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Romanian Users' YouTube "Shakespeares": Digital Localities in Global Fields

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Abstract: The cultural production of "Shakespeare" on the Internet has received growing attention in recent years, particularly in reference to newcomers in the field such as media users or "prosumers". This is potentiated by the connectivity of digital platforms and growing access to digital means of production and distribution. From a field perspective on digital cultural production, participation online can be seen as a socially situated activity, often differentiated and marked by the habitus of digital media users. The present article aims firstly to discuss the utility of a field conceptualization of the cultural production of Shakespeare online, with reference to the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Secondly, through a critical framework derived from cultural and media economies, this article analyses Romanian appropriations of Shakespeare's works on YouTube as cultural productions inscribed in both the global digital economy and also in the local cultural field. Thirdly, based on an overview of Romanian producers who have published Shakespeare videos and on the analysis of their visibility and circulation online, as well as their chosen genres and discourses, I argue that the Romanian digital (re)production of Shakespeare is situated at the periphery of both the national and the global digital field. User-made Shakespeare productions are yet to find valuation in the local cultural and media fields, being situated in an illegitimate location for appropriating Shakespeare. This will be contextualized in the larger discourse regarding the fundamental role of curation, but also in light of recent concerns about privileged locations, languages, and algorithmic bias across online cultural production, circulation, and consumption.

Keywords: participation; Shakespeare online; field of cultural production; YouTube; Romanian users; local

1. Introduction

User-made videos appropriating Shakespeare's texts have been produced and distributed on YouTube for more than a decade. The global platform has provided an unprecedented, albeit far from universal, access to means of video distribution, concentrating a profusion of productions created by newcomers alongside institutional and corporate "Shakespeares". The works resulting from users' cultural participation have been selected and valued in scholarly and curatorial discourse as forms of vernacular creativity and performances of identity politics (O'Neill 2014); with respect to their storytelling genres (Desmet 2018; Lanier 2018) and converging media (Calbi 2013); and in terms of the various "offline" cultural traditions they inherit such as pop culture appropriation practices (Lanier 2010). Such steps in legitimizing user-made videos as cultural objects through a set of evaluative criteria and frames of interpretation have also taken more informal routes that include blogs and "grassroots intermediaries" (Jenkins et al. 2013, p. 7) such as Luke McKernan's Bardbox, Jeremy Fiebig's The Shakespeare Standard, and Lisa Starks's "Shakespeare Friends" Facebook community.

Situating Shakespeare users outside institutional walls has meant seeing them in relation to youth culture and to a variety of interpretive communities who employ common production and

consumption practices. These fragmented, multiple, and often incidental relations between users have unveiled an online discourse on Shakespeare that "accommodates the far-reaching permutations of a network of linguistic, aesthetic, and cultural associations" (Fazel and Geddes 2017, p. 3).

Of course, there are a few problems with regard to participation in the Shakespeare network. Alongside impediments to participation in the digital culture as a whole (van Dijk 2013), it has previously been shown how YouTube's political economy can take over the agency in making cultural and user associations (O'Neill 2017a). The online attention economy can also determine whether producers maximize their chances of gaining views and engagement, competing under a neoliberal logic characterized by institutional and corporate practices (Lehmann and Way 2017). In examining Romanian users who have appropriated Shakespeare on YouTube, I argue that weaker ties with the Shakespeare network are symptomatic not only of the platform's political economy and heightened competition, but also of a digital cultural economy which falls short in legitimizing local cultural production.

Posing language and retrieval barriers to international curators, Romanian users' works are absent from local blogs and online cultural magazines as well. Their appropriation practices are overwhelmingly class assignment parodies of *Romeo and Juliet*, an online trace of the play's canonical presence in some of the local literature and English high-school curricula. If English-speaking users produce an abundance of creative responses to Shakespeare's texts, some of which are attracting a large viewership, digital curators' attention, and even awards, local production is rather scarce and users barely manage to stir the interest of any interpretive community in appropriating Shakespeare. Shifting the focus from the many to the few, this article aims to contextualize user-made appropriations in a cultural field framework, bringing forth the "global cultural field" (Massai 2005, p. 6) model in conceptualizing, this time, the "world-wide" cultural production online.

The dynamics between a global digital economy and the local symbolic economy are here explored by analyzing Romanian producers' legitimation process (Bourdieu 1993, pp. 50–51) in a local context where Shakespeare has overwhelmingly belonged to academic and theatrical fields. More specifically, my analysis focuses on producers' positions in relation to both the local and the digital fields they enter by firstly discussing the utility of a field conceptualization of digital cultural production for digital Shakespeare. Then, local users' appropriations will be contextualized in the digital economy and in the local cultural economy, where Shakespeare's position as high culture triggers few, if any, interpretive communities' interest in pop culture Shakespeare. Against scarce legitimizing agents and audiences, I discuss the positioning of three Romanian producers of YouTube Shakespeare, taking into account their views, choice of genre, and discourse: the short performance parody of the balcony scene in *Romeo si Julieta varianta scurta romaneasca:))*, uploaded on the Umor Romanesc channel (Umor Romanesc 2015); the mash-up music video or vidding *Parodie Romeo și Julieta* (Glogovetan 2015), created by user Ioan Glogovetan; and the satirical performance vlog *Sonnet 116-William Shakespeare* (Gherman 2017), created by comedian Silviu Gherman. While these choose media and comedy subgenres that are globally consecrated in appropriating Shakespeare on YouTube, local audiences are yet to consume and legitimize works which interfere with Shakespeare's cultural authority.

2. Shakespeare Users in the Digital Field of Cultural Production

Even if a canonical author has a high status and is used as a source of authority in the cultural field being invoked "as a source of legitimation by all of the participating rival groups" (Sela-Sheffy 2002, p. 141), their role as a generative model in the current cultural production is not a given, not even in the case of a highly adapted author such as Shakespeare. This means that a canonical status can ensure the circulation of newly-derived cultural artefacts on the market as shock-absorbers in changing cultural paradigms, but this does not automatically attract valorisation or producers' recognition in the market. These processes require field-specific criteria, strategies of differentiation, and knowledge of who occupies dominant positions in the specific cultural field.

The field model provides a dynamic unit of analysis for digital Shakespeare, seen here as a cultural production in the making, because its structural laws around the dialectic of cultural distinction are able to accommodate, with difference, current media and cultural settings. Shakespeare is produced and consumed relationally, across multiple platforms and affinity spaces online, becoming a site of struggles between institutions, private organizations, and individual social actors over "the power to impose the dominant definition" (Bourdieu 1993, p. 42) of Shakespeare's meaning in global digital media. Similar to digital fields of art production (Goriunova 2012) or music (Suhr 2012), digital Shakespeare has been reigniting scholarly debates about the definition of what is and what is not Shakespeare, and over who gains and who loses legitimacy and authority in digital scholarship and practices (Carson and Kirwan 2014), as well as in participation (Rumbold 2010; O'Dair 2011). My own attention to local user-made appropriations is a position-taking in itself, inscribed through the available positions within the convergence of the academic fields of Shakespeare and digital humanities.

The legitimization of YouTube appropriations in the global Shakespeare community of interest, for instance, has evolved from their categorization under general labels such as "fun stuff" (the Internet Shakespeare Editions recommendations), "other links" (the Shakespeare Resource Center) or "other sites" (Mr. William Shakespeare and the Internet) to the abovementioned digital curation practices, including Stephen O'Neill's selection of YouTube adaptations available on his own channel. In 2016, the Shakespeare Standard's Bardie Awards conferred the New Zealand-based retelling of *Love's Labour's Lost*, entitled *Lovely Little Losers*, the award for the Best Shakespeare-inspired series (Third Annual Bardie Awards 2016). In Bourdieusian terms, agents of consecration have begun to legitimize these works for their contribution to the Shakespeare network and to Shakespeare as a site of cultural production (Holderness 1988). Importantly, such curatorial interest for YouTube Shakespeare has been shown in other communities and industries as well, from online entertainment magazines to blogs targeting young audiences and fandoms such as Bustle, Odyssey, and Hellogiggles. The latter have reviewed several web series (Coronado 2016; Epley 2015; Kadner 2014), including *Nothing Much To Do*, a *Much Ado About Nothing* adaptation; *Kate the Cursed*, a Canadian adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*; and *Jules and Monty* (*Romeo and Juliet*). The Australian series *Shakespeare Republic* has received numerous awards from film industry festivals dedicated to web film productions (Awards and Screenings 2015–2019).

Such symbolic processes of evaluating productive participation are essential in the digital economy, which seldom manages to reward Internet users' work financially. As media theorists have shown, much of what is produced in digital media is "outside the market economy" (Bolin 2011, p. 26) and rather confined to political, social or cultural economies. Recent studies on what users look for when uploading videos on YouTube point to cultural and social gratification needs such as "giving information, self-status seeking, and social interaction motives" (Khan 2017, p. 242). Thus, users primarily aim for symbolic capital, which in turn can be transformed, following Bourdieu's field logic, in economic gains in the long run.

Digital intermediaries such as YouTube provide free access for publishers and consumers, but for a creator to receive revenues, they must set up a channel, publish regularly, produce plenty of viewing hours and attract subscribers, so that YouTube can start placing advertisements on their videos. The revenue coming from advertisements differs from country to country and is unequally divided between the content creator and YouTube. For newcomers, the textual and production work involved in publishing original content often becomes part of what Australian queer web-series creator Emma Keltie called "authorized participation" (Keltie 2017, p. 133), referring to that which is temporarily allowed by the culture industry, only to be "colonized" thereafter and used to reinforce the industry's dominance. Given the necessary resources in producing videos on a regular basis and competing with corporate and institutional production, Keltie argues that participation is at best temporary, unless a creator is recognized by the culture industry and can continue producing being supported through different avenues. While the possibility to compete with dominant industries is limited, Web 2.0 does allow for novel "bids for meaning and value" (Jenkins et al. 2013, p. 44) for vernacular productions,

performed by active audiences in circulating media content themselves across social media platforms. Reminiscent of fandoms' practices, users engage in social distribution practices by spreading media content for different personal, cultural, political or economic purposes. The extent to which this form of "user-circulated content" (Jenkins et al. 2013, p. 15) can legitimize producers' cultural works very much depends on the audience with whom users share those goods: in niche communities of interest or of practice, such as the case of fan communities or the abovementioned Shakespeare groups, productions can enter a process of reviewing and valuation according to the community criteria. If shared with their wider social network, however, the work becomes part of identity performance: in this case, audiences often think more about what the person circulating the work is trying to communicate about themselves, such as personal taste, personal experience, mood, or views, than about the production or producer of the work. Thus, in order for newcomers to feel legitimated, it is important that their works be circulated either extensively or in meaningful locations where communities of interest exist. Such strategies require social media users to have both digital skills and an up-to-date knowledge of the cultural field.

The role of dominating search engines and digital intermediaries in consumption needs to be taken into consideration as well, since they impose dominating genres, as well as structures and algorithms with an editorial role in retrieving and ranking search results. In addition to the echo chamber and filter bubble effects shown to constrain cultural consumption in social networks, digital intermediaries' algorithms retrieve content which suits the Internet users' consumption habits and interests, reproducing what the user is likely to be interested in or enjoy, so as to reward search engine use. The first time I searched for *Romeo și Julieta* (the Romanian translation for *Romeo and Juliet*) and activated the "Geographical location" filter, along with the "Relevance" and "Romanian language" filters, only two results appeared: one was the National Television Theatre production from 1978, digitized by the Romanian Television Corporation; the other was The Geeky Blonde's video from the *Condensed Shakespeare* series produced in the United States. Given that I previously knew several theatre trailers promoting local stage productions of *Romeo și Julieta*, not seeing them in my results indicated that the geographical filter was not reliable. Interestingly, after searching for such trailers specifically and viewing several Romanian productions digitized by theatres and television companies, a repeated keyword search following the same initial query and filters displayed all the videos I had watched, including the original two results. Our most recent consumption practices determine, through YouTube's algorithmic systems, what we find and consume next, such hierarchies challenging views or the hopes of a decentred video archive capable of producing "disjunctive shifts among cognitive frames of reference" (Desmet 2017; see also O'Neill 2014). The frames of reference reflect not only what we already know, but also our most recent preferences recorded in the algorithms, leading to an unreliability of search results and to a transfer of agency over what we consume to a digital platform. As such, digital intermediaries are not only gatekeepers of information online, but also potential reproduction machines of consumption preferences and habits. Without a previous cultivation and digital literacy, Internet users are unlikely to extend their cultural consumption beyond the familiar boundaries, drawn by interests, topics, and narratives, but also linguistic and geographical areas. In interpreting Romanian Shakespeare appropriations as cultural objects, the ineffective filter confirms their distribution in a global flow where location and borders might lose their importance (O'Neill 2017b, p. 288) to such an extent that they become digital forms of "archival silence" (Huang 2013, p. 284–85). Out of the 30 search results displayed after employing several keyword combinations, including "name of the play in Romanian", "language" and "Shakespeare" or "name of the play in Romanian" and "famous lines" (such as "to be or not to be"), and excluding digitized video heritage, the following is evident: 11 objects were opera and theatre trailers, 7 were the aforementioned parodies, 2 were *Romeo and Juliet* video essays, 2 were commercials, 2 were pop songs, 1 was a comedian's performance vlog of *Sonnet 116*, and 1 was a television production summarizing *Hamlet*, using the *Thug Notes* style and format. From these, I have chosen three user-made appropriations based on their representative value in terms of genre and discourse from the available productions.

3. Appropriating Shakespeare in the Local Field

The valuation of local media appropriations had a legitimizing force for their inclusion in the global cultural field. The main criteria in valuing such works were, nevertheless, their "significant role in mass culture [...], as well as in more traditional sites of cultural production" ([Massai 2005](), p. 4). As argued above, while broadcasting on a global digital platform, Shakespeare users still rely on more traditional processes of legitimation in order to gain the type of symbolic capital they are looking for. Their digital works can either be valued in consumption, attracting Internet users' views and engagement, or in production, by the media industry's formal and informal agents or by other web or Shakespeare producers from their respective communities, according to Bourdieu's field model. For Romanian appropriations of Shakespeare on YouTube, their productive participation meets a few limitations in this respect: they rely on the production and consumption practices of local Internet users, as they address a Romanian-speaking audience. Even when they remove language barriers and perform in English, as in the case of Silviu Gherman's rendition of *Sonnet 116*, or just use images and music, as the *Romeo and Juliet* parody does, YouTube's algorithm makes it difficult for them to reach a global audience. Moreover, there are currently very few local blogs and cultural magazines curating online cultural production and, when they do, they mostly select what has already been socially curated on Facebook, the dominating social network used by Romanians. Part of the Romanian independent cultural journalism scene potentiated by digital media, Vice Romania, Scena9, or Sub25 magazines address the educated youth, the cultural omnivores sometimes labelled as "hipsters" who consume both high and popular culture. Following the rising popularity of his videos among youths, for instance, Scena9 interviewed a 19 year-old YouTube video user who transformed the typical literary analyses of Romanian canonical authors used for the high-school baccalaureate exam into rap songs. Comedian Silviu Gherman was also interviewed by several industry websites in relation to his YouTube parodies of Romanian cultural and political authority figures, which had attracted a larger user engagement, but his Shakespeare appropriation was never discussed.

Local curators' lack of interest in user-made Shakespeare videos and users' own limited creative responses to Shakespeare are not the result of a rejection of hybridity or of web genres. They are rather a result of Shakespeare's position both in local cultural production fields, namely Shakespeare as text in translation, theatre, and specialized academic study, and also in consumption fields, dominated as they are by attending theatre productions, as well as by viewing or listening similar productions via mass-media. In Romania, Shakespeare has resisted appropriation by the youth culture consuming media products. Although the state-owned Romanian Television and Radio have been producing inside their own studios Shakespeare adaptations since the 1970s in the programs known as the *National Television Theatre* and *National Radio Theatre*, their filmed or recorded studio performances are theatrical events, which borrow the "value criteria and professional hierarchies" ([Munteanu 2007](), p. 63) from the theatrical field in order to give actors and stage performances a mass public exposure. Television theatre and radio drama have been meant to educate mass audiences and popularize stage productions, continuing the dominant emphasis on Shakespeare's theatricality. A handful of corporate commercials using Shakespeare as hypotext got closer to global media industries' practices in capitalizing on Shakespeare's brand, locally coding him however as a "paragon of high culture [...] connoting elitism, sophistication and specialist knowledge" ([Colipcă-Ciobanu 2016](), p. 42). More recently, the media industry, similar to stage directors' attempts ([Nicolaescu 2016]()) to attract younger audiences by remediating popular media, aimed to retell Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and other canonical literary works with more accessible language, references, characters, and plots for local (digital) media consumers: in 2014, a private television ([Prima TV 2014]()) produced and aired a show called *S-o dăm carte în carte cu Dorian*, which imported the format and style of the YouTube web series *Thug Notes*. In spite of its relatively good reception when uploaded on YouTube, primarily due to the celebrity of its presenter, a well-known comedian in the urban stand-up scene, the show was cancelled after its first season.

Against this local cultural background in which Shakespeare has occupied high positions in the field, to which the disconnectedness from more global audiences is added, user-made Romanian

appropriations struggle to find their legitimizing communities or agents. In the following section, I will focus on three case studies which productively respond to Shakespeare by tapping into audiences' consumption of comedy. Although mass-media comedy is a popular genre of cultural production, with its own hierarchical structure reflected in the following works as well, Romanian Internet users are reluctant to enjoy irreverent treatments of the Bard.

4. Romanian Users' Parodies, Illegitimate?

A relevant particularity in local cultural consumption is that Romanians are less than half as likely to watch video content online from commercial or sharing services as other E.U. and U.K. citizens, preferring to a much higher extent to participate in social networks, to listen to music or to read online news (Eurostat 2019). Facebook's video feature has also hampered users' desire to step into a different video platform and discover new content. Although some emerging artists, influencers, and journalists do create content on YouTube and promote it via Facebook, the platform is dominated by pop music record labels and television shows. Users' cultural production on YouTube in Romania is also yet to attract academic interest; the only studies concerning the local use of this medium of production and distribution pertain to the fields of marketing and political communication.

Struggling with the dominance of Facebook in the local web sphere, as well as with institutional and corporate channels on YouTube, users who create Shakespeare appropriations also compete with theatres' marketing-driven trailers. Trailers have a larger viewership than user-made videos, the most popular by far being the National Opera in Bucharest's promotional trailer for *Tango. Radio and Juliet* (Opera Națională București 2011), a contemporary ballet retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* with Radiohead's music which gained 24,567 views, followed by Petrică Ionescu's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Teatrul Național I.L. Caragiale 2016), attracting 6914 views, or the National Theatre in Timișoara's *demoHamlet* (Teatrul Național Timișoara 2016), with 5476 views. Theatres have started to use social media communication and genres in order to engage with their main audiences, who are typically young (aged 19–37), educated, and urban professionals. Cultural consumption statistics show that the audiences attending theatre performances have the highest rate of cultural participation in all other cultural activities in the public sphere, including online (Matei and Hampu 2018, p. 156). Their eclecticism in consumption guarantees the success of many stage performances making use of pop, rock or hip-hop music, with one of the most popular local adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* being Gérard Presgurvic's pop-rock musical, which since 2009 has been staged many times in Bucharest at the National Operetta and Musical Theatre Ion Dacian.

Distinguishing themselves from institutional Shakespeare, users employ different genres and discourses in appropriating his works: rather than maintaining the source texts' dramatic or poetic genres, users choose to rewrite *Romeo and Juliet* and *Sonnet 116* in comedic genres, as do their international peers. Compared to the more recent success of Shakespeare web series (Lanier 2018), however, Romanian users create single Shakespeare-related videos, which either remain their only video upload on the platform, or are followed by uploads of other humoristic sketches and class assignments. Although they appeal to the same audience category as theatres, few user-made YouTube appropriations manage to attract more than a few hundred views.

The first such video, representative for local classroom inspired parodies of *Romeo and Juliet* is a video entitled *Romeo si Julieta varianta scurta romaneasca:))* (373 views, no comments), posted by the channel Umor Romanesc, meaning "Romanian Humour", which has 91 subscribers and five other funny videos. This particular video based on Shakespeare's play is a six-second comic twist of the iconic orchard or balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, in which a teenager playing Romeo attempts to signal his presence to Juliet by throwing pebbles at her window. Just as Juliet hears the signals and prepares to open the window after obliviously reading a magazine in her room, Romeo throws a heavier rock that lands on Juliet's face, instantly running away at the sight of his blunder. As most student-made Romanian versions of this scene, the appropriation does not remain faithful to the original play's setting and scene development in which Romeo sees Juliet and overhears her sighs

regarding having fallen in love with a Montague. The user primarily replies, instead, to the universalist interpretation signifying a romantic wooing situation, where the scene's original stakes, motivation and context at large can be easily replaced according to the user's own preferences. The ubiquity of this scene in the cultural and educational flow makes it so familiar to local audiences that no actual lines need to be spoken or in-depth knowledge of the play be held in order for it to be recognizable. In this case, viewers' expectations are defied when the sudden slapstick element aiming for a comic effect interrupts not only the anticipated teenage flirt, but also the entire relationship and subsequent plot. Relinquishing the suspension of disbelief as many parodies of the play do, this alternative early ending is also telling for the specific Romanian humour that marks this version: a low burlesque, based on a character's ridiculous failure in achieving the most rudimentary of tasks.

Such comedic tricks and characters are commonly used in folklore, as well as in entertainment television shows, appealing to a large audience with a low or medium level of education. Their commonality, accessibility and entertaining value guarantee such shows' viewership. Other local student-made videos use similar techniques in appropriating *Romeo and Juliet*, as a result of both the humour they consume from local pop media and their need to personally respond to aspects of the play they often find too antiquated, frustrating, or sophisticated. With regard to the balcony scene, characters' metaphorical language and their rapid evolution to a marriage plan have a defamiliarizing effect upon local teens studying the play in school, the exemplified response managing to domesticate the scene. In spite of using pop culture recipes that work for young audiences, however, the attempt to bring Shakespeare's story to the realm of the burlesque has not managed to attract legitimation either in consumption, as it only attracted 382 views and no user comments, or in production, as the video did not stir the interest of local curators and communities. The clash between a teenage joke and Shakespeare makes such videos marginal.

A similar intention to turn *Romeo and Juliet* into a parody is stated by user Ioan Glogovetan, who uploaded *Parodie Romeo și Julieta* in 2015, attracting since then 1380 views, 10 likes, 3 dislikes, and no comments. The user chose to create a mash-up parody in which he remediated scenes from Franco Zeffirelli's classical film adaptation from 1968, to which he added a variety of local music genres, including the most consumed pop and ethno music, but also the culturally illegitimate *manele* or "gangsta" pop (Schiop 2018) to which I will return below. As a statement of a more knowledgeable user, the choice for Zeffirelli's film differs from the usual cinematic reference point in Anglo-Saxon youth culture, namely Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996). The purpose of using the 1968 production, bearing in mind the genre and music used to translate the plot and mood of the play in local terms, is precisely to signify elevated and prestigious Shakespeare through its institutionally consecrated film adaptation. English textbooks used in the Romanian secondary education use stills from Zeffirelli's film in order to illustrate learning units on *Romeo and Juliet*.

For a fairly careful selection of scenes providing a plot overview of the play in four and a half minutes, Glogovetan meticulously chooses lyrics, rhythms, and genres from mostly local music that match or comment upon the characters' dynamic and mood. For instance, over Romeo's melancholic longing for Rosaline, a nostalgic ethno song is dubbed, the user tapping into the illustrative power of its lyrics: "I thought I wanted more/I didn't know how to listen to you/And I'm dying from missing you/My love is all I've got left and I'm dying from missing you" (Nek feat. Shusanu and Mr. Juve, author's translation). A joyful, upbeat ethno love song is used to convey the relationship between Juliet and the nurse, transitioning towards reggaetón and *manele* rhythms from the Capulets' ball onwards: "Dance, dance, and show them what you can do, Come and dance just with me, I want to spite all others" (Mr. Juve and Bobo) to dub the lovers' first encounter, while the *manele* lyrics "Here come the cops, taking all my stuff/I hide the dollars and the marks" (Liviu Mateș, *Vine poliția*) are played when the nurse catches the lovers and pulls Juliet away. The position of music genres in the local cultural field determines, in this case, the position of Glogovetan's parody in the fields of consumption and production. In terms of consumption, ethno music is considered the rural version of pop music, and is nevertheless highly consumed across all ages and levels of education. Conjoining ethno and pop music

with "highbrow" Shakespeare, such parodies can have a widespread entertainment value, and appeal to large audiences. In using *manele* as well in his dubbing, however, the user brings Shakespeare to the realm of contested, illegitimate culture, given the genre's position in the local field.

Composed and performed by Roma ethnics, *maneaua* (pl. *manele*) is a music genre which took off mid 1980s and gained popularity during the 1990s and early 2000s as a mixture of Romani traditional folklore, electronic instruments, and Turkish, Serbian, or Bulgarian pop. Lyrics are stylistically simple and, at times, vulgar or grammatically faulty, addressing themes of interest derived from the urban ghetto: clandestine businesses and relationships, love, sex appeal, pain, friends, and foes. Initially performing for Roma and lower classes' community events, such as parties, weddings, or funerals, singers started to be promoted by record labels and media channels, attracting upper and middle class criticism both of their subject matter (ideologies such as consumerism, conformism, misogynism, tribalism) and also of their behavioural models (such as trickery for getting ahead, showing off material possessions, or cheating). Ever since the anti-*manele* discourse began to dominate the public sphere, in particular through conservative intellectuals' downright rejection of the genre, mass media has largely excluded the artists from mainstream radio and television channels, pushing them to the margins, as a peripheral cultural practice belonging primarily to the poor and uneducated or to Roma communities. *Maneaua* has since been associated with bad taste, lack of education, and being kitsch, deemed as an undesired product of post-communist eclecticism. Arguing against the cultural field's dismissal of the genre, leftist groups have started to appropriate such music, maintaining that what keeps *manele* peripheral in the cultural field is actually the result of structural racism towards the artists and their primary target audience (Schiop 2018), rather than of the subject matter, ideology, and lyrics style, since these resemble "gangsta" rap or reggaetón themes and lyrics. The latter genres, comparatively, are global genres which have been popular in Romanian cultural consumption, thus differently evaluated in the field. Even though, more recently, *manele* singers have started to shift from a lower to more middle class production, blending with mainstream genres and importing their scenarios and imagery, their uses in parodies allude to their contested cultural capital in order to mock or lower the status of the parodied subject. On YouTube, there are a few parodies of *Romeo and Juliet* using *manele* and a collage of Shakespearean lines retold in such rhythms and language style, tapping into the difference between a high cultural authority and "low" cultural practices in the local field.

This class discourse is more explicitly shown in the final example to be showcased here, *Sonnet 116-William Shakespeare*. This has gained more views and user engagement than the previous ones (3743 views, 180 likes, 3 dislikes, 9 comments), given Silviu Gherman's ongoing vidding activity attracting its own community and the aforementioned online magazines' interest. The user is one of the few emerging artists committed to producing online videos, using crowdfunding websites such as Patreon in order to support his work. Gherman is producing parodies and satirical videos on both Facebook and YouTube, and his channel presently has 34,278 subscribers, with a frequency of at least one video a week on Facebook and different monthly web series episodes on YouTube. With a mission statement of "providing education and humour to a godforsaken and blunted population" (Gherman's YouTube channel), his humour addresses a niche audience, with journalists repeatedly describing his style as distinct from pop and commercial entertainment, and not digestible by mass audiences: dry, absurd, unexpected, self-ironic, and critical, most of the time infused with elements of ridicule and satire spoken with a straight face in every-day domestic or public settings. Gherman challenges cultural and social dominants in manner and discourse, requiring previous cultivation in order to decipher his critical undertones. In 2015, he became well known to a larger category of social network users outside the restricted artistic community, with a video parody of Dan Puric (Gherman 2015), an actor working at the National Theatre in Bucharest who in the past 10 years has become a public spokesman of orthodox nationalism by giving speeches and interviews in mainstream media, holding conferences all throughout the country and publishing books about Romanian national identity. Without explicitly addressing political views, Gherman parodied the actor's bombastic, exalted language and amateur mix of approximate quotations from historical right-wing cultural authorities. In doing so, Gherman

attracted the interest of left-wing cultivated consumers frustrated by Puric's discourse. The video became viral on social media, reaching 279,217 views, a considerable figure for the local cultural battlefield. Since then, he has also collaborated with established industry players who are interested in experimenting with the absurd and meta-language practiced by Gherman in more popular productions.

In line with his anti-establishment and anti-elitist comedy, Gherman's YouTube performance of *Sonnet 116* is set in the artist's own apartment hallway and kitchen, where he is filmed while reciting the sonnet in English to the camera, as if wisely explaining to the viewers what love is. The video provides English subtitles as well, making the verses easier to understand for Romanian viewers. As he remarks "O no! it is an ever-fixed mark/That looks on tempests and is never shaken", the camera shows him opening the refrigerator looking for food and, failing to find any, a bit pensively closing it. He then casually proceeds to his trash bin where he finds a slice of bread, which he goes on to combine with mustard ("Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks") and chomp on right after uttering the last lines. The gap mentioned in the previous example regarding illegitimate, peripheral cultural practices and Shakespeare's elitism is even more explicitly shown by Gherman, who rather widens it by choosing to contrast a display of poverty, scarcity, and insalubrious solutions to basic needs, with a snobbish, know-it-all rendition of a sophisticated Shakespeare text. User comments show the different reactions to Gherman's humour. Some viewers have asked him about drug procurement, implying the comedian's level of absurdity can only be the result of drug or alcohol consumption, while others have ironically identified with the character's practice of reciting poems while eating from the dumpster. Others still comment on his use of Shakespeare's sonnet, praising Gherman's learning of a "pretentious text" in order to produce an amusing video. Achieving a comical effect through the disproportionate gap, the coexistence between cultivation and poverty is interesting in this case, as it does not necessarily reject the sonnet's value in the same way as Gherman's treatment of Dan Puric's bombastic style does. Rather, it reinforces Shakespeare's value, but with the purpose of commenting upon the class differences at play in the local cultural field itself, where emerging cultivated artists struggle with precarious working conditions and finances. Moreover, it might well be considered a satirical reflection upon the status of the (web) artist in Romania, putting into question the actual feasibility of romantically pursuing high culture when the need for resources is more stringent.

Gherman's discourse on Shakespeare's position in the cultural field compared to local artists and their audiences can be inscribed in more recent public debates upon artists' social security, as there is currently no public policy addressing artistic work in Romania, or in the global discourse on cultural production online more generally where, as I already noted, participation becomes temporary due to a lack of legitimizing agents and rewards. The use of *Sonnet 116* to tap into economic struggles could appeal to leftist, intellectual communities who might both recognize and understand Shakespeare's text and its politics too, and adhere to the discourse itself. However, given their low economic and political power in the local field, the position of Gherman's video is marginal, without any legitimizing agents to place a value on Shakespeare's association with peripheral cultural practices.

5. Conclusions

This article has discussed local users' participation in digital Shakespeare as forms of cultural production in a digital field, thus supplementing network approaches and presentist analyses with a focus on the symbolic economy into which newcomers enter. YouTube video producers can be legitimized either in consumption, by various audiences and communities of interest, or in production, by consecrating agents or other producers. If English-speaking producers have drawn digital and institutional curators' interest within various fields, including Shakespeare studies, the film industry, youth culture, or Internet users at large, Romanian producers are yet to find legitimizing agents for their Shakespeare appropriations. I have argued, using cultural and media economy theory, followed by an overview of the local digital and cultural fields in which Romanian "Shakespeares" are produced, that local YouTube appropriations are struggling to find their own interpretive communities and valuing agents due to a number of factors. Firstly, there are language barriers and increased competition with

institutional and corporate content, as well as algorithm bias in reproducing consumer preferences, which hamper both global audiences from finding vernacular productions on the platform and also global formal or informal curators from evaluating them. Secondly, the local field's underdeveloped means of legitimizing digital cultural production largely leaves YouTube videos to be valued in terms of consumption, which often occurs through social curation practices employed primarily on Facebook. Thirdly, the local coding of Shakespeare as elite culture combined with the low presence of pop culture appropriations outside theatres means that YouTube users enter a contested position from the onset. Finally, based on a closer analysis of users' practices in appropriating Shakespeare, it is evident that a demystifying or class critique of the Bard's elite position springing from the emerging pop culture Shakespeare in Romania is locally struggling to find its own interpretive community and legitimizing agents. The symbolic and, eventually, economic valuation of digital cultural practices is highly determined by their local institutional and discursive context.

Consequently, the extent to which global platforms can generate a global discourse on Shakespeare, one that accommodates a flow of local cultural practices, seems rather limited for the time being. In spite of the accessible global media of production and distribution, online cultural production continues to be affected—if not entirely determined—by privileged locations and languages. In turn, the assimilation of global media genres and discourses into local users' productive responses to Shakespeare is ultimately evaluated in local digital and cultural fields. Given the obstacles of global curatorial practices in valuing local production, a closer interdisciplinary inspection of how local fields might variously factor in, foreground, and improve the evaluation of digital cultural practices needs to inform future research on the culturally specific iterations that Shakespeare productions on YouTube invariably take.

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