

## REMEDICATION OF SHAKESPEARE ADAPTATIONS IN FILMS

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Shakespeare has been in a state of eternal revival, being rediscovered for centuries by artists, writers and critics all alike. It has been accommodated to the contemporary tastes with a hunger for survival through a continuous stream of adaptation. The coherent and resounding message is clear in Patricia Ferrara's voice, when she anticipated in Towards a Theory of Shakespearean Film, that 'Shakespearean film is here to stay', written by her in the year 1988 (Ferrara 167). This has been fairly true of the popularity that Shakespeare has enjoyed throughout the evolving times and how it has sustained the image of being a cultural icon. Shakespeare's body of literature boasts of being encumbered and captured in different shapes and forms, with some adaptations showcasing reverence or oedipal envy to its authoritative hold. Yet what is being said of the ever-increasing list of films made on Shakespearean canon is not free of the bounds of the fidelity debates, which have marred a free reception of these films. It is instilling the burden that the Shakespearean legacy carries.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Adaptation, Shakespeare, Remediation, Films*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The changing tides of adaptation theory have made it possible for us to distance ourselves from the didactic poignancy of the source text and embrace a more open reception, acknowledging the independence of the newly created version of the playwright's work. It has also added to acceptance of the impulse to adapt or engage with the texts. It is making Shakespeare readily accessible to masses and allows people of varied interests to become acquainted with his works. The film productions have become a part of the cultural output and its value as a teaching aid has been recognized irrespective of the critical deductions of it. And we seem aware largely of the ramifications of their existence. Ferrara noted in the early work on Shakespeare how undeterred the adaptation enterprise is, propagating and foiling our perceptions of Shakespeare (Ferrara 167).

Ferrara sums up the evolution of Shakespearean productions, exploring both the text and performance of it, with an emphasis on the variations observed in the form of Shakespeare's plays. Each century has paved a way to 'fix' the previous century's perception of the text. Each age was particularly critical of the interpretations of the last age, lambasting them as 'foolish' and 'aberrant' (Ferrara 168). The distance, which now ranges from both temporal and local evaluations of the text, between Shakespeare's theatrical conventions and all subsequent ones has been great and thus each inclined towards a different and unique production method. Shakespeare's theatre enjoyed great popularity in Elizabethan era yet its undocumented status and the impact of the interim have caused the protocol of his theatre to die out. There is no authoritative presence, in the conception of theatre's protocols, which dictate the performance of the play.

The revivalist strain has not witnessed many similarities with the elements that are known of the Elizabethan stage. We have an abundance of Shakespearean adaptations yet there is a lack of over-arching faithfulness to the text, which has brought out a modified revival. Ferrara evokes the dearth of all-male acting productions as an example. Our desire for faithfulness has proved to be fickle and debatable. The fascination with embarking on a quest to constantly recapture the precise nature of Shakespeare's work has been the desire of every age yet the context of the play has been lost in this transmission. Shakespeare's authorial intent is theoretically absent from what his characters say, guarding against any possibility of reaching a definitive Shakespeare. The variety of interpretations and performance styles has led to an instinct to adapt. New meanings continue to emerge giving us new Shakespeare.

The instability of our vision of Shakespeare ensures re-adaptation and remediation of his texts slowly over time. The new frames of adaptation would also be unappealing to the future generations. Ferrara sums up this struggle eloquently when she states 'our posterity will look askance at our schizophrenic balance of almost biblical reverence for the text with a frequent cavalier disregard for it in performance' (Ferrara 167) The twentieth and twenty-first centuries' penchant for adaptability has posed favorable conditions for it to become an appreciated exercise. The new critical approaches have added to a warm reception and reimagining of the various texts, adding depth of layers of meaning to the iconic characters. This pleasure inducing response of the productions connected to its being based in times different than the intended one has only called for recontextualisation and remediation of the texts.

According to Ferrera, films are posed with a dual criterion to judge the Shakespearean production: whether it adds to the already explored interpretations of the text; simultaneously extending the meaning of the text and offering a focus on detail. Aesthetic pleasure and reverence for Shakespeare's concepts experience withdrawal in these productions. She is cautious enough to term these standards time-bound and imperfect, giving a sense that this approach too will be discarded. Her call therefore is to lay down a theoretical basis of Shakespeare on film.

The most interesting aspect of Ferrera's assertions is her awareness of what is to become a major phenomenon, which is that the films would not function as an alternative text rather as a substitute for Shakespeare's texts. The major reception in the present era is mediated either as a new mode of engagement with the text, for audiences who have been introduced to the Shakespeare's texts or for rest of the audience as a substitute text, which is much more sizable in proportion as the primary text. While observing in the mode of translations from one language to another, D. S. Carne-Ross too lays out a similar differentiation between the two. Film figures as a metaphorical translation of a stage play when one takes his theory of translation. Ferrera being much more open to the possibility of adaptation, determines people writing about adapting Shakespeare for film as the audience which perceives film as alternative text. She recognizes the limitations of such critics as they pay little attention to the status of film as substitute, thus they are unable to venture beyond esthetic identity and original solutions of adaptations (Ferrara 169).

The hierarchies involved while experiencing this change of medium demonstrate the long tradition of the west and the religious roots of theater which inform its status as a high art form, bringing in its clutch the theories of stage viewership. Ferrera reminds us of the ideals often invoked by the stage viewership theories such as of catharsis, participation and communion which one only interact within the theatrical performance. Her analysis is highly valid when one interrogates the audience response and finds it linked with theories of the stage.

The question of audience becomes of paramount importance when one looks at the depth and range of the Shakespearean adaptations and productions produced in the time span since they were written. More than anything else, it is the evolution of the audience, which one finds at the heart of any adaptation being made, keeping in mind that Shakespeare also borrowed and adapted heavily the several sources at his disposal. A lapse of five hundred years since the first performance posits the immensity of the audience, which has been privy to Shakespeare. There is no definitive audience for each. Ferrera captures very ably that any fervent desire to muster an audience similar to Shakespeare's original audience, 'with its topical knowledge of Elizabethan London, its fondness for puns, pageants, public hangings, and long harangues from the pulpit' will end in vain (Ferrara 170). While it is visible from the Prologue to *Henry V* that Shakespeare termed even the original audience as inadequate, stating that Henry deserves 'monarchs to observe the swelling scene' of his triumphs (Ross 9). There might never be a perfect audience for Shakespeare. Still differentiating between the live theater and film theater, Allardyce Nicholl points out that the former places living human beings on stage in front of the audience, while the latter places pictures of human beings in front of the audience (Nicholl 49). This concludes that the things that the two audiences will watch will never be the same. The problems that arise due to this are the loss of self-reflexivity in Shakespeare's stage metaphors and the plays-within-plays. These are not due to any flaw in the quality of adaptation, rather due to the medium specificity of films having a different fabric. The immediacy present in theatrical performances is lost in translation to the filmic medium. The engagement of the emotions of the audience with the film text never equals that of the play on stage. Film acts as a recording of a performance rather than the performance itself. It avoids and subverts any reference of it being a performance. It defies Shakespeare's self-reflexivity. Shakespeare made conscious attempts to make the audience recognize the inadequacy of the stage performance and to utilize their own imaginations.

The view shared by Nicholl is that mimesis appears more artificial in a stage performance than it does in a film. The conventional, space-bound and imperfect visuality of the stage gets transformed into the holistic visuality of the film. The conventions of film are however more invisible and naturalistic. The stage presents an incomplete reality and any attempts of illusion making in its space get diffused to an extent. The lingual conventions such as 'verse, the aside and soliloquy, long set speeches; the improbabilities of plot such as multiple disguises, mistaken identities, and the bed trick; and visual conventions, such as tableaux and pageants' as contended by Ferrera can be more favorably be captured in a film, due to its veiled mimesis (Ferrara 170). Film has the aid of modes such as voice-overs, visual representation of metaphors, elaborate visual effects and prosthetic make up etcetera to canvas the several elements of Shakespeare on screen. Ferrera notes the failure of the filmic mode to balance the holistic visuality while making the descriptive poetry visual in its medium. The visual representation hampers the efficacy of the poetry. She cites examples of Renaissance painters and their literal illustrations, which made the poetry's distortions ridiculous when they tried to portray women who had roses for cheeks and so on (Ferrara 171). There is no accurate visual manner to assess this figuration.

Stage performances give us a shifting vision of the plays by Shakespeare while films have an air of definitiveness about them. Films end up becoming a permanent version of the play as long as they continue to be received by the audience. The shade of Shakespeare in theatrical productions is shaded more or less by the actors who played the characters, yet their interpretations are bound to fade with time. Films threaten this flux in play involved in the permanent figure of the Shakespearean texts' adaptations. They have unprecedented power in giving us an authorial Shakespeare, which goes against the fabric of the unsettled nature of Shakespeare. Ferrera insists upon the possibility of films becoming a substitute text (Ferrara 172). The continuation of the idea of the flexible text becomes endangered by such a view.

However, the materialization of such a perspective deeming the film to be a kind of usurper, having a better claim for the audience's attention fails to recognize the individuality of each adaptation. Films function as a way to encounter different reading of the text. They pose unique versions of a text which widen the scope of our understanding of a text. Re-contextualization and remediation allow for a text to resume holding its position as the source, while giving us a finer perspective on the text. Films are more open to grasp and remediate the gaps in Shakespeare's text and are able to build structural units which bridge the gaps present in Shakespeare's times and ours. Thus guarding against films ruling our vision of Shakespeare's plays, as Ferrera instigates, is an unfounded fear based on iconophobia and logocentric anxieties, which fail to understand that films are complementary to Shakespeare's texts and their survival (Ferrara 167).

The twenty-first century lives in a constant stream of media output by television, films and internet, being motioned into a constant flux of ideas through information and entertainment. Past content also gets revived and oriented to serve new purposes. Literature serves frequently as an inspiration to bring about different kinds of adaptations such as in the form of video games, films, television series, and etcetera. These artifacts owe a debt to the materials from the previous generations, caught up in an ongoing cycle or re-contextualization of pre-existing sources. Shakespeare has served as a magnificent source for countless film adaptations and is invaluable to the scale of strides being made in remediating his works.

The Shakespearean adaptations formulate new founded morals and agency, while securing the ties to the original work. The mechanical reproductions serve some artistic purpose which furnish some motive. Walter Benjamin visualized this accurately in the twentieth century:

'An analysis of art in the age of mechanical reproduction must do justice to these relationships, for they lead us to an all-important insight: for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the "authentic" print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics' (Benjamin 224).

The focus of adaptations has shifted largely from recreating the original text faithfully to finding new voices in the text. These reworking seem like alternative reading of Shakespeare, emboldening the background to the foreground, like that in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* by Tom Stoppard. They have the power to bring to the surface voices which have been long overshadowed by adherence to only one form of text and authorial readings, posed by critics and scholars. These adaptations challenge our understanding of Shakespeare giving us the space for contending and becoming more inclusive. The present day politics enters the centuries old text and revive Shakespeare for a new generation.

John Berger contends along similar lines when he asserts that 'the art of any period tends to serve the ideological interests of the ruling class' and in today's era, it serves the majority (Berger 86). Berger indicates a coming about of several meanings due to this exercise 'meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings' (Berger 19). The 'aura' or the experience of the text is not limited to the perusal of a fortunate few. The replication allows for it to exist in multiple places with multiple owners to give rise to a wide range of responses. The meaning of art is no longer its aesthetic value but whatever the practitioner intends it to be.

The remediation or adaptation of texts by Shakespeare shifts the appearance, tone, and value during the transition into a new medium. Imelda Whelehan asserts that the original text gets reframed in the adaptation due to the effect of the period in which a text is adapted. Not approaching the adaptations from a traditional point of view, Whelehan calls for an approach that does not hold the original text in a higher esteem than its remediated offsprings, she says that we should use 'a cultural studies approach [that] foregrounds the activities of reception and consumption and shelves – forever perhaps – considerations of the aesthetic or cultural worthiness of the object of study' (Whelehan 18).

Whelehan's concepts find an essence in Benjamin's argument when he states that 'there is still the preconception that the novelist produces a work of quality, of 'high' art as it emerges from the solitary efforts of the individual to express their distinct vision, untrammelled by concerns about the commercial value of the product which is deemed subsidiary to aesthetic value. A film is, conversely, produced and packaged under a company logo, the high price of production necessitating the guarantee of box-office success' (Whelehan 6).

Whelehan argues that the novelist free from the 'commercial value' is not essentially producing work higher in artistic merit than its cinematic counterpart (Whelehan 8). She states that every new adaptation brings a cultural refocusing of the original text, thus making the Shakespearean or any other text a case study of its own society rather than of the original text's society. She substantiates this using Geoffrey Wagner's three forms of adaptation: transposition, commentary, and analogy. Transposition takes place when a novel adheres to a close affinity to the text and is translated exactly from the book to the screen, commentary features some alteration in the story to assert a point through the film, and finally, analogy, when the novel's context is altered in the film to make a certain statement through its reframing. This gives us the sense that having an understanding of the original text is no longer enough: it becomes pertinent to ascertain the relation between the adaptors' own existence and the art it reproduces.

Remediation theory does not merely figure changing the old source from an old format to a new digital one. Rather it works on remediating the content itself. Janet Murray captures this tendency when she contends 'we cannot be satisfied with just reproducing older information formats in digital form, settling for mere remediation of the textbook, the lecture, the broadcast TV show, the paper newspaper' (Murray 618) The adaptations are more focused on the audience they must cater to. The alterations are made in the original content thinking about the required changes from such a point of view, which inevitably give rise to a drastically different version of the original text.

Shakespearean adaptations witness a wide import of concepts from post-structuralism, post-colonialism, feminism, and cultural studies, which has led to the breaking down the self-isolating criticism around the text, and bringing about concepts of audience agency. This development beginning from 1980s and 1990s, dubbed "The Impact of the Posts" by Robert Stam, placed audience pleasure as a central intertextual citation for any critical concerns (Stam 39). Fidelity criticism was weaned out to examine adaptations and rather assume the role of adaptations in interrogating the political and ideological undercurrents of the source texts. This allows the text to be imported through transcultural mode, gender, racial and sexual constraints to be broken to find a space for marginalized discourses. Adaptation figures as critique - which Stam terms 'intertextual dialogism' and Linda Hutcheon dubs 'transculturation' - borrowed from Bakhtin and Kristeva to posit culture as a vast web of references and tropes ripe for appropriating, disassembling, and rearranging (Hutcheon 31).

These theoretical evaluations give us a conducive environment to treat re-contextualized pieces of film adaptation of Shakespeare as a new form of art itself. This delimits the potential that adaptations posit to revitalize the text and to

ensure its survival and propagation. The undercurrents present in Shakespeare emerge in a better light to build an inclusive space where queer and feminist perspectives can exist.

Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory gives one several avenues to understand the cultural exposition of hierarchies, founded on the grounds of fidelity criticism. She cites an example based on Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) 'it does seem to be more or less acceptable to adapt Romeo and Juliet into a respected high art form, like an opera or a ballet, but not to make it into a movie, especially an updated one like Baz Luhrmann's'. Adaptations are perceived to be a 'lowering' of the original text and thus, the response to it is likely to be negative (Hutcheon 3). There is not admiration devoid of suspicion as observed in Julie Taymor's *Titus*, her critically acclaimed film version of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*.

Owing to the pleasure derived from repetition, Hutcheon argues that pleasure comes from 'repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise. Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change' (Hutcheon 7). Her argument implies the consumerist need for adaptation and the reason for its sustenance. Shakespeare's delight is not lost when one considers how widely it is adapted even today and how the emergence of special effects and technology finally have given us the means to imbibe a world as poignant and magnificent in its detail, such as the one we see in bard's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The variations in details owing to the time, place, culture, gender narratives and etcetera give us an unmatched magnitude of the number of deviations possible. It becomes the practitioners' role to understand the source text with its wide range of meaning and weave an adaptation that would bring forth audience pleasure.

Michael Alexander's terming adaptations as inherently 'palimpsestuous' works signifies to us the haunted nature of all the adapted texts (Alexander 6). Prior texts act as a looming presence in our consciousness and in our experience of the adaptation. The word adaptation itself announces the overt relationship of the film with the adapted text, Hutcheon claims. This is what calls for a wide range of comparisons to be made between them. Fidelity criticism, has long dominated the discourse concerning adaptations, forming the critical orthodoxy in adaptation studies, pertaining to canonical works. Degree of proximity has formed the typology to evaluate adaptations in relation to the original curbing any remediation of the content. Hutcheon dismantles any formulation which has relation with the fidelity criticism when she states that 'adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication. And there are manifestly many different possible intentions behind the act of adaptation: the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or to call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying.' Adaptations form a site of 'contested homage' oedipally envious and worshipful at the same time (Hutcheon 20).

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* has remained popular with audiences, despite debates surrounding its critical acclaim among critics and reviewers. It has been privy to productions on stage, film and television, becoming almost an archetypal presence in the public consciousness. It has been reinvented and witnessed varied amounts of substantial authority over its adaptations. There is no record of its first performance but evidence posits that it enjoyed popularity in the Elizabethan times. It probably would have been enacted by Lord Chamberlain's Men, in the early years of its performance. According to Jay L. Halio all is speculation until December 12, 1660, when William Davenant was "granted a warrant to act *Romeo and Juliet*" (Halio 33).

There are four key texts which will be taken into consideration for analysis in this dissertation. Joe Calarco's *Shakespeare's R&J* (1999) is a play which figures as an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. It features an all-

male cast of four boys, who secretly read out Shakespeare's text in the setting of a catholic boys' school. The play incidentally brings out questions of homoeroticism and homophobia in the face of institutional authority. The play utilizes teenage rebellion as a site to connect with the Shakespearean text. The boys end up revealing how gender constructs and sexual relationships operate in the world in this intertextual palimpsest.

Alan Brown's *Private Romeo* (2011) is based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and is also inspired by Joe Calarco's *Shakespeare's R & J*. It also features an all-male cast and the film retains the gender pronouns of the text without the aid of cross dressing. The cadets in the McKinley Military Academy, an isolated military school seem to be confronting the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy which bars the openly gay cadets from serving in the military.

*Ophelia* (2006) is a novel by Lisa Klein, which is a feminist retelling of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The novel focuses on the events from Ophelia's perspective, treating the events of the play to create a feminist bildungsroman of the protagonist. Klein reevaluates the patriarchal discourses surrounding Denmark and instead presents us with a world where a more empowered Ophelia can witness female solidarity. The novel achieves this by introducing additional characters who were not present in the original storyline, taking many departures from the Shakespearean text. The rewriting uses several practices associated with intertextuality to subvert bard's authority. Ophelia is able to save her life and escape the masculine violence of Denmark in this rendition.

*Ophelia* (2018) is a British-American film directed by Claire McCarthy and written by Semi Chellas about the character of the same name from *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. It is based on the novel *Ophelia* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This film alters a number of events of the novel itself and adapts both the texts. It is a feminist film directed by a female director, which engages in remediating Shakespeare's text to empower often neglected and muted character of Ophelia. It takes several key points from feminist film theory and disrupts the male gaze. It subverts the voyeuristic pleasure of the camera at the expense of its female protagonist. Ophelia here is no longer eroticized and fetishized to fit Hamlet the Dane's character trajectory.

"New Queer Cinema" is a term first coined by the academic B. Ruby Rich in *Sight & Sound* magazine in 1992 to define and describe a movement in queer-themed independent filmmaking in the early 1990s. The term developed from use of the word *queer* in academic writing in the 1980s and 1990s as an inclusive way of describing gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender identity and experience, and also defining a form of sexuality that was fluid and subversive of traditional understandings of sexuality. Since 1992, the phenomenon has also been described by various other academics and has been used to describe several other films released since the 1990s. Films of the New Queer Cinema movement typically share certain themes, such as the rejection of heteronormativity and the lives of LGBT protagonists living on the fringe of society. Contemporary queer films have also utilized similar thematic resonances to ensure queer visibility and Brown's *Private Romeo* is no exception.

Feminist film theory criticizes classical cinema for its stereotyped representation of women. Its aim is to adequately represent female subjectivity and female desire on the silver screen. During its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s a poststructuralist perspective domineered the approach to cinema, claiming that cinema is more than just a reflection of social relations in that it actively constructs meanings of sexual difference and sexuality. The semiotic study of woman as image and the psychoanalytic study of the male gaze had a lasting impact not only in film studies, but also within the wider fields of visual culture and cultural studies. In the 1990s feminist film theory moved away from a binary understanding of

sexual difference to multiple perspectives, hybrid identities, and possible spectatorships, which resulted in an increasing concern with questions of “race” and ethnicity, masculinity and queer sexualities.

The four texts namely Calarco’s *Shakespeare’s R & J*, Brown’s *Private Romeo*, Klein’s *Ophelia* and McCarthy’s *Ophelia* employ the standpoints of queer film theory and feminist film theory to empower and grant visibility to characters and discourses which have been on the margins of Shakespearean texts. It is an act of rewriting which negotiates with the authorial meanings established by the canon. It subverts and rejects the inconvenient aspects of the texts to bring out their own thematic explorations. It makes the site of adaptation ripe for inclusive discourses to be found in pre-existing Shakespearean works. Thus, it is important to study these texts to understand the contemporary surroundings based on the alterations made in centuries old works. It reinterprets the text to create an awareness of how reader exchange is possible in any venture to readapt the text. The resultant remediation of queer and female in Shakespeare’s canonical plays is a significant impulse to revive latent meanings in the text.

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