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Spectres of Shakespeare: Ong Keng Sen's *Search:*  
*Hamlet* and the Intercultural Myth

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**Abstract**

Located within the myth of Shakespeare's universality is a belief in the power and poeticism of his language. If we acknowledge Richard Eyre's assertion that 'the life of the plays is in the language', what becomes of this myth when Shakespeare is 'transferred' across cultures? What happens to Shakespeare's 'universality' in these cultural re-articulations? Using Ong Keng Sen's *Search Hamlet* (2002), this paper examines the transference of myth and/as language in intercultural Shakespeares. It posits that intercultural imaginings of Shakespeare can be said to expose the hollow myth of universality yet in a paradoxical double-bind reify and reinstate this self-same myth.

**Keywords:** myth, hauntology, spectre, intercultural Shakespeare, Ong Keng Sen

**Résumé**

Au cœur du mythe de l'universalité de Shakespeare on trouve la croyance dans le pouvoir poétique de sa langue. Si l'on adhère à l'affirmation de Richard Eyre selon laquelle 'la vie des pièces réside dans la langue', que devient ce mythe quand Shakespeare est 'transféré' dans d'autres cultures ? Qu'advient-il de 'l'universalité' de Shakespeare dans ces ré-articulations culturelles ? Utilisant *Search Hamlet* (2002) de Ong Keng Sen, on étudiera le transfert du mythe et du/comme langage dans ces Shakespeare interculturels qui semblent vider de son sens le mythe de l'universalité tout en réifiant et rétablissant paradoxalement ce même mythe.

**Mots clés:** mythe, hantologie, spectre, Shakespeare interculturel, Ong Keng Sen

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## What Shakespeare? (I): The Intercultural Myth of Shakespeare

My language? Heavens!  
I am the best of them that speak this speech,  
Were I but where 'tis spoken (*The Tempest* 1.2.428–30)

There is a wealth of scholarship on Shakespeare's language by literary critics, language historians and linguists, with this being testimony to the belief that the Bard's language defines his greatness and his work's prodigiousness. Shakespeare's stagecraft is the language he writes in and the imagery he employs. Frank Kermode cites director Richard Eyre's view that 'the life of the plays is in the language ... Feelings and thoughts are released at the moment of speech'.<sup>1</sup> Inga-Stina Ewbank notes how Shakespeare skilfully manipulates the 'arts of language' to persuade the audience of the human realities of thoughts and feeling.<sup>2</sup> What underlies this fascination and intense study is a conviction that his language *marks* 'Shakespeare' – as writer, cultural and historical icon. Conversely, what happens to Shakespeare and his works when he becomes what Richard Burt terms 'unspeakable'<sup>3</sup> in Asian adaptations and 'intercultural revisions'?<sup>4</sup> Are they 'a lesser product, imperfect, if not aberrant, in tongue'?<sup>5</sup> When Shakespeare's works become transformed into other languages and cultural settings, the metaphor, verse and poetry are perceptibly that which remains untranslatable, with the power and effect of imagery substituted by other performance languages – dance, music, song and ritual. In that act of 'silencing', does Shakespeare no longer become 'the best of them' and can he only be so 'where 'tis spoken'? While the view that something essential in Shakespeare disappears because of the erasure of his language is a precarious position to take,<sup>6</sup> one needs to question the ontology of Asian Shakespeares and their responsibilities in citing 'Shakespeare'. In the absence of his language, do these productions, as altered 'dumb shows', perpetuate the mythology of Shakespeare's transcultural timelessness even as they dismantle and deconstruct notions of what/who Shakespeare is?

Being the world's most popular playwright, Shakespeare is also most culturally reconceived and reimagined. Underlying these makeovers is an intercultural faith that Shakespeare's works are for 'every-man' in every time. With the increasingly commonplace practice of 'Other' Shakespeares, there remain imminent questions that emerge with acts of production and spectatorship: 'what', 'where' and 'wherefore' Shakespeare? In Singaporean director Ong Keng Sen's *Search: Hamlet* (2002),<sup>7</sup> a site-specific performance occurring in the historical space of Kronborg Elsinore, produced for the *Hamlet* Sommer Festival, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is radically deconstructed and reconstructed as a dance-theatre event. It becomes 'a *free interpretation* of Shakespeare's play',<sup>8</sup> emptied of the ur-text's plot, narrative, textuality, structure, direction and language. *Search: Hamlet* is not Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and has no Hamlet – it is a performance of a search for who and what Hamlet is, by secondary characters who are sketchy adaptations of Shakespeare's characters. They abandon their given names and adopt generic titles such as the Young Girl (Ophelia), the Mad Woman (Gertrude) or the Warrior (Laertes). The production discards Shakespeare's lyrical language and, as intercultural experiment, has actors speak in their native tongues: Bahasa Melayu, Chinese Mandarin, Kawi (Old Javanese), Japanese and English. Traditional Asian and contemporary dance forms become the new performative language. Lacking coherent narrative and cogent structure, the postdramatic production was presented as a series of installation pieces occurring in the various chambers of the castle. These then culminated in a dance event occurring in the main courtyard of the castle. Apart from the underlying thematic thread of a 'search' for Hamlet and the occasional reference to him, there was nothing of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that remained.

Ong's *Search: Hamlet* is an apt exemplification of works that inspire questions of transformation, adaptation, fidelity and 'faithfulness': What (part) of Shakespeare becomes

‘intercultural’ in the throughflows of translation and transposition (political and/or aesthetic)? What happens to the Shakespearean work when it undergoes cultural transfigurations and when the language of Shakespeare becomes discarded in favour of a native tongue or a different performance language embodied as dance, music or ritual? Where is ‘Shakespeare’ in the circulation of these new intercultural signifiers? What then, as Kennedy and Yong ask, do we speak of when we interpellate the name ‘Shakespeare’ in such culturally revised forms? What ‘trace’ – the mark of the absence of a presence, an always-already absent present<sup>9</sup> – of Shakespeare’s text remains in Asian intercultural revisions? Recognisably, the plural positions adopted in response to these questions reveal the complex nature of intercultural adaptations. Using Ong’s *Search: Hamlet*, this paper seeks to encourage critical inquiry into these questions raised. It suggests that Asian Shakespeares perform a myth of intercultural possibilities that distances (and erases) ‘Shakespeare’ and through replication and reiteration transforms what Roland Barthes terms ‘history’ into ‘nature’. Asian Shakespeares at once reveal the hollowness of appropriation even as they reify the self-same myth that is consumed.

### **What Shakespeare? (II): Language, Metalanguage and Myth**

In describing its socio-semiotic power, Roland Barthes describes myth as a second-order semiological system that is predicated on a first-order sign system. It feeds on the primary form and disempowers it through transformation from sign to signifier. Myths are, therefore, a metalanguage, ‘a second language, in which one speaks about the first’.<sup>10</sup> In the process of moving from the first order to the second, myths create a parasitical distance that at once feeds on yet ‘empties’ and distances itself from the first. Barthes’s cautious attitude toward myths comes from a belief that they create an illusion and that in the act of reading and consumption, one dehistoricises history and turns history into ‘nature’.<sup>11</sup> Those who consume the myth no longer see it as construction and it is read as ‘innocent speech’<sup>12</sup> for it does not hide its intentions but rather naturalises its being. Myths interpellate those who consume them with innocence and equate their signification with an essence even as they empty language via a removal of signs from contexts and dissolution of the first order.<sup>13</sup> Yet even as they dehistoricise, myths create new naturalised concepts which seem to be absolute by sustaining and predicating on existing socio-political stereotypes. The image that is the myth becomes equivalent to this new history through a hollowing and (re)filling with a concept.<sup>14</sup>

In Asian Shakespeares, the intercultural myth is the transcultural and transhistorical translatability of the Bard’s works. Shakespeare becomes mythologised and in an explicit and literal fashion, his language is ‘emptied’ even as it becomes ‘filled’ by new forms that further naturalise this cross-cultural circulation. His works (and certainly his name) become a second-order semiology that is parasitical on the first – the language that has placed Shakespeare to be the foremost writer of the Western canon and that which, scholars of Shakespeare’s language believe, is the prime reason for his significance. This principle of translatability, or more contentiously ‘universality’, is a myth perpetuated by Western humanist scholars but consumed and reified with every adaptation of Shakespeare’s works. While intercultural theatre practice has become, in the recent two decades, a levelled playing field where Asian practitioners have actively excavated Western material for political, aesthetic and capitalistic gain, and Shakespeare has distinctly become the *sine qua non* of such assimilative practices adapted to various cultural-political agendas, the forgotten impetus of such gestures needs to be interrogated: can these Asian transformations be considered ‘Shakespeare’, recognising with an auto-reflexive awareness that authenticity is itself a mythology? Can a mere adaptation of plot, or a transposition of ‘universal’ themes, be sufficient to term an Asian adaptation as ‘Shakespeare’ even as it is modified by the qualifier ‘Asian’?

### **The King, The Thing and Hauntings in Search: Hamlet**

*Search: Hamlet* is the final work in Ong Keng Sen's intercultural trilogy of revised Shakespeares. Like *Lear* (1999) and *Desdemona* (2000) that came before, *Search: Hamlet* (2002) stages, self-consciously, a disambiguation of Shakespeare without word(s). Performed by secondary characters in Shakespeare's text, the intercultural 'event' that involved hybrid performance styles of Japanese Noh, Butoh, Thai Khon and modern Euro-American dance styles revolved around the search for the who, what and where of Hamlet. In this extreme deconstruction, Ong used Shakespeare to interrogate 'Shakespeare' – including concepts of authenticity, cultural authority and ownership. As Ong relates in an interview, *Search: Hamlet* 'would be an interesting exercise of re-imagining and scrambling culture, cultural authenticity, and cultural possession'.<sup>15</sup> While rooting it in geographical specificity, Ong sought to 'return to *Hamlet* as a parable for life'<sup>16</sup> and to encourage the audience to 'rethink *Hamlet* in a way that would include different peoples, that would open up his conflicts into a universal realm, into the everyday conflicts which could have a resonance for individuals all over the world today'.<sup>17</sup> In many ways, *Search: Hamlet* performs Barthes's dialectic: Ong's production is predicated on Shakespeare but 'Shakespeare' is emptied and filled with a new mythology that in turn reifies that absent presence of Shakespeare, this hauntology of a universal Shakespeare.

The term 'hauntology' necessarily evokes Jacques Derrida's use of the term in *Specters of Marx* (1993). Derrida notes how Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* infamously begins with the phrase, 'a spectre is haunting Europe'. While Marx's spectre is the spectre of communism, Derrida shows how Marx's own spectres of radical critique haunt Europe and the world with greater necessity after the collapse of communism; 'haunting would mark the very existence of Europe'.<sup>18</sup> Even though Derrida's explications of this New International are firmly political, he suitably draws a parallel relationship between the spirit of Marx and the ghost of Hamlet's father: they both assert greater authority and (spectral) power as revenants and present absence, for the future is oriented to the past as reaction and response. For Derrida, a spectre is not merely a spirit for even as it is not present and not real, it is there; it enters into and disrupts the presence of whatever is real or present. It is 'the visibility of the invisible, or an invisibility of a visible ... the tangible intangibility of a proper body without flesh, but still the body of *someone* as *someone* other'.<sup>19</sup> In *Hamlet*, the spectre of the dead King is always the body of someone as someone other. As Hamlet observes, 'The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body. The king is a thing' (4.1.27–8). This hauntology reflects the ontological puzzle of performing *Hamlet* as well as Shakespeare. The spectre of 'the thing itself' (*King Lear* 3.4.104), not only of the imagined ur-Hamlet or what Derrida terms the 'Thing Shakespeare'<sup>20</sup> – 'a *thing* of the *spirit* which precisely seems to *engineer itself* [*s'ingénieur*] ... [t]he animated work becomes that thing, the Thing that, like an elusive specter, *engineers* [*s'ingénie*] a habitation without proper inhabiting ...'<sup>21</sup> – persists in every (re)performance of Shakespeare's works and in that way creates a mythology of hauntings; the intercultural myth of Shakespeare is likewise hauntological. A hauntology 'does not belong to ontology, to the discourse of Being of beings, or to the essence of life or death'<sup>22</sup> but rather is persistently reinstated with every re-creation that is both the Thing and not the Thing, embodied and disembodied – a spectre.

In Ong's characteristic post-dramatic style, *Search: Hamlet* is structured as two distinct acts. The first is a series of eight performance installations, performed by individual characters of the play, occurring simultaneously in various chambers and rooms of Kronborg castle. The second half of the production takes place in the courtyard and is composed of five books, akin to the Japanese Noh form: the Book of the Ghost, the Book of the Warrior (Laertes), the Book of the Young Girl (Ophelia), the Book of the Mad Woman (Gertrude), and the Book of the Demon (Claudius). Each book is a contained performance of one of the secondary characters' narratives that centre on the questions of identity – of Self, of Hamlet, and of Self *vis-à-vis* Hamlet. Hamlet is reflected (upon) as presence and evoked as 'Not/I' – a spectral presence both as a haunting of the fictional character in Shakespeare's writing and also of the Hamlets on stage and screen. The performance interrogated the re-presentations and being of Hamlet

and the intercultural myth of transference and adaptation.<sup>23</sup> Set as a play that would ‘ask questions rather than [provide] trite answers’,<sup>24</sup> *Search: Hamlet* was performed without Hamlet (and what Ong terms a ‘dead performer’).<sup>25</sup> ‘Hamlet’ is absent and the performance is haunted by the trace of his presence, iterable marks, and the invisible interpellation via references to his name by other characters who in turn are used as reflections of this search for Hamlet that is within oneself. It is an attempt to perform the ‘every-man’ *via negativa* for as Ong states, ‘[t]here is no Hamlet, no European Hamlet, no Danish Hamlet, no Asian Hamlet’.<sup>26</sup> His ‘presence’ is further composed of the spectres of Hamlets that echo across stage and celluloid representations of the ‘thing’ itself that have now collectively composed an ontological reality of the anti-hero which is little more, as Derrida reminds us, a hauntology that deconstructs this ontological Hamlet. Like the ghost of his father, Hamlet’s ‘more-than-real’ fictionality reifies the absent presence in Ong’s erasure of a corporeal Hamlet. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida regards a spectre as distinct from a spirit for a spectre is ‘a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal carnal form of the spirit’<sup>27</sup> and in its (absent) being it is some ‘thing’ neither soul nor body but both. Its flesh and phenomenality are that which makes the spectre visible but also that which permits it to disappear in the apparition. In *Search: Hamlet*, the spectral presence of Hamlet is constantly invoked through a performance of other characters, themselves, ‘unfulfilled central spirits’ playing at (being) Hamlet and haunting the site of Kronborg castle, and of the ‘original’ play.<sup>28</sup> They slip in and out of Hamlet’s consciousness and demonstrate degrees of Hamlet behaviour: ‘the intimate companion in the warrior (Laertes); the rebel in the young girl (Ophelia); the self-absorption and self-obsession in the mad woman (Gertrude); the struggle between temptation, guilt and action in the demon (Claudius)’.<sup>29</sup> Hamlet becomes a spectre that is the ‘becoming-body’, that which inhabits multiple bodies and as phenomenality that is an absent apparition, appearing and disappearing in many bodies and no-body. For Ong, this invocation of Hamlet evokes the central issue ‘about who is Hamlet in our times, in our culture, in our communities ... everybody has a different image of Hamlet, and a different perception of Hamlet’s role – who is Hamlet in their countries?’<sup>30</sup>

This interrogation of not merely Hamlet’s presence but also of the ontology of intercultural Shakespeares (Who is Shakespeare? Who is Shakespeare in ‘other’ countries?) is exemplified in one particular performance of the first act. Against the backdrop of Kronborg’s faded granite walls, Indonesian musician Antonius Wahyudi Sutrisna sings (and eventually wails incomprehensibly) as he plays on the *gender*, a gamelan metallophone. As he sings, the emaciated, androgynous actress Ann Crosset (who plays Gilda Rosie Krantz III, clearly a homophonic play on Shakespeare’s Guildenstern and Rosencrantz) informs the audience that ‘there is no Hamlet in this production. You guys know that right? We are all playing secondary characters... We all auditioned for Hamlet but we all got cast in secondary roles’. This explicit interpellation of Hamlet’s absent presence haunts much of the performance. In the prologue of the second act that occurs in the castle’s courtyard, Charlotte Engelkes, the storyteller, wanders across the *banamchi*-inspired platform<sup>31</sup> and asks the audience,

Who can play Hamlet? Anyone who is disappointed at his mother. Anyone who feels the need to take action. Anyone who chooses to walk around with heavy bitter thoughts. Anyone who feels an outcast in his family; Or theatre company ... Anyone who can learn a little piece of text. Anyone who likes to suffer, and we have a lot of them. Anyone who thinks about revenge today ... We are Hamlet.

While this sequence is suffused with parodic overstatements and trite declarations about Hamlet’s everyman quality, it reverberates with the hauntings of the *Hamlet* myth where the ‘body’ is with Hamlet, but Hamlet is not with the body. Hamlet is a thing. And this thing is a mythological simulacrum that renders Hamlet as more-than-real, at once present and absent. In

*Search: Hamlet*, the absence continually ascribes presence, a reification of the spectral Hamlet through a negation of his physical presence and a refusal to acknowledge his name. Nearing the closing moments of the play, Engelkes emerges on the stage to proclaim that she is

... not yet playing Hamlet. I don't know where he is. I don't know why everybody is looking for him. He might be something to look for. He might be something to look forward to, something to look at or something to look after. I'm not looking  
....

The storyteller's admission of a refusal to acknowledge her fictional adoption of Hamlet is a refusal to interpellate Hamlet as first person 'I' or second person 'You'. Her recognition that he might be something to look forward to and something to look after, with 'after' being a distinct pun indicative of the past and of dependence, reifies the haunting of Hamlet further for spectres are devoid of time; spectres are also dependent on the dialectic logic of absence and presence. Like the spectres Derrida speaks of, the trace of Shakespeare and his work, the histories of the text and its performances, assert and inscribe their presence more determinedly.

Writing about the re-presentations of Shakespeare in film, Maurizio Calbi advances the term 'spectro-textuality' to identify adapted works that simultaneously evoke this presence and absence of Shakespeare, a condition where the Shakespearean text haunts adaptations as spectres. Calbi notes that in the multiple reincarnations and citations of Shakespeare in the digitised and globalised mediascape of the twenty-first century, 'the *presence* of "Shakespeare"' has become 'increasingly heterogeneous and fragmentary'.<sup>32</sup> Yet all of these Shakespeares are not a 'pluralisation of the same entity'<sup>33</sup> but rather the haunting and spectral presence of 'Shakespeare', as 'simultaneously material and evanescent',<sup>34</sup> that 'itself' (rather than himself) becomes remediated and re-formed. In these new 'selves', Calbi believes, contemporary media adaptations (not merely film but also new media forms) significantly deconstruct the polemics of the original and the copy, and of the 'pure' and 'hybrid' work – 'in fact, it enhances ... the ethico-political impact of this and other adaptations'.<sup>35</sup> Like Hamlet in *Search: Hamlet*, Shakespeare is 'a ghostly absent force that keeps on haunting';<sup>36</sup> he remains a spectre in adapted works even when these works do not claim such a lineage but instead, as *Search: Hamlet* proves, seek to sever such a connection through its relentless interrogation and deconstruction. Nonetheless, the deeper the severance of this umbilical link, the stronger the haunting is and the more powerful the myth of Shakespeare's universality is perpetuated.

Ong's intentions of producing a work that demands deep reflection about the local and the global, cultural ownership and geopolitical boundaries are provocative and even necessary in a post-local condition of globalised hybridities. Yet the success of this attempt cannot be attested to since it was a fragmented and fractured *bricolage* that assaulted the senses but left little coherent sense for the audience to weave. Still, *Search: Hamlet* is exemplary of the intercultural myth for it performs the emptiness and hollowness of such trans-formed reproductions. In Ong's work, the absence of *Hamlet* and Hamlet reifies an absent Shakespeare whose only relationship to the performance is that of a spectral presence. What is performed in *Search: Hamlet* becomes its (own) mythology – a second-order system that has radically distanced itself from the first with only the trace of the first order lingering as the occasional play on Shakespeare's lines in the play and the hyperreality of Kronborg castle. Even the *dramatis personae* become destabilised and deconstructed with Ong's intentional interplay of gender inversions and ambiguity, racial and cultural reversals, and extreme transpositions of performative expression. Ann Crosset is a woman that unseats easy gender categorisations with her emaciated naked body that borders on the hermaphroditic – she is Gilda Rosie Krantz III and not Gilda, is Guildenstern and Rosencrantz but only as a trace of their (male) selves. The world-renowned male Thai Khon dancer Pichet Kunchun plays Gertrude, the Balinese Topeng dancer I Wayang Dibia plays Claudius, the Malaysian female choreographer Aida Redza

assumes the role of a hypermasculine Laertes and the Japanese Butoh dancer Carlotta Ikeda plays a 'Ghost'. Multiple languages intermingle and the dancing body displaces Shakespeare's words. A romantic pop ballad, sung by Dicte to a hybridised soundscape of violins, gamelan instruments, rebabs and flutes, replaces Ophelia's mad yet poignant songs in Act 4 Scene 5. In this performance, there is no stable site called 'Shakespeare' or Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

### **'Something is rotting': Site Specificity and The Myth of Kronborg**

*Search: Hamlet* is performed site-specifically at Kronborg, Elsinore. Even as the materiality of the space seeks to provide a phenomenological experience of historical 'presence' and 'authenticity', such play on site-specificity instead exposes the intercultural myth further through a hyperfictionalising of history. Kronborg, as a name, as signifier, is 'meaningless' without Shakespeare and while it is a UNESCO World Cultural and Heritage site – a testament to the rich history that surrounds this Renaissance landmark and one that Shakespeare distinctly appropriated – the castle's historicity has been refashioned by Shakespeare. There is no Kronborg without Shakespeare (and no Kronborg in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* without the historical locale). The site-specific use of the castle in Elsinore then reifies that (inter)play of presence and absence established in the performance. Kronborg is both present and absent as Shakespeare haunts Kronborg. Its linguistic signifier, its name and reputation have transited from history to myth – *Hamlet's* myth, or rather Shakespeare's myth. In *Search: Hamlet*, the empty signifier of Kronborg is alluded to in a moment of performative reflexivity. Gilda Rosie Krantz III relates a random account of a dream she had of her dead mother performing household chores at a community church in Cincinnati, Ohio. In that dream, the dead mother expresses her wish that more people had been present at her funeral and then proceeds to ask if Gilda is okay. Gilda replies that she's miserable as she's living in Denmark. She declares that 'something is rotting. We all live in the house of Denmark yet the house of Denmark *seems empty*'. While this sequence is distinctly a parody of the conversation between Hamlet and the ghost of his father, Gilda's self-reflexive lexical play on 'something is rotten in the state of Denmark' (*Hamlet* 1.4.90),<sup>37</sup> exposes the hollow, empty myth of Kronborg as the 'Home of Shakespeare's Hamlet';<sup>38</sup> such a myth, as Gilda declares, seems empty.

In 'Siting and Citing *Hamlet* in Elsinore, Denmark', Alexa Huang claims that in using Kronborg 'the fictional inhabits the actual site of production. In turn, the performance site and its cultural location reconfigure the fictional'.<sup>39</sup> Ong's site-specific performance thus engenders a new form of 'rooted cosmopolitanism'<sup>40</sup> that is used to resist cultural authenticity 'derivative of any single cultural location being represented in the performance'.<sup>41</sup> Taking Huang's observations further, the mythology of *Hamlet* a priori erases any sense of locality or history; the geography does little to the fictional in the ways that the performance is predicated on a second-order semiology which precedes site-specificity. The sense of 'rootedness' is a manufactured condition, for the Kronborg in which *Search: Hamlet* locates itself is mythical space. It is this mythology that permits the 'meaningfulness' of performing *in situ* even if that meaning manifests itself as resistance, interrogation or substitution. The site-specificity reifies and refracts the myth that is *Hamlet*. The trail of fictions (since *Hamlet* is itself appropriated from another legend – the legend of Amleth, Prince of Denmark) mapped upon history (and historical space) lingers as spectres that echo across the hallways and chambers of Kronborg. These echoes reverberate with the 'emptiness' and absent presence, the ghosts, of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. *Search: Hamlet* as intercultural adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (and the Hamlets before) becomes a 'textuality'<sup>42</sup> or a 'reframing of earlier framings'<sup>43</sup> albeit this textuality exposes, as it interrogates via the characters, the authority of the 'original' or the 'authorised' *Hamlet*. Kronborg thus becomes a site for the conjuration of Hamlet's spirit (or the spirit of Hamlet) and according to Derrida, conjurations are, first, an alliance or a plot or conspiracy but they are also a means to exorcise, 'to attempt to both destroy and to disavow a malignant, demonized, diabolised force, most often an evil-doing spirit, a specter, a kind of



ghost who comes back or who still risks coming back *post mortem*'.<sup>44</sup> Conjuring Hamlet at Kronborg, as an intercultural experiment in present absence, is to therefore at once seek an alliance with the spectres of Hamlet and also exorcise him. It is in this double action of alliance and exorcism that the myth of *Hamlet* is kept alive. Consequently, performing and re-invoking this myth at Kronborg castle, as Barthes posits about mythologies, turns history into nature.

### Myth and Appropriation

The question then remains: what is there of 'Shakespeare' in intercultural revisions such as Ong's? If narrative and plot are only that which become transferred, can these performances appropriate the name that is Shakespeare, recognising that many of his plays were themselves adaptations of existing myths and stories, and what made his appropriations supersede that from which he borrowed can arguably be regarded as his play with and on words? As forms of appropriation, Asian Shakespeares invite an epistemological reflection on where they stand theoretically in relation to the signifier 'Shakespeare', for as Christy Desmet notes, 'something happens when Shakespeare is appropriated, and both the subject (author) and object (Shakespeare) are changed in the process'.<sup>45</sup> Can this change in Asian revisions, however, be termed 'Shakespeare'? As Derrida posits the conjurations and the double bind of exorcism and alliance, earlier discussed, intercultural Shakespeares can be said to be caught in a similar bind, since Shakespeare haunts these invocations and reconstructions as a spectre that exists to be paradoxically re-presented and re-moved, invoked and dispelled; Shakespeare (as is Hamlet in *Search: Hamlet*) becomes an 'indeterminate ensemble of spectral and iterable marks'.<sup>46</sup>

Intercultural Shakespeares can then be said to be Shakespeare present and absent – they invoke the spectre of Shakespeare and are

something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it is ... One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge.<sup>47</sup>

Materially, these works consistently evoke comparisons with Shakespeare's work that in itself is a collective of mythologies, stories, versions and editions. While they do not belong to existing 'knowledge' and discourses of Shakespeare, intercultural experimentations, without his words, allow for new interpretations and considerations of the source text, thereby enabling the absent source to become a signifier in new contexts. These in turn further reify the mythology of Shakespeare.

In 'Myth Today', Barthes declares that 'the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be appropriated'.<sup>48</sup> It is, and will be, appropriated by 'such and such group of readers and not another'.<sup>49</sup> Myths are shared codes that become naturalised for the form<sup>50</sup> will be wholly absorbed by the concept and the concept is not abstract, it is 'filled with a situation' and one in which a 'whole new history [is] implanted in the myth'. *Search: Hamlet*, like many other intercultural revisions, is located in this collective mythology of Shakespeare's translatability and timelessness; it occupies even as it simultaneously intensifies this self-same myth. *Search: Hamlet* quite literally performs 'not-Shakespeare' to expose the hollow intercultural myth of Shakespeare. There are only hauntings, spectres and traces. Consequently, one may argue that Asian Shakespeares impoverish the meaning – in this case that meaningfulness of (and in) Shakespeare's language. The meaning, Barthes's term for the signifier in the first-order, 'loses its value, but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment'.<sup>51</sup> While Barthes's observation of myth is clearly evident in Asian Shakespeares, one could also claim that this impoverishment facilitates receptions of Shakespeare as a quarry for new gains that allows a necessary interrogation of commonly assumed 'essences' and 'authenticities'. The

circulation of the intercultural myth then permits the survival and rejuvenation of ‘Shakespeare’ – the King and the thing.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Richard Eyre quoted in Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (London, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2000), 4.
- <sup>2</sup> Inga-Stina Ewbank, ‘Shakespeare and the Arts of Language’, in Stanley Wells (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), 51.
- <sup>3</sup> Richard Burt, *Unspeakable Shakespeares: Queer Theory & American Kiddie Culture* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1998).
- <sup>4</sup> These can be defined as cross-cultural aesthetic re-imaginings that depart from the Shakespearean source, its concerns and its form. See Dennis Kennedy and Yong Li Lan, ‘Introduction: Why Shakespeare?’, in Dennis Kennedy and Yong Li Lan (eds), *Shakespeare in Asia: Contemporary Performance* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), 10.
- <sup>5</sup> Kennedy and Yong, *Shakespeare in Asia...*, 2.
- <sup>6</sup> See Kennedy and Yong, *Shakespeare in Asia...*, 3.
- <sup>7</sup> The performance can be viewed at Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive <a-s-i-a-web.org>. Accessed 16 November 2015.
- <sup>8</sup> *Search: Hamlet* programme notes, 18. My italics. The phrase used to describe the performance is interesting for it readily admits the removal and emptying of Hamlet, and that Shakespeare is merely a floating, dislocated signifier.
- <sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1974), xvii.
- <sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York, Hill and Wang, 1972), 114.
- <sup>11</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 129.
- <sup>12</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 131.
- <sup>13</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 122.
- <sup>14</sup> The concept is Barthes's term for the ‘signified’ in the second-order semiology.
- <sup>15</sup> Ong Keng Sen in Alette Scavenius, ‘Searching for Hamlet: An Interview with the Director’ <www.theatreworks.org.sg/interviews.html>. Accessed 16 November 2015.
- <sup>16</sup> Ong in Scavenius, ‘Searching for Hamlet...?’.
- <sup>17</sup> Ong in Scavenius, ‘Searching for Hamlet...?’.
- <sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York, London, Routledge, 1994), 4.
- <sup>19</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx...*, 7.
- <sup>20</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx...*, 22.
- <sup>21</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx...*, 18.
- <sup>22</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx...*, 51.
- <sup>23</sup> Ong reveals that he did not want a ‘simple immersion into the character scripted by Shakespeare’ and sought to constantly probe the construction of Hamlet through the perspectives of the artist and the artist's relevance to him. See interview with Scavenius, ‘Searching for Hamlet...?’.
- <sup>24</sup> Ong in Scavenius, ‘Searching for Hamlet...?’.
- <sup>25</sup> *Search: Hamlet*, Programme Notes, 19.
- <sup>26</sup> Ong in Scavenius, ‘Searching for Hamlet...?’.
- <sup>27</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 6.
- <sup>28</sup> *Search: Hamlet*, Programme Notes, 21.
- <sup>29</sup> *Search: Hamlet*, Programme Notes, 21.
- <sup>30</sup> Ong in Scavenius, ‘Searching for Hamlet...?’.
- <sup>31</sup> *Hanamchi* are the raised stage extensions of Japanese Kabuki, located to the left of centre, that run from the entrance of the theatre to each end of the stage.
- <sup>32</sup> Maurizio Calbi, *Spectral Shakespeares: Media Adaptations in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, Palgrave, 2013), 2.
- <sup>33</sup> Calbi, *Spectral Shakespeares*, 2.

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<sup>34</sup> Calbi, *Spectral Shakespeares*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Calbi, *Spectral Shakespeares*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Calbi, *Spectral Shakespeares*, 154.

<sup>37</sup> The line reference is taken from the Arden Shakespeare edition. See Jenkins, Harold (ed.), *Hamlet* (London and New York, Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1982).

<sup>38</sup> Kronborg is often officially advertised with this title. See 'Visit Denmark', <<http://www.visitdenmark.com/kronborg-castle-shakespeare-hamlet>>.

<sup>39</sup> Alexa Huang, 'Siting and Citing Hamlet in Elsinore, Denmark', in Ruth J. Owen (ed.), *The Hamlet Zone: Reworking Hamlet for European Cultures* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 81.

<sup>40</sup> Huang, 'Siting and Citing Hamlet...', 81.

<sup>41</sup> Huang, 'Siting and Citing Hamlet...', 81.

<sup>42</sup> See Joseph Grigely, *Textuality: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1995). Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe have appropriated this term for Shakespeare adaptation studies. See Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe, *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen* (Cambridge, Polity, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> Cartelli and Rowe, *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen*, 26.

<sup>44</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 47-8.

<sup>45</sup> Christy Desmet, 'Introduction', in Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (eds), *Shakespeare and Appropriation* (London and New York, Routledge, 1999), 4.

<sup>46</sup> Calbi, *Spectral Shakespeares*, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 119.

<sup>49</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 119.

<sup>50</sup> This is Barthes's term for the signifier in the second-order.

<sup>51</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 118.

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