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Analysing Shakespearean Adaptations in Modern European Absurdist Drama: Alfred Jarry's  
*Ubu Roi* and Eugene Ionesco's *Macbett*

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**Abstract:**

*This paper seeks to analyze two key Shakespearean Adaptations in Modern European Absurdist Drama. The texts being analyzed are Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi (1896) and Eugene Ionesco's Macbett (1972). Written in very different styles and separated by a little less than a century, both plays offer a stark expression of the miseries and absurdities of human condition while also adapting the Shakespearean tale of ruthless ambition and power play Macbeth. It is pertinent to note that the two plays deal with Macbeth in different ways and in the process, revive the Shakespearean idiom to the tune of contemporary issues.*

**Keywords:** *Shakespeare, Theatre of Absurd, Alfred Jarry, Eugene Ionesco, Martin Esslin, Albert Camus, Myth of Sisyphus, Avant garde, tragicomedy.*

While the first use of the term 'Absurd' in a conceptually and theoretically conscious sense has been traced to Albert Camus's path breaking essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), it was

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scholar and critic Martin Esslin who categorized the work of certain playwrights following a similar trajectory under the umbrella of the *Theatre of the Absurd*. The idea was to emphasize the absurdity of life, the realization of a growing sense of helplessness, of the strangely meaningless nature of life and yet a cyclical seemingly eternal quest which led, much to one's bewilderment, nowhere! Extensive use of tragicomic elements, sustained experimentation with form, and a close relationship with the philosophy of existentialism and the avant garde defined the style of the theatre of absurd.

Some general features of the theatre of absurd may be: repetition of dialogues, minimal stage props, convoluted rational logic, a chaotic view of religion, extensive use of clichés, breakdown of all 'meaningful' communication, a systematic devaluation of language and parodying the limitations of language, exploration of nothingness and emptiness, and, use of unexplained metamorphosis and supernatural elements. Martin Esslin defined it thus in a seminal essay:

“The Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.”<sup>1</sup>

In the essay “Between Absurdity and the Playwright” William Oliver underlines the essential belief of the absurdist playwrights which is that “our existence is absurd because we are born without asking to be born, we die without seeking death, we live between birth and death trapped within our body and our reason, unable to conceive of a time in which we were not, or a time in which we will not be – for nothingness is very much like the concept of infinity: something we perceive only in so far as we cannot experience it.”

In a section in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Dinah Birch makes many useful observations. For Birch, one attempts to recognize the fundamentally mysterious and indecipherable nature of the world by defining it as absurd, and it is this recognition which is frequently associated with the particular feelings of loss, purposelessness, and bewilderment. Birch infers that The Theatre of the Absurd gives ample expression to these very feelings, hence

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<sup>1</sup> Esslin, Martin. “Introduction: The Absurdity of the Absurd”. *Bloom's modern critical interpretations Waiting for Godot - Samuel Beckett*. Infobase Publishing, 2009. Pg- 29.

leaving an observer feeling baffled by disjointed, meaningless, or repetitious dialogues, seemingly incomprehensible behaviour, and totally disorganized plots that deny all notion of logical or 'realistic' development. Birch further observes that The Theatre of the Absurd was largely influenced by popular traditions and practices of entertainment as also by mime, acrobatics, and circus clowning. Birch makes a significant note that moreover, the theatre of the absurd played a pivotal part in extending the range of post-war drama as it sought to redefine the legitimate concerns of 'serious' theatre.

In a piece on 'The Theatre of the Absurd' of the *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*, Claude Schumacher traces the emergence of the theatre of the absurd in the play of Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) and Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1914) and in the theories of Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) in the nineteenth century Paris.

Existentialist philosophy draws upon Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*; it is said that the gods had condemned Sisyphus to roll a rock ceaselessly to the top of a mountain, from where the stone would fall back to the ground owing to its own weight. There is no hope of any change or redemption from the cycle, full of repetitive action without any idea of 'progress', unending and leading nowhere. In this context, Corrigan clarifies regarding the absurdist stance on meaning, "Yet the defiant rejection of language as the main vehicle of the dramatic action, the onslaught on conventional logic and unilinear conceptual thinking in the Theater of Absurd is by no means equivalent to a total rejection of all meaning. On the contrary, it constitutes an earnest endeavor to penetrate to deeper layers of meaning and to give a truer, because more complex, picture of reality."

Arguably one of the most intense tragedies, the earliest published version of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is in the first folio of 1623. The exact dates of writing or first performance of the play are not known, however it is thought to have been conceived and performed during James VI of Scotland's ascension to the English throne in 1603 when he became James I of England. The play crucially fuses multiple facets of human psychology, superstition and power-politics. In his introduction to *Macbeth*, Edmund Chambers<sup>2</sup> calls

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<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Ed. Edmund K. Chambers. London and Glasgow: Blackie & Son Ltd, 1968.

Macbeth “wildly superstitious” who falls prey to “terrible imaginings” and a man of action who is unable to sustain his rationality in the state of inaction i.e. when there is nothing “to be actually done” and hence, what he suffers from, is “purely fear” without any remorse or repentance. On the other hand, Lady Macbeth is his “exact converse; she has banished all superstition from her soul” and is a woman of thought– “she can scheme and plot, but she cannot act”, has to let her husband perform the “deadly deed” and hence, what she suffers from is not fear but remorse and mental agony. Finally, Chambers pronounces the play to be “a drama of man at odds with fate, driven from sin to sin and its retribution by external invincible forces”.

French playwright Alfred Jarry’s (1873-1907) *Ubu Roi* (1896)<sup>3</sup> is loosely constructed on the lines of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and has the principal characters named Papa Turd and Mama Turd (Turd meaning a lump of excrement). Hence, the first line of the surrealist-absurd play begins with the exclamation “Pshit!” by Papa Turd. *Ubu Roi* was written by Jarry at the young age of twenty-three; it remains his most influential and best known work till date. It is pertinent to note here that "Ubu Roi" and the subsequent "Ubu" plays grew out of Jarry’s adolescent rebellion against his detested teacher M. Herbert, developing from sketches he wrote on him as a schoolboy, portraying the ultimate embodiment of hypocrisy, ignorance, greed and mediocrity. He died of tuberculosis at a meager age of 34; reviewing Jarry’s recent biography called *A Pataphysical Life* by Alistair Brotchie, Ian Pinder<sup>4</sup> defies anyone to close the book “without a sense of sadness that somebody so rare and unworldly came to such a sorry end”. . Pindar points to Brotchie’s wry observation, “One of the undoubted achievements of *Ubu Roi* was that it upset almost everyone who saw it”. Pindar underlines the fact that the comical-disturbing play offers no explanation, solace or solutions; while Jarry called it a comedy, it is amply evident that the humour is immensely sinister: though the audience is invited to laugh and laugh wildly, the sinister laughter is possible when it realizes the joke is on themselves. It is useful to draw further from Pindar’s sensible review of the biography, which records that Jarry played along with the expectations that he should be Ubuesque, in public, until the very character of Ubu became a contradictory part of his psychological make-up; he would bellow “Merdre!” on cue, and his

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<sup>3</sup> Jarry, Alfred. *Ubu Roi*. Tr. Beverly Keith and G. Legman. NY: Dover Publications, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Pindar. *Merrrrrrrrre!: Alfred Jarry and Père Ubu*. The Times Literary Supplement. Published 17<sup>th</sup> April 2013. <<http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1246470.ece>>

“Ubu-speak” became habitual. A pertinent question is raised here: was Ubu a monster that took over its creator, a mask he could not remove? Brotchie notes the trite remark of one acquaintance who went so far as to say that Jarry was “devoured by Ubu”. Brotchie digs deeper to observe that though the public associated Jarry with Ubu, he saw himself as Faustroll: half-Faust, half-troll (self-sufficient creatures in his private mythology). Jarry finished *Les Gestes et Opinions du Docteur Faustroll, Pataphysicien* (The Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician) in 1898, but never sought to publish this coded autobiography in which Faustroll visits miraculous imaginary lands.

Another reviewer John Stokes goes to see a new production of *Ubu Roi* at Silk Street Theatre, Barbican, which according to Stokes, even now manages to confront the audience with an upsetting image of itself – and ends by calling for bankers’ blood.

The first performance of *Ubu Roi* at Theatre de le’Oeuvre in Paris in 1896 was deemed immensely scandalous. It was described as “the most extraordinary thing seen in the theatre for a long time” by notable critics like André Gide.

“The chief personage, who is some kind of King, carries for sceptre a brush of the kind that we use to clean a closet... After Stephane Mallarme, after Paul Verlaine, after Gustave Moreau, after Puvis de Chavannes, after our own verse, after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, *what more is possible? After us the Savage God.*”

(W. B. Yeats)

These were W.B. Yeats’<sup>5</sup>solemn remarks after watching the play. The play documents a highly farcical and grotesque life-story of an officer in the court of the King of Poland – Papa Turd, who mirrored the mediocre and nonsensical stupid characteristics of middle class officialdom in Poland. With the encouragement and assistance of his greedy wife Mama Turd, Papa Turd kills

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<sup>5</sup> Yeats, W. B. *The Trembling of the Veil*. Chapter 3- “Hodos Camelionis”. 1922. Web. 10<sup>th</sup> June 2013. <<http://archive.org/stream/thetremblingofth33505gut/pg33505.txt>>

the King and assumes sovereign power. He goes on to ruthlessly execute and torture his subjects, taking recourse to skewed logic and amasses great fortune before finally being driven out by the Russian Army and in the end, flees across Europe.

Shakespeare's play presents five female characters in all, namely, the three witches, Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff. Jarry's *Ubu Roi* has only two- Mama Turd or Lady Macbeth and Queen Rosamunde or Lady Duncan, thereby completely omitting the witches. Ionesco goes further by presenting Lady Macbeth, Lady Duncan and the first witch- all rolled into one and the second witch also doubling up as Lady Duncan's lady-in-waiting in the course of the play.

In completely doing away with the witches and the supernatural, Jarry's *Ubu Roi* presents the Lady Macbeth character of Mama Turd not only as the prime mover of Macbeth-Papa Turd's actions, it also drains her of the complex psychological guilt of regicide, making her in the process, a 'masculine' woman in relentless pursuit of money and power. This is reminiscent of the scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* where Lady Macbeth invokes the spirits to 'unsex' her prior to the killing of the King. The following dialogue between the couple in the very first act, reveals their nefarious intentions:

**Papa Turd:** Now by my green candle, King Wenceslas is still alive. And suppose he croaks – hasn't he got loads of children?

**Mama Turd:** What prevents you from massacring the whole family and putting yourself in their place?

**Papa Turd:** Ah! Mama Turd, you do me wrong. Watch out you don't end up in the soup.

**Mama Turd:** Poor unfortunate, when I'm in the soup who'll patch the seat of your pants?

**Papa Turd:** Is that so? And if you don't, then what? Isn't my ass just like everybody else's?

**Mama Turd:** If I were in your place, that ass– I'd want to plant on a throne. You could make lots of money, and eat all the sausages you want, and roll through the streets in a carriage.

(Act 1 Scene 1 )

Later we see that in the absence of Macbeth-Papa Turd, Mama Turd not only flees with the entire treasure of the Polish state, but also schemes wildly against her husband whom interestingly, she utterly loathes. In Act 3 Scene 2, we see Mama Turd's feeble attempts to resist her husband's insane and unbridled greed that ironically she herself has fanned:

**Papa Turd:** Bring the first Noble, and pass me my Noble hook. Those that are condemned to death I'll put through the trapdoor and they'll fall into the basement of Pinchpork and then into the room below where their brains will be removed by the debraining machine. (*To the 1st Noble.*) Who are you, you buffoon?

**FIRST NOBLE:** Count of Vitepsk.

**Papa Turd:** What's your income?

**FIRST NOBLE:** Three million rixdales.

**Papa Turd:** Condemned!

*He grabs the Noble with the hook and puts him down the hole.*

**Mama Turd:** What base ferocity!

**Papa Turd:** Second Noble, who are you? (*The Noble says nothing.*) You going to answer, dirt bag?

**SECOND NOBLE:** Grand Duke of Posen.

**Papa Turd:** Excellent! Excellent! That's all I want to know. Into the hole! Third Noble, who are you? You have a dirty head.

**THIRD NOBLE:** Duke of Courlande and of the cities of Riga, Ravel, and Mitau.

**Papa Turd:** Very well! Very well! Don't you have something else?

**THIRD NOBLE:** Nothing.

**Papa Turd:** Into the hole then! Fourth Noble, who are you?

**FOURTH NOBLE:** Prince of Podolie.

**Papa Turd:** What's your income?

**FOURTH NOBLE:** I am skint.

**Papa Turd:** For using foul language, you go in the hole. Fifth Noble, who are you?

**FIFTH NOBLE:** Margrave of Thorn, Palatine of Polack.

**Papa Turd:** That's not much. Don't you have anything else?

**FIFTH NOBLE:** It is sufficient for me.

**Papa Turd:** Hey well!. It is better to have little than nothing. Into the hole! What are you snivelling about Mama Turd?

**Mama Turd:** You are too ferocious, Papa Ubu.

**Papa Turd:** Hey! I'm becoming richer. I'm going to have them read me MY list of MY possessions. Herald, read me MY list of MY possessions.

The only instance at which a supernatural element is hinted at in the Jarry's *Ubu Roi* is when Mama and Papa Turd are in a dark cave and in order to save her guilty self from his anger, she tries to pretend to be Archangel Gabriel taking advantage of the darkness around her ostensibly to make Papa Turd forgive her and accept her in spite of her wicked scheming and other such grave misdeeds. Her bluff however is easily busted by her husband Papa Turd as soon as the sun rises and Papa Turd recognizes his wife's figure, a fierce quarrel breaking out between them thereafter. Unlike Shakespeare's play where Macbeth is killed towards the end, Jarry keeps the ending open with both Papa Turd and Mama Turd united in their disgrace, aboard a ship gone astray, raving like maniacs with nowhere to go. Jarry's *Ubu Roi* therefore occupies the realm of the grotesque and slapstick, turning the canonical tragedy of *Macbeth* into a farcical tragic-comedy in the absurdist sense.

To talk a little about a twenty-first century production of Jarry's play, reviewer Everett Evans<sup>6</sup> describes *Ubu Roi* as one of those plays theater fans likely have read about but seldom have an opportunity to experience in production, Classical Theatre Company's current staging of *Ubu Roi* turns on the spotlight. In the play, a grotesque, pear-shaped King Ubu becomes the crude personification of every disgusting aspect of human behavior. Talking about the instant production, Evans informs the reader further: Director of the production Philip Hays has reported in his program notes that this version is not a word-for-word translation, but a considerably

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<sup>6</sup> Evans, Everett. *Jarry's 'Ubu Roi' still has the power to shock*. The Houston Chronicle. Published 30<sup>th</sup> January 2013.

<<http://www.chron.com/entertainment/article/Jarry-s-Ubu-Roi-still-has-the-power-to-shock-4236869.php>>

refurbished take - "cut, rearranged, rewritten and amended with scenes and songs cribbed from Jarry's other 'Ubu' plays," as well as some passages of Hays' invention.

Evans mentions that Hays has directed the play with much resourcefulness and ingenuity on Ryan McGettigan's likewise resourceful and ingenious platform set, equipped with ramps and lots of trap doors. Evans notes that while Jarry's original specified Ubu's scepter as a toilet brush - using rolls of bathroom tissue as another recurring visual motif seems to be Hays' idea, as the tissue represents everything from cash to weaponry. Talking further about the execution of the play on stage, Evans describes that the designer Macy Perrone dressed the oversize puppets in properly outre garb; Actor Mark Roberts made a disgustingly stupid and pathetic Papa Ubu - greedily clamoring, infantile and ineffectual; Susan Koozin made a strong impression playing Mama Ubu as a blowsy, vulgar, inexhaustible harridan; Dan Geist's smirk of mock heroism buoyed his turns as Buggerlass; Jovan Jackson's sardonic bite as Captain Bordure was likewise appreciable; bringing the playwright on stage, Lorenz Lopez spoke a brief preface with the arch blandness of Alfred Hitchcock's deadpan TV introductions. Less a linear narrative than a succession of random outbursts, the play shows the monstrosity of human condition as Papa Ubu plotting with Mama Ubu (his wife) and fellow conspirators kills the King of Poland, so Ubu can seize the throne. Evans concludes by making a crucial point that as Jarry noted, his characters are not meant to register as people but as oversize puppets; everyone behaves viciously and arbitrarily, with much violence, looting, desecration and mayhem along the way.

Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994), a Romanian-French playwright, has written a tragic farce called *Macbett* (1972)<sup>7</sup> adapting Shakespeare's play into the contemporary crisis of the cold war era. In the hands of Ionesco, the Shakespearean play gets transformed into a darker and crisper version albeit with a little tweaking here and there and, a systematic exploration of chinks within it.

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<sup>7</sup> Marowitz, Charles and Donald Watson. Tr. *Exit the King, The Killer and Macbett: Three Plays by Ionesco*. NY: Grove press, 1973.

An online reviewer John Baker<sup>8</sup> feels that Eugene Ionesco's *Macbeth* remoulds Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into a furiously comic tale of ambition, corruption and excess, creating a tragic farce which takes human folly to its wildest extremes. Ionesco's play is concerned with the degeneration of power, the absurdity and the madness of *all* power brokers and those involved in the process of bringing about war.

Ionesco's rather lengthy play, though primarily an absurdist take on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, stays quite close to its source text. Ionesco poses the question— Why have three witches in action when two will do as well? and tackles it convincingly in the play. Hence the plot of *Macbeth* spans out with a pair of weird sisters/witches, and in a significant intervention, combines the role of the Macbeth's wife with a new character – that of Lady Duncan. The story here is held within the contours of Macbeth's ambition towering beyond his own imagination, leading to his brutal assassination of the king, here in collusion with both Banco and Lady Duncan. While the Shakespearean play explored beyond the superficial act of murder and treason, Ionesco's *Macbeth* hovers faithfully around the regicide, while it portrays the killers as mediocre and clumsy plotters. As a result, we get an in-depth exploration of the Scottish tragedy which eerily transposes the fatality of visions and other such metaphors into the instant mundane existence. The play features an unusual subplot in which visibly annoyed with her husband, Lady Duncan pursues a very public affair with Macbeth, urges and aids him in the act of regicide and subsequently marries him.

Eugene Ionesco's *Macbeth* while retaining the supernatural in the form of two witches, takes the tragedy to another level: when Macbeth discovers right before the banquet that the beautiful seductress he married a few hours ago was not Lady Duncan but an ugly witch who wears rags, an apron covered in vomit, muddy boots, has dirty grey hair, crooked teeth, a pointed nose and carries a stick tipped with poisoned steel. The fact that this is revealed to Macbeth by Lady Duncan herself, in front of the entire court, heightens the tension as Macbeth, now bewitched beyond redemption, says "I'd like to meet that old hag again. She took the way you

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<sup>8</sup> Baker, John. *Macbeth by Eugene Ionesco*. <<http://johnbakersblog.co.uk/macbeth-by-eugene-ionesco/>> Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> May 2013.

look and the way you move and made them still more beautiful. She had a more beautiful voice than yours. Where can I find her?"

It would be pertinent to note here that Ionesco gives surprisingly identical speeches to both Banco and Macbett, reiterating the hint of both being cousins. Moreover, both apparently seem to have identical physical features too and at one point even Lady Duncan is unable to tell them apart.

Right from the beginning, Lady Duncan is shown to be leading the charge. Ionesco's King Duncan is an emasculated greedy despot depending entirely on those around him. It is in fact Lady Duncan who gets to ride a horse and visit the battlefield to figure out which side is winning. She appears to take the lead sexually as well, when she flirts unabashedly with Macbett indulging in obscene amorous plays with him even in the presence of Duncan who is surprisingly oblivious of what stares him in the eye. Hence her denouncement of Macbett later in the banquet scene seems surprising and unreal to any careful reader.

Also, Lady Duncan's habitual duplicity is brought to the fore when she reveals that the slayer of Macbett, Macol (who is drawn on both Macduff and Malcolm) is not her son but Banco's, and that she had retreated to seclusion in order to preserve the pretense of being pregnant with the royal heir. The two witches who assume the garbs of Lady Duncan and her Lady in waiting are shown as mischievous old hags capable of convincingly shift forms and assume courtly manners. The collation of the characters of Lady Duncan and the first witch is remarkable as it is Lady Duncan herself who has continuously incited Macbett's dormant passion in the beginning but the culmination of this forbidden passion can occur only with the unholy combination of the satanic witch into her person which further propels the series of actions.

It is interesting to note how Ionesco seems to justify the act of regicide as Lady Duncan, Macbett and Banquo become the unholy trinity affecting the crime with willing complicity. This problematises the killing of Duncan in more ways than one: through the killing of Glamis and Candor, he is established as a despot thoroughly unfit to rule either his kingdom or his own household as it is his own wife who is complicit in and indeed initiates the chain of events leading to his murder. Significantly, Ionesco's *Macbett* opens up the dilemma and the choice of proceeding on a sinful path to Banco as well by giving him identical looks and speech as Macbett and by making him party in Duncan's murder.

Interestingly, it is only after the witches disappear that the supposedly “real” Lady Duncan is able to come out of her imprisonment and reveal her firm allegiance to the slain King, thereby calling off Macbett’s falsity. The play ends with the victor Macol in a fit of menacing megalomania, promising to make Macbett seem pure as snow as compared to his own monstrous vices which he enumerates to his subjects, thereafter declaring himself to be the “super-highness, super-king, super-majesty and the emperor of emperors”. Within all this commotion, Lady Duncan’s character has disappeared, without a trace and quite eerily, like a witch.

Ionesco’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* may be derided by some scholars as mere attempts at collaborating with a Shakespearean text for the sake of it, however, a closer analysis of *Macbeth* reveals how Ionesco succeeds in opening up the chinks in the text for a greater multiplicity of meanings by slightly tweaking the storyline and collating a few characters. In Ionesco’s scheme, everyone involved in these unholy actions is either after power or is engaged in a clownish attempt to hold onto it. Unlike Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Ionesco’s *Macbeth* emerges as a sardonic tale about a man Macbett who brutally murders another for his the sake of sovereign power, forgetting in the process, the woman who made his ascent possible, and hence it is that woman, Lady Duncan who calls the curtains on Macbett’s fiendish acts. After Macbett meets death, his corpse is carried to be beheaded and his head is brought out on the end of a spear. It is Duncan's foster son and Banco’s biological son Macol who revenges the bloody deeds declaring his will to surpass Macbett in becoming the bloodiest tyrant of all, attesting in the spirit of absurdism that the very idea of justice is nothing but an illusion.

To conclude, while both Jarry and Ionesco’s plays were written in very different styles and were separated by just a little less than a century, both the plays offer a stark expression of the miseries and absurdities of human condition while also adapting the Shakespearean tale of ruthless ambition and power play *Macbeth*. It is pertinent to note that the two plays deal with *Macbeth* in different ways and in the process, revive the Shakespearean idiom to the tune of contemporary issues.

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