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Whoring Shakespeare: The Commodification of the Bard

To the uninitiated, Shakespeare's contemporaries may seem to be esoteric remnants of a past dominated by one author alone. The truth, of course, is that the early modern stage was widely varied and supported the careers of dozens of talented writers. In our own time, one hears of non-Shakespearean early modern plays being produced periodically, especially Christopher Marlowe or John Webster, but not with the same frequency that Shakespeare enjoys, especially not in America. Shakespeare's cultural dominance accounts for his ubiquitous staging, but his contemporaries still hold some relevance for us too. The question is, in an age when Shakespeare has dominated the staging of classical theatre for more than a century, is staging his contemporaries viable on the modern American stage?

One of the most prestigious regional theatres staging canonical drama in America, San Francisco's American Conservatory Theatre (ACT), proved that it is possible to produce non-Shakespearean Renaissance drama by staging three early modern, non-Shakespearean plays over the course of a fifteen-year period: *The Duchess of Malfi* (1993), *Edward II* (2000), and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (2008), but the success of the performances, or lack thereof, was tied to how prominently Shakespeare was featured as a touchstone to contextualize the work. In discussing ACT's fits and starts with early modern drama, I will show how the need for

Shakespearean contextualization grew out of ACT's disastrous first attempt at staging a Renaissance contemporary play, and how in the two subsequent productions, ACT managed to use Shakespearean analogy to pacify skeptical audiences.

Historically, Shakespeare was a staple of ACT's repertoire, but no other early modern playwright had ever been performed by the company since its founding in 1965 until 1993. John R. Wilk's book, *The Creation of an Ensemble: The First Years of the American Conservatory Theatre*, discusses founder Bill Ball's vision for ACT, which focused on creating an "actor's theater" – one that "combines the concept of resident repertory theatre with the classic concept of continuous training, study and practice as an integral and inseparable part of the performer's life" (Wilks 1986, 179). As expressed in ACT's "Statement of Purpose," the goal of the company was "to awaken in the theatre artist his maximum versatility and expressiveness." (Wilks 1986, 178). In addition to emphasizing actor training, the company would produce classical repertory that educated its audience. Wilk quotes Ball saying, "I like to feel that we are giving plays in a way and in order that if someone were coming to our theatre for seven or eight years, they would feel as though they had a complete theatrical education" (Wilks 1986, 67). Clearly, Ball, who approved or rejected every play selection, believed that frequent Shakespeare viewing was a part of that "complete theatrical education," since a variety of Shakespeare's plays were staged during his tenure as artistic director from 1967-1993.

Wilk reports that critics of ACT's early years thought the repertory was a shade too conventional – “safe,” as he puts it (Wilks 1986, 66). Comparing ACT to past San Francisco companies, Charles R. Lyons writes in 1970 that

[ACT] is not devoted to bringing the best of the avant-garde or the most rarely performed of the classics to San Francisco – not for example, in the way in which the old Workshop put forward Genet, Beckett, Brecht, and Aristophanes in the early sixties. Of course, ACT has a wider and more appreciative audience. That economic fact is obviously a strong influence on the choice of the season's repertory. (Lyons 1971, 477)

Lyons's comment about ACT's lack of commitment to “rarely performed ... classics” implies that ACT's early productions pandered to its conservative audience's appetites. However, in the same review, Lyons describes ACT's *Merchant of Venice* from the 1970-71 season in positive terms, making note of its clever, subtle changes, such as turning Belmont into a yacht named “The Belmont” (Lyons 1971, 478). ACT's *Merchant* wasn't innovative in the same way that Peter Brooks's famous *Midsummer Night's Dream* was in the same year; however, it served its purposes – to attract and retain audiences and to give the company actors their first opportunity to engage with one of Shakespeare's problem plays at ACT.

Because Shakespeare dominated ACT's seasons for twenty-eight years with no other Renaissance dramatist being represented on stage in that time, it is surprising in retrospect how much the emphasis on classical theatre changed under the management of current artistic director Carey Perloff, who officially took over

the helm in 1993. As of the 2015-16 season, the last Shakespeare play produced at ACT was *The Tempest* (1996), a production dwarfed by the grand reopening of ACT's main stage, the historic Geary Theatre, seven years after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake nearly destroyed it. Despite the splashy reopening of the Geary, reviews of *The Tempest* were lackluster. Steven Winn, a critic for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, panned the show, saying, "With all its theatrical hardware and directorial presence, this 'Tempest' winds up being at once too austere and too fussy to capture the play's transporting appeal," but his reaction to the restored theatre made up for the disappointing production: "Seeing theater again in this beautiful and wonderfully proportioned space is a joy that needs no further justification" (Winn 1996). Prior to the 1996 *Tempest*, ACT had staged seventeen Shakespeare plays in the previous thirty years, a few of them multiple times.¹ ACT's more recent seasons from the last twenty years include writers who are staples of American and British theatre alike, such as Edward Albee, Tom Stoppard, David Mamet, Caryl Churchill, Sam Shepherd, Harold Pinter, and George Bernard Shaw, among other familiar names. This list of playwrights shows a preference for contemporary theatre; however, ACT had certainly not abandoned classical theatre after 1996 – writers from Sophocles to Molière have graced the stage more recently.² The company simply left out the most frequently performed British playwright: Shakespeare.

Resurrecting Shakespeare's early modern contemporaries may or may not have been an intentional dismissal of the Bard. In her recently published memoir about her tenure at ACT, *Beautiful Chaos: A Life in the Theater*, Perloff never mentions making a conscious decision to abandon Shakespeare on the Geary stage.

However, ACT's silent rejection of the culturally "safe" Shakespeare in favor of other early modern options suggests a desire to break from past criticism such as Lyons's in which ACT was accused of being too conservative in their play selections.

The edgier early modern plays that were performed in 1993, 2000, and 2008, demonstrated a departure from that traditionalist past, whether by design or not. Importantly, there was not simply an attempt to shock. Rather, all three of the early modern plays ACT produced in the seasons above symbolically engaged with contemporary political issues during the eras in which they were produced. For instance, the choice to perform *Duchess* closely coincided with the first of Bill Clinton's sex scandals during the presidential campaign of 1992, in which media obsession with a politician's private life culminated in a special broadcast of *60 Minutes* after the Super Bowl to question the Clintons about the Gennifer Flowers affair (Kroft 1992). The performance of *Duchess* occurred after Bill Clinton had weathered the scandal long enough to be inaugurated president in the winter of 1993. Director Woodruff's stated objectives in the program notes were to show how "the sixteenth century Italian court at Malfi [serves] as a locus for thinking about our own systems of political and corporate power, and how these structures promote behavior that degrades women" (quoted in Gelb 1993, 294). Certainly, *Duchess* is a good choice to show the hegemonic dominance of patriarchal structure, and Gelb's review is evidence that Woodruff's plan to be explicitly political worked. The staging, in fact, was so overtly critical of societal treatment of women that it dismissed the early modern context and planted itself in the contemporary scene. The *Duchess*'s marriage to Antonio and the fall out that results, including her own

death arranged by her brothers and Bosola, and carried out by executioners, shows how managed and manipulated women are, even women with some degree of power, in a stereotypically patriarchal society. Gelb stated:

The imagery [of ACT's *Duchess*], which more and more throughout the evening focuses on the degradation of women, is also a pretty good mirror of life outside the theater... [the] expressionist, performance-influenced *mise en scene* is aggressively presentational and functions more as a kind of statement, a readily translatable metaphor for society, than as a world the characters inhabit. (Gelb 1993, 294)

That connection between contemporary politics surrounding women and their agency, or lack thereof, found a metaphoric touchstone in ACT's *Duchess*. Perloff states in her book *Beautiful Chaos* that director Robert Woodruff wanted to stage *Duchess of Malfi*, in particular, in order to portray "the graphic degradation of women that he felt was fundamental both to our own culture and to Jacobean drama" (Perloff 2015, 46). Society's anxiety about female sexuality was among the deeper issues, as ACT's production notes of *Duchess* make clear: "There is something in our culture that fosters a fear of femaleness, of fluidity, and that promotes acts of violence toward women" (Miller 1993, 3).

None of these assertions point directly to a link between ACT's production choice and the Clinton scandal; however, the dominance of Clinton's story in the media cannot be ignored and can show relevance of *Duchess* to the early 1990s that might otherwise have not been obvious. But why might the Clinton scandal inspire a staging of *Duchess* rather than another play – a "safer" Shakespeare play? Wrestling

with the sex lives of politicians and their privacy, or lack thereof, might thematically be tied to Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, for instance, but Clinton's alleged philandering differs from the historical pair because the woman involved was not equivalent to Clinton in terms of power, unlike Antony and Cleopatra, both politicians in their own right. Relationships between different castes or classes might lend themselves to performing Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well*, but that play lacks the assumption of consent within the Clinton and Flowers's affair; unlike Helena and Bertram's relationship, which took a bed trick to solidify. When analyzing *Duchess*, on the other hand, there are compelling parallels that strike one as analogous to Clinton's affair. First, the Duchess conceals her relationship with Antonio. The reasons for Clinton keeping his affair secret are obvious. The Duchess's clandestine relationship, on the other hand, results from both class fraternization norms of the period and the fact that Ferdinand and the Cardinal, the Duchess's brothers, do not want her to remarry. Ferdinand lets his opinion be known from the beginning of the play: "They are most luxurious / Will wed twice" (1.1.299-300).³ Furthermore, the Duchess's choice of partner would not solely have been hers to make in 1504, when the play is set, nor in 1612, when the play was presumably written. Thus, lack of privacy and women's limited autonomy and agency shape the narrative. Ferdinand's obsession with keeping the Duchess chaste speaks to the 1990s media and political obsession with Clinton's chastity,⁴ or lack thereof, and a total disregard for sexual privacy, which as far back as the historical Edward II came with disastrous consequences for political elites. The Duchess's choice of husband, like Clinton's choice of paramours, falls into a class beneath her status. Antonio

speaks about class climbing and how ambition “is a great man’s madness” (1.1.421).

He denies that, despite his feelings for the Duchess, he would ever act upon them:

Conceive not I am so stupid but I aim
 Whereto your favors tend; but he’s a fool
 That, being cold, would thrust his hands i’th’fire
 To warm them. (1.1.426-9)

Antonio knows his place in the class system, and he also understands the dangers of fraternization beyond his status. The Duchess persuades Antonio by explaining her own frustrations with class: “The misery of us that are born great! / We are forced to woo, because none dare woo us” (1.1.442-3). Ultimately, he is won over, and the tragedy quickly unfolds. One of the key issues that characters comment on frequently in the play is the implications of the actions of the high born on everyone in society. Even secret relationships – whether they are marriages or affairs – have wide reaching consequences when a person in a powerful role is involved. In the Clinton era, those implications were certainly felt, as the nation obsessed over his philandering. Whether or not Bill Clinton’s Gennifer Flowers affair had anything to do with the selection of *Duchess of Malfi* at ACT is unknown – or at least is not mentioned in Perloff’s interviews or her memoirs. If it were not an intentional connection, it is a striking coincidence that a play like *Duchess* would be chosen in this period.

In her first year at ACT, in which *Duchess* was produced, Perloff said in an interview that she wanted to create a new vision for the company:

“This is a critical opportunity for us,” Perloff said, “to signal that ACT is an institution that can embrace this kind of work. My mission is to build a broader audience.” She went on to call “Duchess” a “carefully thought-out catalyst” for that process. (Winn 1993, C3, 5)

But was the play itself or its *staging* what Perloff wanted to use to build a broader audience? Did ACT want to attract people with knowledge of the early modern era that extended beyond Shakespeare? Or was ACT using a play that their subscribers would be unfamiliar with in order to experiment with staging? The details are murky. However, the fact of the matter is that ACT offered was a highly controversial performance of *Malfi* that caused high walkout rates, hundreds of angry letters, and demands for refunds on tickets – clearly not what Perloff had in mind.⁵

At issue was the *particularly* violent representation of the already brutal tragedy. Critic Robert Hurwitt describes one of the more horrific scenes in the staging:

When [Director Robert Woodruff’s] Duchess (Randy Danson) is murdered, she is stripped naked, bound in rubber straps, and smeared with blood – before she’s strangled. Then she’s left lying on a desk, naked from the waist down, for the rest of the play (just under a half an hour). (Hurwitt 1993. D1, 4, 5)

Another scene in ACT’s *Malfi* showed “a man apparently sewing a woman’s vagina shut while another woman draws a crosshatch of bloody gashes across her own

spread thighs” (Hurwitt 1993, D5). Critic Steven Winn grappled with the problematic glut of violence in the production, too:

Even for those, myself included, who feel that many of the excesses of ACT’s “Duchess” are in tune with the spirit of the play’s grim Jacobean sensibility, this unnerving production does raise questions about the distinctions between artistic vision and crass exploitation. (Winn 1993, C2, 5)

Obviously, the critics did not respond to Perloff’s new vision as anyone at ACT had hoped.

Perloff answered the public outrage at the time saying that she “failed to grasp fully how little our audience has been exposed to work like this” (Winn 1993, C5). But what does “work like this” mean? Does it mean that audiences are not accustomed to early modern drama that isn’t Shakespeare? Does it mean that the representations of bondage and violence were too extreme for the traditionalist audience? Perloff’s comment equivocates as much as it answers critics, and belies the fact that ACT did try to prepare its audience for the darkness of its staging of *Malfi*. ACT sent subscribers a letter before the production opened, as Hurwitt writes, “warning that the show ‘contains violence, nudity and explicit sexual imagery that are discomfoting to many audiences,’ inserting a similarly provocative cautionary note into the program” (Hurwitt 1993, D4). Yet such a note, Hurwitt claims, is also a marketing strategy to raise audience interest enough to fill the seats for *Malfi*, despite its mainstream obscurity. “The message is clear,” writes Hurwitt, “If this

type of bold theater experience sounds intriguing to you...” (Hurwitt 1993, D4). Yet, the strategy did not keep audiences in their seats once they entered the theater.

In the following year, ACT used the *Malfi* scandal as a way to lure back subscribers, using the subscribers’ complaints about *Malfi* in their promotional materials. In Perloff’s memoir, she discusses the marketing rebound from *Malfi*:

As a fitting conclusion to that annus terribilis, we printed a subscription renewal brochure that was covered in quotes from the letters we had received over the course of the year. I leavened the most hostile ones with the occasional positive remark, but I let the criticism stand. The audience must have felt heard and therefore somewhat vindicated, because ironically a surprisingly large percentage resubscribed. (Perloff 2015, 58)

Hurwitt states that ACT’s strategy was “to display sensitivity to subscribers’ complaints at the same time that it offers tantalizing glimpses of how provocative the company can be” (Hurwitt 1993, D3). Perloff’s lesson from the contentious *Malfi* season, according to Hurwitt, “is not to avoid shows that may provoke controversy, but that she could do a better job preparing the audience for the work, providing a context for it” (Hurwitt 1993, D3). More than twenty years after that production of *Malfi*, Perloff has greater context for what went wrong. In her memoir, she admits,

Indeed, Woodruff’s production was a bold, graphic, shocking, rather heavy-handed reading of an admittedly violent and sexually aggressive play. And many ACT subscribers, who had received no

warning and were apparently used to their classics being somewhat more decorously presented, were appalled. (Perloff 2015, 46)

Perloff also explains that the play didn't have much time to become cohesive. With only four weeks to rehearse, *Malfi* was not truly ready to open when it did: "The spectacle that greeted audiences during the preview and opening-night process was unfinished and still somewhat inchoate" (Perloff 2015, 47). It is telling, though, that after all these years, Perloff still has a binder containing the 750 letters – most of them hate mail – she received about the production of *Malfi* (Perloff 2015, 48).

In the years following *Malfi*, ACT returned to Shakespeare with productions of *Othello* and *The Tempest* in the 1994-95 and 1995-96 seasons respectively, but seven years after the *Malfi* debacle, ACT dipped into the non-Shakespearean early modern realm again. Once again, modern politics potentially had a hand in the choice of play: *Edward II*. Gay rights activists were making progress in this era, after the panicked days of the AIDS crisis (Berk 1987; Kirp 1986). California previously had created laws against hate crimes; however, in 1999, Governor Gray Davis took anti-discrimination legislation for gays and lesbians a step further with three measures that would (1) create a state-wide registry for same-sex domestic partners, (2) "outlaw harassment of gays in public schools and colleges," and (3) "[strengthen] older state laws that ban discrimination against gays in housing and employment" ("Gay Rights" 1999). It was after these developments, in the 1999-2000 season, that ACT staged Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*. In staging *Edward*, ACT portrayed the love relationship between Edward and Gaveston sympathetically and focused on the injustice of their murders. Critic Steven Winn notes that the

violence in *Edward* is “vivid, if not graphic,” and the focus on the love relationship allowed the production to inspire more support for Gaveston and Edward, even as they are separately murdered, rather than creating the utter repulsion and alienation that resulted in the extreme violence in ACT’s staging of *Malfi* (Winn 2000, C1, 4). Nonetheless, critics received *Edward* with mixed reviews.

The controversy surrounding *Malfi* clearly colored the presentation of Marlowe’s homoerotic history play. A telling reorganization of context strategy can be seen by comparing the preparatory publications ACT produced to accompany *Malfi* with the one it created for *Edward*. The narrative content of the preparatory materials for *Malfi* was shorter than the *Words on Plays*⁶ to *Edward*, for instance, by about ten pages, but also striking was the exponential difference in the use of the cultural icon, Shakespeare, in each publication. In the narrative context of the publication on *Malfi*, there are only five mentions of Shakespeare.⁷ And these allusions include mostly non-essential information, such as,

After the success of *The Duches of Malfi*, in its initial 1613-14 production, which featured Richard Burbage as Ferdinand and Henry Condell – who helped compile Shakespeare’s First Folio – as the Cardinal, the play was periodically revived; but for much of its history, *The Duchess* has been subjected to moral “improvement.” (Miller et al 1993, 10).⁸

In *Edward II*’s preparatory materials, Shakespeare is mentioned by name a total of thirty-four times,⁹ including dramaturge Paul Walsh’s observation that some scholars speculate that Marlowe’s untimely death was faked and that “after his

supposed assassination he was in some way concealed, to return and write his later plays under Shakespeare's name" (Walsh et al 2000, 13). Rather than treating Marlowe like a stand-alone early modern playwright, as ACT did with John Webster, their educational materials suggested that Marlowe and Shakespeare could very well be one and the same person, and if Marlowe and Shakespeare were really the same person, then this playwright's work and style wouldn't be so unfamiliar to theatre-goers after all. Furthermore, if there were even a remote possibility that "Shakespeare" – whoever that may be – were the same man who had written this play, then, of course, it was necessarily important.

Directed by Mark Lamos, *Edward* faced less controversy than *Malfi*, despite the use of full male nudity and unapologetic violence. With the careful contextual work that ACT did, at times foiling and at times twinning Marlowe and Shakespeare, ACT fought against *Edward's* obscurity. Perloff's cautious comments about the play revealed a stronger sense that risqué early modern work needed to be handled with particular care: "I think it's really important to be completely up-front, to be very clear about what the subject matter is...so you don't walk in thinking you're going to see something polite and decorous, because it won't be" (Guthmann 2000, 40-1). Playing up the homoeroticism of *Edward*, ACT appealed, Guthmann stated, "to a gay audience – and anyone else with an eye for male eroticism" (Guthmann 2000, 40-1). As is hinted at in ACT's *Words on Plays* publication, Marlowe outperforms Shakespeare with the fulfillment of homoeroticism in *Edward II* that Shakespeare only ever nods at in plays like *Merchant of Venice*. So instead of teasing the prospective audience with promises of intriguing theater, like ACT did with *Malfi*,

the company appealed to particular demographics – (1) the gay community and (2) the audiences who think Shakespeare takes too conservative a route in his representations of homoerotic relationships.

With the precedents of *Malfi* and *Edward* casting shadows of varying lengths on ACT's future early modern work, it would seem that ACT chose to play it safe – or as safe as could be, considering the content of the play – with its 2008 production of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, avoiding explicit sex scenes and the extremities of violence on stage. Lighting, including both blackouts and spotlights, obscured the most physically offensive moments in the play, such as Giovanni and Annabella's consummation of their relationship and the murder of Annabella, both of which very well could have been exploited to excess. But then, the lighter touch of the production caused many reviewers to call foul when ACT's staging allowed Giovanni to enter, blood soaked with an *empty* dagger after murdering Annabella. Giovanni describes the gory prop, Annabella's heart skewered on his dagger – those lines were *not* cut in the production – but there was no heart to be found. Robert Hurwitt complained:

One of [Director Carey] Perloff's choices will dumbfound anyone with a glancing knowledge of the play... Either a prop got mislaid on opening night or she's cut [the play's] most famously gruesome effect, the climactic brandishing of a dagger-skewered heart. (Hurwitt 2008)

The tact ACT took with *'Tis Pity* was to underplay physical violence and focus on Giovanni's narcissism on the micro-level, and the corruption of the Italian society, on the macro-level.

The modern parallel with *'Tis Pity* comes not through the incestuous relationship between Giovanni and Annabella, but through comparison of the corruption of Parma with recent events in the United States. 2008 was the end of the George W. Bush administration, plagued by the faulty intelligence of weapons of mass destruction that led the United States into the lengthy and costly Iraq War. At that time, the nation was hungry for change and angry at its leaders for their role in deepening the instability in the Middle East and contributing to distrust of American intentions in the Muslim community. The year *'Tis Pity* premiered, 2008, was an election year in which two unlikely Democratic candidates, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, vied for the nomination. Within two days of the ACT opening of *'Tis Pity*, then-Senator Obama became the Democratic presidential nominee, leading, eventually, to his election as the first African-American president of the United States. The Bush era of divisive politics, aided by Karl Rove and Dick Cheney, threw the nation into an enormous backlash, which gave Obama's message of "Change" a strong advantage. Informed citizens who were horrified that the United States would implement torture, undermine privacy, and broaden government intrusion could easily make connections between Parma and the contemporary moment of 2008. When I saw ACT's production of *'Tis Pity*, the audience laughed at the end of the play when the Cardinal confiscated the land and money of the dead. That laughter signified, to me, a cynical response to the keepers of order – in *'Tis Pity's* case, the Church, and in contemporary society's, the government. The laughter of the San Franciscan audience indicted the political environment that had allowed war to happen unnecessarily, that had tortured prisoners, and that had denied wrongdoing.

Even more directly, if theatre is meant to hold the mirror up to nature, then the Cardinal's corrupt seizure was an uncomfortable miming of American war mongering motivated by seizing money, oil, and land in the Middle East.

Once again, as with *Edward II*, the name "Shakespeare" – and the invocation of *Romeo and Juliet*, among other Shakespeare plays – appeared in every single publication ACT produced on *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. From the press release to the program, and on into *Words on Plays*, Shakespeare appears to be everywhere in this production's mindset. An interview with director Carey Perloff, published in both the program for *'Tis Pity* and in *Words on Plays*, uses the word "Shakespeare" six times, and one long response is to the question, "Do you see *'Tis Pity* as relating to or being in dialogue with *Romeo and Juliet*?" Perloff's response is that she sees Ford being more heavily influenced by Christopher Marlowe – whom loyal ACT subscribers might remember from a few years prior – citing *Tamburlaine* and *Dr. Faustus* as particularly influential on Ford. However, the comparisons with *Romeo and Juliet* are then enumerated. Perloff states:

'Tis Pity is absolutely and recognizably in dialogue with *Romeo and Juliet*. It starts out with a brawl in the street. You see the setup between warring families. The Italian notion of vendetta is a theme, in which revenge is repeated endlessly and honor is paramount. You have Putana, who is the flip side of the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* – she's not exactly warm and comforting – and the Friar as the go-between. People have read *'Tis Pity* for centuries as a darker version

of *Romeo and Juliet*, although I think Giovanni is a much more interesting character than Romeo. (Paller et al 2008, 11)

Rather than dismissing Shakespeare's influence in this question, Perloff's response mirrors the rhetoric used in the publications regarding *Edward II*: Shakespeare doesn't go far enough in his representations of fraught relationships – not in homoerotic friendships (in comparison with *Edward*), not in forbidden love (in comparison with *'Tis Pity*). Once again, subtly subverting Shakespeare as the dominant playwright acted as scaffolding for promoting a more obscure playwright, Ford.

The Bay Area critics followed suit in the invocation of the Bard.¹⁰ The review of *'Tis Pity* in the *San Jose Mercury News* opens with Juliet's line, "O happy dagger," and in the next paragraph calls *'Tis Pity*, "the anti-'Romeo and Juliet'" (D'Souza 2008).¹¹ Robert Avila reports that Giovanni and Annabella are "clearly intended as a darker version of Romeo and Juliet" (Avila 2008). Lee Hartgrave writes, "There are *Romeo and Juliet* qualities to the play and sometimes reminds of [sic] *Taming of the Shrew*. It's hard to believe that this play with this steamy plot was written in the 1600s" (Hargrave 2008). Kenneth Jones calls *'Tis Pity* a "post-Shakespeare English-language classic" and goes on to quote director Perloff as saying "Many consider this play to be like *Romeo and Juliet*, but with a much darker hue" (Jones 2008). Robert Hurwitt's review title includes the Shakespearean cliché "star-crossed lovers" and compares the play to both Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard III* (Hurwitt 2008). Nirmala Nataraj begins her review of the play, writing, "... there are obvious congruencies with Shakespeare" (Nataraj 2008). Chloe Veltman also makes the

Shakespeare connection: “like Shakespeare’s star-crossed lovers Romeo and Juliet (to whom the characters in Ford’s play are often compared), their passion is forbidden by law” (Veltman 2008).

The pointed contextualization critics made between Ford and Shakespeare was likely no accident, since ACT’s *Words on Plays* exploited the Shakespeare connection once again, as it did with *Edward II*. In the *‘Tis Pity* publication of *Words on Plays*, Shakespeare is mentioned twenty-six times by name, and individual plays are referenced above and beyond those citations. Why Shakespearean context is necessary becomes clear when, in Perloff’s interview in *Words on Plays*, the interviewer asks a question that confirms the long cast shadow of *Duchess of Malfi* on ACT’s attempts to produce non-Shakespearean early modern drama:

Q. There has been a lot of discussion over the years about the risk ACT took in producing *The Duchess of Malfi*, one of the company’s famous, or infamous, Jacobean productions. Do you feel you are taking on any risk in producing *‘Tis Pity*?

Perloff acknowledged that producing early modern plays like *Duchess*, *Edward*, and *‘Tis Pity* is a risk, but that *‘Tis Pity* is even more so, because of the title: “Advertising has been a challenge because certain spaces have refused our ads because of the title of the play – as if the word ‘whore’ were a four-letter word!” (Paller et al 2008). To diffuse the sting of the title, Ariel Franklin-Hudson’s article in *Words on Plays*, “Sources, References, and Contexts for *‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore*,” links the play directly to *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard III*, and *Othello*, as well as compares Giovanni to Marlowe’s Faustus. So while the word “Shakespeare” appears fewer times than it

does in the *Edward II Words on Plays*, the Shakespearean connection is much more explicitly stressed in the analysis of *'Tis Pity* itself.

'Tis Pity met with somewhat mixed reviews, and according to financial records provided to me by ACT, it was the lowest grossing production of the year for the company.¹² In the 2007-2008 season, of which *'Tis Pity* was the final production of the season, the highest grossing play was *Sweeney Todd*, the first play of the year, with total sales of \$1,429,918. *'Tis Pity*, in contrast, grossed \$198,122 – roughly 14% of *Sweeney Todd* sales. Unfortunately, figures for the earlier productions cited in this paper are unavailable. However, the financial figures I have show that ACT takes risks that commercial theatres cannot. The point of non-profit theatre is to educate its audience, just as ACT's founder, Bill Ball, wanted. Nonetheless, a theatre, non-profit or otherwise, needs to be financially viable if it is to continue to exist. Even without financial data, we can see in the reviews alone that part of ACT's problem in producing early modern, non-Shakespearean theatre has been a lack of context for those plays. I would argue that Shakespearean context is key to continuing this project of bringing more esoteric Renaissance playwrights to the stage for general theatre audiences. Additionally, continuing to choose from early modern plays that have direct connection with current political climates helps to show the relevance and importance of Renaissance writers.

The advantage of performing early modern, non-Shakespearean plays is that these writers show that Shakespeare did not write in a vacuum, but is just one of many excellent writers of the period. The truth is that having knowledge of other early modern writers gives audiences an advantage to approaching Shakespeare,

too. Having a context in which Shakespeare becomes a contemporary of his own time will deepen audiences' understanding of his writing, as well as the writing of his fellow early modern playwrights. The counterargument to ACT's project of performing early modern, non-Shakespeare plays is that a generation of ACT's theatregoers will have missed out on large-scale productions of work by Shakespeare himself. Fortunately, the San Francisco Bay Area is replete with theatre options, and there is no lack of filmed Shakespeare either. The pressure to conform to canonical drama, emphasizing Shakespeare, lessens in an environment with an active theatre scene, but specifically in deciding to produce or not to produce Shakespeare, theatres can rest assured that there are other educational options for students of the Bard.

Will ACT continue to produce other early modern playwrights? Of course, in a living theatre's history, no one can predict with confidence what the future holds. But if past is prologue, ACT can position itself as an important venue for staging early modern playwrights outside of the Shakespeare canon. To do so, ACT will have to continue to mirror contemporary political life when selecting early modern, non-Shakespearean plays in order for their choices to seem relevant. Additionally, ACT's cunning use of Shakespearean contextualization will help to sustain ACT's project to educate audiences more broadly and successfully – not just about other early modern writers, but also about the context in which Shakespeare wrote too. We can only hope that ACT will continue to perform these important plays, thereby giving a unique education to audience members that not only enlarges their understanding of the Renaissance, but also their understanding of Shakespeare's influence. After

all, Shakespeare was only one of *many* important, thought-provoking early modern playwrights, who were also “for all time.”

Notes

¹ Dates indicate the season in which plays were performed. From 1976-1981, each season opened with a Shakespeare play. 1967-8: *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet*; 1970: *The Tempest*; 1970-1: *Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest* (revival); 1971-2: *Antony and Cleopatra*; 1972-3: *The Merchant of Venice* (revival); 1973-4: *The Taming of the Shrew*; 1974-5: *Richard III* and *The Taming of the Shrew* (revival); 1975-6: *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Taming of the Shrew* (revival); 1976-77: *Othello*; 1977-8: *Julius Caesar*; 1978-9: *The Winter's Tale*; 1979-80: *Romeo and Juliet*; 1980-1: *Much Ado about Nothing*; 1981-2: *Richard II*; 1983-4: *Midsummer Night's Dream*; 1984-5: *Macbeth*; 1987-8: *King Lear*; 1989-90: *Twelfth Night*; 1990-1: *Hamlet*; 1994-5: *Othello*; 1995-6 *The Tempest*. ACT's production history can be found on their website at http://www.act-sf.org/home/about/history/production_history.html. Accessed 9 June 2015.

² Molière's *Scapin* was performed in 2010, adapted by Bill Irwin and Mark O'Donnell, and directed by Bill Irwin. Sophocles's *Elektra* was performed in 2012, translated and adapted by Timberlake Wertenbaker, music by David Lang, and directed by Carey Perloff.

³ References to *Duchess of Malfi*, *Edward II*, and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* are taken from *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington, et al. (2002).

⁴ In addition to the Flowers episode, Clinton's alleged sexual harassment of Paula Jones – settled out of court – and his well-publicized affair with Monica Lewinsky, and his impeachments as a result of perjuring himself about it, suggest a pattern of behavior, none of which could have been predicted in 1992.

⁵ Winn (1993) reports that “About 15 percent of the audience walks out during every performance. A ‘significant’ number of letters to ACT from their patrons – 102 to date – shows 70 percent displeased to distressed by the production, according to spokesperson Hollis Ashby. Only 11 writers endorsed the show. Others wrote to ask for ticket refunds or exchanges.”

⁶ ACT produces “educational” materials for each of their plays; however, I would argue that “educational” veils the true intent of these publications, which is marketing. The *Words on Play* magazines are available for purchase (subscription or individually) and effectively contextualize the plays and persuade readers of the play's value and relevance to contemporary life.

⁷ Including the bibliography and “reflections” references, there are a total of thirteen mentions of the word “Shakespeare” in the Teachers' Handbook to *Duchess of Malfi*.

⁸ Other contextual uses of Shakespeare include: “But the term (Jacobean) is usually reserved for the distinctively sinister and bloody tragedies by Shakespeare's successors in the Jacobean years from 1604 to 1625,” not acknowledging that Shakespeare was still alive and working in theatre for, perhaps, up to ten of those years (p. 6). Shakespeare is also mentioned when dramaturge Miller notes parenthetically that, “Shakespeare's

Macbeth may have been written to gratify the Scots king's preoccupation with the supernatural" (1993, 7).

⁹ Thirty-one times, Shakespeare is mentioned in the narrative text regarding *Edward II*, and is used four times in the context of references and titles.

¹⁰ The connection between *Romeo and Juliet* and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* has been made in scholarship, of course, as well. See for instance, R.L. Smallwood's "'Tis Pity She's a Whore and *Romeo and Juliet*," *Cahiers élisabéthains* 20 (1981): 49-70; and Verna A. Foster, "'Tis Pity She's a Whore as City Tragedy," *John Ford: Critical Re-visions*. Ed. Michael Neill. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988. 181-200.

¹¹ D'Souza notes that the last time ACT produced a Jacobean tragedy (*Duchess*), it "offended audiences and sent them scurrying from the theater." It's clear that the legacy of that 1993 production of *Duchess* had an enormous impact on reviewers if *Duchess* is being recalled in print fifteen years later.

¹² Jason Siefer, Director of Finance and Operations at ACT, provided ticket sales figures from 2007-2013. The figures I received for the 2007-2008 season were as follows: *Sweeney Todd*: \$1,429,918; *The Rainmaker*: \$211,284; *A Christmas Carol*: \$933,359; *Speed-the-Plow*: \$444,763; *Blood Knot*: \$204,756; *The Government Inspector*: \$236,802; *Curse of the Starving Class*: \$199,551; *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*: \$198,122. In the six-year period for which I have figures, the lowest grossing play was *War Music* (adapted and directed by Lillian Groag; based on the book by Christopher Logue), which grossed \$109,121 in the 2008-2009 season, during the height of the worst recession since the Great Depression. The highest sales, by far, were from the new musical adaptation of *Tales of the City* (libretto by Jeff Whitty; Music and lyrics by Jake Shears and John Garden; based on Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* and *More Tales of the City*) in 2010, which grossed \$3,584,610 – more than double its nearest competitor, *Sweeney Todd*. Figures for the seasons in which *Duchess of Malfi* and *Edward II* were produced were, unfortunately, not available.

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