

# Updating Shakespeare: Reflections on the Possibilities of Reading and Teaching Shakespeare Today

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We live in a world with incredibly fast, diverse, and rich possibilities for using technological devices to gather information about the earliest examples of literature as well as early modern works. It is possible to watch any of Shakespeare's plays through a variety of stage performances or movie adaptations, then augment our understanding through documentaries and even online archives. Movie adaptations sometimes serve as postmodern interpretations of Shakespeare's works, reworking the Elizabethan and Jacobean moral, cultural, intellectual values and literary patterns to produce new and global approaches to Shakespeare's plays. As modern readers, students, and researchers, we have great advantages over former generations in this regard. We are in a wide network in which we share our experiences, knowledge, and perspectives about Shakespeare's works. We have wider and more immediate access to sources, translations, and adaptations that enable us to conduct better, broader, and more diverse research to develop a global discourse and understanding among cultures and across borders. Taking into consideration the opportunities we have today regarding the implementation of a variety of technological tools in education, it is clear that the outcomes resulting from the use of new technologies in teaching Shakespeare are greater and better than in past decades, and with new technologies the future will benefit from more insightful perspectives.

In Shakespeare's time technology uncloaked the mystery of distant lands, resulting in considerable cultural, intellectual, and financial gains. Cultural and technological innovations might have roused Elizabethan society's desires, but they led to problematic issues on a global scale. Technology and science also empowered the imperial authority, leading to the expansion of British cultural horizons and, eventually, the British Empire emerged, established upon an extended colonial presence across the world.<sup>1</sup> Emergence of theatres had coincided with and were influenced by the naval and economic developments in England. Elizabethan and Jacobean theaters had provided "an imaginative geography of elsewhere" for the curious Elizabethan audience, intrigued by the "reformulation of information from and about other parts of the world."<sup>2</sup> Inevitably technology had made information more accessible, and drama processed recent discoveries to present the distant world to Elizabethan audiences. Technological enhancements rendered the cross-cultural perspective possible for both the authors and audiences, so that British theater guided the country's understanding of different cultures and foreign individuals.

In the modern world technology is evolving much faster than Shakespeare would have imagined, simply considering Web 2.0 which allows people from all around the world to reach any kind of information within seconds. Numerous websites allow users to check out historical places, ebooks, blogs, online archives, and distant sources of information, not only making it so much easier

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Vitkus described European colonialists' interests by stating that "many European Prosperos went forth with their knowledge and technology, seeking to enslave new Calibans and Ariels wherever they might be found" (168). He argued that, "newly constructed permanent playhouses (along with gun-bearing ships and joint-stock corporations) were among the leading cultural and technological innovations produced by the Elizabethans" (169). See Daniel Vitkus, "Circumnavigation, Shakespeare, and the Origins of Globalization," chap. 10 in Dymphna Calaghan and Suzanne Gossett, eds., *Shakespeare in Our Time* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016). <sup>2</sup> See Daniel Vitkus, *op. cit.*, p.169.

to access resources but also allowing even casual readers and researchers to understand the complexities of the issues facing them. New technologies provide Shakespeare's modern readers and theatre-goers new opportunities to do more thorough research, gain deeper understanding, and conduct more global discourse.<sup>2</sup> In his article "Shakespeare's Here," Scott L. Newstok, after exploring how prominent poets and authors including John Milton and Ben Jonson emphasize the pervasive influence of Shakespeare's works in their poems, concludes his article by asking "what ceremony else?"<sup>3</sup> Newstock marvels at Shakespeare's unending victories over time and the audacious triumphs of his works. Apparently, he will be the subject of more conquests in times to come.

Today, in the age of technology, we are still examining the immortal legacy of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's language has noteworthy differences from modern English and modern translations help prevent misunderstandings. New technologies enable people from all around the world and from different cultures to live (approach?) the same experiences, feelings, and thoughts and this resulted in new and global approaches to Shakespeare's plays. Singh names these approaches with an exact term, "hybridity."<sup>4</sup> In India, Singh attended a conference at Presidency College, where several academic papers discussed Shakespeare's works from a global, diverse, and sometimes "non-Western" perspective. Singh describes this post-modern Shakespearean tradition as "myth of a universal Shakespeare" and situates himself in a "cross-cultural" position. "Cross-cultural" and "hybridity" are key terms as they are some of the most important consequences of the age of internet. This is a world-wide age and the act of reading is not passive. Now, we are not only readers, but also commenters, editors, creators, re-producers of literary classics like Shakespeare's. Being active readers is the first and foremost requirement of a cross-cultural and global teaching and learning. In our day modern readers engage, understand, interpret Shakespeare's plays from different cultural and individual perspectives and re-produce them, comment on them with a post-modern approach. It is almost like a nice mixture of cultural, social, political aspects, and a lively meeting of the readers and a dramatist from different cultures, even from different centuries. "Hybridity" is a key term to understand the relation between the new technologies and a new understanding of Shakespeare. Historical contextualization is an effective method in developing a complete understanding of socio-historical norms and notions of Shakespeare's time and plays. Being involved in the reality behind fiction and the process in which it is altered, modified, and rewritten enables us to develop an interest in tracing the crumbs of reality we find in other texts and discover what the authorial intervention transforms the reality, and this discovery of creative intent may smash the wall of language or dialect, even cultural and geographical barriers. For modern people, works of fiction that can be seen as pieces of social commentary about their own time and delivered to them through ages might be most interesting to investigate with a new look each time.

Shakespeare's plays have always been an inspiration to many directors. From the *Forbidden* (1956), a movie which was based on *The Tempest*, to *She's the Man* (2006), inspired by *The Twelfth Night* there are a lot of examples. Shakespeare was also indebted to an earlier tradition. He has a discourse which frequently refers to the classics with his jokes, (mis)quotations and allusions<sup>5</sup>. Considering this great antique tradition of classics and their influences on Shakespeare, it is possible to gather

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<sup>2</sup> Christy Desmet states that "individual writers have appropriated Shakespearean plots and characters to explore such crucial topics as race, gender and national identity" (p. 236). Callaghan and Gossett, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> See Scott L. Newstok, "Shakespeare's Here," chap. 5, in Callaghan and Gossett, op. cit., p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> See Jyotsna G. Singh, "The Bard in Calcutta, India, 1835-2014," chap. 10, in Callaghan and Gossett, op. cit., p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> See Coppélia Kahn, "The Classics as Popular Discourse," chap. 16, in Callaghan and Gossett, op. cit. 263.

contextual information about the sociological, psychological, and historical background of the plays and develop a global discourse and understanding between cultures through internet sources.

Reading, watching, and understanding Shakespeare's plays in the twenty-first century is easier than it has ever been. People can express their thoughts on Shakespeare to the whole world, opening up the chance to see a wide variety of unique perspectives on the subjects Shakespeare handles in his plays. The new age also gives access to people who are interested in different versions of Shakespeare's plays. Not only do we now have more humorous productions such as *Drunk Shakespeare*, or movies that update the stories to a modern setting such as *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) that attract a more diverse audience, but this age also offers more access to Shakespeare's plays presented in Braille, audiobooks, sign language, and projects that allow free access to a variety of editions. Perhaps most important is the ability to study and discuss them and understand how the modern responses are different from those of the Elizabethan audience.

Among numerous subjects that provide close analysis is how Shakespeare handles mortality in relation to other themes. Without doubt today's technology grants us the depth of understanding and diversity of perspectives that the Elizabethan audience lacked. People tend to watch movies and TV series more than they read books or other written material and therefore have probably seen a wider variety of themes and characters than anyone in an average Elizabethan audience. For instance, the Tudor government had made suicide illegal and the prevailing culture considered it a sin, so it is handled in a more tragic manner in the plays. Many modern books and plays depict suicide as something heroic, or simply as the best choice in a desperate situation. For example, in "The Final Problem," Arthur Conan Doyle does not make it completely clear whether Sherlock Holmes simply falls to his death while fighting James Moriarty, or whether Holmes deliberately jumps while clutching Moriarty. However, many modern stories are more explicit in depicting their protagonists' choice of a heroic suicide. In its modern retelling of "The Final Problem," *Sherlock* (2012) features Jim Moriarty and Sherlock Holmes on top of a building from which Sherlock decides to leap, and in *Hannibal* (2015) Will Graham, upon realizing that Hannibal Lecter enjoys killing people, decides to commit suicide while hugging Dr. Lecter. Although in both series the heroes survive, just as Holmes does in Conan Doyle's story, the message is clear: suicide can be for the greater good. Similarly, in the interactive video game *Beyond: Two Souls* (2013), one of the main characters commits suicide and is immediately shown happily reunited with his dead wife and daughter.

Just like in modern TV series such as *Sherlock*, a nineteenth-century detective stories take advantage of current technology's ability to make older plotlines appealing to contemporary audiences, Shakespeare, some four hundred years ago, adapted older material for his audiences. However, with the technological developments we enjoy today, we should also be able to reach back to Shakespeare's time to re-examine his works. Historians always suggest that to understand a historic era, one should consider the culture of that era. For many people in this century, from scholars to casual readers, sampling the culture of four hundred years ago is incredibly easy.

A great variety of opportunities—such as movie adaptations, cartoons, and online courses—can be used for Shakespeare studies either for research or to augment educational activities. For instance, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Shakespeare website offers free access to the complete works of William (Shakespeare) (are the parenthesis required?). In addition to the movies that are mostly accessible online, National Theatre Live presents theater productions of Shakespeare's plays that can be considered while examining different representations of the scenes. Anyone who has access to virtual libraries and online sources can examine how other playwrights influenced Shakespeare's works. It clearly shows the benefits of technology and the vast

opportunities modern readers have to explore interactions between these playwrights and plays.<sup>6</sup> Massachusetts Institute of Technology's website MIT Open Course Ware offers a great variety of lectures on Shakespeare and how he influenced other major writers. One such course, titled "English Renaissance Drama: Theatre and Society in the Age of Shakespeare," is designed to analyze the interactions between Shakespeare's contemporaries such as Christopher Marlowe and John Webster through lecture videos, assignments and reading lists.

"Thick-reading," using Clifford Geertz's term,<sup>7</sup> allows us to investigate the gender issues or racial connotations in Shakespeare's works, allowing an application to present-day perspectives but also illustrating how we tend to see the past through the lens of the present. This becomes problematic when we interpret one of the Shakespeare's plays written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. How should we stage it in the twenty-first century? How should we read it today under the lights of current literary theories?<sup>8</sup> New technologies make it possible to modernize the way we understand, teach, and perform Shakespeare's plays. Updating Shakespeare's plays in production is a frequent choice, yet others base their productions on historical accuracy, striving to replicate Elizabethan and Jacobean costumes and even stage props such as antique wine glasses, thrones and wigs. However, we can be more imaginative in contemporary practices. As mentioned in *Shakespeare in Our Time*, "Historicism itself necessarily produces an implicit allegory of the present in its configuration of the past" (213).<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare's plays, from the great tragedies to the comedies, have something to tell all people all over the world. In fact, it does not really matter whether the play is staged reflecting Britain's social and political atmosphere or being updated to address a contemporary audience in a non-anglophone culture. Shakespeare's plays are so exuberant and transcendental that they connect with basic human desires. *King Lear*, for instance, has social criticism regarding the absolute power of a monarch in the reign of King James I, but we still find something relevant to us. Greediness of human pride and misfortunes of hypocrisy are some of the themes that an updated performance can profitably explore. We disrespect the play and the playwright if we insist that it be performed or even read from a singular perspective.

As Diana Henderson mentions in her article "Pluralizing Performance": "We have arrived at a moment that acknowledges the diversity of Shakespeare performances both past and present."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Scott Newstok, in his article "Shakespeare's Here," focuses on the epitaphs and poems written by the great writers of Shakespeare's time. He begins with an epitaph by an anonymous poet in Shakespeare's Second Folio, and then, he analyzes other epitaphs and elegies written by John Milton, Leonard Digges, Ben Jonson, and William Basse. Newstok, op. cit., p. 85-90.

<sup>7</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> David Bevington talks about the process of teaching Shakespeare in academic courses and how Shakespeare, in time, became its own perspective ("Shakespearean") and branched into different disciplines, such as Shakespeare and Gender, Shakespeare and Politics, Shakespeare and Performance and many others. See David Bevington, "The Classroom," chap. 3 in Callaghan and Gossett, op. cit., p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> Historicism as a way of thinking emphasizes the importance of social context in understanding a literary text or a cultural symbol. New historicism specifies the relation between the text and society in which the text is produced. According to this mode of thinking, a play does not only reflect the social reality of its original culture, but it also interferes with contemporary order by producing and reproducing that older culture anachronistically. This function of literature opened a fruitful area for critics in the 1980s and created a dramatic change in our understanding of Shakespeare's plays as well as others. See William C. Carroll, "Historicism," chap. 13 in Callaghan and Gossett, op. cit., p. 212.

<sup>10</sup> See Diana E. Henderson, "Pluralizing Performance," chap. 19 in Callaghan and Gossett, op. cit., p. 313.

<sup>10</sup> See Newstok, op. cit., p. 314.

Robert Lepage demonstrates this diversity. Considered one of the major norm-breaking directors in theatre, Lepage carries the conventional idea of theatre to a new level with his innovative multimedia productions. His staging of *The Tempest*, which debuted at Quebec City's Festival d'Opéra in July 2012, is known for its interdisciplinary formation. He drew from architecture, music, design, and technology, recasting the script as a libretto set to music conducted by English composer Thomas Ades to present the play as an opera. The combinations make the play lively as well as rich with visual effects such as lightening, ropes, a scaffold or a chandelier to maintain Ariel's invisibility or a 3D view supported with lights which make Miranda and Ferdinand look like shadows while walking towards the sea. Not only do these devices make the audience get involved in the play but they also contribute to the depth of the play. For instance, Lepage used the auditorium and antique stage of Milan's Teatro alla Scala to portray Prospero's island, thus symbolizing Prospero's banishment from the Milanese society.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, new performances of Shakespeare allow the director to deploy new technology to add artistic visions, aesthetics, authenticity, and globalization. The audience may encounter an Italian theater in Quebec or a naval battle on a landlocked stage.

New technologies do not only mean developments in visual and technical effects but they also influence new adaptations. *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet* are some of the plays produced and re-produced as adaptations that include almost the same plot line yet differ in terms of the century, setting, costumes, and technology they employ. For instance, one movie adaptation of *Othello* (2001) portrays the same desire for revenge, tricks and machinations, but the character Othello is the commissioner of London's Metropolitan Police rather than a general in the Venetian military. Adaptations embrace the modern world's technology, architecture, and socio-cultural, aesthetic economies.<sup>11</sup> With the help of new technologies, audiences experience a lifelike atmosphere as well as authenticity of settings and actions.

In conclusion, understanding Shakespeare is not only visualizing the plays but also understanding the different concepts that they offer, including some that were nonexistent when the plays were written. As modern readers investigate these new concepts and gather new ideas, they can read the plays with a different understanding that was not possible in Shakespeare's time. The future holds the strong possibility of even more new concepts that give readers different perspectives, new approaches, and unprecedented discourses to reach different understandings of Shakespeare's plays. Today it is easy to reach back to early modern times in terms of understanding the period and visualizing Shakespeare's world, but in the future it will be even more amazing to travel back in time.

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<sup>11</sup> See W. B. Worthen, "Shakespeare and Performance," chap. 19 in Callaghan and Gossett, op. cit., p. 325. *Othello* opens with the sight of 1600s Venice, but now producers have the flexibility to depict the city and its people as they were in Shakespeare's time or in any other period or culture.