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Global Shakespeares: A Critical Introduction

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Definition

Shakespeare's works and Shakespeare as a cultural figure have been closely associated with world cultures. The history of global performance dates back to the late sixteenth century when Shakespeare's plays began to be performed in continental Europe during his lifetime. The word "global" in global Shakespeare does double duty: it is an attributive genitive naming the stakeholder and playwright of the Globe Theatre, and it is a descriptive adjective signaling the influence and significance of that theater and of Shakespeare. Shakespeare has become both an author of the Globe and a playwright of global stature. One reason for Shakespeare's global reach is the oeuvre's ability to allow audiences to project various values onto the open narrative structure. The illusion that Shakespeare seems to be universal lies in the fact that Shakespeare's narratives are flexible and can blend into other cultures.

Introduction

Shakespeare's works and Shakespeare as a cultural figure have been closely associated with world cultures. The word "global" in global Shakespeare does double duty: it is an attributive genitive naming the stakeholder and playwright of the Globe Theatre, and it is a descriptive adjective signaling the influence and significance of that theater and of Shakespeare. Shakespeare has become both an author of the Globe and a playwright of global stature.

Shakespeare's plays often feature locations outside England, Scotland, and Wales, and characters from the Mediterranean, France, Vienna, Venice, and elsewhere. Even the history plays that focus intently on the question of English identity and lineage feature foreign characters who play key roles, such as Katherine of Aragon in *Henry VIII*, and the diplomatic relations between England and France. As products of an age of exploration, Shakespeare's plays demonstrate influences from a rich treasure trove of multilingual sources in Latin, Italian, Spanish, and French. Arthur Golding's 1567 English translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a Roman collection of mythological tales, provided a rich

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network of allusions for Shakespeare's comedies (e.g., the story of Diana and Actaeon).

In fact, the history of global performance dates back to the late sixteenth century when Shakespeare's plays began to be performed in continental Europe during his lifetime. European tourists and emissaries to England have also attended Shakespeare's plays. During his lifetime, Shakespeare's plays were performed in Europe and were subsequently taken to corners of the globe that seemed remote from the English perspective, including colonial Indonesia in 1619.

Since the late sixteenth century, Shakespeare's plays have been performed in many parts of the world and in an increasing number of languages, dialects, and styles. It is notable that his work and name have been closely associated with the open-air theater and cultural institution known as the Globe in Southwark, London. Performances in the context of world cultures enrich Shakespeare's own imaginations about the world, because globalization is a process that opens up cultures to one another and produces many new "worlds" within.

Over the past century, stage, film, and television adaptations of Shakespeare have emerged in the performance cultures of the UK, the USA, Canada, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Asia-Pacific, Africa, Latin America, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, and other parts of the globe. Anglophone-educated audiences in this global context become both outsiders (to the foreign style) and insiders (familiar with certain aspects of Shakespeare), while audiences elsewhere are insiders to local performance styles and outsiders to some parts of the Shakespearean narrative.

Global Shakespeare is not a phenomenon that takes place exclusively outside of the Anglophone world. Take the UK, for example. Performance styles borrowed from other cultures have helped to bring a sense of novelty to Shakespeare's familiar plays. British directors began employing hybrid performance styles as early as the 1950s, with Peter Brook being a notable example. His *Titus Andronicus* (1955), starring Laurence Olivier, is one of the landmark productions that contributed to the rehabilitation of the play. It transformed *Titus* from an undervalued melodrama to a serious study of primitive forces and raw emotions of jealousy and revenge. Realistic but heavy-handed portrayal of the horrors and violence in traditional presentations of this play was replaced by an elegant, minimalist, Asian-inspired stylization. There was a strong contrast between aural and visual signs: scarlet streamers flowing from Lavinia's mouth and wrists to symbolize her rape and mutilation and harp music accompanying her entrance. Brook's Asian symbolism tapped into the kinetic energy of the play as ritual and inspired Jan Kott when it toured to Warsaw. Brook went on to produce *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1970, which became an instant hit, and to adapt the Indian epic *Mahabharata* in 1985. His *Titus* is significant in the context of what I call boomerang Shakespeare, as it anticipates the use of red ribbons as symbols of blood and gore in Japanese director Ninagawa Yukio's 2006 production of *Titus* in Stratford-upon-Avon at the RSC Complete Works Festival. Ninagawa treated the play as myth, because recurring ritual in a cycle is best understood through symbolism. Boomerang Shakespeare encompasses a range of events, including non-Anglophone productions, co-productions by British and foreign artists, local events celebrating Shakespeare's global afterlife, and British productions that incorporate elements from more than one culture in its cast, style, or set. In 1994, the Barbican Theatre hosted a festival entitled Everybody's Shakespeare that offered performances by the Comédie-Française (Paris), the Suzuki Company of Toga, Tel Aviv's Itim Theatre Ensemble, Moscow's Detsky Theatre, and the Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus. More recently, the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival during the London Olympics, where the Globe Theatre hosted 37 productions of Shakespeare's 37 plays in 37 languages, ushered in a new era of British appreciation of worldwide performances of Shakespeare. Such festivals of global Shakespeare are sometimes criticized for turning touring productions into a commodity that reinforces popular stereotypes of foreign cultures. The commodification of foreign cultures makes them seem easy to digest (the cherry blossom for Japan, drumming for Africa, the carnival for Brazil, and so on). Despite these potential pitfalls, festivals and

touring productions do make important contributions to the afterlife of the Shakespearean canon.

By giving expression to marginalized, oppressed, and disenfranchised cultural voices, performances of Shakespeare's sonnets and plays become a vehicle of empowerment, an agent to foster the multicultural good. Within the Anglo-European West, both homegrown and touring companies have staged Shakespearean performances in Britain that may sometimes seem foreign to the sensibilities, styles, and linguistic repertoire of the local audiences. Acclaimed directors such as Claus Peymann (Berliner Ensemble, Germany), Robert Lepage (Quebec), and Peter Sellars (USA) and internationally active British directors such as Tim Supple have presented the beauty of estrangement through multi-national casts, hybrid performance styles, and the use of one or more foreign languages on stage (*see* Multilingual Productions).

On screen, too, Shakespeare has enjoyed a spectacular afterlife since 1899 when a silent film of a stage performance of *King John* (dir. Herbert Beerbohm Tree) was released. While mainstream scholarship tends to assume that international films of Shakespeare blossomed in the mid-twentieth-century post-war era with the prominent examples of Grigori Kozintsev, Franco Zeffirelli, and Akira Kurosawa, the era of Shakespeare on silent film was already quite international. Kurosawa's well-known *Throne of Blood* (*Macbeth*, 1957) and *Ran* (*Lear*, 1985) are far from the earliest or the only international films. Around the time Asta Nielsen's cross-gender *Hamlet* (1921) was released as a silent film, gender-bending silent film adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* were being made in Shanghai with expatriates in China as well as diasporic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia as target audiences. In post-British Raj India, James Ivory's 1965 film *Shakespeare Wallah* follows a traveling troupe of English actors performing Shakespeare on the Indian subcontinent. Shakespeare has become part of the British diaspora and Indian cultural scenes thanks to an imposed British educational system and local resistance to cultural colonialism. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, global film industries enjoyed a decade of relative optimism and what scholars have called a renaissance of Shakespeare on film. The 1990s, up until the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001, marked a time when filmmakers in the West were temporarily released from anxieties of the Cold War and turned their attention to Jane Austen, Edith Wharton, Shakespeare, and other classics. The international boom of Shakespeare on film, however, has continued into the twenty-first century, characterized by new experiments with genre. In 2006, for example, Chinese director Feng Xiaogang adapted *Hamlet*, Hollywood visual language, and the martial arts genre in his feature film *The Banquet*. Hollywood Shakespeare films such as Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* and John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* have inspired creative re-interpretations of these films and of *Romeo and Juliet* in Anthony Chan's Hong Kong film *One Husband Too Many* and Cheah Chee Kong's Singaporean film *Chicken Rice War*.

Shakespeare has also thrived in other media around the world and has often been used as proof of concept or launch material for new technologies. As noted above, Shakespeare played an important role in early cinema. Directors of silent film drew on the canonicity of Shakespeare to validate and legitimize the new art form when only theatre was widely regarded as highbrow. Due to Shakespeare's cultural cachet, his words are often used when new media are launched. When promoting his new invention of the telephone at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in June 1876, Alexander Graham Bell recited a soliloquy from *Hamlet*. Emperor Dom Pedro of Brazil reportedly cried "My God, it talks!" and Sir William Thomson later told the assembly at the British Association in Glasgow that "I heard 'To be or not to be ... there's the rub' through an electric telegraph wire." As a play about ghosting and a ghost on a haunted stage, *Hamlet* can be said to anticipate telephony as a new media and technology of representation on a global scale.

Buoying the fascination with the idea of containing the world within the "wooden O" (*Henry V*) was the fact that using globes and maps was an integral part of the education of an

early modern gentleman. Even though it is not the only venue associated with the playwright, the Globe in London has generated many of the ideas and tropes about Shakespeare's universal appeal. Other London venues of the same period, such as the nearby Rose Theatre, never garnered the cachet that the reconstructed Globe (opened in 1997) enjoys. The modern Globe, a major tourist destination, is a palimpsest for the historical Globe, which opened in 1599 and burned to the ground due to fire from a stage cannon during a performance of *Henry VIII* in 1613.

In addition to performances in international contexts, Shakespeare and his contemporaries were fascinated by the idea of the globe. In the late 1590s, courts, grammar schools, and colleges were regularly adorned by globes and maps such as Gerhard Mercator's world maps. While there are a number of theories about why the Lord Chamberlain's Men named their playing space "the Globe" in 1599, it is likely that they did so to tap into the English enthusiasm for terrestrial and celestial globes such as the renowned 1592 globes by Emery Molyneux.

There are many reasons why global Shakespeare productions are often accompanied by a celebratory tone and much fanfare. Presentations of Shakespearean motifs, quotations, and plays on the world stage have often been construed as a source of legitimation of cultural value. Along with post-Cold War campaigns for soft power, festivals and directors in many countries put on Shakespeare's plays as part of their quest for cosmopolitanism.

Among the key features of Shakespearian performance in our times are cross-media and cross-cultural citations. Adaptations refer to one another, as well as to Shakespeare, across cultures and genres. Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film version of *Romeo and Juliet* is a good example. It brings both the melodramatic and tragic elements of the play into stark relief against modern media history. The Singaporean film *Chicken Rice War* (dir. Cheah Chee Kong, aka CheeK, 2000) parodies Hollywood rhetoric and global teen culture by commenting on the popularity of Luhrmann's film, which starred Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio and brought the classic tale of power and passion to a fictional, modern-day Verona Beach. *Chicken Rice War*'s engagement with Shakespeare shows its director's desire to use a global icon to critique the Singaporean government's propaganda about the city-state's identity: "New Asia."

Reading the same play in a different context, however, produces a different kind of intertextuality. For instance, in twenty-first-century Palestine, *Romeo and Juliet* has acquired a new sense of urgency beyond a tragic love story. In the shadow of bombing and wars, the lovers' fleeting affair has given way to the danger they are in and the risk they take. Juliet asks Romeo how he has made it to her balcony. Romeo says he is aided by "love's light wings." This exchange is usually interpreted in a lighthearted manner, with an emphasis on the couple's youthful exuberance. Reading the play with his students in Abu Dis, Tom Sperlinger notes that what might otherwise have been construed as a more innocent lover's complaint or teenage hyperbole now acquires a far more earnest tone, especially when Juliet warns Romeo that "[i]f they do see thee, they will murder thee" (2.2.70). Engaging with *Romeo and Juliet* in the context of modern military conflicts entails a deeper level of self-reflection and offers the potential to see the play in a new light.

Elsewhere Shakespeare has been used as a platform to explore politically and socially sensitive issues. Set in modern Iran, *HamletIRAN* (2011) suggests that "something is rotten" in the country where the Green Movement arose in the wake of voting fraud during the 2009 presidential election. Directed by Mahmood Karimi-Hakak, the production features characters singing Persian folk songs and courtiers wearing turbans, with an image of Mount Damavand in the closing scene. The performance takes place around a pool, a traditional centerpiece of Persian gardens. The tormented hero of the play wishes to set things right, but he does not act rashly for fear his country may fall into chaos. Likewise, the Tibetan-language film *Prince of the Himalayas* (dir. Sherwood Hu, 2006) explores the sensitive topic of Tibet's place in modern Asia. Set in ancient Tibet, the film centers on the young prince Lhamoklodan, who sets out in a quest to find his

and his country's identity. In the Thai metatheatrical adaptation of *Macbeth*, titled *Shakespeare Must Die* (dir. Ing Kanjanavanit, 2012), the characters stage a play in which a general takes the throne through a series of bloody murders. The story parallels that of a superstitious and murderous contemporary dictator known as Dear Leader. The two worlds collide when the players stage *Macbeth* in a world ruled by the dictator. *Shakespeare Must Die* is political in nature and critiques Thai politicians. At the time it seemed inevitable that the film would be censored due to its sensitive subject matter. Shakespeare's tragedy serves as a platform to launch a difficult conversation about contemporary issues.

The other key feature of global Shakespeare is artistic collaboration in a post-national space. It is no longer productive to profile performances by their perceived cultures of origin. Shakespeare's works are not transmitted simply from the center to the periphery, or merely from one country to another. Such labels as "Shakespeare in India" are not always helpful in our understanding of global Shakespeare. As evidenced by the cultural coordinates of such stage works as Sulayman Al-Bassam's *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, the "origin story" and reception history are far from linear or straightforward. The British-Kuwaiti play has been accused of reinforcing and benefiting from Western prejudices against the Arab region. Karin Beier's *Der Sommernachtstraum* features nine languages (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Düsseldorf, 1995; Berliner Theatertreffen, 1996). It espouses an unabashedly utopian vision of "ein europäischer Shakespeare." Ricardo Abad's *Otelo* (Manila, 2008) appropriates the Philippine *komedya*, a legacy of the Spanish colonial period. Ninart Boonpothong's production *When I Slept over the Night of the Revolution* (Bangkok, 2007) is haunted by the restless ghosts of Hamlet and Thaksin Shinawatra, the ousted Thai prime minister. Other works challenge the binary of Anglo-American cultures and "the rest of the world." The German poet and filmmaker Michael Roes's Arabic-English film *Someone Is Sleeping in My Pain: An East-West Macbeth* (2001) was set and shot mostly in Yemen and performed mainly by Yemeni tribal warriors who were not professional actors. Likewise, the cross-cultural double entendres in *Life Goes On* (2009), a British-Asian film of *King Lear* by Sangeeta Datta, compel us to consider an entire network of cultural exchange. The Bollywood film is set in contemporary London among an immigrant family of Hindus from Bengal. It creates a cultural location that is neither here nor there.

Translation, in tandem with performances online, on screen, and on stage, is an important force behind the rise of global Shakespeare. The *Complete Works* has been translated into German a number of times beginning with the German Romantics and into Brazilian Portuguese by Carlos Alberto Nunes in 1955–1967 and by Carlos de Almeida Cunha Medeiros and Oscar Mendes in 1969. Literary translation sometimes modernizes the semantics of the source text, which brings the text forcefully into the cultural register of a different era. As such, Shakespeare in translation acquired the capacity to appear as the contemporary of the German Romantics, a spokesperson for the proletarian heroes, required reading for the Communists, and even an icon of modernity in East Asia. We can learn a great deal even by just looking at new titles given to Shakespeare's plays, because they reveal the preoccupation of the society that produced them, such as the 1710 German adaptation of *Hamlet* entitled *Der beträfte Brudermord* (*The Condemned Fratricide*) and Sulayman Al-Bassam's *The Al-Hamlet Summit* (English version in 2002; Arabic version in 2004). While Western directors, translators, and critics of *The Merchant of Venice* tend to focus on the ethics of conversion and religious tensions with Shylock at center stage, the play is transformed in East Asia with Portia as its central character and the women's emancipation movement in the nascent capitalist societies as its main concern, as evidenced by its common Chinese title *A Pound of Flesh*, an 1885 Japanese adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* entitled *The Season of Cherry Blossoms, the World of Money*, and a 1927 Chinese silent film *The Woman Lawyer*. Translations are sometimes presented as part of a country's soft power. In New Zealand, the translation of the *Sonnets* and *The Merchant of Venice* into te reo Māori was hailed as a major cultural

event. By 1934, Shakespeare had been translated into over 200 Indian languages using Indian names and settings. Shakespeare has come to be known as *unser* Shakespeare for the Germans, Sulapani in Telegu, and Shashibiya in Chinese (the latter two are transliterations of the sounds of the "Shakespeare").

It is worth noting that global Shakespeare productions have been censored as often as they have been celebrated. Shifting political ideologies have suppressed and encouraged the translation or performance of particular plays for one reason or another. During the 1930s, for example, censorship drove performers and audiences to just a few plays in Japan, the Soviet Union, and China. As Japan was preparing for wars and calling for its citizens' unquestioned loyalty, its government censored *Hamlet* on the ground of the theme of regicide. "Left-wing" plays were banned from the International Theatre Day organized by the Japan League of Proletarian Theatres (led by Murayama Tomoyoshi) on 13 February 1932. In 1935, Joseph Stalin disapproved of *Hamlet*, because, according to him, life is joyful for the communist state. While the comedies were generally supported by the Soviet government, Shakespeare was banned entirely during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966–76. Shakespeare's comedies had a firm place in the state-endorsed repertoire for the stage and reading materials in the USSR and its close ally, China, during this time. Shakespeare was appropriated as the spokesperson for the proletariat, an optimist and a fighter against feudalism through such plays as *Much Ado about Nothing*.

Conclusion

Global Shakespeare is a body of traveling cultural texts and a space where people and ideas meet. However, making and studying global Shakespeare is a localizing process. One reason for Shakespeare's global reach is the oeuvre's ability to allow audiences to project various values onto the open narrative structure. The illusion that Shakespeare seems to be universal lies in the fact that Shakespeare's narratives are flexible and can blend into other cultures.

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