

## Yassified Shakespeare

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ABSTRACT ♦ WORKS CITED

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This essay theorizes the concept of “Yassified Shakespeare.” To “yassify” something is to “glamify” it — generally by running it through multiple digital filters and simultaneously making it queerer in the process. Yassification is about excess: the more ridiculous the yassification, the funnier and more effective it is. Accordingly, yassified Shakespeare is a genre of Millennial and post-Millennial appropriation of Shakespeare’s name, persona, and/or work that queers itself in the process of adaptation and remixes Shakespeare’s cultural capital with a sexy, genre-specific, hyper-contemporary aesthetic. This essay considers how yassified Shakespeare materializes in the musicals *Something Rotten!* and *♫ Juliet*, in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, at Renaissance Faires, and on TikTok.



At the top of the musical *♫ Juliet* (2019) we meet William Shakespeare, whose theatre troupe is in rehearsals for a production of *Romeo and Juliet*. But this Shakespeare is far from an attempt at a 3-D Chandos portrait. Will rises from the stage floor as his ensemble sings the chorus from the Backstreet Boys’ 1999 single “Larger than Life”:

All you people can’t you see, can’t you see,  
How your love’s affecting our reality,  
Every time we’re down,  
You can make it right,  
And that makes you larger than life. (Martin 2019)

The music pulsates and it becomes abundantly clear that *♫ Juliet* is not stuck in the sixteenth-century play-book. The musical makes use of Max Martin’s songbook to tell the story of an alternate reality in which Anne Hathaway forces Shakespeare to give Juliet a new ending, one with (perhaps) more agency. David West Read’s

libretto weaves in some of the most famous pop songs of the 1990s and 2000s, including “Larger than Life,” the second single off the Backstreet Boys’s hit 1999 album *Millennium*. “Larger than Life” is a “thank you” letter to the rabid Millennial fans who made the band one of the most successful boy bands in history. Appropriated into *& Juliet*, “Larger than Life” speaks to the unwavering support that Shakespeare’s fans gave the Bard, rendering him “larger than life” within this world. This Shakespeare is fun, charismatic, and sexy, not to mention his writing is on fleek. Much like *Something Rotten!*’s William Shakespeare, who oozes sex appeal and reminds audiences that “it’s hard to be the bard” because of the fame and all the pressure that comes with it, *& Juliet*’s Shakespeare is a “drag Shakespeare” for a new age. Folks: this Shakespeare has been yassified.

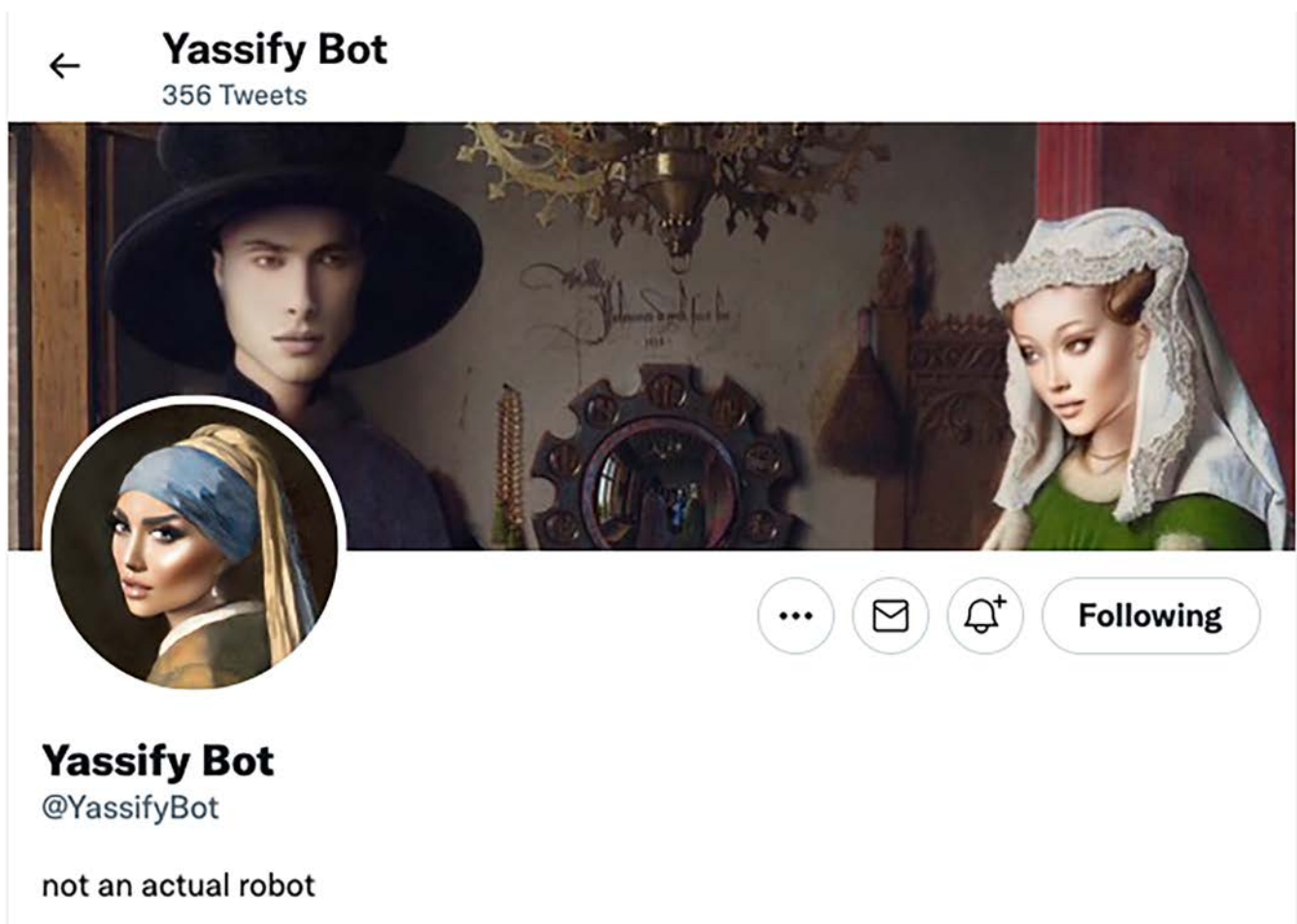


**Figure 1.** Oliver Tompsett as William Shakespeare in *& Juliet* in London. Photo by Johan Persson.

Since *Something Rotten!*’s 2015 Broadway debut, mainstream appropriations of early modernism have followed a distinctly yassified bent. *Something Rotten!* gave way to *Six* and, most recently, *& Juliet* (to say the least of Boston perennial favorite *The Donkey Show*).<sup>1</sup> First seen on social media in 2020, to “yassify” something is to “glamify” it—generally by running it through multiple digital filters and simultaneously making it queerer in the process. Yassification is literally to make something “larger than life”; often the product of yassification

<sup>1</sup> *Something Rotten!* ran on Broadway from 2015 to 2017, *Six* opened on the West End in 2017 and moved to Broadway in 2020 after a successful 2019 Chicago premiere, *& Juliet* made its Broadway debut in November 2022 after successful runs in London and Toronto. A musical version of *Love’s Labours Lost* ran in summer 2013 at The Public Theater’s Shakespeare in the Park. *The Donkey Show*, while never on Broadway, ran in various global locations for 20 years from 1999 to 2019. And, of course, these contemporary musicals are in conversation with earlier Shakespearean appropriations such as *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938), *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948), *West Side Story* (1957), and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1971).

becomes absurd. Yassification is a self-satirical genre whose goal is to provoke thought about the preliminary object while creating something that conforms with a campy glamified aesthetic. Yassification rose to internet prominence in fall 2021 when the YassifyBot went viral on Twitter, spawning endless memes of celebrities, famous paintings, et cetera that had been subjected to highly-filtered “glow-ups.”<sup>2</sup> Yassification is about excess: the more ridiculous the yassification, the funnier and more effective it is. Yassification is in conversation with Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacrum in that both theories address how society interacts with digitally appropriated objects (1994). The difference here is in treatment of the final digital object: in contrast to the simulacrum, yassification does not supplant the original. That is, *Œ Juliet* will never be the sole representation of *Romeo and Juliet* in a cultural heritage. Yassification is a distortion of reality, and its satire lies in its self-referential nature. For yassification to work, there needs to be an original object for comparison to the filtered yassified version. Yassified Shakespeare is a genre of Millennial and post-Millennial appropriation of Shakespeare’s name, persona, and/or work that queers itself in the process of adaptation and remixes Shakespeare’s cultural capital with a sexy, genre-specific, hyper-contemporary aesthetic.



**Figure 2.** *The Yassify Bot Twitter Account.* <https://twitter.com/YassifyBot>

<sup>2</sup> A “glow up” is slang for a makeover. See the Yassify Bot on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/YassifyBot>.

While Yassification is linked to the technological developments of the smartphone, filters, and digital photographic manipulation, the movement has its roots in drag and ballroom culture. It's impossible to yassify something without queering it, directly or indirectly. Layering the necessary filters on top of an image to yassify it parallels a drag performer layering makeup and body-altering illusionary garments onto their physical frame in order to enact their glamorous stage personas. In this vein, we suggest that performing the persona of Shakespeare in the creative context of playful anachronisms (either as Oliver Thompsett and Stark Sands have done in *Juliet* and Christian Borle and Adam Pascal did in *Something Rotten!*, or as many Renaissance faire performers have done at various festivals around the world) is an act of drag. Actors playing Shakespeare in these contexts are not simply playing the role of a historical persona, but rather layering contemporary sensibilities and yassified analyses of Shakespeare as a character onto that performance.

There are also, of course, more traditional readings of drag that intersect with Shakespeare's work. There are drag performers who have acted in Shakespeare's plays, such as Emma Rice's 2017 production of *Twelfth Night* at The Globe wherein a drag queen named Le Gateau Chocolat played Feste. There are also drag appropriations of Shakespeare. Take, for example, *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 7 episode 3, entitled "Shakespeare," which aired on March 16, 2015, four years after Madhavi Menon (2011) introduced the term "Shakespeare" into critical contexts with her edited collection by the same title. In this episode, queens were divided into two teams and asked to perform in the Shakespearean adaptations "Romy and Juliet" and "MacBitch." Drag queens remixing Shakespeare is not a phenomenon confined to reality television: the internet hosts a plethora of audio clips of sundry celebrities reading sonnets, and these have also become fodder for the yassified drag act of lip sync.<sup>3</sup> A YouTube search for "lip sync Shakespeare sonnet" will yield videos of the drag queen Tootight Lautrec moving her mouth to the phrases of Shakespeare as spoken by Alan Rickman, Imogen Stubbs, Imelda Staunton, and David Tennant (among others).

Then, of course, there's TikTok, which has quickly become a hotbed for culture-making since its international debut in 2017 and subsequent United States rollout in 2018 (Boffone 2021, 2022). The platform features a wide spectrum of video content, much of which takes a yassified angle, leaning into the silly, the ridiculous, and the idiosyncratic. On TikTok, Gen Z reimagines and appropriates Shakespeare, oftentimes leaning into queer readings of the canon. For example, the #ShakesTok community reads *Twelfth Night* through a queer lens, homing in on the trope of cross-dressing and, ultimately, drag. TikTokers such as @nofearshakespeare, @lungthief, and @kaicfox appropriate and reclaim the Shakespeare canon as a definitively yassified piece of queer culture. Indeed, as #ShakesTok reveals, the possibilities of yassifying Shakespeare continue to grow in the digital age (Boffone and Rosvally 2023b).

**Figure 3.** <https://www.tiktok.com/@lungthief/video/6990162140745256198>.  
@lungthief, "twelfth night, a summary," July 28, 2021.



3 Of course, neither drag nor lip syncing are Millennial phenomena; rather, we highlight how these queer art forms are yassified through a Millennial digital filter.

Although TikTokian encounters with Shakespeare may feel like avant-garde Shakespearian appropriation, experiments like those seen on TikTok connect to a lineage of queer engagement with Shakespeare. These digital spaces took their cue from real-world appropriations such as *The Donkey Show*. The phenomenon we are observing now is what happens when digital Shakesqueer refracts offline and back into the real world.

Yassified Shakespeare isn't *new per se*. After all, the *RuPaul's Drag Race* episode that gave us "MacBitch" debuted nearly eight years ago and Menon's concept of "Shakesqueer" is on the cusp of going through puberty. Yet, the past decades do, in fact, reveal an increased public engagement with Shakespeare from the queer community. As digital culture grows and more and more people become "extremely online" (much like the authors of this essay), Shakespeare has become an axis through which to make meaning using Millennial and post-Millennial paradigms. Yassified Shakespeares operate as a parody of mainstream cultural capital repackaged as refreshed cultural capital. This appropriation of drag and ballroom culture is something we now need to reexamine through Shakespearian lenses. Why are queer and queer-coded cultural producers yassifying Shakespeare? What are they reclaiming? Why now? And, why Shakespeare?

In some ways, Shakespeare is the most logical site for mainstream yassification. Given the massive and loaded cultural capital that comes with Shakespeare's brand, as well as the long history of queer Shakespearian appropriations, there's plenty of well-trodden space for would-be yassifiers to work. The refraction of analog to digital to analog culture is timely since broadband became widely available in the early 2000s, making the past decade a coming-of-age moment for digital natives. In a word, yassification is now because contemporary culture-makers grew up with the technologies of yassification. While queer appropriations of Shakespeare have existed essentially since Shakespeare first drafted the plays, "yassification" specifically requires the inclusion of digital technologies refracted into the real world. *Something Rotten!* needs the safe yet muscle-bound bad boy heartthrob aesthetic of 90s boy bands and digital thirst traps to guide its reimagining of Shakespeare as a character.<sup>4</sup> *♣ Juliet* relies on the pop music of the late 90s to become nostalgic for Millennial tastemakers in order to be the front and center focus of Shakespeare's glitter glow-up (Boffone and Rosvally 2023a). Yassification is an iteration of queer Shakespearian appropriation that speaks to a certain generation because of its dual ties to the literary generational nostalgia of Shakespeare's works, and the nostalgia of Millennial childhood. Yassification offers the opportunity to twine these nostalgias together to reimagine Shakespeare as even more expansive than literary critics already consider it to be.

As a graphic example of analog space sliding into digital culture: on July 21, 2015, [Broadway.com](https://www.broadway.com) released a music video of Christian Borle as Shakespeare gallivanting around New York City and declaring that it's "*Hard to be the Bard.*" In tight-fitting jeans, aviator sunglasses, a black leather jacket (casually draped over the

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4 A "thirst trap" is a picture or video that someone posts online designed to garner sexual attention. Thirst traps typically reveal copious amounts of skin, smoldering looks, washboard abs and/or tasteful side-boob. As "thirsty" is slang for "horny," the goal of a thirst trap is to capitalize on the horniness of the viewer. If the thirst trap is successful, then it will lead to a "thirst follow" in which the viewer follows the account purely for reasons of sexual attraction.



shoulder to give us front row tickets to the gun show), and an Elizabethan-style neck ruff,<sup>5</sup> Borle visits street performers in Times Square, takes selfies while being painted portrait-style, drinks fruity cocktails, and runs from adoring fans. The whole while, he smizes for the camera and makes writer’s block sexy.<sup>6</sup> While there was little effort to make Borle look like Shakespeare, Borle’s over-the-top satiric performance embodies all the sexy campiness of drag. His admirers are a flock of mixed-gendered twenty-somethings — nodding to the queerness of Shakespeare’s desirability. The video was meant as publicity for the newly-opened *Something Rotten!*, but in digital hindsight it also provides a relic of this particular yassified object while being a stable reference to the analog space of traditional theatre: an actual Broadway performance that happened on an actual stage with actual actors.



**Figure 4.** <https://youtu.be/8hnI7yhIWGY>. “Hard to Be the Bard” starring Christian Borle from *Something Rotten!*

Or take for instance, how cultural capital elides in *Juliet’s* act 1 finale where Romeo descends from the ceiling on a larger-than-life neon sign of his name crooning the opening lyrics to Bon Jovi’s “It’s My Life.” When Danielle saw the show in Toronto in August 2022, the audience began to laugh as they realized what was happening: the song’s title lyrics don’t surface until the chorus, and yet its cultural capital is so strong that most

5 The “gun show” refers to someone gratuitously flashing their well-toned biceps for the camera. For more on the “Shakespearean ruff,” see Ella Hawkins (2021).

6 “Smizes” is a term coined by Tyra Banks from her hit reality show *America’s Next Top Model*. Smizes is a portmanteau of “smiles” and “eyes.” It is used to describe when someone uses their eyes to be sexy toward the camera.

will recognize “the point” before Romeo voices these words. The humor in this recognition combined with the absurdity of the situation is an allegory for yassification in general: a familiar character literally descending deus ex machina-style while anachronistically belting some very fitting lyrics as an audience howls in recognition. This moment—this sliding of lenses as the world comes into sharp focus and the audience makes the connection between Shakespeare, Romeo, and Bon Jovi—this is the essence of yassification. It’s what makes Shakespeare’s cultural capital larger than life.

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