

## Revisionings of *Hamlet*: The Crux of an Interpretive Paradigm

MOHAMMAD SAFAEI

*School of Language Studies and Linguistics  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)  
Bangi, Malaysia  
safaeim@hotmail.com*

RUZY SULIZA HASHIM

*School of Language Studies and Linguistics  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)  
Bangi, Malaysia*

### ABSTRACT

*This article is a brief survey of Hamlet criticism along with different types of revisioning Hamlet in a variety of genres since the early twentieth century. Four major types of revisioning Hamlet are considered in this article: absorption of Hamlet by a competent writer as a challenge to Shakespeare; rewriting of the play as a response to the questions unaddressed in the original text; revisioning of the play as a feminist struggle intent upon defending women against patriarchal readings of them; transforming Hamlet as a postcolonial urge to rewrite the past. Further, it is argued that varied types of revisioning, adapting, or transforming Hamlet, though roughly different in their exact significations and delineations, are the consequence of two major factors: psychological reaction to Shakespeare, and, being situated within a socio-political context. By reducing the causes of revisioning into the two broad categories of psychological and contextual, varied types of revisioning that are ostensibly discrepant and unrelated may obtain a common foundation for analysis and comparison. Further, it is argued that Hamlet is surrounded by the enormous bulk of criticism on Hamlet which informs the readers and affects their interpretation of both the play and its revisionings. Developing an interpretive paradigm for revisioning phenomenon entails the investigation of the basic concepts on which revisioning phenomenon is founded. Revisionism is a complex phenomenon; a reductionist approach toward the basic concepts involved in revisioning and its analysis can be regarded as a step toward gaining more insight into the revisioning phenomenon in our era.*

*Keywords: revisioning; postcolonialism; feminism; psyche; context*

### INTRODUCTION

The application of discrepant terminology, the broad spectrum of critical approaches, and the enormity of Hamletiana at times baffles analysis of the revisionings of *Hamlet*. Levin (1959) observes that “*Hamlet*, like the major problems of human experience, has been surrounded with a whole library” (p. 3). The Polish theorist Kott (1965) remarks that “the bibliography of dissertations and studies devoted to *Hamlet* is twice the size of Warsaw’s telephone directory” (p. 47). Jenkins (1982) remarks that despite all attempts made by generations of

annotators, there are many passages in *Hamlet* which “still lack satisfactory exegesis” (p. vii), and not all exegetic annotations on *Hamlet* are necessarily correct. The analysis of the works which have transformed *Hamlet* poses certain challenges which have to be addressed both in theory and method. To assess the scope of revisioning and to determine which work is more revisionary in nature is the problem which this paper attempts to explore, though the attempt may appear to a Shakespearean scholar curtailed vis-à-vis the edifice of Shakespearean criticism. More drastically maimed, we confess, is a survey of *Hamlet* criticism within the scope of a few pages. The major objective of this paper is not to appraise which theory addresses the questions of *Hamlet* and its revisionings adequately; nor does this paper claim that all the theories surveyed in this paper do justice to the study of revisionism in literature. Our objective is mainly to explore certain constant figures among a number of major theories which have been applied to the phenomenon of revisioning and the transformations of *Hamlet*, in particular. At best, the paper is not a solution to, but, a further problematization of what is termed revisioning through a medley of methods and theories that are applied to the criticism of *Hamlet*'s revisionings.

The very signification of the term revisioning is the first issue which appears in any study of revisioning. Whether a transformation of *Hamlet* is an instance of appropriation or revisioning puzzles analysis, for each of these terms are grounded on certain assumptions that are discrepant in definition. Sanders (2001) argues that several terms such as adaptation, appropriation, and revisioning have been utilized to explain the process of absorbing and transforming Shakespeare, yet there is no consensus among scholars as to the exact delineation of each of these terms. Instances of discrepancy as to the proper taxonomy of forms can be observed in Jorgens' (1977) different classificatory sets which he develops to analyze film productions of Shakespeare which are traditionally classified based on their deviations from theatrical conventions and performances. In the first grouping, he divides them into three major groups of presentation (in which a version close to the original play is produced by the artist), interpretation (where the production conveys a certain critical viewpoint of the director toward the original work), and adaptation (where the original play becomes an ingredient for a new production). In a different categorization, Jorgens mentions three genres: filmic, realistic, and theatrical. Despite Jorgens' (1977) efforts to hypothesize the taxonomy of adaptation or “means of treatment” (p. 12), Hatchuel (2004) contends that the postulated nomenclature does not provide a lucid explanation for each of these genres, for every filmic mode of Shakespeare can eventually be considered as some form of adaptation—a creation which distances from the original play.

This paper adopts the term revisioning to address a number of issues pertinent to the exploration of *Hamlet* and its transformations, for a review of the ways through which *Hamlet* has been transposed reveals that the term revisioning seems, for various reasons, more apposite than adaptation or appropriation. First, adaptation is often confined to the recasting of a literary work from one medium into another which is often a screen version (Cuddon 1998). Second, appropriation connotes forceful seizure of some property (Sanders 2001); and at times it connotes, according to Young (2005), disparagement, offensiveness, profanity. Third, revisionism, in Bloom's (1975) opinion, is a constituent part of trends in human thought, denoting consent to a doctrine up to a certain point and then to deviate from it in order to redress it. Similarly, in the domain of literature, revisionism is to revere and then

to rewrite a literary work with a corrective purpose. Fourth, revisioning represents the feminist movement that, as Rich (1972) announces, underscores the reassessment of the past from new perspectives and “of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (p. 18); this outlook has been widely adopted by various feminist theorists such as Gilbert and Gubar (2010) and Kolodny (2010). Thus to enhance clarity in our survey of *Hamlet*’s transformations in this paper we have utilized the term revisioning, though other roughly synonymous terms such as appropriation or adaptation are also used when it is deemed appropriate.

The history of revisioning *Hamlet*, as it is surveyed in this article, cannot be disentangled from the play’s historical reception and criticism; nor can *Hamlet*’s reception be severed from the status of its author. To analyze a revisioning of *Hamlet* entails a necessary and perplexing step which disconcerts the reader’s interpretation of the revisioning work. In fact, how is it possible to analyze the revisioning of a work which itself is, as Levin (1959) remarks, a conundrum, regarded by Shakespeare scholars as “a dramatic sphinx, and as the Mona Lisa of literature” (p. 4)? In other words, what is that particular meaning and form of *Hamlet* which is transformed in a revisioning work? The answer to this question entails a review, however brief, of *Hamlet*’s criticism and its author which is imbued with both laudation and disparagement. As to the universality of Shakespeare, Garber (2008) is convinced that the playwright is broadly disseminated in today’s culture; that his absorption is often unacknowledged; and that he is, as a ubiquitous figure in today’s education, probably read more than ever. In Bloom’s (1998) opinion, the plays of Shakespeare represent the acme of “human achievement: aesthetically, cognitively, in certain ways morally, even spiritually” (p. xix). Shakespeare’s ideas, to some critics, have attained the status of eternal truth. According to Garber (2008), many of the ideas that people conceive of as true were in fact written by Shakespeare: “ideas about human character, about individuality and selfhood, about government, about men and women, youth and age, about the qualities that make a strong leader” (p. xiii). If one, like Bloom (1998), regards Shakespeare as the secular Bible, and juxtaposes *Hamlet*, the charismatic character, with grand biblical figures such as David and Christ, then one would be able to argue that revisioning of *Hamlet* is a reaction or a response to the canonicity of Shakespeare as the prophet of secularism in our age. Thus one’s conception of *Hamlet* or its author determines his interpretation of an instance of revisioning.

*Hamlet* himself has been the subject of laudations. Bevington (2011) lays emphasis on *Hamlet*’s tremendous effect on the cultural history, arguing that the prince’s greatness is not a consequence of his superhumanity but the result of his profound insight into the anguish of the modern man, for throughout the past centuries his qualms and questions have not lost their relevance. *Hamlet* is compared with the greatest biblical characters; Bloom (1998) compares *Hamlet*’s charismatic character to that of King David in The Old Testament. Hunt (2007) opines that *Hamlet* is not a mirror, but in fact, the yardstick of what humanity means. *Hamlet*, Grazia (2007) argues, is a universal figure and his universality is the result of his autonomous character: “Like Germany’s Luther, France’s Descartes, Italy’s Machiavelli, and England’s Bacon and Hobbes, he is accorded epochal status for inaugurating a distinctly modern consciousness” (p. 4). To conceive of *Hamlet* as not only the mirror of Renaissance man but modern humanity per se affects our interpretation of *Hamlet*’s being deprived of voice or social status in certain modern revisionings of *Hamlet*. In other words, if we are

convinced that Hamlet is the reflection of humanity, what would be our interpretation of his distortion in a novel, like Haig's (2006) *The Dead Fathers Club* or Isler's (1994) *The Prince of Western Avenue*, in which Hamlet figure is reduced in his power; should the attrition of his powers, social as well as physical, be interpreted as a reaction of the modern world toward the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon, in specific, the British Empire, or is it a ubiquitous phenomenon experienced by modern man around the civilized world? The following section presents a brief review of major attitudes toward *Hamlet* and the way *Hamlet*'s transformations are interpreted.

### REVISIONING

Despite historical acclamations lavished upon both Shakespeare and *Hamlet*, the phenomenon of revisioning has continued throughout time. This implies that neither Shakespeare's thought nor Hamlet's is, in the minds of some if not many, associated with absolute truth. The revisioning works of *Hamlet* testify to the fact that any revisionist author or director reads the original play differently—with the readings often at variance with one another. The relation between every new revisioning work and the original play depends on two major factors: the critical attitude of the revisionist writer, dramatist, or director toward the original text and its author; and the cultural and socio-political context in which he or she is situated. The major difference between criticism of *Hamlet* and its revisioning is that whereas the former turns into a critique, the latter manifests itself in the form of a new artistic work. Every new author or director has his own interpretation of *Hamlet*. Jackson (2007) observes that any new production of Shakespeare has to decide on a number of choices which will be finalized by the director's reading of the original play. To give or not to give perspicuous representation to the innuendoes of liaison between Hamlet and Ophelia, or, between Gertrude and Claudius rests with the final interpretive outlook of the director. Kott (1965) remarks that "*Hamlet* cannot be performed in its entirety....One has to select, curtail and cut. One can only perform one of several *Hamlets* potentially existing" (p. 47).

Not all receptions or adaptations of *Hamlet* meet the favourable response of the critics; nor is *Hamlet*'s theatrical success ascribed to a limited number of aesthetic factors. For instance, *Hamlet*'s wide reception, according to Hunt (2007), marks the play's inner artistic qualities which will not suffer attrition, for the play has not lost its lustre throughout time; *Hamlet*'s artistic success is attested by its numerous editions and performances with Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film version as the most glamorous and expensive film production, proving to be "a commercial and critical hit" (p. 4). Despite Hunt's admiration for Branagh's razzle-dazzle production of *Hamlet*, Charnes (2006) argues that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* at a time when the dubiety concerning the monarchical succession after Elizabeth I had demoralized the English nation; the play begins with references to the possibility of an invasion launched by young Fortinbras; and it ends with Fortinbras' conquest of the Danish kingdom. As a result, the inclusion of an invasion by Fortinbras in a film like Branagh's *Hamlet*, which marginalizes the political tensions and political dilemmas addressed in the original play, seems supererogatory. Any Freudian or Lacanian reading of *Hamlet* proves inadequate in attending to the main concerns of the play, i.e. those concerns which are political in nature. Feminist critics pay attention to the other aspects of the play. To Kolodny

(2010), feminist revisionism of *Hamlet* is an attempt to invite the viewer to ponder “Ophelia’s sufferings in a scene where, before, he’d always so comfortably kept his eye fixed firmly on Hamlet” (p. 2053). For instance, Lillie Wyman’s 1934 novel *Gertrude of Denmark*, according to Rozett (1994), presents “a critical challenge to the literary establishments’ adulation of Hamlet” (p. 88) and the opinionated view of Shakespeare toward women as mothers and wives. Charnes (2006) observes that as a consequence of the psychological reading of the play as a family romance influenced by Freud, Ernst Jones, and Lacan, the new versions of *Hamlet* have generally diluted or deleted the play’s political themes. Hence, there is reciprocity between *Hamlet*’s criticism and its revisionings. *Hamlet*’s revisionings are critical readings of *Hamlet*; the critic’s assessment of a revisioning work, or an adaptation of *Hamlet*, depends upon his interpretation of the play.

That Shakespeare is a popular commodity has enkindled much controversy. Bristol’s (1996) opinion is that Shakespeare is a commercial hype and the names of his plays are dazzling enough to make a box-office success. Shakespeare, according to Sturgess (2004), has always been an entertainment in America. Every American city in the nineteenth century had to have a church and a theatre, with Shakespeare’s plays, especially *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello* the most popular. Conversely, Bristol (1996) claims these are the publishers and theatrical impresarios that contribute to the commodification of Shakespeare by ensuring his prominence in the cultural market; the publication of Shakespeare’s various inexpensive editions which help promote his consumption is a measure taken to enhance the playwright’s commodification. If one, drawing on Bristol, regards *Hamlet*, as a commercial hype, then the revisionings of *Hamlet* may be interpreted as mere attempts made to gain financial benefit from an already established booming market.

Despite Bristol’s (1996) emphasis on the modern attempts to popularize or commercialize Shakespearean plays, it appears that *Hamlet*’s popularity is not a new phenomenon. *Hamlet*’s early reception can be corroborated by the number of its editions; the play, according to Hunt (2007), was published thirteen times in the seventeenth century. However, the popularity of the play has not rendered it invincible to a variety of criticisms and revisionings. Revising *Hamlet* appears to be more than a marketing strategy, and the play has been transformed by influential literary figures. One of the prime instances of revisionism in the early twentieth century is James Joyce’s *Ulysses* which is, according to Cartelli (2008), one of the most controversial revisionings of *Hamlet* in which Shakespeare is “quoted, parodied, distorted, dislocated, caricatured, misinterpreted, and treated with bardolatric reverence” (p. 19). Joyce’s Stephan, Cartelli (2008) remarks, is endowed with more capabilities than Shakespeare’s Hamlet. His versatility has enabled him to play the roles of an Irish emperor, a freethinker, a drunkard, a disinherited son. Bloom (1994) contends that James Joyce has his own theory of Hamlet and Shakespeare; Joyce rejects Freud’s theory of Oedipus complex about Hamlet and his incestuous desires. *Ulysses* questions filiation and paternal authority. What can be, among others, extrapolated from the above discussions is that Bloom, for instance, interprets the work of Joyce through a Freudian reading of *Hamlet*. As such, the type of the critic’s reading of *Hamlet* affects his interpretation of the transformations in a revisioning of *Hamlet*.

Moore (2001) mentions that the sense of dependence and independence, compliance and resistance are common among postcolonial nations. Among Americans, Shakespeare has

also been the source of ambivalent feelings. Sturgess (2004) stresses that Shakespeare was a formidable figure for the early Americans who were in quest of a distinct national literature. Charnes (2006) contends that *Hamlet* is a reflection of today's American society's uncertainty about their government. On the effect of Shakespeare on the American nation, Sturgess (2004) contends that no other nation in the world has appropriated Shakespeare more than the people of the United States. The playwright has been unconsciously and fortuitously welcomed in the United States despite the common idea that the leaders of the American Revolution should have dispelled Shakespeare whose language was imbued with archaisms and European aristocratic conventions. The reception of Shakespeare despite the American Revolution's condemnation of the old aristocratic traditions is an oxymoron in American history, for Shakespeare was, for the most part, a representation of the same hierarchical and despotic system to which Americans were in opposition.

Hence, in Sturgess' (2004) opinion, the American's favorable response to Shakespeare or *Hamlet* is oxymoronic, for Shakespeare is the mouthpiece of Eurocentric values, whereas early American revolutionaries were in battle against the same values. Reading Shakespeare and *Hamlet* from Sturgess' viewpoint, the critic may interpret *Hamlet*'s transpositions as a reaction against the play's promulgation of Eurocentric virtues. Such an interpretation of a revisioning work of *Hamlet* can be observed in Guerrero-Strachan and Hidalgo (2008). In the view of these critics, *Hamlet* is transformed in Rushdie's short story "Yorick" as a part of postcolonial agenda, for rewriting the past history is an elemental feature of postcolonial culture, and Shakespeare is not an exception to this process. The innumerability of Shakespeare's appropriations testifies to the Bard's rise, yet there are a variety of purposes and intentions based on which revisionist authors can be distinguished from one another. Salman Rushdie's purpose of rewriting *Hamlet* accords with the objectives of postcolonial sentiments; he intends to give prominence to those characters that are traditionally marginalized in grand narratives whose major players are kings, nobility, and larger-than-life figures. Whereas John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* or Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* follow the plot of *Hamlet*, "Yorick" presents an alternative interpretation of the play in contradiction with the authorial version which has been inculcated in the memory of generations of readers and theatergoers. Rushdie is lucid in his intention: events must be subject to constant revision, deconstruction, and refutation. In other words, Guerrero-Strachan and Hidalgo's assumption is that *Hamlet* is the voice of the Empire and as such, they regard Rushdie's "Yorick" as a re-reading or a revisioning of the Eurocentrism in *Hamlet* without considering the inherently contradictory role of the gravedigger who, in the beginning of Act 5, challenges aristocracy, religious rites, divine authority, the prince himself.

Every revisioning work is a critical response to a previous work; the difference between a critic and a revisionist is that a critic writes about a work, but the revisionist's criticism attains manifestation in a new artistic work. As such, one of the purposes of revisioning appears to be an attempt to bridge the gaps in the original play though the critic and the revisionist each follow a separate course of action. T. S. Eliot (1951) denies the existence of a logical correlation between Hamlet's emotions and the events which are assumed to be the causes of those emotions. Hamlet's vituperative language against her mother is unjustified. There is an acute inconsistency in *Hamlet* which is caused by the

playwright's drawing upon, without paying due attention to the nature of, Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*. In T. S. Eliot's opinion, the dialogue involving the edification of Laertes by Polonius, and the scene in which Polonius dispatches Reynaldo on a domestic espionage mission have no relevance to the main theme of the play which is meant to represent revenge genre; moreover, the structure of a basically revenge tragedy is rendered impotent by Shakespeare's inappropriate imposition of a mother-son conflict on a play which originally focuses on political tensions. *Hamlet* is an artistic failure, for Shakespeare is not able to provide reasonable grounds for Hamlet's frivolous emotions; nor is it possible, due to lack of biographical information, to unravel what personal emotions made Shakespeare to create a character he could not rightly develop. "In the character Hamlet it is the buffoonery of an emotion which can find no outlet in action; in the dramatist it is the buffoonery of an emotion which he cannot express in art" (p. 146).

As discussed in the previous paragraph, a number of critics, and in specific, T. S. Eliot, argue that *Hamlet* is an artistic failure as a result of incoherence between emotions and events or as the consequence of introducing scenes to the original play which was the source of *Hamlet*. To add a few words on this topic may clarify T. S. Eliot's critical argument as well as the relevance of this criticism to the analysis of the revisionings of *Hamlet*. *Hamlet*, according to some scholars such as Jenkins (1982), is a revised version of *Ur-Hamlet*, an assumed prototype *Hamlet* of which nothing has survived except for a few hints in the writings of the period. Some scholars believe that *Ur-Hamlet* is written by Thomas Kyd, and some others such as Bloom (1998) believe that the assumed *Ur-Hamlet* is written by Shakespeare himself who revised his own work in the body of *Hamlet*. *Ur-Hamlet* was basically a revenge tragedy resembling Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*. Conversely, *Hamlet* is a play of hesitations and self-mockery which Bloom (1998) considers as the revisioning of *Ur-Hamlet*. As a result of revisioning or revising *Ur-Hamlet*, scholars like T. S. Eliot contend that certain events are inserted into the prototype play that makes it incoherent, if not pointless, as a revenge tragedy.

With regard to such gaps and inconsistencies, there appears a common ground between the work of critics of Shakespeare and the writings of revisionary authors. As Bloom (1973) observes, every literary work is a critical response to a previous work. He argues that whereas a critic's response to a work results in the production of a critique, a revisionary author's reaction to a previous work leads to the creation of a new literary work. This is why Bloom (1975) lays insistence on the existence of a state of intertextuality among literary works, arguing that every literary work is a response to another literary work. In this light, one can argue that revisionist authors, as critics of *Hamlet*, have at times tried to bridge such gaps, to reduce the assumed cases of incoherence, and to improve character development in *Hamlet*. Lillie Wyman's 1934 novel *Gertrude of Denmark* takes issue with the original play. The novel, Rozett (1994) argues, creates a character that is left undeveloped by her original creator, presenting a new Gertrude whom readers can understand and commiserate with. As a prequel to *Hamlet*, Percy Mackaye's 1950 tetralogy *The Mystery of Hamlet, King of Denmark* also attempts to present a background for a deeper appreciation of the original play, *Hamlet*. There are certain actions that foreshadow the words and events of *Hamlet*. During Hamlet's birthday ceremony, King Hamlet orders his son and Horatio to swear upon a child's wooden sword; on the same occasion "the seven-year-old Hamlet and Laertes engage in a half-

playful, half-angry sword fight” (Rozett 1994, pp. 96-7). A striking transformation of *Hamlet*, Rozett (1994) argues, is worked out by Mackaye in the fourth part of his tetralogy when King Hamlet begins to suffer dementia, and, during a sleepwalking incident, reveals, in the presence of Claudius, his vengeful intentions against his brother. Mackaye creates a background which makes the event of fratricide credible. In MacKaye’s view, this is the King Hamlet himself who sets the ground for his own murder. Hence, in Rozett’s view, such authors as Wyman or Mackaye are, among others, creating cohesion in an artistically incoherent work known as *Hamlet*. Updike’s (2000) novel *Gertrude and Claudius* appears to follow a similar objective. As to the critical purpose of Updike in transforming *Hamlet*, Kinney (2002) remarks that by “humanizing the central characters of Shakespeare’s play, Updike deepens both its irony and its tragedy, fashioned for another culture four centuries after its composition” (p. 6).

The brief survey of critical readings of *Hamlet* poses a serious question for the analysis of revisionings of *Hamlet*; in other words, not only have a variety of events and emotions have given rise to transformations or revisionings of *Hamlet*, but the manner the critics analyze a revisioning work depends upon their attitude toward, or, their reading of, *Hamlet*. The following section is a further exploration of analyzing *Hamlet*’s revisioning and its challenges.

## INTERPRETATION

An impediment in the study of revisionism is the application of a broad range of terms in the analysis of revisioning works; yet more crucial than the issue of terminology, is the lack of an adequately broad theoretical ground, and, as a consequence, the absence of an objectified framework for the investigation of a large spectrum of revisioning works. Without such frameworks, the rise of modern feminist revisioning, for instance, to a theorist like Bloom (1975), appears as discontinuity and break in Western literary tradition. Without objectified frameworks, there remains no basis for comparative studies among different revisionings of a single work such as *Hamlet*; nor does it appear to be any objective basis for critical judgement as to the intrinsic as well as aesthetic aspects of revisioning per se. To this effect, we have attempted to take a step, though preliminary, to survey a number of major trends in transforming *Hamlet*: as a psychological reaction against a precursor; as a feminist response to Shakespeare’s reading and representation of women; as a postcolonial reaction to the original text; as a critical response to the gaps, inconsistencies, or inadequacies within the play. Theatrical adaptations of *Hamlet* can also be construed as psychological contextual revisionings of Shakespeare. Every edition of Shakespeare is also a critical reading of the original play. In the RSC edition of *Hamlet* by Bate and Rasmussen (2008), the editors claim that they provide the readers with a text which is “close to the practice of the theatre” (xxv); this implies that the other extant versions of *Hamlet* are inferior to Bate and Rasmussen’s edition.

Without a theoretical paradigm, all these types of revisioning—or even revising—will seem discrepant, intractable to any classification. Within the brief survey of *Hamlet* revisionings, attempts were made to reduce the number of causes and critical responses to Shakespeare’s text into two—though intermixed and concurrent—broad categories:



revisioning as a result of psychological reaction to Shakespeare's canonicity or supremacy; revisioning caused by contextual forces, whether feminist, political, or postcolonial. Among theories of revisionism, Bloom's (1973) conceptualization of revisionism is the point of departure for our further exploration of revisionings of *Hamlet*. Bloom (1973, 1975) regards literary revisionism as anxiety which reveals itself as a creative work responding to a literary master or precursor. This critical response has two major phases: compliance or conformity with the precursor; and deviation from the precursor or his work. Bloom's work has been criticized for several reasons, especially, by feminist critics, for Bloom (1973) builds his theory upon a Freudian basis, the so-called family romance, regarding the relation between the new rising poet and his precursor as an oedipal struggle against a patriarchal figure. This struggle, which is often called by Bloom (1982) as *agon*, results in the emergence of a canonical figure, a new literary master. Revisioning, to Bloom, is a new poet's attempt to prove his "own distinctive existence" (Leitch et al. 2010, p. 1649).

Further, revisioning of Shakespeare is more representative of its contemporaneity, i.e. its contemporary cultural, social, and political context, than a means to financial ends. Hrish (2003) contends that the numerous articles and researches on the commodification of Shakespeare—if taken as objective facts—are self-contradictory, if not self-accusatory, for they in themselves have turned into a profitable commodity. He argues that Shakespeare's plays' adaptability of being turned into commercial hits does not mean that Shakespeare is nothing but schlock and his acclamation and wide reception nothing but indiscriminate reverence. Hence, with the change of context there is a change in revisionings. Bristol (1996), who thinks Shakespeare's cultural supremacy has reached a stalemate, admits that "Shakespeare's authority is linked to the capacity of his works to represent the complexity of social time and value in the successor cultures of early modern England" (xii). Thus *Hamlet* has the capacity of being adapted to different times. Film productions of *Hamlet*, as explored by Kinney (2002), have constantly altered the original play into strikingly new versions, setting the play in today's Manhattan, for instance, with Claudius as the head of a corporation, with most of Hamlet's soliloquies turned into interior monologues. Lee (2009) remarks that as a response to the political oppression by the ruling government in South Korea, director Kukseo Ki adapted *Hamlet* as an instrument for political protest. From 1981 to 1990 he produced five versions of *Hamlet*. His 1981 version was set in contemporary Korea with actors wearing jeans, with as many as fifty ghosts, with monologues implicitly censuring the people's impassiveness against suppression. His fifth version, staged in 1990, was majorly a criticism of the Korean military personnel and their crackdown and slaughter of the masses in Kwangju. Thus a revisioning of *Hamlet* might be interpreted as a way of protestation against, or, a depiction of, certain contemporaneous trends or events and not as a mere marketing strategy.

That the revisioning, adaptation, or the appropriation of Shakespeare is largely affected by their contemporaneity has been discussed in several researches. Das (2005) mentions several transformations which were exerted upon Shakespeare's plays in late 19<sup>th</sup> century by local theatrical groups in India. For instance, in *Hamlet*, the Indianized princesses entertained the audience with local dance, and Gertrude was not poisoned by wine but by milk. Salter (1996) lays emphasis on the ideological identity of actors, however they try—or are trained—to be impartial as professional actors. In postcolonial contexts, Shakespeare is

often an unfamiliar text and attempts have always been made to contemporize Shakespeare. An instance of such attempts is director Robert Gurik's 1968 *Hamlet, Prince of Québec* which dealt, among others, with Québec's political tensions. Hatchuel (2004) contends that Laurence Olivier's 1948 *Hamlet* resembles the American film noir of the 1940s with labyrinthine corridors and stairs and a jigsaw puzzle murder case that has to be resolved. Charnes (2006) believes that the Americans' rising interest in certain Shakespearean plays such as *Hamlet* can be interpreted as a consequence of the clashes with the British Empire which led to the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Charnes' idea is that the Americans' wide reception of *Hamlet* and some other Shakespearean plays such as the *Henriad* results from the way these plays can be observed as the manifest expression of democratic zeal and ideals.

Thus every new adaptation or transformation of *Hamlet* is not only psychological but contextual, yet the question of analysing a revisioning of *Hamlet* poses a further complication. There must be observed, at least, two contexts in the analysis of *Hamlet*'s revisionings. The first is the cultural and political context which gives rise to the transformations of *Hamlet*, and the second is the bulk of *Hamlet* criticism through which every transformation or revisioning of *Hamlet* is interpreted. Interpretation, as explained by O'Rourke (2012), is always contextual; as such, there is no unmediated activity as reading or writing. Moreover, neither the indeterminacy of the historical context nor the obscurity of intentionality must be used as a premise to regard the text as an autonomous entity sequestered from its context and author. More importantly, the social historical context must not be regarded as a homogeneous mould which gives shape to a work; nor is an author the inmate of context: there are moments when an author has his own friends and foes among his audience—his immediate context, especially in dramatic art. For instance, Charnes (2006) argues that to think of Americans as a homogeneous nation is far from true since American nation is a multilayered society with multifaceted issues, although the United States, in the minds of many people across the world, is associated with a “gigantic behemoth, irrespective of individual citizen's votes or political views” (p. 6).

A review of the revisioning work, as briefly presented in the previous section, reveals that a great portion of what is termed revisioning in current literary criticism is not, despite Bloom's (1973) observations regarding the origins of revisionism in literature, an agon among rising masters with their precursors but a response of ordinary even fledgling writers to Shakespeare and his work *Hamlet*. De Man (1983), disregarding the deficiencies of Bloom's theory of poetic influence, its linearity of scheme for literary tradition, its reliance on an oedipal conflict among writers and their precursors, and its mystic account for the origins of anxiety, conceives of Bloom's theory as an insightful account of the intratextuality among texts. In brief, any revisioning work consists of two elements: imitation of a previous author and deviation from his work. Thus, drawing on Bloom, an act of revisioning consists of two major constituents: conformity and contradistinction with the former referring to an author's compliance with his precursor and his borrowing from the original text; and the latter implying the elements which create distinctness for the new author. Klein's (2006) *Ophelia* is one of the instances of such conformity and contradistinction—retelling the story of *Hamlet* with Ophelia in the highlight. Holderness' (2002) *The Prince of Denmark*, too, provides the reader with instances of conformity with the plot of the original text, yet Ophelia

is, by Holderness, adorned with pulchritude, with “sharp breasts pushing at the tightness of her bodice” (p. 86) and with a brightness of mind and “a certain strength of character” (p. 84); Holderness builds grounds for Hamlet’s love for Ofelia to the extent of being mentally distracted: “so lost in thought to be oblivious of his surroundings” (p. 86).

The previous examples of revisioning in two novels by Klein (2006) and Holderness (2002) are not to be simply construed as similarities and differences, or as we would like to term, conformities and contradistinctions. That *Hamlet* has morphed, through a revisioning process, into a novel is, as discussed earlier, an instance of revisioning, yet there are ideas and concepts which cannot be simply recognized as well as categorized as an instance of transformation. *Hamlet*, as Levin (1959) explains, is surrounded by a library of criticism; many editions of *Hamlet* are glossed and annotated; the readers gain access to the text of *Hamlet* through glossaries, annotations, critical comments. Each editor of *Hamlet*, Jenkins (1982) remarks, has to face a huge amount of literature in providing footnotes or annotations, for “there are numerous detailed controversies on points of interpretation which no annotator can ignore” (p. 81). These annotations which are provided by various editors of *Hamlet* do not always clarify the text; conversely, the “sheer bulk of previous commentary creates its own practical difficulties” (p. viii). Hence, readings of *Hamlet* are not unanimous in content. For instance, Hamlet, in justifying his stratagem in providing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with a fake letter which will terminate their lives in England, coldly observes that their death is the consequence of their indiscretion and meddling in the affairs between two “mighty opposites” (5.2.62), i.e. Claudius and Hamlet himself. On the question of Hamlet and Claudius’ equal might, Hawkes (1985), regarding Claudius as a versatile villain, observes that:

he is brother (even the primal brother, Cain, as he himself suggests), father in a legal and political sense to Hamlet, lover and later husband to Gertrude, murderer of King Hamlet, monarch, and political head of the state. In a sense, all these roles are situated within his enormously forceful role of uncle, on the basis of which his opposition to Hamlet is determined. He is, as the play terms him, no simple villain, but Hamlet’s “mighty opposite,” and that mightiness constantly tugs back, recursively, against the smooth flow of a play that bears, perhaps surprisingly, only the prince’s name (p.317).

In Hawkes’s view, Claudius is as mighty as Hamlet and his name deserves to be included the title of the play. With regard to Hamlet’s statement, i.e. “mighty opposites,” Bloom (1998) adopts an entirely opposite stance:

When we attend a performance of *Hamlet*, or read the play for ourselves, it does not take us long to discover that the prince transcends his play. Transcendence is a difficult notion for most of us, particularly when it refers to a wholly secular context, such as a Shakespearean drama. Something in and about Hamlet strikes us as demanding (and providing) evidence from some sphere beyond the scope of our senses. Hamlet’s desires, his ideals or aspirations, are almost absolutely out of joint with the rancid atmosphere of Elsinore. “Shuffle,” to Hamlet, is a verb for thrusting of “this mortal coil,” where “coil” means “noise” or

“tumult.” “Shuffling,” for Claudius, is a verb for moral trickery; “with a little shuffling,” he tells Laertes, you can switch blades and destroy Hamlet. “There is no shuffling” there, Claudius yearningly says of a heaven in which he neither believes nor disbelieves. Claudius the shuffler, is hardly Hamlet’s “mighty opposite,” as Hamlet calls him; the wretched usurper is hopelessly outclassed by his nephew....There is in Claudius’s villainy nothing of the genius of Iago, Edmund, and Macbeth (pp. 385-6).

Whereas Hawkes admires Claudius as a mighty versatile villain, Bloom’s criticism is suffused with contempt for the character of Claudius, for he regards the usurper inferior to his nephew. One may argue that one reading, that is Hawkes’s interpretation of the phrase “mighty opposites,” for instance, is more objective as it is based on textual evidence, yet Hawkes (1985) does not always rely on text; for instance, in his comments on Fortinbras, who calls the dead prince “most royal” (5.2.403), Hawkes opines, “Nobody, so far as we have seen (and of course Fortinbras has not seen what we have seen), was likely to have proved less royal” (p. 311). It appears ironic that Terence Hawkes who regards Hamlet a contemptible character in the play, takes Hamlet’s remark for granted and regards it as the just assessment of the relation between the prince and his uncle. Now we consider an imaginary revisioning of *Hamlet* in which the avuncular figure is superior to his nephew. Should the analyst consider the case as an instance of conformity or contradistinction? Has the author of the given novel, let’s say, Haig’s (2006) *The Dead Fathers Club*, transformed Claudius or not? Uncle Alan, in Haig’s novel, is a fifty year old man; he is versatile, influential, charming. His nephew is an eleven year old physically feeble sleepwalker who is haunted by the ghost of his revengeful father and is humiliated by almost all his peers and elders. That Uncle Alan and his nephew are not mighty opposites is certain, yet whether a critic can interpret the case as either conformity or contradistinction is uncertain, for he is supposed to interpret the revisioning work with regard to the original work: *Hamlet*. Should one interpret the relation between Uncle Alan and his nephew in the light of Bloom’s (1998) criticism, or, in accordance with Hawkes’ (1985) reading of *Hamlet*? To construe the relation of the uncle and his nephew, and the other similar instances, is a crux of interpretation which one faces in his analysis of a revisioning of *Hamlet*.

Jenkins (1982) observes that in *Hamlet*, “hardly a line of dialogue has failed to attract comment and an article or two in the journals” (p. viii), yet he remarks that not only do many lines in *Hamlet* lack adequate exegetic explanation, but they need corrections. Drawing upon the above discussions and presuppositions, we would like to contend that to decide whether an instance of a particular event, behaviour, or theme in a revisioning work of *Hamlet*, is an instance of transposition depends not only on the critic’s understanding of the play and the text, but on the critical literature which has been produced concerning that particular instance, i.e. the critical literature or the language through which the work of *Hamlet* or a revisioning of *Hamlet* presents itself to us. That Hamlet, according to Lidz (1975), is deprived of the fulfilment of his Oedipal-incestuous wish and experiences it through Claudius is Freud or Ernst Jones’ reading of *Hamlet* and not a statement boldly expressed in the text of the play and understood by Shakespeare’s contemporary audience. In the absence of a Freudian reading of delay, the critic may interpret the so-called delay in Hamlet’s revenge anything

except Hamlet's vicarious enjoyment of his suppressed desires. As such, the critic who discards one mode of reading has to adopt another mode. In the case of delay, for instance, Jenkins (1982) refers to two centuries of debate on the concept of delay in *Hamlet*, observing that there are even critics "who deny that Hamlet procrastinates" (p. 136). Hawkes (1985) explores the contradictory nature of *Hamlet* and how the play involves, within itself, *Telmah*, a plurality of elements which contradict each other and render impossible the imposition of a single mode of reading and interpretation of events in *Hamlet*.

*Hamlet*, as briefly discussed within this article, has been transformed as a result of several factors: social, cultural, political, artistic, and psychological. However, the final manifestation of all these factors or forces is a work which has borrowed certain elements from *Hamlet* and has transposed the others; the scope of transposition, or as we discussed, revisioning, depends on the revisionist author's attitude toward, and, interpretation of, the play. Similarly, the critic's interpretation of a revisioning work not only need to consider the psychological or social context which have given shape to a certain mode of revisioning, but he has to move through the bulk of *Hamlet* criticism in order to determine the scope of each instance of transformation which is exerted upon the original play. Further, any revisioning of *Hamlet* is not simply a transformation of *Hamlet*, but a transformation of, and, a response to a particular mode of reading *Hamlet*. In other words, an instance of revisioning or transformation may at times be subject to contradictory readings of the play; as such, an instance of revisioning, and as we discussed, contradistinction, in one mode of reading, may be a mere conformity with the original work in a different mode of interpretation. Further, any interpretation of an instance of revisioning may either ignore or marginalize, if not refute, antithetical readings of the same instance in *Hamlet*.

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