

Phony Bardolatry

Adaptation of Space, Text, and Performance in Shakespeare since the Restoration

William Shakespeare is frequently held aloft as perhaps the greatest playwright in the history of English Theatre, if not theatre as a whole. Certainly his influence on Western theatre is undeniable, regardless of one's opinion on his plays themselves. Whether he deserves this acclaim, however, is not the focus of this paper. Rather, this paper aims to analyze the way Shakespeare has been adapted and altered in popular culture since the English Restoration. Audiences in both the United States and Great Britain – the two locations focused on in this paper – have demonstrated a tendency to adapt certain elements of either space, text, or performance when performing the works of Shakespeare. Depending on time and location, these adaptations may be made to accommodate the realities of the status of theater companies, to use the work to make a statement about a contemporary issue, or simply to bring it more into alignment with contemporary tastes. The American frontier in the nineteenth century favored adapting space, post-Restoration England favored adapting text, and modern America – and to an extent England as well – favors adaptations of performance.

It is important to clarify what exactly is meant by “adaptation” in this context, as the boundaries of what is and is not an adaptation can vary depending on person and context. By “adaptation”, here I refer to productions which claim to be – in whole or in large part – the original text of the play or a slight rewrite of it. Thus, something like Nahum Tate's rewritten *King Lear*, which substantially changed the ending, would fall within the scope of this paper as it still purports to be Shakespeare's play, albeit in a slightly revised form. However, the twentieth century American musical *West Side Story* would not fall within the scope of this paper because, while it structures itself after *Romeo and Juliet*, it does not purport to *be* that play.¹ In other words, if someone with an average level of knowledge regarding Shakespeare could reasonably be expected to believe that what they are being

¹ Betsy Schwarm, “West Side Story,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 08 April 2015 <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/West-Side-Story>>.

presented is a work by William Shakespeare, it falls within the scope of this paper. It is also worth noting that this definition is not restricted to stage productions, but film adaptations do not play a major role until relatively recently.

From the Restoration until around the time of the work of William Macready to restore their originals in the mid-nineteenth century, English theatre was crowded with an abundance of rewritten plays of Shakespeare's. Nigel Cliff, in his 2007 book *The Shakespeare Riots*, discusses some particularly egregious examples of these adaptations. For instance, Cliff points to a version of *Romeo and Juliet* written by Colley Cibber in 1744 which "mashed together the original, Otway's version [a previously adapted version], and a chunk of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*" in which, among other changes, "Juliet wakes up in the charnel house before Romeo dies and the lovers pour out seventy long lines penned by the great actor [Cibber]." ² This is in addition to other adaptations such as the previously mentioned adaptation of *King Lear* by Nahum Tate, which contained a happy ending, and a musical adaptation of *The Tempest*. ³ These adaptations were not motivated, however, by any sort of distaste for the works of Shakespeare. Rather, many of these authors saw themselves as refining Shakespeare and, in a sense, rescuing it from itself. Tate, Cliff recounts, described *King Lear* as "a Heap of Jewels, unstrung and unpolisht; yet so dazling in their Disorder, that I soon perceiv'd I had seiz'd a Treasure. [sic]" ⁴ In other words, in their minds Shakespeare was a writer before his time, and it took the more "refined" writers of later centuries to fully unlock their genius.

Shakespeare was massively popular on the American frontier in the nineteenth century. This popularity stemmed from a particularly American love of grand oratory, as well as the prominence of Shakespeare in the education system of the time. Nigel Cliff recounts the story of an old steamboat pilot known by Mark Twain who could recite Shakespeare "not just casually, but by the hour," as well as stories of horsemen and plantation workers traveling for miles to watch performances when

² Nigel Cliff, *The Shakespeare Riots* (New York, Ny.: Random House Press, 2007), 100-101.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

companies were in town.⁵ However, the American frontier was not known for its grand stages. Rather, traveling companies would take a wagon or steamship from town-to-town to perform, usually with rather spartan staging due to the restrictions this placed upon them. This is a departure from the type of spaces common in England during Shakespeare's time. In many ways, it is similar to the medieval stage and its pageant carts rather than either the Elizabethan stage or even contemporary stages in more developed areas.⁶ In this way we see the space of Shakespeare's plays adapted due to practical considerations, but this adaptation of space was part of a larger pattern in this place and time.

In modern America and England, we have largely returned to the original text of Shakespeare's plays when performed. While the plays are still largely performed in theaters which differ from Elizabethan theaters, the more notable adaptations are in the performance sphere. Modern Anglophone countries frequently adapt the setting or characters of Shakespeare's plays, such as using a contemporary setting or genderbending the characters. Frequently this is a tool used to emphasize the relevance of the play to audiences which may struggle to understand why this piece of Elizabethan theater is still important now. As an example, a recent controversial production of *Julius Caesar* came under fire for intentionally adapting the setting to be a reflection of the modern United States, and characterizing Caesar in a Trumpian fashion.⁷ While this drew criticism for depicting the assassination of a leader meant to resemble the President on the floor of the senate, it made the message that the director wanted to convey abundantly clear. Why should we care about this centuries-old play about an ancient assassination? We should care because it shows the dangers of demagoguery and political violence. Though the play and the event may be distant to us, and the language may be antiquated, our society still has lessons to learn from Shakespeare. Often, even if the contemporization of the setting is not being used to draw so an explicit a point, Elizabethan costuming is still often eschewed in favor of

5 Cliff, 13-14.

6 Lee A. Jacobus, *A Compact Bedford Introduction to Drama: Sixth Edition* (Boston, Ma.: Bedford/St. Martin's 2009), 125-127.

7 Lois Beckett, "Trump as Julius Caesar: anger over play misses Shakespeare's point, says scholar," *The Guardian*, 12 June 2017.

contemporary clothing. An example of this is the 2009 film and stage adaptation of *Hamlet* by the Royal Shakespeare Company, which clothed the royal tragedy in modern clothing.⁸ The timelessness and universality of Shakespeare is at the heart of many contemporary adaptations of his works. Though it strays slightly from the scope of the paper, this is also reflected in the number of more separate adaptations of Shakespeare's works, such as the aforementioned *West Side Story*.

Though not all adaptations of performance in modern times have to do with the message of the play. In some cases, the adaptation is in the form of a change of media. Any film adaptation of a Shakespeare play is itself an adaptation of both space and performance as well, taking advantage of the innovation of a new form of media after Shakespeare's time. While this form of adaptation frequently incorporates other adaptations common to modern Shakespearean performance, it is worthy of a separate mention as well. Adapting Shakespeare to film frequently represents a recognition of the changing ways contemporary audiences consume media, with film being a much more widely consumed form of entertainment than live theater.

Since the Restoration, it has been rare for theater companies to stage Shakespeare in a purely faithful manner. As the stage evolved in Western theaters, the space of Shakespeare tended to evolve with it, though with some interesting, unique developments in certain times and locations. The return to Medieval-esque stages on the American frontier or the modern jump from live theater to film are both particular examples of these interesting developments. Text was one of the first elements of Shakespeare to be adapted, some popular adaptations going as far back as the Restoration itself, just after Elizabethan theater. These adaptations, though they often changed large and important parts of the original text, still purported to be Shakespeare, and thus fall within the scope of this paper despite often containing little of the original text. Performance is particularly popular to adapt in contemporary American and English theater. Where Elizabethan costuming and setting may seem outdated, contemporizing the setting and costuming creates a new sense of relevance for audiences who may

8 Michael Billington "From Timelord to antic prince: David Tennant is the best Hamlet in years," *The Guardian*, 5 August 2008.

otherwise be alienated by the antiquated language. That Shakespeare is often not performed as it originally was is not a condemnation of Shakespearean theater after his death, but rather a reflection of audiences and theatre-makers acknowledging that there is a universal heart to Shakespeare and attempting to find the best way to demonstrate this to their contemporaries, and recognizing that attempting to present the works entirely as-written may close off some of their audience to that universality.

Bibliography

Beckett, Lois. "Trump as Julius Caesar: anger over play misses Shakespeare's point, says scholar." *The Guardian*, 12 June 2017.

This source both contains pictures which aid in illustrating the point, as well as contains discussion of the intention of the director in contemporizing the play in the way that it was.

Betsy Schwarm, "West Side Story," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 08 April 2015 <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/West-Side-Story>>.

This source was largely included to back up that *West Side Story* is an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Billington, Michael. "From Timelord to antic prince: David Tennant is the best Hamlet in years." *The Guardian*, 5 August 2008.

This source contains examples of the costuming of this production.

Cliff, Nigel. *The Shakespeare Riots*. New York, Ny.: Random House Press, 2007.

I relied heavily on this source for this paper, and it was reading this book which inspired me to pursue this topic.

Though the focus of the book is the Astor Place Riot, it discusses in several of its early chapters the status of Shakespeare both in the American frontier and in nineteenth century England.

Jacobus, Lee A. *A Compact Bedford Introduction to Drama: Sixth Edition*. Boston, Ma.: Bedford/St. Martin's 2009.

I used this source particularly for information about the development of space over time, as its discussions of the way the stage changed over time are very illuminating.