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"TO MEME OR NOT TO MEME", AND TO DO SO DURING A PANDEMIC
Shakespeare and the Memetic Transmission of a Classic

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Abstract – Shakespeare's protean quality is an intrinsic feature: his works and even his persona have always been adapted and have been capable of transmitting through time and space. Rather than merely being the latest form of remediations, this paper suggests that memes can be related to the very nature of a classic, which resides in its transmissibility. In this paper, informed by the idea that a classic is comparable to a viral content, I analyse a few Shakespeare-related internet memes created in the first half of 2020, during the initial phase of the Coronavirus pandemic emergency, that assimilate Shakespeare in a pandemic context. An English icon, Shakespeare seems to be able to speak to different audiences in their own language, even in the lyophilized form of the internet meme.

Keywords: meme; adaptation; virality; cultural transmission; intersemiotic translation.

1. O beware, my lord, of the words

One of the secondary effects of the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020 has been a mostly sterile debate about the significance and validity of metaphors: was it right to talk about a *war* against the disease? Were doctors and nurses *soldiers* fighting against an invisible enemy?[1] Apparently, most of the authors of articles and short essays about this topic forget what a metaphor actually is, and what its purpose is – using an image to refer to something else.[2] Another metaphor has fared better in recent years, and was in fact already spreading with levity in a pre-pandemic world – the metaphor of virality (see Wasik 2010). When the Western world still seemed far from the risk of being

[1] See, for instance, Cassandro 2020, Testa 2020. Many of the articles on this topic refer to Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and the following *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989).
[2] The power of metaphors is the subject of numerous studies, for example Lakoff and Johnson (2003).

torn apart by a disease, only pieces of information seemed capable of going viral and reaching – even *infecting* – our brains. This online virality has not been stopped by the pandemic; on the contrary, the forced free time available during the global lockdown has favoured the spread of information, misinformation and, of course, internet memes, the most viral of all contents.

If the internet has allowed the rapid global spread of pieces of information, words and thoughts have always been viral. Internet memes are only the last expression of a tendency which is inherent within ideas: they have always tried to infect as many brains as possible, even if that meant mutating in the process (see Dawkins 2016). A particular category of ideas, classics are literary works capable of being adapted in different contexts, geographically and temporarily far from the ones in which they were conceived, and to persist in a culture, to the point where the work's titles become proverbial (think of "all's well that ends well"), and their characters become personifications of features or attitudes (think of the adjective "hamletic", or of an "Othello" as the jealous husband par excellence).

In this paper, informed by the idea that a classic is comparable to a viral content, I will analyse a few Shakespeare-related internet memes created in the first half of 2020 during the pandemic emergency, in order to show how William Shakespeare has always proved capable of transmitting himself through time and space. An English icon, Shakespeare seems to be able to speak to different audiences in their own language, a protean quality which might just be what makes him a classic, even when it means to be used as a textbook for washing hands in order to avoid being infected by the plague of the twenty-first century. The Shakespeare-related memes analysed in this paper use in various ways a Shakespearean content, either as a variation in a fixed frame (such as in the Lady Macbeth washing hands meme), or as the fixed text that triggers internet users' fantasies about creating textual or visual variations (as in the "Shakespeare wrote King Lear in quarantine. I…" meme).

By using Limor Shifman's proposal of dissecting an internet meme into its content, form and stance (Shifman 2013), this paper will analyse different types of Shakespeare-related internet memes. A comparative approach is at the basis of this paper, which is in debt to information theory (see Eco 1972 and Gleick 2011), according to which any content rests on a balance between repetition and innovation. As to the analysis of the internet memes, notions developed in linguistics, especially in the field of pragmatics, have proven useful.

2. Lady Macbeth's guide to properly wash your hands

Since one of the prescriptions to contain the pandemic was to pay particular attention to hand washing, and since the correct way of doing it was represented in an omnipresent detailed infographic in the early phase of the pandemic, the graphic has been used as a source to produce internet memes. One of the ways in which internet memes work is by melting two different worlds of meaning, often a contemporary reference and a content capable of addressing a specific audience with a shared base of knowledge, a shared encyclopaedia.

The contemporary reference being the pandemic, the fixed visual content provided by the World Health Organization of the washing hands guide is an image composed of twelve boxes, numbered from 0 to 11, that shows a detailed sequence of actions to be performed in order to obtain an effective, hopefully virus free cleanliness. The image (Figure 1) is to be found on the website of the WHO, with the further indication that "Washing your hands properly takes about as long as singing 'Happy Birthday' twice" (World Health Organization).

Figure 1
How do I wash my hands properly?

It is likely that this unusual timeframe indication has unleashed the imagination of the internet users as to different contents to insert as a replacement, since the description of the sequence of actions has been replaced by several quotations, taken from different sources, mostly well-known songs such as Aqua's *Barbie Girl*, Britney Spears' *Gimme More* and so on (See Soen 2020). Internet memes created in this way have been shared with the hashtag #WashYourLyrics, and a website by the same name allows users to create a new internet meme by simply inserting a song title and the name of a singer.

The importance of the target audience can be gleaned from the fact that there are memes for a wide range of different audiences, from very large ones (such as when popular songs are involved) to niche ones. A content in general, and an internet meme content in particular, has a niche audience when it is to be understood only by those who can make sense of a very specific reference, such as a scene from a TV series or a passage from a literary classic. If the song content of the washing hands internet memes, apart from the original reference to the Happy Birthday song, is justified by the duration time (a catchy sound is useful to make the process of washing hands last for the right amount of time, no matter the actual lyric), the television or literary quotation are contents more likely to be selected for their meaning or, more generally, for the semantic area they belong to. The *Twin Peaks* washing hands meme, for instance, is a quotation related to water ("This is the water / and this is the well, / drink full and descend / The horse is the white of the eyes / and dark within"[3]). It is not surprising that in this context, William Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth has been quoted from the scene in which she tries to clean invisible blood from her hands (*Macbeth* 5.1):

> LADY Out, damned spot! Out, I say! – One: two: why then, 'tis time to do't. – Hell is murky! – Fie, my lord, fie! A soldier, and afeard? – What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? – Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? (Shakespeare 2017, p. 158)

[3] See *30 Twin Peaks Memes*. The phrase, a sort of dark magic formula, is pronounced by a hideous character in the 8th episode of *Twin Peaks*' third season (2017), while he is crashing a radio speaker's skull. As for the whole series, this scene and the meaning of the phrase remain object of speculation.

Figure 2
Lady Macbeth's washing hands internet meme.

3. A classic never ends: the protean quality of Shakespeare and his medium leaps

There is no doubt that *Macbeth* is a classic, whose liveliness and persistence in Western culture confirm its place in the Olympus of literature. A classic is a book which is capable of travelling through centuries and always finding a new audience, its intrinsic quality consisting in being the bearer of a message out of time, larger than life, a universal truth. Thus the traditional interpretation. Or, maybe, a classic is a work capable of posing the right questions, never answering them – and *maybe* it is that indeterminacy, which is the key to its liveliness, which qualifies a book as a classic (think of the mystery of *Hamlet*).[4]

Of course, a classic is not necessarily a book. A book is only a medium, a technological support that allows a story to be carried through

[4] See Garber (2004).

space and time: Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the classics par excellence, became books only at a late stage of their literary life. The same is true for the works of Shakespeare. His works were born as living and breathing narratives, inseparable from the stage, the actors, and even the circumstances they were conceived for.[5] Sometimes, a *book* is thus only a crystallisation of an endlessly mutable story.[6]

As Charles Augustin Saint-Beuve contends, an author can also be considered a classic in his wholeness, as in the case of Shakespeare:

> A true classic, as I should like to hear it defined, is *an author* who has enriched the human mind, increased its treasure, and caused it to advance a step; who has discovered some moral and not equivocal truth, or revealed some eternal passion in that heart where all seemed known and discovered; who has expressed his thought, observation, or invention, *in no matter what form*, only provided it be broad and great, refined and sensible, sane and beautiful in itself; who has spoken to all in his own peculiar style, a style which is found to be also that of the whole world, a style new without neologism, new and old, *easily contemporary with all time.* (1963, p. 67, emphases added)

In spite of all the motivations that can contribute to the definition of a classic, its capability of being "easily contemporary with all time" is the key to a classic's continuing relevance and prospering. But which part of a classic is transmitted and is actually capable of travelling through space and time? Sometimes it is the plot, sometimes the characters, when they have become iconic; or, its language and/or its precise words, which can turn into proverbs or even clichés. Shakespeare has been adapted in each of these ways – we could say in every way possible – and still consistently provides, even in the lyophilized form of the meme, the viral content of the contemporary digital world, proving a vitality and a transmissibility arguably shared by no other author or story.

Shakespeare's protean quality has always been noted: in 1765, Samuel Johnson wrote: "He has long outlived his century, the term commonly fixed as the test of literary merit" (1963, p. 317), and "the stream of time, which is continually washing the dissoluble fabric of other poets, passes without injury by the adamant of Shakespeare" (p. 323). For Johnson, the Bard's transmissibility may lie in the "representations of general nature. […] the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only

[5] Or, at least, this is the common belief; for a different opinion, see Erne (2008).

[6] The dialectic between crystal and flame is an incisive image used by Italian writer and essayist Italo Calvino to refer to the art of writing (see Calvino 1993); the American writer John Barth wrote about a contraposition of algebra and fire (see Barth 2013), and this balance of opposite forces is also explored in E.M. Forster's *Aspects of a Novel*, where the elusiveness of life is opposed to the clockwork functioning of an impeccable plot.

repose on the stability of the truth" (pp. 317-318): consequently, the poisonousness of jealousy can be easily translated with the same plot from a sixteenth century setting to a contemporary one, as is the case of the movie *O* (2001), an adaptation and modernization[7] of *Othello* in which the main character is a basketball player and the story recast in the form of a dark teen drama. Also a modernization and a teen drama, *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) adapts *The Taming of the Shrew* to a 1990s American high school setting, maintaining the original plot and names of the Shakespearean characters. Still, during the years between the end of the 20th and the beginning of the twenty-first century, Baz Luhrman's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) adapts the star-crossed lovers' classic to a contemporary US setting, but interestingly maintains the original dialogues, so that not only the plot but also the language and the exact Shakespearean words are transmitted, providing a natural access point to the source material (which should hopefully be the ultimate destination of an adaptation's audience).

The film adaptations of the Shakespearean works represent a first medium leap. Theatrical representations of his tragedies, comedies, histories and romances are the natural reincarnations of the stories in the literary genre they were conceived for, while book editions are only a means of preserving the stories, but hardly a completely satisfying one, when it comes to an oeuvre conceived for the stage. Still, theatrical representations and books have also evolved and contributed to adapting Shakespeare in order to establish a connection with a contemporary audience; as for the theatre, cross-gender casting contributes to revitalizing a new staging, as in the case of the 2018 Shakespeare's Globe production of *Hamlet*,[8] in which the eponymous character, Horatio and Guildenstern were played by female actors, while Ophelia was played by a man. Book adaptations and, broadly speaking, contaminations have also proved fertile in spreading Shakespearean seeds through space and time, as in Ian Doescher's rewriting of popular movies (such as the *Star Wars*[9] saga and *Back to the Future*[10]) as Elizabethan tragedies through a mimicry of the Bard's rhyme, metre, and stage directions.

If theatre houses a first level of adaptation, maintaining the original Shakespearean medium and playing with its semiotic components (such as the bodies of the actors and the consequent dialectic between their phenomenal value and their semiotic one, see Fischer-Lichte 2004), film adaptations not only operate on the field of modernization but can also exploit the medium's own potential, as Peter Greenaway does in *Prospero's*

[7] About the theory of modernization, see Eco (2003).
[8] Directed by Federay Holmes and Elle While.
[9] Doescher (2014).
[10] Doescher (2019).

Books (1991) by superimposing different images and playing with their juxtaposition (see Squeo 2014). In this case, Shakespeare's material's vitality is expressed by the adaptability of the plot, the iconic quality of the main character and the universality of the theme of revenge.

Shakespeare is also remediated (see Bolter and Grusin 2001) as a character himself, and becomes the protagonist of fictional stories which contribute to the continuing process of his iconization, for example in the Oscar winning movie *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), in which he is involved in a love story that is entangled with the creation of *Romeo and Juliet*. In an episode of the TV series *Doctor Who*, Shakespeare is visited by the eponymous time traveller and his companion Martha and, by quoting his works, they end up suggesting to the Bard a number of 'his own' ideas, causing a "causal loop" (see Susca 2020). Another proof of a classic's protean quality is its adaptation for a younger audience,[11] as is the interesting case of the Disney comics versions of Shakespeare's works such as *Hamlet* and *Othello*:[12] here the process of adaptation has to follow precise rules – for example, Disney characters never die, and that is a challenge when it comes to the Shakespearean bloodshed in the ending of his tragedies.

Whatever Shakespeare's core quality which allows him and his works to be successfully transmitted through time might be (is he really the inventor of the human, as Harold Bloom (1998) asserts?), his messages have always been capable of assuming the shape of the next medium: exactly as Proteus, Shakespeare is a god of water, constantly changing in order to fit new containers, the (currently) last of which is the internet meme.

4. Which we call a meme, by any other name would spread as well

In his book on genes (1976), scientist Richard Dawkins theorized upon the existence of memes, the cultural equivalent of genes: this was the starting point of a fruitful field of studies, memetics. If the genes are responsible for the transmission across time of people's intrinsic biological features, the memes are units of cultural transmission, i.e. the way in which gestures, phrases, stories and instructions succeed in overcoming temporal boundaries. Memes "should be regarded as living structures" (Dawkins 2016, p. 249), and "meme transmission is subject to continuous mutation, and also to blending"

[11] Using the comic versions of Shakespearean works can be a means of addressing young students compelling them to read the original oeuvres.

[12] *Paperino-Amleto Principe di Dunimarca* and *Paperino Otello* are published in the 37th volume of the collection Capolavori della letteratura 2020.

(p. 253). Memes therefore permit a literary character or plot to live on, but they do not guarantee philological exactness. Dawkins notes that, when it comes to memes, "fecundity is much more important than longevity of particular copies" (p. 252). Of course, every science has its own internal debates, and the memetic is not an exception. Since Dawkins christened them, memes' nature has been disputed, generating several competing approaches, such as "mentalist-driven" memetics, which distinguish "idea complex and meme vehicles" (Shifman 2013, p. 366), and "behavior-driven" memetics, which focuses on the practice of spreading contents.

A particular type of meme is the internet meme, since its diffusion via the web has deeply influenced its nature and exponentially increased its virality; Limor Shifman stresses the fundamental differences between memes and internet memes:

> According to Knobel and Lankshear (2007), the word meme is employed by Internet users mainly to describe the rapid uptake and spread of a "particular idea presented as a written text, image, language 'move,' or some other unit of cultural 'stuff'" (p. 202). This vernacular use, the authors submit, is utterly different from the one prevalent in the academic study of memetics: If the former tends to describe recent, often short-lasting fads, longevity is the key of "serious" memetics, since successful memes are defined as the ones that survive in the *longue durée.* (2013, p. 364)

In the same article, as he tries to approach memes in general and internet memes in particular, Shifman proposes "to isolate three dimensions of cultural items that people can potentially imitate: content, form, and stance":

> The first dimension relates mainly to the content of a specific text, referencing to both the ideas and the ideologies conveyed by it. The second dimension relates to form: This is the physical incarnation of the message, perceived through our senses. It includes both visual/audible dimensions specific to certain texts, as well as more complex genre-related patterns organizing them (such as lip-synch or animation). […] the third-communication-related dimension […] relates to the information memes convey about their own communication [and] is labeled here as stance. […] I use "stance" to depict the ways in which addressers position themselves in relation to the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees, and other potential speakers. Like form and content, stance is potentially memetic; when re-creating a text, users can decide to imitate a certain position that they find appealing or use an utterly different discursive orientation. (2013, p. 367)

Shifman's internet memes dimensions can be used to analyse the Lady Macbeth washing-hands internet meme. The "content" is an inescapable aspect, common to memes and internet memes. It answers to the question: what is the message of this meme? In the Lady Macbeth case, the message is a

quote from Shakespeare (which can also be labelled as an adaptation and a parody).

Shifman's "form" is a semiotic category (is the meme a phrase, a video or an image?). An internet meme's form is a structure which has become viral; it can be a fixed image to which different texts are superimposed, a video format, or a stylistic feature which is replicated or referred to (often with the filter of the parody). The Shakespearean internet memes here analysed have a form composed of a fixed image and a text subject to variation.

As to Shifman's "stance", it is a pragmatic feature which involves the audience: it deals with the tuning of the message to a certain kind of addressee, equipped with the notions necessary to make sense of the message of the internet meme as deriving from the juxtaposition of its content and form. Despite their viral nature, internet memes always speak to niche audiences, which can be larger or smaller. An audience can be addressed also by the choice of a certain platform or group, and not only by aspects related to language pragmatics.

Dissecting memes is useful in order to reflect on what aspects of 'Shakespeare' are being transmitted and remediated in the digital context; the memetic one is a particular case of remediation with its own rules. As far as Shakespeare is concerned, its plots, phrases and characters are used as contents, but Shakespeare himself also has become a content. As to the stance, a Shakespearean meme's audience is usually acquainted with the Bard's oeuvre but might also be partially composed of people who do not know much about Shakespeare or his plays and will, potentially, swim upstream toward the source text.

5. Shakespeare and the internet memes during the 2020 pandemic

To answer the question posed in Section 2 about the nature of a classic, we could say that a classic has what we might call a *meminess*, a unique combination of elements which favours its time travelling in the form of memes, even if this results in modifications and distortions. A classic is capable of transmitting itself through time and space by the means of generating adaptations, parodies, and internet memes; as for adaptations and parodies, the memetic transmission works as a sequence of tele-transports, each of which interferes with the content and modifies it (which is why the starting point of every adaptation should always be the uncorrupted original source, even when the adaptation is a palimpsest of references).

Shakespeare's *meminess* is so deeply rooted that plots, quotes, and the figure of Shakespeare himself have all become internet meme material,[13] which means that they can be easily melted with new contents and frames, and can engage new audiences, so that they can indeed be "easily contemporary with all time" (Saint-Beuve 1963, p. 67).

As to the creation of Shakespearean internet memes during the time of the pandemic crisis in 2020, the Lady Macbeth washing hands internet meme was composed by the melting of a Shakespearean content (the verbatim quote from *Macbeth*) and the contemporary need for cleanliness due to the pandemic: as to the form, it is composed of a fixed image and a variating text. Another internet meme created at the same time had instead a fixed Shakespearean text reference which could then be completed with different contents. The sentence "Shakespeare wrote King Lear [while] in quarantine. I…" (see Marsh, online) is a fixed content, and everyone could fill in the gap with an autobiographical content, which in many cases aimed at ironising people's poor use of their unexpected free time, as for "Shakespeare wrote King Lear while in quarantine and all I've done is stress eat."[14] Other variations of this internet meme – whose main feature lies precisely in the balance between the repetition and variation of the content – constitute a response to the first kind of self-accusatory contents, as in the tweet: "Enough with this Shakespeare wrote King Lear in quarantine shit. Shakespeare didn't have access to rocket league."[15] Some of the contents of this evolution of the internet meme had a visual form, as in the use of gifs (Figure 3).

The internet meme in Figure 4 exemplifies the importance of finding the right audience in order for a meme to be appreciated and diffused; even a viral content addresses an audience who share digital literacy. The internet meme in Figure 4 has a Shakespearean content which has been modified to fit in the present time (the pandemic), and is composed of distinct text and image (they are not overlapping in a unique image). A content whose comprehension requests a shared knowledge can only work for a selected audience: as a matter of fact, this meme has been posted in a Facebook group dedicated to English literature.

[13] I consider a Shakespearean meme an internet meme that explicitly refers to the Bard and/or his oeuvres. Other essays on memes in Shakespeare are based on a broader understanding of the concept of meme, *e.g.* the archetype of the father-son conflict in the analysis of the memes on *Hamlet*, even when the tragedy is not explicitly referred to; cf. Denslow (2017).

[14] Tweet by Ryan Knight, @proudsocialist, 14 March 2020.

[15] Tweet by dunce mACABbre, @Babo_Yaga, 14 July 2020.

Figure 3
A Shakespearean textual and visual content.

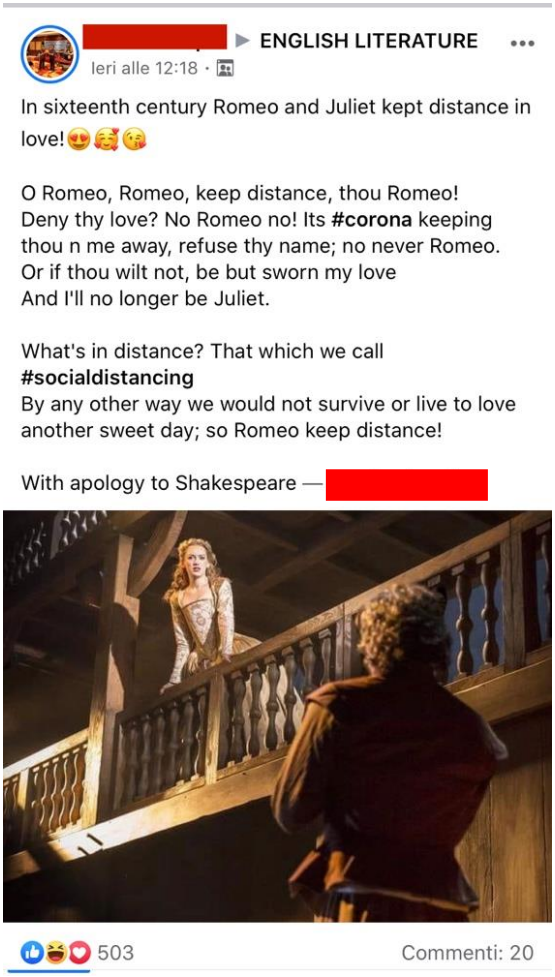

Figure 4
A Shakespearean meme for a niche audience.

The text of the meme in Figure 4	The original text
O Romeo, Romeo, keep distance, **thou Romeo!** **Deny thy** love? No Romeo no! Its #corona keeping thou n me away, **refuse thy name**; no never Romeo. Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love **And I'll no longer be** Juliet. **What's in** distance? **That which we call** #socialdistancing **By any other** way we **would** not survive or live to love another sweet day; **so Romeo** keep distance! With apology to Shakespeare	**O Romeo, Romeo,** wherefore art **thou Romeo**? / **Deny thy** father and **refuse thy name. /** Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love / **And I'll no longer be** a Capulet. […] **What's in** a name? **That which we call** a rose / **By any other** word **would** smell as sweet; / **So Romeo** would, were he not Romeo call'd, / Retain that dear perfection which he owes / Without that title. […] (Act II, scene II, Shakespeare 2001, p. 51)

Table 1
The text of the internet meme (left) and the Shakespearean source text.

Table 1 shows how deeply modified the source text is, which, in fact, works only as a distorted echo in the internet meme text. But it is an echo capable of activating the memory of the Shakespearean text in the right audience, as the one of a private group called "ENGLISH LITERATURE" should be. Even if an internet meme of this kind works as an in-joke for literature enthusiasts (and only works for those who are able to understand the reference), it does not require having actually read or viewed a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* – as a matter of fact, merely watching Baz Luhrmann's modernization *Romeo + Juliet* could guarantee valid credentials to be part of the qualified audience for this meme. In other cases, just having heard the titles of Shakespearean plays allows for a complete understanding of a Shakespeare based internet meme, as in the case of Young Vic Theatre's modified Shakespearean contents in the pandemic context for an audience with a basic cultural literacy. On 8 April 2020, on its Twitter profile, the theatre based in London published the following tweet (Figure 5):

Figure 5
Young Vic's tweet.

From the same profile, a series of ironic elaborations of contemporary 'Shakespearean' plays was published:

Figure 6
Young Vic's Socially distanced Shakespeare.

As in the previously analysed memes, these variations on the theme are based on the echoing of Shakespeare – in this case, of the titles of Shakespeare's plays. The blending of the Shakespearean content with the contemporary references for a selected audience (whose only competence consists in being able to recall the titles of tragedies and comedies) results sometimes in a loose formulation: titles as *The Facemask of the Shrew* and *All Well That's Handgel* do not even respect the sentence structure of the original title, while *A Midsummer's Skype Meet* and *Much to Zoom About Nothing* not only are closer to the original sentence structure but also make sense and convey irony

on one of the most felt changes during the pandemic, i.e. the pervasiveness of online meetings.

6. Conclusion

Far from seeking a possible conclusion, this article's purpose is to point out how contemporary forms, such as internet memes, can be vehicles of literary contents, and so contribute to the process that makes a classic and keeps it alive. Shakespeare's ability to endure (his *meminess*) depends on his being a classic, but at the same time *makes* him a classic, a content capable of adapting (being adapted) through time and space. Shakespearean internet memes, even when recalling the author's life and plays merely superficially and loosely, contribute to his transmission, and constitute access points to Shakespeare's plays. Ultimately, it is the knowledge of these plays which remains is the only true means of maintaining vivid and prolific all the adaptations, even in the condensed form of the internet meme.

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