CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS OF SHAKESPEARE

SHAKESPEARE AND THE MODERN DRAMATIST

Michael Scott

Shakespeare and the Modern Dramatist

Michael Scott
Professor of English
Sunderland Polytechnic

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NOTE ON THE SHAKESPEAREAN TEXT

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1

Introduction: Re-Interpreting Shakespeare

Shakespeare could be considered a thief. I am not referring to his poaching exploits on the Charlecote estate but to his plays. Shakespeare 'stole' his stories from historical chronicles, prose and poetic romances, classical, medieval and Tudor drama. He recreated stories for public and private stages during a particular historical period. Professional theatre was his career and he was successful in it. He was intrinsically involved on its business as well as its artistic side, having a financial investment in his company and its theatre. He remains big business today, recreationally and educationally. His texts are set for intermediate, advanced and degree level examinations. In Stratford, England and 'Stratfords' elsewhere, he has theatres and companies in his name, dedicated to performing his work. Over recent years the BBC has presented all thirty-seven known plays written by him and exported them throughout the five continents. He is ranked with the very few – Beethoven, Mozart, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Picasso, Tolstoy – as one of the greatest artists of Western civilisation; a man who Ben Jonson proclaimed was for all time. Yet as a dramatist his 'universality' is peculiar in that his artifacts are not 'fixed'. Stanley Wells writes:

> If Shakespeare is, in Ben Jonson's phrase, 'for all time', this is partly because he demands the collaboration of those who submit themselves to him, – demands not merely intelligence of response, such as is demanded by, for instance, *Paradise Lost* or *Middlemarch*, but demands a more creative response, and demands it from the reader as well as the performer . . . this is to some extent a feature of the medium in which he was working. Compare, for example, a play with a film. A film is fixed, determined. Like a play, it is a collaborative product; but the

> collaboration is simultaneous, and once it has occurred it is over. A film, like a naturalistic painting, is closed, final, of its age, a period piece. But plays go on growing and developing. They are capable of having a life of their own.[1]

Although the text of a play must be located within the particular historical period in which it was first composed, it is not fixed to that period in terms of its life in performance. Dramatic texts are imperfect artifacts in that their creators, the dramatists, do not have complete authority over what is performed. Implicit within the composition by a playwright of a dramatic text there is an instability which the nineteenth-century Swiss innovator of theatrical lighting Adolphe Appia claimed results in a weakening of drama as an artistic form of expression:

> In every work of art there must be a harmonious relationship between feeling and form, a perfect balance between the idea which the artist wishes to express and the means he uses to express it. If one of the means seems to us clearly unnecessary to the expression of the idea, or if the artist's idea – the object of his expression – is only imperfectly communicated to us by the means he employs, our aesthetic pleasure is weakened, if not destroyed.[2]

Certainly the experience of twentieth-century dramatists has shown them not to have control over the final product of their drama. Chekhov almost despaired at Stanislavski's interpretation of his plays which turned his comedy of *The Cherry Orchard* into a naturalistic tragedy. Ionesco records his surprise on seeing the first performance of his play, *The Bald Prima Donna*, dealing with the tragic absurdity of the human condition, being received with joyful hilarity by the audience. Bernard Shaw wrote meticulous stage directions and prefaces to instruct his directors and actors as to exactly how he wanted his plays performed. Practice demonstrates, however, that such instructions can be considered, followed or left at the directors' and actors' discretions. Edward Bond attempts to be involved with major productions of most of his plays but still complained, for example, of the RSC's use of music within Barry Kyle's production of *Lear* in 1983.[3] Like all artists the dramatist has no control over the reception of his work but neither has he over the collaborative creative interpretation demanded by his art form.

Even in the dramatist's own day he/she is faced with the problem of creative collaboration. Shakespeare's famous admonishment of his clowns in *Hamlet* (3.2.36f.) has no doubt found sympathy with many playwrights. With 400-year-old drama there is the added problem of what Shakespeare actually wrote. The plays were pirated, changed, developed. Improvisations were not recorded. Rival companies cheated. The first publication of *Hamlet*, the Bad Quarto (1603), was pirated and as such is fragmentary, as the soliloquies as well as other factors indicate. Compare, for example, the following extracts from the first quarto with the speeches as they are generally recorded in any modern edition where the editors rely more heavily on the second publication, the Good Quarto (1604), and the first collected edition, the First Folio (1623). I will give an extract first from probably the most famous speech in the play as found in the New Penguin edition (1980) which is widely employed theatrically and educationally, and follow this by an extract from the Bad Quarto. As will be seen the Bad Quarto's lines for the soliloquy are something of a hotchpotch:

> To be, or not to be – that is the question;
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep –
> No more – and by a sleep to say we end
> The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep –
> To sleep – perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub . . .
>
> New Penguin edition 3.1.56–65

> To be, or not to be, I there's the point
> To Die, to sleepe, is that all? I all:
> No, to sleepe, to dreame, I mary there it goes,
> For in that dreame of death, when wee awake,
> And borne before an euerlasting Iudge,
> From whence no passenger euer retur'nd,
> The vndiscouered country, at whose sight
> The happy smile, and the accursed damn'd . . .
>
> Bad Quarto[4]

Similarly the earlier soliloquy 'O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I' as printed in the Bad Quarto (where in fact it is a later soliloquy!) might prove surprising. Again I will begin with the opening lines in the New Penguin edition:

> Now I am alone.
> O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
> Is it not monstrous that this player here,
> But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
> Could force his soul so to his own conceit
> That from her working all his visage wanned,
> Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
> A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
> With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing.
> For Hecuba!
> What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,
> That he should weep for her? . . .
>
> New Penguin edition 2.2.546–57

> Why what a dunghill idiote slauve am I?
> Why these Players here draw water from eyes:/
> For Hecuba, why what is Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?
> What would he do and if he had my losse?
> His father murdred, and a Crowne bereft him,
> He would turne all his teares to droppes of blood,
> Amaze the standers by his laments,
> Strike more then wonder in the iudiciall eares,
> Confound the ignorant, and make mute the wise,
> Indeede his passion would be general . . .
>
> Bad Quarto[5]

Textual scholars attempt in their editions and writings to approximate the original design and content of the Shakespearean play which is not necessarily its first edition or indeed any single edition. When we talk therefore of the 'authentic Shakespearean text', we are employing a misnomer. What is usually being referred to is the text as edited and reconstituted from the various Elizabethan and Jacobean Quartos and the Folio that have survived.

The textual history of the plays is different from the performance history. From their first appearance Shakespeare's plays have been

subject to adaptation and recreative interpretation. The most famous seventeenth-century re-write is probably Nahum Tate's *King Lear* (1681) with its happy ending. But Tate's version of *King Lear* is less revolutionary than many other versions of Shakespearean plays throughout the centuries.[6] Titles were changed, characters edited out or their lines increased. *The Merchant of Venice* for example in 1701 became under George Granville (Lord Lansdowne) *The Jew of Venice*, being 'improved' with lines such as the following for Shylock:

> 'I have a Mistress, that outshines 'em all –
> 'Commanding yours – and yours, tho' the whole Sex.
> 'O may her Charms encrease and multiply:
> 'My Money is my Mistress! Here's to
> 'Interest upon Interest.
>
> *Drinks*[7]

During the nineteenth century, in particular, there was a vogue for Travesties and Burlesques comically feeding off Shakespearean plays and enjoying titles such as *The Rise and Fall of Richard III; or A New Front to an Old Dicky* (1868) or *A Thin Slice of Ham let!* (1863) in which Hamlet soliloquises:

> Dad's widow and his brother joined in one,
> Makes me her nephew and my uncle's son!
> A nice mixed pickle I am in; no doubt,
> 'Twould puzzle Lord Dundreary to find out
> My kindred to my dear aunt-mother here,
> But that I am my own first cousin's clear.[8]

One such burlesque by W. S. Gilbert, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* (1874) has an affinity this century with Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.[9] Some of the finest 'adaptations' of Shakespeare, however, were to take place towards the end of the nineteenth century in terms of Verdi's translations of Shakespearean plays into opera. His *Macbeth* (1847, rev. edn 1865), *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893) are within an artistic tradition of creating opera from Shakespearean texts as with for example Rossini's *Otello* (1816) and Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (1830) or in the present century Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960). In

ballet Prokofiev's masterpiece, *Romeo and Juliet* (1938) must rank as one of the finest interpretations made of a Shakespearean play, although one dependent in its theatrical interpretation on its various choreographers over the years: Lavrosky, Ashton, MacMillan, Nureyev. Main-line Shakespearean production in the nineteenth century allowed for interpolations and was often followed by dramatic squibs, dances or other entertainments. Henry Irving allowed for elaboration and spectacle in his Shakespearean productions, and was not averse to interpolating an episode in order to enhance his interpretations of the play. As Shylock, for example, he made what has become a famous addition to the action, showing the Jew returning to his home unaware of Jessica's recent elopement:

> The scene showed the Jew's house, "with a bridge over the canal which flows by it, and with a votive lamp to the Virgin on the wall. There a barcarolle is sung by some Venetians on a gondola, and a number of masqueraders rush merrily past." As the sound of their laughter and music died away, the curtain descended. . . . After a few moments, the curtain was raised once more, showing the same scene, but now silent and deserted. Shylock appeared, "lantern in hand, advancing, bent in thought," and as he drew close to the house – still unaware that it is now empty – the curtain fell. In later performances, he sometimes knocked at the door.[10]

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the Meiningen Company under the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen and his director Chronegk began a European movement to invest Shakespearean production with an historical authenticity, although one that related *Julius Casear* for example to a nineteenth-century rather than an Elizabethan historical view of Rome. The Meiningen experiments were overtaken by the naturalist movements in acting perpetrated by Antoine and Stanislavsky, a form of acting prevalent to the present day. In the early part of this century attempts were made by William Poel and Harley Granville-Barker to return to the 'authentic' Elizabethan texts and performances and since then similar experiments have continued periodically in a variety of theatres. Plans are presently afoot to recreate the second Globe Theatre on London's South Bank. What is interesting for our discussion is the realisation that a Shakespearean play is not a stable entity.

Surrounding what we popularly consider to be Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or *The Merchant of Venice* is both a textual and an intertextual history. The former refers to literary attempts to discover the text, the latter to the traditions that have grown around it through its performance over the centuries. Actors continue, develop or react against certain traditions. As will be noted later,[11] Henry Irving's portrayal of Shylock was one staging post in the creation of a theatrical character going back to the eighteenth-century actor Charles Macklin, who himself was reacting against another tradition, and looking forward to Laurence Olivier or Emrys James. When in 1984/85 Antony Sher shocked audiences by his portrayal of Richard III as a spider-like creature on crutches, he was necessarily reacting against a modern audience's intertextual acquaintance with the character as portrayed by Laurence Olivier in his 1955 film. Olivier's portrayal, however, was itself a development of an existing tradition of acting the role going back through the centuries. Even though Sher affronted audience expectation by playing against the Olivier tradition he still fed off the intertextual life of the play. Keir Elam drawing on work by Julia Kristeva, has instructively written about the intertextual nature of a play:

> Appropriate decodification of a given text derives above all from the spectator's familiarity with *other* texts . . . the genesis of the performance itself is necessarily intertextual: it cannot but bear the traces of other performances at every level, whether that of the written text (bearing generic, structural and linguistic relations with other plays), the scenery (which will 'quote' its pictorial or proxemic influences), the actor (whose performance refers back, for the cognoscenti, to other displays), directorial style, and so on. 'The text', remarks Julia Kristeva, 'is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality. In the space of a single text several *énoncés* from other texts cross and neutralize each other'.[12]

One of the dangers with such intertextual neutralisation is that Shakespeare ceases to challenge or confront audiences but rather declines into mundanely fulfilling or extending certain expectations. This in turn can lead to a deadly theatre; a processed culture which has no significant communicative value. Perhaps it was with such a tamed Shakespeare in mind that the French dramatic theorist, Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) proclaimed 'Elizabethan theatre works stripped of the lines; retaining only their period

machinery, situations, characters and plot'. Artaud was concerned about the inertia that he saw as being prevalent in the common presentation of classic drama. In his seminal work *The Theatre and Its Double* he advocates the need to regain theatre's mythic strength which he believes is required for the sake of mankind:

> Either we will be able to revert through theatre by present-day means to the higher idea of poetry underlying the Myths told by the great tragedians of ancient times, with theatre able once more to sustain a religious concept, that is to say without any mediation or useless contemplation, without diffuse dreams, to become conscious and also be in command of certain predominant powers, certain ideas governing everything . . . or else we might as well abdicate now without protest, and acknowledge we are fit only for chaos, famine, bloodshed, war and epidemics.[13]

In this respect Artaud, whilst admitting that 'the Theatre I wanted to create presupposed a different form of civilisation',[14] advocates a theatre where the dreams, desires and fears of the audience are distilled by the dramatic performance. The theatre for Artaud has to be appropriate to present reality not to the past. The notion of classic drama is a dangerous anachronism and one which must be reacted against:

> Past masterpieces are fit for the past, they are no good to us. We have the right to say what has been said and even what has not been said in a way that belongs to us, responding in a direct and straightforward manner to present-day feelings everybody can understand. . . . In the long run, Shakespeare and his followers have instilled a concept of art for art's sake in us, art on the one hand and life on the other, and we might rely on this lazy, ineffective idea as long as life outside held good, but there are too many signs that everything which used to sustain our lives no longer does so and we are all mad, desperate and sick. And I urge *us* to react.[15]

The extent of Artaud's influence on the development of contemporary theatre and particularly on the adaptation of Shakespearean drama is hard to judge. Some dramatists such as Edward Bond,

have gone to some pains to deny an affinity between Artaudian theory and their work. Charles Marowitz on the other hand has explicitly promoted Artaudian ideas both in his productions and in his writing although he is clearly not solely dependent on the French dramatic theorist. Connections could also be detected between some of the apocalyptic Artaudian theory and absurdist drama particularly that of Ionesco. It is no coincidence that the first English translation of Ionesco's *Macbett* was made for the stage, in the USA by Marowitz. In the 1960s Peter Brook with the Royal Shakespeare Company staged a number of Artaudian experiments with his famous *Theatre of Cruelty* season and to a lesser extent with his 1962 *King Lear*. In each case Marowitz was involved.

Although Artaud recognised that the theatrical revolution which he advocated was necessarily dependent upon a change in social order his work lacks the political motivation found in the theory and much of the drama of Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956). Yet there is an affinity in their belief that Shakespearean drama has ceased to retain its Elizabethan force. In his sonnet *On Shakespeare's Play Hamlet* Brecht debunks the Prince of Denmark and bourgeois attitudes towards him and his play:

> Here is the body, puffy and inert
> Where we can trace the virus of the mind.
> How lost he seems among his steel-clad kind
> This introspective sponger in a shirt!
>
> Till they bring drums to wake him up again
> As Fortinbras and all the fools he's found
> March off to win that little patch of ground
> 'Which is not tomb enough . . . to hide the slain.'
>
> At that his solid flesh starts to see red
> He feels he's hesitated long enough
> It's time to turn to (bloody) deeds instead.
>
> So we can nod when the last Act is done
> And they pronounce that he was of the stuff
> To prove most royally, had he been put on.[16]

Clearly it was the nodding Shakespeare audience Brecht wanted

to challenge with his adaptations of a number of plays, including his renowned *Coriolanus* (which wasn't actually realised in production until after his death).[17] Brecht wished to break down audience expectations of classic drama in order to rescue them from decadent empathetic responses. For him the malaise was one detectable throughout theatre:

> . . . our enjoyment of the theatre must have become weaker than that of the ancients, even if our way of living together is still sufficiently like theirs for it to be felt at all. We grasp the old works by a comparatively new method – empathy – on which they rely little. Thus the greater part of our enjoyment is drawn from other sources than those which our predecessors were able to exploit so fully. . . . Our theatres no longer have either the capacity or the wish to tell these stories, even the relatively recent ones of the great Shakespeare, at all clearly. . . . We are more and more disturbed to see how crudely and carelessly men's life together is represented, and that not only in old works but also in contemporary ones constructed according to the old recipes. Our whole way of appreciation is starting to get out of date.[18]

It is this reaction too which many of the dramatists of the plays considered in this book are attempting to correct in one way or another. The selection chosen for discussion demonstrates how a variety of dramatists – all of whom are still writing – have fed off, re-written or brought into question both the textuality and intertextuality of the Shakespearean canon.[19] On the one hand, for example, Edward Bond reacts against the notion of a universal Shakespeare, a man for all time. He creates in *Lear* a socialist drama, specifically re-aligning the *King Lear* myth for the late twentieth century. On the other hand Tom Stoppard is happy to proclaim the Elizabethan's universality stating in a 1980 lecture *Is It True What They Say About Shakespeare?* that Shakespeare 'calls spirits up from the vasty deep, spirits which manifest themselves into a paradigm of human emotion, action and expression, and when he calls them up they come'.[20] His *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* rather than re-aligning the *Hamlet* myth, forms instead a commentary in comedy on the play, thereby providing a further interpretative perspective which may well send the audience back to Shakespeare refreshed and ready to see his work anew.[21]

Stoppard in other words despite the zaniness of his drama works within the boundaries of bourgeois theatre whilst Bond attacks them, trying to free his theatre from them. Not all the plays discussed, however, were written with a Shakespearean model in mind. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* for example and to a lesser extent Pinter's *The Homecoming* have provoked a critical and sometimes theatrical response whereby they have naturally been compared to Shakespearean models. The discussion considers how or why these plays have provoked such reactions. Marowitz and Wesker are considered together in their reaction to *The Merchant of Venice* which they both find to be an offensive play for modern society. Their reaction, however, raises issues of the intertextual life of the play which has conditioned their response. Marowitz's name constantly crops up in a variety of contexts. In many ways he has been to the forefront in experiments concerning the adaptation of Shakespearean drama. Chapter 8 considers three of his collages.

Many of these 'feed offs' or what Ruby Cohn terms 'off shoots' of Shakespeare can prove difficult at first acquaintance. The aim of this book is to introduce some of them to those interested in Shakespearean or modern drama or both. To do this most of the chapters provide an analysis of the stated plays attempting to show how they operate, the reasons behind their composition and to some extent what they signify. The Postscript extends this investigation to a brief consideration of production trends in Shakespeare particularly by the Royal Shakespeare Company in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Theatre is not the examination of static scripts. It is the creation and re-creation of dramatic scores on a living stage. The play texts introduced here are designed for performance. Some, such as the Stoppard and the Bond, have enjoyed significant productions in major theatres or by major companies, others such as Wesker's *The Merchant* or Ionesco's *Macbett* await the courage to be shown in this country by one of the subsidised theatres in affording them a significant production. Primarily these plays were not scored by their dramatists to be 'read' or to be 'written about' but to be performed. Shakespeare's contemporary dramatist, John Marston, rightly advised:

> Comedies are writ to be spoken, not read.
> Remember the life of these things consists in the action. . . .[22]

The life of these plays consists in their own action and they may lead us also to consider questions concerning the dramatic actions of Shakespeare.