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ENGL 431 – Canadian Shakespeares

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Colonial Canadian Shakespeare: West Meets East at Stratford

In his essay “The Regional Theatre System”, Czarnecki picks up on the challenge of creating a national theatre in Canada, but also articulates the central and defining challenge in developing a unified sense of Canadian identity; Canada, because of its immense span from ocean to ocean, is inevitably divided into regions distinct from their provincial boundaries. The regional boundaries which identify the Maritimes as distinct from French Canada and the Prairies as distinct from the West Coast, for example, imply not only geographical, but also social, cultural and political differences between these regions. Because Canada is a nation born from British imperialism, the colonial relationship that exists even today between Canada and Britain is undeniable, though this colonial relationship is by no means uniform across Canada. The different regional attitudes towards Britain and Canada’s colonial history became evident to me when, as a Western Canadian, I saw a production of *Hamlet* in Central Canada: at the Stratford Festival in Stratford, Ontario. This production served to illustrate that Shakespeare serves as a standard by which to measure the colonial relationships between a given Canadian region and the British Crown; therefore Shakespeare also helps to illuminate the discrepancies between these different regions in relation to Canada’s colonial history.

The Stratford Festival, whose mandate is to “produce, to the highest standards possible, the best works of theatre in the classical and contemporary repertoire, with

special emphasis on the works of William Shakespeare”, has become *the* place in Canada to see productions of Shakespeare. As Czarnecki notes in his essay, in a country such as Canada there are immense obstacles before the creation of “a national theatre accessible to audiences across the country” (35), but because the Stratford Festival is not staged in a major urban centre it is primarily a tourist destination; therefore, Stratford is a “nationally” accessible theatre, at least for “a national audience which can pay to get there” (35). The Stratford Festival is, however, decidedly Canadian not only because it takes place in Canada, but also because it caters to both talent and audiences native to Canada and from abroad; this mix of Canadian and international accessibility is precisely what makes the Stratford Festival so fitting to the “cultural mosaic” which defines Canada. In the summer of 2000, my family and I made the pilgrimage from Calgary, Alberta to Stratford, Ontario, and saw a production of *Hamlet* which illustrated a distinctly Central Canadian relationship to Britain and their great Bard, Shakespeare.

The Canada of the Stratford Festival is therefore not *my* Canada. As left-winger with a love for the arts, I certainly do not fit neatly into the political or socio-cultural stereotypes of what constitutes a “Western Canadian”. My identity is, however, deeply rooted in Calgary’s location in the foothills between the vast expanse of prairie and the Rocky Mountains. Because so much of my extended family lives in Central Canada and because of Canada’s Toronto-centric “national” media, I internalized the widely-held regional stereotypes that exist both in reference to Westerners, but also the western-borne stereotypes pertaining to Central Canada at a young age. My “sophisticated” Toronto cousins and Toronto-raised parents joked about Calgary as being backwards and redneck, which merely served to strengthen my view that Central Canadians were little more than

narrow minded snobs. This view of Central Canada that I developed during my adolescence was, by association, also true of Britain. As a Western Canadian, Canada's colonial history seemed distant and irrelevant, whereas Canadian history had taught me that Central Canada shared old and deep ties with the British Crown. My Canada was Western Canada, separate and distinct from Central Canada, and even further removed from Britain.

Shakespeare was taught in high school as a British cultural artifact, and while respected, was at the same time read as irrelevant to the Western Canadian perspective. This distance between my Western identity and Canada's colonial history was further exaggerated because I was a French immersion student: my teachers, who were almost all from Quebec, taught the Quebec curriculum which strongly emphasized the history of "la Nouvelle France" with limited mention of Britain's imperial role in early Canada. This emphasis on Quebec culture and "la francophonie" left me fluently bilingual and with a fondness for Quebec, but compounded my Western alienation because British history was under-represented. Because of Calgary's municipal focus on newness and innovation, as opposed to what was perceived as the Central Canadian emphasis on tradition and history, Shakespeare was read in high school as a necessary evil, rather than as an iconic part of our Canadian colonial heritage. After all, Alberta and the other "Western" provinces, with the exception of British Columbia, did not even join Confederation until 1905, making *my* Canadian history much shorter than that of Central Canada, Eastern Canada or the Maritimes. My deeply rooted regional identity as a Western Canadian complicated not only my relationship with Britain and Central Canada, but also complicated my relationship to Shakespeare as a product of this distant "mother country".

The production of *Hamlet*¹ that I saw at Stratford in August 2000 was an example of colonial Canadian Shakespeare. This production starred Paul Gross as Hamlet, who, as a Calgarian, was an actor that I recognized from the television show, *Due South*². Unlike the informal, outdoor, and “Shakespeare in an Hour”³ versions of Shakespeare that I had seen in Calgary, this production of *Hamlet*, fitting to Ontario’s coat of arms which states, “Ut inceptis fidelis sic permanent” (loyal she began and loyal she remains), undeniably emphasized an authentic rendering of the work. Though Shakespeare is dead, both literally and in the Barthesian sense of having liberated the reader in the interpretation of his works (or the adaptor in the production thereof), this production of *Hamlet* was a big-budget bid for authenticity. Seeing *Hamlet* allowed me to understand that this production, which adhered to an Elizabethan-feeling aesthetic, elevated Shakespeare’s text to the level of a Platonic “ideal”, thus rendering authenticity impossible. By elevating the original text in this manner, the actual production could only pale in comparison to “Shakespeare”, though it was a seamless and professional execution of the work. The production, with a running time of over three hours, had cut little of the dialogue, though the sparse stage directions in the Shakespeare text gave the director much of the creative say in the physical performance. As a Western Canadian viewing this production through my particular biases and assumptions about Central

¹ *Hamlet*, ran at the Festival Theatre in Stratford from May 3 to November 5, 2000. Directed by Joseph Zeigler. Starring Graham Abbey, Domini Blythe, Benedict Campbell, David Keeley, David Kirby and Jerry Franken. Set design by Regency under Christina Poddubick, lighting design by Louise Guinand. I attended a weekday matinee in August, and the audience was almost entirely made up of families with young children. A full program can be found online at [<http://www.paulgross.org/theatreindex.html#hamlet>]

² *Due South* aired on CTV and CBC from 1994 to 1996, and starred Paul Gross as an uptight Canadian Mountie working with the Chicago police force.

³ “Shakespeare in an Hour” was periodically produced by Calgary’s Lunchbox Theatre, a company which caters to downtown business men and women by putting on weekday performances over the lunch hour. “Shakespeare in an Hour” is a comic adaptation of Shakespeare, condensing all of his canonical comedies and tragedies into an hour’s worth of theatre.

Canada and through my (mis)conceptions about what Central Canadians think of those from the West, this production came across as not Canadian, but as homage to the British imperial ties that linger between Central Canada and Britain. From my particular vantage point, this was colonial Canadian Shakespeare; that is Shakespeare served up with reverence and respect for the “mother” country, with an emphasis on tradition and historical accuracy.

Shakespeare, as an increasingly cross-cultural icon, allows regional differences within Canada to be measured according to their respective colonial ties to Britain. The strong ties that linger between Central Canada and Britain are emphasized by the placement of a virtually “national” festival theatre which specializes in productions of Shakespeare in Ontario. My deeply rooted identity as a Western Canadian made this “authentic” production of Shakespeare’s tragedy appear overly reverent and traditional when compared to my earlier exposure to Shakespeare in Calgary, a relatively new city. This reaction to the production of *Hamlet* was only further proof, however, that Shakespeare’s iconic position in Canadian culture originates in our shared colonial history. Adaptations of Shakespeare are telling of regional differences, which is only the case because Canada too is rooted in Shakespeare’s home country.

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Full production details of the Stratford Festival's 2000 production of Hamlet available at

<http://www.paulgross.org/theatreindex.html#hamlet>