

# “*To tell our Storie*”: Reflections on a Queer Adaptation of *Hamlet* in Twenty-first Century South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

From my actor-director’s point of view, ‘decolonising’ Shakespeare means not to keep to the original, ‘traditional’ concept of performing and interpreting Shakespeare’s plays; it means giving them my voice as a gay white male. Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” soliloquy incited me to approach *Hamlet* from a queer perspective. This article reflects on how I approached the play, without forcing the queer issue, by looking at the relationship between Horatio and Hamlet. Horatio is present in key moments of the play, and most of their interactions are when they are alone. By doing a close reading of the play, identifying queer cues, I adapted the play with Hamlet and Horatio in a same-sex relationship. Reading *Hamlet* from a queer perspective answers the question as to why Horatio is in Elsinore and present at key moments in the play. By placing Hamlet and Horatio in a same-sex relationship, Horatio’s presence becomes more meaningful. The interpretation of the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy, the ‘nunnery scene’, the ‘mousetrap scene’ and his exile adds a new layer to the character of Hamlet, and by extension Horatio. Next, I reflect on the performance of the queer adaptation, which was done in 2014 at the University of the Free State with a professional cast, co-directed by Peter Taljaard and myself. I offer a close reading, in chronological order, of the adaptation, highlighting key moments in the play that were used to establish Hamlet and Horatio’s relationship, while referring to interpretation choices made by my co-director and myself.

## Introduction

What does it mean to ‘decolonise’? In his article “‘Decolonisation’, the new ideology” Bert Olivier<sup>1</sup> explains that those who seek to ‘decolonise’ aim to obtain ‘independence’ from colonial oppression and “exploitative power” and to find, among other things, with that independence, their “own voices”: “decolonising’ themselves”, meaning “to become independent in their thinking, speaking and writing”.<sup>2</sup> He adds that to decolonise “is NOT to return to some mythical state that supposedly existed before the arrival of the colonising settlers”.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Bert Olivier is attached to the University of the Free State as Extraordinary Professor of Philosophy. He is also an adjunct professor in the School of Humanities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

2 Bert Olivier, “‘Decolonisation’, the new ideology”, *Mail & Guardian*, March 3, 2016. <http://thoughtleader.co.za/bertolivier/2016/03/23/decolonisation-the-new-ideology/>

3 Bert Olivier, “What ‘decolonisation’ means: E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*”, *Mail and Guardian*, September 7, 2016. <http://thoughtleader.co.za/bertolivier/2016/09/27/what-decolonisation-means-e-m-forsters-a-passage-to-india/>

Bringing this conception to the current debates in education, Behari-Leak et al state that: “[A]n understanding of the process of “decolonisation” lies more in its detail than its definition”. In essence, it means to break away from the traditional (colonial) way of doing things, focus on the how to do – a kind of ‘doing it in your way’.<sup>4</sup>

How then can that be applied to Shakespeare? And more specifically to the staging of *Hamlet* in Bloemfontein, South Africa in 2014? From an actor-director’s point of view, it might mean not to keep to the original, ‘traditional’ concept of performing Shakespeare and implies moving away from the traditional interpretation of his scripts. In this adaptation, what new perspectives and interpretations could be arrived at? Would these not constitute a form of decolonisation if they created a space for marginalised identities to be foregrounded? Starting from the politics of the personal, it meant taking Shakespeare from its original cultural context and, as a gay white male, giving it my voice – or, in the reflective context of this article, as an actor-director, approaching *Hamlet* from a queer perspective.

Hanna Kubowitz reflects on a statement made by Beloff that “[b]eing heterosexual has several benefits ... One can enter into most cultural narratives, that is novels, films, fine art, on the basis of simple and satisfying identification”.<sup>5</sup> For Kubowitz, this means that being homosexual inadvertently hampers the “entrance to, and identification with” most cultural narratives. As a gay man, I find that while reading certain plays, I do identify on a personal level with the characters and situations, but interpret the characters and situations from a queer perspective. One Shakespearean play that enables my ‘queer interpretation’ is *Hamlet*, and the passage that most resonates from this (personal) perspective is his “To be, or not be” soliloquy.

But why does *Hamlet* feel so familiar and easy to relate too? Marjorie Garber writes that “the experience of Hamlet is almost always that of recognition”.<sup>6</sup> Sandra Young adds that it can also be because we recognise the internal conflict between his duty as prince and his “inner yearnings”, his self-doubt, and his emotional self-examination and that maybe all this comes to characterise our contemporary time.<sup>7</sup> According to John Gouws *Hamlet* is very similar to Shakespeare’s sonnets: “both works seem capable of functioning like Rorschach inkblots, by making us reveal (increasingly) more about ourselves the more we try saying something about them”.<sup>8</sup> As mentioned earlier Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy resonates with me on a personal level, but what is the soliloquy really about? Brian Pearce claims that in his “To be, or not to be” soliloquy Hamlet “directly contemplates both suicide and the possibility of taking action”.<sup>9</sup>

Ray Eston Smith has suggested that instead of contemplating suicide, Hamlet could be agonising about whether or not to kill Claudius, more importantly how to avoid damnation for killing him, knowing that it would be a suicidal attack.<sup>10</sup> Another suggestion by Eston Smith is that Hamlet might be questioning his motives for killing Claudius: does he want to kill him to save the Danish people from a murdering tyrant or is it for his own ambitions? Or, is Hamlet trying to solve his dilemma “whether ‘to be or not to be,’ like the Ghost”, his father? Charles Darnay adds that this soliloquy does not advance the plot but rather acts as a reminder as to where Hamlet is, “we need to take stock and realise the central conflict within him”.<sup>11</sup> But as Eston Smith declares: “Hamlet is too often portrayed as an indecisive,

4 Kasturi Behari-Leak et al., “Decolonising the curriculum: it’s in the detail, not just in the definition”, *The Conversation*, March 9, 2017. <https://theconversation.com/decolonising-the-curriculum-its-in-the-detail-not-just-in-the-definition-73772>

5 Hanna Kubowitz, “The Default Reader and a Model of Queer Reading and Writing Strategies Or: Obituary for the Implied Reader”, *Style* 46. 2 (2012): 201. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.5325/style.46.2.201.pdf>

6 Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Random House, 2004), 466, quoted in Sandra Young, “Recognising Hamlet” *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 26. 1 (2014): 13. <http://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC159614>

7 Sandra Young, “Recognising Hamlet”, *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 26. 1 (2014): 13. <http://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC159614>

8 John Gouws, “Shakespeare and the Self: Being True to Hamlet”, *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 9. 1 (1996): 32. <http://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC48092>

9 Brian Pearce, “Hamlet, the Actor”, *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 19. 1 (2007): 66. <http://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC48092>.

10 Ray Eston Smith, “To be or not to be”, *Literature Network Forums* comment, October 31, 2011, <http://www.online-literature.com/forums/showthread.php?65221-To-be-or-not-to-be>

11 Charles Darnay, “To be or not to be”, *Literature Network Forums* comment, December 28, 2011, <http://www.online-literature.com/forums/showthread.php?65221-To-be-or-not-to-be>

suicidal wimp... I see him rather as a valiant soldier of the spirit, fighting a desperate internal battle to defend the sovereignty of his soul”.

There is yet another way to look at the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy: Hamlet goes to Wittenberg and is characterised as a scholar.<sup>12</sup> When Hamlet says to Horatio “in your philosophy” it indicates the subject that distinguishes University from grammar-school. Margreta de Grazia suggests that while Hamlet is questioning “To be, or not to be” it might be that, as a scholar who studies philosophy, he is, in fact, reading from a book.<sup>13</sup> After all, it is a prop he prominently uses elsewhere in the play. Elizabeth Hanson comments that if it is so, it might be “a treatise by Gorgias of Leontini”, the same book Faustus, another Wittenberg scholar, throws aside at the beginning of *Dr Faustus* when he “bid[s] *on kai me on* [on being and not being] farewell”.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that Hamlet is not focussing on his inner life and identity but rather that he is involved in academic discourse.

Ben Crystal<sup>15</sup> makes an interesting observation; that as a departure to the speech, instead of the familiar phrase, one could use “the notion of life and death, or being and not being”.<sup>16</sup> However, to me, Hamlet’s critical question had a very personal resonance: to be or not to be ‘gay’ – or rather whether or not to accept being gay. This question pointed to my internal struggle around self-acceptance, even into my early 20s. It made me wonder, what if that was Hamlet’s struggle? Could it be interpreted that Hamlet is struggling here with his sexuality?

But why study homosexuality in *Hamlet* in a South African context? South Africa is one of sixteen countries worldwide that permits same-sex marriages but as Rebecca Davis states: “South Africa brings together the best and the worst of realities for gays: deeply progressive legislation, and deeply regressive social attitudes”.<sup>17</sup> In 2013 several posters on Rhodes campus and at a shopping centre outraged university staff, students and alumni. One of the posters had the following text: “Homosexuality is a crime punished by imprisonment hanging or beheading in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria and others”. However, the University of Rhodes’ Fairness Forum, declared these posters as acceptable “on the basis of free speech”.<sup>18</sup> At the United Nation’s Free & Equal campaign in July 2013 the UN human rights chief Navi Pillay pointed out: “South Africa has some of the worst cases of homophobic violence. People are literally paying for their love with their lives”. The Archbishop Desmond Tutu declared his support for this launch by saying: “If God, as they say, is homophobic, I wouldn’t worship that God”.<sup>19</sup> The ACDP leader, Rev Meshoe, lashed out against this comment saying God is not homophobic and he does not hate anybody, but homosexuality is a sin and if people cannot “live up to the standard of the word of God they should not find fault with scripture”.<sup>20</sup> Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe also attacked

12 Elizabeth Hanson, “Fellow Students: Hamlet, Horatio, and the Early Modern University” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 19. 1 (2011): 219–220. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23025628>

13 Margreta de Grazia, “Soliloquies and Wages in the Age of Emergent Consciousness” *Textual Practice* 9 (1995): 69–72, esp. 73–74, quoted in Elizabeth Hanson, “Fellow Students: Hamlet, Horatio, and the Early Modern University” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 19. 1 (2011): 219–220. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23025628>

14 Elizabeth Hanson, “Fellow Students: Hamlet, Horatio, and the Early Modern University” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 19. 1 (2011): 219–220. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23025628>

15 Ben Crystal co-wrote with his father David Crystal: *Shakespeare’s Words* (Penguin 2002) and *The Shakespeare Miscellany* (Penguin 2005). In 2013 he published for Arden Shakespeare / Bloomsbury the *Springboard Shakespeare* quartet series where he gives “the reader a clear route through thinking about, understanding and enjoying four of Shakespeare’s greatest works”. See <http://www.bencrystal.com/about/>

16 Ben Crystal, *Springboard Shakespeare: Hamlet*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2013), p.119.

17 Rebecca Davis, “Analysis: Why Tutu’s support for gay rights matters” *Daily Maverick*, July 29, 2013. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2013-07-29-analysis-why-tutus-support-for-gay-rights-matters/#.Wa0d2IR95hE> (accessed August 13, 2015).

18 Victoria John, “Outrage over ‘homophobia’ posters” *Mail and Guardian*, June 6, 2013, <http://reference.sabinet.co.za/document/SAM052013122> (accessed August 13, 2015).

19 Rebecca Davis, “Analysis: Why Tutu’s support for gay rights matters” *Daily Maverick*, July 29, 2013. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2013-07-29-analysis-why-tutus-support-for-gay-rights-matters/#.Wa0d2IR95hE> (accessed August 13, 2015).

20 Babalo Ndenze, “Tutu lashed by Meshoe over gay statement”, *Cape Times*, July 31, 2013. <http://reference.sabinet.co.za/document/SAM0520131277> (accessed August 13, 2015).

Tutu's statement saying: "Tutu should just step down, because he supports gays, something that is evil. We say no to gays".<sup>21</sup>

It is clear that although the South African constitution includes protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation, socially it is still an issue. In 2017 Clayson Monyela, spokesman for the Department of International Relations and Co-operation acknowledged that "South Africa was still faced with the challenge of homophobia and violence against gays and lesbians".<sup>22</sup>

Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy was the passage that incited my queer interpretation of the play. But how could I approach the rest of the play without forcing the queer issue? I started to look at the relationship between Horatio and Hamlet. Horatio is present in key moments of the play. Most of Horatio's interactions with Hamlet are when they are alone. I started to wonder how it would influence the interpretation of the whole play if Hamlet and Horatio were to be in a same-sex relationship. But, to do that, I first had to analyse Horatio's position in the play and his interaction with Hamlet and the rest of the characters.

What follows is a summary of Horatio's appearances in the play. Act 1 opens with the changing of the guards. They had asked Horatio, Hamlet's friend from Wittenberg, to come and talk to the ghost. During the scene, Horatio and the guards discuss current affairs. Horatio offers insight into why Denmark appears to be preparing for a war and explains the historical background. In light of this, I started to ask: how does Horatio, who is not Danish and has only recently arrived at the castle, know so much about the historical and political situation in Denmark? One plausible answer is that Hamlet and Horatio are confidants, lovers.

In the next scene, Horatio and Marcellus go to inform Hamlet of the ghost. From Hamlet's reaction upon seeing Horatio, it is clear that he did not expect him to be in Elsinore. When Horatio greets him, Hamlet says "I am glad to see you well: / Horatio, or I do forget my selfe" to which Horatio replies "The same my Lord" (346–348).<sup>23</sup> Hamlet asks why he is at Elsinore and Horatio answers that he came for old King Hamlet's funeral. Whether this is true or not, Horatio had to travel for three weeks from Wittenberg to Elsinore.<sup>24</sup> A rather long journey just to attend the funeral of your friend's father. It can be interpreted from this gesture that Hamlet and Horatio have a special relationship. Horatio is also the only person in whom Hamlet confides about what the ghost told him. Hamlet sees Horatio as "just" and in his speech where he says "Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man / as e'er my conversation cop'd withal!" (1904–5) it is clear that he trusts Horatio, more than anybody else.

After Hamlet's exile to England, Horatio is the person who advises Gertrude that she should speak to Ophelia before Ophelia's famous 'mad scene'. Later Horatio receives a letter from Hamlet, telling him that he is on his way back to Denmark. Why was Horatio still at the castle after Hamlet left? How did Hamlet know that Horatio was still there? These moments were the starting point for my queer adaptation with Hamlet and Horatio in a same-sex relationship. But could it be put on stage?

### The 'dependent' Hamlet

How has *Hamlet* been interpreted over the centuries? In a letter to a friend in 1897, Sigmund Freud compared Oedipus to Hamlet and came to consider "falling in love with the mother and jealousy of the father ... as a universal event of early childhood". The work of Freud's biographer Ernest Jones had a significant influence on performances of Hamlet. According to Jones, Hamlet's 'mystery' is rooted in his Oedipus complex.<sup>25</sup> Young claims that since Freud, audiences see Hamlet as "caught in a vortex of

21 City Press editor, "Mugabe attacks 'gay-supporting Archbishop'" *City Press*, July 28, 2013, <http://www.news24.com/Archives/City-Press/Mugabe-attacks-gay-supporting-Archbishop-Desmond-Tutu-20150429> (accessed August 13, 2015).

22 SAinfo reporter, "Anti-gay discrimination is wrong: South Africa" *Brand South Africa* news, February 26, 2014. <https://www.brandsouthafrica.com/south-africa-fast-facts/news-facts/lgbti> (accessed August 13, 2015).

23 When I quote from the First Folio text (DjVu Editions e-book) line numbers, rather than act/scene/line references, will be provided.

24 During the Middle Ages, travel by horse averaged 20–30 miles (+/- 40 km per day). See [https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/32n9ji/what\\_was\\_it\\_like\\_to\\_travel\\_during\\_the\\_middle\\_ages/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/32n9ji/what_was_it_like_to_travel_during_the_middle_ages/) Estimated distance from Wittenberg to Elsinore is approximately 860 km walking (google maps)

25 Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976), quoted in Philip Weller, "Freud's Footprints in Films of 'Hamlet'," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 25. 2 (1997): 119. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4379678>



tormented, inward-looking decisions and Oedipal self-doubt”.<sup>26</sup> This representation, however, has been influenced by centuries of interpretation, supported by the obsession of post-Enlightenment Europe and the theories of Freud and post-Freudian theorists of subjectivity and sexuality.

The first film adaptation of *Hamlet* in 1900, where sexuality played a significant role, became a blueprint for future interpretations.<sup>27</sup> The Freudian interpretation of Hamlet’s repressed Oedipal desire for his mother Gertrude was the basis for Laurence Olivier’s portrayal of Hamlet in his 1947 adaptation and established the idea that “Hamlet’s motivation was sexually based”.<sup>28</sup> The kisses Gertrude gave Hamlet in the film were too intense to be regarded as mere motherly affection.<sup>29</sup> In Franco Zeffirelli’s film in 1990, Hamlet (portrayed by Mel Gibson) enters his mother’s room, and during his confrontation with her, he throws her onto the bed, “mounts her and violently thrusts his hips into her groin”.<sup>30</sup> Gertrude then grabs Hamlet’s head and gives him such a passionate kiss on the mouth that if the “Ghost did not appear at this point, full-fledged intercourse would follow”.<sup>31</sup> The mainstream appeal of Olivier’s award-winning film gave Freud and Jones’ theory, about the source of Hamlet’s motivations, much more credibility, but it was Zeffirelli’s film that established Hamlet’s Oedipal desires as ‘fact’. He also implied that Gertrude’s actions towards Hamlet accounted for this desire.<sup>32</sup>

Recent productions started to move away from the ‘Oedipal desire’ interpretations. In the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2008 production, with David Tennant as Hamlet, director Gregory Doran focused on “constructing his inward-looking hero”.<sup>33</sup> He re-established the play’s idea of secrecy, corruption and betrayal.<sup>34</sup> Jude Law portrayed Hamlet in 2009 and the director, Michael Grandage, moved away from Hamlet’s “psychological conundrums” and established a much more mature, heroic Hamlet.<sup>35</sup> In 2010 the National Theatre production of *Hamlet* with Rory Kinnear as Hamlet focused on Denmark’s repressive political system which is governed by surveillance and control, a clear comment on the abuse of power.<sup>36</sup> In the 2015 production at the Barbican Theatre in London, the director placed a heavy focus on suicide throughout the play. To portray Hamlet’s ultimate desire to commit suicide, he had Benedict Cumberbatch in the title role, come on stage with a noose around his neck. Ophelia left after her mad scene to go and commit suicide while Gertrude drank from the cup in the final scene in a clear attempt to commit suicide.<sup>37</sup>

Although bound to British culture in ‘the colonies’, there have been several acclaimed productions and adaptations of *Hamlet* in South Africa. Most notable is Janet Suzman’s production of *Hamlet* in 2005 where Hamlet comes across “as an Angry Young Man”.<sup>38</sup> The production, with John Kani as Claudius, Dorothy Ann Gould as Gertrude and Vaneshran Arumugam as Hamlet, was performed at several theatres in South Africa, as well as the Swan Theatre in London. The performance had a multicultural South African hue: a black Claudius, a white Gertrude and an Indian Hamlet.<sup>39</sup> At the 2007 Grahamstown

26 Young, “Recognising Hamlet”, p.13.

27 James R. Simmons Jr, ““In the Rank Sweat of an Enseamed Bed”: Sexual Aberration and the Paradigmatic Screen “Hamlets”,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 25. 2 (1997): 111. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43796782>.

28 Ibid., p.112.

29 Ibid., p.113.

30 William van Watson, “Shakespeare, Zeffirelli, and the Homosexual Gaze”, *Literature/Film Quarterly* 20. 4. (1992): 308. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43796567>

31 Simmons, “In the Rank Sweat of an Enseamed Bed”, p.116.

32 Simmons, “In the Rank Sweat of an Enseamed Bed”, p.116.

33 Young, “Recognising Hamlet”, p.21.

34 Yvonne Griggs, “Review of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (directed by Gregory Doran for BBC TV), BBC Two, 29 December 2009,” *Shakespeare* 6. 2 (2010): 253. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17450911003790257>

35 John Lahr, “Swash and Buckle.” *The New Yorker*, October 19, 2009. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/10/19/swash-and-buckle> (accessed August 23, 2017).

36 Young, “Recognising Hamlet”, p.22.

37 Gemma Miller, “Review of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (directed by Lyndsey Turner) at the Barbican Theatre, London, 24 October 2015,” *Shakespeare* 12. 4 (2016): 463. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2016.1146792>.

38 Len Ashton, “Hamlet as an angry young man”, *Sunday Independent*, July 17, 2005. <http://reference.sabinet.co.za/document/SAM0620053072> (accessed August 13, 2015).

39 David Blair, “Shakespeare: The quintessential storyteller of Africa”, *Star*, April 24, 2006. <http://reference.sabinet.co.za/document/SAM0620061628> (accessed August 13, 2015).

National Arts Festival, Shakespeare SA (a performance arm of the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa) did a production of *Hamlet* set on-board The Red Dragon, a ship moored just off the coast of Sierra Leone in 1607.<sup>40</sup> Fred Abrahams directed a similar production at the Pieter Toerien Montecasino Theatre in 2017 set on-board The Red Dragon with a cast of six men, doubling several roles.<sup>41</sup>

### My 'decolonised' Hamlet

To summarise lesbian, gay or queer approaches to literature, Lois Tyson offers several questions. Relevant to my adaptation is:

How might the works of heterosexual writers be reread to reveal an unspoken or unconscious lesbian, gay, or queer presence? That is, does the work have an unconscious lesbian, gay, or queer desire or conflict that it submerges (or that heterosexual readers have submerged)?<sup>42</sup>

According to Peter Barry, queer critics do the following:

Identify lesbian/gay episodes in mainstream work and discuss them as such (for example, the relationship between Jane and Helen in *Jane Eyre*), rather than reading same-sex pairings in non-specific ways, for instance, as symbolising two aspects of the same character.<sup>43</sup>

I used the First Folio as a source for the adaptation process to stay as true as possible to Shakespeare and/or his first editors' use of punctuation marks. I focused on Hamlet as a young man struggling with his father's death and his mother's hasty marriage, but also his internal conflict about his sexuality and his feelings for Horatio. If we imagine that this is the subtext, how would that affect the interpretation of the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, in light of the aspect of "being or not being"? How would it play into Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia and her consequent madness as well as the 'mousetrap scene'? Perhaps Hamlet's sexuality was the 'disgrace' to the family and kingdom that motivated Claudius' immediate decision to exile Hamlet, in addition to the murder of Polonius? Could a possible sexual relationship be the reason why Horatio is intent on sharing the poisoned wine in the final scene?

I did a close reading of the script and identified queer cues, which supported a possible love relationship between the two men: Horatio is present in key moments of the play as discussed previously. Most of Horatio's interactions are with Hamlet. The first time the court sees Hamlet and Horatio together is during the mousetrap scene. It is only after Hamlet's exile that Horatio interacts with Gertrude and Claudius. It is not clear where Horatio originates from, but we know he is from the lower class. He is well versed in the political aspects of Denmark as seen in his retelling of Old King Hamlet's victory with the soldiers. He is a scholar, studying with Hamlet in Wittenberg and they are friends. From this I was able to generate a motivated and convincing queer adaptation; however this also required that I cut all references to the political aspects of the play (with regards to young Fortinbras' revenge) and only focus on Hamlet's personal journey.

In 2014 I was able to produce my queer adaptation of *Hamlet* with a professional cast at the University of the Free State to explore the above concept. I co-directed the play with Peter Taljaard (who also portrayed Claudius), and I also portrayed the role of Hamlet. In the next section, I will offer a close reading, in chronological order, of the adaptation highlighting key moments in the play (with examples from the text) I used to establish Hamlet and Horatio's relationship. I will also refer to interpretation choices made by Peter and myself or the actors. The spelling in the quoted passages is the original spelling of the First Folio.

40 Christopher Thurman, "Shakespeare at the National Arts Festival, 2007: theatre review", *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 20, no. 1 (2008): 63. <http://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC48110>

41 Chris Thurman, "Editorial: Aboard the Red Dragon in 2017", *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 29, no. 1 (2017): iii. <http://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-875562bfa>.

42 Lois Tyson, *Critical theory today: a user-friendly guide*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), p.341.

43 Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: an introduction to literary and cultural theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.143.

## The adaptation

### *Act 1 Scene 1*

Peter and I used this scene to establish the play in a South African context and introduce Horatio and the ghost. I cut Horatio's discussion on why Denmark appears to be preparing for a war in the opening scene with the changing of the guard. To establish the South African context of the play, the guards wore SANDF uniforms.<sup>44</sup>

### *Act 1 Scene 2*

In scene 2 Horatio and Marcellus arrive to inform Hamlet of the ghost. Hamlet is clearly surprised to see Horatio.



**Hamlet** I am glad to see you well:  
Horatio, ~~or I do forget my selfe.~~

**Horatio** The same my Lord,  
And your poore Seruant euer.

**Hamlet** Sir my good friend,  
Ile change that name with you:  
But what in faith make you from Wittenberge?

**Horatio** A truant disposition, good my Lord.

**Hamlet** I know you are no Truant:  
But what is your affaire in Elsenour?  
Wee'l teach you to drinke deepe, ere you depart.

**Horatio** My Lord, I came to see your Fathers Funerall.  
(346–364)

In Act 1 Scene 2 Claudius and Gertrude refuse that Hamlet returns to Wittenberg (294–299). Hamlet has not been back to Wittenberg since his father's death, which at this moment in the play, is a month. Hamlet and Horatio's first meeting occurs immediately after Hamlet's soliloquy, "O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolute it selfe into a Dew" (313–343). Shakespeare's placement of this meeting right after Hamlet's sombre soliloquy is ingenious. In the speech, Hamlet talks about suicide, and Horatio's presence momentarily dispels Hamlet's grim mood. Peter and I decided that Hamlet feels completely alone and isolated at this moment, especially now that he cannot go back to Wittenberg.

I cut Hamlet's line "or I do forget my selfe" which indicates that he does not recognise Horatio immediately. In the performance, Hamlet was relieved and happy to see Horatio. This scene was the first moment where we could introduce the concept of them being in a same-sex relationship. To the question why he is in Elsinore, Horatio claims that he felt like playing truant to which Hamlet replies that he knows Horatio would never leave school without permission and again asks why he is there. In the performance, the second time Hamlet asks he does so more lovingly and intimately, taking Horatio's hand and kissing it, for a moment forgetting that he is at the court and that Marcellus is also present. When Hamlet realises what just happened in front of Marcellus, he quickly changes attitude and adds "Wee'l teach you to drinke deepe, ere you depart." (363). A clear attempt to conceal what has just happened in front of Marcellus.

Horatio then admits that he was there for King Hamlet's funeral. In our discussions, Peter and I decided that as Hamlet's lover, Horatio's motivation was to support Hamlet during this tough time. It is approximately a three-week journey from Wittenberg to Elsinore. We felt that logically this was quite a long journey for a young man to come to old King Hamlet's funeral unless there was another underlying reason. As mentioned earlier we used this scene to establish the romantic relationship between Hamlet and Horatio; but now in addition to having to process his mother's hasty marriage, Hamlet is confronted with Horatio and his internal conflict about his sexuality. Hamlet ends the scene with:

44 We only made use of the army costumes for visual reference. The characters still talked about Denmark, Wittenberg etc.



**Hamlet** (to Horatio) ... so fare ye well:  
Vpon the Platforme twixt eleuen and twelue,  
Ile visit you.

**Horatio** [*All*]  
**Hamlet** My [*Our*] duty to your Honour.  
Your loue, as mine to you: farewell.

(451–455)

In the performance Hamlet took Horatio's hands during "so fare ye well: / Vpon the Platforme twixt eleuen and twelue, / Ile visit you.", then kissed his hand before placing it on his heart on "Your loue, as mine to you: farewell." In this way the concept was carried through the words into the action.

#### *Act 1 Scene 4*

In the original script Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus arrive at the watch tower together. I am sure Shakespeare did not put a lot of thought into why they arrive together. On the Elizabethan stage, the actors needed to enter and start the scene. For the adaptation, however, Peter and I wanted to show the audience that it is the first time after their first meeting in scene 2 that Horatio and Hamlet are together. It would strengthen their 'coming out' in the 'mousetrap scene' where the other members of the court see Hamlet and Horatio together for the first time. To establish that to the audience we had Marcellus and Horatio wait for Hamlet at the watch tower.

*[Marcellus and Horatio waiting for Hamlet. Hamlet enters]*

**Hamlet** The Ayre bites shrewdly: is it very cold?

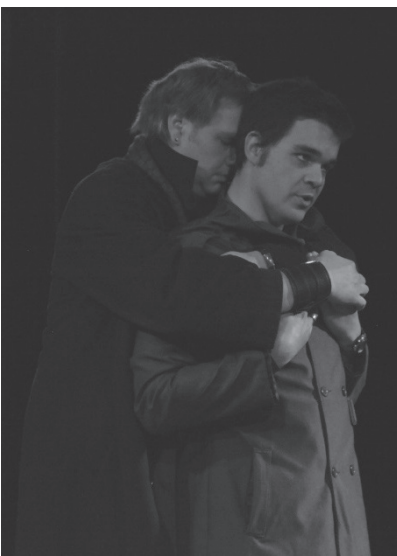
**Horatio** It is a nipping and an eager ayre.

**Hamlet** What hower now?

**Horatio** I thinke it lacks of twelue.

(604–607)

In the scene, Horatio wore a red scarf, which he placed around Hamlet's neck during their greeting. Props like pieces of clothing or accessories are frequently used in Shakespeare's plays to further the plot. Desdemona's handkerchief in *Othello*, the rings Portia and Nerissa give to Bassanio and Gratiano in *The Merchant of Venice*, and the letter Malvolio reads in *Twelfth Night* are a few examples. In our pre-production discussions around Hamlet and Horatio's relationship, Peter and I realised that Hamlet would need something of Horatio's during his "To be, or not to be" soliloquy to visually show the audience that he is referring to their relationship. We felt that this was the moment where Horatio could give something to Hamlet. It was important for the audience to see that the prop came from Horatio. Small items like rings, bracelets, necklaces, are too small and would have 'disappeared' on stage. However, Hamlet mentions that it is cold and we decided that a scarf would work best. It needed to be red, not only for the symbolic meaning of love, but also because of the colour filters we used in the lighting design which made the scarf stand out.



Hamlet and Horatio stood in a loving embrace while waiting for the ghost to appear. It is the first time they are alone (except for Marcellus who is there) and away from the eyes of the court. They could be intimate in a stolen moment without fear that someone might see them. We needed to make it clear to the audience, without a doubt, that they are in a sexual relationship.

After the ghost reveals to Hamlet what actually happened in the orchard, Horatio and Marcellus arrive. Hamlet refuses to tell them what the ghost revealed to him. However, he takes both Horatio and Marcellus into his confidence and informs them that he intends "To put an Anticke disposition on" (868) and makes them swear not to reveal anything. In the performance I ended the scene with Hamlet



saying to Marcellus while holding Horatio in an embrace, “Neuer speake of this that you haue heard or seen” (new line), after which Hamlet and Horatio exit hand in hand.

### *Act 2*

Nearly two months have passed since the events of Act 1. In Act 2 Scene 2, Rosincrance and Guildensterne<sup>45</sup> arrive after Claudius sent for them. It is interesting to note that Claudius did not ask for Horatio’s assistance. Peter and I decided that it would reinforce the idea that nobody knows Horatio is there, which would also add strength to the ‘coming out’ of Hamlet and Horatio in the ‘mousetrap scene’. After Hamlet’s encounter with Rosincrance and Guildensterne and the actors, Hamlet conceives the plan to catch “the conscience of the King”.

### *Act 3 Scene 1*

In our concept, the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy is a pinnacle moment for Hamlet regarding his relationship with Horatio. We used this speech as the moment where Hamlet had to decide whether to accept his sexuality and his relationship with Horatio or not as discussed earlier. As mentioned previously, no-one has ever seen Hamlet with Horatio except for Marcellus, who swore that he would reveal nothing.

Hamlet enters with the scarf Horatio gave him in Act 1, fiddling with it and smelling it while starting with “To be, or not to be, that is the Question”. During the speech, there are key moments where Hamlet refers back to the scarf: “Whether ’tis Nobler in the minde to suffer / The Slings and Arrowes of outrageous Fortune, / Or to take Armes against a Sea of troubles, / And by opposing end them” (1710–1714). Conceptually,



“The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” implied dealing with and accepting the possible negative reactions to his sexuality and relationship with Horatio while “or to take arms ... by opposing end them” we read as denying his own identity and his feelings for Horatio. Keep in mind he is a prince and Laertes makes it clear in Act 1 Scene 3 that “He may not, as unvalued persons do, / Carve for himself”(482–483).

There is no denying that the question of death and suicide are present in this soliloquy, but ‘death’ need not only concern physical death but also the ‘death’ of identity and the self. For Hamlet to deny his sexuality is the same as “killing” a part of himself. In the lines “For in that sleepe of death, what dreames may come, / When we haue shuffel’d off this mortall coile, / Must giue vs pawse. ... But that the dread of something after death, ... Puzels the will, ...” (1720–1734), we interpreted the fear after ‘death’ not only as the fear of the unknown but also the fear of regret for denying who he is. In the performance Hamlet puts the scarf back around his neck before seeing Ophelia; a gesture to indicate that he accepts his sexuality and more importantly his relationship with Horatio and the choice to be open about it.

In the ‘nunnery scene’ that follows, Hamlet famously rejects Ophelia. There are several interpretations as to why Hamlet treats Ophelia so harshly. The most accepted one is that he is aware of her betrayal and that Claudius and Polonius are listening<sup>46</sup>. He gives her several opportunities to admit that she is lying to him and when she lies about the whereabouts of her father, Hamlet flies into a rage. Another approach to this scene is that Hamlet is expressing pent-up anger towards his mother. He feels that she has been unfaithful to his father and that her marriage to his uncle is incestuous. During his confrontation with Ophelia, Hamlet’s hate towards his mother becomes evident. Ophelia becomes the substitute for Hamlet’s mother, at whom he indirectly aims his rage.

For our performance, we approached it from a different angle. Act 1 makes it clear that there is a sort of ‘relationship’ between Ophelia and Hamlet. To support our proposal that Hamlet is a gay man, we decided that for the sake of pretence Hamlet uses Ophelia to take suspicion away from his sexuality.

45 First Folio spelling.

46 James Hirsh, “The “To Be, or Not to Be” Speech: Evidence, Conventional Wisdom, and the Editing of “Hamlet”,” *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 23 (2010). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24322554>

There is no denying that they know each other very well and one can assume that they grew up together and are very good friends. Seeing Ophelia after deciding to come out is very hard for Hamlet, and we used the beginning of this scene to indicate that to the audience.

Hamlet assumes that she is reading a prayer book and asks her “Nymph, in thy Orizons / Be all my sinnes remembred.” (1743–1744), as he feels guilty about his deceit towards her and the decision he has just made. She tells him that she wants to return the gifts he gave her. Hamlet’s first instinct is to deny that he ever gave her anything. He finds it difficult to lie to her like that and says “I did loue you once.” (1770). He then admits that “I loued you not.” (1774). When she says that “I was the more deceiued.” (1775), he responds that men are untrustworthy and that she would be better off in a nunnery. The use of the word ‘nunnery’ can be interpreted in two ways; either as a euphemism for “brothel” (as was the case in the Protestant Elizabethan world)<sup>47</sup> or literally as a nunnery. We used both interpretations. The first time Hamlet uses ‘nunnery’ he means a nunnery, a place where she cannot marry at all; she cannot be under the influence of any man, or influence men in any way, safe from men, like him, who will use her.

However, after she denies the whereabouts of her father, Hamlet realises that she is also deceiving him, and he then insinuates that she should go to a brothel. He relapses into his “antic disposition” to make Claudius and Polonius think that his madness is because of Ophelia.

### Act 3 Scene 2



In the adaptation, I cut the beginning of this scene where Hamlet talks to the actors about their acting. To focus on Hamlet and Horatio’s relationship we needed to build up momentum and Hamlet’s talk to the actors would have broken the tempo.

Hamlet went through a journey during the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy from a) questioning whether or not to accept, to b) accepting his sexuality, to c) rejecting Ophelia during the ‘nunnery scene’. In the performance we started the scene with Horatio waiting for Hamlet,

again reinforcing that when they are at the castle, they are not together. Upon his arrival, Hamlet greets him with “Horatio, thou art eene as iust a man / As ere my Conuersation coap’d withall” (1904–1905). This speech was the moment where Hamlet tells Horatio that he chose him as his partner “Since my deere Soule was Mistris of my choyse, / And could of men distinguish, her election / Hath seal’d thee for her selfe” (1914–1916). He ends with “Giue me that man, / That is not Passions Slaue, and I will weare him / In my hearts Core. I, in my Heart of heart, / As I do thee” (1922–1925) telling Horatio that he is committed to him and their relationship. They embrace and hold each other for a while. For me, as an actor, this speech was the moment where Hamlet revealed his innermost being to Horatio. Peter and I realised that for the first time Hamlet could be open in his affection towards Horatio without being afraid that people might find out they are in a relationship. The secrecy and lying to others and himself is over. After they embrace Hamlet informs him what the ghost told him and asks for his help in observing Claudius.

The ‘mousetrap scene’ is now not only a scene where Claudius’ guilt about the murder is revealed to Hamlet, but it is also the moment where Hamlet reveals his relationship with Horatio to the court and his parents. As the court enters for the play, Hamlet and Horatio are holding hands. Gertrude asks Hamlet to come and sit next to her, to



47 “According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this text contains the first quotation in which ‘nunnery’ is used as slang for ‘brothel’ – the ironic opposite of a virginal community of nuns. In his book, *Christes Teares over Jerusalem* (1593), Thomas Nash or Nashe (1597–1601) refers to prostitutes who ‘give free privileged’ to gentlemen in ‘theyr Nunnery’ (pp.79r–v). ... Critics have debated whether this simply implies that she should enter a convent to escape corruption, or whether it also hints ambiguously that she should go to a brothel – because the world will inevitably corrupt her with its impure ways.” See more at: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-use-of-the-word-nunnery-to-mean-brothel-1593#sthash.36HK27pC.dpuf>

which he replies “No good Mother, here’s Mettle more attractiue.” (1964), indicating Horatio. For the adaptation, I cut the dialogue between him and Ophelia.

### *Act 3 Scene 3*

Claudius’ outburst “I like him not, nor stands it safe with vs, / To let his madnesse range” (2272–2273) not only now refers to Hamlet’s apparent madness, but also to his sexuality and forms part of Claudius’ motivation for sending him to England.

### *Act 4 Scene 5*

It is unclear how much time has passed after Hamlet left for England in scene 3, but it is safe to assume that it is at least a few weeks as Polonius has already been buried. Horatio is still at Elsinore and we decided that Gertrude accepts them as a couple and therefore she allows him to counsel her.

During Ophelia’s mad scene she sings the following:



**Ophelia**     *By gis, and by S[aint] Charity,  
Alacke, and fie for shame:  
Yong men wil doo’t, if they come too’t,  
By Cocke they are too blame.  
Quoth she before you tumbled me,  
You promis’d me to Wed:  
So would I ha done by yonder Sunne,  
And thou hadst not come to my bed.*  
(2796–2803)

In the performance, she placed her head on Horatio’s chest during “You promis’d me to Wed: / So would I ha done by yonder Sunne, / And thou hadst not come to my bed”. We conceived that she is talking to Hamlet through Horatio. On the line “I hope all will be well. We must bee patient”, she places her hand on his cheek as a way of accepting Horatio and Hamlet’s relationship. When she exits, Claudius instructs Horatio to follow.

### *Act 4 Scene 6*

In the original script, Horatio receives a letter from Hamlet, telling him that he is on his way back to Denmark and that Horatio should meet him. In our pre-production discussions on why Horatio was still at Elsinore and how Hamlet knew he was still there, we decided that Horatio stayed at the castle and that he and Hamlet were in constant contact through text messaging. Instead of a letter, we had Hamlet send Horatio a text message where he recounts how pirates attacked the ship and that he ended up being the only person taken prisoner.

During my research, before I did the adaptation, I came upon a scene in Quarto 1<sup>48</sup>, not included in the First Folio, between Horatio and Gertrude which I included in this scene. Horatio informs Gertrude “Madame, your sonne is safe arriv’d in Denmarke, / This letter I euen now receiv’d of him, / Whereas he writes how he escap’t the danger, / And subtle treason that the king had plotted” (2985). Gertrude then confirms her suspicion about Claudius, and it is clear that Gertrude knows about Claudius’ deceit and ill doings.

Gertrude asks Horatio “But know not you Horatio where he is?” He replies “Yes Madame, and he hath appoynted me / To meete him on the east side of the Cittie / To morrow morning”, to which she replies “O faile not, good Horatio”, Horatio informs her of what happened on the ship, and she greets him “Thankes be to heauen for blessing of the prince, / Horatio once againe I take my leaue, / With thowsand mothers blessings to my sonne”. (3515–25), to which I added “and you”. This scene was another moment we used to visually show that Gertrude accepts and respects Hamlet’s relationship with Horatio.



*Act 5 Scene 2*

Hamlet and Horatio enter holding hands and Hamlet recounts what happened on the ship. In the performance, Hamlet was very affectionate to Horatio. After Osric informs Hamlet about the duel with Laertes, Horatio for the first time pleads with Hamlet not to accept the challenge. Throughout the play, Horatio emotionally supports Hamlet with unwavering loyalty in every decision and endeavour. In our discussions around Hamlet and Horatio's relationship, Peter and I realised that even though they were in Wittenberg and away from the Danish court, Hamlet and Horatio would still have been very secretive about their relationship, as I mentioned previously in the 'mousetrap scene' discussion. Hamlet's acceptance of their relationship and his decision to 'come out' was also an important moment for Horatio. They did

not have to hide their relationship anymore, and Horatio could finally be open about his feelings towards Hamlet as well. With Hamlet's exile to England, Horatio 'lost' him again and now Hamlet is back. We decided that Horatio knows that Hamlet will lose the duel and he could not lose him again.

To Horatio's plea not to duel, Hamlet replies "If it be now, 'tis not to come: if it be not to come, it will be now: if it be not now; yet it will come; the readinesse is all, since no man ha's ought of what he leaues. What is't to leaue be-times?" (3669–3672). Peter and I discussed this moment at length: Hamlet could refuse, and he and Horatio could run away. It was difficult to justify why Hamlet would be ready to die, right after reuniting with Horatio. To motivate Hamlet's decision to duel we decided that Hamlet knows there is no way out since Claudius has already attempted to get rid of him, and chances are he'll try again. Hamlet is guilty of killing Polonius, and we thought that Hamlet would like to make amends with Laertes. Through my performance of this speech we revealed to the audience that it was difficult for Hamlet to admit that he knows he might lose this duel but that in some way he is ready, a hard decision for him for it means that he would lose Horatio. Hamlet was holding Horatio's hand while greeting Laertes when he entered. What worked for us was that this love-lost moment added to the tragedy of the tale.

In the performance, an important moment for Horatio was his eagerness to share the poisoned wine in the final scene – to die along with Hamlet. On the surface, the reference to him being an antic Roman refers to the practice in ancient Rome of committing suicide when defeated, as in the case with Cassius and Brutus in *Julius Ceasar*. Another aspect to look at is the acceptance of same-sex relationships in ancient Rome, usually between a man from the upper class and either a slave or man of lower class, as in the case of Hamlet and Horatio. It was a moment in the performance where we could show Horatio's love for Hamlet. Throughout the play, Hamlet took an active role in displaying his affection towards Horatio, but now it was Horatio's turn.

After Hamlet wrestles the cup from Horatio's hand, he tells him "If thou did'st euer hold me in thy heart, / Absent thee from felicitie awhile, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in paine, To tell my Storie." (3832–3835). In the adaptation, I replaced "my story" with "our story".

The play ends with Horatio's final words "Now cracke a Noble heart: / Goodnight sweet Prince, / And flights of Angels sing thee to thy rest", (3848–3850) and then he kisses Hamlet. The image of Hamlet dying in Horatio's arms, with Horatio intent on drinking the poison too, is reminiscent of the tomb scene in *Romeo and Juliet*.

**Epilogue**

The original text lends itself to a queer interpretation of Hamlet and Horatio's relationship without forcing the issue. Nowhere in the adaptation did I have to make any major changes to the dialogue to support Hamlet and Horatio's relationship. Peter and I found that the subtle changes in the actors'



interpretation of the lines and the physical interaction between the characters brought Hamlet and Horatio's relationship to the forefront.

A colleague once said, "Horatio is only a plot device to move the action forward". Yet reading *Hamlet* from a queer perspective answers the question as to why Horatio is in Elsinore and present at key moments in the play. By placing Hamlet and Horatio in a same-sex relationship, Horatio's presence becomes more meaningful. The interpretation of the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, the 'nunnery scene', the 'mousetrap scene' and ultimately his exile adds a new layer to the character of Hamlet, and by extension Horatio. Isn't it time to move away from, or rather "decolonise" the old cliché that Hamlet is obsessed with death, suicide and his Oedipal desires for his mother, and rather focus on him as a young man coming of age – wanting to live and love?

Imagine an adaptation of the epilogue from *Romeo and Juliet* (5.3.321–26):

*A glooming peace this morning with it brings  
The sun for sorrow will not show his head.  
Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things;  
Some shall be pardoned, and some punished;  
For never was a story of more woe  
Than this of Hamlet and his Horatio [sic].*

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