

“Because Survival is Insufficient”: Sir Patrick Stewart’s *#ASonnetADay* and the Role of Adaptation in a Pandemic

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Abstract

This essay locates the popularity of Sir Patrick Stewart’s COVID-19-inspired Instagram series, *#ASonnetADay*, in its presentation of opposing forces. It begins by explaining how the tension between the actor Sir Patrick Stewart and the character he is well known for playing (Captain Picard) produces two irreconcilable Shakespeares in *#ASonnetADay*: one that is defanged and “universal” and another that chafes readers with 21st-century sensibilities. The essay then focuses on the audience’s perception of Stewart as a celebrity in order to point out his presentation of himself as familiar, likable, and domestic, on the one hand, and as famous, privileged, and aloof, on the other, noting how this selfpresentation echoes and buttresses the dual image of Shakespeare found in the series. Opposites such as these are unsurprisingly present in *#ASonnetADay* because contradictory characteristics are inherent in all adaptations; acknowledging one of these opposing pairs—repetition and difference—explains the appeal of *#ASonnetADay* and illuminates the role adaptations play in contexts such as ours, when survival proves to be insufficient.

Introduction

In 1999, *Star Trek: Voyager* coined a phrase that would be repeated for years to come, such as in Emily St. John Mandel’s 2014 novel, *Station Eleven*, which imagines the aftermath of a global flu pandemic. *Star Trek*’s now-famous line, “Survival is insufficient,”¹ is appropriated in Mandel’s novel by a band of itinerant players, who mount productions of Shakespeare’s works after 99% of the world’s population has been annihilated by the “Georgia flu.” The Traveling Symphony’s motto, “Because survival is insufficient,” reminds one of the novel’s protagonists, Kirsten, that in spite of the fear, danger, and uncertainty of the present moment, art is not a frivolous luxury; rather, it is vital to human existence, even, or especially, when the world has fallen apart (Mandel 2015, 58).²

Star Trek actor Sir Patrick Stewart recently deployed Instagram in a parallel context and with a similar conviction about the role of Shakespeare in desperate times. Stewart’s recent project, *#ASonnetADay*, features videos of the actor reading Shakespeare’s poems to a global

audience beginning on 21 March 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic-induced lockdown, and continuing through 3 October 2020. The series was surprisingly popular, with individual posts typically receiving hundreds of thousands of viewings and scores of comments.

To explore why this performance of Shakespeare appealed to so many during lockdown, I will examine how the tension between the actor Sir Patrick Stewart and the character he is known for playing (Captain Picard) produces two irreconcilable Shakespeares in *#ASonnetADay*: one that is defanged and “universal” and another that chafes readers with 21st-century sensibilities. I then focus on the audience’s perception of Stewart as a celebrity in order to point out his presentation of himself as familiar, likable, and domestic, on the one hand, and as famous, privileged, and aloof on the other, noting how this self-presentation echoes and buttresses the dual image of Shakespeare found in the series. Opposites such as these are unsurprisingly present in *#ASonnetADay*, I argue, because contradictory characteristics are inherent in all adaptations; acknowledging one of these opposing pairs—repetition and difference—explains the appeal of *#ASonnetADay* and illuminates the role adaptations play in contexts such as ours, when survival proves to be insufficient.

SirPatStew and/vs. Captain Picard

“Engagest!” jonsonphotography, response to Sonnet 1 (*#ASonnetADay*, 22 March 2020)

“These are like having Picard quoting on the bridge but SO MUCH BETTER. ♥♥♥.”
victoriousvelez, response to Sonnet 83 (*#ASonnetADay*, 15 July 2020)

Marvin Carlson uses the term “ghosting” to describe the moment when the audience is presented “the identical thing they have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context,” such as when an actor carries with them the roles they have previously played:

The recycled body of an actor, already a complex bearer of semiotic messages, will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles if they have made any impression whatever on the audience, a phenomenon that often colors and indeed may dominate the reception process. (Carlson 2003, 7, 8)

More specifically, an actor might be haunted by three sometimes contradictory factors: (1) previous actors’ interpretations of a role the actor is now performing; (2) the previous role(s) the actor has performed; (3) “knowledge or assumptions about the actor’s life outside the theatre” (Carlson 2003, 85). In the case of #ASonnetADay, Stewart is haunted by the second and third factors.

Stewart’s “impression [. . .] on the audience” prior to #ASonnetADay is significant to “the reception process” of this adaptation and is intimately tied to Shakespeare. The actor became a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1966 and first appeared as the Bard-loving Jean-Luc Picard in the *Star Trek* series in 1987. Although the Instagram audience does not usually mention his RSC years, it does frequently refer to Stewart as “Picard.” The first season of *Picard*, a series that itself has been variously billed as a “reboot” (Bianculli 2020), “spin-off” (Sepinwall 2020), and “extension” (Salkowitz 2020) of the *Star Trek* franchise, aired from 23 January 2020 to 26 March 2020 on CBS. As a result, Jean-Luc Picard, who had not been on screen since 2002, was fresh in viewers’ minds. Additionally, as Carlson suggests, an actor’s previous roles can leave a deep impression on an audience and become the lens through which they view the actor in their current performance.

In #ASonnetADay, the ghost of Picard haunts Stewart and influences the message viewers receive about Shakespeare. Stewart’s role as the French captain with an English accent, who sipped Earl Grey tea, loved Gilbert and Sullivan, and frequently referenced Shakespeare, began in the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation (TNG)* in the late 1980s, and concluded with the full-length feature film *Star Trek: Nemesis* (2002). Picard’s and, more generally, *Star Trek*’s relationship to Shakespeare has garnered attention among scholars, even if they disagree on the effects of pairing the early modern playwright with the popular sci-fi series.³ Rather than rehearse those arguments here, I would like to highlight a few key points concerning the Picard-Shakespeare relationship that influence the presentation of Shakespeare in #ASonnetADay, particularly for what Linda Hutcheon has called the “knowing” audience (Hutcheon 2013, 120). The intersections between Picard and Shakespeare—in particular the presence of a Shakespeare text and the question of Shakespeare as a “universal” author—produce a conflicting image of Shakespeare in #ASonnetADay.

In *TNG*, Picard kept a hardcover edition of *The Globe Illustrated Shakespeare: The Complete Works* in a glass case in his Ready Room near the door; the book is often featured in scenes filmed in this setting, even if it is not directly part of the action, and thus is closely associated with the captain. By contrast, in his Instagram posts, Stewart relies on the paperback Folger Shakespeare Library edition of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets and Poems*. Thus, while “Picard’s Shakespeare is the transcendental author of the antique book in the museum-quality glass case, which lacks only a ‘Don’t Touch’ sign to further protect Shakespeare as a static and rigid cultural commodity” (Hagarty 1995, 56), Stewart’s Shakespeare is accessible, both physically and intellectually. The actor introduces the text as “an American edition of the sonnets” with helpful editorial notes, some of which he occasionally reads to viewers (*#ASonnetADay*, 6 April 2020). Further demonstrating the accessibility of the *Sonnets*, Stewart often casually folds back the pages of the relatively lightweight book when reading from it while appearing to be offering the book to viewers—an image that stands in contrast to the heavy tome that Picard clutches to his chest in *TNG* when it is not under lock and key (figs. 1 and 2).

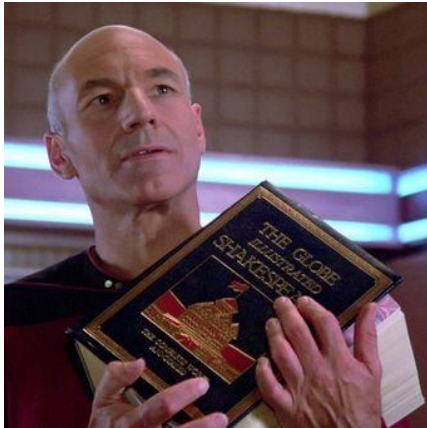


Figure 1.

Figure 1. Stewart as Jean-Luc Picard in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* protecting his hardback



Figure 2.

The Globe Illustrated Shakespeare (*TNG*, “*Hide and Q*”).

Figure 2. Stewart appearing to offer viewers the Folger Shakespeare Library paperback edition of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets and Poems* in *#ASonnetADay* (15 May 2020).

The follow-up series *Picard* provides viewers a glimpse of the lead character’s much prized *Globe Illustrated Shakespeare* in Picard’s private vault at the Starfleet Archives. In the

series’ inaugural episode, “Remembrance,” the camera reveals the text while panning over the room’s contents, indicating that it is an item of value to Picard and implying that the captain notices it when he enters the room. Thus, while presenting Shakespeare as accessible to all who tune in to his Instagram videos, Stewart is simultaneously haunted by an older, more exclusive version of Shakespeare associated with his character, Picard. This Shakespeare is locked down even more tightly than he had been in the Ready Room, as he is now stored in a vault that only Picard has the authority to enter.

In the final episode of its first season, Picard reinforces this conservative vision of Shakespeare and reiterates the notion that survival alone is insufficient. While fulfilling a promise to unplug Data’s memory in order to end his existence, Picard solemnly recites lines from *The Tempest*: “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep” (4.1.156-8). Data’s request to die is borne of his desire to experience life as humans do, with a finite existence. Earlier, in *TNG*, the android was on a quest to understand humanity; one of the central ways in which he did this was to study Shakespeare under Picard’s tutelage. As Brandon Christopher has noted, *TNG* presents Data pursuing “the double, and apparently inextricable, processes of learning Shakespeare and learning humanness” (Christopher 2019, 236). Picard confirms this when he tells Data, “you’re here to learn about the human condition and there is no better way of doing that than by embracing Shakespeare” (*TNG*, “The Defector”). To this end, Picard directs the android in *Henry V* in “The Defector” (1990) and in *The Tempest* in “Emergence” (1994); throughout the series, he also gifts Data copies of *The Sonnets* and *Hamlet*. In *Picard*, confirmation that Data has achieved his goal comes when the captain recites Shakespeare while Data is shown aging and dying, as humans do. Simultaneously, the show confirms that Shakespeare speaks unproblematically to all who encounter him and is unsullied by time, place, or identity politics.

The ghosting that occurs in *#ASonnetADay* reveals tension between the conservative vision of a Shakespeare who is a “static and rigid cultural commodity” (Hegarty 1995, 56) and the more culturally attuned image of a playwright whose politics warrant questioning. The friction between these two Shakespeares is clearest when Stewart elects to skip certain poems because his 21st century sensibilities are at odds with Shakespeare’s early modern values. When Stewart is expected to read Sonnet 9 (“Is it for fear to wet a widow’s eye”), for example, the actor declines to recite this poem, announcing to viewers, “Well, I’m going to do Sonnet 10

because I don't like Sonnet 9. Now, you can read it yourselves and make that decision but I—I found it offensive, so I'm not going to do it because nobody's going to make me”

(#ASonnetADay, 29 March 2020). Shortly following this, when viewers were expecting to hear Sonnet 20 (“A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted”), Stewart offers more explanation for his refusal to deliver this poem, though the implication is that the politics in Sonnet 9 were similarly unsavory to those here:

So, after several hours of looking at Sonnet 20, I'm going to pass on this one too because it makes me quite uncomfortable. There is an issue of how he [i.e., Shakespeare] writes about women that I don't like, so I don't have to say it because nobody can make me. (#ASonnetADay, 8 April 2020)

In asserting that no one can compel him to read certain poems, Stewart shapes his audience's image of Shakespeare and of himself. He refuses to speak the poet's words because, to him, doing so would be equivalent to promoting Shakespeare's politics, which are in conflict with his own.⁴ Identifying some poems as unworthy of airtime, Stewart (the man) tells viewers that Shakespeare does not always express the universal human condition, even if Picard (the character) claims otherwise.

Yet, even as Stewart resists Shakespeare's outdated values, he embraces the poet's relevance to the current moment, observing, “Sometimes what Shakespeare writes can sound extraordinarily contemporary as if he wrote it yesterday” (#ASonnetADay, 23 July 2020). Though he finds Sonnet 120 to be “dark, and, it seems to me, very bitter and harsh,” Stewart comments that it includes “phrases which sound very, very modern.” He then assures viewers, “You'll recognize them when they come up” (#ASonnetADay, 23 August 2020). Here and elsewhere in the series, Stewart makes the point that Shakespeare sounds like us; he underscores this by ending one recording saying “William Shakespeare's Sonnets, 2020” (#ASonnetADay, 23 July 2020), making the actor seem like Picard by implying that the Bard speaks unproblematically to us today. This association with Picard is reinforced by fellow actor Jonathan Frakes when he praises Stewart's reading of the “contemporary” sounding Sonnet 91 (“Some glory in their birth, some in their skill”) as “Delightful” (#ASonnetADay, 23 July 2020). Frakes played William Riker, the Starfleet captain's second in command, so seeing Frakes means the viewers also see Riker, which, in turn, encourages them to see Stewart as Picard. Thus,

Frakes’ appearance here intensifies the haunting of #ASonnetADay by Picard and seems to confirm its message that Shakespeare is universal.

Though it might seem that because a major mainstream network (CBS) carried *Star Trek* and now *Picard* while Stewart’s Instagram feed is privately-run—and so not subject to the financial gamble of a television series—two distinct Shakespeares were bound to emerge from Stewart’s performances. To attract the biggest audience, CBS would want an inoffensive Shakespeare, one who could be called on to connect the universe without incident. By contrast, Stewart, as an individual, is welcome to promote whatever politics he pleases. This contrast, while accurate to a degree, overlooks two significant points. First, as Stewart himself and others have observed, *TNG* was an optimistic show; it imagined a “humanist future in which issues like poverty, race and class have long been sorted out, and conflicts are more often resolved through negotiation and problemsolving than at the point of a phaser pistol” (Holloway 2020, np).

Picard, by contrast, is darker, as Stewart has remarked:

In a way, the world of ‘Next Generation’ had been too perfect and too protected [. . .] It was the Enterprise. It was a safe world of respect and communication and care and, sometimes, fun. In ‘Picard,’ the Federation—a union of planets bonded by shared democratic values—has taken an isolationist turn. [. . . *Picard*] was me responding to the world of Brexit and Trump. (qtd in Holloway 2020, np)

Because Stewart’s personal politics were influential on the development of *Picard*, there is not an easy separation to be made between the private (Instagram) and the public (CBS). Rather, in the show, Stewart’s left-leaning criticism of world politics comes in contact with a Shakespeare akin to the Shakespeare of *TNG*—the one under lock and key, meant to convey a universal humanity. This conservative vision of Shakespeare haunts #ASonnetADay because the ghost of Picard makes it so. When #ASonnetADay’s viewers see the character Picard as they look at Stewart, Shakespeare becomes a high culture, apolitical unifier of the cosmos, and Stewart is thus, as one viewer puts it a “beacon of humanity” for performing his work.⁵ When, on the other hand, viewers see Stewart the man as they look at him, Shakespeare becomes “an author that you get to wrestle with as opposed to submitting to” (Thompson 2019, np).⁶ Due to ghosting, these two irreconcilable Shakespeares appear simultaneously in #ASonnetADay and direct us to Stewart’s own dualistic presentation of himself in the series.

“I hope my hat is not too much of a distraction”

The pandemic that inspired *#ASonnetADay* offered fans a new perspective on celebrities, Stewart included. As Ann Larabee has observed, the COVID-19 lockdown intensified the potential for perceived intimacy between the famous and their fans:

Glimpses into celebrities’ private lives, including their habitations, are essential to feelings of intimacy and kinship with them. [. . .] In a disaster where massive numbers of people, worldwide, are forced to stay indoors, this display of domesticity is riveting. As people meet online, newly revealing their own domestic spaces for work and play, celebrities’ domestic spaces are screen openings among many such openings. As celebrities are seen going about their daily lives, they perform among many ordinary performances and in relation to them. The contrast of their strange lives to the ordinary could never be more pronounced. (Larabee 2020, 257)

Sometimes, the contrast revealed in celebs’ videos is not welcome to the average viewer; Larabee notes that a post from J Lo showing her family frolicking around a pool during lockdown was not received well by those whose financial security was threatened by stay-at-home orders. Thus, concludes Larabee, “celebrity culture [. . .] is now most appreciated as a romanticized, benign, soothing domesticity. This domesticity [however] must be eccentric enough to offset the potential arrogance, aloofness, and estrangement of wealth and cultural power” (Larabee 2020, 259). With this in mind, what image of domesticity do viewers get from Stewart’s posts? Does he manage to communicate a persona that is “eccentric enough” to keep viewers from feeling distanced from him due to his wealth and security? How does the image of Stewart as either familiar, likeable, and domestic or as distant, aloof, and privileged affect the image of Shakespeare that emerges from *#ASonnetADay*?

Cultivating a relationship with his audience by addressing them directly with a “Hello” or “Hi,” Stewart makes them feel as though he is familiar with them. This effect is most pronounced when, after having not posted for nearly six weeks, he reestablishes a bond with his audience by confessing to them, “I have missed our sonnet sessions” (*#ASonnetADay*, 30 June 2020). Stewart’s use of the word “our” leads viewers to feel as though their personal relationship with

the actor has been reestablished as he speaks of a shared experience he has with them. Their hope for feelings of friendship and intimacy is solidified with Stewart’s closing promise to “See you tomorrow”— something viewers had been hoping to hear for weeks (*#ASonnetADay*, 30 June 2020).

Stewart further establishes closeness with his audience by presenting himself as an engaged yet fallible and opinionated reader. When Stewart resists reading Sonnet 9, as mentioned above, one viewer, *tommiestorer*, lovingly creates a hashtag for Stewart’s commentary: “@sirpatstew YOU CRACK ME UP!! Love that we’re getting to see you ‘unfiltered’ along with hearing these beautiful poems. #youcantmakeme” (*#ASonnetADay*, 29 March 2020). This “unfiltered” Stewart also appears when he makes mistakes while reading. After having to start Sonnet 15 (“When I consider everything that grows”) twice because of his error in reading it, he looks at the camera and asks, “Was that okay?” Although it is unclear whether the question is directed toward his wife, Sunny, who films him, or toward the viewers, commenters took it upon themselves to answer him. *vampiree143*, for one, assured him, “It was perfection! Showing you aren’t perfect is the best perfection I know! Thank you for showing you are human and make mistakes . . . hugs!” (*#ASonnetADay*, 3 April 2020).

Stewart’s imperfections further lead to a closeness with viewers when he grants them the authority to perform the poems themselves. For example, he describes Sonnet 83 (“I never saw that you did painting need”) as “really hard,” and tells viewers, “Have a go yourself. I’m sure you can do better than I will do.” He then proceeds to make mistakes while reading the sonnet, pronouncing “lives” in line 13 as if it means ‘more than one life’ rather than ‘survives’ and later tripping over line 12, reading “I bring a tomb” instead of “and bring a tomb.” After the second mistake, he breathes a sigh and takes comfort in the fact that there are only “two more lines” remaining in the poem (*#ASonnetADay*, 15 July 2020). Electing not to edit or rerecord videos that bear witness to his errors leads viewers to see Stewart as any other struggling reader rather than as an authority figure who has the last word on Shakespeare. By presenting the sonnets as challenging, even to experts like Stewart, the actor endears himself to his viewers.

Alongside comments about the difficulty of the sonnets, Stewart offers literary lessons in plain language, which results in making both the actor and the poet accessible to a wide audience. He sometimes offers helpful context for the sonnets, noting, for example, that

beginning at Sonnet 127 (“In the old age black was not counted fair”) the subject of the poems switches from the young man to the Dark Lady (*#ASonnetADay*, 9 September 2020). Elsewhere he defines words, often at his wife’s request—such as when she inquires about the meaning of “quietus”—making it feel as if any viewer could ask him about Shakespeare’s vocabulary and he would kindly answer them (*#ASonnetADay*, 29 August 2020). Stewart also offers casual (albeit superficial) commentary on the poems. Regarding the narrator of Sonnet 83 (“I never saw that you did painting need”), he concludes, “He’s angry. He’s really pissed off” (*#ASonnetADay*, 15 July 2020). He judges Sonnet 141 (“In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes”) to be a “Good sonnet. Strong. Good” (*#ASonnetADay*, 13 September 2020). He advises readers that the sonnets “get very good toward the end” of the sequence (*#ASonnetADay*, 25 September 2020), which, for him, seems to be because at Sonnet 149 the poems “get darker and darker and darker” (*#ASonnetADay*, 26 September 2020). Even though academics might challenge the rigor of Stewart’s analysis, audiences received his commentary positively, perhaps because it was not bogged down in heady explanation.

The intimacy Stewart establishes through his greetings, errors, and literary criticism is buttressed by the seemingly quotidian nature of his life. Pets, for example, feature in *#ASonnetADay* and showcase Stewart’s domestic side. When his neighbor’s cat joins him at the start of one recording, for instance, Stewart asks his wife for the cat’s name (Glen) while he climbs into Stewart’s lap (*#ASonnetADay*, 27 April 2020). When Glen wanders off, Stewart jokingly concludes that the animal dislikes this particular poem. Unscripted and unedited encounters such as this lead viewers to feel that they are getting the “real” day-to-day Stewart in his posts. Later in the series, Zoe, Stewart’s newly adopted Pitbull, further illustrates this sense of the “everyday” when she appears in multiple posts, alternately panting, begging for attention, or lying on a blanket-covered couch while being baby-talked to by an off-screen Sunny, who frequently zooms in on the animal. Sunny’s amateur cinematography and unedited videos resemble our own unpolished, spur-of-the-moment iPhone movies, and offer further proof that the couple is like any other we might know. The husband and wife routinely joke with each other and exchange comments that are genial and ordinary, such as when they are on vacation at Mono lake and complain about how “buggy” it is outside (*#ASonnetADay*, 6 July 2020). Occasionally, they show the cracks in their domestic bliss, such as when Sunny tells him to adjust his reading

glasses because they are “cockeyed,” he looks slightly annoyed (#ASonnetADay, 4 August 2020). During most of these encounters, Stewart is dressed casually, in hoodies and tee shirts advertising his personal musical tastes and politics, as were, no doubt, many watching him, further underscoring the actor’s ostensible similarity to his audience.

The unique circumstances under which he recorded himself reading the *Sonnets* deepened the connection between Stewart and his viewers. As Larabee observes, “A big disaster intensifies such connections [. . .] as audiences look for meaning, direction, and emotional outlet” (Larabee 2020, 257). This intensification is illustrated in #ASonnetADay by many followers who express a presumed closeness “to remote persons far beyond our kith and kin,” developing what sociologist Chris Rojek calls “para-social” relationships (Larabee 2020, 257). One viewer refers to Stewart as “uncle Pat”; another writes, “‘Pity the world’ without Sir Patrick Stewart. He always feels like family”; and a third tells Stewart, “You, sir, are honestly my second Dad. Thank you so much from the deepest-depths of my heart. I do really love you, so much.”⁷ Viewers also express closeness when responding to Stewart’s apologies for posting a video late or for giving a subpar reading of a sonnet, assuring him there is no need to be sorry. While Stewart actively cultivated these relationships by appearing avuncular, witty, and welcoming, the pandemic simultaneously permitted viewers access to details in the actor’s life they would not have been privy to under “normal” circumstances and thus encouraged their feelings of intimacy with Stewart.

The “dad” Stewart became to some viewers is indicative of the “intensified domesticity” that was revealed in many male stars’ pandemic videos; “the spectacle of action heroes—who would normally be racing to save the day—placidly reveling in domesticity,” included figures like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sam Neill, Samuel L. Jackson, and Patrick Stewart (Larabee 2020, 257). Like the other male celebrities, Stewart establishes a connection with his viewers at the intersection between gender and the domestic sphere: “The masculinity portrayed in these [male stars’ lockdown] videos takes pleasure in a benign, if attractively odd, domesticity” (Larabee 2020, 258). This domesticity was apparent when Stewart is sitting in a chaise lounge outside his home shelling cranberry beans at the start of one post. The moment was, obviously, staged, but it gave the impression of Stewart’s relationship to the domestic sphere typically associated with women. He immediately clarifies that he is not a skilled cook, and so is exclusively assigned

tasks such as this. He says he puts up with “being committed to doing all of this darn shelling because the end result is going to make it all worthwhile,” and then advises viewers how to prepare these “absolutely delicious” beans before setting his bowl aside to read Sonnet 77 (“Thy glass will show thee how thy beauties wear”) (*#ASonnetADay*, 8 July 2020). Stewart’s established masculinity—communicated by his body in the posts and, one imagines, the roles he played prior to *#ASonnetADay*⁸—allows him to feel comfortable performing domestic tasks such as this. Similarly, in another post, when he sports Sunny’s straw hat while reading outside (fig. 3), Stewart cheerily jokes with the audience, “I hope my hat is not too much of a distraction” (*#ASonnetADay*, 8 May 2020). Wearing a woman’s accessory, chuckling, and lounging in the sun, Stewart illustrates Larabee’s point regarding how male celebrities were perceived by their fans during lockdown: “If celebrities are para-kin, then these are the dotty uncles, part of—but not quite part of—ordinary family life” (Larabee 2020, 258).



Figure 3. Stewart wearing his wife’s hat (#ASonnetADay, 8 May 2020).

Yet, though many viewers may have “dotty uncles” who behave similarly to Stewart, they are repeatedly made aware that the actor’s life is not identical to theirs. Stewart’s \$4.3 million, 4,500 square foot home in historic Hancock Park, Los Angeles, which features prominently in *#ASonnetADay*, presents the most glaring difference. That the Instagram posts feature various parts of this house is a significant point of tension in the series: viewers feel at home, as they become familiar with many spaces in and around Stewart’s house; yet, at the same time, they are aware that this is a fabulous mansion, one beyond their means, and, likely,

decorated and kept clean by employees rather than by the owners. The pool and its surrounding lounge and grilling area, for example, which are featured when guest reader Jonathan Frakes appears, confirms that the grounds are luxurious. At that reading, Stewart introduces his friend at one end of a long table—physically distanced, as the pandemic required—while causally holding a glass of white wine (*#ASonnetADay*, 16 May 2020).

Like the space, and the appearance of another famous celebrity, the alcoholic beverages remind viewers of Stewart’s privileged lifestyle. Early in the series, the actor often appears to be drinking high-end cocktails, the contents of which viewers speculate upon, though the actor never confirms. Later in *#ASonnetADay*, he is explicit about his tastes, praising champagne (“One thing I love about champagne is that you can just take a sip and it tastes as if you’ve had a mouthful”), wine (“A little rosé among the roses.”), and martinis. This last beverage is trotted out in celebration of arriving at the last sonnet in the sequence, and with it comes another marker of Stewart’s class. Noting that “you can’t wear a tuxedo and not have a martini in your hand,” Stewart reveals his expectations for celebrating such a milestone (fig.4) and is marked as a member of the elite class—a far cry from his humble beginnings in the North of England (*#ASonnetADay*, 3 October 2020). This upper-class status underwrites Stewart’s lessons on Shakespeare, giving weight to the actor’s readings.



Figure 4. Stewart in a tuxedo and drinking a martini (*#ASonnetADay*, 3 October 2020).

Is it thus only a member of the elite class, a knight of the British empire,⁹ who can explain to us what Shakespeare means and how he should sound?¹⁰ Or, is Stewart our “dotty uncle,” the goofy, avuncular figure in the armchair next to us who casually chats about the Bard?

Just as two Shakespeares are in tension in *#ASonnetADay*, so it is with Stewart, who is both average and exceptional, both welcoming and privileged. In the series, Shakespeare and Stewart exist at an intersection of opposites: both are celebrities whose reputations are tied to elite *and* popular culture and whose politics are sometimes muffled and sometimes magnified. As Shakespeare “so habitually offer[s] competing perspectives” in his work (Shapiro 2020, xxvi), so too does Stewart’s presentation offer competing perspectives of the playwright and of himself in *#ASonnetADay*. That such oppositions would emerge in Stewart’s series is not surprising, for adaptations are inherently built on opposing forces; audiences of adaptations are compelled to toggle between old and new, “original” and adaptation, past and present, Shakespeare and not-Shakespeare, sameness and difference. In *#ASonnetADay*, the irreconcilable tension between routine and surprise permeates the series and holds the key to understanding why this adaptation was so appealing to viewers living through a pandemic.

“You are better than Xanax”

Overall, viewers responded positively to *#ASonnetADay*, describing Stewart’s videos as soothing and comforting, an antidote to the stress brought on by the pandemic. One comment stands out as expressing the unique role Stewart’s adaptation played during lockdown: gemsetloves writes, “You are better than Xanax” (*#ASonnetADay*, 21 May 2020). Explicitly articulating *#ASonnetADay*’s powerful and unique function, this remark echoes the series’ hashtag title as it implies that Stewart’s project is medicinal, a prophylactic meant to ward off potential unwellness brought on by the pandemic.¹¹ The mention of Xanax in particular suggests that *#ASonnetADay* alleviates the anxiety and panic that were common responses to our new and uncertain circumstances in 2020. Overstatement perhaps, though the notion that an adaptation might serve a potent function in the context of a pandemic, is worth consideration. What is it about *#ASonnetADay* that provides comfort in this context, and what might this series’ appeal tell us about the reception of adaptation during a global crisis?

The answer to these questions lies at the intersection between the repetition and difference that is inherent in adaptations and in the unique circumstances of 2020. Stewart’s audience expressed mixed feelings about sameness while in lockdown. Born of our repeated days spent at home, not knowing which part of the week it was became a common complaint and

something Stewart joked about when posting Sonnet 39: “(Note: Recorded yesterday for Sunday but had some technical difficulties in posting. What’s a Sunday now anyway?)” (*#ASonnetADay*, 27 April 2020). His viewers similarly noted this feeling of monotony: “Truly wonderful Sir. Thank you for your time in helping relieve our tedious days,” wrote *archievasadvisor*. “Yes, the days are kinda in a flow currently,” agreed *tine.wb.333* (*#ASonnetADay*, 27 April 2020).

And yet, in the midst of laments about sameness, many viewers expressed joy at watching Stewart regularly:

A sonnet with my morning tea kickstarts my day. 🥰 (*the.crusher.66*, responding to *#ASonnetADay*, 29 April 2020)

Thank you soooo much . . . I’m working from home . . . 7 weeks now and when I take my lunch break, I listen to SPS . . . it just makes me happy. Well wishes to you and your family from San Diego CA ♥ (*mjcuttineaux*, responding to *#ASonnetADay*, 29 April 2020)

I end my day with your heartfelt sonnets thank you Sir Patrick. (*gigiandpo*, responding to *#ASonnetADay*, 26 March 2020)

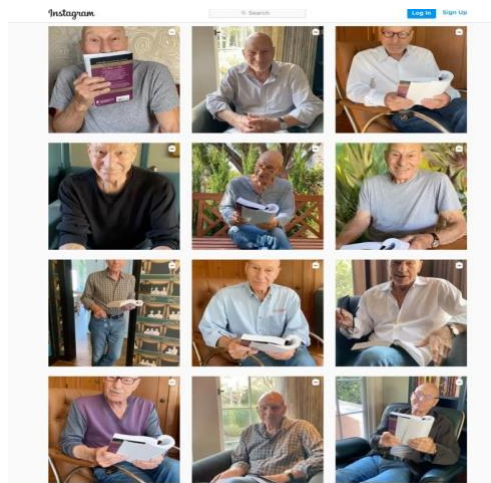
That Stewart’s readings have become one with the habits of viewers’ days—having one’s first cup of tea, eating lunch at midday, and getting ready for bed—underscores not only their potency but also their routineness. One fan went so far as to liken *#ASonnetADay* to her regular religious practice, further emphasizing the ritualistic nature of some viewers’ relationship with the series:

First I watch the Morning Prayer from the Dean of Canterbury Cathedral, THEN Sir Patrick reading a sonnet. I can face whatever the day has to offer armed with these two beautiful men. Bless you both!! (*queenzenyatta*, responding to *#ASonnetADay*, 27 April 2020)

Audiences’ simultaneous laments about sameness and their celebrations of ritual and repetition may initially seem counterintuitive. How could those in lockdown both dread that their days were identical and yet desire to listen every day to a Shakespearean sonnet read by the same man?¹²

Linda Hutcheon’s description of adaptation as “repetition, but repetition without replication”

(Hutcheon 2013, 7) helps to unpack this paradox. The pleasure in adaptation, Hutcheon asserts, “comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise”; “the conservative comfort of familiarity is countered [in adaptation] by the unpredictable pleasure of difference” (Hutcheon 2013, 4, 173). Stewart’s sonnet series provided viewers with both ritual/comfort/familiarity and newness/surprise/difference. On the one hand, *#ASonnetADay* has a recognizable and repeated format, including Stewart’s greeting, the reading of a sonnet, the Folger Shakespeare edition of the poems, the setting, and the filming technique. Yet, simultaneously, viewers occasionally got commentary, a new location in or around Stewart’s estate, a prop—such as a cat, a drink, or a hat—a blooper, or a different pair of glasses. This combination of repetition and difference is visually underscored in the Instagram format, which shows still images from each video posting. Looking at SirPatStew’s page, we see photo after photo of him about to read a sonnet (repetition); yet, each image varies slightly in terms of setting, costume, props, and, occasionally, reader (difference) (fig. 5). Technology in this instance concretely illustrates Hutcheon’s theoretical point about adaptation possessing similarity and difference simultaneously.



*Figure 5. Stewart reading various sonnets on different days.*¹³

It is noteworthy that *#ASonnetADay*’s audience felt both comfort in hearing Stewart read each day and delight at the differences they observed in his posts. Viewers’ ostensibly conflicting feelings about repetition and variation invite us to consider the unique function that adaptations serve in the midst of a pandemic that has led to lockdowns, quarantines, curfews, and work-from-home orders. In the midst of such a global crisis, a population that that craves something

new and surprising in the face of a monotonous life and yet simultaneously finds solace in certainty and ritual is the ideal audience for adaptations. As we continue to endure the COVID-19 pandemic, viewings of adaptations will likely rise because they fulfill our needs and desires by their very nature. If as Hutcheon has noted, “context conditions meaning” (Hutcheon 2013, 145), then we might take note of the ways in which a pandemic affects both the creation and reception of adaptation. For certainly, as #ASonnetADay illustrates, adaptations have the ability to play a unique role in our lives once survival is deemed to be insufficient.

Notes

¹ In the context of the episode, “Survival Instinct,” aired on 29 September 1999, the line indicated that living beings would rather choose their own destiny than submit to a prescribed existence, even when the price for agency is high.

² Stephen Purcell observes that although the novel seems to waiver between whether the performance of Shakespeare in a post-apocalyptic world is “hardly worth it” or “noble” (Mandel 2015, 119), the positive ending of *Station Eleven* indicates its endorsement of “a humanist understanding of theatre’s value” (Purcell 2016, 72). This position is underscored by the fact that

Kirsten has “*Survival is insufficient* [. . .] tattooed on her left forearm” (Mandell 2015, 119). Philip Smith, on the other hand, sees the motto as indicative of the novel’s interest in history. He comments that “we might expound [from the phrase] that survival means more than just continuing to live—to survive one must maintain a past” (Smith 2016, 297).

³ See Buhler, Christopher, Hegarty, Houlahan, Pendergast, and Reinheimer for differing treatments of *Star Trek*’s presentation of Shakespeare.

⁴ Though he is sometimes explicit about the nature of his displeasure, Stewart is notably silent on the subject of the poet’s attitude toward race, e.g., he will not read Sonnet 131 (“Thou art as tyrannous, so as thou art”), “because I don’t like it.” Stewart also never discusses the

possibility of same-sex desire in the *Sonnets*. For other poems and topics that Stewart skips, see Appendix B.

- ⁵ This comment comes from perryross9 in response to Sonnet 138.
- ⁶ In Thompson's interview on NPR's *Code Switch* podcast, she makes the point that the image of a universal Shakespeare who is unquestioningly good for us needs to be resisted.
- ⁷ These responses to #ASonnetADay come from janilani (29 March 2020), patmullarkey (22 March 2020), and rtwod2 (26 March 2020), respectively.
- ⁸ Comments in #ASonnetADay often focused on Stewart's body ("Not to diminish from the power of the reading, but way to rock that bicep, Sir" [natashainla, 23 March 2020]), and his masculinity has also been noted more broadly (David Tennant's statement on the occasion of Stewart's 80th birthday, "He's so strapping and virile" [qtd in Weigand, Shoard, and Moses 2020, np]).
- ⁹ Stewart was awarded his OBE in 2010.
- ¹⁰ Stewart was born into a family of limited means; this combined with his native Northern accent would have marked him as unsuited to wield such cultural authority. At a young age, however, his acting teacher emphasized that he "lose that accent" and "work on what was called RP, received pronunciation, which is how people on the BBC—newsreaders on the BBC spoke like that." The actor notes that he often code switched as a young man and comments on the class-related ramifications of occasionally not doing so: "Weekends when I worked with [. . .] my acting teacher, who had a beautiful accent and a beautiful voice, I would attempt to speak RP. And then Monday to Friday when I was at school, I spoke with a broad Yorkshire accent. And sometimes I would get them mixed up and, oh, did that get me in trouble with my friends" (Briger 2020, np).

¹¹ The series title is Stewart’s adaptation of a well-worn proverb he recalled his mother reciting when he was a child: “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.” In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Stewart proposed, “How about ‘a sonnet a day keeps the doctor away?’” (*#ASonnetADay*, 22 March 2020).

¹² This is in contrast to actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company who also recorded their dramatic readings of the sonnets during lockdown. Rather than the ritual and routine of Stewart’s readings, the RSC recordings were performed by several different actors, usually in front of nondescript backgrounds, without commentary or daily life intruding. They did not aim for coverage either; they read the following sonnets only: 2, 4, 17, 18, 20, 66, 71, 105, 116, 130. See “Sonnets in Solitude”: <https://www.rsc.org.uk/shakespeares-sonnets/sonnets-in-solitude>.

¹³ From left to right, top to bottom, images are from *#ASonnetADay*, 20 August 2020, 18 August 2020, 17 August 2020, 16 August 2020, 15 August 2020, 14 August 2020, 13 August 2020, 12 August 2020, 11 August 2020, 9 August 2020, 8 August 2020, 7 August 2020.

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