

Shakesploitation and Shlockspeare in Film Adaptations

Andreea IONESCU*

Abstract

The paper brings forth the issue of the relevance and/ or contemporaneusness of Shakespeare's plays for the twenty-first century audiences. It scrutinises the impact that the globalized contemporary means of mass communication have had on the Bard's work by considering phenomena that Richard Burt calls Shakesploitation or Shlockspeare, which have been introduced on the film market by the Hollywood film industry. In addition, it looks into the problems related to the authorship of all these adaptations, given the numerous (ab)uses that the Shakespearean texts have been subject to lately.

Keywords: Shakespeare, globalisation, authorship, translation, glo-calisation

Nowadays everyone seems to know everything about everyone anywhere in the world as a result of the swiftly growing industry of the media environments and of the expanding online milieu, which have boomed alongside the development of modern means of transportation which currently offer one unprecedented ease of movement around the globe. There are treaties which enable the free passage of merchandise and people virtually everywhere, international alliances which promote peace or offer support in case of war, and all this is done in order to bring everything closer still to oneself. This is part of the globalization process, a widely debated phenomenon through which there is a perpetual exchange between the peoples of the world, arguably, to the point where they might merge into one single unit. Everyone is online in a world of cloud back-ups and information at the tip of the fingers. The contemporary man is spoilt by technology which allows a high degree of personalisation – control appliances with the app on your smartphone, take a nap in traffic while the Tesla car drives you to work, say “Okay Google” and it will tell you where you parked your car, when to pay your bills, how to get to work faster, or how soon you need to do the shopping... People nowadays feel entitled to know everything about everyone with the click of a link; they are in a

*PhD candidate, “Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati, andreea.ionescu@ugal.ro

perpetual and insatiable hunger for knowledge. But it is not scientific breakthroughs that the human race is interested in to the point of mania, it is the private life of the others, especially of superstars, that arouses curiosity more often than not. There is a need for celebrity worldwide television channels or magazines, paparazzi with ultra-high definition cameras which can shoot someone from a considerably large distance, or reality TV shows because people want to know more about their favourite VIPs. The more information one has or can acquire, the better.

Shakespeare and Dislocation

In such a world, one may wonder whether there is still any interest in high culture, and if so, how it might be integrated in the network of popular culture. Maybe there still is some interest in great classics like Shakespeare, Molière or Dostoyevsky, but they seem to be in a tight competition with pop-idols who have to flaunt their assets or create scandals in order to attract any kind of attention.

At a first glance, one might be tempted to say that a writer like William Shakespeare cannot find a place in the twenty-first century culture, that the language used in his texts is outdated and difficult, almost impossible to understand for a teenager nowadays, that the themes of his work are old-fashioned, and so on and so forth. Despite this, Shakespeare could not be more popular. The only difference is that the way in which he is understood has changed.

Perhaps good evidence in this respect is that the romantic comedy *Shakespeare in Love* won the Academy Award in 1998. The film introduces the young playwright, Will Shakespeare, who has lost his creative muse and struggles to finish his latest play, *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter*. Viola, the daughter of a newly enriched nobleman, passionately loves poetry and the theatre and, she auditions for a part in William Shakespeare's play, although women are not allowed to perform on stage in sixteenth-century England. Will falls in love with Viola, who becomes his muse. Infused with newfound inspiration, he rewrites his play into *Romeo and Juliet*. At the premiere of *Romeo and Juliet*, Queen Elizabeth, who is in attendance, forgives Viola for having performed in the play and orders Master Shakespeare a play for the approaching Twelfth Night celebration. Thus Shakespeare writes one of his renowned comedies, which bears the same name. The interesting aspect of this film is, of course, the plot itself. People are not tired of Shakespeare, but they expect from him the same as

from any other star. Film-goers want to see the *real* Shakespeare, not his plays. Or, as Annalisa Castaldo, a Shakespearean film critic, puts it:

I found that everyone I knew wanted my opinion of the film, and I discovered that a surprising number of people (including with undergraduate degrees in English) wanted to know if that was how Shakespeare “really” wrote *Romeo and Juliet*. Historically, scholars know that Shakespeare, in fact, based his play on a popular poem by Arthur Brooke, called *Romeus and Juliet*, which, despite important differences, tells essentially the same story of young love tragically lost. (Castaldo, 2002: 187)

As Queen Elizabeth, Judi Dench won an Oscar, despite the fact that her appearance in the film measures up to almost eight minutes. “This award might appear to confirm the Anglophilia of Hollywood and Britain’s neocolonial status in relation with the US. After all, Dench won for her role as arguably England’s foremost imperial Queen” (Burt, 2003: 23). Considering the award and the questionable appearance of the ‘Queen herself’ in the film (who seems to be there just as a supreme authority that helps the two lovers conceal their misdoings) Richard Burt writes in his essay “Shakespeare, ‘Glo-calization’, Race, and the Small Screens of Post-Popular Culture”: “Queen Elizabeth, yes; Shakespeare, no (unless Hollywoodized as a romantic comedy)” (2003: 24). What Burt is actually hinting at is, in fact, an opinion that is widespread among contemporary literary critics, namely that Shakespeare is being decanonized, dislocated, everywhere in the world, through popular culture or else through the mass-media. While some critics accept this shift of values, others tend to see this phenomenon with reticence. The one thing everyone agrees with is that there has been an alteration of values and that Shakespeare is not seen as he used to be.

This dislocation of Shakespeare appears in either what one might call highbrow pop culture, as illustrated by films like Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo+Juliet* or Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet*, which offer a new artistic view of Shakespeare’s work, or in other forms of pop culture such as porn films, romance novels or ads, for example.

[...] few academics will have heard of romance novels such as Malia Martin’s *Much Ado about Love* (Shakespeare turns out to be Queen Elizabeth’s daughter) or hardcore porn adaptations such as *A Midsummer Night’s Cream* (dir. Stuart Canterbury, 2000), and the even more obscure Hungarian gay porn *Midsummer’s Night Dream* (dir. Steve Cadro, 2000), the futuristic *Macbeth* porno spin-off *In the Flesh* (dir. Stuart Canterbury, 1999),

or porn adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* such as *West Side* (dir. Ren Savant, 2000) and *Shakespeare Revealed* (dir. Ren Savant, 2000). [...] And doubtless few viewers of Michael Almereyda's mainstream film *Hamlet* (2000) will recognize clips taken from the classic porn film *Deep Throat* (dir. Gerard Damiano, 1972) in *Hamlet's* deep inside Denmark film within a film, "The Mousetrap: A Movie". Surely, there are many similar examples no one has ever archived or ever will. (Burt 2002a: 7)

Richard Burt uses the term *Schlockspeare* to refer to any decontextualized, commercial appropriation of Shakespeare. The examples of the expropriation of Shakespeare presented above are but a few of the instances in which the Schlockspeare phenomenon appears. A more common illustration of this phenomenon is that the younger generation tends to associate, more often than not to even identify, a particular actor/actress with the character (s)he played in a certain film. This tendency is highly criticized by Richard Burt. The critic gives the example of a film (*Orange County*, dir. Jake Kasdan, 2002) in which the teacher asks the class whether they have ever been acquainted with the names "Romeo" and "Juliet". At this question one of the students hurriedly answers "Claire Danes" and another one adds "Leonardo DiCaprio". The teacher wittily points out that there is another person involved in that film, one almost as famous as the ones mentioned by the students, namely William Shakespeare, and holds up a Folger edition of *Romeo and Juliet*. Contrary to the first impression, what the teacher in *Orange County* does through his further comments is to value film over literature, as ironically this film presents the modern day adults and youth as having very little consideration for literature (Burt 2003: 14).

An equally interesting example to consider here is an episode of *Blackadder* (1999) in which the protagonist, who gives the name of the show, travels back to the early 1600s in a time machine gone out of control and meets Shakespeare.

[Blackadder] asks Shakespeare to autograph the frontispiece of a script of *Macbeth*, and Shakespeare graciously obliges. As he leaves, Blackadder pauses, however, adding "just one more thing" and he then floors Shakespeare with a punch, explaining "this is for every schoolboy and schoolgirl for the next four hundred years. Have you any idea how much suffering you are going to cause? Hours spent at school desks trying to find one joke in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? Years wearing stupid tights in school plays and saying things like 'What ho, my lord', and 'Oh look, here comes Othello, talking total crap as usual'. (Burt 2003: 24)

This is the usual way in which Shakespeare is received by modern day students. His work is thought of as boring, old-fashioned, outdated, difficult to follow and to understand. So, in order to keep Shakespeare's memory alive, the Schlockspeare phenomenon has emerged.

Transnationalizing Shakespeare

The Shlockspeare phenomenon is actually a small part of a larger current which has been spreading across the world: transnationalism. "In its simplest guise, the transnational can be understood as the global forces that link people or institutions across nations. Key to transnationalism is the recognition of the decline of national sovereignty as a regulatory force in global coexistence" (Ezra, Rowden 2006: 1).

The best example of transnational exchange is provided by the film industry. Since its beginning, films have never been restricted access across borders; for instance, those made in Hollywood were known around the world, regardless of distance. In time, though, this freedom of movement which films had in reaching different countries on different continents became a necessity. "The impossibility of assigning a fixed national identity to much cinema reflects the dissolution of any stable connection between a film's place of production and/or setting and the nationality of its makers and performers" (Ezra, Rowden 2006: 1). As Hollywood started growing, imposing itself as the leading power in the film industry, there was a need for European filmmakers to start international collaborations with companies across the ocean in order to be able to keep up with a more and more demanding public. Thus, alliances across the ocean were made in order to create films, despite the fact that, originally, the French or the British were mostly the authority in making films. Since British-American collaborations in film production became common, in the twenty-first century co-productions involving European or American and Asian producers have emerged.

The transnational comprises both globalization - in cinematic terms, Hollywood's domination of world film markets - and the counterhegemonic responses of filmmakers from former colonial and Third World countries. The concept of transnationalism enables us to better understand the changing ways in which the contemporary world is being imagined by an increasing number of filmmakers across genres as a global system rather than as a collection of more or less autonomous nations. (Ezra, Rowden 2006: 1)

In this context, the Schlockspeare phenomenon merges with another new current involved in transnational exchanges that Richard Burt calls “glo-cali-zation” (2003: 16). What Schlockspeare and glo-cali-zation share is the attempt to introduce Shakespeare to the twenty-first century world of digital and multi-mediatised film industry. As far as Schlockspeare is concerned, the attempt is materialized by adapting Shakespeare to the modern day world, making his work the matter of romantic comedies or even porn films, for instance, or making it the pretext for reflection on issues that the twenty-first century audience might be interested in. As for glo-cali-zation, no one could explain how it functions better than the critic who first introduced the term, Richard Burt:

By “glo-cali-zation”, I mean both the collapse of the local and the global into the “glocal” and the retention of “Cali” (or Hollywood) as the center of the film industry. Shakespeare film adaptations significantly blur if not fully deconstruct distinctions between local and global, original and copy, pure and hybrid, indigenous and foreign, high and low, authentic and inauthentic, hermeneutic and post-hermeneutic, English and other languages. (Burt 2003: 15-16)

But as Hollywood’s authority over the film market increases, there is a new debate on whether Shakespeare truly belongs in a cinema. As it has been mentioned before, in order to get Shakespeare into a Hollywood film, some changes have to made, as in the case of *Shakespeare in Love*, for example. Usually, in order to do so, the first thing that needs adapting is the text itself, so that the so-called computer-generation can understand the language without any problem. The actual difficulty is figuring out what happens to Shakespeare when one adapts his work for the big screen, when one takes away the very thing that mattered in the first place, namely the actual language of the plays. Perhaps this is a mere “dumbing down” (Burt 2002b: 205) of the text for the benefit of an audience accustomed to foolproofing, or it may be truly the necessary, natural next step for the plays to ‘survive’ in the twenty-first century.

Shakesploitation in Teenage Film

There are critics who argue that Shakespeare belongs in theatres, cinemas and so on and so forth, as Shakespeare created his plays for people to enjoy them. Some even maintain that this endless copying of Shakespeare’s work is only for the best. They accept all adaptations of Shakespeare, regardless of how unconventional they might be. They stress the fact that all

adaptations of Shakespeare can only bring about the reinforcement of the sense of universality of Shakespeare's genius. Along these lines, some critics accept that the Schlockspeare phenomenon is anything but new; in fact, they claim that it has been there since Shakespeare's times:

While many accounts of the decontextualized commercial appropriation of Shakespeare (what Richard Burt has dubbed Shlockspeare) presume it to be a modern phenomenon and bastard kin to a "legitimate" tradition in text and performance, one might just as well argue that their origin is unitary: Schlockspeare was there "in the beginning", in the texts performed and pirated in seventeenth-century London. [...] Schlockspeare is the spectre and Shakespeare is the author who polices or indulges him. In other words, it was ever thus, with purists and crowd-pleasers as Siamese twins, the strange stage-fellows unable to survive alone. (Henderson 2002: 109)

On the other hand, there are critics in whose opinion Shakespeare, as a world symbol of high culture, cannot belong in what they call second-rate films and adaptations of Shakespeare are, in some way, almost an insult to what the genius of Shakespeare represents for the history of literature. To represent their position, Richard Burt, who also came up with the terms "glo-cali-zation" and "Schlockspeare", has coined the term "Shakesploitation" (2002b). He argues that many of the films which were produced in the 1990s are quite similar in plot to some of Shakespeare's works. He insists that, after the hit success of *The Titanic*, ingeniously enough named "Romeo and Juliet on a boat" by film critics in the reviews of that time, the film industry started being monopolized by the so-called "teensploitation" films (2002b: 205). These are films which have as a background the love story of a teenage couple. Usually, a girl looked on as a social dropout, the so-called 'figure of the loser', meets the really popular boy whom she considers, at first, to be unreachable and rude, ill-intended, and even quite slow. This type of girl is usually very smart, always gets good grades, reads Shakespeare and is almost always a virgin. She is the very opposite of the popular, beautiful, not-so-smart ex-girlfriend of the boy. As the action unfolds, the boy starts gaining the trust of the unpopular girl who falls in love with him. Toward the end of the film, the boy's love and honesty are put to the test and the female protagonist gets the impression that the boy was not honest, proving her instinct right. But, for the film to have a serious profit, a happy-ending is compulsory. And so, the protagonist is proven wrong in a public display of affection almost always

accompanied by a public humiliation of the boy, whose reputation is cleared and they both live happily until...graduation.

The flicks project a cinematic fantasy wherein the ugly duckling, intelligent Cinderella-like heroine will triumph over her (usually) hotter but dumber rivals, not only winning the hunky guy but ending up with a far better relationship than the superficial rival would ever be able to manage. "Girls," these films call out, "you can stay a sober virgin, and he'll still be into you!" (Burt 2002b: 206)

As it has been stated above, many such teen films have the work of Shakespeare as a source of inspiration, but critics like Richard Burt argue that, because of their leaving behind the original language, the only thing these adaptations do is to "dumb down Shakespeare in fulfilling manufactured preteen fantasies about being popular" (Burt 2002b: 207). This argument could go on endlessly, though, considering that none of the above presented sides has no evidence to support their theories other than their own views.

Authorship in Adaptations

Another controversy related to adaptations of Shakespeare's plays concerns the authorial status. Given that adaptations have various "amounts" of Shakespeare left in them, a new question arises, more than naturally, namely whose work these adaptations really are - whether they can still be considered Shakespeare's or should be credited to someone else such as the director, or maybe the script writer. This, in turn, is a result of the constant deliberating over whether a play performed at any given time is put on as Shakespeare had *intended*. The matter could also be regarded as one of bias. Everyone makes presumptions about how Shakespeare *should* be performed, be the staging a so-called classical one, or an innovative one, not to even mention that there are innumerable translations across languages, genres or time. Yukio Ninagawa's London production of the *Twelfth Night* introduces the British audience to a kabuki performance of the famous play, and it is indeed debatable how much of the Bard survives and how much gets lost in translation.

A very good example of a translation over time may be the 2001 Shakespeare adaptation of *Othello, O*, which uses a twenty-first century setting for the screening of the Shakespearean tragedy. In this modern version of Shakespeare's *Othello*, Odin James is the African-American star of the basketball team at a predominantly white boarding school. He is expected to become a big basketball star and is in love with Desi, the most

popular girl in the school. Hugo, the coach's son, is outshone on court by Odin, and has a difficult relationship with his father who treats Odin like a son. Ultimately, Hugo's feelings of envy and neglect lead him to plot against Odin, to make him doubt Desi's love for him, so that he would be overwhelmed by jealousy, just like Othello. Although the script is based on William Shakespeare's great tragedy, the only thing that has remained from the original play is the plot outline. Thus, the director presents to his audience an *Othello* without any of the things traditionally expected from a screening of this play: there is no Venice, no Ottoman threat, no sixteenth century setting, and, foremost, there is nothing left of the thing which best characterizes Shakespeare's work, i.e., the language. As such, audience and critics alike may be left puzzling over the obvious question of authorship of such an adaptation, or translation, for in all honesty, the work of the adaptor, in this case where so much has been changed, may be considered just as original as the play adapted had once been.

A possible way out of this seemingly never-ending authorial debate has been offered by W.B. Worthen in his book, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*. He starts from Peter Shillingsburg's theory about "the relationship between the immaterial work and its manifestations" that Shillingsburg terms "*version, text, document*" in the attempt "to clarify the complex relationship between works, texts and performances" (Worthen 1997: 11). As Shillingsburg puts it, the text is:

the actual order of words and punctuation as contained in any one physical form, such as manuscript, proof, or book. A text is the product of the author's, or the author-and others', physical activity in the attempt to store in tangible form the version the author currently intends. And yet a text (the *order* of words and punctuation) has no substantial or material existence, since it is not restricted by time and space. That is, the same text can exist simultaneously in the memory, in more than one copy or in more than one form. The text is contained and stabilized by the physical form, but is not the physical form itself. Each text represents more or less well a version of the work. (qtd. in Worthen 1997: 11)

Along these lines, the concept of *work* is blurred and almost acquires the air of an old legend that nobody knows exactly what it refers to, but everybody believes in. Nevertheless, Worthen argues that "the work at any time consists in the multiplicity of its versions, the history of its transmission, reception, consumption" (1997: 14).

Taking this into account, there is no need to legitimate the various adaptations of Shakespeare, be they Trevor Nunn's or those of the Japanese

kabuki director Yukio Ninagawa, because, as Worthen describes the phenomenon, they are all performances:

Editorial theory elaborates the sense that what Barthes means by *a text* is more like what we usually mean by a *performance*: a production of a specific version of the work in which a variety of intertextual possibilities are materialized, and which produces a variety of ways of understanding the work. Editorial critics frequently invoke “performance” to characterize the relationship between works and texts, how texts appear to assume an authentic relation to works, or become the vehicles of authorized meanings. (Worthen 1997: 16)

By regarding every adaptation as performance, such matters as authority are partly avoided. This does not mean, though, that the dispute on this matter is considered closed.

Another explanation for this need to ‘translate’ Shakespeare in various ways and for its impact on the issue of authorship is provided by Elsie Walker:

... these films demonstrate the “positives” of postmodernism [Hutcheon] identifies: the recognition of cultural and temporal differences, the freedom that comes with realizing there is no “final” text, the democratization of art (mixing “high” and “low” elements), the use of parody and playfulness to challenge the “authority” and “authenticity” of a “revered” text in the process of reclaiming that text for a wide, contemporary audience. (Walker 2006: 27)

All in all, as far as Shakespeare is concerned, it appears that he is here to endure in the collective consciousness. As far as Hollywood is concerned, as long as people pay to see ‘teensploi’ adaptations, there will be someone willing to produce them. Whether one chooses to accept or reject all these ‘translations’ as part of the story that Shakespeare has been telling for centuries, there is one simple truth that remains: this is the evolution that Shakespeare has had to go through in order to ‘survive’ the twenty-first century; whether one likes it or not, it is the stepping stone to whatever the future holds for the Bard and his audience.

References

- Burt, R. (2002a). ‘To e- or not to e-? Disposing of Schlockspeare in the Age of Digital Media’. In Burt, R. (ed.). *Shakespeare after Mass Media*. New York, Hampshire: Palgrave, 1-32
- Burt, R. (2002b). ‘T(e)en Things I Hate about Girlene Shakesploitation Flicks in the Late 1990s, or Not-So-Fast Times at Shakespeare High’. In Lehman, C. and

- Starks, L. S. (eds.). *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema*. Madison, Teaneck: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, London: Associated University Presses, 205-232
- Burt, R. (2003). 'Shakespeare, 'Glo-cal-i-zation', Race, and the Small Screens of Post-popular Culture'. In Burt, R. and Boose, L. E. (eds.). *Shakespeare, the Movie 2. Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, Video, and DVD*. London and New York: Routledge, 14-36
- Castaldo, A. (2002). 'The Film's the Thing: Using Shakespearean Film in the Classroom'. In Lehman, C. and Starks, L. S. (eds.). *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema*. Madison, Teaneck: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, London: Associated University Presses, 187-204
- Ezra, E. and Rowden, T. (2006). 'What is Transnational Cinema?'. In Ezra, E. and Rowden, T. (eds.). *Transnational Cinema, the Film Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 1-12
- Henderson, D. E. (2002). 'Shakespeare: The Theme Park'. In Burt, R. (ed.). *Shakespeare after Mass Media*. New York, Hampshire: Palgrave, 107-126
- Walker, E. (2006). 'Getting Back to Shakespeare: Whose Film is it Anyway?'. In Henderson, D. E. (ed.). *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 8-30
- Worthen, W.B. (1997). *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press