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The Country Wife. Between Pragmatic Analysis and Translation

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Alexa Alice Joubin, Victoria Bladen (eds.), *Onscreen Allusions to Shakespeare: International Films, Television, and Theatre*[1]

Abstract

The title of this superlative recent volume of essays, edited by Alexa Alice Joubin and Victoria Bladen, boldly announces its focus on a topic that could be seen as trivial: mere allusions to Shakespeare and his works in screen texts. The films and shows covered therein are *not* screen adaptations of Shakespeare, which are the subject of a great many books. Instead, the essays in this volume examine brief Shakespeare references in film or television texts. This study continues the ongoing work of postmodern and cultural studies strategic goals to *read* all cultural products and practices as *texts* that reveal the multiple potential meanings of any given text, which is always already embedded in multifarious contexts. The essays in this volume demonstrate that the Bard has been and is a *ubiquitous presence* in international media in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, evidenced by the fact that each essay looks at film and/or televisual texts from a different country. Refreshingly, Joubin and Bladen contend that this volume examining Shakespearean allusions extends beyond the question of whether a screen text is or is not "Shakespeare(an)", instead focusing "further along the intertextuality continuum" to look at the often powerful ideological and artistic work performed by brief references to Shakespeare. Indeed, the Bard's brief appearances in screen texts like these, as adeptly argued in this volume, help keep Shakespeare alive in significant ways, rather than damning him to a purgatorial half-life.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Shakespeare on screen; theatre; intertextuality; allusion; adaptation; global media

The title of this superlative recent volume of essays, edited by Alexa Alice Joubin and Victoria Bladen, boldly announces its focus on a topic that could be seen as trivial: mere allusions to Shakespeare and his works in screen texts. The films and shows covered therein are *not* screen adaptations of Shakespeare, which are the subject of a great many books. Instead, the essays in this volume examine brief Shakespeare references in film or television texts. This study continues the ongoing work of postmodern and cultural studies strategic goals to *read* all cultural products and practices as *texts* that

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reveal the multiple potential meanings of any given text, which is always already embedded in multifarious contexts. Joubin and Bladen point out that "Shakespeare has a ubiquitous presence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. [The Shakespearean corpus] has been continually deconstructed, quoted in and out of context, hybridized, recycled and appropriated in a wide range of contexts. Fragments of Shakespeare's texts prove highly mobile" (2022, 2). Indeed, the essays in the volume demonstrate that the Bard really gets around, evidenced by the fact that each essay looks at film and/or televisual texts from a different nation. The editors' curation of the volume truly embodies the "international" focus declared in its subtitle.

Refreshingly, Joubin and Bladen contend that this volume e xamining Shakespearean allusions extends beyond the question of whether a screen text is or is not "Shakespeare(an)", instead focusing "further along the intertextuality continuum" to look at the ideological and artistic work performed by "[n]uanced and attenuated" references to Shakespeare (5). The editors assert: "Shakespeare may not be the main focus of tattered allusions in cinema, television and theatre, yet even passing references to Shakespeare can have the power to shift the meanings and readings of a work" (2). This *power* is well demonstrated in each essay, whether the topic is a Brazilian *novela* or a Maltese short film. While the word *tattered* is used throughout book; however, as it indicates an artifact in poor or dilapidated condition, it does not quite seem an accurate modifier for the Bard as he appears in these chapters and the screen texts they examine. These "Shakebytes", to use Poonam Trivedi's redolent coinage, are not insubstantial cameos or ragamuffins peregrinating through these screen texts. Quite the opposite, Shakespeare's brief appearances in screen texts like these, as adeptly argued in this volume, help keep Shakespeare alive rather than damning him to a purgatorial half-life, like King Hamlet's Ghost. As Maurizio Calbi avers, Shakespeare still haunts us and these allusive texts because he can be transformed and repurposed in so many ways, even in potent small "bites". The authors gathered in *Onscreen Allusions* reveal many of the diverse functions for which Shakespeare can be used, such as signaling "sophistication and class," both positively and negatively: paying deference to "an established authority" while channeling that authority, or, conversely, citing the Bard as "an act of resistance or challenge to the hypotext" (4). As these essays show, quoting or misquoting, alluding to or gesturing toward Shakespeare's texts also "carries with it the burden of previous uses of those lines" (4). Indeed, references to Shakespeare are frequently made via allusions to screen adaptations rather than his plays directly, such as the use of musician Nino Rota's love theme, "What is a Youth?", which appeared in Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), in a Brazilian comedic televisual spoof of the balcony scene in the same year, as Aimara da Cunha Resende examines in her chapter in this volume.

We have arrived in an era when spectators the world over are likely to be more familiar with Shakespeare's afterlives – film adaptations, advertisement imagery, YouTube videos, culturally specific Bardic touchstones – than with the plays as they appear on the page, be it material or digital.

There are two major conceptual through lines in *Onscreen Allusions*: intertextuality and spectatorship. These are distinctly and deftly interconnected throughout the volume in ways that are not always conspicuous in writing employing these theoretical discourses. Linda Hutcheon's book *A Theory of Adaptation* is referenced several times in the volume, across multiple chapters, in regard to "knowing" and "unknowing" spectators (Hutcheon 2013, 120-8). This points to the crux of intertextuality's ultimate reliance on spectators who "know" the "other" text(s) being referenced. As the authors in this volume masterfully present, small shreds/threads of Shakespeare woven into other narratives often require an even deeper knowledge of the Shakespearean work than an adaptation, as the reference is fleeting and its relationship to the story, theme, characters, and *mise-en-scène* can flow by unnoticed and unnoted. To some degree, intertextual allusions are always reliant on spectators "knowing". However, there are screen texts able to communicate the significance of their intertextuality to both knowing and unknowing audiences, such as films and television content aimed at middle and lower-class audiences, which are discussed here in chapters by Trivedi, Resende, Márta Minier, and Boris N. Gaydin and Nicolay V. Zhakharov. In addition, "knowing" always operates on a continuum: there are Shakespeare scholars (who generally are *not* the target demographic) and there are folks who learn about Shakespeare plots, characters, and images through cultural circulation without ever seeing or reading a Shakespeare play.

Resende's chapter on allusions to *Romeo and Juliet's* balcony scene on Brazilian television provides excellent examples of viewers who have little or no exposure to Shakespeare or the play beyond the images circulating in their culture, but that is in no way a barrier to the comedy or pathos communicated in references to this iconic scene (100). Critically, Resende reminds us that Shakespeare's presence in Brazil – a former colony of Portugal, not Britain – is "a matter of hybridism rather than of sacred permanence" because "[t]he Bard is not known by the average Brazilian" (99, 100). Conversely, as can be seen in Trivedi's chapter on three Bollywood films, India's relationship with Shakespeare is siphoned through centuries of their British colonial past, such that indigenising Shakespeare, even in pieces, is an oppositional act. However, Resende contends that the Brazilian short films and hybrid-genre *novelas* alluding to the balcony scene are reaching out to a new, different kind of audience: "no more the *erudite* author or director catering to *cultured minds*, but the evanescent content and language of everyday life embodied in native performers bringing to the fore quotidian situations and easy laughter,

often rooted in satirical ridicule of politicians and people from the higher social stratum" (101). The screen texts discussed in this volume sometimes take a mocking stance toward the Shakespeare 'bits' embedded in them, using referents like the balcony scene to display the absurdity and irrelevance of 'elite' culture and reinforcing class identity by inviting viewers join the text's oppositional gaze at a Shakespearean icon.

An analogue invoked a number of times in the volume is that of the *palimpsest*, a classic image for intertextual theorists. The writing on the vellum is scraped off and overwritten, but traces of the previous message(s) remain. In the introduction, Joubin and Bladen make the key point that the "study of 'Shakespeare in tatters' and in fragmented citations differs from the study of full Shakespeare plays" (3). As the chapters in this book brilliantly display, the palimpsestic (or palimpsestuous, as Shakespeareans often prefer) relationship between the brief allusion or citation of Shakespeare to the larger narrative in which it is placed can be much more complex than in adaptations of the plays. To analyze the significance of these often momentary appropriations of Shakespeare texts, "we have to understand it as a palimpsest that contains multiple layers of intertexts and meanings. The meanings of these palimpsests are inherently unstable, because they depend on the knowledge and experiences of the observers" (3-4). One chapter that demonstrates this beautifully is Mariacristina Cavecchi's, "Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in Federico Fellini's *Roma*", in which she explores the significance of the historical and iconic roles of the figure of Julius Caesar in Italy and specifically Rome, the consequential position of Shakespeare's play in those contexts, the ways Mussolini employed these icons, and Fellini's complex relationship with all of these factors as embodied in his 1972 film *Roma*. Cavecchi compares Fellini's approach and structure in *Roma*, "a city literally and metaphorically built on layers", to Shakespeare's presence in the film: "Like the archeological finds, Shakespeare survives in a fragmentary fashion, which functions as a reminder of his oeuvre and his distance from us in such a way that our perception of his work and even of small tattered pieces of it is inevitably tied to our own expectations and lives" (147). This could, of course, describe a great many "Shakebytes", and it returns the reader to the realm of spectatorial theory and its crucial relationship with intertextuality. One of the most fascinating questions grappled with in this chapter is whether Fellini's brief allusion to a theatrical Julius Caesar is or is not referring to Shakespeare's play (after all, his is not the only one). So, is it Shakespeare('s)? Ultimately, it does not matter because *Roma* is built on layers of Shakespeare embedded in the history, theatre, opera, and screen texts of Italy. Another matter she explores might be a little too close to home: Are Shakespeare-spotters "overfishing" (for) Shakespeare in other texts? Do we (perhaps speciously) see Shakespeare everywhere? Is this a problem —

maybe even ridiculous? Cavecchi declares that the Julius Caesar play referred to in Fellini's *Roma* is probably not Shakespeare's, "[y]et, this discovery does not materially change how 'Shakespeareans' [scholars, students, fans] . . . interact with it and the film. What I am suggesting is that the meanings of *Roma* and of its *Julius Caesar* segment are shaped and determined to some extent by the expectations of this specific kind of viewer [us!]" (132). Shakespeare or not, the allusion still functions as a referent to his play and all of its Italian baggage. Like the speaker "Prufrock" in T. S. Eliot's eponymous poem, Shakespeare is not the "Prince" here, but an "attendant lord" in the entourage; he swells the scene in a way that illuminates and elevates the Roman protagonist (Caesar, Mussolini, Fellini, take your pick).

Intertextual theoretical models fruitfully used in the volume include Douglas Lanier's "Shakespearean rhizomatics" and Maurizio Calbi's notions of Derridean spectrality and "hauntology" in Shakespeare, an extension of the work in his exceptional monograph *Spectral Shakespeares*. In *Onscreen Allusions*, Calbi investigates three very different films, two Italian and one Filipino: director Davide Ferrario's *Tutta colpa di Giuda* (Blame it on Judas) (2008), set in a prison in Turin; Alfredo Peyretti's *Moana* (2009), a biopic about an Italian porn star; and Connie Macatuno's *Rome and Juliet* (2006), a Filipino lesbian romance. In the first film, a postmodern mix of *cinéma verité* and musical, prisoners participating in a theatre program laugh at the pieces of *Hamlet* 'quoted' at them, "What piece of work is man . . .", on a video clip, revealing an "unbridgeable chasm between 'high' and 'low' culture" and inviting the audience to identify with the scornful prisoners. This snippet of Hamlet's risible "hauteur doubles as the hauteur of 'Shakespeare'", countering the "'therapeutic Shakespeare' that emerges from a largely US-based tradition of 'prison Shakespeare'" (19-20). *Moana* uses a quotation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and other references to "Shakespeare", once again, to "draw the boundaries between high culture and cinema, theatre and porn cinema. Yet, the world of porn turns out to be uncannily proximate to a festive comedy gone awry", particularly in the enforcement of patriarchal power over women's bodies, but this woman's story does not end in jocular matrimony (25). The third film covered by Calbi, *Rome and Juliet*, also centers on patriarchal prerogatives but does so by challenging heteronormativity *and* canonical Shakespeare. Calbi cogently identifies "Shakespeare" as a "fragmentary, spectral presence" in each of these films.

Victoria Bladen's chapter also uses the notion of Shakespeare as spectral presence and as a ghost haunting specific characters in three very different Australian films citing Shakespeare. These films —Raymond Longford's silent comedy *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919), Peter Wier's eerie *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), and Jerzy Domaradzky's poignant *Lilian's Story* (1996) — are historically diverse, arising from different moments in the history of

Australia and its screen culture(s), yet they demonstrate that the Bard is "a crucial part and active force in the process of negotiating complex questions of national identity and articulating the postcolonial relationship between Australia and Britain" (34). Speaking of haunting, Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin's chapter looks at a French film adaptation of Agatha Christie's novel *By the Pricking of my Thumbs* (1968), translated idiomatically into the title *Mon petit doigt m'a dit…* (dir. Pascal Thomas, 2005), wherein she uses a *double auteur* approach that investigates, with a dash of playfulness, whom the film is referencing: Agatha or Bill? Vienne-Guerrin's mysterious chapter follows a creepy musical motif throughout the film, which is revealed only at the end to have lyrics taken from Shakespeare: "By the pricking of my thumbs / Something wicked this way comes". Shakespeare turns out to be a major key to solving the mystery, but he has been hiding in a melody all along: "when it comes to studying Shakespeare in tatters, we deal with ghostly figures, Shakespeare being there without being there" (124).

Shakespeare as spectral signifier of colonial subjugation from a postcolonial perspective is at the heart of the chapters of Chris Thurman and Poonam Trivedi. After providing crucial South African contexts for Shakespeare and the nation's special relationship with *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Othello*, Thurman turns to the critically acclaimed 2011 film *Otelo Burning* (dir./prod. Sara Blecher), an isiZulu language film about teenage boys living in a Black township who are competing in the sport of surfing and for the affections of Dezi. There are a few echoes of the plot and, of course, the nomenclature of the film and characters Otelo and Dezi that connect it to Shakespeare's tragedy, but, overall, the film "honors" *Othello* more "in the breach" than in the "observance" (*Ham.* 1.4.16). This prompts Thurman to examine the production history of the film, deducing that statements from the director indicate that the South African government foundation from which the filmmakers sought funding "would not support a South African film production unless it conformed to an archetypal, recognizable, 'universal' narrative" (64). Thus, "Shakespeare helped to authorize the South African narrative — he provided a form of cultural authority, a stamp of approval . . . which would in turn guarantee audience buy-in" (ibid.). The bits of Shakespeare in *Otelo Burning* were its ticket to coming to fruition: no Shakespeare, no funding. As in other postcolonial contexts, South African Shakespeare has been used as "a tool of the oppressor" as well as "an icon of the struggle for freedom" for indigenous and formerly enslaved peoples (65). Poonam Trivedi's vivacious chapter, "Bits and Bites in Indian Cinema", explores three films that use different "modes" of referencing bits of Shakespeare, or "Shakebytes" (79-80): *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* (dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 2007), *Matru ki Bijlee ka Manola* (*Matru's Biljee Changes her Mind*) (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj, 2013), and *Bodyguard* (dir. Siddique, 2011). *Eklavya* reiterates pieces of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 as a symbol of

both love and elite culture, in a film structured by the *Mahabharata*'s story of Eklavya, which is about a low-caste man following his dharma despite the harrowing sacrifices demanded of him to do so. Trivedi describes this mode as "surrogacy," as Shakespeare is used to "justify and redeem . . . a tale of centuries-old oppression, deceit, and treachery" (84). Vishal Bhardwaj – who made the Shakespeare adaptations *Maqbool* (2003), *Omkar*a (2006), and *Haider* (2014) – uses quotations of *Macbeth* as part of an elaborate prank in his Bollywood masala film *Matru ki Bijlee ka Manola*, achieving "a nimble appropriation for comedic inversions and a self-assertion of [Bhardwaj's] own games with Shakespeare" (87). This displays ludic playing with Shakespeare, citing the tragedy both for humor and to point toward political and commercial corruption. The final "mode" is "shadow Shakespeare", to be found in *Bodyguard*, wherein *As You Like It*'s cross-dressing courting games are alluded to but not named. Trivedi concludes that these three types of Shakebytes "present a new diversity of form and intent in the referencing of Shakespeare in Indian films", and she reminds us that "[d]ismembering the iconic bard and appropriating its bits and pieces" is always a way of possessing, indigenizing, and repurposing a signifier of past colonial control (88).

Travelling from postcolonial to post-Soviet Shakespearean environments, we turn to the chapters of Márta Minier, investigating two very different films of Polish provenance, and Boris N. Gaydin and Nicolay V. Zhakharov, exploring several Russian screen texts alluding to *Hamlet*. Minier's piece looks predominantly at *Żółty szalik* (*Yellow Scarf*) (dir. Janusz Morgenstern, 2000), a Polish film made for television, wherein she analyzes the significance of the collisions between Polish Christmas rituals, family relationships, addiction, and Shakespeare: a very 'local' combination of factors. Minier tantalisingly declares that this film "may be seen to construct the missing Christmas tale of Shakespeare that Max Beerbohm's 'Shakespeare and Christmas' . . . playfully laments not having" (158). The film also echoes Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, featuring a protagonist who goes on a journey of reckoning and potential reconciliation in the midst of the Christmas holidays. This "Everyman-meets-nativity-meets-Scrooge-meets-Hamlet" film does briefly quote the "To be" soliloquy in a bar scene and presents "Hamletian existential questions", but the Bard is not primary: the orchestration of *Yellow Scarf*'s contextual and intertextual discourses demands that Shakespeare be read in relation to the local and personal rather than the other way around (166, 161). Minier also discusses the award-winning global film *The Pianist* (dir. Roman Polanski, 2002), a holocaust narrative, and its brief but telling allusion to *Merchant of Venice*. In their chapter "Soviet and Post-Soviet References to Hamlet on Film and Television", Gaydin and Zhakharov explore Russia's complex relationship with Shakespeare's Danish prince: "in Russia, Hamlet is the undisputed leader . . . Russians consider Shakespeare

their own national poet, and Hamlet is one of the main iconic images that are deeply rooted in the very core of Russian culture" (177). These authors explore several different screen texts that reference Hamlet, ranging from brief references "to what we term Hamletization", which "suggests a process of appropriation encompassing allusions, appropriation of and/or references to characters, motives and/or aspects of plot" (178). Gaydin and Zhakharov provide the fascinating example of a Soviet "crime comedy film", *Beware of the Car* (dir. Eldar A. Ryazanov, 1965), wherein in protagonist, "an eccentric modern-day Robin Hood", is a thief and an amateur actor playing Hamlet in a community theatre production. The acting coach for this *Hamlet* asks his thespians, "'Isn't it time, my friends, to hitch our wagon to [alternately translated '*to have a stab at*'] William, you know, our Shakespeare?' The phrase. . . has remained very popular in Russia and has become almost like a proverb that is used when somebody is encouraging others to do something difficult but special, in an ironic way" (ibid.). Once again, we find ourselves in the realm of Shakespeare in the second, third, or perhaps fourth degree, yet he continues to haunt our utterances and shape how we perceive the diversity of worlds around us in meaningful and surprising ways.

The fine "Afterword" of this volume is penned by Mark Thornton Burnett, wherein he explores a fifteen-minute short film from Malta, *Daqqet ix-Xita/ Plangent Rain* (dir. Kenneth Scicluna, 2010). Burnett, as the other scholars in this volume, provides illuminating historical and cultural contexts while performing an incisive close reading of the film text itself. The ubiquitous use of water imagery along with the film's black-and-white cinematography underscore the "melancholy and dreariness" of this tale of grief and familial dysfunction, establishing "motifs of soddenness and rottenness", the dis-ease that haunts *Hamlet*. *Plangent Rain* is an experimental film that uses sound contrapuntally, as Sergei Eisenstein insisted it should be, creating cinematic collisions that force spectators to feel and think, yet the film answers some of the questions Shakespeare's play leaves open by "furnish[ing] us with a backstory" (197). In his summation, Burnett reiterates Trivedi's question of whether a taxonomy of allusions is possible (200). However, the vitality and diversity of the chapters in *Onscreen Allusions* reveal that one standardised taxonomy, as those posed by Gerard Genette, while occasionally helpful, would always be insufficient to encompass the infinite variety of Shakespearean intertextuality.

Each example in this book demonstrates that particular shreds and patches of Shakespeare have been carefully chosen for and articulated in these films and television series to communicate messages both local and global: Shakespeare is a signifier wielded for a purpose. *Onscreen Allusions* importantly extends current work on screen media Shakespeares that are *not* adaptations (although the long debate over the boundaries of "adaptation"

also continues). Another outstanding study devoted to Shakespearean intertextuality that is cited several times in this volume is *Shakespeare / Not Shakespeare* (edited by Christy Desmet, Natalie Loper, and Jim Casey), published in 2017. However, as that volume focuses predominantly on Anglophone texts, *Onscreen Allusions* opens up new territories, demonstrating that these Bardic references are significantly shaped by, as Resende avers, "the metamorphosing influence of the target culture and the individualized stance of its appropriator", thereby establishing that "[t]his kind of deviation is partly responsible for Shakespeare's *immortality*" (97). Playing with "Shakebytes" can evince hearty laughs or be deadly serious, as we read in these excellent chapters, but all of it is worth exploring as enriching intertext, a means of speaking to spectators through multivalent palimpsests of historically and culturally situated screen texts. As Mikhail Bakhtin recognised in regard to literary studies nearly a century ago, this is the direction Shakespeare on screen is and should be heading: pursuing diverse voices, audiences, media, cultural contexts, industrial profiles, and hermeneutic methodologies. Perhaps Shakespeare is not our contemporary, but his ever-metamorphosing ghosts most definitely are.

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