural stage" employing the music, movement, and spectacle of *igal* dance accompanied by music played on indigenous instruments from the variety of Philippine traditions. Alegre's close reading of the subtle poetic expressions in scenes from the performance, aesthetic movement, and bodily expression of poetry, defines the ways this particular adaptation stages and presents utopian impulse in a way that transforms Shakespearean tragedy by simultaneously appropriating several mythologies. Furthermore, it provides a valuable discussion of the importance of physicality for Shakespearean utopian form.

Rowena Hawkins' article "'Hopeful Feeling[s]:' Utopian Shakespeares and the 2021 Reopening of British Theatres" takes us in another direction and reminds us of the "here and now," of the post-pandemic moment that has come to re-define our society on a global scale. The isolation and lockdown during Covid-19 led to a vast array of creative online performances from the readers' theatre Zoom performances of *The Show Must Go Online* series which broadcast weekly readers theatre performances of Shakespeare's complete works, to the explosion of digital screenings from theatres around the world. Hawkins transports us to the utopic moment when theatres reopened in 2021 and audiences cautiously emerged, eager to enter theatres, yet changed. She explores the hopeful moments generated by two performances, focusing on how the pandemic remained present, yet mitigated by the joyful hope of not forgetting, but incorporating, the dystopic real through textual adaptation and the aesthetics of stage and costume design. Most importantly, she reminds us of the society generated by theatre through audience involvement via her personal theatre experience and in the process she captures the utopian moment, saliently.

Archana Jayakumar returns us to the Asian Shakespeare adaptations in her “From Race and Orientalism in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to Caste and Indigenous Otherness on the Indian Screen,” which offers a detailed close reading of the 2012 *10ml Love*, an independent film in Hindi and English, following the lives of cosmopolitan youth in urban India. Jayakumar deftly presents how “two opposing political utopias” emerge and are consequently subverted in the film as it reveals, through strategic scenic design and language, the “tensions between the utopias at both ends of the political spectrum” through the “various marginalized social locations and identities across Indian society.” Though Shakespearean adaptations in Hindi cinema have recently been explored (Trivedi and Chakravarti; Sanders; Panjwani et al.), Jayakumar’s article sheds further important light on the rich cinematic traditions in India, which make ample use of Shakespearean source texts. Leaving Asia and the UK for the United States, John M. Meyer’s article brings us squarely in the presence of the uniquely coopted “prelapsarian poet” of the U.S., William Shakespeare, identified, as Meyer argues, as author of literature before “the institutionalization of colonial slavery” and thereby symbolically freed of the associated shame that literature of the United States necessarily bears. Questioning the space and place of Shakespearean performances, routinely idealized in outdoor performances yet located near or at sites “specifically tied to the enslavement and disenfranchisement” of people of African descent, Meyer insightfully connects location to text to reveal an “unexpected connection between the performance of Shakespeare in America and the subjugation of Black persons” which raises questions about “the unique and utopian assumptions of Shakespearean performances in the United States.” By asking where we perform Shakespeare and why, Meyer’s article questions the unique idealization of Shakespeare in the United States and how this translates into a problematic utopian endeavor. While Meyer explores how *where* we perform Shakespeare informs our understanding, Ronan Paterson’s article, “Utopia, Arcadia, and the Forest of Arden,” approaches textual idealization of place in *As You Like It*. From within the idealized pastoral realm of Arden, Paterson first questions the consideration and naming of Arden as a “forest,” and its various textual transformations and ambiguities. He then traces the ‘green world’ in English pastoral poetry and how it informed Shakespeare’s recreation of his own role as a utopist through his own yearning for a golden world. Just like Meyer’s, Paterson’s article offers a critical cultural and historical key to the “space” and “place” in utopian worlds through the lens of Shakespeare, his text, and how we perform them.

In his “Staging Dystopian Communities: Reimagining Shakespeare in Selected English Plays” Michał Lachman focuses on Edward Bond’s *Bingo* and Frank McGuinness’s *Mutabilitie*, and a recent reimagining of *Macbeth* in David Greig’s *Dunsinane* that create utopian spaces within Shakespeareana through the

use of Shakespeare as character. His article carefully outlines how the utopic potential of Shakespeare includes textual reinvention, and how building "dystopian visions of contemporary communities or images of state and political justice" emerges profoundly in the "palimpsestic presence" of Shakespeare himself. Through three plays that link the dramatic movement of history from 1973 to 2010, Lachman traces how Shakespeare as a "cultural construct" is deployed as a means to understand contemporary political and social life through each play's complex "dystopian vision" that nevertheless captures the visions of the "world apart" that is central to literary utopias. Following one specific adaptation and modernization of Shakespeare's text, Magdalena Cieślak interviews theatre director, actor, and writer, Stratis Panourios, whose long history of working with Shakespeare in Greece led him to a provocative work, staging of *The Tempest* as "therapeutic theatre" at the Korydallos Detention Centre, Greece's largest prison complex, located in Korydallos, Piraeus, in 2017. Staging Shakespeare in prisons is a familiar endeavor by now, even if that prison is only a frame for adaptation, as in the Donmar Warehouse's all-female productions of Shakespearean "trilogy" that also included *The Tempest* with each play set in an imagined female prison which incorporated and enclosed the audience. Prisons call into question the many variances of utopia and dystopia, particularly envisioned through enclosure and concepts of freedom. No play does this more poignantly than Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In this insightful interview, Cieślak discusses with Panourios his experience, revealing the challenges and decisions in developing and staging this engaging performance which was, at times, problematic. Perhaps most vividly, the experience revealed the continuing desire of the theatre practitioner to capture the utopian moment of hope in a space often associated with hopelessness.

Finally, Sibel İzmir article, "Transformative Potential and Utopian Performative: Postdramatic *Hamlet* in Turkey" returns us to the liminal space between utopia and dystopia; between the dystopian reality of Turkey's recent catastrophic earthquakes, coming so soon after the now year-long brutal violence of the Russian war against the Ukraine, all in a world still reeling from the Covid-19 pandemic. İzmir's article, revised for this issue in a Turkey definitively changed in the aftermath of the earthquakes, focuses on and analyzes a production of *Hamlet* directed by Işıl Kasapoğlu in 2014 for the Istanbul State Theatre, which challenged and deconstructed the traditional Shakespearean performances using post-dramatic theatre techniques to engage the audience with the "transformative potential" of the theatre. İzmir bravely connects the European thinking on the postdramatic theatre with Jill Dolan's notion of the utopian performative, venturing to describe how to continue to use Shakespeare to generate utopia within a dystopian world through and in diverse, often clashing theatrical traditions, schools of thought and paradigms that might speak to one another, albeit indirectly.

In a recent article in *The Guardian*, Nataliya Torkut of the Ukrainian Shakespeare Centre appealed for continuing support for Ukraine in its ongoing defense of freedom, noting in conversation with Jessica Murphy that “Ukrainians need not only weapons but culture and art in order to survive the onslaught of war:” she insists on the “extreme importance” of reading Shakespeare, because, she states, “we need something that helps us feel that life is worth living” (online). The persistence of Shakespeare within even the most dystopic of spaces and times is, in itself, a utopic endeavor, as the Authors and the guest editors of this issue can amply attest. Shakespeare’s oeuvre and cultural presence indeed become a “utopian machine” through which it is possible to imagine a world full of possibility, lived “with such perfection.” The articles offered here critically re-examine the role of utopia and the utopian impulse in Shakespeare’s works and its relation to the transformations that they have undergone in diverse places, through different languages and mediums. Not without a reason *Staging Utopias* suggests those ways of engaging Shakespeare in trying scenarios, in places and ways that might not seem familiar. This issue took shape during and emerged out of the pandemic, the war and natural disasters: these translate to the lived experiences of heartache, illness and loss. *Staging Utopias* has become, inadvertently, a witness to the spirit that will not be broken and a sense of togetherness that upholds us as Shakespeare readers in the hardest of times. We are deeply grateful to our Authors who persisted in their valiant undertakings: it is owing to their craft and determination that we can embark on a voyage into an undiscovered country: a reading mind that is like no other place. It is only through acts of reading, after all, that a textual utopia can momentarily be realized, when it is performed jointly, in a community united by a utopian impulse to learn from one another and “feel that life is worth living” (Torkut online). It is through reading, discussing and performing Shakespeare that the utopian can be glimpsed both in our lived experience and/or in textual worlds that we come to share, hopefully in peace. Let us continue to read—and reach to Shakespeare for the stuff of dreams.

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