Bending and Blending Shakespeare: Tribute or Iconoclasm?

An Analysis of *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* by Ann-Marie MacDonald

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of “Master in de Taal- en Letterkunde: Engels-Spaans” by Tine Vandermeersch

August 2009
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude toward my supervisor Prof. Dr. Jozef De Vos for his guidance and advice. I would also like to thank Prof. Dr. Hilde Staels for introducing me to the work of Ann-Marie MacDonald and for stimulating me to write about this particular play. Furthermore, I wish to thank Jessica Shulist, the helpful publishing assistant of the Canadian Historical Review Archive. She provided me with several rare issues of the Canadian Theatre Review. Also, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the academic staff and the faculty library staff. I have derived a huge amount of personal and academic benefit from my time spent at Ghent University. In addition, I wish to extend a special word of thanks to my friends for their stimulating interest and helpful suggestions, for their willingness to proofread parts of this MA dissertation, and for giving me the incentive to carry on during the final stages of the writing process. Finally, I wish to thank my family and especially my parents for their financial and emotional support, and for always encouraging me. Thank you.
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I. Introduction

First published four hundred years ago, Shakespeare’s plays continue to be staged and appreciated all over the world. Over the last centuries, this playwright has become an icon of western culture. Shakespeare, also known as the Bard, is presented as a supreme genius and the crown jewel of English culture. He has influenced literature, theatre, and even the English language in itself. Even though Shakespeare inspired many art forms, I will only discuss and examine his influence as a playwright on theatre. The emergence of new editions of his plays and the organisation of Shakespeare festivals and conventions indicate a persistent interest in the Bard and his dramatic works. After all this time, scholars are still dissecting Shakespeare’s texts and coming up with new study topics and possible interpretations. The staggering amount of essays, dissertations and books on Shakespeare demonstrate his ongoing influence.

Since the sixteenth century, Shakespeare’s plays have been translated into many other languages, making him the most-read playwright worldwide. At several points in history, Shakespeare’s plays dominated the European stage, and from the eighteenth century onwards, his dramatic works were staged internationally. Producers and directors explored new ways to represent and stage Shakespeare’s plays, enabling a vast number of interpretations. Scholars have studied the various stages of Shakespeare reception for many generations now. They reveal a gamut of possible approaches: some performances stay textually and/or structurally faithful to the original play, some cut or add wholes scenes, while others engage in other complex processes such as cultural appropriation, recontextualisation, parody, and modernisation. Considering the scope of his fame and influence, it is not surprising that there are so many different theatrical responses. His plays have been adapted and rewritten in many different ways. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there has been a substantial rise in the number of radical approaches to Shakespeare. More and more playwrights tend to use
the Elizabethan plays as a mere starting point, and experiment with characters, setting and plot. These modern adaptations are interesting study matter. Not only is the plot in itself interesting, also the way in which the play relates to its point of departure proves to be a fascinating field of study.

I will focus on one (post)modern adaptation in particular, namely Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet), written in 1988 by the Canadian playwright Ann-Marie MacDonald. This play draws heavily on Shakespeare’s Othello and Romeo and Juliet. I will investigate how exactly MacDonald interprets and represents these plays. In order to gain complete understanding of the script, one must research the three plays individually. Therefore, I will confront and compare the different versions and pinpoint all adaptive strategies. In order to capture this adaptation’s relation with the Shakespearean tragedies adequately, it is imperative that I analyse and illustrate the correspondences and deviations between the plays on all possible levels. Therefore, I will discuss style, language, genre, characters, devices, conventions, and themes. Furthermore, I shall investigate how this adaptation affects Shakespeare’s canonical status. Drawing on the recent work in adaptation studies, I intend to reveal the complex relation of this radical adaptation to Shakespeare and the canon.

In short, the aim of this dissertation is to discuss how Shakespeare’s works are represented in MacDonald’s play, and to determine what effect this adaptation has on his canonicity. Is Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) a tribute to, or, a rejection of Shakespeare’s canonical status?

In the first chapter, I will outline the life and works of Ann-Marie MacDonald and briefly discuss her style and recurrent themes. I will start the second chapter – which forms the theoretical framework for this dissertation – with an introductory frame of Shakespeare reception and adaptation. Drawing on the work of Ruby Cohn, Daniel Fischlin, and Mark
Fortier, I will provide a general overview of the attempts that have been made in defining, categorising, and anthologising Shakespeare adaptations. Furthermore, I shall investigate the complex relation between adaptations and their source plays. For this, I will pay attention to the recent evolutions in the field of adaptation studies and reveal the different models and opinions. In addition, I shall discuss the breakdown of the traditional adaptation model and explain the need for a more modern model to describe the relation between modern adaptations and Shakespearean source plays adequately.

In the third chapter, I will determine the position of MacDonald’s play, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, within theatre history and, most importantly, reception theory. I shall demonstrate that this postmodern play engages in an ambivalent relation with Shakespeare and therefore defies a categorisation according to the traditional model.

The following chapter concerns a study of intertextuality. I will identify the main intertexts within the play and illustrate how MacDonald conceives and structures them. By comparing and contrasting Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* with MacDonald’s adaptation, I will illustrate the different adaptive strategies and the particular attitude toward the Shakespearean urtexts. I will centre my focus on the textual and generic changes.

In the fifth chapter, an extensive comparative study will reveal how MacDonald imitates and parodies Shakespeare’s plays on multiple levels: theatrical conventions and devices, metre, style, language, and characters. I shall discuss how the Canadian playwright makes use of Shakespearean means to challenge and subvert the original plays.

Subsequently, I will take a closer look at the theatrical and metatheatrical elements in the play. I intend to explain how dramatic devices such as play-within-a-play and cross-dressing heighten the theatricality of the performance and will also discuss the visual and physical humour in this play.
In the final chapter, I will discuss two alternative readings of *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*. Firstly, I shall attempt to explain how cross-dressing and the overt exploration of sexualities contribute to the blurring of gender boundaries. I shall demonstrate that MacDonald subverts various scenes and character representations to challenge Shakespeare’s gender stereotypes. Secondly, I will argue that this play can also be interpreted independently, as a quest to overcome an existential crisis.
II. Biographical Information on the Author: Ann-Marie MacDonald

Ann-Marie MacDonald was born in 1958 in Baden-Baden, Germany. Both of her parents were born in Canada; her father was a Canadian officer of Scottish descent and her mother was of Lebanese heritage. The family lived on the Royal Canadian Air Force base in Germany, where her father was stationed, until MacDonald reached the age of five. They then moved back to Canada and settled down in Ottawa. MacDonald attended Carleton University in Ottawa, where she studied languages and literature. After one year, however, she dropped out and went to the National Theatre School in Montreal where she trained to become an actor. She graduated in 1980, and soon after, made her entrance in the Canadian theatre world. Her first major parts were in two William Shakespeare’s plays; she filled the part of Rosalind in *As You Like It* and played Maria in *Twelfth Night*. MacDonald became a successful actress. She performed in many plays, some television dramas and even in films, including *Where the Spirit Lives* (1989), for which she won a Gemini Award.

MacDonald is not only a talented performer, she is also a very successful playwright. In 1985, she started working for a feminist theatre collective and co-wrote several plays. Her first solo project as a playwright began in 1988 with *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*. This stage play proved to be a big success and was produced worldwide. MacDonald received several awards for her first play, including the Governor General's Award for Drama, the Floyd S. Chalmers Award for Outstanding Play and the Canadian Authors' Association Award for Drama. This certainly encouraged her to continue her work as a playwright. Over the next few years she wrote several more plays, including *The Arab’s Mouth* (1990), the opera libretto *Nigredo Hotel* (1992) and *The Attic, the Pearls and Three Fine Girls* (1995). Her most recent dramatic work is *Belle Moral* (2004).

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1 The biographic information is taken from various sources: *The Literary Encyclopedia*, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, *The Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia* and *Quill and Quire*. 
MacDonald’s debut novel, *Fall On Your Knees*, was published in 1996. It was this novel that won her wide acclaim as a writer, especially in Canada and the United States. Her book won The Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book. In 2002, Oprah Winfrey promoted the novel by adding it to her book club list, which propelled *Fall On Your Knees* to international bestseller status. The story covers the secrets and sins within several generations of a Canadian family. MacDonald’s own family background is reflected in the cultural diversity and the interesting mixture of nationalities of the characters. Her second novel, *The Way the Crow Flies*, was published in 2003 and revolves around a Canadian family who, parallel to MacDonald’s own family, lives on a Royal Canadian Air Force station. The story deals about the loss of innocence and the omnipresence of lies in times of war.

Ann-Marie MacDonald is currently living in Toronto, Ontario. She and her partner, playwright and theatre director Alisa Palmer, married and adopted a child in 2003. MacDonald has emerged as a very prolific and versatile Canadian artist. She is a successful actress, novelist, host, director, producer and playwright. She is well-known in the literary and theatrical world and successfully combines her projects in both areas. MacDonald has already made some great contributions to Canadian literature. The vast amount of literary nominations and awards indicates her popularity as an author and playwright.

MacDonald’s eye for detail, together with her wit and skill to create stirring character-driven stories typify her entire oeuvre. The majority of her writings underline the human diversity regarding culture, values and sexuality. MacDonald tends to challenge mainstream ideology and society, and gives voice to marginalised groups. She strives for tolerance and acceptance of differences (Staels). She places unusual themes in the forefront. MacDonald’s experimental behaviour towards genre and her preference for mixing high and low culture, are also striking features (Staels). Her novels and plays contain a lot of allusions and references to other writers. She certainly is an intellectual writer, with considerable knowledge of
international literature and the classics. MacDonald also enjoys playing with language; her wit, subtleness and the amount of word puns -especially striking in her plays- are all part of her unique writing style.
III. Theoretical Framework: Adaptations

3.1. General Overview: Definition, Categories and Anthologies

All roads lead to Shakespeare, or perhaps it might be more correct to say that
Shakespeare leads to all roads.

(Bentley 107)

Shakespeare’s plays have intrigued and inspired playwrights since the seventeenth century. The desire to adapt some of the most famous tragedies and comedies in western literature has proven to be irresistible. Throughout the world, playwrights have been eager to alter and bend Shakespeare, producing a wide range of theatrical responses to his works. According to Fischlin and Fortier (2000), “the twentieth century, especially in its second half, has been . . . a highpoint in the theatrical adaptation of Shakespeare” (2). Indeed, this thriving undertaking is typical of “our postmodern age of cultural recycling” (Hutcheon, Adaptation 3). The act of reiterating, changing and reworking a preceding work, or simply said, an adaptation, is actually a form of critical and creative reception. The ubiquity and variety of adaptations indicate that adapting Shakespeare is no longer a “cultural taboo” (Fischlin and Fortier 1). The theatrical adaptations demonstrate “the power of imagination and innovation to triumph over nostalgia and authenticity” (Bradley 1). Shakespeare’s works are still part of the universal cultural heritage. Therefore, adaptations of his plays should be interpreted as a response to his canonical status.

Over the years, the study of Shakespeare adaptations has become part of the expanding field of reception history. The investigation of adaptive strategies has proven to be fully worthy of academic attention within theatre and reception studies. However, one cannot help
but notice the scarcity of scholarship and theoretical work concerning adaptations. Fischlin and Fortier (2000), two adaptation theorists, agree that adaptation studies are a “marginalized and undertheorized activity” (4). There is even little consensus about the definition of adaptation. Some critics have attempted to grasp and define the theatrical responses to Shakespeare, and invented new descriptive terms. However, there does not seem to be a universal and workable definition. In her theoretical book on theatrical responses to Shakespeare, Ruby Cohn (1976) has tried to summarise the different labels:

- Rewriting of Shakespeare is known by an array of names – abridgments, adaptations, additions, alterations, ameliorations, amplifications, augmentations, conversions, distortions, emendations, interpolations, metamorphoses, modifications, mutilations, revisions, transformations, versions. (3)

Cohn, however, refuses these labels and prefers to use the term “offshoot” (3). Moreover, she distinguishes three “offshoot” categories according to the adaptive processes they employ. The first category contains the dramatic responses that modify the Shakespearean texts by reducing or revising particular words or lines. The second category comprises plays that depart from the original script but carry out a substantial amount of cuts, additions and alterations. The final category is characterised by invention and includes all transformations. The playwright transforms the original play by inventing new events, inserting new characters, altering the plot or even conceiving a different ending. This last group of “offshoots,” to use Cohn’s term, represents the theatrical works that are least connected to their source play.

In the introduction to their anthology, Fischlin and Fortier use the name “adaptation” as an umbrella term, covering the wide range of different theatrical responses. It is indeed the most established term to describe theatrical rewrites. Theorist Linda Hutcheon (2006) defines an adaptation as “an extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art”
Lacking an accurate definition, it is becoming more and more difficult to determine whether or not a certain play is an adaptation of Shakespeare. One might wonder if a stage play that contains one single reference to a Shakespearean character, a one-man performance of *Hamlet*, or a burlesque version of *Othello*, is in fact Shakespeare adaptations or not. Where does one draw the line between a superficial reference and an adaptation?

Lynn Bradley (2008) disputes the vagueness of the term “adaptation,” and ventures to refine its definition. According to her, “the term Shakespeare adaptation refers specifically to works in which the author makes an explicit connection to a play by Shakespeare, whether in terms of narrative, character, title, language, or issues, which invites a particular response from the audience to compare the adaptation to their memories of the original” (4). Bradley emphasises the importance of explicit references and calls attention to the rewriter’s actual intention. This description remains rather vague, but certainly helps to narrow down the scope of the term adaptation.

Adaptation theorists refer to Shakespeare’s works as “source plays” and “original versions”. One should, however, always bear in mind that some of Shakespeare’s plays are in fact also indebted to previous works. Shakespeare also borrowed elements from preceding narratives and transformed existing stories. It turns out that his plays are not that “original” either. Nonetheless, over the centuries, Shakespeare has become a cultural icon and his works have achieved worldwide recognition. His adaptations are now the point of departure for new adaptations, which indicates how relative the notions authenticity and originality actually are (Fischlin and Fortier 4). In an essay on adaptations, Mark Fortier notes that “the continual deformation of Shakespeare both appeals to a sense of the authenticity of the original works and creates a new sense of authentic identity by using Shakespeare as an index of the authority of identity itself” (qtd. in Graham 105). Theatrical adaptations of the Bard’s plays have become a global phenomenon.
Shakespeare adaptations draw on one or more Elizabethan plays and borrow certain elements from them. Some adaptors preserve a large amount of elements from the original play, whereas others wander from it and replace most elements with their own. Clearly, adaptors have appealed to a wide range of adaptive practices. An adaptation may cut or add scenes, remove or add characters, rearrange and reassign lines, or completely alter the Shakespearean plot. Some adaptors even subvert Shakespeare’s play and reinvent the entire story. Adaptation studies reveal the astonishing creativity of modern adaptors. Shakespeare adaptations are indeed an expansive field of study. Cohn’s threefold classification has proven to be too rigid since it is inadequate to pigeonhole the ambivalent (post)modern dramatic responses. Rather than categorising a particular adaptation into well-delineated groups, scholars should try to situate it on a “reception continuum,” according to its distance to the original play (Hutcheon, *Adaptation* 171). At one end of the continuum, there are those adaptations that stay loyal to Shakespeare’s version, and preserve the Shakespearean plot, characters, and text. At the other end of the continuum are the adaptations that entail a radical relation to Shakespeare and reinterpret and revise the original story.

As a result of the ever-expanding corpus of Shakespeare adaptations, it is difficult to gain a clear view on the range of adaptation and adaptive strategies. In order to grasp the enormous diversity and creativity of the theatrical adaptations, a small number of scholars have initiated to anthologise them. Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier have made a meritorious effort by compiling adaptations from the last four centuries. In their book, *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A critical anthology of plays from the 17th Century to the Present* (2000), they discuss some adaptations extensively and, most importantly, incorporate an extensive list of titles for further study. This “eclectic anthology” includes “a range of responses to Shakespeare across time and also across cultures” (Carson 102). Their aim was to acquire an miscellaneous overview and stimulate scholars and students to examine some lesser-known
adaptations. Meanwhile, Daniel Fischlin has also started an online anthology, the Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project (2004). Over the last four decades, adapting Shakespeare has been an extremely popular enterprise in Canada. Fischlin endeavours to collect information about the Canadian adaptations and their authors and tries to keep up with the continuous inflow of new material. These inventories are extremely useful for further studies as they reveal the diversity and omnipresence of adaptations and expose the paucity of descriptive work that has been done on plays like MacDonald’s Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet).

3.2. Relation between Adaptation and Source Play

In the past, many scholars considered adaptations to be unoriginal, inferior, or even treasonous copies of masterpieces. Fortunately, modern scholars, like Linda Hutcheon, have defended the positive value of adaptations. Hutcheon argues that “adaptations are derived from, ripped off from, but are not derivative or second-rate” (Adaptation 169). She challenges the common misrepresentation, and explains that an adaptation does not parasite its predecessor: “[a]n adaptation is not vampiric: it does not draw the life-blood from its source and leave it dying or dead, nor is it paler than the adapted work. It may, on the contrary, keep that work alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise” (Adaptation 176). Adaptations are “both a process of creation and reception,” they play upon earlier texts and derive and reincorporate elements from them (Adaptation xiv). They function as a playwright’s response to the initial text and author.

Over the last decades, multiple attempts have been made to specify the exact relation between Shakespeare’s plays and their theatrical adaptations. Several theorists and critics have investigated the consequences of an adaptation in relation to the original author and canon. The majority of them, however, have been thinking in dichotomous terms and
consequently they have oversimplified how adaptations relate to their source works. The traditional model divides the theatrical responses in two separate groups: adaptations are either paying a tribute to Shakespeare or they are dethroning him. Similarly, Hutcheon distinguishes between “adaptations of Shakespeare [that are] intended as tributes” and those “as a way to supplant canonical cultural authority” (Adaptation 93). The theorists Fischlin and Fortier share this vision and state that some adaptors “seek to supplant or overthrow, others borrow from Shakespeare’s status to give resonance to their own efforts” (6). According to this oppositional model, some reworkings of Shakespeare show respect and entail a corroboration of Shakespeare’s canonical status, whereas others adopt a rather iconoclastic attitude. For instance, a burlesque version of one of Shakespeare’s plays celebrates and reinforces Shakespeare since it entirely depends on the original version and takes Shakespeare’s universality for granted (Bradley 5-6). A play like Tom Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (1966), on the other hand, supposedly disrupts and supplants Shakespeare’s Hamlet, as the play focuses on two minor characters and writes in the margins of the source play.

Nonetheless, this traditional binary opposition does no longer suffice as it fails to describe the complex interaction of many (post)modern works with Shakespeare. Lynne Bradley (2008), a young adaptation theorist, advocates for the suspension of the traditional dichotomy and puts a new model forward. She argues that several modern adaptations constitute “a complex double gesture that celebrates Shakespeare and rejects him at the same time” (emphasis added, 9). Indeed, many modern adaptations display this new way of interacting with Shakespeare. In order to comprehend the relationship to their theatrical ancestor, one needs to desert the traditional categories. Scholars should revise the conventional model to expand its applicability. The breakdown of the long-established adaptation model certainly opens new perspectives on Shakespeare adaptations.
Modern adaptors engage in a complex and ambivalent relationship with Shakespeare since they bend and subvert elements of his plays. In some cases, they entirely transform and parody Shakespeare’s plays, as they carry out generic changes or introduce non-Shakespearean characters. These adaptations are far removed from the Shakespearean basis and might even imply a critique toward the original play. Even though these rewrites are certainly challenging Shakespeare’s plays, they are also reaffirming Shakespeare’s universality. The fact that a playwright goes back to Shakespeare, is a tribute in itself. Adaptors depend on Shakespeare’s heritage to reject him (Bradley 9). This double attitude – rejection and celebration at once – is exactly the basis for Bradley’s new adaptation model. On the one hand, modern adaptations criticise the original versions. On the other hand, the adaptors also acknowledge and show respect to their theatrical ancestor, since they draw on his universal value, and rely on the audience’s familiarity with the original play to establish the effect and difference between the two versions. According to theorist Linda Hutcheon, even radical adaptations “reinforce the value of literary heritage” (Adaptation 6). No matter how disruptive the adaptations are, they are still indebted to Shakespeare, as their conception entirely relies on the Elizabethan play(s).

The German critic Wilhelm Hortmann (2008) emphasises that even postmodern parodies and burlesques of Shakespeare’s plays do not have the supposed iconoclastic effect: “The cultural icon remained un tarnished by being exposed to the topical allusions, the mix of genres, and the general topsy-turvy-dom of its burlesque” (200). Yet, these plays add new perspectives and explore new interpretations of Shakespeare’s work. By subverting the original plot and the classic characterisations, they also reveal the stereotypical interpretations and preconceptions about the Elizabethan plays.

It is worth noting that some modern adaptations are so dense and multi-layered that they also function independently. Consequently, it is possible to interpret these adaptations as
adaptations, or as theatrical works on their own. Hutcheon explains that “for an adaptation to be successful in its own right, it must be so for both knowing and unknowing audience” (Adaptation 121). Clearly, the knowing spectators will derive more meaning from the play; however, spectators that do not pick up on the similarity or contrast with the adapted play, may still enjoy the performance. Even without observing “the intertextual pleasure,” these modern plays stand on their own (Hutcheon, Adaptation 117).

In summary, adaptation scholars still have a lot of work on hand. Theorists need to reconsider the definition and the nature of adaptations. They are confronted with an ever-expanding corpus, and must continue to detect and describe the many adaptive strategies in use. Furthermore, it is necessary to renew the traditional adaptation models, supporting a wider applicability in the field of Shakespeare reception. Modern adaptations often entail a double gesture toward Shakespeare, they honour and reject him at the same time. Shakespeare’s works remain a source of inspiration for many playwrights. As adapting Shakespeare is an ongoing practise, the creation of anthologies and inventories is extremely helpful for future scholarship. In my opinion, each adaptation should be discussed and analysed individually, rather than being classified into rigid taxonomies. I therefore argue that an individual approach is the best way to disclose an adaptation’s complex interaction with Shakespeare.
IV. Situating Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)

4.1 Situating Play within Adaptation & Reception History

It is beyond doubt that MacDonald drew upon several of Shakespeare’s plays in order to write Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet). In the preceding notes on the play, MacDonald acknowledges Shakespeare in the following way: “The Bard is immanent, and beyond thanks” (2). Another indication can be found in the title, which explicitly refers to two famous Shakespeare characters; Desdemona, one of the main characters in Othello, the Moor of Venice (circa 1603) and Juliet, one of the title characters in Romeo and Juliet (circa 1596). However, these are not the only characters that MacDonald borrows from Shakespeare; Othello, Iago, Romeo, Juliet’s nurse, Tybalt, and Mercutio also take part in this play.

The entire plot revolves around the two Elizabethan plays. At the very beginning of the performance, the ending scenes of Othello and Romeo and Juliet are enacted simultaneously on stage. In the first scene of MacDonald’s play, the protagonist, Constance Ledbelly, appears on stage, carrying a copy of the complete works of Shakespeare (7). Soon after, the audience discovers that Constance is an Assistant Professor at Queen’s University and that she is writing her doctoral dissertation on the origins of Shakespeare’s Othello and Romeo and Juliet. She sets out to tackle the illusion of Shakespeare’s originality. While Constance is reading and studying several scenes of both plays in her copy, the Elizabethan characters appear on the forestage to act them out (9-14). At the end of the first act, Constance is literally pulled into the world of these source narratives (23). At first, she observes the developing story as a mere bystander, but then she ventures to address the Shakespearean characters. She even interferes with their doings, thus changing the outcome of the two source narratives (infra 5.2.1.B. Genre Bending). Constance’s interventions have a huge impact on the lives of the Shakespearean characters. Constance becomes aware of the disruptive
consequences of her actions and exclaims: “I’ve wrecked a masterpiece. I’ve ruined the play” (25). A few scenes later, she notes: “The Mona Lisa and a babe float by. / Which one of these two treasures do you save? / I’ve saved the baby, and let the Mona drown,” hinting at her iconoclastic actions (33). Indeed, MacDonald’s adaptation takes a radical approach toward the two Shakespearean tragedies. In *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, MacDonald reconsiders and transforms some of Shakespeare’s most captivating and well-known stories and characters.

Clearly, MacDonald’s play contains countless explicit references to Shakespeare and his works. The Canadian playwright transports characters and storylines from his plays to her own work. However, MacDonald entirely rewrites, or rather, reinvents both plays. She even subverts the famous handkerchief scene and pillow scene from *Othello*, and the fencing scene and balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, which I will discuss in more detail later on. Some critics have argued that MacDonald’s play is too radical to be an adaptation of Shakespeare. However, Fischlin and Fortier’s anthology as well as the online anthology, *Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project*, do include this play as a Shakespeare adaptation. Furthermore, this play most clearly fits Bradley’s definition of adaptation (supra 10). MacDonald explicitly refers to Shakespeare’s plays on multiple levels: title, characters, narrative, language, and themes. Because this play completely transforms and disrupts the original plays, I would situate this play on the extreme end of the reception continuum.

Being an intellectual artist, MacDonald is undoubtedly well-familiar with Shakespeare’s work. The fact that she ventures to revisit two of his most famous narratives, *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, does not mean that she is not an appreciator of Shakespeare’s dramaturgy. MacDonald does not set out to disrupt his authority. On the contrary, in an interview with Melanie Lee Lockhart (2005), she states:
And in terms of Shakespeare, it’s really the centre of the canon. When I went to the National Theatre School, and through high school, there was this idea that there’s no greater writer than Shakespeare. But I didn’t come to love Shakespeare until I started to screw around with Shakespeare. Then I developed a love of Shakespeare. I approached it simply as raw material that I thought was probably kind of boring and this was going to be fun. I think [Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)] ended up as a tribute to Shakespeare. It’s a testimonial. Because it was done in the spirit of ransacking –and that’s what Shakespeare did. And I think the greatest thing you can do for an author is to make free with him, ultimately, or they won’t survive. If they’re going to survive, they have to survive all kinds of things. (150)

Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) reflects a double gesture toward Shakespeare. MacDonald “expresses an awareness of both [her] debt to him and [her] difference from him. [Her] interaction with Shakespeare reflects a need to acknowledge him and to write against those positions he is seen to represent” (Bradley 8). In addition, it is important to point out that each adaptation, whether it sets out to reproduce or subvert, entirely depends on Shakespeare and his oeuvre, since it would not have been possible without the preceding existence and fame of his plays. Therefore, one should acknowledge that MacDonald, like any adaptor, “re-affirms the cultural power and the canonical precedence of the Bard” (Mirrlees 59).

MacDonald uses Shakespeare’s works as a springboard for her own play. She bends and blends Shakespearean conventions and employs a collage technique to create her own version of the traditional stories. In her theoretical book, Modern Shakespeare Offshoots, Ruby Cohn (1976) explains that this technique “estranges the [original] play by omitting and repeating Shakespearean lines, assigning them to different characters, and thus emerging with different scenes” (81). MacDonald decontextualises fragments of scenes and plot structure by
transporting them to her own play. In this way, she playfully deconstructs the original stories. The playwright reinvents the classic characters and explores the inherent possibilities. The new version constitutes a complete updating of the stories into contemporary culture and ideology. MacDonald brilliantly succeeds in dissolving the stereotypical interpretations and suggesting a modern alternative.

*Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* defies the audience’s expectations by subverting all characters and storylines. In this case, the contrast between MacDonald’s adaptation and Shakespeare’s plays creates a comic effect. In fact, humour and parody play a central role in this play. MacDonald asserts that humour is “a way of inviting the reader in, and that’s exactly about complicity. And once you’ve established that complicity, once you’ve welcomed the reader, then you can do all kinds of weird things. And then, you can be outrageous” (Lockhart 154). In other words, humour becomes “the vehicle of subversion” (Dvorak 129). MacDonald parodies the Shakespearean plot, language, style, and characters (infra 6. Bending Shakespeare: Comparative Study). The reversal of scenes, the exaggeration of certain characteristics, and the introduction of stock elements contribute to the play’s burlesque effect. Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier (2000) explain the power of Shakespeare adaptations:

> Shakespearean adaptation . . . is not about faithful adherence to the narrative or performance conventions of traditional Shakespeare, but about the degree to which the playwright can transform that material and reshape conventions in such a way as to expose the orthodoxies that support the tradition. When successful, such reshaping puts the enormous cultural power of Shakespeare to work in a way that undermines the way in which that power conventionally operates. (17)
4.2. Situating Play within Theatre Tradition

*Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, written in 1988, is considered to be a post-modernist play. According to Pantaleo and Sipe (2008), post-modernism is an art movement that is characterized by a general distrust and questioning of former absolute theories and values. This critical re-evaluation of common assumptions began in the 1970s as a reaction against modernist ideals. Other important post-modern practices include experimentation, fragmentation, self-awareness, bending and breaking of rules, and blurring of boundaries. The most salient feature of post-modernism perhaps, is the use of intertexts. The pre-eminent modes of expression are irony, parody and humour (Pantaleo and Sipe 1-8).

Post-modern theatre shares the same philosophy and characteristics. To verify whether *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* is part of this movement, I will briefly touch upon some of the most important post-modern elements. Firstly, one could certainly claim this play distrusts former absolute values, as it questions and investigates Shakespeare’s canonical status. Secondly, MacDonald’s treatment of the Shakespearean plot, characters and conventions highlights her experimental attitude. This leads us directly to the third element, the bending and blurring of boundaries. MacDonald’s script blends poetic language and colloquialisms. She also transgresses the border between tragedy and comedy (infra 5.2.1.B. Genre Bending) and gender roles (infra 8.1. Gender Bending). However, the use - or abuse - of intertexts is possibly the most striking postmodern practice in this play. MacDonald vigorously transforms, rearranges, and recycles scenes and elements of Shakespeare’s plays, as I will discuss in more detail later on. Another post-modern characteristic of this play is the use of parody and the omnipresence of humour. At multiple moments in the play, the discrepancy between the Shakespearean source material and MacDonald’s adaptation produces a comic effect. Finally, the theatrical nature of the play is also put forward
Throughout the story (infra 7.2. Theatricality). Throughout the performance, the characters make remarks, directed toward the audience, which comment on what is happening or has just happened. These remarks are called meta-comments. When used in a play, this aesthetic device is called meta-theatre. Other meta-elements and techniques will be examined later on (infra 7.1. Metatheatre). Considering the presence and validity of the main features, it is safe to say this play can therefore be labelled as a post-modern play.
V. Use of Intertextuality

It might be useful to look at Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* as intertexts rather than source texts. In fact, adaptations are closely related to the notion of intertextuality. According to Hutcheon, an “[a]daptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations . . . as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation” (*Adaptation* 8).

5.1. Definition of Intertextuality

Generally speaking, the notion of intertextuality, a term coined by Julia Kristeva, implies that a certain text or artwork, implicitly or explicitly, refers to other texts or artworks. This procedure calls for a more active reader, one who is familiar with the work the author is referring to (whether it is a poem, a novel, a play, etc.) and is also able to recognise it. Chronologically speaking, the work that the author refers to always precedes the work which contains the reference to it. The text that contains references or allusions to other texts is called a hypertext, while the one being referred to is called an intertext. According to Kristeva, intertextuality is “a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an intertextuality)” (“Revolution” 59). All texts are therefore interdependent, or in Kristeva’s words: “[A]ny text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (“Desire” 66). For example, the play *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* absorbs and transforms Shakespeare’s plays, which in their turn have also absorbed and transformed earlier material. One could say the borrowed elements from a previous author gain new meaning as part of a new work.
5.2. Identification of Intertexts

Throughout this play, MacDonald deliberately refers and alludes to previous literary and theatrical works. The use of intertexts is actually a common practice in the work of MacDonald. In her debut novel, *Fall On Your Knees* (1996), for example, MacDonald combines intertextual references to songs, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, moving pictures, and novels such as *Wuthering Heights* (Emily Brönte) and *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brönte) (Staels).

One should the presence of intertexts as an added value, since the references contribute to the density of the hypertext, thus creating a layered effect. MacDonald wants the included intertexts to have “a cumulating effect of feeling” (Lockhart 147). However, much of the effect relies on the reader’s ability to recognise the references and allusions. MacDonald herself notes that “[f]or the reader who does pick up on them, the experience is heightened because every time you make mention of one of them, the entire world that comes with that reference comes to your story as well” (Lockhart 147). Moreover, the use of intertexts may also invite the reader’s complicity, or, as MacDonald explains, “[the] reader will feel included and proud for having recognized” (Lockhart 153).

Intertextuality and citation depend on the deliberate and conscious use of pre-existing cultural material. Seen in this light, a work of adaptation like MacDonald’s play is a valuable exercise, since it refers to a variety of other authors. She extracts words, sentences and speeches from Shakespeare’s plays and adds them to her own work. In the published script of *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, all direct quotes are set in a different font. This certainly facilitates the identification of the intertexts, thereby contributing to the reader’s involvement. However, a spectator who attends a performance of this play does not have this advantage, he or she has to recognise the references without help from the playwright. Spectators with certain knowledge of Shakespeare’s work will be more likely to make sense of all allusions. In order to give an adequate analysis of *Goodnight Desdemona*
(Good Morning Juliet), it is imperative that I now identify and interpret the various intertextual references.

5.2.1 Othello and Romeo and Juliet

Shakespeare’s Othello (circa 1604) and Romeo and Juliet (circa 1595) are the two main intertexts in this play. In this segment, I shall examine how the Shakespearean tragedies are rendered in MacDonald’s play. First, I will investigate the way in which the original texts are represented in this stage play. The different techniques of representation will be illustrated with several examples from the printed text. Secondly, I will take a closer look at the generic differences between Shakespeare’s plays and MacDonald’s creation.

A. Textual Analysis

There is a noticeable evolution in MacDonald’s attitude toward the Shakespearean script. As the play progresses, MacDonald’s approach to the original play gradually becomes more radical. In fact, it is possible to distinguish three successive modes of representation. In the beginning, the playwright’s rendition of the events remains faithful to the Elizabethan version. During the Dumb Show, the tragic ending scenes of both Othello and Romeo and Juliet are truthfully depicted on stage (MacDonald 5). The only difference is that in MacDonald’s play, the scenes are presented without spoken dialogue.

The first act of Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) displays a different attitude toward the Shakespearean texts. MacDonald incorporates scenes from the two plays, but cuts lines and fragments of the dialogue. This results in a misrepresentation of the original scenes. An illustration of this approach can be found in the fragment where Iago tries to mislead Othello by inciting him against Desdemona (10-11). This conversation between Iago
and Othello is actually a condensation of two entire scenes in Shakespeare’s version\(^2\). This substantial cut drastically accelerates the development of action. Compared to the Shakespearean version, this scene causes the spectators to conjure a very different image of Othello, who is so hasty in mistrusting and condemning Desdemona.

The moment when Constance enters into the Shakespearean world, marks the beginning of the third mode of representation (24). From this point onward, MacDonald adopts a more radical approach toward the original versions. Constance interrupts and disrupts the ‘normal’ proceedings of the other characters. The normal course of events is subverted and so the original Shakespearean stories fall apart. However, rather than abandoning the original storylines all together, MacDonald ingeniously recycles various fragments and elements. She reinserts various original lines and dialogues in the new story. These remnants of the original plays are also subverted since they have to function in an entirely new context.

I shall now illustrate the various techniques MacDonald uses to represent and subvert the Shakespearean subtexts with several examples. In order to facilitate the confrontation and comparison between the two versions, I created two columns; the column on the left-hand side contains the original text by Shakespeare, whereas the lines on the right are taken from MacDonald’s play.

Throughout the play, MacDonald playfully rearranges the original lines and even reassigns them to different characters. In the following excerpt, Iago tries to mislead Desdemona and incite her against Constance:

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\(^2\) Following lines are glued together as if they belong to one continuous dialogue:

(3.3)396-398, 477-488, 524   (4.1)193-197b, 201   (3.3)527b-528
In Shakespeare’s version, Iago tries to deceive Othello, leading him to believe that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio. MacDonald’s play also contains this handkerchief scene (23), but since Constance prevented Iago’s plan from succeeding, the latter now tries to incite Desdemona against Constance by means of revenge. Even though this dialogue takes place with a different character, there is a striking textual similarity. Later on in the play, Iago tries to make Desdemona believe Constance is having an affair with her husband, Othello. Similar to Shakespeare’s Othello, Desdemona needs proof of this deceit:

**OTHELLO.** Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore; Be sure of it: give me the ocular proof, Or by the worth of mine eternal soul, Thou hadst been better have been born a dog Than answer my wak’d wrath! (3.3.397-401)

**DESDEMONA.** If she be false, heaven mocked itself. 
[Holding her sword at IAGO’s throat]
Wretch, be sure to prove my friend a villainess
Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof. (47)

Again, MacDonald skilfully reuses parts of the original speeches. Desdemona speaks Othello’s lines. Even though these lines function in an entirely new –yet parallel– context, they make perfect sense. One can only fully appreciate the cunning humour of similar scenes in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* if one is familiar with the original version. For the most part, the effect relies on the spectator’s ability to not only recognise the specific lines, but also to notice and consider the discrepancy between the contexts in which the lines are uttered/used.
Frequently, the humour of a certain scene is not based on the similarity, but rather on the discrepancy between Shakespeare’s version and MacDonald’s creation. In the following excerpts, there is a striking difference:

IAGO. Patience, I say; your mind may change.
OTHELLO. Never, Iago. Like to the Pontic Sea, whose icy current and compulsive course Ne’er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on To the Propontic and the Hellespont, Even so my bloody thoughts with violent pace, Shall ne’er look back, ne’er ebb to humble love, Till that a capable and wide revenge Swallow them up. (3.3.498-506a)

IAGO. Patience, I say. Your mind may change.
DESDEMONA. As well it may. La donna é mobile. (42)

Whereas Othello’s lengthy response indicates his determination, Desdemona’s answer reflects her volatile and capricious nature. Moreover, Desdemona’s concise remark contrasts sharply with Othello’s elaborate and metaphorical answer. The Italian expression “La donna é mobile,” hints at the clichéd female fickleness and at the same time refers to another intertext, Verdi’s opera Rigoletto (infra 5.2.4).

Another way to “overwrite” Shakespeare’s version is ridiculing Shakespearean elements and conventions by reinscribing them in a new context, which renders them absurd and/or outdated. Originally, Sampson and Gregory, two servants of the Capulet family, provoke the Montagues by biting their thumb at them. This insulting gesture soon escalates into a fight between the Capulets and the Montagues. In the following excerpt, MacDonald makes fun of this passage:

SAMPSON. Nay, as they dare.
I will bite my thumb at them;
which is a disgrace to them, if they bear it.
ABRAHAM. Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?
SAMPSON. I do bite my thumb, sir.
ABRAHAM. Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?
SAMPSON. [Aside]
TYBALT. [laughter – CONSTANCE nervously bites her thumbnail]
Do you bite your thumb at me sir?!
CONSTANCE. No! I just bite my nails, that’s all.
TYBALT. Do you bite your nails at me sir?
CONSTANCE. No I swear! Look, I’ll never bite them again. This’ll be a great chance for me to
Tybalt notices Constance’s compulsive habit. He interprets this gesture as offensive, according to Elizabethan societal norms. This almost escalates in a fight; however, in contrast to Shakespeare’s text, the duel is averted. Instead, an absurd conversation about nail-biting takes place between Constance and Tybalt. Once again, MacDonald pulls the original sentences out of the Shakespearean context and puts them in a new, present-day perspective. It is precisely this sharp contrast that produces the absurd and comic effect.

Furthermore, MacDonald also radically transforms the two perhaps most famous scenes of Romeo and Juliet and Othello, namely “the balcony scene” (Romeo 2.1) and “the pillow scene” (Othello 5.2). First, I will take a look at how MacDonald reconsiders and rewrites the balcony scene. After altering the course of events, Constance tries her best to recover the original play, but it is already too late for that. The result is that Romeo and Juliet, the paragon of romantic love and passion, have grown bored of one another after only one day of marriage. Constance is mistaken for a boy (infra 8.1. Gender bending) and both Romeo and Juliet fall madly in love with her. In the following excerpt, Juliet sets out to declare her love to Constance – or rather, Constantine:

Enter JULIET below the balcony, dressed in Romeo’s clothing.

JULIET. [Below] But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?
   It is the East, and Constantine the sun!
CONSTANCE. Uh oh. (67)

The setting and Juliet’s two first lines are sufficient to remind Constance and the audience of the balcony scene. MacDonald’s version totally undermines the canonical status of this scene. This crucial moment is turned upside down: instead of Juliet, it is Constance who is up on the
The setting (bedchamber), the pillow, and the first sentence help the audience to recognise the situation. In this climax scene, a jealous Desdemona tries to smother Constance. Othello’s lines are reassigned to Desdemona. The difference with the reconstruction of the balcony scene is that in this case Constance, a non-Shakespearean character, joins in and responds with the exact words of the original Desdemona.

During the last scene of the third act, MacDonald diverts the lines from Othello to Juliet. At this stage, even the Shakespearean plays – the intertexts – interact with each other:
CONSTANCE. Juliet?

[Juliet screams]

JULIET. Not dead?

[Constance shakes her head]

Not yet quite dead?

CONSTANCE. Not one bit dead. (81)

This ingenious scene is an excellent example of MacDonald’s skills. *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* is a playful cut and paste job. By incorporating decontextualised Shakespearean elements, familiar scenes and speeches suddenly become unfamiliar. MacDonald bends the Shakespearean speeches, reverses the original scenes, inverts the roles and reassigns the lines in order to investigate and reconsider Shakespeare’s universality.

B. Genre Bending

Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* are both tragedies. In *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, MacDonald eliminates the tragic elements and replaces them with comical ones, or, as the critic Djordjevic (2003) notes, she “manages to transform the two source narratives into their generic opposites” (3). In order to fully understand how MacDonald transforms these tragic stories, it might be interesting to briefly examine the dramatic structure of both plays and then confront and contrast them with MacDonald’s play.

In 1863, Gustav Freytag published his book *Die Technik des Dramas*, in which he explains his dramatic theory, known as Freytag’s pyramid or triangle (see fig. 1). This method can be applied to describe and analyse the plot structure of dramatic works. I will use his model to schematise the various structural stages of Shakespeare’s plays. According to Freytag, there are five successive stages in a tragedy: exposition and initial conflict, rising action, turning point, falling action, and catastrophe.
Shakespeare’s *Othello* is a typical degradation story, a story which describes the downfall of a heroic figure (Keunen 135). In the beginning, Othello leads a happy and balanced life (*exposition*). Iago feels badly done by Othello, because he has been passed over for promotion. He manipulates Othello and tricks him into believing his wife, Desdemona, is unfaithful to him (*initial conflict*). Othello needs proof and begins a quest for evidences (*rising action*). Iago’s wife steals Desdemona’s handkerchief, a present from Othello, and then the resentful Iago invents a story that he has seen the handkerchief in Cassio’s possession (who was promoted instead of Iago). Othello becomes mad with jealousy and wants revenge (*turning point*). The irrational Othello ultimately kills Desdemona (pillow scene). Then, the truth about Iago is revealed and Othello becomes aware of his mistake (*falling action*). At the very end, the remorseful Othello stabs himself and dies (*catastrophe*).

![Freytag’s Triangle](image)

Fig. 1. Freytag’s Triangle from Bart Keunen; “Vergelijkende Literatuurwetenschap”, Hand-out April 2007, Ghent University.

The same five stages are also present in *Romeo and Juliet*. The two protagonists meet at a masquerade and fall in love (*exposition*). However, a feud between their families prevents them from seeing each other thereby impeding their romance. Nevertheless, Romeo and Juliet are madly in love and plan to marry (*initial conflict*). During a fierce duel between the Montagues and Capulets, Romeo kills Juliet’s cousin Tybalt to revenge the death of his dear
friend, Mercutio (turning point). As punishment, Romeo is sent into exile. Meanwhile, Juliet decides to drink sleeping potion to stage her own death. That way, she and Romeo can elope later on (falling action). Romeo, unaware of these latest developments, receives word of Juliet’s supposed death. Mournful and heartbroken, Romeo goes to the crypt and drinks a poisonous liquid to commit suicide. Soon after, Juliet awakes and finds Romeo dead. She then stabs herself through the heart with a dagger (catastrophe).

In *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, MacDonald inserts a non-Shakespearean character in the Shakespearean stories. After having been warped into the Shakespearean world (23), Constance irrevocably changes the course of events. MacDonald carefully chooses the decisive moments in the plot to introduce Constance, a non-Shakespearean character. The timing is crucial and both in Cyprus and Verona, Constance intervenes precisely during the third stage of the plot structure: the turning point (Djordjevic 3). She interrupts Othello and Romeo just as they are about to make a tragic mistake. MacDonald is aware of this “genre-defining moment in a tragic narrative” (Djordjevic 1). Indeed, without this turning point there would not be a tragic ending. Constance arrives in Cyprus and warns Othello against Iago’s devious schemes:

**CONSTANCE. No!**

*Both OTHELLO and IAGO turn and stare at her, amazed*

Um . . . you’re about to make a terrible mistake . . . m’Lord.

*Shocked, and at a loss for words to explain her statement,*

**CONSTANCE gathers her courage and timidly approaches IAGO**

Excuse me please.

*She plucks the handkerchief from IAGO’s hose and gives it to OTHELLO*

**OTHELLO.** Desdemona’s handkerchief! *To IAGO* Which thou didst say she gave to Cassio! (24)

She prevents the tragic chain reaction which otherwise would have resulted in Desdemona’s and Othello’s death. The same thing happens in Verona:
ROMEO. Hold Tybalt! Good Mercutio!

[ROMEO is about to fatally intervene in the sword fight]

CONSTANCE. [Aside] One Mona Lisa down, and one to go.

[She tackles ROMEO. They fly into the sword fight, knocking TYBALT and MERCUTIO aside. TYBALT and MERCUTIO Jump to their feet and immediately point their swords at CONSTANCE while ROMEO sits on her] (50)

Constance prevents Romeo from killing Tybalt and averts tragedy once more. After altering the normal course of events, Constance now plays an active role and from this moment onward, she becomes the new protagonist in both Othello and Romeo and Juliet. Even though the original turning points are taken down, tragedy soon tries to catch up. MacDonald inserts a playful echo of the original stories: Constance now seems to be stuck in the same inescapable tragic development. Iago tricks Desdemona into believing Othello is cheating on her with Constance (initial conflict). In a similar fashion as Othello in Shakespeare’s version, Desdemona wants proof (rising action). Iago deceives her into thinking Othello gave Constance a golden necklace that Othello actually bought for her. Desdemona is furious and wants revenge (turning point). Mad with jealousy, Desdemona tries to kill Constance (pillow scene). At the last moment, Desdemona realises her mistake and Constance survives. The comical repetitiveness of the situation is also noticeable when it comes to Constance and Juliet. When these two characters meet at a masquerade, Juliet instantly falls in love with Constance (exposition). Tybalt and Romeo - and Constance - now try to prevent the romance (raising action). To avoid further confrontation with Tybalt, Constance pretends to be dead. Juliet receives word of Constance’s death and goes to the crypt. Juliet beholds Constance in death pose, whereupon she decides to take her own life. Fortunately, Constance intervenes and persuades her against committing suicide.
Although tragedy seemingly lurks around the corner and catastrophe is ready to repeat itself, there is no tragic ending here, no final catastrophe. In fact, this play has a happy ending, which makes MacDonald’s adaptation a comedy instead of a tragedy (see fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Freytag’s Comedic Triangle from Bart Keunen; “Vergelijkende Literatuurwetenschap”, Hand-out April 2007, Ghent University.

MacDonald subverts the dramatic structure of the Elizabethan plot and inserts comic situations and devices. In other words, this modern plot combines tragic and comic elements, consequentially blurring the boundaries between tragedy and comedy. MacDonald successfully bends and blends the two stories and genres. According to Mark Fortier (1989), this play can be seen as “a reworking of Shakespeare’s genres, ‘a comical Shakespearean romance’ ”(49).

5.2.2. Other Shakespearean Intertexts: Hamlet and King Lear

Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) also refers to two other Shakespearean tragedies, namely Hamlet (circa 1600) and King Lear (circa 1605). MacDonald alludes to these additional intertexts through the use of direct citation. In the first fragment, Desdemona appropriates King Lear’s voice:
CONSTANCE. I’m guilty too:
I helped him in deceiving Queen’s for years.
DESDEMONA. Thine eyes were shrouded by the demon Night,
and so art thou more sinned against than sinning. (37)

MacDonald adds another dimension to the play by letting a character from *Othello* say a line that actually belongs to the title character from *King Lear*. In Shakespeare’s story, King Lear made a huge error in judgement by disinheriting and banishing his daughter Cordelia. In the third act, he cries out that even though he has wronged many people in the past, it was eventually he himself who suffered greater injustice (3.2.57). In Macdonald’s play, Desdemona compares Constance with King Lear. She convinces Constance that, although she made a mistake by ghost-writing for Professor Claude Night, it was him who ultimately took advantage of her. It is worth noting that MacDonald explicitly mentions two other characters from *King Lear*: Goneril and Regan (53).

Secondly, MacDonald also makes some explicit references to *Hamlet*. Constance asks “O, what would Desdemona do to Claude, / had she the motive and the cue for passion / that I have?” (46). These lines are directly taken from Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* (2.2.591-593). In this particular scene, the doubtful Prince of Denmark laments his own inability to revenge his father’s death. Again, this is a playful parallel to Constance’s state of mind, considering she seeks vengeance against Professor Night. Toward the end of the play, Constance is approached by a ghost (73). At first, she thinks it might be the ghost of Yorick, the dead court jester from *Hamlet*. The following excerpt contains another reference to *Hamlet*:

GHOST. Do not forget. This visitation is but to
whet thy almost blunted purpose. Beware of
Tybalt. He hath no sense of humour.
Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me-e-e. (74)
This speech is clearly a combination of two passages in *Hamlet* (1.5.96, 3.4.112-113), in which the ghost appears to remind Hamlet of his task. In a similar fashion, the ghost in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* reminds Constance of her quest for the author of the manuscript.

5.2.3. Quest Story

As said before, Constance is writing her doctorate about the origins of Shakespeare’s *Othello and Romeo and Juliet*. She tries to decipher an old manuscript which, according to her, contains the two source comedies that Shakespeare used to write his tragedies. Constance is warped into the Shakespearean world with a twofold assignment: she needs to find the author of the manuscript as well as discover her own true identity. Structurally and thematically, Constance’s story resembles that of a quest. In his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), Campbell described the various stages of a quest story. He distinguished three main sections: departure, initiation and return. Typically, the protagonist is called to adventure and goes on a search, a journey to find and obtain a certain object or specific knowledge. Often, the seeker needs to travel to distant and exotic worlds, where he has to overcome several obstacles and tests. The hero can only return home when the object of the quest is obtained (Keunen 130-132).

*Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* is organised in a similar way. At the end of the first act, Constance is called to adventure: “Open this book if you agree / to be illusion’s refugee / and of return no guarantee - / unless you find your true identity / And discover who the Author be” (21-22). She accepts the quest and is directly transported from her office at Queen’s University to the exotic worlds of Cyprus and Verona (departure). Constance knows she cannot return home unless she completes the assignment: “[Y]ou see, I can’t return until – That is . . . / my Queens have charged me with a fearful task: / I must find
out my true identity / and then discover who the author be” (30); “It is my quest / And it means more to me than love or death” (71). Throughout the second and third act of the play, she has to stand her ground in the eventful Shakespearean world and needs to overcome a series of obstacles (initiation). At the end of the third act, she discovers that she was actually the author and the fool all along. She bids Juliet and Desdemona farewell and is warped back to her office. She completes the quest and safely returns home (return).

5.2.4. Other Intertexts

For the sake of completeness, I have to mention that MacDonald also inserts references to other literary, poetical and musical works. The remaining intertexts include: the opera Rigoletto (1851) by Giuseppe Verdi (42), the song Volare (1958) by Domenico Modugno (21), the song Young at Heart (1954) by Frank Sinatra (7), Sappho’s love hymns (78), and the novel Jane Eyre (1847) by Charlotte Brönte (53).
VI. Bending Shakespeare: Comparative Study

In the previous part, I discussed *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* as intertexts in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*. It is, however, also possible to regard Shakespeare’s tragedies as pretexts, which function as a point of departure for Macdonald’s play. When an author parodies a certain work, like MacDonald does, he or she departs from the original and preceding text to complete his or her goal (pre-text). An author may want to parody certain elements of the work, like the particular style and the generic conventions, or the entire work in itself. Parody in itself, can be understood as intertextuality on a second level. A work of parody not only contains references to the preceding text, but it is also a critical and ironical treatment of the source text. Once again, the author relies on the competence of the reader or spectator to recognise and make sense of the transformation. In her book, *A Theory of Parody* (1985), Hutcheon underlines the ironical dimension of parody: “[p]arody, therefore, is a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text” (6). What we see here, is a defence of the positive evaluation of parody which she describes as an “act of reassessment and acclimatization” (2). Even though parody transforms and subverts the pre-text, “[the] transgression is always authorized,” considering that “[in] imitating, even with critical difference, parody reinforces” (26). According to Hutcheon, parody is “a mode of coming to terms with the texts of that rich and intimidating legacy of the past” (4). Applied to *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, this shows that MacDonald’s reorganisation and recycling is not necessarily derivative. As said before, it is not MacDonald’s intention to ridicule Shakespeare either. Therefore, MacDonald’s play can be considered as a positive method of dealing with Shakespeare’s universality. One could say that a parody appropriates the pretext, but at the same time it also distances itself from the source text, thus creating a new text. There is a lot
of tension between the text and the pretext, which in this case causes humour. According to Harmon and Holman (2000), a parody “may prove to be a valuable indirect criticism or it may even imply a flattering tribute to the original writer” (376). This double gesture toward the pretexts resembles the relation between modern adaptations and source plays. This is not that surprising either, considering “parody is an ironic subset of adaptation” (Hutcheon, Adaptation 170).

There are various techniques to transform and parody a pretext: exaggeration, inflation, inversion, humour, irony, anachronisms, decontextualisation (historical, geographical or linguistic), word puns and meta-comments (Sklodowska 171). In the following section, I will illustrate how and on what levels MacDonald imitates and parodies Shakespeare’s plays.

6.1. Greek and Renaissance Theatre

MacDonald makes use of several conventions from Greek and Renaissance drama. Even though most of these conventions are considered to be rather out-dated and old-fashioned, she imitates various aspects of these theatre traditions in her play. However, by placing them in a contemporary context, MacDonald draws extra attention to them, consequentially making the audience all the more aware of their presence.

Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) opens with a dumbshow (5). This is a theatrical device that was often used in medieval and early Renaissance drama. During a dumbshow, the actors present the actions without speaking, giving rise to pantomimic scenes. Shakespeare also made use of this device, for instance in Hamlet. During MacDonald’s modern dumbshow, three scenes are enacted simultaneously: the two final scenes of Othello
and *Romeo and Juliet*, which display the catastrophic deaths of all four protagonists, and an alternative ending scene for Constance’s story.

MacDonald’s play also contains a prologue and an epilogue, both very common devices in Greek and Elizabethan drama. Traditionally, the prologue and epilogue were told by a narrator, who often also played the part of a minor character in the play. The prologue serves as an introduction to the play, the narrator already informs the audience of the main themes and characters or supplies a possible frame of interpretation. The epilogue contains the final conclusion, a critical remark, or an invitation toward the audience to reflect about the true meaning of the play. In this adaptation, the prologue and epilogue are told by the Chorus. In the prologue (5-6), this narrator talks about fate, identity and the subconscious, which are all thematically important as I will discuss later on in more detail (infra 8.2. Existential Crisis). The narrator also introduces the audience to the protagonist of the play, Constance Ledbelly. And the epilogue concludes with a philosophical recapitulation of the play (89). The choral presence is in itself already a reference to Greek staging conventions. The chorus normally consists of a fairly large group of actors. The function of this device is to provide comments on the play during the actual performance. In this play, however, except for the prologue and epilogue, the one-man chorus only intervenes once. At the end of the first act, the chorus comments on the impossibility of the past events and then urges the audience to nevertheless accept them as real in order to fully experience the true meaning of the play (22).

As said before, MacDonald also imitates the generic conventions of Renaissance drama. She incorporates the five typical stages of a tragedy and subverts them (supra 29). MacDonald parodies the events which lead to the downfall of the major characters in the original plays. According to Constance, the turning points in Shakespeare’s tragedies are based on “flimsy mistakes – a lost hanky, a delayed wedding announcement – mistakes too easily concocted and corrected by a Wise Fool” (14). She argues that without these
coincidental incidents, Shakespeare’s plays would have been comedies. Interestingly, this is precisely what MacDonald had in mind: defuse the turning points and turn Shakespeare’s tragedies into comedies. In other words, *Goodnight Desdemona* (Good Morning Juliet) provides a ‘what if’ alternative: what if Desdemona’s handkerchief had been retrieved, what if Romeo and Juliet had made their wedding plans public? MacDonald’s version has a happy ending, as the tragic downfall of the protagonists is averted so that at the end of the play nobody dies, in sharp contrast with the original plays where death is omnipresent.

Next to genre, MacDonald also parodies several other theatrical conventions. Like Shakespeare, MacDonald uses comic devices such as cross-dressing and mistaken identity in her play. In Elizabethan times, women were not allowed on stage, so all female characters were actually played by male actors to start with. In addition, Shakespeare frequently made use of cross-dressing in his comedies. This implies that female characters disguise themselves as men or male characters disguise themselves as women. In some of his works, cross-dressing even plays a central role in the plot. In *As You Like It* (circa 1600), for instance, Rosalind, the daughter of the duke, is banished to the Forest of Arden. There she cross-dresses as Ganymede, a young shepherd. Dressed as Ganymede, Rosalind meets Orlando, with whom she had fallen in love before her banishment. Orlando does not recognise her and confides his love for Rosalind to Ganymede. As Ganymede, she offers Orlando to help him seduce Rosalind. Ganymede pretends to be Rosalind to let Orlando practice his wooing. Shakespeare makes clever use of this mistaken identity and gender confusion. In fact, a male actor pretends to be Rosalind who pretends to be Ganymede who poses as Rosalind. Similar gender complications are common in Shakespeare’s play, they heighten the comic effect and give rise to ambiguities. MacDonald also makes use of this plot device for her play *Goodnight Desdemona* (Good Morning Juliet). In the beginning of the third act, Constance is warped from Cyprus to Verona (49). Constance appears on stage “wearing just her longjohns, boots
and tweed jacket” (50). Her skirt was ripped off during a sword fight and stayed behind in Cyprus. This explains why Romeo, Tybalt and Mercutio mistake her for a boy. Constance decides to play along and renames herself Constantine. Like in Shakespeare’s plays, this mistaken identity leads to absurd situations and funny scenes. Romeo and Juliet both fall in love with Constantine and set out to seduce him. Romeo, on the one hand, thinks Constantine is only attracted to women: “I’ll wear a woman’s gown until I die, / sith it’s a piece of skirt that likes his eye” (65). Juliet, on the other hand, thinks Constantine is attracted to men: “I now perceive the slant of Constantine’s desire. / He looks to match his stick to light his fire. / And since he savours a two legged pose, / I’ll into Romeo’s closet and steal a hose” (65). The very next scene, Juliet appears dressed in Romeo’s clothing and Romeo in Juliet’s clothing, both of them trying to woo Constantine (68-72). For this purpose, Romeo even renames himself: “Constantine . . . it is I, Romiet . . .” (72). All through the third act, Constantine is dressed in longjohns, Juliet is wearing a doublet and tights, and Romeo appears on stage in a dress. MacDonald clearly parodies Romeo and Juliet, she turns one of his most famous tragedies into a travesty. MacDonald skilfully combines overt cross-dressing, mistaken identity, gender confusion, and character reversal to build up to a climax.

Shakespearean plays occasionally include stage fencing and duels. The two most famous fight scenes are probably the duel between Hamlet and Laertes (Hamlet 5.3), and the swordplay in Romeo and Juliet, when Tybalt slays Mercutio and Romeo kills Tybalt (3.1). MacDonald also inserts various fighting scenes in Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet). The second half of the play contains a lot of stage action. The first stage fight takes place in Cyprus. Iago and Desdemona are merely practising their fencing skills; however, Constance thinks they are engaged in a real fight and she intervenes to save Desdemona from Iago (46). In the next fight, Desdemona attacks Constance in a burst of jealousy (49). Soon after, Constance is transported to Verona and there she intervenes again, this time during the
well-known fight scene between Tybalt, Mercutio and Romeo: She tackles ROMEO. They fly into the sword fight, knocking TYBALT and MERCUTIO aside. TYBALT and MERCUTIO jump to their feet and immediately point their swords at CONSTANCE while ROMEO sits on her (50). Constance is able to free herself from this perilous situation. Later on in the play, Constance is once again involved in a swordfight, this time she fights against Tybalt:

TYBALT. A l’arme!
[TYBALT tosses her a sword. She catches it]
CONSTANCE. All right, then, come on! [Swishes her sword] I trained in Cyprus you know, come on. [Swish] Hit me. [Thumping her chest] Hit me right here.
[TYBALT lunges. CONSTANCE yelps with fear and fends him off clumsily] (75)

The final fight scene takes place between Desdemona and Constance. Desdemona tries to smother Constance in the bed with a pillow (81). Throughout the play, there is a lot of physical action and violence. In Shakespeare’s plays, fights and duels were a matter of honour the participants fought to the death. Constance, by contrast, always manages to escape at the very last minute, usually by pure chance.

Some of Shakespeare’s plays, for example As You Like it, feature a love triangle or even quadrangle between several characters. MacDonald’s play also contains a love triangle, a very complex one actually: Romeo – Juliet – Constance/Constantine. The cross-dressing and mistaken identity give rise to a complicated web of potential heterosexual and homosexual relations. This provides MacDonald with the opportunity to explore different types of love and gender preferences (infra 8.1. Gender Bending).

Finally, one should also mention that Shakespeare often includes supernatural elements in his works. In Hamlet, for example, Shakespeare uses a ghost as a messenger and plot catalyst. The ghost makes several appearances in the play, reminding Hamlet to avenge his father’s death and kill his uncle. As said before, Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) also features a ghost. Similar to Shakespeare’s story, the ghost appears to remind Constance of her quest and to give her advice. In fact, some lines directly refer to
Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The fact that Constance can be warped to Cyprus and Verona also may remind the audience of the divine intervention in Greek drama.

In conclusion, Macdonald makes clever use of multiple Greek and Elizabethan conventions and plot devices. She imitates them and then takes it one step further. She incorporates several conventional dramatic techniques and juxtaposes them with the contemporary context. The play combines different generic characteristics and the plot involves various theatrical devices such as love triangles, cross-dressing, and mistaken identity.

6.2. Metre, Style, and Language

As said before, MacDonald recycles fragments and pieces of Shakespeare’s original texts (supra 5.2.1.A.). According to Cohn (1976), adaptations, like this play, “both value and devalue language: they value it because they offer Shakespeare’s actual words, but they devalue it because the words are wrenched out of context” (227). By rearranging, reassigning and decontextualising the original lines, MacDonald gives them a new meaning in a new play (recontextualising). The remnants of Shakespeare’s plays are enclosed by new lines and new speeches, which were added by Macdonald. Some of those additions are written in true imitation of Shakespeare’s style, whereas others are very contemporary and contain modern colloquialisms. Long sequences of blank verse alternate with contemporary prose. The tension between the Shakespearean verse and the modern phrases generates a burlesque effect and humour.

The majority of Shakespeare’s plays are written in blank verse, a verse form with a regular metre, but no rhyme. The most frequently used metre is the iambic pentameter (five times one short and one long syllable). Each verse line consists of ten syllables, but one single
poetic line can be broken down and divided between two or more speakers. Shakespeare also applies enjambment, which means that several successive lines can run on and form one syntactic unit. Shakespeare sometimes alternates blank verse with free-verse passages, consisting of lines that were not subject to a particular metre. In *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, MacDonald also alternates between different forms of speech. The prologue and epilogue are written in unrhymed iambic pentameter. During the first act, the monologues and dialogues reflect everyday speech, except for the illustrative enacted passages from *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* of course, these contain the original lines by Shakespeare. The first act ends with a soliloquy, spoken by Constance, and an intervention from the Chorus who resumes the unrhymed iambic pattern. In a similar fashion, the lines in the second and third act also largely consist of five iambic feet. When Constance enters the Shakespearean play, her lines almost immediately switch from everyday speech to iambic pentameter: “Please be a dream. I’ve got to get back home! / Back to my cats. They’ll starve. They’ll eat the plants” (25). After some time, Constance becomes conscious of this change: “I speak in blank verse like the characters: / Unrhymed iambical pentameter. / It seems to come quite nat’rally to me. / I feel so eloquent and . . . [Making up the missing beats] eloquent” (34). This meta-comment also indicates Constance’s shortcomings with respect to Shakespearean metre. MacDonald playfully imitates the metre and rhythm of Shakespeare’s plays. In the following excerpt, she exploits the free treatment of blank verse, one blank verse line is broken down in four parts and divided between two different characters:

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CONSTANCE. Uh-Oh. What did you hear?
DESDEMONA.           Enough to rear
                     Suspicion’s head.
CONTANCE.             Oh no.
DESDEMONA.             Oh yes!
CONSTANCE.             Oh well. (45)
```
The three disyllabic interjections need to make up for the lacking last syllables.

MacDonald also imitates Shakespeare when it comes to style, fluency, punctuation, word choice, and enjambment. The Bard is known for his rhetorical figures and patterns, such as the elaborate metaphors and similes. MacDonald appears to be a skilful imitator. Despite of the time difference, she adopts Shakespeare’s stylistic and linguistic usage:

JULIET. Be thou the mirror of my desire:
    Reflect my love as thou dost ape my form.
CONSTANCE. Thou wouldst distort the pool, thy looking-glass,
    With words of love like careless pebbles tossed;
    the rippling waters tell a loving lie,
    and show my face as thee as ’twere thine own.
    still waters would reflect a agèd crone. (78)

This dialogue demonstrates that MacDonald is certainly capable of constructing verses in true Shakespearean style. Furthermore, Constance adopts an archaic and rhetoric mode of speech. The metre (unrhymed iambic pentameter), style, word order, diction (thou, wouldst, dost, thine) and figures of speech (love imagery and simile) in this fragment resemble the work of Shakespeare himself. However, MacDonald does not always merely imitate Shakespeare, but often takes it one step further:

IAGO. Beware my lady, of the mouse who eats
    the lion’s cheese while sitting in his lap.
    to eat there? – What?! (40)

In this fragment, MacDonald mocks Shakespeare’s elaborate comparisons and metaphors. In order to deduce the meaning of Iago’s advice, one has to grasp the metaphorical references: “mouse” refers to Constance, “lion” refers to Desdemona, and “cheese” to Othello. Even Desdemona, a character from Shakespeare, does not understand what Iago is alluding to.

In addition, MacDonald juxtaposes modern phrases with Shakespearean verse style. Particularly in situations of distress, Constance ‘forgets’ to speak in verse form. For example,
after she stepped in between Iago and Desdemona, she says: “Gee. I’m sorry. Um – [To Iago] here’s your sword back and everything . . . [retreating] Have fun” (47). The contrast between this everyday spoken language and the elegant language used by the other characters produces humour. Throughout the play, Constance also uses slang expressions: “Omigod” (24,32), “Oh, okay, bye” (38), “Gosh” (28), “Yeah” (36), “ ‘Night ‘night” (44), “Gee” (47), “O my” (62), “Uh oh” (67), “You little brat!”(76) and “Oh, shit” (79). Moreover, MacDonald introduces modern terms into the verse style:

I was labelled as a crackpot,
by the sacred herd of Academe;
and after years spent as a laughingstock,
I finally came to think that it was true.
But, Desdemona, now that I’ve met you,
I want to stand out in that field and cry, “Bullshit!” (37).

The insertion of modern terms such as “crackpot,” “laughingstock,” and “bullshit” renders the verses more fluent and generates humour. The last line actually contains twelve syllables, which emphasises the colloquial expression even more. Desdemona immediately asks Constance to clarify the term “bullshit”, Constance does this and Desdemona repeats the term:

DESDEMONA. So raise I now the battle cry, Bullshit!
CONSTANCE.&
DESDEMONA. Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit! (38)

The fact that a Shakespearean character uses the term “bullshit” only heightens the parody of the play. The contrast between the characters’ registers and vocabularies often leads to comic situations:

CONSTANCE. Tsk, tsk, tsk, well I’m not surprised. I saw you talking to that creep, Iago –
DESDEMONA. “Creep?”
CONSTANCE. Colloquial for, “base and noisome knave.” (44-45)
Through Constance, Desdemona becomes initiated in slang expressions and contemporary language. The incomprehension of certain terms leads to comic word alterations:

**CONSTANCE.** Have you known God to be called Shakespeare?
**DESDEMONA.** Shake?
Spear? He might be a pagan god of war. (31)

**CONSTANCE.** If I could find those foolscap pages –
**DESDEMONA.** Fool’s cap? (31)

Another important characteristic of Shakespeare’s style is the omnipresence of word play, clever puns, doubles entendres and sexual innuendos. MacDonald uses the same techniques to introduce wit and add humour. She repeatedly inserts subtle word plays. For instance, when Juliet laments her marriage to Romeo and reveals her desire to be a maid again, MacDonald contrasts the homophones *maid* and *made*: “No maid but matron, thus made and unmade” (56). A second example of MacDonald’s play on words is taken from the passage where Constance bids Romeo and Juliet farewell after the masked ball: “Thanks for the party. It was a ball. Shut up Constance” (66). The playwright plays with the literal and figurative – a slang expression – meaning. The most prominent puns in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* are the outrageous sexual innuendos. Shakespeare frequently employs slang and sexual language to refer to body parts and reproductive organs. In *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, the character Mercutio, talks bawdy and uses many slang terms for genitals (2.1.25-40, 3.1.35-37). MacDonald skilfully imitates this:

**JULIET.** Boy, wherefore is thy voice so sweet and high?
**SERVANT.** For that I sing castrato, lady.
**JULIET.** Oh, has thou a brother that’s a tenor?
**SERVANT.** Ay ma’am. [Points off] Look where he tunes his instrument
**JULIET.** [Exciting] So tune I mine, to pitch in a sweet duet. (60)
The words “castrato,” “tenor,” and “instrument” clearly refer to the male genital.

MacDonald’s Juliet makes several other sexual innuendos:

CONSTANCE. I wouldn’t say I’m really all that wise.
I have done lots of homework on you, though.
For years I’ve sought to penetrate your source,
and dreamt of meeting you a thousand times –
JULIET. Awake. Or let me share thy sleep of dreams.
I’d have thee penetrate my secret source,
and know me as full as well and deep as thou
dost know thyself O dreamer, Constantine. (64)

Whereas Constance is referring to the author of the manuscript, Juliet plays on a possible sexual interpretation. Another example of sexual innuendo can be found in Desdemona’s line, “I saw thee fingering his very jewels!” (81). This may refer to the diamond necklace which she thinks Othello gave to Constance, but also to the sexual act of adultery itself. The two most lewd and bawdy passages in MacDonald’s play are the conversations between Tybalt and Mercutio, and between Juliet and her nurse: “our jocund tools of sport” (51); “behind his boyish drool there lurks a foaming wolf” (57); “false chancre for thy nether lips” (57). In true Shakespearean fashion, MacDonald juxtaposes rhetoric and poetic lines with coarse bawdy passages. She bends the Shakespearean verse and blends different registers at the same time.

6.3. Characters

The third and most important object of parody is the representation of Shakespeare’s characters. MacDonald completely transforms the characters of Shakespeare’s Othello and Romeo and Juliet. As said before, MacDonald cuts nearly all minor characters, she only retains the ones who have a direct relevance to the main action. The remaining characters are portrayed entirely different, since MacDonald puts the classic characters in a modern perspective. Djordjevic distinguishes three modes of parody with reference to character
manipulation: deflation, exaggeration and invention (7). I will demonstrate how MacDonald transforms each protagonist of Shakespeare’s plays. It is important to provide some information about the classic characters in order to fully understand how MacDonald parodies these.

In Shakespeare’s version, Othello is a respected general in the Venetian army and a valiant warrior. Due to Iago’s trickery, the noble Othello becomes a jealous husband. He becomes so consumed with irrational rage and obsessive jealousy, he ultimately kills his innocent wife, Desdemona. MacDonald drastically deflates Othello’s role in her play. He is not the tragic hero anymore, nor the protagonist of the story. He is also portrayed as a loving husband rather than a strong warrior. Similar to Shakespeare’s version, Othello tells stories about his adventures; however, these are undermined by Iago’s remarks:

OTHELLO. [To Constance] If that you be the mirror of my soul,
then you must learn the story of my life:
of moving accidents by flood and field,
of hairbreadth scapes i’th’imminent deadly breach,
of being taken by the insolent foe-
CONSTANCE. Oh yes, I know.
IAGO. [Aside] So know we all the wag and swagger of this tale.
OTHELLO. In Egypt, kicked I sand into the eyes
of infidels who thought I made a truce
when I did give to them a pyramid
on wheels they pulled into the garrison.
But I had packed it full with Christian men,
who slit the savage throat of every Turk.
CONSTANCE. That sounds like Troy.
IAGO. [Aside] Not Troy, but false.

He becomes “the stock type of the miles gloriosus” and his character is pushed into the background of the story (Djordjevic 7).

Shakespeare’s Desdemona is faithful, loving, innocent and courageous in going against her father’s will and secretly eloping with Othello. She admires Othello’s bravery,
valour and reputation. This tragic heroine is often considered as a somewhat naive victim of Iago’s schemes and Othello’s mistrust. MacDonald’s Desdemona, on the other hand, is warlike, jealous and assertive. This character is entirely reinvented and her impulsive nature is exaggerated. The playwright achieves this, for instance, by reassigning many of Othello’s original lines to Desdemona. The following statements are actually pronounced by Othello in Shakespeare’s play:

3 Othello 3.3.487-488 and 4.1.193

“O that the slave had forty thousand lives. / One is too poor, too weak for my revenge!” (41), “I’ll chop her into messes” (48). Desdemona is portrayed as Shakespeare’s Othello: impulsive and violent. According to the stage directions she presses Constance “in a soldierly embrace,” through which MacDonald emphasises Desdemona’s masculinity (29). She is presented as a warlike fighting machine with “a taste for blood” (32). She even fantasises about becoming an Amazon: “I’d join these ranks of spiked and fighting shes: / to camp upon the deserts vast and sing / our songs of conquest, and a dirge or two / for sisters slain on honour’s gory field” (30). When the battle with the Turks begins, she urges Constance to join her to the battlefield in order to “enjoy the fray” (32). Instead of being Othello’s loving wife, she now becomes the jealous, irrational spouse.

Shakespeare’s Romeo is the archetypal lover, romantic and passionate. His unrequited love for Rosaline leaves Romeo heartbroken at first, but he soon forgets all about her. When he sees Juliet, he immediately falls in love with her: “Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight, / For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night” (1.4.169-170). He has found his true love, Juliet, and is completely devoted to her. In MacDonald’s rendition, however, Romeo is presented as a flighty lover, he is not at all devoted to the changing objects of his affection. MacDonald deflates his devotion to Juliet and exaggerates his fickleness (Djordjevic 8). Romeo falls in love thrice over the course of the play. After the clandestine marriage with Juliet, he meets Constance and remarks: “Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, nay! / For I ne’er saw true
beauty till this day” (51). In fact, Romeo actually mistakes Constance for a boy, which heightens the parody even more, seeing even his sexual inclination varies. Later on in the play, Romeo becomes infatuated with Desdemona. This time, he comments “O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!” and tells her that he worships her (83). These lines are actually taken from the passage wherein Romeo sees Juliet for the very first time. MacDonald inserts the very same lines to undermine Romeo’s sincerity and devotion even more.

The classic Juliet is sincere, mature and innocent. Despite of the fact she is extremely young, her love for Romeo is honest and pure. In Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet), Juliet embodies completely opposite qualities. MacDonald’s version of Shakespeare’s heroine is childish, unvirtuous and flirtatious. After the first marriage night with Romeo, Juliet is already annoyed with him: “love’s first keen edge grows dull with use and craves another grinding” (58). At her very own wedding feast, she is on the prowl for a new lover. She meets Constance and, assuming Constance is a boy, she notes “Hail, Roman Cupid that hath heard my cries, and sent Greek Eros to benight mine eyes!” (63). Without diffidence, Juliet tries to seduce Constantine. The amount of sexual innuendos underlines her unvirtuous nature. As a temptress, she is straightforward and aggressive:

JULIET. Wherefore?
CONSTANCE. Well . . . for one thing, you’re married.
JULIET. Hmph.
CONSTANCE. And we’ve barely met.
JULIET. So? (69)

Constance’s remark “Heavenly days, what’s come over you?! / You’re supposed to be all innocence,” reflects the discrepancy between Shakespeare’s and MacDonald’s Juliet (68). MacDonald’s Juliet does not even hesitate to engage in homosexual activities when she finds out about Constance’s real sex. In Shakespeare’s version, Juliet commits suicide because she

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4 Romeo and Juliet 1.4.169-170
5 Romeo and Juliet 1.4.161
is so heartbroken after finding Romeo dead. MacDonald exaggerates her death wish, the modern Juliet is virtually obsessed with committing suicide (Djordjevic 7). During the masquerade, she comments that “only death is sure,” and reveals her morbid inclination: “I wish I were dead!” (64,66). From that moment onward, she repeatedly and unremittingly refers to death and suicide (65,68,71,77,79,80,82,84,85,86). Juliet is “in love with death, ’cause death is easier to love” (86). She is more than adamant to kill herself, to such an extent she almost brags about it to Desdemona: “I twice did nearly slay myself today” (85). Constance has to confiscate Juliet’s sword, dagger, and bottle of poison in order to prevent her from committing suicide. At the end of the play, Constance cannot tolerate Juliet’s obsession any longer and she exclaims: “I’ve had it with all the tragic tunnel vision around here” (86). MacDonald transforms Shakespeare’s innocent tragic heroine into a nymphomaniac defeatist (Djordjevic 7).

In Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, the two title characters fall in love at first sight. Notwithstanding their young age, their love appears to be genuine and mature. MacDonald, on the other hand, emphasises their age and represents Romeo and Juliet as fickle teenagers. She deflates their love to such an extent that their passion is already gone after the wedding night: “Th’affections of our love’s first-sighted blood, / have in the cauldron of one hot swift night, / all cooled to creeping jelly in the pot” (54). She depicts the couple as being stuck in a routine marriage:

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JULIET. Ay me. [Yawn]
ROMEO. [Half-asleep] Was that the lark?
JULIET. It was the luncheon bell.
ROMEO. Oh no! [Leaps out of bed]
    Julie-e-et, where be my blue doublet?!
JULIET. Under the bed where thou didst leave it, dear.
    [Romeo retrieves his doublet] (54)
```
When Romeo goes out, the newlyweds “exchange a cursory peck on the cheek” (55). In sharp contrast to the classical, idealised perception of the two lovers, they are clearly annoyed with each other and even fight and argue:

ROMEO. Sayst thou?! Thou that bedded the first doublet
to o’erperch thine orchard walls?
JULIET. Thou caitiff!
I sicken of thy blubb’ring boyish charm. (66)

In addition, MacDonald emphasises their immaturity: Romeo calls Juliet “a sniv’ling girl” and Juliet reciprocates the insult by calling him “a stripling boy” (59). Romeo and Juliet act extremely puerile:

JULIET. Oh! I shall tell my father of this insult!
[They are both on the verge of passionate tears]
ROMEO. Be thou assured my father will hear of it! (66)

They also bicker about their pet and even about who saw Constantine first (55,66). One can argue that MacDonald’s representation of the Shakespearean protagonists is actually a parodic and comic reversal of the original characterisations. Instead of fulfilling the audience’s expectations, she subverts the classic views and entirely rewrites, or even, reinvents the characters.

It is clear that MacDonald transforms Shakespeare’s plays on many levels. Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) parodies the Shakespearean conventions, style, language, events, plot structure, and characters. According to Mark Fortier (1989), many elements in this play are “extrapolations of possibilities in Shakespeare’s texts” (50-51). Interestingly, in this radical reworking of scripts and stories, MacDonald mainly uses the same devices and techniques as Shakespeare did, only exaggerating or deflating them. Fortier also signals that “MacDonald’s reappropriation of Othello and Romeo and Juliet is effected through Shakespearean means: Shakespearean language, Shakespearean comic devices” (50).
MacDonald makes clever use of the inherent possibilities on all levels. The new representation of Desdemona, for example, is based upon actual elements from Shakespeare’s play (Djordjevic 7). Already in the original version, Desdemona likes to listen to Othello’s adventures: “these things to hear / Would Desdemona seriously incline” (Othello 1.3.159-160). According to Othello, Desdemona is fascinated by his adventures: “She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished / that heaven had made her such a man” (1.3.176-177). This comment inspired MacDonald to represent Desdemona as a pugnacious woman. In fact, the playwright does exactly what Desdemona supposedly wished for: she transforms Desdemona into Othello.

Throughout the play, MacDonald juggles with the original plots and scenes, thereby opening up new perspectives on the original events and characters. Although MacDonald provides the audience with a radical alternative, shorn of the preconceptions associated with the plays, she still preserves many parallels between the original version and her own creation.
VII. Theatricality and Metatheatre

In the previous chapters, I investigated how MacDonald borrows and bends certain elements from Shakespeare’s works. I will now look more deeply into the meta-dramatic strategies and theatrical aspects in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*. I am aware of the different meanings and perspectives on theatricality; however, for the purpose of this chapter, this term will be broadly understood as all elements that draw attention to the performative aspect of the play, in other words, all elements that remind the audience of the fact that they are watching a play. Theatrical devices widen the gap between reality and representation on the stage, and also sabotage the illusion of verisimilitude and mimesis. Metatheatrical passages also contribute to the distance between the real and the represented. A metatheatrical comment implies self-awareness and self-reference, which are common features in postmodern theatre (supra 4.2). In this chapter, I will focus on the function and effect of several metatheatrical comments in MacDonald’s play and I will also identify and discuss passages and speeches that foreground the theatricality in this play.

7.1. Metatheatre

The playwright inserts several comments that highlight the fictional nature of the play. These metatheatrical comments discuss the artificiality of the play and call attention to the dramatic conventions and boundaries. In fact, it is a device whereby a play comments on itself or on other plays.

MacDonald uses the technique of play-within-a-play, the protagonist in this play investigates the authorship of two Shakespearean tragedies and mentions several fictional dramatic characters. Constance comments on the plot structure and characters of both *Othello*...
and Romeo and Juliet. In the second act, however, things become more complicated. Constance is transported into the Shakespearean world and enters the two plays. She is certainly aware of the fact she has been warped into a fictional world and even comments on the act and scene division: “My god. Perhaps I’m on an acid trip. / What if some heartless student spiked my beer?! / [stops counting] Nonsense. This is my head, this is my pen, this is Othello, Act III, Scene iii” (34). Furthermore, Constance, the protagonist of the frame play, actually interacts with both ‘interplays’. She rewrites the Shakespearean stories by intervening in the plot. According to Bradley, this play “draws our attention to storytelling . . . and the extent to which stories can be changed, re-written, and re-told” (337). Constance is aware of the destructive consequences of her actions: “I’ve wrecked a masterpiece. I’ve ruined the play, / I’ve turned Shakespeare’s Othello to a farce” (25). Meta-comments like this one, indicate the character’s awareness of what is happening and remind the audience of the fictional nature of the play.

Moreover, Constance also interprets her own role in the play. She compares herself to the commonly used ‘deus ex machina’ device of Greek tragedy, a higher force or divinity (deus) that suddenly intervened and provided a contrived solution to the conflicts of the characters: “I entered, deus ex machina, / And Desdemona will not die, / Because I dropped in from the sky ...” (33). At the end of the play, she realises she “defuse[d] the tragedies by assuming centre stage as comic hero,” and re-examines her role: “I’m the Fool!”(14,87). This is an clear example of meta-comedy: a comic figure that comments on its own comic role as wise fool.

When Constance wants to leave the interplay, she asks: “Where’s the exit?!” (25). She positions herself as a spectator, a member of the audience who can leave whenever she wants. However, Constance has altered the original development of action and is now trapped as an
active character in both stories. Constance reassures herself that nothing bad will happen to her:

Okay, I’ll be right there.
[DESDEMONA exits]
They can’t use real blood, can they?
[Another cannon blast]
Omigod!
Oh Constance, don’t be scared, it’s just a play,
And Desdemona will look after you. (32-33)

She argues it is “just a play,” it is merely an illusion. Constance experiences the events from the sidelines, like the audience. She continuously shatters the dramatic illusion and undermines the verisimilitude of the events to reassure herself. She even mentions the artificiality of the special effects, for instance, the use of fake blood. Throughout the play, Constance is aware of the improbability of her own experience. When she enters into contact with a ghost, she asks “What play is this?,” since the ghost reminds her of another play, *Hamlet* (73). It is worth noting that both Shakespeare and MacDonald make use of asides, soliloquies and monologues. All these kinds of (meta-)comments are also intricately linked with the notion of theatricality, as I will discuss in the following section.

7.2. Theatricality

*Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* employs several conventions that reinforce the theatricality: the dumb show, the chorus, the prologue, the epilogue, the use of soliloquies and asides, and the plays-within-a-play. All these devices call attention to the play as a play and provide the audience with a sense of theatricality.

This play also contains many highly theatrical scenes and actions. As stated in the introduction to the play, “[h]eads are to come out of wastebaskets, turtles are ripped apart,
ghosts walk the earth, and someone magically disappears. These visions are by no means intended as filmic; quite the contrary, they come from an understanding of theatricality as it was practiced a century ago” (xiii). Indeed, MacDonald foregrounds the artificiality of the play by means of several strategies.

The first method MacDonald uses, is the insertion of supernatural elements. In the first act of the play, the story takes place in a realistic setting: Constance’s office at Queen’s University with a desk, telephone, documents and books (7). Then, the fantastic elements come into play:

CONSTANCE hesitates for a moment, then opens the Manuscript. Its three pages fall out and down into the wastebasket. CONSTANCE sets the cover on her desk, then stoops and reaches into the wastebasket to retrieve the pages. Suddenly her arm jerks downward; she is being pulled down into the wastebasket. “Warp” effects, sound of screeching wind and music. When the sound and lights return to normal in Constance’s office, she is nowhere to be seen. The phone receiver dangles off the hook. Smoke issues from the wastebasket. The CHORUS’s head, a cigarette between the lips, emerges from the wastebasket] (22)

Constance disappears into the wastebasket and the Chorus emerges. The lighting and sound effects add emphasis to this event. The juxtaposition between the realistic beginning and the supernatural events heighten the theatrical effect. The wastebasket-episode actually bears a resemblance to the absurdist play Endgame (1957) by Samuel Beckett, where two characters, Nell and Nagg, also emerge from their dustbins. Interestingly, Beckett’s play also contains many allusions to Shakespeare’s works. Another supernatural element in MacDonald’s play is that Constance is transferred to fictional worlds, namely Shakespeare’s Cyprus and Verona. Furthermore, in the third act, a scared Constance is singing “I never saw a ghost in my life, ‘cause there’s no such thing” to herself when all of a sudden a ghost appears:

[Suddenly, ghost sounds: wind, chains, smoke. A skeleton-faced GHOST emerges through a trap door. He wears Constance’s red toque with the pom-pom. CONSTANCE turns and sees him, and is terrified] CONSTANCE. Holy Mary, Mother of God! -
GHOST. A man told me he hadn’t had a bite
in three days, so I bit him. I awoke
today and shot an elephant in my
pajamas. How he got there, I know not.
I just flew in from Padua, and zounds,
are my arms tired! (73)

Not only is the supernatural highly present in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, it is also a recurrent aspect in Shakespeare’s plays. In this case, the insertion of a supernatural, skeleton-faced, toque-wearing, jesting ghost undermines all sense of realism. The comic ghost resembles the fool-figure in Shakespeare’s work. Similar to the Fool in *King Lear*, Yorick in *Hamlet*, and the Clown in *Othello*, this ghost’s humour and exaggerated characteristics heighten the theatrical effect.

Another method used by MacDonald’s to theatricalise the story is the use of detailed clownlike episodes. Throughout the play, there is an emphasis on physical and visual humour. The following stage directions indicate a choreographed scene with slapstick humour: “A sheaf of papers slides under the office door. CONSTANCE goes to the door and stoops to pick them up just as they begin to slide out again. A little tug of war ensues. Suddenly the door opens against CONSTANCE’s head. She stands up to see a young female STUDENT”(8). This episode also demonstrates Constance’s clumsiness. The next passage not only emphasises Romeo’s and Juliet’s childish behaviour, it also another example of typical visual humour:

ROMEO. Goodbye dear.

[ROMEO attempts to exit with Hector]

Let go thy hand, for I must needs be gone,
And Hector goes with me.

JULIET. Nay, stays with me.

ROMEO. He goes.

JULIET. He stays!

[A turtle tug-of-war ensues]

ROMEO. Goes!

JULIET. Stays!

ROMEO. Goes!

[Hector is ripped in two]
JULIET. Ah Hector! Look how he bleeds!
ROMEO. Warm and new killed. O Hector. O heavens!
[They weep] (55)

Romeo and Juliet fight about a turtle, Hector, who does not survive the argument. The tug-of-war motive is a recurrent aspect in MacDonald’s play. During the masquerade, Romeo and Juliet play tug of war with Constance, trying to monopolise her attention: Juliet sends Romeo away, Romeo comes back and cuts in when Juliet and Constance are dancing, then Juliet intercepts Constance again, causing a flaming row between both seducers (64-66). Another example of visual humour is when the clumsy, absent-minded Constance arrives at the office and forgets to remove her “bright red woolen toque with a pom-pom at the end” (7). None of the three persons she interacts with, bring this explicitly to her attention. As a result, she wears the eye-catching headgear throughout the first act, in itself already a comic sight for the audience. MacDonald postpones Constance’s realisation to create a comic effect. In fact, Constance could have noticed it already after a student’s ironic remark:

STUDENT. Thanks, Miss. By the way, I like your hair like that. It’s really pretty.
CONSTANCE. Oh
[She vaguely touches her hair below the toque]
Thanks.

The audience does notice the toque and understands the irony of the remark, whereas the still unsuspecting Constance merely accepts the ‘compliment’. This knowledge gap between character and audience leads to a comic effect. At the very end of the first act, when Professor Night “tugs the pom-pom on her toque,” Constance finally realises she is still wearing her toque and, embarrassed, she “slowly pulls of her toque and drops it into the wastebasket” (20). The fact that the Ghost later reappears with the very same toque contributes to the absurdity and theatricality of his character and the entire play. Furthermore, Romeo’s and Juliet’s pursuit of Constantine during the masquerade leads to two other visual and humoristic
scenes. Firstly, a situation of mistaken identity leads to physical humour. Romeo mistakes Tybalt for Constantine and places his hand on Tybalt’s bottom. Tybalt responds:

[Tybalt whirls about, yanks ROMEO’s eye mask forward, and lets it snap back when he recognizes him]

TYBALT. Ah, Romeo, ‘tis thee my cuz!

[Tybalt gives ROMEO a macho slap on the ass and laughs]

ROMEO. Tybalt! I knew ’t was thee.

[ROMEO punches TYBALT, jock-like, on the arm] (60-61)

Secondly, Juliet tries to entice Romeo away from Constantine by pretending someone stole his horse. Romeo immediately runs out to see, but when he returns he reveals in an aside, “I rode not hither on a horse tonight!” (65). Romeo has been fooled by Juliet, and is presented as gullible. These clownlike episodes all sharpen the audience’s awareness of the theatricality.

Other elements that call attention to the play’s own theatricality are the choreographed fights and dances, the masquerade and the cross-dressing. A character who pretends to be someone else, reminds the audience of the fact that his character is also only a part played by an actor to begin with. In fact, cross-dressing adds another layer to the play: Romeo acting as Romiet, for instance, symbolises the play-within-a-play-within-a-play. The masks that the characters wear at the Capulet ball produce the same effect.

The final method to increase theatricality is the chronological misplacing of persons and objects. First of all, the insertion of a twentieth-century character, Constance, in a Shakespearean setting is clearly an anachronism. Constance is chronologically out of place. In this regard, the colloquialism and modern slang can also be interpreted as stylistic anachronisms. Furthermore, there are also several contemporary objects that surface in Cyprus and Verona. All objects that Constance tossed in the wastebasket in the first act, ultimately find their way into the Shakespearean world: a can of Coors Light Beer, the Gustav manuscript, her appendix, her Brownie wings, and a cigarette butt (10-21). These
anachronisms contribute to the theatricality and absurdity of the play. They also produce a comic effect and give rise to absurd situations. The appendix, for instance, turns up in the middle of a fight:

TYBALT. I am for you!

[He draws. Something like an anchovy hangs off the end of his sword. CONSTANCE recognizes it, and plucks it off]

CONSTANCE. Good heavens, this is somebody’s appendix . . .

[Mouthing the word] mine! (75)

When Tybalt arrives at the masquerade, he appears on stage in a lively mood while drinking a Coors Light (62). The canned beer belongs to another age; however, Tybalt seems to have no problem in finding out the purpose of this object. After finishing the beer, he “crushes his Coors Light can in his fist, tosses it at CONSTANCE’s feet, and exits” (65). Tybalt is depicted as a modern and violent macho-man.

The use of anachronisms is a way to parody the Shakespearean setting. However, one could also interpret this mingling of elements from two time periods as a way to modernise Shakespearean setting and characters, and create a more universal setting. By representing Juliet as a whiny teenager, Desdemona as a fighting machine, and Tybalt as a beer-drinking wrangler, MacDonald succeeds in subverting the idealised characters and interpretations, thus creating an alternative contemporary version. Still, this adaptation retains many Shakespearean elements and themes, hinting at Shakespeare’s timelessness and universality.
VIII. Themes and Possible Readings

In the following chapter, I shall examine the central themes and possible readings of *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*. In the first section, I will explain how MacDonald challenges prescribed gender identities and undermines gender stereotypes. In the second section, I will argue that this play also functions independently of Shakespeare’s plays. I will illustrate that the story can be read as an existential excursion through the subconscious mind.

8.1. Gender Bending

8.1.1. Feminist Reading

*Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* starts with a mute representation of the final scenes in Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* (5). During the Dumbshow, Othello smothers Desdemona and Juliet commits suicide. MacDonald’s adaptation focuses on the lives of the Shakespearean heroines. In sharp contrast with Shakespeare’s plays, Desdemona and Juliet are no longer passive victims of fate, but instead two active women (Burnett 8). They are the captains of their own soul. MacDonald’s representation of the classic heroines entails a critical perspective on the Shakespearean characterisations. She breaks the stereotypical representation of female characters down:

CONSTANCE. For instance, Academe believes that you’re a doomed and helpless victim.
DESDEMONA. I?
CONSTANCE. Ay.
DESDEMONA. Did I not flee my father, here to dwell beneath the sword Hephaestus forged for Mars?
Will I not dive into Sargasso Sea, to serve abreast the Amazons abroad?
Will I not butcher any cow that dares
low lies to call me tame, ay that I will!
So raise I now the battle cry, *Bullshit!!* (38)

Desdemona is now portrayed as an independent and assertive woman. Constance’s remark, “Boy, Shakespeare really watered her down, eh?,“ playfully indicates the discrepancy with the classic representation of Desdemona (45).

One of the leitmotifs in MacDonald’s oeuvre, is giving voice to marginalised and silenced characters, as said before. In this play, MacDonald places the female characters in the forefront. According to Bradley, “giving voice to female figures operates . . . to counteract the silencing traditionally associated with female characters in Shakespeare” (307). While Juliet and Desdemona claim a more important role, Romeo and Othello are pushed into the background of the story. Othello, for instance, disappears from the stage after merely two scenes. Furthermore, all male characters are cast in a negative light (Bradley 314). Tybalt tries to kill Constance and Romeo becomes a fickle erotomaniac. The biggest villain, however, is Professor Claude Night, Constance’s superior. He takes advantage of Constance by making her ghost-write his publications, his reviews, and even his society speeches. When she supplies the “latest commission,” he unscrupulously remarks, “I do wish you’d learn to type, my dear. I’m weary of doing my own typing” (17-18). He also makes condescending, sexist remarks, and calls Constance his “little titmouse” (15), his “pet” (19), and an “old girl” (20). He blandly tells Constance he has taken up the lecturing post at Oxford, instead of proposing her for the appointment. Then, the self-interested professor insolently asks her to help him clean up his desk: “What’s your schedule like day after tomorrow? I hoped you’d help pack my books” (19).

MacDonald challenges the classic interpretation of the Shakespearean protagonists and emphasises the agency of the female characters. She even undermines the “cliche of male woo-ing,” by reworking the balcony scene (Djordjevic 13). It is now Juliet, instead of Romeo,
who tries to woo the person on the balcony (MacDonald 67). Constance follows the same evolution as Desdemona and Juliet: she starts off as a passive victim and, as the play progresses, evolves into an active and assertive woman. During the first act of the play, Constance lets herself be walked all over. Two students, “Julie, uh Jill” and Ramona, come to her office, but they do not treat Constance as their superior. On the contrary, the first one lies to her:

STUDENT. I know it’s a week past the due date but [Lying] you remember the extension you gave me, eh?
CONSTANCE. I did?
STUDENT. Yes, because I’ve been ill lately. [Cough-cough]
CONSTANCE. Oh yes, well, whatever, that’s fine. (8-9)

Ramona, spotting an opened beer can, even gives Constance a lecture: “But the way, Coors beer is part of the rightwing infrastructure that has brought this hemisphere to its knees” (12). Professor Night takes Constance for granted and even her students make fun of her. The Chorus describes her as “a teacher, spinster – ‘old maid,’ some would say – / whose definition of fun and excitement / is a run of ‘ibids’ in an essay” (22). When Desdemona asks Constance to tell something about her life, she answers, “There isn’t much to tell. It’s very dull” (28). Constance is also aware of the fact that her students have nicknamed her “the Mouse,” and describes herself as a “laughingstock” (37), “just a little wimp” (45), a “good sport” (45), and a “big joke” (45). After meeting with the Shakespearean characters in Cyprus, Constance reveals, “I wish I were more like Desdemona” (45). Interestingly, from this moment onward, Constance becomes more and more assertive. After intervening in the fight between Iago and Desdemona, Constance notes:

Dear God, I could have murdered that poor man.
I saw a flash of red before my eyes.
I felt a rush of power through my veins.
I tasted iron blood inside my mouth.
I loved it! (47)
Constance is no longer portrayed as a typical victim and gradually becomes more independent and aggressive, like Desdemona.

In MacDonald’s adaptation, compared to Shakespeare’s plays, Juliet is not that innocent and Desdemona not that passive. Desdemona and Juliet become the main agents in the story, next to Constance of course. Furthermore, all female protagonists escape their tragic ending. MacDonald rewrites the fate and features of Shakespeare’s heroines. According to Bradley, MacDonald

[b]oth corroborates with Shakespeare and challenges him at the same time, engaging with characters he first imagined but expanding on them to stress values that are important to her, in a double gesture that effectively criticizes assumptions she sees behind Shakespeare’s representations of women and behind the traditional interpretations of those women that stress their lack of agency and the dangerousness of their desire. (299)

MacDonald’s adaptation challenges Shakespeare’s stereotypical representations of female characters. Even though MacDonald generally dissolves the gender stereotypes, the script still reproduces several gender preconceptions (Bradley 297). For instance, the expression “La donna é mobile” refers to the clichéd fickleness, as said before. In addition, Constance bites her nails out of sheer nervousness (51-52) and also notes: “Not that I’m some sort of feminist. / I shave my legs and I get nervous in a crowd” (37). However, on the whole, this woman’s version of Shakespeare’s plays challenges gender stereotypes and “encourage[s] audiences to understand the limits of Shakespeare’s representations of women” (Bradley 329). According to Bradley, this play should be interpreted as a contemporary feminist response to Shakespeare.
8.1.2. Cross-dressing

As said before, Shakespeare made substantial use of cross-dressing for both male and female characters of his comedy plays. It is worth noting that also MacDonald is familiar with this theatrical technique. In her debut novel, *Fall On Your Knees* (1996), for instance, a young woman called Rose, dresses in a man’s suit. Rose and her girlfriend, Kathleen, frequently go out at night and pretend to be a heterosexual couple. The play *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* also features cross-dressing and homosexuality.

Firstly, is important to mention that MacDonald wrote the script in such a way that the actors are able to fill multiple parts at the same time. Even though this play counts sixteen different characters, it can be acted out by a cast of five actors. In this way, the actor who plays Othello, for instance, also plays the part of Tybalt, Professor Night, and Juliet’s Nurse. Male actors who play female roles might remind one of the all-male cast in Shakespearean times. However, there are also female actors who play male characters. This is the case with actress-Desdemona who additionally plays Ramona and Mercutio. The roles of Juliet and the Soldier are also combinable.

On a second level, there are also three characters who disguise themselves in the opposite sex: Romeo becomes Romiet, Constance becomes Constantine, and also Juliet dresses in men clothes. Mistaken identities and overt cross-dressing by both genders lead to the blurring of conventional gender roles and sexuality. MacDonald’s characters are lusting for one another outside the confines of heterosexuality. In her review of this play, Marta Dvorak (1994) explains that “the notion of masculine and feminine become ambivalent, obscure, the borders blurred by the homosexual, bisexual, the transvestite, the hermaphrodite, the androgyne” (132). Indeed, MacDonald’s adaptation “explore[s] all forms of sexualities” (132). The play features an astonishing amount of possible sexual orientations. The classic couple Romeo-Juliet represents the heterosexual relations. Juliet-Constance, Romeo-
Constantine, and Romeo-Tybalt, on the other hand, are all examples of homosexuality. Desdemona’s remark, “Zounds! Doth no one in Verona sail straight?,” summarises the extravagance of sexual constellations and practices in a comic way (85). Clearly, cross-dressing and gender confusion facilitates MacDonald’s intention: challenge the normative ideas of gender and sexuality and celebrate differences.

8.2. Existential Crisis

The story in Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) can also be understood as Constance’s fantastic quest to find her true identity. At the end of the play, Constance returns to her office at Queen’s university. She is situated “precisely as [she] was at the onset of the first warp at the end of Act I” (MacDonald 88). It becomes clear to the audience that Constance’s adventures in Cyprus and Verona were in fact manifestations of her subconscious. Already at the end of the first act, when Constance is about to be warped to Cyprus, the Chorus notes, “For anything is possible, you’ll find, / within the zone of the unconscious mind” (22). During the epilogue, he explains it was all “one subconscious dreamy thought” (89). After being told she will no longer work at Queen’s University, Constance experiences an actual identity crisis. She has to find her true identity in the Shakespearean world. Interestingly, “Othello and Tybalt are permutations of Professor Night, and the Chorus, Iago, and Yorick can be seen as versions of her own goading animus” (xii). In addition, Desdemona is a “permutation” of Ramona, and Juliet is a version of the student “Julie, uh Jill.” As said before, most actors in this play fulfil various roles. Since these double roles are played by one actor, the audience is well aware of the characters’ transformations. Furthermore, Desdemona and Juliet can also be interpreted as “archetypes of [Constance’s] own unconscious” (xii). In MacDonald’s play, these three women share the same birthday, or
as Juliet notes, they “share the self-same stars” (69). In Verona, Constance discovers her true identity, not only is she the Author and the Fool, apparently she is also Desdemona and Juliet. The “merging of unconscious selves” effects the “re-birthday” of Constance (6). As said in the previous part, Constance evolves as the story progresses. Gradually, she becomes more like Desdemona and Juliet, active and sensual. In the last scene, Constance realises the trinity of her identity: “Desdemona and Juliet, respectively in the archetypal roles of the woman of action and the sensual woman, along with her own role of the intellectual woman form the tripartite soul of the ideal woman” (Djordjevic 17).

The search for the self is typical of existentialism, a philosophical attitude that centres on the analysis of existence. Next to identity crisis, other main features of this movement include: the emphasis on the insignificance of human life, a sense of general confusion and uncertainty, and metaphysical anguish. Constance is described as an existentialist. This dialogue contains an explicit reference to existentialism:

CONSTANCE. I know . . . I guess I just have a thing for lost causes.
PROFESSOR. You’re an incurable romantic Connie.
CONSTANCE. Just a failed existentialist. (16)

In the following excerpt, Constance comments on her own insignificance:

Oh I’m not, I’m, I’m not the least bit special, I’m, I’m just one flawed and isolated fragment of a perfect infinite mind like anybody else, I – I think that I exist in that you and I are here chatting with the sense evidence of each other, insofar as we’re not over there not chatting, no I’m not special – unique maybe, in the, in the sense that a snowflake is unique, but no more valuable than any other flake . . . (16)

In addition, her view on life is one of uncertainty:

You have no idea what – life is a hell of a lot more complicated than you think! Life – real life – is a big mess. Thank goodness. And every answer spawns another question; and every question blossoms with a hundred different answers; and if you’re lucky you’ll always feel somewhat confused. Life is - ! . . .
Life is . . .
  a harmony of polar opposites,
  with gorgeous mixed-up places in between,
  where inspiration steams up from a rich
  Sargasso stew that’s odd and flawed and full
  Of gems and worn-out boots and sunken ships - (86)

She also proposes “to live by questions, not by their solution,” and to “to trade our
certainties, for thy confusion” (87). This last existentialist trade might remind one of Hamlet.
IX. Conclusion

Put Shakespeare’s plays in a blender. Knead and bend conventions. Gradually mix in the new elements until well blended. Remove all stereotypes. Add new perspectives. Finish by sprinkling word puns and humour. Such is the recipe of MacDonald’s play Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet).

MacDonald’s postmodern script is highly allusive. MacDonald displays her abilities as an intellectual playwright in this dense and intertextual play. The humour of this adaptation plays on the audience’s knowledge and expectations. Therefore, the readers and spectators who have advanced knowledge of the source plays and intertexts will derive more meaning and enjoy the performance to a much higher extent. This analysis departed from the published script; however, the amount of stage directions and descriptive elements made it possible to paint a broad picture of the play, as the playwright includes information on the stage properties, scenery, costumes, and cast division.

By comparing and contrasting this adaptation with Shakespeare’s works, I examined how MacDonald ingeniously recycles and transforms elements from the preceding plays. The two main source plays are Othello and Romeo and Juliet. This comparative study shows that MacDonald applies a collage technique on multiple levels. On the textual level, MacDonald undermines canonical scenes by rearranging and reassigning lines and speeches. Textual appropriation is of course also “a form of artistic recycling” (Hutcheon, Parody 15). I discussed the effect of this approach and illustrated the subversive technique by placing different versions of particular scenes next to each other. Furthermore, I analysed how the insertion of a non-Shakespearean character in a Shakespearean plot effects a generic change. By neutralising the turning points in both plays, the Canadian playwright successfully turns Shakespeare’s tragedies into comedies. MacDonald also recycles theatrical devices and
conventions. The most striking aspect of this reworking, however, is on the level of characterisations. MacDonald parodies and subverts the classical representations. In this adaptation, for instance, Romeo and Juliet are no longer the idealised romantic couple. She completely reinvents the Shakespearean protagonists. By exaggerating and inflating particular characteristics, ultimately, the characters become more real, their behaviour more plausible. In addition, the foregrounding of female characters and downsizing of male presence and authority can be interpreted as MacDonald’s attempt to break the Shakespearean gender stereotypes down. Similar to Shakespeare, she also uses cross-dressing as comic device. The gender bending gives rise to the exploration of sexuality and gender preferences, and results in many sexual intrigues. In short, MacDonald bends Shakespearean conventions, and blends three stories.

Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) parodies Othello and Romeo and Juliet, and appropriates many Shakespearean features. ‘I have demonstrated that MacDonald preserves Shakespeare’s characters, lines, style, and comic devices, but exaggerates, decontextualises, and even reinvents them. The subversion of these two canonical plays often leads to hilarious scenes. The many witty remarks and word puns contribute to the playfulness of this play. Frequently, the subverted scenes also imply a criticism toward Shakespeare. For instance, this adaptation challenges the victimisation of female characters and highlights the improbable relationship between Romeo and Juliet. The modern playwright subverts well-known scenes and characters to question the common assumptions and proposes alternative interpretations.

Shakespeare’s plays were a source of inspiration for MacDonald. She revealed that her play began as a mockery, but ended up as a tribute. Indeed, the traditional adaptation model does not suffice to represent this play’s complex relation to Shakespeare. On the one hand, this play challenges him, because it criticises and subverts his plays. On the other hand,
MacDonald imitates many elements of his plays and relies on his universality, thus reinforcing his status. Bradley’s new model aptly reflects the ambivalent relation between this adaptation and Shakespeare’s works. The postmodern play both reaffirms and challenges the Shakespearean version at the same time. I will repeat the question stated at the beginning of this dissertation: Is this play a tribute to, or, a rejection of Shakespeare’s canonical status? The right answer to this question is: both. In her play Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet, MacDonald clearly assumes a double gesture toward Shakespeare: she imitates and distances, celebrates and rejects, she pays tribute and ventures in iconoclasm.
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