APPROPRIATING SHAKESPEARE: ISSUES

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Abstract: Shakespeare is an active literary force whose works have been revised over and over again during the twentieth century on stage and on film. The so called Bardbiz has proven to be profitable across the planet mainly due to the "universal" nature of his plays, i.e., the social and psychological issues that he raises and which resonate equally in anglophone and non-anglophone cultures. Yet, a distinction must be made between appropriations and adaptations. For the purpose of this paper, this distinction is based on the one that Julie Sanders proposes. This paper focuses on the potential problems that appropriations, which are loose reinterpretations of the original text, may bring. The paper shows scenes from films that have adapted Shakespeare's plays in one way or another. The aim of this comparison is to show how adaptations work with the text and bring it to life, while appropriations often distort the original and leave the viewer with a false representation of the original play. There is a genuine and valid concern that future generations will know of distorted versions of Shakespeare's plays and believe them to be the same as the text. The problem arises with loose appropriations, which have become popular in the movie industry worldwide. For people who have read Shakespeare's plays, it is not a problem to recognize the differences and changes in the original text. However, for younger generations, especially Millennials and those born after them, these appropriations can be misleading. Younger generations who consider themselves computer natives are bound to online sources and databases and would rather get a visual tutorial/representation then read a book. Hence, for them, film adaptations are always the preferred choice when it comes to understanding literature. This is particularly important since film versions are supported by elaborate marketing and appeal to younger generations with popular A-list actors and setting which is relatable to the contemporary audience. Unfortunately, loose appropriations of original texts give them a false sense of acquired knowledge. Loose appropriations tend to distort the original text by changing the characters (mostly adding new ones) and/or the text (the plot). Furthermore, this paper opens the discussion on textual fidelity, which needs to be brought back and re-examined after the film adaptation frenzy of Shakespeare's works that has happened especially in the Americas, Asia, and Africa. For example, Vishal Bhardwaj has made quite a few successful adaptations of Shakespeare's plays while incorporating social and political issues in India. Finally, the purpose of this paper is not to discourage adaptations; rather, it is to raise awareness of the dangers of appropriations and to preserve the original text for future generations to enjoy and adapt to some future times, which will be different than our own.

Keywords: Shakespeare, adaptations, appropriations, film, Millennials

"I am become a name" Tennyson's Ulysses remembers with a sigh. Yet, what does it mean to become a name? Does one, like Ulysses, have to conquer the world with a sword and be a great warrior, or can one conquer the world with a piece of paper, ink, and a quill? Unlike Ulysses, Shakespeare is not a passive name remembered and lamented; he is an active literary force infiltrating cultures while quickly and masterfully adapting into them. Shakespeare has not only conquered the world and become a name, he has become, as Terence Hawkes so genuinely phrased it, a global business - Bardbiz. He has become a global phenomenon. In non-anglophone cultures, Shakespeare has proven to be universally adaptable because these cultures either want to be closer to Western way of life or thinking, or because his texts invite discussions about gender inequality, racial tensions, and social stratification - among other issues. There has been an explosion of adaptations of Shakespeare's texts in India, Japan, China, Burma, and South Africa in the past century. It is interesting how in most cases the original text and the adaptation complement each other and touch on issues that are regionally specific. Sarah Hatchuel, Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, and Victoria Bladen have written about non-Anglophone cultures and global Shakespeare. 15 In one such case, they show how adaptations of Macbeth have reflected on the supernatural, issues of power, and gender roles in South Africa. Their point was that what had once been considered a marginalized and non-Anglophone cinematographic outpost had a lot to contribute to the global conversation on Shakespeare. Additionally, these specifically local adaptations have become not only acceptable, but they have also proven to be valuable for the international discourse on Shakespeare.

On the other hand, there are those who question this popularity and the business behind it. Whose business is Bardbiz and what is the endgame? Moreover, if literature can assist in liberating the oppressed, could it not be used for indoctrinating those who are not Europeans? In colonial India, Shakespeare was an important part of the imposed

¹⁵ Hatchuel, Sarah, Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, and Victoria Bladen. (2014). Eds. *Shakespeare on Screen: "Macbeth."* Mont-Saint-Aigan, France: Publications des Universites de Rouen and du Harve.

curriculum. The unfortunate relatable nature, or as some would argue universality, of his plays made his works a useful tool for penetrating into other cultures. His works take the English language and culture to places where the bayonet can't reach; they transform and assimilate from within the social and cultural borders and boundaries, and they make Britishness likable and acceptable. Whatever the reason for using Shakespeare's name and works it is evident that adaptations and appropriations have become the method of embedding Shakespeare into other cultures. Yet, let's pause and reconsider the implications of adapting Shakespeare's plays and the impact it has on Millennials and generations born after them. This paper looks into the problems that may arise with the use of loose appropriations, and the impact they could have on the original texts and future generations who will receive these appropriations.

Plausibly, the laws of nature are such that adapting and transforming others is equally proportional to your own change. As much as we love seeing Shakespeare's plays adapted and appropriated, there is the inevitable danger of altering them as well. There is a genuine possibility that appropriations of his plays may eventually lead to an irrevocable change of his works. The conceivable danger stems from the rapid and relentless development of technology. Millennials are born into it and consider themselves computer natives opposed to older generations who are not. For them, reading is connected to the online environment, and the concept of the library is connected to an online database. Furthermore, the length of texts needs to be short. Young people do not want to read "the whole" book. They prefer abridged versions or even better YouTube clips and mashups. Everything that can be digested and understood within a ten-minute span is viable. So, what happens to the reading of Shakespeare's original texts? There are those who are willing to invest their time into carefully reading the text, consulting the dictionary, and contemplating on the purpose of the text. "Others, though, need to develop the skills of untangling unusual sentence structures and of recognizing and understanding poetic compressions, omissions, and wordplay." This is quite a daunting task for contemporary young readers who are used to listening and viewing instead of reading. However, in Shakespeare's case, it can also be linguistic in nature. Sometimes, adaptations of his texts are needed to bridge the gap between "his" English and the one of today's generations. In America, the series of books titled "No Fear Shakespeare" translates, or should one say adapts, his English to colloquial language line for line, so that people (mostly teenagers and students) will understand his plays. However, could we consider what is left in the end to be Shakespeare? Such re-workings can lead to a permanent change of his works, which will eventually replace the original.

In their benevolent, and mostly profitable, endeavor to bring Shakespeare's texts closer to new generations, filmmakers have discovered that appropriating texts and adjusting them to cultural and political situations has paved a way to a new wave of reception. It is irrefutable that adapting Shakespeare has been done since his own days. Soon after his death certain alterations have been made to his texts, and it is because of adaptations that his texts have survived and withstood the test of time. Sandra Clark points out that it has been done as early as the Restoration period 1660, 18 while Gerald E. Bentley contends that it occurred even sooner: "[the] refurbishing of old plays in the repertory seems to have been universal practice in the London theaters from 1590-1642." Frederick W. Kilbourne wrote about the immense alterations that were done to the authentic texts, which in the XVII century almost displaced the originals. One such example was the famous or one could even argue "infamous" version of Nahum Tate; a politically charged interpretation of King Lear, which ended happily with the marriage of Cordelia and Edgar. Audiences always want something new as did the average Jacobean theatergoers. Once the play was experienced in its original staging, the desire to see something new and different came naturally. Nevertheless, Tate's own desire to "improve" Shakespeare's work was eclipsed by the same belief that actors had well into the nineteenth century, who also made corrections and revisions, just as twentieth century editors still defended this practice and conformed his works to their own tastes and age. Hence, they boldly replaced what was said with what should have been said. 20 Admittedly, one might wonder whether there is an authentic text at all. One possible answer, although not simple or definitive, is that there are many texts that are available for further adaptation and appropriation, and suitably for our discussion one might add, as Marjorie Garber does as well, that there are just as

¹⁶ Adaptations, appropriations, offshoots. For further reading on the difference between adaptations and appropriations see Sanders, Julie. (2008). *Adaptation and Appropriation*. New York: Routledge.

¹⁷ Shakespeare, William. (1998). *The Winter's Tale*. Eds. Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Folger Shakespeare Library Press, xv.

¹⁸ Clark, Sandra. (1997). Ed. Shakespeare Made Fit: Restoration Adaptations of Shakespeare. London: Everyman.

¹⁹ Bentley, Gerald Eades. (1971). *The Profession of Dramatists in Shakespeare's Time*. 1590-1642. Princeton: Princeton UP, 263.

²⁰Garber, Marjorie. (2004). *Shakespeare After All*. New York: Random, 12-14.

many Shakespeares as there are versions of his texts. 21 Perhaps it is opportune to add that the authentic text was reworked to sound better or to fit the age. Sometimes, authors felt that they needed to "work on" the texts of one of the most celebrated authors of the western world and, hereinafter, prove their own merit and writing skills. The palimpsestuous and adaptive nature of texts invites re-workings and alterations. Yet, it is here that we must stop and reflect on the consequences of such actions in our age and make a distinction between adaptations and appropriations. We must separate that which is Shakespeare from that which is not just as we acknowledge that there is a Shakespeare anthology that we all refer to. There is a source text.²² Appropriation differs from adaptation, because it is the re-working of the source text and taking it a step further by adding more material or changing the existing text. It is important to note that appropriation nowadays is mostly cultural appropriation. There is dispute about the manner and degree of taking elements from other cultures, since it often happens that they are used in ways that seem colonial and which are not sanctioned by the members of the original cultural. I argue that such appropriations are welcome as long as they do not change the plot, the characters, and the final outcome. These elements are not the issue of this paper, but they are in the center of many scholarly debates. Therefore, textual fidelity must be kept in mind. The problem is that sometimes these core elements are altered for the sole purpose to make the film "exotic" or interesting. Some examples of this type of "blending" of the original text and the non-Anglophone culture follow. Haider²³ is a noted adaptation that captures the unfortunate events in Kashmir during 1995. The film focuses on the insurgency of the 1990s, and shows Haider, a young medical student, who returns to Kashmir to find that his father was abducted and betrayed by his own brother. The elements of the play are skillfully interpreted into the *Hamlet* plot with the emphasis on the issues of terrorism and the unresolved problems in this region. Sulayman Al-Bassam's *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, ²⁴ comments on the danger and consequences of terrorism as a regional and global threat not only to the Christian but to the Muslim population as well. Hamlet Goes Business, 25 focuses on the issues of corporations and their influence in societies in Finland. This specific version comments on the dangers and consequences of consumerism, and how it will, eventually, prevent people from being happy, experiencing emotions, and seeing that the real value is in the relationships that people build with others. In 2012, the Hamlet Live team proposed a live streaming of the play with a chat room in which the audience could interact as the play was unfolding. Hence, Hamlet26 streamed around the globe and was widely viewed. The performance addressed the present fear of a desolate and cataclysmic future that awaits Mankind. The story takes place in 2080 on a dangerous Earth mostly destroyed by wars, and Denmark is the only territory in which life is still bearable. Macbeth was also adapted in other cultures. Sangrador.²⁷ 'the bleeder,' is a black and white film. Leonardo Henriquez commented, "Although the premise for making this film was to identify the aesthetic aspects of Macbeth, there were also aims of recuperating, vindicating and learning from Shakespeare's perfect dramaturgy and confronting the challenge of translating it to Andean space and time." Another presentist adaptation of *Macbeth* is Entabeni. 29 The story takes place in present-day Johannesburg. There is a parallel between the storyline and South African politics and the dictatorship of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. The language in the series of dramas in the Mzansi project was Zulu and Xhosa and not English. Alexander Abela filmed Makibefo in a coastal village Faux Cap on Madagascar for the same reasons as Maake did.³⁰ The film follows the original story, but it shows the political ambition and the violence in the small village. The film appealed to the locals, because it showed how the hunger for power exists even in the smallest of societies. Some parts were added to the plot so that the film could be as truthful as possible to their way of life. For example, the witch doctor tells Makibefo that he will achieve glory

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²¹ Ibid

²² The complete texts of the First Folio

²³Bharadwaj, V. (Dir.) Perf. Shahid Kapur, Irphan Khan, and Shradda Kapoor. (2014). *Haider*. India: UTV Motion Pictures.

²⁴ The Al-Hamlet Summit. (2016, 7 Mart). Retrieved from. http://www.sabab.org/the-al-hamlet-summit/

²⁵Kaurismaki, A. (Dir.) Perf. Pirkka-Pekka Petelius, Esko Salminen, and Kati Oulinen. (1987). *Hamlet Goes Business*. Finland: Villealfa Filmproduction Oy.

²⁶ Hamlet Live. N.d. "Our Hamlet." (2016, 11 March). Retrieved from http://www.hamletlive.com/our-hamlet/

²⁷ Henriquez, L. (Dir.) Perf. Daniel Alvarado, Karina Gomez, and Francisco Alfaro. (2000). *Sangrador*. Venezuela: Centro Nacional Autonomio de Cinematografia. Spanish.

²⁸ Marquez, H. (2003). /Arts Weekly/ Film Venezuela: Macbeth Rides the Andes. Retrieved from http://www.ipsnews.net/2003/05/arts-weekly-film-venezuela-macbeth-rides-the-andes/

²⁹ Maake, N. (Dir.) Perf. Dumisani Dlamini, Malusi Skenjana, and Zikhona Sodlaka. (2008). *Entabeni*. SA: South African Broadcasting Corporation.

³⁰Abela, A. (Dir.) Perf. Martin Zia, Neoliny Dety, and Gilbert Laumord. (1999). *Makibefo*. France/Madagascar: Blue Eye Films.

before he is turned into a snake. Also, there is a display of traditional food and costumes in the film. Similarly, $Maqbool^{31}$ by Vishal Bhardwaj, is an adaptation which takes place in the underworld of Mumbai, which focuses more on the social problems in India than on the original text. Later he filmed another appropriation Omkara, which is the retelling of Othello. These adaptations have more or less incorporated the original text into the existing culture and local context, which is reflected in the domestic commercial success these movies had. They also show us that the text does not need to be changed in order for the play to be understood.

Hence, if we are to keep Shakespeare's plays as they are, the adaptation must be faithful to the original text.³² Both Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh respected the text; despite adjusting the setting to make their films more popular and understandable. They understood that their creativity and mastery of understanding the text had to be shown through acting and not re-working of the source. Hence, the question is not should we adapt Shakespeare's texts but how it should be done. The twentieth century has been especially prolific in this field. Before the 1960's, film adaptations were not as popular as theater ones. Theater was still prevalent when it came to Shakespeare's plays. Then film replaced the theaters, and shortly afterward VHS replaced the movie theaters, and then followed DVDs and Blu-rays. The new millennium brought, yet, another change to adaptations. YouTube and the internet replaced television. Stephen Greenblatt wrote, "The dominant media of our time – television, film, and popular music – depend, as did the Elizabethan theater, upon the intersection of arts: words, images, music, dance." In essence, culture is a synthesis of views, beliefs, and various media, which themselves are considered to be new works of art. What better example of this than an average phone on which you can combine all these media. Finally, with the new millennia the living room ambience is replaced by just about any place where young people can view clips on their phones.

Omitting and cutting texts was always a part of adapting them; however, the XXI century audience, which is by now used to simplified texts, can handle the authentic Shakespeare only to a certain point. The source texts need to be revised, re-worked, shortened, and in the end embellished with famous actors if the younger audiences are to accept them. Samuel Crowl iterates how there has been a renaissance of Shakespeare on film since the 1990s. However, professors do not have the time to show them in class, so Crowl shares that he has learned over the years that few films ever enter the classroom; consequently, "most film or television productions are likely to find their way into the Shakespeare survey via the film clip." He, specifically, writes about film clips and scene selections from film; however, it can be argued that mashups and other visual media are used by professors and students alike as a replacement for film and a supplement to class discussions. Usually, this occurs when professors want to show the difference in the interpretation of the original text. For example, the scene when Romeo and Juliet meet is performed and staged differently; thus, it is suitable for such endeavors. Yet, for the average movie fan and YouTube aficionado, these clips are not perceived as versions used for comparison between the original and the similar; rather, they are accepted as the genuine. The fine line between adaptations and appropriations has been carelessly blurred and with it, as unfortunate collateral damage, so has the original text.

One particular film that is worth addressing comes from Mexico, and it is an example of films that are loose appropriations. *Amar Te Duele* is a 2002 popular Mexican film, which was advertised as a story based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. According to online reviewers, the movie was a success and it resonated profoundly with those who saw it. The real-life problems with class stratification in the suburbs of Mexico City are the crux of the story, while the intolerance and hatred between the rich and the poor are poignantly portrayed by the two young lovers. If Fernando Sariñana adhered more closely to the text, this would have been quite a convincing and successful adaptation. Actually, as far as the audience in Mexico and the Latino world is concerned, this "adaptation" was quite a success. However, I have to disagree. The characters in the film were changed and the character of Mariana, Juliet's close friend, was introduced. She not only interfered in the relationship between the young lovers, but her actions changed the plot of the story considerably. Apart from this alteration, there is the "minor" detail/change in the plot with which the film culminates; there is a fight at the bus station in which Renata (Juliet) dies and Ulises (Romeo) lives. Such discrepancies might seem trivial, but the matter of the fact is that the plot has been seriously changed. By no means should this particular "version" of the story be "inspired" by Shakespeare's play. The truth is that young people who do not have the incentive to read the play, and rely solely on online sources, will miss pointers such as "inspired" and "based on." For them, this is the contemporary version of

³¹Bhardwaj, V. (Dir.) Perf. Irrphan Khan, Tabu, and Pankaj Kapur. (2004). *Maqbool*. India: Kaleidoscope Entertainment

³² Hindle, Maurice. (2015). Shakespeare on Film. UK: Palgrave, 115.

³³ Greenblatt, Stephen. (1997). The Interart Moment. In *Interart Poetics: Essays on the Internalations of the Arts and Media*. Eds. Ulla Britta Lagerroth, Hans Lund, and Erik Hedling. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 14.

³⁴ Crowl, Samuel. (2008). Shakespeare and Film: A Norton Guide. New York: Norton, xiii.

Shakespeare's story. Such productions are supported by elaborate marketing on the net and on tv, and consumers buy into that. Once you put Shakespeare in the same line as the title of the film, people who did not read the original text will take it as his work.

Another problem with appropriations is that a good number of Shakespeare "adaptations" for teens are loaded with pseudo-Shakespearean language and tag lines. Emma French writes about the popular films O (Nelson, 2001), IO Things I Hate About You (Junger, 1999), and Romeo and Juliet Revisited (Carver, 2002) and how they are filled with lines which are attributed to Shakespeare but in fact are not his. These might seem like minor and rather benevolent errors; however, they are out there on the net and young people use them. They use them as Shakespeare's lines. So, these at first innocent mistakes come back like a bad penny and are quoted on and on in other movies and series. The filmmakers in their desperate need to attract more young people to the theaters are not overly concerned with the occasional inconsistency or mistake. I would argue that apart from teachers and scholars, who are aware of the mistakes and issues at hand, the young population is oblivious to the misconceptions that they are fed. Let us not forget the simple fact that seeing is believing, and that the young take at face value what they hear and see at the movies. My concern is with unchecked facts and pseudo Shakespearean presentations, which are increasing in numbers over the years, and my worry is that trendy teenage films such as She's the Man (Fickman, 2006), A Midsummer Night's Rave (Cates, 2002), Get Over It (O'Haver, 2001), or Happy Campers (Waters, 2001) will be considered adaptations in the future.

So, the problem with appropriations is a complex issue that incorporates more than just loosely adapting the text and deserves more analysis, which this short paper cannot provide. My argument is that adaptations are welcome as long as they stay true to the original text. Some of the examples above show how adaptations can be different without corrupting the source text, and others show how loose appropriations can mislead the viewers. Furthermore, I would like to argue against claims that the problem is in the "old" language. The recent Argentinian translation of Hamlet written by Rafael Squirru is an excellent example of the combination of solid translating from one language to another and art, while the simplicity of language is appealing to the younger generations as well as to those who possibly do not have a higher education.³⁵ The amazing aspect of this translation is that it was done to "suit" the Latino ear, since previous translations of Shakespeare, in the Latino world, were mostly European Spanish. Yet, Squirru stays faithful to the original, while bringing the play to life in contemporary Latino Spanish and with amazing surrealist illustrations done by Juan Carlos Liberti. Therefore, the problem pertains to those filmmakers who, in their desire to be different and artistic, by changing the texts of these plays, are changing Shakespeare. By no means do I agree with Richard Kimball who advocates against adaptations, because they "bring Shakespeare to communities across America. And by Shakespeare, I mean Shakespeare, not some PoMo rendition that portrays Hamlet in drag or sets Midsummer Night's Dream in a concentration camp." This derogatory remark about postmodern adaptations is used by those who believe that adaptations are doing more harm than good, and that they are not bringing the audience closer to Shakespeare, and by Shakespeare they mean the source text. Nevertheless, such discussions among scholars and critics, which are necessary and constructive in nature, do not infringe the film industry, which continues with adaptations of not only Shakespeare but also other once-considered high-culture authors. Therefore, commercial success and profit prevent moneymakers from worrying about authenticity and fidelity to the author and text. On the other hand, the success of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in the past twenty years has brought Shakespeare to the limelight again and has sparked a new wave of international discussions and research.

The aim of this paper was not to discourage adaptations, but rather it was to raise awareness of loose appropriations and the possibility that they might be slowly changing Shakespeare for future generations, and that it is our duty to acknowledge this possibility and to address it and re-open the discussion regarding textual fidelity. We, scholars and teachers, are the guardians and keepers of the original texts, whether they are Shakespeare's or someone else's. We are the ones who accepted the noble cause of protecting the texts and passing them down to other generations who will live in a future that we will not know. We must not be selfish and keep his words, which have brought so much joy and tears, for ourselves. Finally, while we welcome and encourage Shakespeare's adventures into foreign lands we must preserve his texts, so that they can be adapted anew in some future time.

illustrations/

³⁵ Hewitt, Marianne. Inside an Argentine Translation of 'Hamlet' Paired with Surrealist Illustrations. *Shakespeare and Beyond Folger Library*, (2018, April 27) Retrieved from https://shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu/2018/04/27/hamlet-squirru-liberti-argentine-translation-surrealist-

³⁶ Worthen. W. B. 'What light through yonder window speaks?': The Nature Theater of Oklahoma *Romeo and Juliet* and the Cult(ure) of Shakespeare. DiPietro and Grady 158-59.

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