

VIRTUAL SHAKESPEARES: THEATRICAL ADAPTATIONS AND
TRANSFORMATIONS OF SHAKESPEARE, 1600-1997

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“Every page is a paper mirror. You bend over it and look at yourself. Water likewise gives back our image; but what image has ever been able to hold the river?” he replied.
—Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Resemblances* (66)

Despite the best efforts of academics and others with a vested interest in sustaining the Shakespearean tradition, Shakespeare cannot be fixed as a static discursive practice in a discrete synchronic slice of literary history. Rather, Shakespeare, perhaps one of the most inventive and prolific of literary adapters himself—witness the profound depth of inter-textual filiations woven through the plays—has become a fluid, inter-zonal site within the complex web of discursive, cultural, and historical practices, not all necessarily literary, associated with him. Conventionally situated at the epicenter of the English literary tradition, a virtual ground-zero from which radiates all that is holy and good about English literature—Michael Bristol goes so far as to state that “Shakespeare is the name of a tutelary deity or cult-object” (19)—it is often forgotten that what Shakespeare did himself, what shaped his discursivity, was a writing practice informed by an intense regard for adapted materials. As Gary Taylor succinctly puts it in a discussion of the debate over the original nature of Shakespeare’s genius, “Shakespeare, of course, was as guilty of theft ... as any author Shakespeare stole with a clear conscience. He copied plots, characters, speeches, images, and aphorisms from classical authors and from his own

contemporaries, without acknowledgment” (140-41). Despite this, Taylor goes on to note that in the eighteenth century “The propriet[ary] concept of authorial copyright, the criminalization of literary expropriation, the entrepreneurial cult of originality—all were harnessed, like so much else, to the bandwagon of Shakespeare’s reputation” (141). Taylor’s statements, while making for good copy, leave out the crucial information that “a great deal of the material he uses is commonplace” (Martindale 10) and that Renaissance compositional practice, which involved the selection and blending of disparate classical materials, was based on a mastery of mimesis: “One learned to write by imitating the ‘best’ authors, that is the most admired classical writers” (Martindale 12). Shakespeare’s writing practice merely conformed to the compositional methods that were conventional in his time.

These observations have become critical commonplaces but they frequently fail to grasp a crucial outcome of such an imitative writing practice—namely, that the theatrical adaptation of source texts is situated at the imaginary centre of canonical English literature by way of Shakespeare’s distinctive reliance on a plethora of source/original texts: from Ovid, to Plutarch, Holinshed and a host of significant others. This, despite the fact that consequent theatrical adaptations of Shakespeare, from the most staid and predictable to the most radical and *outré*, have been marginalized in relation to the canon, that is, in relation to the acceptable body of work constituted as a site of fore-grounded study within the college curriculum. This essay discusses the range of historical writing practices that have arisen in response to the idea of Shakespeare, to the virtual presence of his writings as they have seeped across cultural boundaries, canonical restrictions, and ideological predilections. It also proposes a genealogy of adaptive transformations, through and across various national sites

and ideological positions, recognizing that “From their first appearance Shakespeare’s plays have been subject to adaptation and recreative interpretation” (Scott 5). Shakespeare, as the gravitational center of great writing around which all other writers circle, exerts enormous canonical influence even as the recognition of one of the central tendencies evident in his writing practice—adaptation—continues to be either ignored or made the object of contention. “How can we allow adaptations that bastardize his classic status?” goes the argument. Isn’t our job to interpret him in a manner consistent with his own intentions and practices, rather than overlay new interpretations that displace traditional readings in favour of exploratory re-workings that make Shakespeare something other than what we have always thought him to be?

The Shakespeare industry has a powerful investment in Shakespeare’s putative cultural presence, itself a function of methodologies of recuperation, authenticity, reproducibility, and, perhaps least evidently, adaptation. Shakespeare as a cultural phenomenon—equally at home as an image on Lloyd’s of London credit cards and on grunge T-shirts or Charlie the Tuna commercials as on the mainstage of classical repertory companies—is conveniently grounded in the academic discourses that seek to perpetuate and profit from the myth of originary authenticity so firmly tied in to the English national imaginary. Allardyce Nicoll, in an early twentieth-century study of *Dryden as an Adapter of Shakespeare*, went so far as to proclaim Shakespeare a “figure so colossal that he forms a kind of touchstone to any particular period, and we could almost write a history of English thought from 1623 to 1921 by studying alone the attitude displayed towards him by succeeding poets and critics” (6). Fatuous and anglocentric as this may seem, there is some discomfiting truth to Nichol’s observation, if only for the way it puts into

play what is at stake in subsequent adaptations of Shakespearean source texts by way of either poets or critics. Here, after all, is the Shakespeare myth at work, the virtual Shakespeare: at once a colossus, touchstone, a figure within whom all history congeals and against whom the imaginary essence of a nation, its thought, is to be measured.

In this view, which is most emphatically *not* the only view, Shakespeare is the ultimate literary *vir*, guarantor of greatness and aesthetic value, the backdrop against which “English thought” is diffused through his inter-textual influence on subsequent writers. Michael Dobson, in a discussion of eighteenth century bardolatry, suggests that “Shakespeare has been as normatively constitutive of British national identity as the drinking of afternoon tea” (7). Since that national identity is so clearly linked with colonial and imperial imperatives, Shakespeare functions as an important cultural relay by which such imperatives related to an essential Englishness get diffused and negotiated. In relation to the work of English national self-interest, particularly evident in colonial and post-colonial discourses, “The Shakespeare ‘industry’—as it impacts on the educational systems, the critical discourses, and the theatrical culture of a society—often operates in ways that sustain ideas, values, and even epistemologies which are foreign to the receivers and therefore of limited relevance, except in maintaining the interests of imperialism” (Gilbert and Tompkins 19).

In the specific context of South Africa, for instance, Martin Orkin writes “Shakespeare has been primarily appropriated by most amongst the English-speaking educated members of the ruling classes as a means of evidencing their affiliations with the imperial and colonial centres. Possession and knowledge of Shakespeare texts becomes evidence of empowerment, enabling these members of the ruling classes to construct themselves as

both affiliates of the metropolis and as superior to the subordinate classes Shakespeare has thus become for members of the educated ruling classes one signifier of ‘civilisation,’ astoundingly that is, it should never be forgotten, in South Africa one signifier for white apartheid ‘civilisation.’ The web of such a use of Shakespeare spins not only through institutions of education, the media, establishment theatre, public cultural bodies, but even into the thinking of some of the country’s large conglomerates of capital” (235). Complicity with oppression is part of the way in which Shakespeare has been adapted to a colonial context, but such complicity is never necessarily the whole story. Diana Brydon has argued, for example, that in the Canadian context of a “settler-invader” (166) society, rewritings of the Miranda story from *The Tempest* “do not always ‘talk back’ as a contemporary feminist might wish. Alternative patterns of ambivalence, complicity, and resistance emerge in Canadian women’s re-visionings of *The Tempest*” (167-68). Simplistic assumptions about the place of such adaptations in relation to cultures of resistance or complicity are to be avoided, if only because they reproduce the reductive hegemonies they are seeking to overturn or sustain.

Gauri Viswanathan has argued that in the Indian colonial context, Shakespeare and other canonical figures from English literature were used to supplant a native tradition because “Indian defects of character could be traced to ancient Indian literature” (87). The moral imperative aligned with the colonial mission required that such defects be undone through exposure to the salutary values embodied in canonical English literature. This despite the fact that, tellingly, there existed “some objection to the teaching of Shakespeare and other dramatists in missionary schools, and it came from a view that Shakespeare’s language (which contains words like *fortune*,

fate, muse, and nature) reflected a pagan rather than a Protestant morality and would therefore exert an unhealthy influence on the natives” (88). Thus Shakespeare, while performing the work of naturalizing indigenous Indians to a foreign tradition, was perversely seen by some to be dangerous precisely because he had internalized the very difference he was being used to eradicate. It is not accidental that at a time when England is experiencing an intensification of the effects of multicultural influence there is a concerted effort to restore the originary site of Shakespearean theatre, the *Globe*, to its former, authentic glory. The gesture, however unintentional, bespeaks the degree to which Shakespeare’s canonical power is in alignment with a coherent national imaginary, a bulwark against the invasive otherness threatening to undermine the very Englishness he represents. Happily, not all subscribe to such a view. Nigel Wheale’s “Introduction” to a book on the changing use of Shakespeare in the British curriculum observes that:

The appeal to canonical texts, which will revive the nation through the power of their language is an ignorant fundamentalism. While competing nationalisms re-emerge in our period as a consequence of the collapse of ‘superpower’ hegemonies, the British Isles must also carefully define their identity, and the educational curriculum plays a crucial role here. Shakespeare is not now just a quaint icon of Englishness, but a world text, and we can make use of this huge dissemination of the plays as a way of celebrating and reflecting on diversity, dispersion, interdependence, in cultures and values. (26)

In this view Shakespeare serves as a bridge across the hegemony of supposedly consolidated national identities, though one still hears the lingering anxiety produced by

difference in Wheale's appeal that "the British Isles must also carefully define their identity."

Balanced on the precipice between familiarity and estrangement, Shakespearean texts teeter between their putative civilizing effects and their alien potentiality. The transmuted, paradoxical energy of Shakespeare as strange familiar has its analogue in the history of adaptive strategies that have come to the fore in twentieth-century theatrical practices related to Shakespeare. Dennis Kennedy's evaluation of "overriding forces" (6) in the international representation of Shakespeare from 1950 to 1980 suggests that two strategies predominate: "the open stage movement, and the movement to contemporize the meanings of the plays" (*ibid.*). Interestingly, Kennedy locates both practices in foreign enclaves, the former in Anglo-Canada, the latter in a mix of "foreign" contexts associated with Bertolt Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble and Jan Kott (7). Again, major forces in Shakespearean adaptation, and especially the push to contemporize, can be located in non-English sources, which suggests the (far from surprising) permeability of the conservative, national armature traditionally associated with Shakespeare. Even as Shakespeare is used to produce coherent visions of national, ideological, and cultural affiliation, the vulnerability of such visions to forces of influence and change is exposed. Adaptation is the virtual site at which these powerful confluences of contradictory literary and cultural energies are to be found and thus seems particularly well-suited to the kind of study the Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare website supports.

If Shakespeare can be associated with the explicit techniques of colonization exerted upon cultural difference, centrifugal Shakespeare, he can also be associated with the processes by which we in the West (let us not forget, also the product of powerful colonial forces) internalize the

lesson of our sameness in relation to ourselves, centripetal Shakespeare. In very different contexts from South Africa and India, to that of the primary education system at Hamlet Public School in Stratford, Ontario, bardolatry serves a specific function related to a certain kind of indoctrination to conventional reading practices. Teacher Lois Burdett, recipient of numerous awards and subsidies from the Bank of Montreal and Petro Canada, uses adaptations like her *Twelfth Night for Kids*, the first installment in a series entitled “Shakespeare Can Be Fun!” co-authored with Christine Coburn, to introduce children to Shakespeare and Shakespearean interpretive practices. The series title nonchalantly assumes that Shakespeare *can be* painful and difficult and thus in need of redemption by the valiant Ms. Burdett, while also assuming that Shakespeare for kids is necessarily a *good thing*. Reviewer Philippa Sheppard points to the trouble she has with “the attempt to keep everything bright and cheerful for the sake of her youthful readership” (54).

Sustaining good cheer among children, regardless of the content of the texts to which they are exposed, produces a certain kind of reader and political subject, one anodized by the veneer of good cheer in the face of the realities of the human condition. Shakespeare here serves as a prophylactic, a counter to the possibility of reading the world in terms of its less than ideal circumstances. In such a context Shakespeare has become a virtual commodity through which circulate potent reminders of the work of this literary demigod as an authenticator of originality, aesthetic perdurability, coherent national aspirations, and a seemingly endless array of economies that live off and transgress against the cultural memory embodied in everything Shakespearean. Or, as Charles Marowitz puts it in typically blunt fashion: “I have to confess that some of the most contemptible people I have ever known have loved

Shakespeare, and I have found them very hard to take. It is like sharing your bed with bigots, junkies and bores. For many of them, Shakespeare was a confirmation of their world-view. The Christian Universe was memorialised in his work and, from his sentiments, they would easily justify their bourgeois smugness, their conventionality and their pompous morality. For them, it was as if Shakespeare wrote only so that they could quote his aphorisms on their calendars” (1991 17).

Surprisingly, the relentless flow of material Shakespearean—whether highbrow academic or exoteric pop cultural, from the latest musings of new historicist gurus like Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Adrian Montrose to the graphic novels dealing with Shakespearean plays spawned by Neil Gaiman of *Sandman* fame—has failed to recognize, except in the most marginal of instances, how the cultural memorialization of Shakespeare is contingent upon a virtual presence, which is to say a discursive presence that is under constant pressure to conform to local, historically and culturally specific, conditions. Shakespeare’s virtuality, his infinitesimal displacement from point to point within the discursive systems of English language and literature (and from thence outward to other languages, other literatures), is perhaps most notably evident in the way in which Shakespeare has been adapted. By “adapted” we do not solely mean, adapted for the theater using a Shakespearean source text as a model for the adaptation. For Shakespeare, as the site of intense discursive contestations, is not just a foil for directors looking to adapt him to a more contemporary sense of the historical, witness Branagh’s Tsarist film version of *Hamlet* and McKellen’s totalitarian film adaptation of *Richard III*.

Instead, Shakespeare has provided the cultural capital for a wide range of theatrical adaptive practices that do more than trans-substantiate historical context. Playwrights

have written alternative plots, inter-cut the staged staging of a Shakespeare play with another plot (as in Murray Carlin's *Not now, sweet Desdemona*, written as a denunciation of racism and apartheid in the context of a cross-racial relationship), and written texts that precede or succeed the Shakespearean source text that serves as their referent. For instance, writer/director Djanet Sears's blues version of *Othello, Harlem Duet* finds Othello living in Harlem at the corner of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King boulevards, not with Desdemona, but with his first wife, Billie. Sears's work imagines a prelude to Shakespeare's *Othello* in a way that transgresses against, reshapes, and revises the Shakespearean source material via issues of racism (both inter- and intra-community), thus throwing into question the very nature of the source itself as a source of the racism Sears examines. Shakespearean adaptation in this mode is not about faithful adherence to the narrative or performative conventions of traditional Shakespearean practice, but about the degree to which the playwright can transform that material into a counter-discourse that de-forms conventions in such a way as to expose the ideological formations that underpin the tradition. When successful, such a deformation puts the enormous cultural capital of Shakespeare to work in a way that undermines how that capital conventionally operates, exposing the politics of canonical reception, of interpretative coding, of performative practice.

The reception history of Shakespeare, traditionally a function of academic and popular critical discourses that have sought to stabilize Shakespeare in the realm of an adaptive strategy that does not do violence to the source material, has seriously neglected the "other" Shakespeare, the Shakespeare of alternative adaptive strategies that "do things" to Shakespeare, often without regard for his canonical influence and with more of a vested interest in the here and now of making something new. The significance of

radical adaptive practices related to Shakespeare has been noted by Jean I. Marsden, who, in a brief synopsis of the Restoration and eighteenth century adaptations of Shakespeare, sets the context in hyperbolic terms: “The Restoration and eighteenth century produced one of the most subversive acts in literary history—the rewriting and restructuring of Shakespeare’s plays. We have all heard of Nahum Tate’s ‘audacious’ adaptation of *King Lear* with its resoundingly happy ending, but Tate was only one of a score of playwrights who adapted Shakespeare’s plays. Between 1660 and 1777, more than fifty adaptations appeared in print and on the stage, works in which playwrights augmented, substantially cut, or completely rewrote the original plays.

The plays were staged with new scenes, new endings, and, underlying all this novelty, new words” (1). Marsden goes on to note the “conservative politics of most of the adaptations, where instability becomes an ideological evil” (15), thus making the point that despite the radical revisions to which Shakespeare has been subject, those revisions have served, more often than not, to perpetuate a notion of theatrical stability with which the Shakespearean text is frequently wholly incompatible. That incompatibility is a function of numerous factors—the editorial conundra bequeathed to generations of literary scholarship by Shakespeare’s relative indifference to matters editorial, the difficulty of interpretation as a function of Shakespearean discursive play, the difficulty of recuperating performance practices that were ambiguous and shifting, and so forth.

Frequently left out of this equation, however, is the reliance of the Shakespearean text on adaptive strategies that complicate its putative stability, and, if anything, foreground its dependence on the quicksand of source materials, materials that yield an array of difficult questions that de-stabilize the fixity of the text. The dilemma just

described is more than jejune, post-structuralist navel-gazing, for it is in the very difficulty critics have had in coming to terms with theories of Shakespearean adaptation that may perhaps be located in the insistent fetishization of Shakespeare as an academic and cultural commodity. Charles Marowitz, far from your average, practicing post-structuralist, in the introduction to *The Marowitz Shakespeare*—adaptations and collages of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Measure for Measure*, and *The Merchant of Venice*—avers that:

The question is not, as it is so often put, what is wrong with Shakespeare that we have to meddle with his works, but what is wrong with us that we are content to endure the diminishing returns of conventional dramatic reiteration; that we are prepared to go to the theatre and pretend that what dulls our minds and comforts our world-view is, by dint of such reassurances, culturally uplifting; not to realise that there is nothing so insidious as art that perpetuates the illusion that some kind of eternal truth is enshrined in a time-space continuum called a “classic”; not to challenge the notion that its theatrical performance is *automatically* an experience because our presumption of a play’s worth guarantees us that experience. (1978 25)

Adaptation puts the notion of the “classic” to the test: it identifies orthodoxies of interpretation and plays with the range of interpretive movement possible both toward and away from the orthodoxy in question. Adaptation asks that we examine the nature of iteration and reiteration: that we identify what is in fact new in a reiteration—what form of rethinking is possible when faced with a prior textual event? What range of virtual interpretations lie embedded in the interface between the prior originary text and the present moment. Revisions and contestations of Shakespeare are

staggering in their ideological, cultural, historical, and interpretive range: in theatrical adaptations alone a partial listing of playwrights that do something to Shakespeare would have to include work by Jean Betts, Murray Carlin, Aimé Césaire, Normand Chaurette, Margaret Clarke, Michel Garneau, Michael Gow, Robert Gurik, Dorothy Hewett, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Antonine Maillet, David Malouf, Welcome Msomi, Louis Nowra, Ernest Renan, Stephen Sewell, Derek Walcott, David Wallace, David Williamson, and by collectives like the Theatre at Large in Auckland and the British theatre group Gay Sweatshop founded in 1975. To this list we might add names like Howard Barker, Robert Lepage, Philip Osment, Djanet Sears, and Paula Vogel as well as numerous other dramaturges who have adapted Shakespeare for the stage over the last several centuries. Each of Shakespeare's plays is at the center of a wide range of adaptations across multiple genres and media, from television, film, documentary, opera, popular music through to graphic novels, video games, and commercials. The magnitude of the cultural activities and influences mediated by and through Shakespearean "source" texts is a huge archive that projects like the Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project are just beginning to unearth in a systematic manner.

Adaptation as a way of doing things to Shakespeare, indeed as a primary form of engaging with the world, plays out along an extended continuum that integrates and disintegrates, that echoes faintly or that slavishly imitates, that takes a possibility and transmutes it into a new creative outcome—or takes a possibility and bastardizes it in a way that utterly fails. The importance of taking prior, authorial, canonical, highly invested and valued texts like Shakespeare's and remaking them in the image of something latent in the text, or overt in one's relationship to how that text is interpreted cannot be underestimated as a

way of generating new tropologies, new ways of seeing old things. Adaptation is, by definition, an opening into the possibilities of engaging with the world as we find it, not only in relation to Shakespeare as the center of this particular web of textualities, but in relation to other writers who, for better or worse, have come to wield canonic influence. Like Jabès's resonant vision of the page as a virtual mirror and of water that paradoxically holds an image when the image cannot but fail to hold the water, adaptation brings together some of the specular images that emerge from Shakespearean encounters, while recognizing that those images will always fail to contain their, or any other, source.

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