

Performing Truth: Reconfiguration of 'The Mousetrap' in *Karmayogi* and *Hemanta*

Ms. Geetanjali Gitay

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, K.R.T. Arts, B.H. Commerce and A.M. Science (KTHM) College, Nasik, Maharashtra, India.
geetanjalitay@gmail.com

Dr. Sharad K. Binnor

Professor and Head, Department of English, K.R.T. Arts, B.H. Commerce and A.M. Science (KTHM) College, Nasik, Maharashtra, India.
sharadbinnor@gmail.com

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Abstract: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* explores the intertwined themes of revenge, indecision, deception and the protagonist's pursuit of truth. He employs the distinctive dramatic device of play-within-the-play to depict Hamlet's attempt to seek the truth regarding the circumstances of his death. Appearing in Act III, Scene II of the play, this play-within-the-play is popularly known by the metaphorical name the Mousetrap, owing to the narrative function it performs as Hamlet seeks to trap the truth of King Claudius's involvement in his father's murder. Cinematic adaptations of *Hamlet* reconfigure this device according to the cultural and aesthetic contexts in which the play is received and reinterpreted. This paper examines the reconfiguration of the Mousetrap in two cross-cultural Indian cinematic adaptations of *Hamlet* in the twenty-first century: V. K. Prakash's Malayalam film *Karmayogi* (2012) and Anjan Dutt's Bengali film *Hemanta* (2016). The paper draws upon Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation and Gérard Genette's concept of the palimpsest and explores how the play-within-the-play device is retained in the films while altering its cultural and aesthetic expression. The paper argues that the multifarious representations of 'the Mousetrap' demonstrate the inclination of the cinematic adaptation to negotiate Shakespeare's classic dramatic conventions in culture-specific forms that result in new interpretations and culturally situated versions of Shakespeare.

Keywords: truth, indecision, revenge, cinematic adaptation, palimpsest, aesthetic expression

Introduction

Hamlet (c. 1599–1601), Shakespeare's classic tragedy revolving around the themes of revenge, indecision and moral conflict, portrays the eponymous protagonist, Prince of Denmark, Hamlet's struggle to avenge the murder of his father, King Hamlet. Set against the backdrop of the court of Denmark, Shakespeare has drawn upon earlier narratives of the Hamlet legend, significantly Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* and François de Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*. Shakespeare, however, substantially transforms the inherited narrative by developing the psychological, philosophical and theatrical dimensions of the protagonist's revenge. Shakespeare employs the play-within-the-play trope, popularly known as "Mousetrap", through which Hamlet attempts to establish the truth of the Ghost of King Hamlet's accusation against Claudius. 'The Mousetrap' acts as a means of investigation through which suspicion can be converted into evidence.

'The Mousetrap' performs an important function in the narrative structure of *Hamlet* as it foregrounds the relationship between performance and truth. Hamlet, uncertain whether the Ghost speaks the truth or seeks to deceive him, chooses the dramatic performance by the players visiting Elsinore Castle as a tool for establishing the truth of his father's murder. The Players' performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, modified by Hamlet to include details corresponding to the murder of King Hamlet, enables him to observe his uncle Claudius's response. Claudius's interruption of the performance and subsequent reaction provide Hamlet with the confirmation he seeks. The device consequently operates simultaneously at several levels: it advances the revenge plot, reveals Claudius's guilt, foregrounds Hamlet's consciousness about theatre practices and introduces a metatheatrical dimension into the play. Shakespeare thereby creates a complex dramatic situation in which a fictional representation of a crime becomes the means through which a concealed reality is exposed. 'The Mousetrap' can therefore be understood as a site where theatre, truth and spectatorship intersect.

The performative possibilities of 'The Mousetrap' have contributed to its continuing significance in adaptations and performances of *Hamlet*. Indian cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare have likewise involved processes of translation, appropriation, indigenisation and cultural recontextualisation. *Khoon Ka Khoon* (1935) by Sohrab Modi, *Hamlet* (1954) by Kishore Sahu, *8 X 10* Tasveer (2009) by Nagesh Kukunoor and Haider (2014) by Vishal Bhardwaj are instances that demonstrate the longstanding trajectory of cinematic adaptation of *Hamlet* in Hindi cinema. The present paper, however, focuses specifically on the cultural reconfiguration of "the Mousetrap" in two films, *Karmayogi* (2012), directed by V. K. Prakash, a Malayalam adaptation of *Hamlet* and *Hemanta* (2016), directed by Anjan Dutt, a Bengali adaptation of the play.

The present paper draws upon Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* and Gérard Genette's *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* and examines the representation and reconfiguration of the Mousetrap in the selected cinematic adaptations of *Hamlet*. While Shakespeare's text utilises the theatrical performance as an instrument for testing guilt and uncovering the truth of the antagonist, the two

Indian adaptations reshape this device according to their respective cultural and cinematic contexts. By placing *Karmayogi* (2012) and *Hemanta* (2016) in dialogue with the source text, the paper argues that cinematic adaptation functions as a site of cultural negotiation in which a Shakespearean narrative convention is simultaneously inherited and transformed.

Theoretical Framework

Linda Hutcheon, in 'A Theory of Adaptation' (2006), defines adaptation as 'replication without repetition' (Hutcheon 2006,07). She further defines an adaptation through her threefold criteria, where she states that an adaptation is: 1. an acknowledged transposition of a recognisable other work or works; 2. A creative and interpretive act of appropriation or salvaging, and 3. an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work (Hutcheon 2006, 8). Hutcheon thus conceptualises adaptation as a process of reinterpretation, audience negotiation, and cultural translation. The cinematic adaptations chosen for analysis overtly acknowledge themselves as adaptations of *Hamlet* and comply with Hutcheon's first criterion of adaptation.

Hutcheon emphasises the significance of context on the process and product of adaptation and states that "These ways of engaging with stories do not, of course, ever take place in a vacuum. We engage in time and space, within a particular society and a general culture. The contexts of creation and reception are material, public, and economic as much as they are cultural, personal, and aesthetic. This explains why, even in today's globalised world, major shifts in a story's context—that is, for example, in a national or temporal setting — can change radically how the transposed story is interpreted, ideologically and literally." (Hutcheon 28). Thus, the representation keeps shifting depending on the differing contexts. Each of them, to use Gérard Genette's term from *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, is a 'palimpsest', and they make a permanent change to the original text or what Genette calls 'hypotext'.

These theoretical concepts would be employed in analysing the reinterpretation of "the Mousetrap" in the two instances of cinematic adaptations chosen for the paper. Together, this theoretical framework posits adaptation as a process of cultural negotiation, in which the play-within-the-play acts as a site for the negotiation of performance, truth, and contextually specific forms of representation.

The Play-within-the-Play in *Hamlet*

The play-within-the-play, or "The Mousetrap", spans two scenes in *Hamlet*. The first scene that mentions the Players is Act II, Scene II. The scene opens with Polonius discussing Hamlet's apparent madness with King Claudius and Queen Gertrude and attributing it to Hamlet's love for Ophelia. Polonius' reasoning leads to Claudius's remark, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't" (*Hamlet* 2.2.201–02). Later, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet Hamlet. Rosencrantz informs Hamlet that they have met the Players en route and have invited them to Castle Elsinore; they are tragedians. Polonius' comment enumerating the various genres of tragedy throws light on the variety of dramatic genres prevalent in the Elizabethan era. Soon, the

company of travelling Players arrives at Castle Elsinore. Hamlet welcomes them. He states that Players are “abstract and brief chroniclers of the time” (*Hamlet* 2.2.461-462). He asks the First Player to enact the speech addressed by Aeneas to Dido that includes Pyrrhus’s slaughter. This speech describes the murder of Priam and Hecuba’s grief. Hamlet is deeply moved by the actor’s ability to express intense emotion for a fictional event and contrasts it with his own inability to act despite having a real cause for revenge: “What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, / That he should weep for her?” (*Hamlet* 2.2.559-60), he says.

After learning that the Players can perform *The Murder of Gonzago*, Hamlet asks the players to insert twelve to sixteen lines that will portray the circumstances resembling his father’s murder as narrated by the Ghost. He wishes to ascertain that it indeed was his father’s ghost and not the devil misleading him. “Hum, I have heard That guilty creatures sitting at a play / Have by the very cunning of the scene / Been struck so to the soul that presently/ They have proclaimed their malefactions.” (*Hamlet* 2.2.559-60), he believes. He asks Horatio to observe Claudius’s responses during the performance, as he has resolved to believe that “The play’s the thing/Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (*Hamlet* 2.2.524-540). The scene thus establishes the foundation for the upcoming performance by the players, which Hamlet will use as an instrument to ascertain the claims made by the Ghost of his father.

In Act III, Scene I, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report their encounter with Hamlet to Gertrude and Claudius before Hamlet’s meeting with Ophelia. “The Mousetrap” is performed in Act III, Scene II before King Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia and the court. Before the performance, Hamlet advises the Players regarding the delivery of their lines, an advice that perhaps reflects Shakespeare’s own beliefs regarding acting, which reflect his knowledge of the relationship between acting and audience response (*Hamlet* 3.2.1-2). The Players then stage the play, which depicts a murder closely resembling that of King Hamlet, in which the Player King is poisoned while asleep and the Player Queen subsequently marries another man. As the performance progresses, the parallels between the staged crime and Claudius’s alleged crime become increasingly evident. Claudius abruptly interrupts the performance and leaves while exclaiming “Give me some light. Away!” (*Hamlet* 3.2.262). His reaction converts Hamlet’s suspicion into belief. The performance of “The Mousetrap” contributes to unveiling the truth of the crime committed by the king. It performs a dual function of demonstrating the writer’s beliefs about a dramatic performance as well as establishing the facts for Hamlet regarding the circumstances of his father’s death. “The Mousetrap” is etched in the cinematic adaptations in varying manners. The next section attempts to present a brief, film-by-film analysis, tracing how each adaptation reconfigures the representation of this dramatic device in accordance with their distinct cinematic, aesthetic and cultural contexts.

The Mousetrap in *Karmayogi* (2012)

National Award-winning filmmaker V. K. Prakash’s *Karmayogi* (2012), produced by Creative Land Pictures Pvt. Ltd. and promoted by Kerala Film Promotions Division, is a Malayalam cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* that transposes

the narrative of the source play from the Danish court of Castle Elsinore to unspecified historical period in the feudal and martial milieu of Northern Kerala or the Malabar region. The title *Karmayogi* means a “one who performs deeds without expectations of gain”. The film introduces characters from the Yogi clan who consider themselves to be descendants of Lord Shiva and are his worshippers. They practice *Kalarippayattu*, an ancient martial art form of Kerala, as evident from the opening sequence of the film. In the film, *Ekarajyam*, the headquarters of the Yogi clan, replaces Castle Elsinore. The traditional palatial residence, *tharavadu*, with its warrior-training courtyard and enclosed corridors, becomes the principal spatial setting of the narrative (Buckley).

The protagonist Rudran (Hamlet) is the lone descendant of the Chathothu family that represents the Yogi community. Indrajith Sukumaran plays both characters Rudran Gurukkal (Hamlet) and Rudran Valiya Gurukkal (King Hamlet), Thalaivasal Vijay plays Bhairavan (Claudius), actress Padmini Kolhapure plays Mankamma (Gertrude), Nithya Menen plays Moonumani (Ophelia), Ashokan becomes Shankunni (Horatio), M. R. Gopakumar plays Kidathan (Polonius), and Saiju Kurup plays Kanthan (Laertes). The adaptation significantly reshapes these characters to suit its Keralan setting and cultural framework. Echoing the actions of his textual counterpart, Rudran, when he realizes that his father was assassinated by his uncle, decides to avenge his father's murder. The film's other characters also correspond to their Shakespearean counterparts but are substantially reconfigured within the local cultural context. This cultural translation is further reinforced by the employment of *Kalarippayattu*, the traditional martial art of Kerala, and the *kelipathram* ritual, in which Rudran is understood to be possessed by Shiva. Thus, the film's transposition extends beyond geographical relocation.

The film explicitly establishes Rudran as belonging to Lord Shiva's bloodline, thereby associating the protagonist with the divine destroyer and transforming Shakespeare's contemplative prince into a culturally specific warrior figure (Buckley). The name Rudran is itself central to this cultural transposition. It is associated with Lord Shiva, particularly his fierce or destructive aspect. Unlike Shakespeare's introspective Prince Hamlet, therefore, Rudran is reimagined as a Keralan warrior whose actions are shaped by martial duty, divine identity and karmic action. Rudran's character as an incarnation of Lord Shiva is established by the incorporation of Sanskrit hymns praising Lord Shiva as the background music that further reinforces the cultural transposition of the narrative. It also establishes the cultural milieu for “The Mousetrap” to be reshaped culturally.

Like the Ghost of King Hamlet from the play, Rudran's father appears in his dreams and informs him about his murder committed by his own brother. Rudran, like his textual counterpart, devises a plan to ascertain his suspicion. The play-within-the-play is placed midway through the film, confirming the narrative structure of the source play. “The Mousetrap” is culturally translated as a *Poorakkali* performance in the cinematic adaptation (*Karmayogi* 53:50- 57:54).



Fig. 1: 'The Mousetrap' in *Karmayogi*. Screenshot from the film (0:57:40).

Poorakkali is a traditional ritualistic and martial folk dance from the North Malabar region of Kerala, India and is primarily performed by men in Bhagavathy temples during the nine-day Pooram festival in the Malayalam month of *Meenam* (March–April) to honour *Kamadeva*, the god of love. It is structured as a dance performed in a circle around a large, multi-tiered lit brass lamp, *nilavilakku*. The group leader, called a *Panikkar*, sings the primary lines which the other dancers repeat in chorus. The narratives are often drawn from the epics of the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Bhargava*. It involves vigorous, acrobatic, and masculine movements, heavily influenced by *Kalaripayattu* martial art techniques. As a *Poorakkali* is organised in the Chathotu household, Rudran informs the actors, like Hamlet, to enact a scene reminiscing about his father's murder as narrated by his father in his dream (*Karmayogi* 53:50- 57:54).

The Mousetrap is thus transposed as a *Poorakkali* performance performed at Rudran's home. While performing the ritualistic dance, the participants enact the scene of Rudran's father's death, which echoes the circumstances portrayed in the Mousetrap in *Hamlet*, where a man pours poison in the ears of his sleeping brother, resulting in his death (*Hamlet* 3.2). Bhairavan (Claudius), the antagonist, is perturbed after watching the scene; he stops the performance and leaves, giving Rudran the assurance about the real circumstances of his father's death and a way to decide his further course of action (*Karmayogi* 53:50- 57:54). 'The Mousetrap' is thus culturally reconfigured in *Karmayogi* by translating it into indigenous performance traditions of India. The performance, however, retains the central trope of poisoning from the source text.

The Mousetrap in *Hemanta* (2016)

Noted Bengali filmmaker Anjan Dutt reinterpreted the play in his cinematic adaptation *Hemanta* (2016) and transposed the hypotext from the Danish court to the world of an affluent Bengali film-producing family situated in twenty-first-century Kolkata. Actor Parambrata Chatterjee enacts the titular role as Hemanta Sen (Hamlet), a young filmmaker who returns from New York following his father's sudden death and, like his textual parallel, becomes suspicious of the circumstances surrounding the event. Veteran Bengali actor Saswata Chatterjee plays Kalyan Sen, a character parallel to Claudius, his uncle and now head of the family's film-production company, named *Agradoot*; actress Gargee Roy Chowdhury plays the character of Gayatri Sen (Gertrude), Hemanta's mother and Kalyan's companion. Payel Sarkar becomes Olipriya, a parallel

to Ophelia, and Jisshu Sengupta plays Hirak, a character parallel to Horatio, Hemanta's close friend and confidant. Actor Souptik Chakraborty acts as Lalit, a character corresponding to Laertes/Polonius and Sagnik Chatterjee as Raju (Rosencrantz) and Vivaan Ghosh as Guildenstern, among the other adapted characters. Dutt replaces the royal and political world of *Hamlet* with the dynamics of the Bengali film industry, using the family's production company as the site of conflict for power. The element of the Ghost of King Hamlet and his revelations appears in the form of messages received by Hemanta (Hamlet) and Hirak (Horatio) on their mobile phones from an unidentified number. The messages are accompanied by fluctuations in electricity in the rooms, which act as a transposition of the supernatural elements from the source text.

One of the messages received by Hemanta reads "Time will tell time's best fruit, /There is something rotten in the state of *Agradoot*, /Hurry home my son before it's late, / It's only at home your destiny waits." (*Hemanta* 6.48 -6.54) The message leads Hemanta (Hamlet) to return to Kolkata and alludes to the quote from the source, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (*Hamlet* 1.4.100), a dialogue uttered by Marcellus in the play. Hemanta's dead father owned the companies named Agradoot Pictures, Agradoot Productions, and Agradoot Distribution; the word Agradoot means harbinger, which forms a kind of kingdom in the Bengali film industry, parallel to the kingdom of Denmark. As Hirak (Horatio) attempts to find out the source of the messages with the help of a hacker, the number remains untraceable, but the trail leads him to a website named "Help.com". Certainly, the person or the spirit of the dead father who sends the messages is seeking help. Further, the website also records several suspicious monetary transactions, and Hemanta (Hamlet) wishes to find out the source. His efforts, however, don't succeed, and it makes his resolve stronger to find out the truth about his father's death. It is communicated that he has died by suicide, but Hemanta (Hamlet) believes the facts to be different as understood from the messages.

As Hemanta (Hamlet) arrives in India from the U.S.A., a parallel to the University of Wittenberg from Hamlet, where he is studying for a course in filmmaking, he attends a success party for a film produced by his company titled "*Dansho*", which means a sting, which rouses allusions to the snakebite being the reason for King Hamlet's death as mentioned in the text. Hemanta then decides to ascertain his suspicion, the motive resonating with his textual correspondent.

"The Mousetrap" in the film is culturally negotiated in the form of a scene being shot as part of *muhurat*, the tradition of beginning the shooting of a film on an auspicious day as notified by the Hindu almanac. Hemanta (Hamlet) decides to start shooting for a film titled "*Pratishodh*", meaning vengeance, clearly resonating with his motif, which complies with his textual counterpart. One of the messages he has received earlier from the unknown number reads "One and two and no one saw, Jack and his burrata and cloth's claw." The message throws light on the situation of his father's death, where the murder went undetected due to a lack of witnesses, and the murderer shot Hemanta's father with a pistol and wore gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints behind. Hemanta finds a gun and gloves in the house, which strengthen his suspicion. Hemanta (Hamlet) composes the scene, putting together the details he has learnt from the messages he

receives and the objects he finds in the home. The scene forms the climax of the film which Hemanta plans to make. The Mousetrap (*Hamlet* 3.2) in the film takes place in the film studio of Agradoot Films in Kolkata (*Hemanta* 1:17:30 -1:24:26). Hemanta invites his mother and uncle for the *muhurat*.

The scene begins where the actor playing Hemanta's uncle Kalyan Sen's (Claudius) role reasons the flailing business of Bengali cinema due to influence of Hindi films and television to the actor playing Hemanta's father and owner of the production house. The person further tells Hemanta's father that Bengali films have an audience only in rural areas and not in the city. Instead, they should invest money in a website named "*Sonshoy.com*". The word '*sonshoy*' in Bengali means suspicion, which corresponds to Hemanta's feelings and alludes to the suspicion of Hamlet from the source text (*Hemanta* 1:17:30 -1:24:26).



Fig. 2: 'The Mousetrap' in *Hemanta*. Screenshot from the film. (1:18:22)

The actor playing Hemanta's uncle appeals to the actor playing the role of Hemanta's father, saying that they should start an NGO and, under its guise, collect funds from international sources and then use them for their own purposes, like investing in films or upgrading the studio's infrastructure. The actress playing Hemanta's mother also joins the conversation. Hemanta's father, however, denies getting involved in money laundering. The actors playing Hemanta's uncle and mother ask the character of Hemanta's father to sign a cheque, which he refuses to do. The actor playing Hemanta's uncle is shown wearing black leather gloves and points the gun at Hemanta's father's forehead. Hemanta's father tells him that his son will take revenge for his murder (*Hemanta* 1:17:30 -1:24:26).

As this scene unravels, Gayatri (Gertrude) faints and Kalyan Sen (Claudius) ask for the script and orders the shooting to stop until he approves it; the interruption of the scene corresponds with the interruption of the play by Claudius in the source text. These reactions by his mother and uncle turn Hemanta's (Hamlet) doubt into confirmation about the actual cause of his father's death. Hemanta, after the scene, sitting in the director's chair, questions himself, "Betrayed by the queen, the king fell, Will you take up the task or play the clown?" which signifies the call for him to take revenge for his father's murder (*Hemanta* 1:17:30 -1:24:26). "The Mousetrap" of *Hemanta* thus shifts the performance of the dramatic players of the source text to the performance of film actors. It performs the same dramatic function as that of "The Mousetrap". It transposes it to the socio-cultural context of the film, the Bengali film industry and throws light on the element of suspicious transactions involved in that business.

Conclusion

The exploration of cinematic reconfiguration of *The Mousetrap* in *Karmayogi* (2012) (*Karmayogi* 53:50- 57:54) and *Hemanta* (2016) (*Hemanta* 1:17:30 -1:24:26) demonstrates how adaptation operates as a process of cultural negotiation rather than mere textual transposition. Both films retain the essential Shakespearean function of the play-within-the-play, where a dramatic performance acts as a means of approaching concealed truth, but relocate it within distinctly Indian performative contexts. In V. K. Prakash's *Karmayogi*, *The Murder of Gonzago* is transformed into a narrative performed through *Poorakkali*, an indigenous dance performance tradition of Kerala. The transformation integrates the Shakespearean device into the film's larger cultural world punctuated with indigenous cultural motifs including *Kalarippayattu*, *Kelipathram* and *Shiva* mythology. Rudran's identity itself is closely associated with Lord Shiva, and Buckley argues that this association "heightens the cultural translation of *Hamlet* as mythical superhuman" (42). *The Mousetrap* thus participates in the film's larger strategy of translating Shakespeare through indigenous cultural and performative traditions.

Anjan Dutt's *Hemanta* (2016), by contrast, negotiates the *Mousetrap* through a contemporary cinematic idiom. The theatrical performance of Shakespeare's *The Murder of Gonzago* is transformed into a *muhurat* shot of the film *Pratishodh*, meaning revenge, and relocates the play-within-the-play from theatrical performance to the contemporary Bengali film industry. The distinction between the two adaptations is therefore significant: *Karmayogi* employs a traditional cultural imposition, embedding the *Mousetrap* within an inherited regional performance practice, whereas *Hemanta* offers a contemporary cultural transposition, translating Shakespearean metatheatre into the medium and institutional world of cinema; the play-within-the-play is translated as a film-within-a-film. Such regional transformations exemplify the ways in which Indian Shakespeare films relocate the source text within culturally specific contexts rather than merely reproducing its dramatic structures (Burnett).

The two representations of "the *Mousetrap*" can consequently be understood as cultural palimpsests. In Genette's formulation, a hypertext emerges through its transformative relationship with an earlier hypotext (5); the Shakespearean *Mousetrap* remains discernible beneath the new cultural inscriptions of *Poorakkali* performance and the film *muhurat* shot. Similarly, Linda Hutcheon views adaptation as both reinterpretation and recreation, enabling an adapted work to retain its relationship with an earlier text while acquiring meanings within a new context (8). *Poorakkali* performance (*Karmayogi* 53:50- 57:54) adds to the articulation of a regional identity rooted in Kerala's ritual and performance traditions, while the *Pratishodh muhurat* (*Hemanta* 1:17:30 -1:24:26) situates *Hamlet* within the twenty-first-century social and cinematic ethos of Bengal. These culturally specific transformations extend the afterlife of Shakespeare's play, rather than preserving *Hamlet* as a fixed canonical text. The recasting of "The *Mousetrap*" in *Karmayogi* and *Hemanta* transposes its performance into specific Indian socio-cultural forms. It contributes to the production of multiple, culturally situated "Hamlets", subsequently adding to the global appeal of Shakespeare.

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