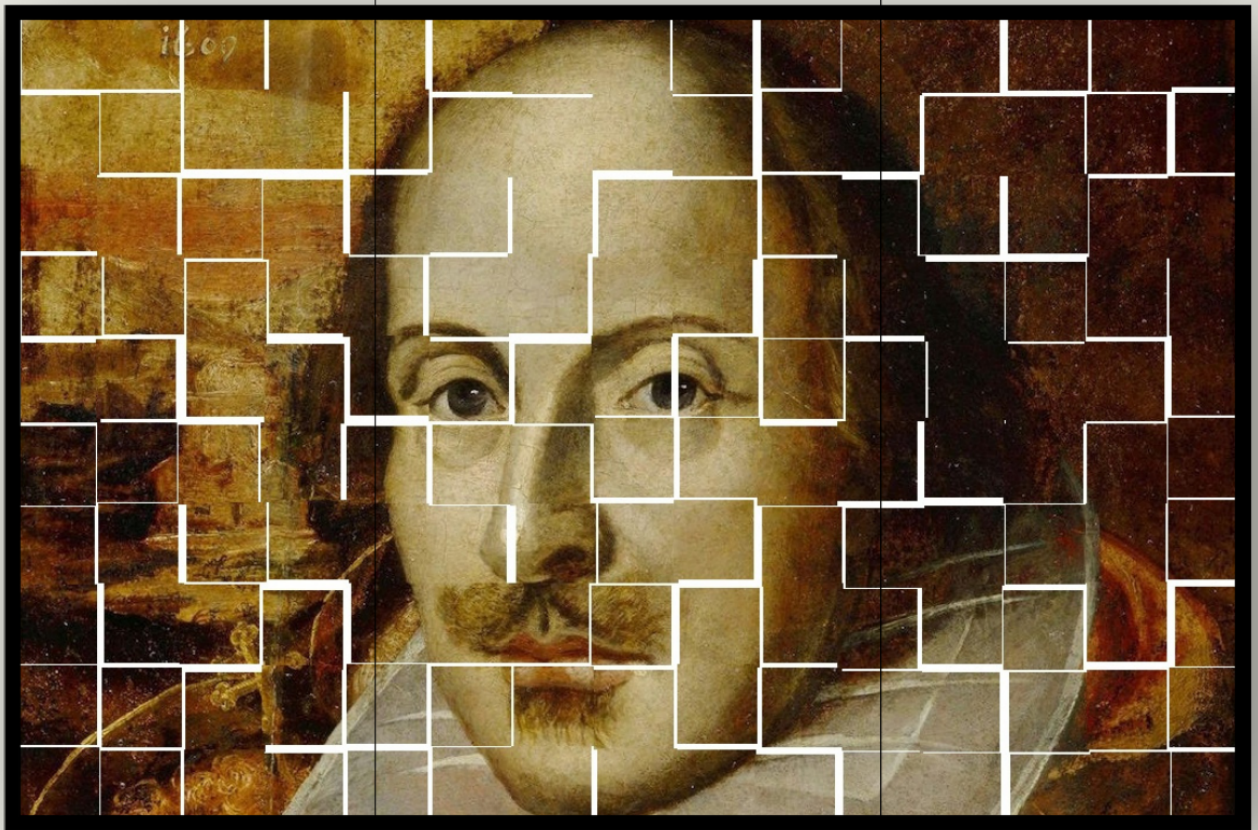


Communication & Extension

WHY WE STILL READ SHAKESPEARE AFTER 400 YEARS (2)

— INTERVIEW: REWRITINGS OF SHAKESPEARE



// Jiayue Li

The Art of Cutting Up Shakespeare
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EDITOR'S NOTE

In the last survey, the editor discussed the reception of Shakespeare's plays in contemporary China, in which I also mentioned the rewritings and adaptations of Shakespearean plays. To further study the rewriting aspect, as a consequence, the editor contacted Dr. Asma Hussein, who instructs the Postcolonial Rewritings of Shakespeare seminar at Georg-August-Universität Göttingen's Department of English Philology. She shared some basic information, new perspectives, and research approaches on the postcolonial rewritings of Shakespeare's plays. In addition, as a participant in this course, I have obtained a better grasp of the "culture shock" between British culture symbolized by Shakespearean theater and Indian culture by the burgeoning Bollywood film industry through watching the 1965 film *Shakespeare Wallah*. Thus, even after 400 years, reading Shakespeare's work and related rewritten works is not simply a single literary activity but also prompts multicultural readers to reflect on their attitudes toward intercultural communication and encounters with various cultures.

REWRITING



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One

L: May I know what's the purpose of offering this course?

H: In succinct terms, the course's title tells it all. The aim is to discuss "Postcolonial Rewritings of Shakespeare."

L: What are the primary forms of rewritings?

H: 'Primary' aside, various forms are subsumed under 'rewriting' ranging from translation, intertextuality, and allusion to the revisionist works as prequels and sequels, and many in-between forms. What all these have in common is the transplantation (or displacement) of a text from one cultural milieu into another with major (as in revisions) or minor (as in translation) permutations and/or transmutations.

L: What's the difference between rewriting and adaptation?

H: Both could be understood as hypertexts grafted upon precedent hypertexts. In literary rewriting, however, both texts are often written literary texts. In adaptations, a change in medium is involved. In the latter, the literary work is transferred to the stage or the screen. Some critics, indeed, argue that adaptation is eventually a form of rewriting.

L: Why did authors in the postcolonial period rewrite Shakespeare's dramas?

H: The 1960-the 70s witnessed a nexus of crises that compelled reconfiguring entities as 'race,' 'gender,' 'identity,' 'home,' etc. They were propelled by these multidimensional crises, attendant configurations, and the concomitant decolonization movements, postcolonial literati, and readership engaged in revisionist rewritings and retroactive readings of Eurocentric classics. One of the heavily rewritten oeuvres is the Bard of Avon's. Shakespeare's dramatic personae got rehabilitated across diverse postcolonial geographies (African, Caribbean, Latin America, etc.,) and his translocated thematics underwent cross-genres, language, and media retroactive rewritings and re-readings.

L: Why do you focus on *Othello* and *The Tempest* in this course?

H: *Othello* and *The Tempest* are amongst the most rewritten plays of the Bard. Additionally, their relevance to the course "Postcolonial Rewritings" is to do with their complex imbrications with postcolonialism, post-feminism, and postmodernism. Both foreground the questions of race and gender. Besides, *The Tempest* is an expression of the colonization discourse.

L: Some rewriting authors come from ex-colonies such as India, Africa, etc. So, considering different cultural backgrounds, how did they generally localize Shakespeare's works, and what's the significance of these works in intercultural communication?

H: In much the same manner, the discourses of empire, hegemony, and supremacy that are propagated in Shakespeare's plays shaped the lives of colonials and lingered on 'post-colonially'...so did the postcolonial rewritings reshaped Shakespearean plays via reversing or revising the subsumed binaries in these discourses. In a few words, Shakespeare's plays were transferred and transformed.

L: What's your favorite rewritten work? Why?

H: I have a list of favorites, and selecting one is not easy. I can name *Water with Berries* by George Lamming and *Pantomime* by Derek Walcott as exemplary. The latter is not a rewriting of Shakespeare, to be sure. As to 'why,' these two and other titles on my list usually secure their place there because of the questions they compel me as a reader to ask and reconsider the artistry of the narrative.

L: What's the impact of your cultural background when you analyze a rewritten work?

H: Coming from the hotspot of the middle east where violence and inequality are rampant plays to my privilege, ironically. The currency of such controversies as race, gender, identity, and the concomitant cultural and political crises that fuel the rife violence facilitates relating to the issues that propel postcolonial writers to engage and undertake the rewriting venture. These are the kind of questions I meant in the previous question.

L: Do you think the "Hogarth Shakespeare Project" is marketing-oriented?

H: The project is a win-win situation. On the one hand, those in charge of the project commissioned bestselling authors to increase the chances of fat profit. But, on the other hand, their project served us (readers, critics, scholars, etc.) food for the mind.

L: Except rewritings, what are your other research interests?

H: My academic research interests are oriented towards Postcolonialism, Modernism, and Postmodernism. My specialized interest is in Anglophone Caribbean Literature.



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Two

From Dr. Hussein's interview, rewriting Shakespeare's plays in the postcolonial age is a means to re-read and reflect on traditional literary masterpieces to identify and reconstruct indigenous racial, cultural, and even gender identities in colonial society. In many adaptations, we may find struggle and assimilation between different civilizations. So to talk about this topic in detail, an Indian classmate Divyansh Dixit and I decoded and discussed the film *Shakespeare Wallah* as a case study, which depicted the conflict between British and Indian cultures through a confrontation between Shakespearean theater and Bollywood film, as well as the characters' identity dilemma of being "British" or "Indian."

L: I think the theme of this whole movie is the cultural rivalry that's hidden behind a love triangle: the status and wealth gap between poor but professional theater actress Lizzie Buckingham and the rich, famous Bollywood actress Manjula reflect the Anti-British sentiment in India at that time, meanwhile, with the local people's enthusiasm for Indian movies, film industry development is the embodiment of the local people's cultural awareness and recovery. What do you think is the theme of the film?

D: Indeed, according to Richard Schechner, "That's a Residue of residue; The native can 'step up,' but the Western developed person ought not to 'step down.'" The film features a lot of nostalgia from British individuals living in postcolonial India for the "golden times" of the British empire. Shakespeare theater used to be a popular art form in pre-independent India, but now it has been losing its attraction to the native citizens. Nevertheless, they didn't want to relinquish their power and priority lightly, which is why Mr. Buckingham, the leader of the Theater group, couldn't comprehend and accept the fact that his work had been rejected.

L: How do you think of the Buckingham's attitude and reaction to their identity as British immigrants in India?

D: (I think) The central element of the diasporic state of being is nostalgia for the homeland, desire for cultural momentous (often food, clothing, familiar art or music), and a desire to return home. And the lack of demand for Shakespearean theater makes them realize that they left their homeland and their culture, not the Indians. And to the image of sadness and frustration of the Buckingham Family and the showy Bollywood cinema are pushing them to think that the loss of Shakespeare is natural and necessary in liberal India.

L: Yeah, I agree with you. The film shows the conflict between the colonial culture represented by Shakespeare and the native culture of the liberated areas from the perspective of "colonialists." But, of course, after freedom, the colonies no longer hoped to connect with the colonial culture, so they adopted a variety of new cultural ways to show their national cultural characteristics and tried to erase the traces of the colonial empire, which is certainly a common feature of much postcolonial literature.

L: So, from your perspective as an Indian, do you think that Indian people have no longer accepted Shakespearean theater?

D: Actually, not exactly; the love and respect for Shakespeare and his art are still present in the free India, which is quite obvious if we look at the number of plays and movies made and constantly being made and celebrated in India. In reality, Geoffrey Kendal was given awards by the Indian government for their achievements in theater in India. So Shakespeare is not a subject of colonialism and postcolonialism, in my opinion, but an artist who should stay alive.

To return to the topic of this article, "Why do we still read Shakespeare after 400 years," which does not mean reading only Shakespeare's original works, but also a significant number of rewritings and adaptations. "Shakespeare" has built numerous bridges of artistic creation and cultural communication as a cultural symbol or cultural mark, allowing writers, playwrights, readers, and audiences from various periods and cultural backgrounds to pay attention to the inheritance and development of culture, as well as the growth and development of self-identity and self-consciousness. Additionally, such works may elicit thought and contemplation on various societal issues or inconsistencies in the works. Shakespearean rewritten works reflect modern and contemporary art creators of the natural and social environment and the new definition and characterization of human identity, providing a more extensive and in-depth path for intercultural communication. Many rewritten works address the limitations of race, region, and gender, reflecting the modern and contemporary art creators' innovative thinking and expectation towards literary creation or theater stage and performance forms, providing more extensive and in-depth cultural exchange.

PS:

1. The Hogarth-Shakespeare Project book lists:

Jeanette Winterson - *The Winter's Tale*
Howard Jacobson - *The Merchant of Venice*
Anne Tyler - *The Taming of the Shrew*
Margaret Atwood - *The Tempest*
Jo Nesbo - *Macbeth*
Tracey Chevalier - *Othello*
Edward St. Aubyn - *King Lear*
Gillian Flynn - *Hamlet*

2. Shakespeare Wallah

Produced by	Ismail Merchant
Starring	Shashi Kapoor Felicity Kendal Madhur Jaffrey Geoffrey Kendal Partap Sharma
Cinematography	Subrata Mitra
Edited by	Amit Bose
Music by	Satyajit Ray
Release date	1965
Running time	120 minutes
Country	United States
Language	English

Plot:

A group of nomadic British performers who traveled across cities and villages of post-colonial India and performed Shakespearean plays. Through their travels, audiences can see the changes of India, e.g: the old was replaced by the new; the Maharaja became a hotel owner; sports took precedence over culture; and the theater was supplanted by Bombay films.

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Wayne, Valerie. 1997. "Shakespeare Wallah and Colonial Spectacularity." In *Shakespeare: the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, and Video*, ed. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt, 95-102. London: Routledge.