

# Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance

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## Introduction: Re-writing and Translating Shakespeare's Originality in a Global Culture

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José Manuel González\*

## **Introduction: Re-writing and Translating Shakespeare's Originality in a Global Culture**

Shakespeare continues to feature in the construction and refashioning of national cultures and identities in a variety of original forms. Recent discussions about originality have forced us to re-assess what we mean by Shakespeare, for originality is not only something pertaining to the past, going backwards in time to an “origin”, but also refers to “original” interpretations of Shakespeare in modern culture, which break away from a tradition, and provide modern reformulations. In the light of these views that demand a reevaluation of Shakespeare as an original author, we need to rethink the idea of Shakespeare's originality today in a variety of places and forms. But first we should clarify what we understand by originality, or being original, as the term can be confusing since it is often related to authenticity, innovation, creativity and imitation. Besides, how many ways of being original are there? Is it only due to the genius of the artist, to the appreciation of the critic or to the culture of the reader/spectator, if we take culture as “a mental construct which fuses together elements of myth and history, desire and projection, imagination, and accomplishment.”<sup>1</sup> We should also take into account the contested legacy of originality of post-colonial Shakespeares in former British possessions as well as post-national Shakespeares which have become the focus of debates concerning national mythologizing and multiculturalism. Originality is, therefore, a complex topic that needs further consideration. Some have attempted to define what makes Shakespeare original by referring to his uniqueness in order to explain his genius in some way. As Jonathan Bate claims, “‘Genius’ was a category to account for what was peculiar about Shakespeare.”<sup>2</sup> If he had not been original and had been deemed to be just the same as every other writer, then he would not be held in such high regard four hundred years on. It might also be argued, as Edwards Said observed, that since “the writer thinks of writing originally, and

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<sup>1</sup> David T. Gies. “A Modern Spanish Culture. An Introduction.” *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Spanish Culture*. Ed. T.S. Gies. Cambridge University Press, 1999, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Bate. *The Genius of Shakespeare*. London: Picador, 1997, 163.

more of rewriting, the image of writing changes from original inscription to parallel script, from tumbled-out our confidence to deliberate fathering-forth.”<sup>3</sup> Thus re-writing transcends imitation and origins.

The volume, therefore, explores new original ways of appropriating, interpreting and re-producing Shakespeare today in different cultures and contexts in accordance with particular interests and anxieties, showing the ideological tension inherent in the local versus the global, in originality versus other original forms and reproductions. Within a theoretical framework, Marcela Kostihova’s paper is concerned with the question of the “authentically original,” proposing a re-definition of what we mean by “originality” and “authenticity” today, and their ideological and social implications, since our readings and interpretations of texts are firmly anchored in the pressures of the present. She shows how the tension between the two concepts causes further trouble when we come to deal with the original/authentic Shakespeare in a global economy, where these two concepts have become central in the market. If “meaning is ideologically produced at the point of consumption, erasing the meaning-making mechanism of the source-culture,” what do we mean, then, by original within a consumer culture? In this way, she calls into question the possibility of making Shakespeare original today, as her reading of *Twelfth Night* illustrates. Since our interpretations are always changing, depending on the commodification of individualized subjectivity and selective consumption, Shakespeare’s originality remains “perpetually elusive” in a world that constantly re-creates values.

The articles by Martin Prochazka and Paul Innes deal with the process by which Shakespeare has been transformed into a national icon, which, in some ways, has become normatively constitutive of the national identity as seen in the re-writings of his plays in a particular historical context, where the mythologizing takes place. Thus Shakespeare is nationalized due to his transcendent originality as is the case of Shakespeare’s national appropriation in Czech 19th century drama at a time of great social and political upheaval. Martin Prochazka analyses the literary and ideological complexity of the times when Shakespeare was appropriated through a kind of “ideologization of historical time,” triggering tensions between the original text and the national re-working of Shakespeare, who shaped the historical consciousness of modern Czech culture and drama. Besides, the re-writing of Shakespeare’s history in the case of Josef Kajetán Tyl and Karel Hynek Mácha, two of the greatest dramatists of the period, was done in accordance with personal preoccupations and literary interests, as shown in their different use of Shakespeare’s historical material.

Paul Innes, for his part, is interested in the making of a national poet, as representative of a language and of a culture, where poets tended to be iconized

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Said. “On Originality.” *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 135.

and canonized as a consequence of “the national emotional appeal to notions of national identity.” He goes on to analyze the process of this elevation in the literary and historical context of other literatures, departing from the Kalevala, a collection of Finnish oral poetry widely regarded as the Finnish national epic, following the analogy with the classical epic inherited from the Greeks and Romans. From this perspective, Edmund Spenser and John Milton should have been the best candidates for the position of national poets, since they wrote epic poems, *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost*, respectively, which might have been regarded as national poems not only of England but also of the nascent British empire. However, “since the specific circumstances of English epic poets render either of the two candidates unsuitable for the position,” the tragedy, based on Aristotle’s precepts, became a most satisfying literary form that provided a deeper aesthetic experience. Thus, the turn from epic to tragedy, he argues, facilitated the process of Shakespeare’s nomination as national poet, culminating in the Stratford Jubilee of 1769, when Shakespeare was firmly established as the unrivalled master of English letters. Since then, his ubiquitous presence and fame have been synonymous with the highest claims of contemporary nationalism, so that simply to be English is to inherit him as the privileged cultural icon.

A very different stance is adopted by Jonathan Baldo, who makes a radically contrary claim as he suggests that *The Merchant of Venice* is one of Shakespeare’s plays that “actively demystify the very idea of nationhood” in the context of economic nationalism and xenophobia, as the idea of nationhood appears “as a fragile and provisional construct, an imaginary unity forged by suppressing countervailing values and voices,” while in other contemporary plays like Haughton’s *Englishmen for My Money* there is a different response to the climate of the 1590s. In his analysis of the two plays, he opposes estrangement to domestication in the wake of transnationality, reflecting the instability of concepts like unity and identity under the pressure of economic growth at home and abroad. The irony lies in the fact that Haughton uses foreignness to promote national values, while Shakespeare employs it to reflect the internal division of English society, as dramatized in the play.

Originality also entails a process of translation that makes it culturally meaningful at different times in different places, acting as pre-condition of other subsequent originalities. However, Shakespeare as a global phenomenon should be considered not only as translational through a creative act of reproduction, adaptation and innovation, but also as translation through the rendering of an original text into another language. Originality, therefore, is closely linked to the idea of translation in two ways. In the first place, as an antecedent that makes available that originality and, secondly, as re-creation with its own aesthetic and cultural value, taking the original beyond its language and national borders, as Daniel Gallimore shows in his study of Shōyō’s Shakespearean translations into

Japanese, which were meant to reform the traditional kabuki theatre and to develop modern Japanese productions under the influence of Western models. He firmly believed that drama should convey the aesthetic experience through the power of beautiful language—that should also be appropriate for performance—and the voice of the actor to enact it.

Robert Sawyer's contribution shows how far adaptations go in the reproduction of an original text, raising questions about how true they are to the original, how they achieve novelty departing from that original text, and how originality and national origins intersect in Orson Welles's "Voodoo" *Macbeth*, a multicultural production deeply concerned with race issues. The three act-play with an all-black cast follows the basic Shakespearean plot with some changes due to Welles's engagement with postcolonial interests and multicultural values as shown in the magical realism of the Haitian setting. Thus, Scotland was transformed into a 19th Haitian location, the wayward sisters were re-imagined as Voodoo priestesses and Henry Christophe, a historical tyrant, became the new Macbeth, suggesting "the never-ending cycle of corruption in many post-colonial era leaders." It was an instant commercial success thanks to Welles's ability to captivate audiences and defy all expectations by raising contemporary social issues and by drawing uncomfortable attention to national problems.

The two final papers explore how Shakespeare's productions help expand and nuance the construction of Shakespeare as a site of cultural origins and origination of postcolonial re-writing. On the one hand, Sanju Thomas analyses V. Sambasivan's adaptation of *Othello* in *kathaprasangam*, where the original Shakespeare play is taken to a postcolonial context through a process of acculturation and "through selective suppression, adaptation and appropriation" of the original text, incorporating local popular elements and making Shakespeare's story available to the community. Sarkar Abhishek, on the other, examines Rudrapal Natak, a Bengali adaptation of *Macbeth* by Haralal Ray within the problematic context of Hindu nationalism. Thus "the play remarkably translocates the mythos and ethos of Shakespeare's original onto a Hindu field of signifiers," where the witches' scenes are substituted by a version of the Tantra, serving "as a platform for cultural re-formulation."