

“Was Hamlet really mad?”

The function of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in Brian Friel’s *Volunteers*

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Introduction

Adaptation and Appropriation

Shakespeare requires no introduction. He was and still is one of the most important Western playwrights, and his relevance surpasses the boundaries of language. His plays have been adapted into forms that include other media, and they also have been appropriated in other texts and media, as well as in popular culture. One does not need to have read Shakespeare to recognize the well-known plots of his masterpieces, and to even be able to quote lines from them. Indeed, Julie Sanders, in *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2016), says that it is crucial for anyone willing to study adaptations to touch base with Shakespeare, a figure who Sanders believes, fairly enough, to function similarly to myths and fairy tales due to his capacity to travel through cultures, languages, art forms, space and time.

The adaptations of Shakespeare’s *oeuvre* can be traced back to as early as the Restoration period in England. From 1660 onwards, Shakespeare has been adapted and appropriated by other writers, musicians, playwrights, painters and, in modern times, film-makers. The bibliography, filmography and an account of other works of art that reference Shakespeare’s works on some level are too extended to draw up a list of them; however, we may speculate the reasons surrounding the recurrent use of Shakespeare’s works in the production of new literature and art. Apart from his known geniality, masterfulness and availability to a wider audience, Shakespeare comfortably

lies outside the modern copyright laws, which secure artists who wish to derive their work from a previously published one to acquire the rights to do so. Shakespeare, in this sense, is exempt of such bureaucracy, proving it to be an increased factor in adapting or appropriating his works.

Although copyright laws make it harder for modern artists to draw on each other's works to produce new ones, this characteristic of literature making literature, or the recognition of parallels among works of art — and, here we do not only mean between literary texts, but also between literature, music, film, painting, etc. — is also responsible for the enjoyment of literature and the arts in general. There is, nonetheless, a fundamental difference between watching an adaptation of *Hamlet* to the screen for example, knowing it is an explicit adaptation, and reading a modern text which between its lines draws parallels to *Hamlet*, inviting the reader to act as a sort of literary detective.

Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), defines adaptation as “an extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art.” (HUTCHEON, 2006, p. 170). However, not every use, even if deliberate, of a prior text in a newer text, is announced. This leads us to Julie Sanders' distinction between adaptation and appropriation:

An adaptation most often signals a relationship with an informing source text either through its title or through more embedded references. (...) But certainly appropriations tend to have a more complicated, intricate and sometimes embedded relationship to their intertexts than a straightforward film version of a canonical or well-known text would suggest. The relationship can therefore seem more sideways or deflected, further along the spectrum of distance than a straightforward generic transposition. (SANDERS, 2016, pp. 35 - 36)

Hence, there is a marked difference when we talk about the adaptation of *Hamlet* to the screen by Kenneth Branagh, for example, and the appropriation of Tom Stoppard's 1967 play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, which focuses on two secondary characters in Shakespeare's play who then take the center stage in Stoppard's play, whereas the other characters, including Hamlet himself, become secondary to the story. Sanders uses this play as an example of the sub-group of adaptation and appropriation called “grafting”, in which “the relationship to the original remains present and

relevant but it is as if a grafting has taken place of a segment, or rootstock, of the original text.” (2016, p. 68)

Grafting is not a new term in adaptation studies and was first coined by Gérard Genette to describe the relationship between hypotext and hypertext, the source text and the recreated one, respectively, in his book *Palimpsests* (1997). Genette was the leading theorist in defining intertextuality regarding literary texts, as opposed to the definitions brought forth by Kristeva, Bakhtin, Barthes, and others, which also consider intertextuality in terms of its political and social levels. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this study, we will employ Sanders’ definition of appropriation and her borrowing of the term “grafting” by Genette to analyze the function of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (circa 1600) in Irish playwright Brian Friel’s play *Volunteers* (1975), describing the several distinct levels in which *Volunteers* appropriates and grafts Shakespeare’s masterpiece. Next, we will briefly introduce the reader to Brian Friel’s work and show that his appropriation and grafting of Shakespeare were not uncommon in Irish theater and playwriting, as it was not uncommon for Shakespeare to draw on Irish folklore and legends and include them in his plays. In fact, we will see that the connections that link Shakespeare to Ireland and, thus, Irish literature, are much more profound than we may think at a first glance.

Ireland and Shakespeare

Although Shakespeare is undoubtedly a prominent name in English literature, he often borrowed aspects from Irish culture. In fact, the first Irish character on an English stage was created by Shakespeare in the play *Henry V*, allying two stereotypes known to Irishmen at the time, namely the threatening warrior and the feckless servant, into the character of Captain Macmorris. In Elizabethan London, the Anti-Irish feeling was increasingly greater as the possibility of an alliance between Ireland and Spain against the British crown grew stronger by the day¹; hence an Irish Captain in a King’s

¹ Queen Elizabeth’s reign was marked by the further attempts of conquering Ulster, modern Northern Ireland, which was still highly Gaelic and resisted crown control. During the 16th century, one of the prominent Ulster leaders in the resistance against England, Hugh O’Neill, sought Spanish aid citing their shared religious beliefs in Catholicism. This alliance was a source of worry to the Crown, since the military aid from, and alliance with, Spain could give the Irish the power to defeat the English Crown.

army was cause for concern of treachery. In a scene where a Welsh comrade-at-arms questions Macmorris fidelity, Macmorris promptly answers;

FLUELLEN Captain MacMorris, I think, look you, under your correction, there is not many of your nation—

MACMORRIS Of my nation? What ish my nation? Ish a villain and a bastard and a knave and a rascal? What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation?

(Henry V, 3.3)

Declan Kiberd, in *Inventing Ireland* (2002), points out the fact that the first notable words of an Irish character in English literature are a denial of his own otherness, “Macmorris is the first known exponent on English soil of a now-familiar literary mode: the extracted confession. So he is made to say what his audiences want to hear.” (p. 13)

Indeed, for the reader who knows even a little of Ireland’s quarrels with England, identity as a nation has been an age-old issue approached by both politics and literature in Ireland. However, we must ask ourselves: extracted confession or witty resistance? Macmorris statement baffles critics who come up with different interpretations for it, and one worth mentioning in our study is that of Andrew Hadfield:

What is Macmorris asking here? Is he denying the efficacy of his Irishness and affirming a solidarity with other Britons with whom he is fighting? Or is he anticipating an attack on his national identity and so preparing to defend the loyalty of the Irish to the English/British crown? The text is enigmatic, confronting the audience with the problem rather than suggesting a solution. (p. 50)

Rebecca Steinberger, in *Shakespeare and Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* (2008), rightly points out that Macmorris’ statement was not a denial of his identity, but a questioning of it. After 400 years of Shakespeare’s play, Macmorris’ question still remains a central topic for Irish politicians and artists. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century that Irish writers started to reflect openly along with their audiences what it meant to be Irish and to live in Ireland. This enterprise was initiated mostly by the creation of the Abbey Theatre, by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory. Although their main goal was to create a theater that was undeniably Irish, and to oppose all the

stereotypes maintained by the English theater, it was impossible to deny so many centuries of an English-oriented culture; however, it is through this knowledge that Irish writers, especially Yeats, Synge and others, were able to reshape the English language into a language of their own,

It is one thing to imitate your Shakespearian father; it is quite another to take the approach of Yeats and turn him into a revised version of yourself. Moreover, both Yeats and Synge were reaching back beyond the imperial mission to a pre-modern, carnivalesque vitality, to those elements which peoples shared before the fall into imperialism and nationalism – elements which survived in Shakespeare's plays, and which seemed to intersect, in suggestive ways, with the folk life of rural Ireland. (KIBERD, 2002, p. 274)

As Kiberd points out, in rereading England, Irish artists were able to rewrite Ireland, to invent and reinvent it continually. As the quarrels with England shaped centuries of Irish history, it is not surprising to see artists rewriting Ireland and what it means to be Irish until modern times. Like with most traumatic experiences in colonialism, postcolonial writing deals with making sense of what has happened or gone wrong. Irish writers, in this sense, are not talking back to experiences passed on to them by their ancestors, but they are also trying to understand their own experiences in contrast with the blurred backdrop of history. Shakespeare seems to provide a perfect setting for making sense out of traumas, and since *Hamlet* to an extent centers around a grieving son's revenge for his father's death, perhaps it is of the most suitable plays dealing with such a theme. In this next section, we will approach Brian Friel's status as a playwright in the second half of the 20th century, his play *Volunteers*, and how Shakespeare's *Hamlet* functions in it on several levels to do exactly what Hadfield (1997, p. 50) says Macmorris did: confront the audience with a problem, rather than suggesting a solution.

Brian Friel, or Ireland's Chekhov

Brian Friel (1929-2015) was a highly renowned playwright in Ireland. He began his career as a writer publishing short stories in *The New Yorker* during the 1950s and early 1960s, but it was only as a playwright that Friel gained notoriety for his masterfulness and became known as the Irish Chekhov. His plays are a perfect mix of melancholy and humor, the recipe the artist chose



for dealing with issues pertaining Ireland as a whole. Unlike many modern playwrights, Friel tried to distance himself as much as possible from the political problems of the land. As McGrath points out in his introduction to *Brian Friel's (Post)Colonial Drama* (1999), in Friel's early writings there are very few indications that Friel is from Northern Ireland. The turning point came with the Civil Rights movement in Northern Ireland in 1968, especially the episode which became known as "Bloody Sunday" (1972), when a peaceful civil rights march ended with 13 killings of civilians. In an interview 10 years after Bloody Sunday, Friel tells Fintan O'Toole about the experience:

It was really a shattering experience that the British Army, this disciplined instrument, would go in as they did that time and shoot thirteen people. To be there on that occasion and – I didn't actually see people get shot – but I mean, to have to throw yourself on the ground because people are firing at you is a very terrifying experience. Then the whole cover-up afterwards was shattering too. We still have some kind of belief that the law is above reproach. We still believe that the academy is above reproach in some way, don't we? (1982, p. 22)

This experience changed the way Friel thought and related himself to the Troubles². In the same interview, he says "The experience is there, it's available. We didn't create it, and it has coloured all our lives and adjusted all our stances in some way. What the hell can we do but look at it?" (1982, p. 23) This newly acquired perception and an even greater awareness concerning the role language, myth, discourse, illusion, politics and history have in shaping our lives, brought forth a maturity to Friel's voice as an artist that would be perfected through the coming years. *The Freedom of the City*, from 1973, is a play that, as Friel himself said, was written still in the heat of the moment. Although the IRA was active again in the 70s, *The Freedom of the City* strangely makes no mention of an organized paramilitary group. This omission was compensated for in his 1975 play *Volunteers*, where men who belong to a group such as the IRA take the center stage as a social and cultural metaphor.

² The period between 1968 and 1988 in Northern Ireland of intense armed conflict between paramilitary groups and the British army.

Volunteers

Premiered in the Abbey Theatre in 1975, *Volunteers* is set in a Dublin archeological site, which both works as a tomb and as a womb. The volunteers are political prisoners who participated in an act to gain political freedom from the British crown, but volunteer to help excavate this ancient Viking settlement, supervised by a professor and a warder before a new hotel complex is built. Like in most Friel's plays, the words have a double resonance, he shows their flexible meaning(s), changing according to a person's background, ideology or lived experience. This is explicit in the play's title: first, there is the historical reference to the group of men who fought during the Easter Rising in 1916 and were known as "The Volunteers", and, second, the condition under which the political prisoners in his play find themselves. We may argue that these two aspects represent the first confrontation we have when approaching this highly enigmatic play. Again, if you are well initiated in Ireland's history, you might jump the gun and connect the dots fast, but what Friel seems to be aiming at, and what will become increasingly clearer throughout the play, is that he wants to start questioning the dots instead.

In a Brechtian turn, we learn of our characters' fate even before the end of the First Act. They have been tried by their fellow internees in prison and have been convicted of treason for volunteering to help in the excavation. The fellow prisoners have planned a riot to camouflage their execution. In this sense, the volunteers are not only digging up Ireland's history, bringing to life objects and historical facts long forgotten, but they are also digging their own graves. There are five internees who are helping in the excavation, but the play is mainly led by the clown figure of Keeney, that Friel describes as being "quick-witted, quick-tongued, and never for a second unaware. Years of practice have made the public mask of the joker almost perfect." (FRIEL, 1989, p. 17) His sidekick is Pyne, who Friel describes as an eager apprentice but whose mask slips in times of crisis. They often banter and sing limericks throughout the play, trying to get the better of their fellow volunteers and their superiors, often achieving such goal and delaying the job. Nonetheless, the play's most truthful and revealing

moments are acted out by Keeney, who seems to know more than he lets on and whose “mad muttering” is an attempt to keep sane.

The play was not well received by the public and the critics. It had short production periods both in London and New York but attracted the attention of scholars due to its layers of meaning and complexity. It is considered one of Friel’s most complex plays that opens into a new kind of dramatic practice for the Irish playwright, as Heaney puts in *Digging Deeper* (1980), an essay he wrote in 1975 defending the play, *Volunteers* allowed Friel to express more freely his gifts. The play has been analyzed on several layers, and one that most intrigues readers and scholars is the allusion on many levels to *Hamlet/Hamlet*, the historical figure, the character and the Shakespearian play. The next section will cover how *Hamlet* functions in *Volunteers* and how understanding that appropriation is fundamental for reading the play.

Hamlet in Volunteers

For the attentive eye, even before the beginning of the play, the first glimpse of a reference to *Hamlet* is the Yorick-like skeleton on the right of stage center, which is banked so it can be seen fully and clearly at all times (FRIEL, 1989, p. 9). The skeleton, named “Leif” by Keeney, features a leather thong around his neck and a hole in his skull, suggesting that he suffered some kind of execution, maybe even ritual. In Friel’s stage directions, he says that most of the action takes place in a huge crater, which functions both as a womb and as a prison yard. Moreover, after the Discovery of Leif’s skeleton and of the volunteers’ doomed fate, it also functions as a grave.

On a general level, the play’s setting makes an allusion to *Hamlet*’s Scene I, Act 5, namely, the Gravediggers scene. In this scene, two gravediggers jest and discuss whether Ophelia should have a Christian or non-Christian burial, and also banter about the nature of suicide as if they were two lawyers pleading their case. As with the gravediggers, Keeney also sets off in soliloquies reflecting on the nature of things, such as history and language. This scene in *Hamlet* is also the scene in which Hamlet confirms he is being considered insane. As both gravediggers had never seen Hamlet

before, they tell him that the Prince of Denmark was sent off to London to recover:

HAMLET Ay, marry, why was he sent into England?

FIRST CLOWN Why, because he was mad. A shall recover his wits there; or if a do not, 'tis no great matter there.

HAMLET Why?

FIRST CLOWN 'Twill not be seen in him there. There the men are as mad as he.

HAMLET How came he mad?

FIRST CLOWN Very strangely, they say.

HAMLET How strangely?

FIRST CLOWN Faith, e'en with losing his wits.

(Hamlet, 5.1)

In this context, Keeney's question to his fellow interneers and the audience seems even more inquiring: "Was Hamlet really mad?" he asks in Act I, when reflecting on what must have happened to Leif. This is a good example of grafting, which Julie Sanders discusses as a technique of appropriation. It is as if Friel carefully dissected Shakespeare's play, and transplanted the gravediggers scene to *Volunteers*. However, the question remains: why? How does this appropriation open up a new layer of understanding of the play? Somewhat similar to the Gravediggers' scene, Keeney in *Volunteers* wonders about what happened to Lief, how he met his demise.

KEENEY: Nice wee hole in the top of the head. I wonder what did it? Maybe an aul' pick-axe. Lovely bit of leather that, too, isn't it? Best of good stuff. And beautifully plaited. Man that wouldn't chaff your neck at all. But the question persists, George — and who knows better than a metaphysician like yourself — damnit the question that haunts me, George, is: What in the name of God happened to him? D'you think now could he have done it to himself? Eh? Or maybe a case of unrequited love, George — what about that? Or maybe he had a bad day at the dogs? Or was the poor eejit just grabbed out of a crowd one spring morning and a noose tightened round his neck so that obeisance would be made to some silly god. Or — and the alternative is even more fascinating, George — maybe the poor hoor considered it an honour to die — maybe he volunteered: Take this neck, this life, for the god or the cause or whatever. Of course acceptance of either hypothesis would indicate that he was — to coin a phrase — a victim of his society. Now, you're an erudite man, Knowxie — what's your opinion?

KNOX: Why don't you shut up, Keeney?

KEENEY: Knoxie may well be on to something. Maybe he was a casualty of language. Damnit, George, which of us here isn't? But we're still left with the problem: Was Hamlet really mad?

PYNE: (*Entering*) Are you playing or are you not?

KEENEY: I'm always playing. Right, George? No, George and I were considering the hazards of language. (*Picks up a bucket and a trowel. To Leif*) Don't stir till I come back.

(FRIEL, 1989 p. 28)

This short passage conveys how dense the play is. In Keeney's first address, he covers a multitude of topics, enough to make the reader and the audience dizzy. Despite all the messages between the lines that Friel seems to be sending through Keeney, some Shakespearian and Hamletian keywords stand out in his speech.

First, Keeney says that the question of what happened to Leif "haunts" him. Hamlet in Shakespeare's play would not have pursued his revenge if he had not been visited by the ghost of his father, who told him he was doomed to walk the earth at night and at dawn return to the fires, suggesting he was in Purgatory. Moreover, the ghost of Hamlet's father says that a serpent stung him, and that serpent now had the crown. The ghost's final words, "Adieu, adieu, Hamlet. Remember me." (*Hamlet*, 1.5) are written down by Hamlet, the words he has sworn to. Like Hamlet, who is haunted by the words of the ghost of his father, Keeney is haunted by the question of Leif's death, while drawing a parallel to his own situation, "maybe he volunteered" (FRIEL, 1989, p. 28).

When faced with the possibility of silence, Keeney thinks it might mean something other, that maybe Leif was a casualty of language, as in a way Hamlet also was, by swearing by the words of a ghost. Keeney finally asks if Hamlet was really mad, and by questioning that, he leaves in between the lines all the other possibilities of what Hamlet was. Was Hamlet mad or a victim of society? A casualty of language? A grieving son taken to an extreme by traumatic loss? Right after Keeney asks about Hamlet's madness, Pyne comes in asking Keeney if he is playing or not. This is a rather interesting question, considering that in *Hamlet* also the theme of the world being a stage and all of us mere actors playing out our roles is developed.

Keeney answers he is always playing, also echoing the *Hamlet's* intense metatheatricality.

The archeological objects found during their excavation of the Viking site range from the 10th century to the 13th century. That is contemporaneous to the time stories of historical Hamlet circulated, culminating ultimately in *Historiae Danicae* by Saxo Grammaticus. In the 1919 *Links Between Ireland and Shakespeare*, Sir D. Plunket Barton explores the evidence as presented by Sir Israel Gollancz, professor of English language and literature at King's College, London, from 1903 to 1930, that the story of *Hamlet* seemed to point to the Celtic West, precisely the Scandinavian Kingdom of Ireland. The story, as we know it, was taken by Shakespeare from Saxo Grammaticus, which collected the tales around the 11th century. Gollancz identified Hamlet as a Danish King of Dublin:

Sihtric, a viking of the House of Ivar, came to Ireland in 888, won and lost the kingdom of Dublin, and died a King of Northumbria in 925. One of the most stirring episodes of his career in Ireland was a battle, fought in 917 (= 919), at Ath Cliath, or Kilmashogue, near Rathfarnham in County Dublin, where he slew Niall Glendubh, King of Ireland. After the battle, Niall's widow, Queen Gormflaith, wrote a song of lamentation, a verse of which is quoted in the Annals of the Four Masters. In this verse she states that Niall "was slain by Amhlaidhe," the Irish for Hamlet. This is the first mention of the name in the literature of any language; and it indicates that Sihtric was known in Ireland by the name of Hamlet. Sihtric's son, Anlaf Curan, had a remarkable career. Following in his father's footsteps, he was at one time King of Dublin, and at another time King of Northumbria. Some of the incidents of his life were so similar to the story of Hamlet, that they are believed to have been among the sources of Saxo Grammaticus's tale; and Mr. Gollancz infers that the "father and son were no doubt blended in popular story, the confusion being greatly helped by the likeness between the names of Hamlet and Anlaf." In this way the Hamlet of Shakespeare's play is traced to the legends which were attached to these two Scandinavian Kings of Dublin, Sihtric and his son Anlaf Curan. (1919, p. 23)

Moreover, Gollancz points out the fact that "Hamlet" was the Icelandic name for a fool, but that this must have been attached to some personal legend, as it was not a Scandinavian expression (1919, p. 24). It, nonetheless, puts Keeney even closer to Shakespeare's Hamlet, who oscillates between these two roles, that of a fool and of the paranoid.

Another interesting aspect in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is that Hamlet swears by Saint Patrick in line 140 (act 1, scene 5), the known patron saint of Ireland, who rid the island of serpents. Moreover, this may have a further significance in the fact that Hamlet's father's ghost mentioned he was doomed to live in Purgatory. Hamlet's invocation of Saint Patrick has puzzled scholars, but once again Gollancz seems to have a plausible interpretation. During the time in which *Hamlet* was written, there was a pilgrimage location known in Lough Derg, County Donegal, in Northern Ireland, as "Saint Patrick's Purgatory". According to legend, Saint Patrick's Purgatory is a cave, or a pit or well, dated from the 5th century, which God showed Saint Patrick to help him convert those who doubted him and required substantial proof. Everyone who entered would believe what he said, they would know the joys of heaven and the torments of hell. The purgatory also bears the meaning of a cleansing and purging place. Many pilgrims traveled to Saint Patrick's Purgatory in a sort of self-discovery journey, the Vision of Owen being one of the most famous accounts of the experience³.

The cave, or the pit, of Saint Patrick's Purgatory seems like a plausible allusion to the pit that the volunteers are working in. They are at once digging out the past and learning more about their history. At one point in the play, Keeney says

KEENEY (*Loudly again*) And I keep insisting to my friends here, the more we learn about our ancestors, children, the more we discover about ourselves – isn't that so? So that what we are all engaged in here is really a thrilling voyage in *self-discovery*.

PYNE He makes it all so interesting.

KEENEY But the big question is: How many of us want to make *that* journey?⁴

(FRIEL, 1989, p. 37)

Indeed, it does seem like these volunteers are having a glimpse of the joys of heaven: first, of a bit of freedom before going back to prison, of learning more about the country they volunteered to help free from English

³ For more, see Chapter VII in Barton's "Links Between Ireland and Shakespeare".

⁴ Friel's emphasis.

rule. They are also seeing the torments of hell, though. They are doomed, they know that. They are digging their graves and knowing that they are neither the first nor the last to die that way because Leif keeps reminding them of their past and future.

Like Shakespeare's Hamlet, the volunteers in Friel's play mask their profound despair in the mad speech of Keeney. Speech, moreover language, can disclose and enclose aspects about our history, both as individuals and as nations, that may serve us well in one period, but deemed fruitless the next. Hence, Hamlet is somewhat a casualty of language because his desire for revenge arises from the words of his father's ghost; Keeney wonders if that is also how Leif became a casualty of language (FRIEL, 1989, p. 28), by preserving in his speech the history, the grudge, the revenge, etc. he was told.

Hamlet's fate was sealed by a ghost's address, dooming the entire family. Friel's volunteers are also victims of their "own competing, conflicting, and contradictory discourses" (McGRATH, p. 133), their state of "volunteering" a double crime, one of going against the institution, a crime they were imprisoned for, and another of helping in the excavation site, thus "betraying" their fellow comrades in prison, sealing their fate as "traitors". These aspects and criticisms run deep in Irish history and dynamics as a country with a violent formation, Northern Ireland in particular until 1998⁵.

However, by presenting us several historical artifacts throughout the play, including Leif, himself once a historical figure, and by having Keeney and other characters wonder about these objects' and Leif's histories, with Keeney often making things up, Friel shows us how history may be seen differently and how one must not treat it as a finished product, like we treat myths and legends, for instance: "'Once upon a time – keep up the protection of the myth.'" (FRIEL, 1989, p. 62). Histories, unlike myths, are not protected. It is common for new facts to surface around a certain topic that will shed new light on a historical period; however, isn't it mad to accept only one

⁵ Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* exemplifies well this aspect of Irish life. In the novel, the narrator tries to make sense of his family's silence surrounding his uncle Eddie, who he believed disappeared for being a police informer, something that stained his family forever. By volunteering in the excavation site, Friel's characters are gaining this status of traitors, or being police informers and, thus, will be punished by their "group".

version of events? Hamlet did not seem to think twice when accepting the ghost's account of events, promptly answering when the ghosts asks him to remember him:

HAMLET Remember thee?

Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat

In this distracted globe. Remember thee?

Yea, from the table of my memory

I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,

All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,

That youth and observation copied there,

And thy commandment all alone shall live

Within the book and volume of my brain

Unmixed with baser matter.

(*Hamlet*, 1.5)

Hamlet erases all he knew before and puts the ghost's accounts on a pedestal in his brain and memory. He is moved by this sole recollection, which he alone has. Hence, we may attempt to answer Keeney's question: was Hamlet really mad? Did he not choose in what to believe? He made his choice, even though it may have been driven by other factors, such as grief, frustration, confusion, etc. The fact, though, is that he made a choice to believe in something and to pursue it to the full extent. *Volunteers* examines this view of historical version and versions and accepting the varied scope of the Irish experience. There is not one history to tell, but histories, even on a national level. Friel's point seems to be confronting the narratives history tells over and over again about the Irish as victims:

Friel again is exploring a postcolonial psyche that has replicated and perpetuated many of the structures of the colonial situation so that the Irish, in the stories and narratives they tell about themselves, continue to perpetuate the victim mentality of colonial times. Unlike Synge's playboy, they have not rewritten their history sufficiently to transform their character and fate. (McGRATH, 1999, p. 134)

In a country that bears such a violent history as Ireland does, most people are haunted by a ghost that must be avenged. The only way to change



history and prevent it from repeating itself is to question what we know as face value, and not to dismiss one's actions based on madness.

Conclusion

Friel's appropriations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* resulted in a play with several layers of complexity, and one that poses important questions to its audiences. Friel perfected his style in further plays, making them more enjoyable but equally heavy in subject matter, allowing the audience to have a pleasant experience or to accept Friel's invitation for dialoguing. Shakespeare was also talented in bringing forth questions and confrontations to his audiences without compromising the play and turning it into propaganda.

Every symbol in *Volunteers* is a piece in a puzzle: the jug that is excavated, the skeleton of Leif, the recurrent citations of *Hamlet*, etc. Keeney ends his participation in the play with a limerick:

KEENEY On an archeological site
Five diggers examined their plight
But a kangaroo court
Gave the final report —
(...)
They were only a parcel of shite ...
Good night, sweet prince.

(FRIEL, 1989, p. 88)

Reading *Volunteers* in confluence with *Hamlet*'s ending also conveys a special interpretation layer to Friel's play. After Hamlet dies, Fortinbras orders for him to be exposed as a soldier, because had he had the chance to prove himself in battle, he would have been most royal. He also orders the soldiers to pay full respect by a peal of ordinance being shot off, and then takes the Danish crown for himself. Horatio promises Hamlet, who dies saying "The rest is silence", to tell the full story, and *Volunteers* ends in silence too, with George folding and putting things away quietly as the lights on stage go down slowly. Most likely after the volunteers' "execution", they'd

also receive an honorable farewell, and Friel again makes the question of treating as heroes the ones Ireland victimizes and the confusion within the Irish psyche in terms of values and morals, a question Friel leaves open and tries to answer in many of his plays.

Hamlet has many functions in *Volunteers*: i) providing a complex layer of interpretation to the play, enhancing our reading not only of Friel's play but of Shakespeare's as well; ii) providing a focus on the Viking heritage that Ireland has, but had been almost wiped out by the nationalist movement claiming the one origin myth of a Celtic past; and, finally, iii) providing the play its central focus, *i.e.*, to question (hi)story as we know it, even famous ones. Friel returns to these aspects in other plays, such as *Translations* (1980), which focuses on language, and *Making History* (1988), which deals with biographies and writing of history as a creative activity. In most of his plays, Friel masterfully incorporates other works that range from textbooks on translation to appropriations of other fictional works. Through his technique, Friel exemplifies what his characters debate on stage: (hi)story is made of rewritings and reformulations – it is, in this sense, organic, and not static. *Volunteers* is the first in a series of independent plays Friel will grow the debate on the nature of history and language and its intricacies in our lives. For now, suffices to say that *Volunteers* leaves Marcellus' line "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" hover over the whole play.

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Abstract

Shakespeare has been adapted and appropriated in several levels. However, it seems Shakespeare held a special bond with Ireland, both as a source of tales from which to craft his plays, and later as a source from which Irish writers would reinvent their art. This study analyzes and describes the way Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is appropriated in Brian Friel's (1929-2015) *Volunteers* (1975), highlighting how this appropriation may provide us with an insight into Ireland's history.

Keywords: Irish drama; appropriation; *Hamlet*.

Resumo

A obra de Shakespeare já foi adaptada e apropriada de inúmeras maneiras. No entanto, parece que Shakespeare tinha um vínculo especial com a Irlanda, fonte de mitos e lendas a serem usadas em suas peças. Mais tarde, Shakespeare tornou-se a fonte a partir da qual escritores irlandeses reformularam sua arte. Este estudo analisa e descreve como *Hamlet* de Shakespeare é apropriado na peça *Volunteers* (1975) de Brian Friel (1929-

2015), destacando como essa apropriação pode oferecer uma reflexão sobre a história irlandesa.

Palavras-chave: Teatro irlandês; apropriação; *Hamlet*.