

ADAPTING SHAKESPEARE FOR THE STAGE, A THEORETICAL APPROACH

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***Abstract.** An adjustment that occurs in a theatrical adaptation is that descriptions, narrations, the represented thoughts of the characters have to be converted by the actors and directors into the act of speech, sounds, and visible actions. This shift from a silent literary work to an audible and visible representation requires an active implication of the spectator, who this time does not have to take the written text through the filter of his imagination, but he has to participate emotionally to the a universe already built.*

***Key words:** adaptation, representation, drama, stage.*

Shakespeare’s plays open themselves up to a world of interpretation. A typology that we are going to discuss in this study is the theatrical adaptation. A theoretical approach of this topic could begin with the analysis of the transfer from paper to stage or from written to spoken.

Alfred Bennett Harbage, a dominant figure in the world of the Shakespearean work research, more than a half century ago imagined the impact of his plays on stage: “People in throngs, of all classes and callings, gathered to see Shakespeare’s plays. They came in wherries, on horseback and on foot, from Cheapside and White Chapel, Westminster and Newington, Clerkenwell and Shoreditch, deserting for an interval their workbenches, their accounts, their studies, their sports, their suits at law and their suits at court. They preferred the pleasures of the Globe to the pleasures of Brentford and Ware, and if they did not pass coldly by the ale-house doors, at least they reserved enough pennies to pay the gatherers” (A. Harbage quoted by A.F.Kinney, 2003: 8). Later, researchers in this field proved he was right. Shakespeare didn’t write for readers. He wrote for audiences. It is important to know that he earned his living as an actor and as an owner of his acting company. This could be considered an explanation for the late publication of his plays, or maybe when published they couldn’t have the expected success on a market invaded by literary creations with religious subjects. Therefore, we should acknowledge from the start that the author himself was the first adapter of his writings to the stage of theatre. His attraction for this magic world is confessed in Jaques’ words in the play *As You Like It*: “All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts”

Therefore the structure of a drama in general should be discussed before analyzing the specific case of Shakespeare. Conflict in a play is the battle between opposing forces. The main character that we develop key relationships with is the protagonist. The character that he opposes is the antagonist. Their clash is the conflict of the play. Conflict represents what the play is about, how the play develops suspense. Nearly every play, but not all, deals with a conflict usually between individuals, but possibly also between the protagonist and society, between the protagonist and circumstances, or between the protagonist and fate. Reinert provides a useful commentary:

“Conflict is the opposition of forces, of whatever kind: man versus mountain, man versus God, man versus himself. It may be as simple as that of a fairy tale (bad queen

versus good princess, bad guy versus good sheriff). It may be as elemental as that of *Everyman*, as preposterous as that of *The Lesson*, as dialectic and ambiguous as that of *The Wild Duck*, as grimly ethical as that of *Purgatory*, as nearly farcical as that of *Tartuffe* and *Arms and the Man*, as metaphysical as that of three such different plays as *Oedipus Rex*, *The Ghost Sonata*, and *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. Drama without conflict is unthinkable. For the essence of the dramatic experience is the fascination with the progress of clashing forces toward resolution: the hero's death or triumph, the villain's defeat, the wedding, the re-establishment of order in a private, a communal, or a universal cosmos. The spoken word is the medium of drama, the objectivity of the performable its mode or manner of being, the surrender of our imagination to that of the playwright the condition for its existence for us, but the drama itself is the action of human conflict. This action we witness partly as safe and superior deities, enjoying the pleasure of dramatic irony at the expense of people who do not know what is happening to them; partly as sympathetic observers commiserating with the good, relishing the downfall of the bad; and partly as fellow fools and sufferers.” (Reinert O., 1961: 7)

The playwright must devise means by which the characters will face challenges and be tested in a short space of time. Audience plays an essential role in any kind of artistic representation. M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* states that there are "four elements in the total situation of a work of art: one, the work itself; two, its content, its form, its language, its imagery, the artist who produced it, and the world that affected the artist; three, the subject of the work, which includes people, actions, feelings-in other words, the total world of the work; four, the audience, the readers or spectators who establish contact with the work”.

Aristotle stated that a tragedy purges the mind and heart of the spectator by creating a response of pity moving him/her toward the central characters and a corresponding response of terror moving him/her away from the central characters. The positive and negative responses provided, some commentators believed, a psychological catharsis of sympathy at the spectacle of suffering and a moral catharsis of self-examination through the fear engendered by an awareness of the agonies caused when a person flaunts the gods or asserts prideful qualities of his/her nature. One can admire, even identify with, the heroism arising from aspiration or pride or devotion in characters in literature and yet fear to imitate such qualities in action.

Theatre at Shakespeare's time represented a controversial art. Protests against this form of artistic manifestation began early during the reign of Elisabeth I, when the public playing was introduced. A letter from an anonymous army officer to Sir Francis Walsingham, secretary to Elisabeth I, sent on January 25, 1587 shows a general distrust and sense of rebellion against theatrical performance and everything involved in the process: “The daily abuse of Stage Plays is such an offence to the godly, and so great a hindrance to the gospel, as the papists do exceedingly rejoice at the blemish thereof, and no without cause. For every day, in the week the player's bills are set up in sundry places of the City, some in the name of Her Majesty's men, some the Earl of Leicester's, some the Earl of Oxford's, the Lord Amiral's and divers others... The playhouses are pestered when churches are naked. It is a woeful sight to see two hundred proud players get in their silks, where five hundred poor people starve in their streets... Now, me thinks, I see your honour smile, and say to yourself these things are fitter for the pulpit than a soldier's pen; but God (who searches the heart and [kidneys]) knoweth that I write not hypocritically, but from the very sorrow of my soul” (quoted by A.F. Kinney, 2003: 139). This

sensitive and delicate confession is an argumentation against the development of stage performance in a society that grows under the shadow of canonical religious beliefs, which block any sort of freedom of expression. The perception of people on theatre was not at all a pleasant one in Shakespeare's time. This negative view is synthesized in *The Anatomy of Abuses* written by Philip Stubbes, who greatly disliked plays, stating that “the arguments of tragedies is anger, wrath, immunity [from the law], cruelty, injury, incest, murder, and such like, the persons or actors are gods, goddesses, furies, fiends, hags, kings, queens, or potentates; of comedies the matter and ground is love and bawdry, cosenage [cheating], flattery, whoredom, adultery; the persons or agents, whores, queans [prostitutes], bawds, scullions, knaves, courtesans, lecherous old men, amorous young men, with such like of infinite variety” (quoted by A.F. Kinney, 2003: 143). All this sequence of negative, aggressive terms emphasizes the puritan direction of the social conscience, the censorship aimed by dedicated clerics and the moral indignation of the poor. However, he managed to surpass the adversity and the uncomfortable reception of an important section of the society, thanks to the royal support given by Elizabeth I and James I. Both regal characters were great admirers of stage performance, which made possible the staging of Renaissance plays.

Theatrical adaptations inspired a wide variety of feelings and opinions at all times. Criticism in this field proved that Shakespeare wrote literary works that can be best valorized through the process of theatrical performance. Due to this stable value of his plays, actors and directors need to fulfill an interpretation task and not a creation one. Audience's answer to Shakespearean text does not necessarily depend on the historical or social context, but it is a constant response to universal existential issues. However, what makes the difference in the reception of his works throughout time, it's the staging manner, the changing involved in the process of adaptation. The written text suffers many times radical transformations in his transition from paper to stage. Words need to be converted into a persuasive performance, which heads to alterations such as: the rearrangement of plot events as in *The History of King Lear*, an adaptation by Nahum Tate, the cutting of characters or an increased importance given to a secondary character as is the case in *Hamletmachine*, an adaptation by Heiner Müller, in which “one of the most striking aspects [...] is the prominence given to Ophelia – Rogoff writes that the play might better be called *Opheliemachine* (57)” (D. Fischlin, M. Fortier, 2000: 209) or radical reinterpretations of the original plot as in *The Woman's Prize, or the Tamer Tamed*, an adaptation by John Fletcher of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* where the accent falls on the presentation of sexual relations in terms of a negotiation without the dominance of male authority.

Another adjustment that occurs in a theatrical adaptation is that descriptions, narrations, the represented thoughts of the characters have to be converted by the actors and directors into the act of speech, sounds, and visible actions. This shift from a silent literary work to an audible and visible representation requires an active implication of the spectator, who this time does not have to take the written text through the filter of his imagination, but he has to participate emotionally to the a universe already built. He reacts crying, laughing, fearing or meditating to the result of someone else's imagination and mind: “Audiences do instinctively and recreationally what actors do professionally: try to explain the thoughts and character of the father who misunderstands a daughter, the son who rebels against a father, the husband who abuses a wife, the woman who loves a man who doesn't return her feelings, the politician who doesn't sleep at night, the ruler who invades a foreign country, the subject who questions the ruler's ethics, the soldier who is apprehensive on the eve of the battle” (L.E. Maguire, 2004: 5).

All these examples of simple human nature manifestation prove that theatre adaptations render to real life what literary texts suggest to the reader’s imagination. This leads us to another idea, that the text hides behind its words a whole universe that can be created by the imagination of a director, that text is a progression of elements: “This idea of text as process, as an interweaving of variable elements, reflects a post-modern desire to replace the logocentric idea of theatre with one in which the performance becomes the site of cultural and aesthetic contestation” (J.C. Bulman, 1996: 2). This connection between the text of a play and the manner in which it is performed on the stage or adapted opens a new debate direction for literary criticism: “Coleridge thought it would be better if Shakespeare’s plays were never staged at all. The only way to experience the real pleasures of the verbal imagination, he claimed, is through the silent encounter between the written text and the isolated reader. And it remains a commonplace, at least among the reading public, that the movie is never as good as the book. But for much of the twentieth century it has seemed possible for serious readers to enjoy Shakespeare on stage without giving up the more difficult pleasures of traditional literary experience” (M. Bristol, K. McLuskie, 2001: 3). This point of view represents one side in the argument between those in favour of opening a new way in the interpretation and reproduction of the Shakespearean texts and those in favour of the preservation of those texts in their original form in order to avoid any possible alteration. Coleridge’s opinion is based on the opulence of these Renaissance plays, which do not need any other artifice to become attractive for the taste of literary reception. However, the reader’s interest and judgement on this type of literature has changed along the time, for several reasons, but these will be analysed in the third part of this chapter.

On the other side of the barricade stand those who consider these aspects, who believe that Shakespeare can be improved in proving that his ideas are universal, their value being incontestable for all times: “The reconciliation of text with performance during the ‘classic age’ was fully achieved when theatrical producers demonstrated their willingness to rely on professional redactions of early modern quarto and folio editions. The costly theatrical spectacles of the Restoration and Victorian stage disappeared as much closer attention was paid to the forms of poetic language transcribed in the early texts. Even Coleridge might have been able to enjoy these productions. [...] Shakespeare’s themes of power, self-fashioning, and social transformation express the pathos of Western modernity with extraordinary vividness. At the same time his works represent a powerful desire for social coherence and meaning. For the modernist theatre, Shakespeare represents the possibility for the celebration of modernity’s themes of emancipation and for resistance to modernity’s chronic dislocations.” (M. Bristol, K. McLuskie, 2001: 3). A number of critics tend to evaluate a work in terms of the moral and ethical effect it has upon the reader or spectator.

The idea of compromise between the original literary source of inspiration for an adaption and the adaptation itself underlines the perpetual disputes that rise from any creative process. This adaptation typology develops from the desire of attaining originality when everything seems to have been said before. The reconciliation of times along the history of literature implies inevitable changing and alterations.

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