

Cecile Sandten

Shakespeare's Globe, Global Shakespeares
Transcultural Adaptations of Shakespeare
in Postcolonial Literatures

Evelyne Keitel, Cecile Sandten (Eds.)

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In Memoriam
Heiner Sandten
(1939 - 2015)

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Introduction

The title of this book, *Shakespeare's Globe, Global Shakespeares: Transcultural Adaptations of Shakespeare in Postcolonial Literatures*, reflects its project of examining transnational rewritings of Shakespeare's plays in and from a post-colonial context. Although I use the term "postcolonial," it must be stressed that many of the works examined in this study move beyond the postcolonial literary strategy of "writing back" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1989) to the colonial centre. Rather, they can be understood as transcultural adaptations that rework the most famous and familiar of Shakespearean plotlines and characters in line with, and in response to, their own local settings. In this way, many of these adaptations tackle and foreground the central issues of race and ethnicity, class and caste, colonial history, gender and language, that are at the forefront of postcolonial critical approaches to Shakespeare's plays.

In this study, I will concentrate on adaptations of Shakespeare in the genres of prose, poetry and drama. The choice of genre reflects not only the adaptation writer's culture-specific preferences; it also illustrates, in practice, the project of transforming a play written for a 16th and early 17th century English theatre audience and performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men into a work that carries local social and cultural resonance beyond its 'original' context.

A note of explanation is necessary about the scope and choice of adaptations examined in this study. Most scholarly work to date has concentrated on Shakespearean rewritings in the genre of the novel.¹ My study is different as it also includes readings of adaptations and rewritings in the genres of poetry and drama. I do not focus on adaptations of Shakespeare in a North American context, although some reference will be made to works emerging out of the Caribbean and Canada. Rather, the focus of this study, in vein with its adoption of postcolonial theories as a critical lens, will be on the diverse approaches to Shakespeare in many of the former British colonies, including Africa, Canada,

1 Exceptions include the "Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project" (CASP, 2007) which is, according to director Daniel Fischlin, "the first research project of its kind anywhere in the world devoted to the systematic exploration and documentation of the ways in which Shakespeare has been adopted into the national, multicultural *theatrical practice*" (Fischlin 2004). Another exception is Chantal Zabus' study *Tempests after Shakespeare* (2002) in which she analyses adaptations of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* across the different genres. In *Native Shakespeares: Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage* (2008), Craig Dionne and Parmita Kapadia collected essays which address indigenous adaptations of Shakespeare plays on local stages.

the Caribbean and India. The linguistic aspect of these Shakespeare adaptations is significant – performing/adapting Shakespeare in a 'foreign' language not only calls attention to the imperial histories of English as an administrative and mercantile language; it also establishes a transcultural framework that critically reflects how the different cultures and histories of the British colonies were forcefully yoked together under one *lingua franca*. This produced its own internal tensions in the British Empire, especially on the Indian subcontinent, which has had an especially complex relationship to Shakespeare due to the playwright's standing as *the* literary and cultural icon of the Empire.

When I started working on this study, I was confronted with the task of how to deal with the enormous variety and sheer number of Shakespearean rewritings that exist all over the world.² My attempt to map the terrain is therefore necessarily selective and inevitably limited; nevertheless, rather than aiming at a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon of Shakespeare as a global playwright, I am more interested in exploring the dynamics and methodologies of adapting Shakespeare's plays in specific postcolonial contexts – for instance, in India or Canada. I also examine the significance of transformations in genre (from Shakespeare's source drama to the target text in the genre of the novel, poem and drama) and differences in cultural and national settings. Significantly, some of these adaptations were written or produced during a time when independence movements were at their peak or when processes of decolonisation had already begun and writers felt a need to "write back" to the former British Empire via its foremost literary/dramatic icon. It is therefore unsurprising that many of the adaptations are based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *Othello*, two plays that have lent themselves particularly well to postcolonial interpretations of issues such as linguistic and cultural imperialism, slavery, the figure of the racial Other/the black body in a dominantly white culture, and black masculinity vs. white femininity. Nevertheless, one must also acknowledge the number of adaptations that have moved beyond the gesture of "writing back" – some of these works have only used Shakespeare's source text as 'inspiration' and a starting point for their own transcultural hybrid writings.

Although this study focuses on 20th century Anglophone adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, these can be usefully read alongside and against earlier Francophone and Latino transatlantic works from the 19th century that had already

2 For an overview and a discussion of Anglo-American Shakespeare adaptations for the theatre, see Priefsnitz 1980.

sought to adapt the Bard's work to their own contemporary settings. In his play *Caliban: Suite de "La Tempête"* (1878), the French philosopher and historian Ernest Renan concentrates on the time after Prospero's return to Milan and the 'democratisation' of Caliban. Likewise, in *L'Eau de Jouvence: Suite de "Caliban"* (1879), Renan focuses on the potential of the character of Caliban in the agendas of social reconstruction and democracy in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, wherein France's loss marked the downfall of Napoleon III and brought about the end of the Second French Empire. Early Latin American writers also adapted Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in their rewritings, adopting paradigms in Shakespeare's play for their own purposes. For instance, in *Ariel* (1900), Uruguayan essayist José Enrique Rodó adopts Prospero's narrative voice, creating a diametric opposition between the characters of Ariel and Caliban, who become mouthpieces for the political ideologies of *modernismo* (Ariel) and utilitarianism (Caliban), the latter of which Rodó critiques.

In Anglophone Canadian literature, Miranda's submission to Prospero's order has even been compared to Canada's former relationship to imperial Britain, a position from which both parties had to 'liberate' themselves in order to achieve independence. Audrey Thomas's *Prospero on the Island* (1971), Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974) and Sarah Murphy's *The Measure of Miranda* (1987) are among the works that explore this twofold orientation. In her first novel, *This Side Jordan* (1960), Laurence "tentatively explores [...] Miranda's potential as symbolic white liberal" (Brydon 1993: 170). The tale of *The Tempest* has even found its way into the genre of science fiction, as popular Canadian science fiction writer Phyllis Gotlieb's novel *O Master Caliban!* (1976) attests. In fact, Shakespeare has had a long and complex history in Canada, as Diana Brydon and Irena R. Makaryk's study *Shakespeare in Canada: "A World Elsewhere"?* (2002) illustrates. As Brydon and Makaryk argue, "[r]einforced by adaptations, rewritings and especially parodies, Shakespeare reigns supreme as one of Canada's pre-eminent playwrights" (Brydon and Makaryk 2002: 5). The urge to seek out a distinctly "Canadian" Shakespeare coincided particularly with literary efforts to satirize local politics that began in the eighteenth century (ibid.). In the twentieth-century alone, there were over one hundred such versions. These include Rod Carley's *The Othello Project* (1996), Robertson Davies' *Tempest-Tost* (1951), Sarah Murphy's *The Measure of Miranda* (1987), Suniti Namjoshi's "Snapshots of Caliban" (1984), and George Elliott Clarke's verse novel *Whylah Falls* (1990) which tells the story of the inhabitants of a vibrant black community in Nova Scotia and features a character called Othello who is murdered in the chapter "The Martyrdom of Othello

Clemence." As Mat Buntin writes, "[a]daptations of Shakespeare in Canada is a flourishing genre. The CASP [Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project] research team has discovered close to 450 plays that are clear adaptations dating back to pre-confederation" (2004).

Why, however, have Shakespearean rewritings so fuelled the Canadian literary imagination? Brydon and Makaryk offer an explanation:

A settler/invasor colony founded on displacements, Canada has been well-positioned to deal with revisions and rewritings of canonical works. Adaptations and parody – authorized transgression, dependent upon and yet opposed to an original – are particularly appealing modes to a country separate from but tied to Britain. (2002: 35)

As we will see from the Canadian rewritings of Shakespeare included in this study, this might well be the case; yet, in order to draw more definite conclusions, one must place these Canadian adaptations alongside other rewritings from a postcolonial context. In addition to Shakespeare rewritings from Canada therefore, this study covers a broad geographical spectrum, including adaptations from Africa, the Caribbean and India. The not inconsiderable task that presented itself at the outset of this project was that of selection – I had to choose not what to include, but what to, regrettably, exclude. When it came to choosing my primary corpus of Shakespeare rewritings, therefore, I decided on a selection of texts that fell into one or more of the following four (though by no means exhaustive) categories:

First, the "true to source-" or "affirmation rewrite" that rewrites, adapts, or produces a Shakespearean play in the original and attempts to recreate the period of the original in its specific scenography and perform the play according to presumed "Shakespearean" acting conventions. This first approach was frequently adopted as part of the British "civilising mission," and is characterised by a certain degree of reverence for the Bard. It shows an affirmation of the effectiveness of the British Empire's English education system, and is the product of an English-educated colonial subject that inherently glorifies Shakespeare, the English language, and British culture.

Second, the "writing back rewrite" that adapts or produces a Shakespearean play in the original, but performs it in a national, regional or local setting and thus attempts a more 'native' interpretation of the text. This approach might be political or radical, in that it produces forms of resistance against the Western source text and its hegemonic implications. Correspondingly, Shakespeare is, albeit inadvertently, initially regarded as the pre-eminent icon of English cultural superiority and European civilisation. In this approach, an analysis of