Doing It Slant: Reconceiving Shakespeare in the Shakespeare Aftermath

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What we take to be Shakespeare on film has no future, or it has only a future past perhaps already being mourned in the ashes of the archive. Have you checked the listings at your movie theaters recently? Know what I mean?

—Richard Burt (e-mail exchange)

Our shared prompt, "After Shakespeare on Film," encourages us to survey the latest breaking frontiers opened up by new media—Shakespeare gaming, virtual Shakespeare, digital archiving, and so on—and decide which ones promise the most in the way of returns for our scholarly investment. Like most of us, I find the Internet a game-changing resource, and consider the possibilities endless for media-oriented Shakespeare scholars to feed off what its constantly unfolding frontiers make available, as my closing comments will indicate. But given my negligible interest in most Shakespeare riffings on YouTube—today's top ten on Bardbox gives us, along with part 1 of Stephen Cavanagh’s estimable Derry Hamlet (2005), a schoolyard of six-year-olds reciting "To be or not to be," a clip of the initially amusing Cat Head Theatre that grows tedious in its second minute, and a mash-up called My Dinner with Andre the Giant that doesn't take that long to annoy—I can’t imagine doing much critically with such resources other than pedestrian sociologizing on the democratic populism of the Internet. And even as some of the best minds of my generation virtualize themselves on Second Life, I find the prospect of generating avatars within a Shakespearean framework—much less writing about it—about as appealing as participating in the human chess game at the New Jersey Renaissance Fair.

While I'm lolling on my Procrustean bed, I might add that I also find the phrase and the prospect opened up by "after film" a tad preemptive. I don't really think the cinema, which has already died as often as Shakespeare's Cleopatra, will be truly dead anytime soon, at least as we now know it. Quality films may no longer be available outside the precincts of festivals, museums, or Netflix, and screens will continue to get smaller. But car chases and meeting cute will no doubt remain box-office manna for some time to come, while stubbornly eccentric artists like Pedro Costa, Bela Tarr, and Guy Maddin persist in making the most audience-unfriendly feature films on record. Shakespeare on film is more of a muddle because of the comparative lack of product at the moment. There are, of course, more Shakespeare-related films being generated than meets the unwearying eye, especially when we widen ours to take in what's being circulated out in the world at large, from India's Mogboi (2003) and Omkara (2006), to Singapore's Chicken Rice War (2000), to Italy's Sud Side Story (2000) to Northern Ireland's Mickey B (2007). Though all of these films merit discussion, none of them—among which we should include Alexander Fodor's low-budget glam-Hamlet (2007) and the four updations that comprise Shakespeare-Told (2005)—arguably operates at the sophisticated level of address as Julie Taymor's Titus (1999) or Michael Almereyda's Hamlet (2000). And that, as I'll discuss below, is a large part of the problem for those of us for whom pop culture and prose Shakespeare often comprise two unappealing sides of the same coin. But I have a related concern here that has less to do with the death of film, or the death of Shakespeare on film, than it does with the rapidly diminishing legibility of "original-language Shakespeare," which to some parties implies the death of Shakespeare itself. And this prompts me to wonder aloud what about or pertaining to Shakespeare we think we will be spinning (and spinning off) in film and new media in the not-too-distant future.

In a chapter of her new book, Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation, where she surveys the positions of several of Shakespeare-Told's critics and dissenters, M. J. Kidnie quotes Trevor Nunn to the effect that "Ultimately for me, it's the language that matters—no language, no Shakespeare." As I note in my review of that book, Kidnie finesse Nunn's objection by demonstrating how the series' Macbeth, scripted by Peter Moffat, compensates for the
loss of Shakespeare's language by "writing what at times registers as strange television dialogue." She claims that in authoring Shakespeare "for a new medium and a new millennium," Moffat projects "a distinctive authorial effect that is consistent with modern perceptions of the canon as high art," and that "[p]aradoxically, it is this slanting proximity to the work, one's ability to hear the 'Shakespeare' in Moffat's Macbeth," that makes the film a legitimate "instance" of Shakespeare's work. Kidnie is entirely right here, but her being right undercuts some of what she tries to claim for other productions in the series. If it's the "slanting proximity" of hearing the "Shakespeare" in Moffat's Macbeth that makes Macbeth Moffat's, then what's the effect of not hearing the Shakespeare, but instead seeing a Shakespeare-derived plot flattened and deformed by the romantic and comedic genre conventions of British commercial television in the series' versions of A Midsummer Night's Dream and Much Ado About Nothing? As a quodam champion of Geoffrey Sax's recent televised updating of Othello, I do not mean to reject out of hand every example of what I am calling "prose Shakespeare." Indeed, as scripted by Andrew Davies, the 2001 ITV Othello offers brilliantly apt readings of and substitutions for Shakespeare's language, as does, in a more minor key, Mickey B, an Educational Shakespeare Company (ESC) updating of Macbeth, set in Maghaberry Prison in Northern Ireland, directed by Tom Magill and cowritten by Magill and two of his convict-actors Sam McLean and Jason Thompson. Both screenplays are not only differently literate but literary, their updating apparently having been generated by reasons other than the need for mass legibility. But such films stand as proverbial exceptions that prove a related rule, that being that Shakespeare is seldom now identified with the language of his plays as much as with their major characters and plots. Even in recent original-language film adaptations, ranging from Luhrmann's Romeo + Juliet (1996) to Almereyda's and Fodor's Hamlet films, speakers invariably accelerate, flatten, or slur their lines as if to imply that taking verse-speaking seriously would be inconsistent with filmic realism, and that, in the end, the word is not the thing. One does not need, in the end, to endorse Nunn's traditionalist stand to wonder what is so singularly Shakespearean about plots—which Shakespeare himself appropriated and adapted from one medium to another—to have them be the one thing Shakespeare's adapters have decided to remain faithful to in updatings as far afield as the Shakespeare Re-Told (SRT) Much Ado and Dream and Vishal Bhardwaj's Maqbool and Omkara.

Not to belabor the chicken-and-egg question, but what accounts for this situation? Is it merely the conventional privileging of plot in mainstream cinema and television alike that is responsible for both the supersession of original-language Shakespeare and the avoidance of substitute dialogue that might itself be construed as too literary or inventive? Is this supersession rather the predictable by-product of the accelerated displacement of language by image in contemporary visual media in general, a process that began more than one hundred years ago with the advent of silent film? Or is it generated by the perception that both original-language Shakespeare and other avowedly literary forms of contemporary address have become too challenging for mainstream audiences? (This very question makes me wonder whether such a concern motivated Kenneth Branagh's notorious cutting of so many of Rosalind's lines in his recent televised version of As You Like It (2007).) I would assume that any answer would have to include parts of all three explanations, the first two classifiable in terms of medium specificity, with the third tied more to corporate marketing projections than to conclusions based on sustained study or analysis of literacy change (though observations of our own students' growing inability, or reluctance even to try, to grapple with Shakespeare's language could doubt confirm them).

If Shakespeare cannot continue to exist in language that either is becoming incomprehensible to most audiences, or held to be so by those who control the media of production, can his plots alone—firmly yoked as they are to no more than a few well-known characters—both signify and authorize what is construed to be recognizably Shakespearean? My answer would be yes, certainly, and especially for those who get or prefer to take their Shakespeare secondhand, that is, through the media of updatings and spin-offs. In the first place, since the plots serve as structural frameworks for the most famous plays ever written, some half dozen of which continue to make the rounds of most every secondary school in the English-speaking world, they have become deeply embedded in that world's cultural imaginary, some even achieving the status of myths of universal application. (This is especially the case for plays like Romeo and Juliet and King Lear, whose plot has been effectively naturalized in films as far afield as the postwar American films House of Strangers [dir., Frank Mankiewicz, 1949] and Broken Lance [dir., Edward Dmytryk, 1954]—on the one hand, and Akira Kurosawa's Ran [1985] on the other, in most cases without
audiences perceiving the lineal connection.) And, since the plots are nonetheless malleable and freely available to anyone to revise or flesh out, they may, in their new permutations, prove appealing to audiences new to, or completely innocent of, Shakespeare (a group growing larger by the minute).

This is not to say that I anticipate the tyranny of plot to prompt either original-language Shakespeare or Shakespeare's centrality in intertextual transactions to disappear anytime soon. And this is because of three practices I would like to elaborate on in the space remaining. The first of these is the continued use of original language in feature film productions that take far more manifest liberties with setting, dramatic structure, and chronology, and that are particularly venturesome in their use of interpolated visual material and editing practices. The most memorable recent examples of this kind would be the aforementioned films by Luhrmann, Taymor, and Almereyda, whose repurposed style and mode of address convey the same "slanting proximity" to their originals as does the language Moffat deploys in his SRT version of Macbeth. However inferior it may seem by comparison, Alexander Fodor's variably ghoulish and mannered Hamlet—which deploys sounds, settings, and a phenomenology derived from The Matrix films as systematically as Forbidden Planet (1956) mixed 1950s science fiction stylings with popular (mis)understandings of Freud to generate a Tempest for its time—also provides a promising example of doing original-language Shakespeare slant on-screen. In choosing for no obvious reasons to transform Polonius into the sadistic young vixen, Polonia, to turn Horatio into Hamlet's fetching female friend, and to make the even more fetching Ophelia a dependent junkie, Fodor clearly aims to lay a youth-oriented soft-porn—and variably misogynistic and homophobic—gloss on what is often a palpably self-indulgent experiment. Fodor's Hamlet is maddeningly erratic throughout, due no doubt to his lack of experience in the role of master director and script doctor extraordinaire (the "Who is Fodor?" section of the Web site glibly answers, "The son of a Hungarian porn film director, making films out of Berlin and Amsterdam, up to the age of ten he thought all women walked around in the nude," and confesses, "An essential ethos though carries forward from his childhood—there's no point making something if no one watches it"). But the film is also venturesome in ways that most original-language Shakespeare films are not, particularly in its deployment of temporal discontinuity, textual reorganization, presen-

tational acting, and, especially, its use of a virtual space Fodor appropriates from The Matrix (1999) and names the "ghost room"—which becomes the staging ground for Hamlet's meeting with the ghost of his father, for Ophelia's suicide, and, more intriguingly, for several out-of-time sequences when (where?) Hamlet as a child interacts with his still-ghostly father. This device in particular demonstrates how new media can effect not only technical, but phenomenological changes in cinematic conventions, in this instance the conventional flashback, which is here dislocated from a fixed place in a single thinking subject's past to the status of floating recurrence in a stream of seemingly unauthored images and sounds. If other aspects of the film's editing and cinematography seem too much under the influence of Mike Figgis's decidedly slant take on The Duchess of Malfi, in his 2001 film Hotel, that is not, in my view, an unwelcome direction for Shakespeare on-screen to go. It will, in any event, be interesting to compare Fodor's gender-bendings with Julie Taymor's decision to cast Helen Mirren in the role of the female magus, Prospera, in her forthcoming version of The Tempest.

A second, somewhat less-established practice involves the return of heroin to repress Shakespearean verse in modern-language adaptations, something that happens to particularly memorable effect in My Own Private Idaho, Gus Van Sant's 1992 spin on Shakespeare's Henry and Welles's Chimes at Midnight (1966). The Shakespearean repressed also returns in other places where we would least expect to find it, such as, for example, in SRT's versions of Much Ado About Nothing and The Taming of the Shrew, but also in Mickey B, which, as we proceed, may emerge as the unsung hero of this piece. In three instances in Much Ado, we find the play's adaptors taking the kinds of risk that most updates seldom venture by invoking the name and words of Shakespeare in ways that suggest that they and their characters are living both in the play's and the playwright's aftermath. The first time this occurs is when Benedick playfully quotes the phrase "Is this a dagger?" as he brandishes a kitchen knife. The second, more sustained moment occurs in Beatrice and Benedick's recitation of and commentary on Shakespeare's sonnet 116, which ironically concludes with their affirming the poem's claims about marriages of true minds on the basis of the "fact" that Shakespeare really did live and love. The third is when the scriptwriter, David Nicholls, evidently decided that even a contemporary audience could comprehend something
as straightforward as Shakespeare's "There's nothing in this world I love so well as you. Isn't that strange?" a close enough approximation of the lines Benedick speaks in Much Ado (the play) 4.1.287–88 to count as quotation more than paraphrase.

Though it may seem as if I have heretofore lamented the loss of original language in contemporary screen versions of Shakespeare, what I've rather meant to do is critique the loss of pleasure occasioned by their writers' submission (willing or compelled) to the lowest (and laziest) common linguistic denominators (a tendency traceable from William Reilly's willfully inarticulate Men of Respect [1990] to SRT's Midsummer Night's Dream). By contrast, when the two otherwise remote languages of Shakespearean verse and contemporary prose cross as they do here, a considerably richer product results that mixes and matches elevated and elevating discourse with seemingly unstudied and naturalistic dialogue. As the line or lines from the original are uttered—as they are also in the SRT Taming when Petruchio says, "How brightly shines the moon," and Katherine responds, "That's the sun, you bollocks!" both residual and emergent forms of the play engage in productive collaboration with one another even as they compete for dominance.

The impulse to allow what has been repressed to reemerge and reestablish itself is unusually pronounced in Mickey B, where the language is arguably greater for such disparate discourses to clash or collide. Yet no doubt owing to the fact that the three scriptwriters have devised an often-impenetrable form of thieves' cant to substitute for Shakespeare's language, when that language reemerges—as it does, for example, in an only slightly abbreviated version of Macbeth's "sound and fury" speech—it may well sound, at least to the ears of Anglo-American viewers, less strange than the updated Anglo-Irish dialogue, which contains such initially impenetrable localisms as "cair," "dozer," "mucker," "swolly," "lost your marleys," and "throw a warbler," among many others. This naturalization of Shakespearean dialogue through the back door, as it were, complements a concomitant naturalization of the action of the play itself, which effects the transition from Scottish court to Northern Irish prison more smoothly than one might imagine possible. The Maghaberry Macbeth is modestly filmed, and its acting is often as wooden as one might expect, especially in its title role. But the film's ability to remain site-specific—going so far as to substitute Emiliano Zapata's revolutionary vaunt, "Better to die standing than to live on your knees," for Macbeth's more rivalrous "Why should I play the Roman fool and die / On mine own sword?"—while reverting to Shakespearean forms when it cannot claim to do better, in much the way that Benedick, in the SRT Much Ado, is compelled to say "There's nothing in this world I love as well as you," bodes well for future collaborations of this kind in the Shakespearean aftermath.

A third practice that I would like to see developed further involves artists and scholars alike, either separately or in collaboration, employing digital resources to mount reproductions of plays that directly draw on their filmic, theatrical, cultural, and critical histories in the traces of Julie Taymor's Titus and, especially, Peter Greenaway's 1992 Prospero's Books, which is certainly recognizable now, as it was not then, as a trailblazing experiment in database cinema. Such a thought no doubt smacks of that "future past perhaps already being mourned in the ashes of the archive" that the ever-prescient Richard Burt summons up in words I've deployed as this essay's epigraph. But in the Shakespeare aftermath I envision, where the practice of doing original-language productions may largely be relegated to college, university, and summer festival stages, the possibility of making films that no longer seek to perform a version of a play so much as to present the multistoried past, variegated present, and networks of association of individual plays, using every digital resource available, not only seems a consummation devoutly to be wished but a prospect already in our grasp. Indeed, should Shakespeare have even less of a future in the feature-film marketplace than I anticipate, opportunities may well be afforded for a postnarrative screen Shakespeare to develop, geared to the mediated strengths of the Internet, where the artful assembly, display, and delivery of a rich database of information, sounds, and bodies in motion could trump the desire to have successive iterations of Shakespeare's plays reduced to a single narrative and interpretive line. This may sound as if I am advocating a form of encyclopedic documentary, better delegated to the domain of an interactive Web site than to feature film. But both the time and technology seem ripe for the development of films that bring plays or pieces of plays into vibrant—sometimes collusive, sometimes colliding—engagement with what's been made of those plays over time, even as they are in the act of being remade in the present, reimagined and repurposed.
Notes

1. Christy Desmet finds more at work in YouTube videos than I do. Distinguishing her approach to the subject from Richard Burr’s “suggestion that much of Shakespeare is ‘post-hermeneutic,’” Desmet argues that “what gives the amateur productions that I discuss their particular character is their focused attention on specific moments of action and, more important, specific speech acts from the parent text. The engagement between Shakespeare and appropriator is thoroughly rhetorical, a matter of textual give-and-take rather than a wholesale usurpation of the Bard’s words and authority.” In “Paying Attention in Shakespeare Parody: From Tom Stoppard to YouTube,” Shakespeare Survey 61 (2008): 227. As in the days of silent film—when about five hundred Shakespeare-oriented films were made—it is likely the players’ familiarity and status as common property that makes them so often serve as subject matter for parody or imitation. I find YouTube material that challenges the Bard’s authority in more provocative ways more interesting. See, for example, the contributions of Akala, the self-styled black British Shakespeare, at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCECO9IAmUpkN &#61; 1 and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqZYrPxd9CY#feature=related.


4. Ibid., 119.

5. I am clearly treading on subjective ground here, one person’s absolute aberration being another’s signal triumph. Given spatial constraints, I neglect commenting here on SRT’s version of The Taming of a Shrew and Billy Morrissette’s Scotland, PA, both of which I admire, though for reasons that have less to do with their writing than with their “slant” approach to the process and problem of adaptation.

6. Despite being set at an upscale three-star London restaurant, even the more venturesous Mafett Macbeth reproduces plot-turns in Shakespeare’s play that have no reason to be retained in its updated urban scenario (e.g., the murder of its surrogates for Lady Macduff and her children).

7. In a gesture that links his project to Second Life role-playing, Fodor devised a stylish promotional Web site for his film in which major characters—each of whom is designated either a pawn, knight, or king in a chess game apparently designed and executed by Hamlet’s father’s ghost—have their private thoughts expressed in parodic snap-shots formats. See, for example, the entry for Ophelia (subtitled “A Rabbit Caught in the Headlights”): “It’s because I’m a woman isn’t it? People think that just because you’re a woman you can’t think then how come people always say how nice my room is. I picked all the colors. It was ma. You can’t be thick and do that sort of thing” (http://www.hamletmovie.co.uk). Fodor also generously supplies three attributed but incompletely referenced reviews, one of which slams the film for failures and excuses that the other two recuperate and celebrate. For example, what “Donald Richmond” laments—“The acting’s appalling, lines mumbled, even stunted, the beautiful cadences totally ruined”—“John Solamou” considers “very clever stuff . . . that has all the hypnotic grip of watching an open fire” (http://www.hamletmovie.co.uk/Reviews/Reviews1.html).

8. It’s worth noting here that in addition to Hotel, two other films that have done it slant to considerable success are Derek Jarman’s Edward II (1991) and Alex Cox’s Reavers Tragedy (2002), and that the “it” in question has not been Shakespeare, an indication, perhaps, of film-makers’ reluctance to tamper too much with the Bard.

9. For a glimpse of Teynor’s plans, see the following synopsis on the film’s imdb.com Web page: “In Julia Teynor’s version of The Tempest, the gender of Prospero has been switched to Prospera. Going back to the 16th and 17th century, women practicing the magical arts of alchemy were often convicted of witchcraft. In Teynor’s version, Prospera is rapped by her brother and sent off with her four-year daughter on a ship. She ends up on an island; it’s a tabula rasa: no society, so the mother figure becomes a father figure to Miranda. This leads to the power struggle and balance between Caliban and Prospera; a struggle not about brawn, but about intellec” (Written by Anonymous, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1274300/plotsynopsis).

10. As Jason Thompson, the convict-actor who plays the role of Ladyboy, the film’s transvestite surrogate for Lady Macbeth, states, “there’s plenty of boys in here” that can stand comparison with Macbeth, whose “greatest motivating factor is his ambition,” adding that “if they weren’t ambitious, they wouldn’t be in jail because they wouldn’t try to get something that they didn’t already have.” Of the updating of the play itself, Tom Magill, the film’s director states, “I know that Shakespeare is important enough to keep and how we keep Shakespeare and make it relevant to an audience today is by updating or translating him and making him relevant to a new generation and a new group of people. And I think that’s exactly what we’re doing with the Macbeth project at Magdaberry.” Both comments are made in the documentary section of the film’s DVD.

11. See Peter Donaldson, “Shakespeare in the Age of Post-Mechanical Production: Sexual and Electronic Magic in Prospero’s Books,” in Richard Burr and Lynne Branson, eds., Shakespeare the Movie II: Popularising the Plays on Film, TV, Video, and DVD (New York: Routledge, 2008), 105–106. Also see Lewis Manovich, The Language of New Media (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 212–24, for a sustained discussion of database cinema. In a Deleuzian reading of Prospero’s Books, Timothy Murray writes that “Through digital imagery, Deleuze believes, the panoramic organization of space loses the vertical privileging of direction, the screen becomes a database through which information replaces nature, and the ‘brain city’ is subject to the perpetual reorganization of world-memory.” In “You Are How You Read: Baroque Chao-Errancy in Greenaway and Delunize,” in Murray’s Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 132. This is presumably not an exchange that Deleuze favors.

12. The case I’m making here is directly inspired by the brilliantly slant reproduction of Monteverdi’s Orfeo I recently witnessed, which matched a synopsis of Orfeo’s story with the fragmentary musical theme of Black Orpheus (1959) with pitch-perfect renditions of early parts of the opera, followed by the company’s reluctance to continue in that mode, followed by a percussive attack that accomo-
dated the ruptures of *The Rite of Spring* to the rhythms of Debora, followed by bitter recitatives of contemporary relationships gone bad that spoke on behalf of Eurydice, followed by a concluding return to Monteverdi, but this time far more expressively pitched and idiosyncratically rendered than at the start of the proceedings: newly charged, as it were, or recharged. If such productions can be fabricated by a few skilled artists and technicians for performance on a narrow stage in a tent, surely intertextual experiments in kind can be generated on a grander scale for viewing on our shrinking but ever-proliferating screens. *Orfeo* was performed and produced by the Dutch music-theater ensemble, Veenfabriek, under the artistic direction of Paul Koek. The performance in question took place on Governors Island, New York City, September 13, 2009, as part of the New Island Festival.