Review of *Shakespeare Republic*

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**Abstract**

*Shakespeare Republic* (http://shakespearerepublic.com) is a series of short videos that set Shakespeare's characters in our contemporary world.

Sally McLean's *Shakespeare Republic* is a series of short videos anthologized into seasons published online via the *OZ Flix* video distribution platform. McLean's aim is to emphasize a diverse and feminist perspective in their productions of short films of speeches from a number of Shakespeare's plays. *Shakespeare Republic* uses the twenty-first century's cultural questions of race, gender, and identity as lenses for understanding Shakespeare's plays. While selected moments from the plays (delivered in three- to five-minute slices) are set in a world where human relationships are more mediated by technology than they were in Shakespeare's England, the fundamentals of those relationships remain the same. Educators, theater artists, and Shakespeareans of all stripes will leave the series wanting more text and context from the creators, but in two seasons, and with a third on the way, I expect *Shakespeare Republic* will continue to provoke discussion and debate about what Shakespeare has to offer the 21st century.

*Shakespeare Republic* was created in 2015 by McLean, an Australian actor. McLean's professional credits include the BBC Music and Arts Department in London, the Australian Shakespeare Company, and many other film, television, and theatrical production companies. McLean's combined expertise is on full display in *Shakespeare Republic*, which features both a critical eye and ear to Shakespeare's text, and high production values for a series of this kind. Under McLean's direction, the thoughtfulness of the cinematography is equal to that of the series' interpretation of Shakespeare's characters.

While McLean never explicitly defines what she means by the title "Shakespeare Republic," her commitment to casting diversity suggests an underlying philosophy that Shakespeare is (or should be) for everyone. *Shakespeare Republic*'s diverse casting is most effective in the series' treatment of gender. Both cross-gender casting and re-gendering characters are common practices
at some of the world's largest Shakespeare companies, but *Shakespeare Republic* elevates re-gendering characters to the degree that the actor's gender always feels like a creative choice, whether the actor's gender expression agrees with the written character's or not. It is no small accomplishment that a cisgender, female Pheobe succeeds in being as much of a creative casting choice as a cisgender, male Queen Margaret is.

The first season of *Shakespeare Republic* consists of six episodes, featuring scenes from *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *As You Like It*, and even the inclusion of a sonnet, with individual episodes lasting about three to five minutes each. In "Hamlet," for example, director McLean locates the scene of Hamlet's (Rowena Hutson, playing a female Hamlet) "To be or not to be" speech with establishing shots of a rubber duck bobbing in a bathtub, a casually discarded outfit sitting on the floor, the sound of water dripping, and an iPhone. At the end of the speech, Hamlet emerges from the bath with the frosted tips washed from her hair, and discards on to her phone the soaking wet undergarments that we had no hint she was wearing. These visual elements raise the stakes of the moment: immersed as she is in milky white bath water, I feared for this Hamlet's suicide in a way that I never have before at this moment in the play, and her emergence from the bathtub unscathed was a relief. This episode exemplifies the strength of McLean's approach: the deliberate gestures to modern technology tease that you may be witnessing an adaptation, and that perhaps in this telling, Hamlet decides "not to be" is the right answer.

The combined specificity and brevity of *Shakespeare Republic*'s filmed scenes invites the viewer to imagine what the complete production might look like, providing further grounds for discussion and debate for how the events of the play should unfold in the world of the films. If Macbeth is getting a call from the party whip after resolving not to kill Duncan, will Duncan's assassination be literal or figurative? If the latter, how should the film best deal with a Duncan who is physically alive but politically "dead"? Should we view Macbeth's marriage as a metaphor for a political alliance, and how does that change the relationship between him and his "Lady"? In this manner, the vignettes are themselves a metaphorical gauntlet thrown down to the viewer, daring them to imagine what a full production in this world might look like.

The scope of *Shakespeare Republic* expands from season one to season two. Season one focuses primarily on individual speeches in individual contexts, and highlights the ways in which technology might mediate Shakespeare's plays when they're set in the modern world: a male Juliet, speaking at his kitchen table in front of an open computer, discovers that Romeo (also male) has been watching his speech ("wherefore art thou Romeo") through Juliet's laptop, rather than spying from the garden. This is recognizable as a distinct moment from *Romeo and Juliet* that could be part of a larger film. Season two, by contrast, places these speeches and these characters together
in a shared world with a narrative that crosses the boundaries of several plays. It also runs to 13 episodes.

The change in format is a little jarring at first. Because the episodes are short, there isn't much room to scaffold their interconnectedness, and until it becomes clear that these characters now share a world and are capable of interacting with one another, those moments feel like loose ends. The implicit meaning of the series changes when these characters interact in a shared world: at that moment, *Shakespeare Republic* becomes less about "rediscovering, reinvigorating and occasionally re-interpreting these universal observations in a modern setting, through the lens of current events and social issues of our time," and more about McLean's "sense of seeing fragments of 'one day in the life' of a modern, contemporary world where we all happen to still speak in Shakespeare's language" ("Genesis of the Series"). It is a fascinating vision, and trying to sort out some of these threads gives season two a great deal of replay value, but the "takeaway" that *Shakespeare Republic* offers, that "Shakespeare speaks to us now just as strongly as he did 400-odd years ago when he first put quill to parchment" does not follow from season two nearly so well as it does from season one ("Genesis of the Series"). The two presently available seasons of *Shakespeare Republic* thus create a dialog about the nature of Shakespeare in the 21st century.

Season one offers a strong case that Shakespeare needs very little to be meaningful for 21st-century audiences: mostly modern dress and modern technology. Season two almost posits the opposite: that Shakespeare's speeches are cultural objects that need to be separated from the plays they come from to best create meaning. It is a compelling argument about the value and cultural cachet of Shakespeare's text made through performance. What is the inherent value of Henry V's speech to his troops at Harfleur ("Once more into the breach dear friends, once more")? How inspiring are those same words spoken by a schlubby middle aged man to his equally schlubby friends while playing a game of lazer tag? Are the words special when they are so worn by common usage? If they're not special, why do they form a cornerstone of the curriculum more than do someone else's words? If they are special, do the circumstances of their speech mean anything? And is *this* Harry right? Do these men, playing a game with no real stakes, embody mythopoeic courage and achieve romantic "nobility" in their sport? Does their use of Shakespeare make their lives more meaningful, or is it twee? And how should our understanding of this speech change coming from a Henry whom we see in a later episode at the pub giving audience to Jaques' "All the world's a stage" speech?

In a world where Shakespeare's words are more likely to be encountered in a meme or on a coffee mug than spoken on a stage, the second season's approach forces us to examine the ways by which we continue to make Shakespeare meaningful. Some of the season 2 episodes do suggest
they are part of the plays that inspired them: for example, "Edmund" (featuring Falon Ryan as a female Edmund) makes some of the best use of the small screen format and technological mediation in the series. While mobile phones and computers feature prominently in most of the episodes, we see Edmund's letter on the screen as she reviews it on her phone and adds a signature before sending. A viewer curious as to whom she is emailing, and why, will have to read *King Lear* to find out. By remixing speeches from across the canon into a 21st-century milieu, the second season of *Shakespeare Republic* poses thoughtful questions about constructing Shakespeare's relevance to the modern world, while also refusing to provide easy answers to those questions.

Apart from the main series, the Shakespeare Republic company website—the company takes the same name as the series itself—provides links to more information about other projects in their repertoire. These include a live stage show, which accompanied the launch of the second season, and which follows the format of that season; and some information about the short film *Speaking Daggers*, which places eight characters from five different plays by Shakespeare into a 21st-century cafe to discuss their competing philosophies. Neither an archival recording of the stage show nor a copy of the film are currently available on their website, however, and for the moment trailers and other promotional materials describing them are all that are available.

Another short video on the site, "The Bardolator: Who Was Shakespeare" gives an under-two minute introduction to Shakespeare, but despite the tongue-in-cheek presentation of Bardolatry, this film traffics in tired tropes, while at the same time repeating inaccuracies that have been passed down uninterrogated in primary and secondary school English classes. Scholars and educators will acknowledge, for example, that the *OED* credits Shakespeare with the first printed instance of many words in modern English, but that is not the same as claiming Shakespeare invented these words. Yet "The Bardolator" makes that claim, along with several others that will likely give 21st-century Shakespeareans pause.

The Shakespeare Republic website itself does not feature the most easily navigable or user-friendly design. Navigation and informational copy text take a back seat to marketing materials. *Shakespeare Republic* has earned many awards and accolades, but in the design of the website, these are emphasized over the series and its paratexts. Paratexts related to the series are neither housed nor indexed close to the links to the main series videos: those who want to know more about the series will have to look to the "About" page, and several times while writing this review, I had to use a Google search of the domain to find what I was looking for (director's notes, for instance). Better organization of paratextual materials would make the site a more useful resource. It's also worth noting that all episodes of *Shakespeare Republic* are hosted on *OZ Flix* (ozflix.tv), and while free to view, watching them requires registering an account and "renting" them for a
limited period of time. This allows for an ad-free viewing experience, however, which offsets the inconvenience of having to register an account.

*Shakespeare Republic* disrupts and refracts traditional approaches to Shakespeare's plays, presenting original narratives at the intersection of Shakespeare's words and our world in an accessible way. Richer paratextual materials would help scaffold the episodes currently available, but we'll just have to find that context in subsequent seasons. As it becomes clear that these characters are *not* necessarily Shakespeare's characters, or even confined by the text of his plays, I find myself wondering where McLean and her team are going with their overarching narrative. Perhaps the highest compliment I can pay any artist is that they left me wanting more, and *Shakespeare Republic* has done exactly that.
References