

# E ditorial

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People have been working on "what to do with Shakespeare" – a more accurate, if more awkward term than "adapting" – for over four hundred years. Even in England in his own lifetime fellow playwrights were citing, rewriting and contesting the work of this "upstart crow." His younger colleague and collaborator, John Fletcher, went so far in 1611 as to write *The Woman's Prize; or The Tamer Tamed*, a fanciful sequel and arguably proto-feminist response to *The Taming of the Shrew*. Since then, reproductions, homages, appropriations, exploitations, citations, translations, adaptations and tradaptations of various kinds, dramatic and otherwise, have surfaced in an astonishing range of historical periods and cultural contexts, ranging from respectful updatings and popularizing in classic cartoons and mainstream modern dress productions to resistant rewritings such as, archetypically, Aimé Césaire's postcolonial *La Tempête*. "Shakespeare" has been appropriated in the service of everything from "Ye Olde" faux Tudor "Shakespeare Arms" pubs everywhere, through conservative cultural critiques such as Robertson Davies' *Tempest Tost*, to armaments advertising that links Shakespeare's Globe, early modern imperialism and Britain's contemporary global arms trade; from journalistic accounts of the O.J. Simpson trial (*Othello*) through, in Canada, pop-music, de- or re-contextualized settings of *Hamlet's* "Never Doubt I Love" by singer/songwriter Melanie Doane, to irreverent, almost gratuitous gestures directed at the Shakespearean high-cultural sheen, as in the album title, *Shakespeare My Butt*, by the rock group, Lowest of the Low (which includes no other references to Shakespeare). The gesture positions Shakespeare on the wrong side of the Pink Floyd rock culture anthem, "We don't need no education/We don't need no mind control," an agent of what Louis Althusser has taught us to call the Ideological State Apparatus.

But of course Shakespeare himself was an adaptor, and many adaptations of "the Bard," consciously or unconsciously, with tongue more or less in cheek, return to his own sources for grounding or justification. When Anne Marie MacDonald in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* and Michael O'Brien, in *Mad Boy Chronicle* ironically cite or draw upon supposedly lost or actual Shakespearean source texts, however irreverent or subversive their adaptations, they are claiming a place with Shakespeare, justifying their own work by positioning themselves, as adaptors, beside the acknowledged master. They are also doing something very similar to what Shakespeare's revisers have done for centuries, as when Nahum Tate's eighteenth-century *History of King Lear* restored the happy ending (and generic decorum) of

Shakespeare's own source play, the anonymous *King Lear*. When Ken Mitchell dedicates the published script of *Cruel Tears*, his 1975 apparently populist Prairie revisioning of *Othello* written with the country band, Humphrey and the Dumptrucks, to "William Shakespear [sic] and Gerald Cinthio" (Shakespeare's primary source for *Othello*), he is at the same time reifying, renewing and revitalizing "Shakespeare" with all his imperialist cultural authority and staking a high-culture claim for his own work, positioning Shakespeare himself as a revisionist and Mitchell and the Dumptrucks as inheritors of a noble "Shakespearean" tradition of renewing classic texts. In Canada, Shakespearean adaptation, translation and citation have ranged broadly across a spectrum that includes both anglophile, high-cultural, literary alignments such as Charles Mair's nineteenth century neo-Shakespearean closet verse drama, the colonialist "Red Indian" play, Tecumseh and resistant contemporary work by those like Native playwright Daniel David Moses, who claims to have modeled his revisionist, anti-colonialist play, *Brébeuf's Ghost, on Hamlet*. But Canadian adaptations reach far beyond the dramatic, vary in tone from reverence to renunciation and perform cultural work on a continuum from the most extreme kinds of radical revisionism to the most conservative forms of reification. Even when discussion of "Shakespeare" in Canada is confined, as it is here, to performative forms, it extends to everything from youth subcultural "raves" to the mutually validating collaboration of the Stratford Festival with high-end-pop Celtic singer-songwriter and international recording artist Loreena McKennit (whose first album included a sequence from the Stratford production of *Blake*, and who has set Shakespearean lyrics to music on subsequent albums). "Shakespeare" in Canada has been adapted to cartoons, the Internet and Internet cartoons; to a diverse range of sexualities and textualities; to a range of acting styles, training regimens, abilities and disabilities; to high-tech and low-tech forms and to landscapes and mindscapes in various languages and cultural locations from coast to coast.

This issue presents a small sampling of that activity and in its working bibliography points toward a great deal more, showing the extent to which Canada's theatrical history is thoroughly tied to a wide range of performative and ideological practices in which Shakespeare is invoked in some way. Our aim, then, is to indicate, however incompletely, the astonishing range of theatrical practices associated with Shakespearean adaptation in Canada and to suggest the breadth of the ideological content of those practices. A 1902 play by A. E. de García, entitled *Canada*,

*Fair Canada*, which relies heavily on *Romeo and Juliet* for its plot (as adapted to a Canadian setting), features the following exchange between Jean Chopineau, President of the Great Canadian Transportation Company and Lady Rivers (the very names of the protagonists speaking to the kind of cultural divide so crucial to the conception of Canadian national identity):

**Chopineau:** In a word, from Sydney to Victoria, from Kingston to Dawson City, the country is alive. Canada has awoke [sic] from her sleep and realizes the importance of her destiny among the nations of the world. We are up against the rush and go-aheadiveness of other commercial countries, and if we are not equal to it, we will be left behind in the procession. Destiny foreordains the onward march of the Goddess of Progress. She hasn't got time to wait for him to get out of her way, and he obstinately refuses to move. Well, she must pass over him and grind him down, that's all.

**Lady Rivers:** But this is the doctrine of the survival of the fittest.

**Chopineau:** Call it what you will, it is the doctrine of the age and must become the doctrine of awakened Canada. (Knight)

At the turn of the nineteenth century in Canada and in a Shakespearean context, the exchange might seem

strangely consonant with the turn-of-the-century situation that many contemporary Canadians would recognize – one in which the ideologies of progress and Darwinian survival surmount manifest destiny in the name of commerce. The (un)easy adaptation of Shakespearean theatrical contexts to such an ideology very precisely denotes how an iconic cultural referent like Shakespeare cannot be detached from the ideological content with which it is associated. If we are such stuff as dreams are made on, and if part of what we dream takes the form of theatrical representation, then we do well to understand *how* those who speak our dreams to us in the name of Shakespearean adaptation contribute to shaping the material realities that Canadians continue to forge in the theatre and beyond. For better or for worse, “what we do” with Shakespeare in Canada reflects on “what we do” more generally. This issue of *CTR* hints at just what that “doing” might mean in the context of a myriad of adaptive strategies undertaken in the diverse theatrical practices to be found throughout this country. **CTR**

#### Work Cited

Knight, Albert Ernest (A. E. de Garcia). *Canada, Fair Canada*. Montréal: Montreal Shorthand Institute and Business College, 1902.