

A/N:

The panel I run every year at GeekKon is entitled "*Geek Highbrow: Shakespeare and Other Classic Lit Through a Geeky Lens*." This is an admitted misnomer, for two reasons. One, there really isn't any such thing as 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' art. And two, even among people who believe in such a distinction, Shakespeare was not considered highbrow in his day.

The reason Shakespeare's plays are still popular *nowadays* is because of his beautiful, poetic dialogue, multilayered wordplay, complex and well-developed characters, emotional authenticity and insight, and open-minded exploration of universally-relevant issues. But in Renaissance-era England, his plays were popular because of the violence, illicit (often underage) sex, supernatural monsters, toilet humor, and anachronistic pop culture references in what were ostensibly period dramas. A business-savvy reading of Shakespeare will show you all the seams, the shameless fanservice, the market-focused elements, the ripped-from-the-headlines exploitation, every charge commonly slung against the mass-market blockbusters of today (and also against *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, for that matter).

Shakespeare's long posthumous transition from gloriously-sleazy pop-culture phenomenon into Important Academic Iconography™ could inspire volumes of research. For now, all you really need to know is this:

The myth that "Only the ~~wealthy~~ educated can appreciate High Art" has been around ever since people have been drawing a distinction between high and low art... but the inverse idea, that "Only the ~~peasants~~ uneducated can appreciate Low Art," is actually a fairly recent invention. At the time and place Shakespeare was writing, the theatre was looked on as pure sleaze, and being an actor (or playwright) was considered about as reputable as being a hooker... and yet the wealthy and noble went to see plays right alongside the working stiffs. Some theatre companies were even invited to perform at royal courts; Shakespeare became most famous when his company was taken under the official patronage of Queen Elizabeth herself, who even at one point *commissioned* a play (yes, the Queen of England commissioned a work from a guy who had written plays in which several of her ancestors got brutally murdered onstage, and who handled it in such a morally complex manner that the killers and rivals were not portrayed entirely unsympathetically). More on that in a bit.

PLAYS IN THEATRES AT THE PRESENT TIME PRESENT SPECTACLES
AND DEAL OPENLY WITH SITUATIONS WHICH NO PERSON WOULD HAVE
DARED TO MENTION IN GENERAL SOCIETY FORTY YEARS AGO ... THE
CURRENT REPRESENTATIONS OF NUDE MEN AND WOMEN IN THE DAILY
JOURNALS AND THE ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINES WOULD HAVE
EXCLUDED SUCH PERIODICALS FROM ALL RESPECTABLE FAMILIES
TWO DECADES AGO ... THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN DIVORCED ... FORTY
AND FIFTY YEARS AGO LOST AT ONCE AND IRREVOCABLY THEIR
STANDING IN SOCIETY, WHILE TO-DAY THEY CONTINUE IN ALL THEIR
SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS, HARDLY CHANGED ...

EDITORIAL, *THE WATCHMAN*, BOSTON

1908

– hat tip to *xkcd*: "[The Pace of Modern Life](#)"

Imagine someone invites you to a museum exhibition of Surrealist and Impressionist painters. There are a lot of names in the brochure that you've heard somewhere before, like Salvadore Dali (wasn't he the melting clocks guy?) and Claude Monet (some cartoon had a joke about a character having to be reminded his how his name was pronounced ["mo-NAY"]) and Edgar Degas (hey, he was that guy played by Frank from *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and he was going blind and he fell in love with a ballerina played by Kim from *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, in that movie you caught the last two-thirds of while channel surfing one rainy afternoon).

So, how much are tickets for the exhibit tour? Huh, pretty reasonable. You're between Minecraft projects, and *Battlefield 4* doesn't come out 'til next week... plus, next time some hack TV writer has a character namedrop one of these guys to let you know This Character Is Smart And Educated™, you'll get the reference. Might as well, right?

But then you see the other people who are arriving at the museum for the tour.

For a second, you almost think they're cosplaying as Steampunk high society. If you went into a museum with *these* people, you'd feel like you'd showed up at a Victorian-themed ballroom party wearing jean shorts and a *Halo 3: ODST* shirt. Not to mention that you'd lower the average age of the group by about thirty years.

You can see part of the exhibit from outside. From here, it doesn't look like you'd be able to tell what any of those pictures were supposed to look like or what they mean. And you know you'd be too embarrassed to ask the tour guide (who will probably be using big words right from the start) for explanations. You can just picture yourself asking some dumb question that gives away your n00b status, and being surrounded by old rich people looking down their noses at you and whispering stuff like, "hasn't s/he read the complete works of Dostoyevsky? Children these days know nothing of art!" and "probably watches cat videos on E-Tube or whatever it's called," and "these 'computer game' things are ruining our civilization," under their breath.

So you walk away. At least videogames understand you. And speaking of which, the villain in *Saint's*

Row IV kind of reminds you of those guys. Who wants to hang out with assholes like them anyway, right? Leave the old guard behind!

That's the feeling that Shakespeare's name tends to invoke amongst laypersons.

Of course, this is hardly a new phenomenon. Ever since the concept of *art* was invented, long before the first cave paintings were scratched on walls [32,000 years ago](#), every generation has inevitably lamented the shortening attention spans and lack of sophistication amongst their kids and grandkids... while turning right around and mocking any sign of intellectual achievement (or even the **desire** for intellectual achievement) in themselves or others.

SO MUCH IS EXHIBITED TO THE EYE THAT NOTHING IS LEFT TO THE IMAGINATION. IT SOMETIMES SEEMS ALMOST POSSIBLE THAT THE MODERN WORLD MIGHT BE CHOKED BY ITS OWN RICHES, AND HUMAN FACULTY DWINDLE AWAY AMID THE MILLION INVENTIONS THAT HAVE BEEN INTRODUCED TO RENDER ITS EXERCISE UNNECESSARY.

G. J. GOSCHEN, FIRST ANNUAL ADDRESS
TO THE STUDENTS, TOYNBEE HALL, LONDON

1894

The biggest problem in the theatre world right now is that theatre is considered an intellectually-intimidating medium.

Sir Trevor Nunn has served as Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, and then of the Royal National Theatre. This proves that you can become creative head of the most prominent and prestigious theatre companies in the world without understanding, or wanting to understand, anything about Shakespeare. Trevor Nunn is the epitome of those who consider the idea of '*Entertainment*' or '*colors other than blue-gray and dark grayish-brown*' to be incompatible with artistic achievement, and as a result put on productions that are deliberately designed to be as boring, tedious and miserable as possible, because "joy is shallow." The stage productions of Nunn and his ilk aren't meant to be *watched*; they are meant to be *attended*. Their sole purpose is for old rich white people to be seen going to shows that treat Shakespeare with the somber, solemn seriousness that the greatest writer of all time must necessarily "deserve."

Not even the comedies are immune to this desecration. In Nunn's foray into cinema, he turned *Twelfth Night* (one of the zaniest and silliest comedies in history) into a brooding melodrama; slapping a gray filter over the lens, shooting in dark, smoky interiors, cutting half the jokes from the script, and (this is the only explanation I can think of) instructing the actors to deliberately say the lines as unintelligibly as possible, just to raise the barrier of entry.

It's all about image. You remember the opera house we [saw](#) in "The Pony Everypony Should Know"

(possibly the best song of season 2, and that's a real challenge)? You've probably, at some point, seen some TV broadcast from an actual one just like it, or a scene from a movie that takes place in one. So, tell me, what *color* was the place? What is the color you most associate with the walls and decor of a fancy theatre? Gold. The lighting on the TV cameras is filtered to cast the whole place in this warm, rich golden glow, the glow of the fancy trim on the walls and ceiling, playing off the rich dark oak of the orchestra pit and supporting walls, and offset by the bright crimson of the curtains. The gold of the cufflinks and earrings and the white of the tuxedo shirts and pearl necklaces (and the hair), glittering against the flashy black suit jackets and evening dresses of the gaunt and pasty audiences.

And as for the plays themselves, as I mentioned, the colors most associated with those are blue-gray and dark brown, those being the two colors in the washed-out palette that all those dreadful TV-movie adaptations of Shakespeare are rendered in, with gritty and grimy sets and costumes all cast under the gloomiest lighting possible. It's an easy shortcut to making a production look Respectable and Sophisticated, without having to expend any effort in earning gravitas.

THE CAUSE OF THE ... INCREASE IN NERVOUS DISEASE IS INCREASED
DEMAND MADE BY THE CONDITIONS OF MODERN LIFE UPON THE BRAIN.
EVERYTHING IS DONE IN A HURRY. WE TALK ACROSS A CONTINENT,
TELEGRAPH ACROSS AN OCEAN, TAKE A TRIP TO CHICAGO FOR AN
HOUR'S TALK ... WE TAKE EVEN OUR PLEASURES SADLY AND MAKE A
TASK OF OUR PLAY ... WHAT WONDER IF THE PRESSURE IS ALMOST
MORE THAN OUR NERVES CAN BEAR.

G. SHRADY (FROM P. C. KNAPP)
"ARE NERVOUS DISEASES INCREASING?" *MEDICAL RECORD*

1896

This image is no different from the other cultural images and stereotypes that get fed to you. The half-naked teenagers with spray-on tans kneeling around beach campfires and making obscene hand gestures to the camera iconifying spring break. The suburban family gossiping over back fences and competing with their neighbors over who has the greenest lawn, pausing only to smile into the camera during household-cleaning-product commercials. All the neat and tidy representations of our society (so eloquently broken down in *Spring Breakers* and *Mad Men*) that you are told to aspire to be like, or to not be like, depending on which of the neat and tidy moral codes your elders and peers have picked out for you.

And since money is selling an image, it has to provide suitable imagery for its customers to pose against for photographs. So, professional theatre companies play along with this bowdlerization, this prim-and-proper bastardization of Shakespeare, because they're trying to attract the same imaginary people you evaded at the art gallery.

But let us pause for a moment. I must remind you that this is not, contrary to trendy belief, the fault of the "middlebrows." Like with "hipster," the closest thing to a middlebrow is one who derisively accuses others of being middlebrow in order to feel more self-righteous about their own tastes in entertainment. Those who divide entertainment into 'brows are the problem, since 'brows are really just ways of talking

about class as if class were a matter of personal taste rather than of economic necessity.

Theatre, just like comics and games, is going through a Dark Age; where the big-budget titles are obsessed with the superficial trappings of "Maturity™" but don't actually want to address their subject matter in a mature manner... and it's become increasingly difficult for the smaller and more creative outfits to find a voice.

This is not to say that I think theatre is at risk of dying out. We've been here before.

You know the bogeyman of the flashy new media full of trashy sexploitation, luring kids away from the old-school artistic mediums and dumbing down culture, right?

THE ART OF PURE LINE ENGRAVING IS DYING OUT. WE LIVE AT TOO FAST A RATE TO ALLOW FOR THE PREPARATION OF SUCH PLATES AS OUR FATHERS APPRECIATED. IF A PICTURE CATCHES THE PUBLIC FANCY, THE PUBLIC MUST HAVE AN ETCHED OR A PHOTOGRAVURED COPY OF IT WITHIN A MONTH OR TWO OF ITS APPEARANCE, THE DAYS WHEN ENGRAVERS WERE WONT TO SPEND TWO OR THREE YEARS OVER A SINGLE PLATE ARE FOR EVER GONE.

JOURNAL OF THE INSTITUTE OF JAMAICA, VOLUME I

1892

The general perception of our civilization is that we were on a steady track of advancement, growing more civilized and more enlightened... until sometime in the last few decades, when we went into a backwards slide (the exact start date of this backslide depends on your political affiliations). Well, that's nonsense. All the societal problems that have been ostensibly caused or exacerbated by the internet? Most of them were already there, and the internet has merely put them on phone cameras and Youtube so we can no longer pretend they don't exist. And sunlight is the best disinfectant.

Claims that culture is dying? Let's look at the medium of television for a moment. You know that common perception that reality TV and cop shows destroyed our culture by luring ADHD-addled viewers away from quality content in favor of cheap exploitation? Hah. Go watch the movie *Quiz Show* and tell me that TV was a quality medium in the good old days. And in the '00s, ostensibly the era in which the internet destroyed our culture forever, we saw the new Renaissance of the one-hour drama, beginning with *The Sopranos*, and birthing *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, *Six Feet Under*, *Tremé*, *Dexter*, *Breaking Bad*, *Game of Thrones*, the list goes on. These are things you couldn't get made in the days before the alleged dark age of the modern world. As a bonus, most of them are proof that, even in an age with allegedly decreasing attention spans, people are willing to put investment into season-long arcs.

And that's just the "original" IPs. It's even easier to take stupid IPs and remake them with an infusion of genuine artistry. I'm surprised more creatives don't do what Shakespeare did (or what Lauren Faust did, for that matter): take a bland franchise and turn it into something interesting and creative.

Still, there are troubling signs for the advent of traditional media. Movie theaters and print seem to be dying... but that's also due to bloated, unsustainable business models enforced by moronic corporate heads who lucked into cushy positions at the top of the food chain and are sabotaging the long-term health of culture for short-term profits, because they know they'll be fat and happy and above it all once everything collapses.

Theatre isn't going anywhere. It's not "popular," but that's because it's *never* been popular ever since there came another mass-market medium to amuse the populace. Theatre has always found its audience, and ironically, the internet is making it easier.

Yes, that's right, the general trend of civilization is toward progress... and it's truer now than ever.

The words "Highbrow" and "Lowbrow" are just thinly-veiled ways to frame discussions of socioeconomic class as though class were a matter of personal taste, rather than the product of circumstance and a system deliberately designed to keep people from moving out of the social classes they were born into (sort of how "Freedom" and "Security" are both just buzzwords whose sole utility is to be twisted around by anyone who wants to justify selfish behavior by pretending that the harm they inflict on others is for a good cause).

It turns out that, not only is it easily possible to bridge the gap between lowbrow and highbrow (even if you believe there ever was such a gap), but some even make the leap into full-blown high-mindedness. Of course the bourgeoisie has lashed back, and responded with smear campaigns demonizing intelligent media... primarily by seizing the allegedly-derogatory term "middlebrow" (as meaningless a term as any other 'brow) and slapping it onto everything from *The Wire* to *Breaking Bad* to *Mad Men* that dares to bring intelligent and thought-provoking content to the unwashed masses.

The other way they've responded is by doing a 180 on which "-brow" labels they attach to many of the pop-cultural tenets of yesteryear. Hence the cleaning-up of Shakespeare's reputation, and the rebranding as a quaint provider of wholesome sophistication.

There are a number of reasons for this. The aforementioned reactionary and anti-intellectual establishment (whether it be NASCAR or Spike TV, it's the same message), for instance. And, like many things wrong with our culture, another of the main causes is suburban parents, lazy enough to use school and/or TV as a babysitter, but overprotective enough to demand that their baby not learn anything interesting from the experience (again, more on that in a moment). But, strange as this sounds (or maybe it doesn't sound strange at all), I think a major cause is the show *C.S.I.*, and other shows about "smart" people written by less-smart people.

In that ~~parable metaphor~~ analogy about the art gallery, I mentioned that lazy screenwriters will often have The Smart Character namedrop some classical artist. Well, you might also notice that they always stick to the same shallow reference pool. They only mention the most venerated artists, usually less than a half-dozen names in each field. This is partially because they want to use the names that a lay audience will have already heard from time to time (primarily from other bad TV writers)... but more often because these writers themselves don't really know any more about the classical arts than (they assume) their audience does.

This shouldn't be surprising to anyone. It's common knowledge by now that most cop-show writers

don't know anything about police work; do you really expect them to be educated on classic literature? And just as the freak-of-the-week episodes on "furries" implies latex-suited orgies in crowded convention halls, and the topical episodes about feminism show us lesbian-separatist wiccan arsonist college kids (I shudder to think what will happen when these shows finally start doing episodes about bronies), so too are their "Scholarly" characters senile tweed-suited puritans who snort, "*Feh! Kids today are savages! We should take away their computer games and thrash them with belts until they read something wholesome!*"

And yes, that old adage about "stereotypes having a grain of truth to them" holds. Goodness knows there are a number of literature buffs... and bronies for that matter... who could stand to put a little more effort into dispelling those common myths. But the **reason** most stereotypes have "a grain of truth" is simply that, if you look at any sufficiently large and diverse group of people, you're bound to find some examples who fit whatever criteria you may wish to project onto the group as a whole.

Truth cannot live on a diet of grains alone.

The other reason that most laypeople don't get Shakespeare? Well, here's a hint:

Usually, whenever someone finds out for the first time what Shakespeare's plays are actually *about*, their reaction is something like, "Whoa! Why didn't my English teacher tell me this? Lit class would have been so much more fun if I'd known about this part!"

Trust me, your English teacher probably *wanted* to tell you this. They know full well that their students would be much more interested if they knew that half of Mercutio's lines are thinly veiled puns about anal sex with hookers, or that two of Shakespeare's plays have scenes in which characters get their eyes gouged out onstage. That was Shakespeare's whole schtick: Draw them in with the sex and violence, keep them in with the intellectual philosophy.

But school officials are afraid of getting sued by parents outraged that their pwecious widdle babies learned the Facts Of Life from Shakespeare (instead of learning it from their classmates at recess, like normal kids do), so teachers have to dance around the translations, and thus fail to communicate what made Shakespeare so fascinating. The only lesson that kids wind up getting from all this is, "This is something that only boring grownups understand."

OUR MODERN FAMILY GATHERING, SILENT AROUND THE FIRE, EACH
INDIVIDUAL WITH HIS HEAD BURIED IN HIS FAVOURITE MAGAZINE, IS
THE SOMEWHAT NATURAL OUTCOME OF THE BANISHMENT OF
COLLOQUY FROM THE SCHOOL ...

THE JOURNAL OF EDUCATION, VOLUME 29

1907

The side effect of this semi-accidental two-pronged attack is that Shakespeare is now seen as something

to be discussed in fourteen-letter words over milky tea... or worse, something prudish and proper, something your Bible-thumping grandparents shove at you to get you away from the immorality on the TV (the Bible, incidentally, is one of the few pieces of literature with even more sex and violence than the complete works of Shakespeare. Way kinkier sex, too).

Nowhere is this clearer than in the choice of what individual *productions* of Shakespeare get the most attention. Which names get associated with which roles. Which performances become darlings of the critics and turn directors into Artistic Directors, and which ones are osmosed by pop culture.

As for the latter: When a movie/TV character wants to show off more specific knowledge than just referring to a play, what is the specific production they usually reference? Who is the one actor that they most often go to?

Raymond Fowler: "...you have the soul of an amoeba, and the imagination of a pot noodle. You couldn't get a small role in a bakery. You'd get bored watching Olivier play Hamlet!"

Derek Grimm: "Well, I don't like football! Especially foreign teams!"

- *The Thin Blue Line*, "Yuletide Spirit"

Got it figured out yet?

212. *In Hamlet, the lead should not be gnawing on the scenery: between Gibson and Olivier, there's none left to chew on.*

- [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

Olivier's Hamlet. The film that was awarded Best Picture by an Academy who knew even less about Shakespeare than the generations of students who would be bored to tears by it and resolve to never again touch Shakespeare with a ten-foot pole.

It's not even a matter of it being "overrated." If I were the only one who saw the naked emperor where everyone else saw a beautiful wardrobe, I could at least feel the smug self-importance of a rebel standing alone against the current. But the only grain to go against here is people who have never seen it. Nobody likes that movie. It is held up as the pinnacle of human artistic achievement only by those who have no interest in it or in Shakespeare.

EPHEMERAL LITERATURE IS DRIVING OUT THE GREAT CLASSICS OF
THE PRESENT AND THE PAST ... HURRIED READING CAN NEVER BE
GOOD READING.

G. J. GOSCHEN, FIRST ANNUAL ADDRESS
TO THE STUDENTS, TOYNBEE HALL, LONDON

1894

So, will there ever be "another Shakespeare?" Will some other creative arise whose works transcend boundaries, become so revered that they are spoken of for generations?

Well, I mentioned above that Shakespeare was the blockbuster auteur of his day. Nowadays we have Joss Whedon, Hayao Miyazaki, the Pixar team... it depends on your definition of what constitutes "the next Shakespeare," but they fit the criteria of being reliably entertaining, intelligent, meaningful and popular. Yes, they all have their misses (except Miyazaki), but *Wives of Windsor* isn't so great, either.

Speaking of which...

About the Title

A fashionable practice in the titling of Elizabethan plays was to add a subtitle (putting the title in the format of: "X; or, Y"). The full title of *Twelfth Night* was "*Twelfth Night; or, What You Will*."

The main title of this fanfic, "The Merry Ponies of Equestria," is a reference to the title of Shakespeare's play *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and its subtitle of "No Two-Legged Creature" is taken from one of Falstaff's lines in the tavern scene of *King Henry IV Part 1*, when Falstaff is exaggerating how many men he fought with at Gad's Hill: "...if I fought not with fifty of them, I am a bunch of radish. If there were not two or three and fifty upon poor old Jack, then am I **no two-legged creature**" (incidentally, he ran away from two attackers).

Unfortunately, *Merry Wives of Windsor* is just... not very good. Shakespeare's weakest play, in fact. So, why does this fic take its title from that? Well, it shares an idea.

If the *Henriad* was a fanfic of the life and times of Henry IV and Henry V, then *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a spinoff fic, a fanfic of a fanfic, in which the OC has a solo adventure. The play takes place in Elizabethan England, contemporary of the time and place Shakespeare was writing, and involves Falstaff (without any explanation as to why he's suddenly around several hundred years after the Wars of the Roses, or where Hal is while all this is going on) getting into trouble with some local married women.

(incidentally, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is Shakespeare's only play that takes place in contemporary England. All Shakespeare's other plays are either unspecified in time and place, or take place in other eras and locations. Of course, those times and places often resemble Elizabethan England anyway in the plays... apart from some racial and historical stereotypes usually employed to give Shakespeare a better

excuse to ramp up the sex and violence in dramatic license... but MWW is the only play that's actually **supposed** to be set in then-modern England.)

The play's deficiencies can allegedly be traced back to the circumstances of its inception. The most popular "origin story" for this play is that Queen Elizabeth herself (who, as I mentioned above, was Shakespeare's patron) liked Falstaff so much that she requisitioned another play, saying, "I would like to see Sir John in love," and the play was hammered out in two weeks.

Not that the stories of his other plays were his sole untarnished creative vision, or that this stopped him from writing *them* phenomenally well (it is a common saying in the art world that if you give an artist complete freedom and resources, they'll choke and waste it all; but if you give them constraints, they'll create a masterpiece), and most of Shakespeare's plays didn't take all that long to write (the company often had less than three months to learn and rehearse each new play), but it's a plausible enough story.

Still, despite its deficiencies, the play does share the concept of Falstaff in a different world and having a different adventure, so it was an obvious choice for the title here.

Of course, because Falstaff was created by an Elizabethan playwright who wasn't concerned about anachronisms (since Shakespeare's audience wasn't exactly educated about the middle ages anyway), Falstaff was pretty well-versed on contemporary Elizabethan England's social customs, so Merry Wives isn't a fish-out-of-water comedy, just a Falstaff-wacky-hijinks comedy.

Falstaff is less well-versed on Equestria's customs (his camaraderie with Luna notwithstanding), but of course, unlike that play, I actually bother to explain how he got there and where the historical figures from the Henriad are. It would probably have been more in the spirit of Shakespeare to not explain it, to have the absurdity of Falstaff's presence in Equestria uncommented-upon. Fish-out-of-water comedies are hit-or-miss for me anyway (though I love *Equestria Girls*). But of course, MLP would explain how he got there, even if Shakespeare wouldn't; and the exploration of cultural differences would undoubtedly be a theme. And I, of course, am a total world-building junkie, and wouldn't you know it, this wound up fitting into the cosmology of... well, spoilers.

(I also took the title from Shakespeare's worst play because I wanted my fic to look better by comparison)

Why?

So, why cross over MLP with Shakespeare? Why cross this pure and innocent childrens' show with a playwright who, while amazing, had plays that were decidedly not for kids? Sure, Fo:E and suchlike already exist, but "someone else did it first" is hardly a reason.

I could point out that, while the sex and violence were the main draws of Shakespeare's plays in his time, they're not what he's best remembered for *today* (even by people who know what the plays are about), and there's no rule that says you have to replicate elements of his work that don't fit with the tone and rating you're trying to achieve. Shakespeare certainly didn't.

Of course, I've left in a fair bit of that stuff, though mostly in innuendo. But there's nothing that says *you* have to. I've done a Shakespearean take on MLP, but I'd love to see someone do an MLP take on

Shakespeare instead. Hmm, actually, hang on...

NOTE: Text that is in the Author's Notes on Fimfiction will be written in **dark green**. Text unique to this document (which includes all footnotes, the "links" to which in the FimFiction author's notes sections lead here) are written in ~~maroon dark brown~~ **whatever color this is**. The footnotes that linked you here (and other footnotes) will be reproduced in **magenta** and listed by letter after chapter number, for easier reference (unfortunately, you can't hyperlink in a GDoc, so I might move this to a different format at some point, so in the meantime just look for the magenta). Quotes from cited texts will be *purple and italicized* (and quotes from text OTHER than the Shakespeare ~~Overlord~~ Director Checklist will also be written in **Courier font**). I've chosen dark colors to make the contrast less obtrusive, so the footnote markers will stand out more.

From the Prologue:

259. *I will never cast Hamlet as a horse just so I can have characters ride around on his back during the so-called sexually tense scenes.*

161. *If I must stage Macbeth in a modern setting, there is no reason to dress the Scottish nobles as Hare Krishnas, especially if I also arm them with machine guns.*

298. *I will never, ever, ever, use an Enrique Iglesias song as background music for a love scene.*

509. *While there may be a legitimate artistic vision that includes costuming the Exiled Duke and his men as hippies, and another that includes the Usurping Duke and his court in Star Trek costumes, I will not combine these two conceits, particularly if they also accompany a Forest of Arden made of silver balls hanging from the ceiling.*

– *["The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"](#)*

Notes:

360. *I will not attempt to place The Tempest during the American Civil War, with Prospero as a usurped plantation owner and everyone else as Confederate and Union soldiers.*

361. *Similarly, substituting voodoo for Prospero's enchantments is a no-no.*

– [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

It was common practice for Elizabethan plays to open with a prologue introducing the play, just like how many fanfics open with a disclaimer about the boilerplate of copyright and some additional notes as to writing style.

The Renaissance theatrical prologues often consisted of a short speech in iambic pentameter (the [metrical line](#) consisting of ten syllables arranged alternating between non-stressed and stressed). I've gone one further and made it a sonnet, which is exactly 14 lines of iambic verse, twelve of which are arranged in four-line couplets of an ABAB rhyme scheme, and the final two rhyme only with each other.

Yes, there are a number of off-rhymes, which I had to grit my teeth over, because usually when writing poetry I'm a total stickler about [exact rhymes](#). But of course, a lot of Shakespeare's rhyming couplets don't rhyme anymore since of how pronunciations of various words have changed over the years,^[0a] and most of Shakespeare's dialogue is blank verse anyway.

Across all of Shakespeare's works, about two-thirds of the lines are in verse. The verse often varies in spots, sometimes stressing other syllables besides the even-numbered ones, or unstressing the even-numbered ones. This was a subtle stage direction emphasizing which words were more important, by drawing attention to the slightly jarring variation of verse. You can do a lot to affect audiences by subtly jarring their expectations, which often affects audiences on a subconscious level that explicitly "shocking" dialogue does not.^[0b] I, of course, am way too obsessive about rhythm (which is why I can't listen to the music of Franz Liszt, except [when watching Victor Borge play it](#)).

44. *I will not make the staging for Winter's Tale make the audience wonder if they've wandered into a budget production of Starlight Express.*

– [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

Regarding the age rating: no actual "improprieties" are depicted here (you're welcome), but because they're from Shakespeare, some characters' dialogue will be heavy with double meanings and unsavory jokes. Still, it's actually toned down quite a bit from Shakespeare, so the age-rating here remains at "Everyone."

The actors portraying the Shakespeare characters are from YSP's Summer 2012 production of *King Henry IV, Parts 1&2*^[0c] (that's me, in a fat suit and old age makeup, as Falstaff. Yes, I wore that for a seven-hour marathon performance in hundred-degree weather. The things I do for art). It was a rather low-budget production, in case that's not obvious.

287. *I will never stage Macbeth entirely in freestyle rap.*

288. *Failing this, I will absolutely not have the first act staged normally and*

the second act in rap -- the contrast will be immediately obvious and the "out damn spot" scene does not work when Lady Macbeth is clearly sane enough to talk in perfect rhythm, if not sane enough to turn down the part.

289. *Failing both of the above, I will at least not attempt this with a class of middle-school, middle-class, white students who wouldn't know rap if it bit them on the ass and who have only fourteen days of rehearsal time.*
Total.

– *"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*

[0a] Did you know that "reason" was once pronounced like "raisin?" This is the key to one of Falstaff's puns in the tavern scene from *I Henry IV* (II, iv): "*Zounds, if reasons were as plentiful as blackberries, I should give no man a reason upon compulsion, I.*" The joke is, he's comparing raisins and blackberries.

Also, "feast" used to be pronounced "fest," hence Falstaff's rhyme at the end of IV, iii of the same play: "*Well, to the latter end of a fray, and the beginning of a **feast**, fits a dull fighter, and a keen **guest**.*"

Outside of Shakespeare, this is also evidenced in the end of that old poem cited as part of the curse in *Howl's Moving Castle*.^[0d]

"And **find**
what **wind**
serves to advance an honest **mind**."

[0b] As part of my shamefully-neglected pony tumblr "[Theatre Critic Luna](#)," I wrote an [entire \(in-character\) blog post](#) about how, if your goal is to start conversations and make your audience think, judicious usage of tonal dissonance can make a message stick in an audience's mind far better than any preachy dialogue or visual gags, and why staging *The Merchant of Venice* as a comedy can do more to address longstanding issues of anti-Semitism than staging it as a tragedy.^[0e]

[0c] Which you [should totally watch](#), because it's awesome.

[0d] Well, in the book version, not the movie version.

Howl's Moving Castle is one of those odd adaptations where the adaptation is more coherent and holds together better as a story (it is Ghibli, after all), but the original has more to "say," and holds to its own message and themes better.

This is also the case with adaptations like *Jurassic Park* and *Kick-Ass*, except in those two cases, the messages and themes of the original books were a bunch of roadapples delivered with all the wit and subtlety of a Chick Tract, and the movies improved on the source material in every conceivable way.

[0e] Most of all, it's more effective than what Trevor Nunn did, namely: implicitly violating the following item on the Shakespeare ~~Overlord~~ Director's Checklist:

196. *I will avoid dressing people up like Nazis or Fascists. Especially in *The Merchant of**

Venice.

Arnold Wesker, one of my favorite playwrights, wrote an excellent review of that production (and shared some juicy behind-the-scenes gossip about how cutthroat the allegedly-"respectable" theatre world can be) in the form of an open letter to Nunn, available [here](#).

Admittedly, Wesker is hardly unbiased, culturally or artistically (in fact, I find *Shylock* to be one of Wesker's weakest plays), and I do actually disagree with the reasonings behind a number of his points. Reinterpretation of meaning is not necessarily a bad thing with Shakespeare. It's a bad thing with most other playwrights, who are less skilled at hiding their own biases from the audience, but Shakespeare did not go in much for Authorial Intent, and he probably would have edited his work anyway if he'd ever dreamed it would still be performed four centuries later to a (slightly) more socially-conscious audience. But the bulk of Wesker's points are still valid.

Ironically (or perhaps predictably), one of the most damning indictments of Nunn's production could be found in [a review which praised it](#). More specifically, a review that was supposed to be reviewing a completely separate production (Al Pacino's version, which also wasn't very good, but not nearly as bad as that), and yet felt the need to spend half the review slaver over Nunn's production. Here is the money quote from that review:

I always have felt more comfortable playing Merchant as tragedy rather than comedy.

Well, *duh*. Of course you feel "more comfortable" staging *Merchant* as a tragedy. That's the problem. It acts as a safety valve for the social conscience, for well-meaning white people to go and squeeze tears and reassure themselves of how sensitive they are, without actually having to activise, to help stop oppression.

Theatre should not be comfortable.

Notes on Chapter 1 ("Nothing Allied to Your Disorders")

1. *The ghost of Hamlet's father will **not** be played by the entire ensemble underneath a giant piece of diaphanous black material.*

– [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

Okay, so what's going on in the first chapter?

History, Timelines, Background:

Shakespeare played fast and loose with the timelines of history, to the point where no actual date is mentioned at any point in the history plays that I can find. I have opened this fic after the date of the actual coronation of King Henry V, because that was the instigating event for Falstaff's rejection and thus his journey to Equestria, but other relevant historical events (I'd mention some examples, but spoilers) will be re-dated to coincide.

Some of the MLP comic writers have said that the main arcs (The Return of Queen Chrysalis, Nightmare Rarity, &c.) take place on an alternate continuity that branches off after the season two finale. Well, this fic takes place on an alternate continuity from the Henriad, in which Falstaff does not wind up dying an undignified death offscreen during Agincourt, but rather disappears from historical record entirely (same goes for his five companions). Given that Falstaff and Co. (unlike Hal) were purely an invention of Shakespeare (although Falstaff was loosely based on the popular misconception of an actual historical figure, Sir John Oldcastle^[1a]), this is plausible enough. Agincourt (Shakespeare's rendition of it, I mean) still happens in this timeline, though far sooner after... well, spoilers.

165. At no time shall Romeo slap Tybalt with a fish. This is especially key during their confrontation in 3.1.

– [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

The Characters:

Characterizing some of the more sparsely written characters in Shakespeare would seem like a daunting task (who is Bardolph, really?), but in truth, it's actually much easier than writing for a more developed one. Shakespeare's genius was in what he wrote, but his *greatness* is in what he inspires *us* to write. And his plays are like musical scores: they require musicians in order to become music.^[1b]

When it comes to characters like Hamlet, and the most obvious questions such as, "*Why doesn't he just kill Claudius already?*" and "*What's really going on between him and Ophelia?*," the purists will not only patch together awkward answers from vague and probably unintentional hints in the text, but they will also disagree vehemently and frown on any productions that play it differently, regardless of whether they work *as theatre productions*.

This is completely missing the point of Shakespeare. Shakespeare was an actor, he wrote for actors. More importantly, he trusted the other actors in his company to do a lot of the necessary background work, not because he was lazy, but because he knew they also liked having room to be creative and build characters themselves around these few constraints.

If something isn't answered in the text, you're supposed to fill it in yourself, not try to shoehorn an allegedly-canon-supported explanation based on misinterpreting a vague metaphor on line 83 of one scene (which was probably just meant as a dirty joke or pop culture reference anyway).

If a character just has some background/exposition/prompt lines and little or no character development in-text, Shakespeare is giving this stage direction to the actor: "Create any sort of character you like, so long as they would plausibly say those lines and do those actions in that situation."

Therefore, writing a more character-driven fic about the vaguer characters should be done based on one's own interpretation... or, better yet, based on some given performance of the role. Say, for instance, on the performances by my fellow actors and me.

I take a similar view to writing fanfics based on MLP, though of course there's the ever-present danger that canon will arise and shatter my fanon at any time. I'll go back and edit the fic when (and *only* when, so don't worry that I'm going to rewrite the entire thing at a moment's notice) the new canon gives me a better idea to work into an earlier chapter, but until then, just assume I'm playing fast and loose with the

timelines of the show as Shakespeare played with history.

More on that in subsequent chapter notes...

532. *No role in the Shakespearean canon is best played as an Elvis impersonator.*

– [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

[1a] In fact, Shakespeare originally named Falstaff "Oldcastle," until a descendant of the actual Sir John Oldcastle complained, revealing that Oldcastle was not in fact the dissolute rogue he was portrayed as in the earlier anonymously-written history play *"Famous Victories of Henry V,"* from which Shakespeare drew a lot of his historical material for the Henriad^[1c], and Shakespeare was forced to change the name. This is evidenced by:

- In Falstaff's first scene (I,ii), before his name is ever spoken, Hal calls him, "*my old lad of the castle.*"
- Every instance of Falstaff's name in verse is unmetrical (though surprisingly little of *1 Henry IV* is in verse anyway... all of Falstaff's lines are in prose, and even Prince Hal usually speaks in prose when discussing or conversing with Falstaff)
- The epilogue of *2 Henry IV*, while talking about some previous apocrypha that apparently didn't go over so well, also makes mention of this error and shamelessly fishes for forgiveness by apologizing profusely ("*for Oldcastle died a martyr, and this is not the man.*"). Incidentally, Shakespeare almost certainly wrote that epilogue as a topical PSA for the Globe and never intended it to be incorporated as part of the actual text, so I roll my eyes whenever a theatre director includes it in a modern production. Repeating it nowadays shows an unhealthy devotion to the letter of the text at the expense of its spirit.

[1b] For more details: [*"With Shakespeare, the play is just a starting point,"*](#) by Nicholas Hyntner

[1c] If I'm making it sound like Shakespeare was a plagiarist, well, you have to understand something about the Renaissance theatre. "Copyright" was not a thing back then, at least not in anything like its present form. The very idea of "originality" just didn't occur to them, and every major playwright was adapting and rewriting material from earlier plays and books. Shakespeare was essentially a fanfiction writer, as were all playwrights back then. If you accused him or any of his contemporaries of being derivative, none of them would have a clue what you were talking about.

Perhaps this was actually the reason Shakespeare was great, and why there have been so many great productions and adaptations over the years. It's an old adage in the arts that if you give an artist complete freedom and unlimited resources, s/he'll choke and waste it all; but if you give an artist constraints and limits, s/he'll create a masterpiece.

Similarly, I think one of the reasons MLP:FiM is so revolutionary is that they looked at the Hasbro-mandated clichés and storypoints and said, "Let's make something *good* out of this bullshit;" and that one of the reasons the show is in turn so well-received is that the viewer says, "It's a toy-commercial cartoon show for little girls that *doesn't* suck?!" Similarly, when directing a play that was not written by you, and being forced to match your action to the text rather than vice versa, you have more creative energy to spend on making it good, rather than having to waste time on creative decisions that Shakespeare's audience, and likewise our own, wouldn't have cared much about anyway.

It comes down to what standards you want to hold yourself to. Oh, and it also comes down to what you bring to the stories you adapt. Fun fact: At the time Shakespeare wrote *King Lear*, the overall storyline (of the division of the kingdom, the treacherous flatterers and the wrongfully banished honest heir, &c.) had been adapted countless times for the stage... and yet Shakespeare's version was the first-ever recorded version in which Lear and

Cordelia die. The Bowdlerized happy ending (in which everyone lives, Cordelia marries Edgar, and they all live happily ever after blah blah blah) was merely conforming to the more traditional version.

Moral of the story? "Originality" is in the details rather than in the concepts.

Notes on Chapter 2 ("The Vasty Deep")

265. *Do not set fire to the actors to emphasise their emotions. It never helps.*

– [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

Owen Glendower:

Yes, I am using Shakespeare's version of Owen Glendower rather than the actual historical figure. No offense meant to the descendants of the actual Owain Glyn Dŵr.

I am making one shift closer to reality, though. In the plays, Glendower is allegedly killed offstage, halfway through the second play. In reality, Glyndŵr vanished shortly after being driven from one of his last strongholds in 1409, and was last sighted in 1412. No one ever knew what happened to him.^[2a] So yes, that has provided ample material for writers throughout the eons to speculate on why he was never found.

Of course, even if I wanted to go by his historical personage, I'd have very little to go on. The guy's military career and political achievements are well-documented, but his personality? What was he like as a character? A whole lot of fiction, but not a lot of factual info available... at least not to me.^[2b]

The real Owain Glyndŵr, of course, was not a sorcerer, or even an occultist, according to contemporary records. He was in fact a devout Roman Catholic. So, why did he get a posthumous reputation for wizardry? Well, the answer to that is a fascinating illustration of how legends are built up around people over history.

The details are too lengthy to go into here, even for someone as long winded and pretentious as me. If you're interested, there is one book I can recommend: "*National Redeemer: Owain Glyndŵr in Welsh Tradition*," by Elissa R. Henken. You can read [the first 17 pages free](#) at Google Books.

458. *I will not interpolate lines in the histories to clarify some of the complex dynastic relationships if I have not checked to make sure that they are accurate. For instance, I will not insert lines into the first scene of Henry V that say that Henry's claim to the French crown comes from Edward III's "marriage to Philippa of France," since his claim actually comes from his mother and not from his wife, who was not, in point of fact, French, and there will invariably be at least one person in the audience who notices the mistake and laughs at my apparent inability to check my facts.*

– "[The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production](#)"

The Cosmology:

Glendower's spell loadout is taken from the [Atharaveda](#), one of the four Vedas (the holy books of the historical Vedic faith, one of the world's oldest religions, from which Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism evolved).

Why use the Vedic texts when the namedropped pantheon is Mesopotamian and Greco-roman? Well, that will become apparent later in the fic. As will the pantheon.

476. *I will never, ever, allow costumes featuring the shades "hot pink" or "radioactive green" to make it past planning stages. Not even for the faeries.*

477. *Especially not for the faeries.*

– "[The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production](#)"

[2a] It wasn't until 2006... yes, **five hundred and ninety-four years after he was last seen...** that the question was tentatively answered. Adrien Jones, president of the Owain Glyndŵr Society, wrote that he had paid a visit to one of Glyndŵr's direct descendants, Sir John Scudamore. Scudamore took him to Monnington Straddel, in Herefordshire, where one of Glyndŵr's daughters, Alys, had lived. It turns out that after his disappearance, Glyndŵr spent his last years living there with his daughter, until he died in 1415.

However, the link to that article on the Owain Glyndŵr Society's website is down, and I can only find various mentions of it on other sites. And of course we only have Jones's word for it anyway, since the family themselves won't confirm.

[2b] The "main" biography of Owain Glyndŵr (creatively titled *Owain Glyn Dŵr (Owen Glendower)*), by Sir John Edward Lloyd, was first published in 1931. As of this writing, there are exactly four copies available used on Amazon, and the cheapest is \$161.09 US. No library in the USA has it (at least not that WorldCat can find), and only two libraries in the UK (both of them university libraries, of course) have copies.

The only well-known contemporaneous accounts of Glyndŵr are three epic-length poems composed by Iolo Goch, a bard who chronicled much of the royalty and nobility of Wales at the time. I can only find one of the three poems available online, and the translations don't provide much in the way of context.

Iolo Goch has thirty-nine surviving poems in total, which were compiled with annotation and explanations in a book by Professor Dafydd Johnston in 1988 (Dafydd Johnston, incidentally, has written volumes upon volumes about medieval Welsh literature, including one book entitled: "[Medieval Welsh Erotic Poetry](#)").

The book of Iolo's poems, thankfully, is a bit easier to track down than the biography of Glyndŵr; there are used copies available for under \$20 US. But unfortunately, none of the vendors bother to list any product information or blurb or even show a picture of the cover, so I can't be sure I'd even be buying the same book.

Welcome to the world of classical literature in the 21st century.

Notes on Chapter 3 ("Thy Fairy Kingdom")

198. If I make the fairies in Midsummer Night's Dream wear headlamps in my outdoor production because the lights look cool moving through the woods at night, I will come up with an alternative costuming idea for the

matinee performances, when the lights just make them look like deranged miners.

– [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

A common complaint about HiE fics is that the humans acclimate too fast. Well, Shakespeare's plays are loaded with supernatural creatures (it was one of the big draws of his plays, along with the excessive violence and illicit sex^[3a]), and when the human characters in those plays encounter ghosts and witches and fairies and whatever the latest avant-garde theatre director is turning Caliban into^[3b], the humans don't freak out for very long at all... usually just when it's funny (Shakespeare knew how to end a gag before it got stale, a skill which eludes many writers of humorous fiction throughout the rest of history), or when the plot calls for it.

In the Henriad, Glendower can call spirits from the vasty deep, and everyone in England seems to know it, and yet none of the other characters seem to find this worthy of comment at all, except when they're complaining about how his sorcery is messing up their battle plans. *Hotspur is the only one who even questions Glendower's magic abilities... and once he sees proof that it's real, he's only stunned and impressed until the next scene change, after which he never mentions it again, apparently having forgotten that he's just had his entire worldview turned upside down.*

This was partly because most of Shakespeare's audience believed these things were real.

I'm not smugly looking down on "oh, those superstitious people back then." Modern society believes a lot of preposterous things too (don't get me started). I'm just stating a fact.^[3c] People believed in faeries, demons, witches, and Caliban, and imagined hanging out with, fighting, and/or nailing them. Of course, that doesn't mean that people back then wouldn't have run away screaming if they'd ever actually *encountered* a faerie (most paranormal investigators today would run away too if they ever encountered an actual ghost), but we're dealing with fictional characters here, remember.

363. I will not present rational explanations for supernatural events in the play (e.g. presenting Margery Jourdain and the conjurers in 2 Henry VI as frauds) if the plot requires them to be taken as genuine.

– [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

As for the ponies, well, I like to think they learned their lesson after "Bridle Gossip" (Equestria would indeed be a utopia, if its racists can learn *not* to be racist^[3d]), and they do see a greater variety of weird sapient beings than we do.

I wonder how many of you are going to think I misspelled "foul" and not realize it was a pun.

195. If I am going to stage anything outside a theatre requiring actors to be out in public with swords and armour, I will remember to warn the local police first.

– [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

[3a] See [*"Supernatural Shakespeare"*](#) by McKinzie S. Heart.

- [3b] 32. *I will not employ a conception of Caliban which would require him to wear a ghastly furry costume reminiscent of a hypothetical offspring of Chewbacca and the Wolf from Into the Woods.*
33. *Also, I will not require Caliban to hump Stephano's leg while telling him about Miranda, no matter how big a laugh it will get.*
362. *Also, I will not portray Caliban as a Crocodile Dundee wanna-be.*
460. *I will not put Caliban in bondage gear. Nor will he wear a chastity belt.*

– ["The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"](#)

[3c] See 3a.

[3d] Which reminds me. Some claim that Griffons are also a discriminated-against minority in Equestria, and that this justifies Gilda's behavior. I would like to point out that Gilda was able to walk down a crowded market street in Ponyville, bullying and harassing citizens in broad daylight, and received no visible repercussions whatsoever.

This may seem discongruent with Zecora's treatment in "Bridle Gossip," but, well, the real-world perpetrators of such discrimination all too often strike closer to home than to The Other.

51. *Political statements should only be made if they fit within the context of the play -- not at the expense of the context of a play.*

– [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

Bonus points if you catch the *Matilda* reference.

Equestria Girls, Headcanon, and Humans in Equestria's Mythology:

It is the sacred duty of a fan to fill in plot holes. And a frequent hobby is figuring out how to reconcile new canon with fanon. One of my favorite pastimes in fanfics is to turn such incongruities into character development, and I found a fairly obvious solution as to how to reconcile *Equestria Girls* with the popular "Humans are storybook monsters" fanon that I draw from here. Twilight Sparkle, the most rational and skeptical of the ponies, would not spend nearly as much time reading about storybook mythology (she was already the most learned of all the ponies by the start of the first episode, yet she was barely even familiar with the concept of the Elements of Harmony) as to be able to recognize humans on sight. Rainbow Dash, being a jock who only recently discovered her egghead side, wouldn't either; hence the "What are hands?" line (even though the MLP writers do occasionally slip "hand" into the scripts. Perhaps Rainbow Dash was simply having one of those "Hey, we use this phrase a lot in everyday life... but what does it actually *mean*?" moments).

Twilicorn:

I didn't want to force a retread of a character arc Twilight already completed in *Equestria Girls*, and fortunately I didn't have to, because this isn't the same fear that she overcame in the movie. In fact, it's the exact *opposite* fear (which fits much more thematically with this story anyway). Her journey through the mirror was all about learning to be comfortable wearing the crown... but now she's worried she might grow *too* comfortable; that the power might go to her head. I have a hunch that this is something she'll be dealing with in Season 4 at some point (and yes, I promise not to edit this part of the author's notes out in case I'm dead wrong).

Incidentally, regarding immortality. I prefer to draw my headcanon solely from canon and not from out-of-universe Word of Faust/McCarthy... plus, that Tweet regarding Twilight's mortality could just be interpreted as "immortal $\neq$ invulnerable, so she'll go down fighting" anyway (and given how quickly McCarthy backpedaled from that info, I doubt she's going into more detail)... but for this fic, I'm also going by how likely that topic is to ever arise in the show itself, IE, never. So, mortality isn't on anyone's mind... for now.

The Chapter Title:

Equestria's government and economy seem to operate like Roger Rabbit's superpowers: whatever is funnier at a given moment.

I don't blame the writers. I don't think the show ever *wants* to provide direct answers, because it simply doesn't want to get macro-political. The show's activism is at the individual, personal level. I didn't just

choose the phrase "Of Government the Properties to Unfold" for the chapter title because it has the word "Government" in it, I chose it because of the speech that it opens.^[4a]

Shakespeare, like the show, won't unfold the properties of government. It's left to us to do so.

I'll save the more detailed speculations for other chapters (you're welcome), and possibly another fanfic^[4b], partially because it'll be more directly relevant (as opposed to the tangential relevance I usually fill these things up with) later, the extended author's notes *already* have seven nested footnotes for this one chapter alone.

For now, though, here's a bit of foreshadowing, AND a big tip to politically-minded fanfic writers out there:

One complaint I've often heard about the show is that Equestria's government "doesn't make sense." Well, duh. Of course it doesn't make sense to humans. Heck, it'd be more unrealistic if it *did*.

(why yes, I am a Celestia loyalist, however did you guess?)

[4a] Shakespeare was first an Elizabethan playwright, but he also lived through the death of Queen Elizabeth and the coronation of her successor, King James I (formerly James VI of Scotland). Shakespeare's production company had by this time been a longtime fixture at the royal court, writing plays on commission from the queen herself.^[4c] They were understandably anxious to remain in royal favor now that there was a new boss in town, so Shakespeare's next couple plays, *Measure for Measure* and *Macbeth*, basically fawned over the guy.

Measure for Measure is basically a giant Marty Stu fanfic about King James.

In *Measure for Measure*, the wise and benevolent Duke Vincentio of Vienna (who just so happens to share quite a few of King James's well-known personality traits^[4d]) allegedly goes on a diplomatic trip to a far-off land, but actually sticks around in Vienna, disguises himself as a monk, and goes out amongst the common people of his city-state to find out how they really act when the ~~king~~ duke isn't around. He also leaves his puritanical deputy Angelo in charge while he's gone, hoping that Angelo will crack down on the laws of morality that Duke Vincentio feels guilty about having let slip. Angelo, incidentally, was the inspiration for Claude Frollo from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, so of course he starts abusing this power^[4e], then Duke Vincentio has to play the ultimate chessmaster and save the day with the power of his wits, his eloquence, and leadership skills.

Duke Vincentio's opening speech, to his deputy Escalus as he prepares to leave, reads as follows:

*Of government the properties to unfold,
Would seem in me to affect speech and discourse;
Since I am put to know that your own science
Exceeds, in that, the lists of all advice
My strength can give you: then no more remains,
But that to your sufficiency as your Worth is able,
And let them work. The nature of our people,
Our city's institutions, and the terms*

*For common justice, you're as pregnant in
As art and practise hath enriched any
That we remember. There is our commission;
From which we would not have you warp...*

A rough translation and summary is, "Escalus, if I tried to give you instructions on how to run this place in my absence, I'd be insulting you, since you know every bit as much about running the place as I do, and I couldn't hope to give you advice."

Kind of an odd thing for the King James insert to say to his deputy, right? But remember, King James himself was in the audience of this play. This was really a message from Shakespeare to King James, saying, "We're going to put on a play about government and law and mercy and such, but we wouldn't pretend to be qualified to give you advice on how to run a country. This is just a comedy, it's not a tract."

That was Shakespeare's attitude toward politics in general. His plays raise a lot of fascinating questions, but they don't even try to answer them. I may have mentioned before, that modern literary scholars who have spent their entire academic careers analyzing Shakespeare's work in the context of his time, place and career, will proudly tell you that we don't know Shakespeare's personal opinions on any topic whatsoever. For all his current-events ripped-from-the-headlines writing, he didn't comment all that much. This allowed him some great artistic freedoms that he couldn't get otherwise, but it also leads to later criticisms, such as George Bernard Shaw's claim that: *"[Shakespeare's] kings are not statesmen: his cardinals have no religion: a novice can read his plays from one end to the other without learning that the world is finally governed by forces expressing themselves in religions and laws which make epochs rather than by vulgarly ambitious individuals who make rows. The divinity which shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will, is mentioned fatalistically only to be forgotten immediately like a passing vague apprehension. ... All Shakespeare's [sic] characters are so: that is why they seem natural to our middle classes, who are comfortable and irresponsible at other people's expense, and are neither ashamed of that condition nor even conscious of it."* Decent argument, but I find it a little odd that he wrote that in the introduction to a play^[4b] in which one of Shaw's own characters points out *"Some men are born kings, and some are born statesmen; the two are seldom the same."*

Now then, as for *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's next play after *Measure for Measure*. It also had a big shout-out to King James. King James had traced his lineage back to Banquo, see, and in the story of *Macbeth*, one of the people Macbeth kills is Banquo. But, the witches who, on orders of Hecate, predict Macbeth's ascension to the throne of Scotland, also predict that while Banquo will not be king, he will be a father of kings. His kid Fleance doesn't wind up on the throne at the end, but Macbeth does at one point see a vision of a whole lineup of kings down the line... coincidentally, the exact number of James's direct ancestors that preceded his rule in Scotland, and it ends with saying there are countless more after that, meaning James's line would continue forever.

[4b] Check with me after the Season 4 premier.

And possibly sometime after that, as well. I've written to a FimFiction author who has not only canceled but *deleted* a brilliant ongoing political-thriller fic (that author has serious self-image problems... he cancels every single one of his long stories halfway through, and posts lengthy rants about how they suck), and I asked if, since he's no longer writing it, he would mind if I shamelessly ripped it off (yes, those were the words I used. Call me an Elizabethan playwright). I'm still waiting to hear back.

[4c] Well, one play, anyway. See "About the Title," in the intro.

[4d] Duke Vincentio is basically a checklist of the "ideal ruler" that King James outlines in the [Basilikon Doron](#), the book he wrote about his philosophy of government back when he was only the king of Scotland rather than king of England. Duke Vincentio also shares many of King James's own traits as well, particularly his aversion to the limelight, his devout religious belief, his scholarly interest in human nature, &c.

There is one major difference between Duke Vincentio and King James, though: Duke Vincentio is heterosexual. King James was even gayer than Shakespeare.

[4e] Angelo does indeed start cracking down on issues pertaining to sex, not just shutting down brothels but sentencing a young nobleman to death just for knocking up his girlfriend pre-marriage. The condemned man, Claudio, sends his nun-in-training sister, Isabella, to try and reason with Angelo.

Angelo falls hard for Isabella, and after a soliloquy that was the inspiration for the song "Hellfire," he offers Isabella a deal: her virginity for her brother's life.

Fortunately for all concerned, Duke Vincentio hears about this, and, in disguise as a friar, he approaches Isabella with a plan. Isabella pretends to agree to Angelo's deal on condition that the encounter will be silent, dark, and brief. Isabella and the friar go talk to Angelo's jilted ex-fiancée Mariana (who still loves Angelo, because love can be stupid like that) and send her to the rendezvous in Isabella's place, in what was known as a "bed trick."^[4g]

The trick works... in that it fools Angelo, but then Angelo orders Claudio's execution anyway (insert "was it good for you too?" joke here). Then a lot more funny stuff happens involving severed heads and hookers and hangovers (and if you think I'm making any of that up, you haven't been paying attention), and of course it all turns out okay in the end, thanks to ~~King James's~~ Duke Vincentio's awesomeness.

[4f] More on that later.

[4g] Yes, they had a name for it. Of *course* they did. The secret switching out of sex partners was such a popular trope in Renaissance-era literature that not only does it have a TV Tropes page (which I will not link you to here for the sake of your sanity), it even has [a Wikipedia page](#).

These days we know this trope primarily from its usage in English Renaissance comedies... but like many of the naughtiest tropes in classic literature, its first recorded usage was in the Bible.

Yes, really. See [Genesis 29:16-30](#).

Notes on Chapter 5 ("Breathe Life Into a Stone")

495. *I will never have The Ghost of Hamlet's Father appear out of a Pepsi One machine.*

– [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

Thanks to Mind Matter for letting me "borrow" the character of Dr. Shelter from his awesome fic "Prevention," when I needed a character who could (almost) keep up with Twilight on a science conversation and still have enough personality to make the scene entertaining.

256. *The Montague clan are not aliens. No, really, they're not.*

– [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

The Medicine:

Given the low rate of disease transference between species on Earth, I find it entirely plausible that most human diseases wouldn't affect ponies at all, and vice versa.

In exobiology, that paragraph about the evolutionary benefits of oxygen and carbon and phosphorous is based on frequently cited claims, by (human) exobiologists, that other life in the universe might very well evolve on vaguely similar lines to ours. It's something to do with the greater number and complexity of compounds that can be created from carbon as opposed to other possible bases of life.^[5a]

The bit about the difference between human and pony cellular structures is my theory based on the mentioned physical constraints by which pony physiology is not burdened... as well as just based on the fact that the ponies, being cartoon characters, are kind of soft and stretchy.

Just be thankful I couldn't find a spot to work in my speculation on the neurological structures of ponies compared to humans. Maybe if I ever write a TF fic...^[5b]

169. *I will never try to cast Richard III as a cyberpunk war between two companies.*

– [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

Margaret:

Shakespeare didn't even mention Margaret, but if I'm going to have Glendower be a major character in this fic (instead of a one-scene wonder like he was in the play), I have to delve into his personal life sooner or later, and that means meeting his wife.

Fun fact: the real Margaret (Marged ferch Dafydd) Hanmer was indeed imprisoned in the Tower of London... and her death was never recorded. They recorded the deaths and burials of most of her kids and grandkids, but Margaret just disappears from the record. Sort of like her husband.

Of course, I'm not exactly sticking to their historical personages here. And even if I were, there is sadly little historical info available on what she was actually like. Again, much like her husband.^[5c]

So, I had to base Margaret's characterization on other sources. Even those were hard to find, though... for all the mythos that sprung up around her husband, Margaret barely rates a mention even in fiction. But I was able to track down two sources.

I found one text online: a "dramatic biography" by Gonrova Camlan^[5d], written in 1870, in pseudo-Shakespearean iambic pentameter. It isn't all that great; Camlan couldn't even keep the names straight, and the characterization could charitably be described as "basic," but hey, Lady Glendower comes off reasonably well.

I also tracked down a copy of John Cowper Powys's novel *Owen Glendower* (sensing a theme in the titles here?), which I heard had a reasonably interesting characterization of "the Arglwyddes" despite her light role in the actual story. And it does. It's a strange book even by my tastes (it's one of those historical novels that goes into near-fetishistic detail about the hygiene and medical procedures of the time, yet seems to expect you to be already familiar with a number of the social customs and rituals), and of course it has a very different depiction of Owain Glyndŵr than Shakespeare's version, but it's still good.

The version of Margaret in this story is an amalgamation of the versions in those stories.

330. *Making Iago a woman is a bad idea. Making her seduce Roderigo is a worse idea.*

331. *I will not add 'Iago's dream scene' before the murder of Desdemona, with strobe lights, for an excuse for the female! Iago to kiss Desdemona and Emilia. This scene will also not have modestmouse blaring in the background.*

– *"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*

[5a] Among other sources: "[*Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons: An Interview With Dr. Farid Salama*](#)," from *Astrobiology* magazine in 2000.

Personally, I think this carbon centrism in exobiology is just the result of having a too-narrow definition of "life," but of course, Twilight Sparkle wouldn't really find that issue relevant in this case.

[5b] I do actually have an idea for a TF fic... and the setup for extended universe that each large-scale TF fic inevitably spawns (I'm still a little bitter I didn't know about the "Five Score, Divided by Four" EU before all the good characters were snatched up [*ETA: and then the 9/13/13 blowout!*]), but I already take far too long to update this thing. Maybe I'll grab a collaborator at some point. Or a bunch of collaborators and run it as an RP/social experiment, with the transcript turned into a story. Hey, the main characters in my outline are a D&D group (specifically, a Pathfinder group), so it'd make sense.

[5c] Even *less* than her husband, really.

Iolo Goch wrote multiple epic poems about Glyndŵr, but virtually nothing on his wife. The sole mention I could find was in "*Llys Owain Glyndŵr Yn Sycharth*" ("The Court of Owain Glyndŵr at Sycharth"^[5e]), a poem extolling Glyndŵr's castle and household... and only four lines of that are about her:

A gwraig orau o'r gwagedd, (And the best of wives,)

Gwyn fy myd o'i gwin a'i medd! (Blessed am I in her wine and mead!)
Merch eglur llin marchoglyw, (A fine lady of knightly line,)
Urddol hael anional yw; (Most generous by nature;)^[5f]

Not that Glyndŵr's BFF of a bard would have had all that much of reliable substance to say about Margaret if the poem had focused on her longer... but seriously, he spends more words telling us how polite Glyndŵr's *servants* were.

[5d] "Goronva Camlan" was the pen name of Rowland Williams, an Anglican priest and Professor of Hebrew at St. David's College. The play's full title is: *Owen Glendower, A Dramatic Biography: Being a Contribution to the Genuine History of Wales*, available for free [at Google \(play\) books](#), in a compilation with other works by the same author. As I mentioned, though, don't set your expectations too high.

[5e] Sycharth is the small town where Glyndŵr's eponymous castle stood, before it was burned and destroyed in 1403. Incidentally, Prince Hal (yes, the real one) personally traveled to Sycharth to oversee its destruction. Glyndŵr might not have been a sorcerer in real life, but he was a major pain to the English.

[5f] Translated by the Canolfan Owain Glyndŵr Centre, available [here](#). I am currently unable to find any other of Goch's poems available for free online. Have I complained enough times about how hard it is to get ahold of some of this stuff?

Notes on Chapter 6 ("Betwixt Tavern and Tavern")

46. *If I'm doing As You Like It, when the Duke says "Find Orsinio" I will not have the player playing Orsinio standing 2 feet away staring at them.*

– "[The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production](#)"

The centerpiece of the Henry IV plays was undoubtedly the Tavern Scene. True to Mistress Quickly's metafictional musings, much of Shakespeare's audience attended primarily to watch these outrageous characters trash talk, slinging elaborately poetic insults laced with puns and metaphors about various bodily parts and fluids.

It is theorized that the whole reason Shakespeare created the character of Pistol for Henry IV Part 2 was to make the tavern scene in that play even more outrageous, to escalate things further to an outright comic

brawl (and to add anachronistic pop culture references^[6a]). It certainly worked, since despite only being in three scenes, and not even being the focus of those scenes, Pistol was popular enough to get his name on the playbill^[6b]. More than one theatre director has said, "There is no such thing as 'too big' when playing Pistol."

5. *I will not make actors in battle scenes wear knitted chainmail of a color that makes them resemble not so much a medieval warrior as Winnie-the-Pooh.*

– [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

Sorry if the last couple chapters meandered, I wanted to get some of the obligatory HiE scenes out of the way ASAP, to get everything in position for the Tavern Scene, which opens the next "Act."

Yes, I'm dividing this fic up into "acts," following the five-act structure rather than the horrendous three-act structure. Considerable material has been written about this. FilmCritHulk's article is the go-to example, but, while he's right about how awful the three-act structure is, his grasp of Shakespeare itself is a bit shaky, as has been commented on by others. It's still a terrific read though.

I'm also tossing in intermissions, despite the fact that Elizabethan theatre didn't have an intermission between each act break (in fact, the act assignments may have been added by later editors^[6c]). Why intermissions? Well, you'll see. Just know in advance: You won't need to read the intermissions to understand the story.

87. *I will not have Henry throwing tomatoes at a spinning fan blade whilst yelling at Montjoy.*

– [*"The Things I Will Not Do When I Direct a Shakespeare Production"*](#)

[6a] When I mentioned that half of Pistol's dialogue was misquotes from popular dramatists? The playwrights he misquotes weren't contemporaries of King Henry IV, they were Elizabethan playwrights, the contemporaries of Shakespeare.

So, theoretically, I could have Pistol reference 21st-century pop culture in this fic and I'd still keep to the spirit of Shakespeare.

Hmm...

[6b] The [title page of the 1600 Quarto edition](#) of the play says, "With the humours of Sir John Falstaff, and swaggering Pistol." Well, technically it says "With the humours of fir Iohn Falstaffe, and swaggering Piftoll," but you get the idea.

[6c] Or they may have been guesstimates as to where he put them. See ["The Shakespearean Five Act Structure... and Using it For Games!"](#) for a mention of this, and also (as the title suggests) a discussion of how Shakespearean storytelling might be used in video games.

By the way, for all the 562 items on the Checklist, there are a few more recent ones that I personally would have submitted (if the author was still taking recommendations).

#5??: I will not have Hamlet start his big soliloquy by wheeling a huge chalkboard out onstage, writing "TO BE," crossing it out, and saying, "*That* is the question."

#5??: Similarly, while Hamlet may or may not realize that Claudius and Polonius (and possibly Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) are eavesdropping on him, I will not have Hamlet say that speech directly to Ophelia. Especially not while he is making out with her.

#5??: When Fortinbras says "Bid the soldiers shoot," I will not have one of his guards shoot Horatio.

#5??: I will never cast two actors who are dating each other (or married to each other) as Angelo and Isabella. Yes, even if they *are* really good actors.

#5??: I will not end *Measure for Measure* by having Barnadine stab Isabella for no discernible reason. Particularly not while he is leading a song and dance parade across the stage.

#5??: As fun as it is to play up the homoerotic tension between Antonio and Bassanio, I will not imply that the relationship has ever been consummated.

#5??: I will especially not have Portia figure it out during the trial scene, and then play the ring trick as a passive-aggressive act of jealousy tinged with homophobia.

#5??: Shylock is a complex character who is mistreated and misunderstood, and has very valid reasons for his hatred. I will portray him as such. However, I will not pretend that he's secretly a pacifist who doesn't want to kill Antonio.

#5??: If I am embarrassed by a racist throwaway joke, I will cut it. I will not try to mitigate it with an awkward visual gag involving a member of the disparaged race glaring at the character (remember, Shakespeare would gladly have cut or altered those lines if he'd known the

sensibilities of future audiences... and if he'd had any idea that his plays would still be performed after he died).

#5??: Many of Shakespeare's comedies have dark elements, and those can be played up. I will not, however, forget that those plays are still comedies.

#5??: Similarly, I will not remove the comic relief from the tragedies.

#5??: Addressing problematic sociopolitical elements in Shakespeare plays is a good thing. Planning an entire production around that is... iffy. Editing and restructuring the actual text of the play itself to 'focus' on my heavyhanded commentary? That's a sign that I should probably be directing plays that weren't written by dead white guys. Playwrights who aren't dead white guys could use more exposure anyway.

#5??: There should probably be less homoerotic tension between Rosalind and Emilia than there is between Ganymede and Orlando. Also I will not imply a foursome with Rosalind, Emilia, Orlando and Oliver.

#5??: Jacques will not be wearing a giant papier-mâché owl head for half his scenes without explanation.

#5??: Also, if my set designs are too elaborate to allow the scene change from the court to the Forest of Arden to be performed in a reasonable length of time, I will simplify the set designs. What I will *not* do is cover the delay by having two extras also in papier-mâché animal head masks walk out and play a clarinet-oboe duet that has no discernible connection to anything else in the production.

#5??: Pistol (the character) is not intimidating. Not to the sane characters, anyway.

#5??: However "calculated" I may wish to make Hal's friendship with Falstaff and the rogues, I will give some indication that Hal does actually enjoy their company.

#5??: Or at least he should fake it well enough that the taverngoers would plausibly believe it.

#5??: The fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are not the witches from *Macbeth*. Or vice versa.

#5??: I will not have two separate scenes taking place at the same time on opposite sides of the stage. Failing that, I will not commandeer an entire floor of a building and have each of the plot threads from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* playing out in separate rooms in real-time, with the audience forced to walk between rooms to choose which subplot they want to keep track of or check back in on.

And yes, all of these are based on actual productions, that I or my colleagues have seen.