

“The Bard is Immanent”: Politics in Adaptations of Shakespeare’s Plays Since the 1960s

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Abstract Appropriations of Shakespeare in modern drama since the 1960s have become increasingly politicized as they responded to such pressing contemporary issues. This study identifies and discusses two notable kinds of political appropriations: postcolonial revisions of *The Tempest* in particular and women’s rewritings of Shakespeare in general. Of course, the political component of Shakespeare adaptations in modern drama predated the 1960s. By then the name “Shakespeare” had acquired an array of meanings. It signified not only the historical person and his works, but also the attitudes determined by their receptions from culture to culture. By adapting plays, productions could articulate national aspirations or criticise an existing ideology. Like “Shakespeare,” modern and postmodern playwrights had maintained an international presence which often displayed political bias. *The Tempest* has generated modern dramas from Brazil to Zambia, usually focusing on the subject of imperialism and race. Probably Aime Cesaire’s *Une tempeste* (1969) remains the best known of this group. Several tragedies — *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear* — have inspired women’s plays which raise questions about sexuality and gender. Many of these have been produced and published in English-speaking countries by accomplished playwrights such as MacDonald, Elaine Feinstein and the Women’s Theatre Group, Paula Vogel, and most recently, Young Jean Lee (2010). In a few cases, interesting combinations occur: for example, Philip Osment refers to *The Tempest* in *This Island’s Mine* (1988), but he also addresses questions of sexual orientation and the roles of women in twentieth-century Western society. Djanet Sears rewrites *Othello* in *Harlem Duet* (1997), yet she explores black history as well as the status of women in contemporary America. Finally, considering these modern plays as a group illuminates each one and simultaneously throws light on a single important path taken by dramatic adaptations of Shakespeare in the late twentieth century.

Key Words Shakespeare; modern drama; political appropriation; postcolonial

revision; women’s rewriting

The quotation in my title comes from Ann-Marie MacDonald’s notes on the text of her play *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* (2), a rewriting of two Shakespearean tragedies that developed in part as a collaborative project during the late 1980s. A woman’s revision of Shakespeare, MacDonald’s adaptation represents a distinct trend which has become apparent since the 1960s, a period of major cultural realignments in various parts of the globe which forced adjustments of concepts like race, class, gender and sexuality. Appropriations of Shakespeare in modern drama became increasingly politicized as they responded to such pressing contemporary issues. Against this background the following paper will identify and discuss two notable kinds of political appropriations: women’s rewritings of Shakespeare in general and postcolonial revisions of *The Tempest* in particular.

Background

Of course, the political component of Shakespeare adaptations in modern drama predated the 1960s, accompanying the earliest plays from this period which began during the mid-1800s. Over the long century between the 1850s and the 1960s, the name “Shakespeare” had acquired a wide array of meanings, a palimpsest which still exists today. It signifies the historical person who lived between 1564 and 1616, as well as the plays and verse attributed to him. It also signifies the attitudes towards both author and works determined by their reception; and reception varies not only from culture to culture, but even within cultures. Local appropriations of “Shakespeare” often become means through which a country or one of its regions articulates national aspirations. By adapting plays, productions can endorse an existing ideology or censure a repressive one, as they did throughout Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. “Shakespeare” the classic can be politically charged to speak many languages with many voices. In the broadest sense, as Margot Heinemann writes, “Shakespeare has become part of the way that literally millions of people, consciously or unconsciously, imagine and fantasise and think about the world” (228). When people think about the world politically, they usually attend to the distribution of power at various levels of social interaction.

Modern drama provided playwrights with a vital new lexicon to articulate their thoughts about Shakespeare and the world. As I’ve indicated, specialists have long set the chronology of modern drama between 1850 and the present, starting with plays created by important dramatists of the nineteenth century who lived into the twentieth century.¹ Consequently, the term “modern drama” refers primarily to dramatic texts of the modern period, extant or not, rather than productions of Shakespeare’s plays

or theatre history; but the distinction can blur when the staging of a well-known script like *Hamlet* appears extreme enough to constitute a new play. Within this chronological and generic frame, “modern drama” begins with Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), August Strindberg (1849-1912), Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), and George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950). It coincides with two dynamic and influential aesthetic movements: modernism, which started to develop in the mid-nineteenth century, and postmodernism, which probably coexisted with modernism in the mid-twentieth century before displacing it. As a result, “modern drama” has belonged continuously to a period of radical experimentation in the arts. While the prevailing view of the world during this era has remained more pessimistic than hopeful, a response to such changes as industrialization, secularism, and war, many artists have searched for novel forms to represent the spiritual crisis. Modernist and postmodernist playwrights too have rejected established conventions, freeing themselves to follow Ezra Pound’s advice: “make it new.”² Among other strategies they have rearranged the standard components of narrative (plot, character, point of view) and made highly original use of technical innovations. Like the palimpsest concept of “Shakespeare,” they have maintained an international presence which often displays political bias. Modern plays echo not only dramatic and literary precursors, but also Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

To complete the background for this paper, some gaps remain to be filled. First, the plays to be considered — the women’s rewritings and postcolonial dramas — constitute only a tiny fraction of modern dramas influenced by Shakespeare. Substantial evidence, such as published scripts and theatre reviews, reveals hundreds of modern plays related to Shakespeare. Should our calculations include ephemeral productions, the kinds performed by amateur groups and local theatre festivals, the number might increase to thousands. The number has continued to grow enormously since the millennium. Second, dramatic appropriations of Shakespeare during and since the 1960s address a wide variety of political subjects: they include Edward Bond’s *Lear* (1969-71) and *Bingo* (1973-74), which criticize social irresponsibility in Shakespeare’s art and in the twentieth century; Ariane Mnouchkine’s *Norodom Sihanouk* (1985), which comments on a complex political leader and genocide in Cambodia; and Tom Stoppard’s *Rock ‘n’ Roll* (2006), which portrays upheavals in Czechoslovakia during the twentieth century. It is rare, however, to find small groups of modern adaptations focusing on similar contemporary issues. Finally, most modern playwrights who adopt Shakespeare as a model express their ambivalence towards his authority. They have criticized what they conceive as either his aesthetic or his politics. Their mixed feelings, determined by the temperament and self-consciousness of each artist, have emerged in a range of styles from subtle parody to undisguised

insults. Almost from the outset, modern dramatists have expressed ambivalence not only towards Shakespeare, but also towards notable playwrights of their own era. They have experienced compounded variants of what Harold Bloom calls “the anxiety of influence,” the unpleasant sensation which motivates writers to free themselves from the examples of their predecessors. In a related development which began early, modern dramatists have crossed Shakespeare with other texts in both their art and their thinking, practising intertextuality which always comments, often subversively, on the writers quoted. I’ll attempt to point out in the analyses which follow how women playwrights and postcolonial revisionists express their ambivalence towards Shakespeare and intermix his texts with others. In this group of modern plays, the non-Shakespearean material — from music to elements of Caribbean culture — is often celebrated, and it disrupts the Shakespearean prototypes.

The Women’s Part

Women had adapted Shakespeare’s life and art in modern dramas well before the 1960s, but even the best of these plays remain obscure today. In particular Clemence Dane (the name adopted by Winifred Ashton), an early feminist and prolific artist, wrote *Will Shakespeare — An Invention* in 1921. This script anticipates later rewritings by women in its complexity, nuance, and concentration on female roles. Dane’s Shakespeare becomes the sum of his encounters with three women: Anne Hathaway, his wife; Mary Fitton, conceived here as his lover and the model for the Dark Lady of the Sonnets; and Queen Elizabeth. As a whole the dramatic narrative implies that these multifaceted figures determine the protagonist’s future glory. Notably, Shakespeare’s works become the source for his life history as Dane mentions or echoes more than half of the canon.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, and approximately a decade apart, two Canadian plays challenged Shakespeare’s influence in even more complicated dramatic formats: MacDonald’s *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* and Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet* (1997). Both of these later plays went through more than one version in performance and workshops; and both interrogate Shakespeare through his canon. They borrow his techniques, but adapt them in a mix of new ideas and arts, from Jungian psychology to concert music and jazz. In both, the protagonists are women.

MacDonald’s play draws on two Shakespearean tragedies, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*; and its heroine goes through the three-part trajectory which Maynard Mack describes for Shakespeare’s tragic protagonists. Initially the audience hear her distinctive voice; then she follows a cycle of change to become her own antithesis; and finally there is a recovery of sorts. But MacDonald makes adjustments to the

formula, rearranging it for comedy. At the beginning, Constance Ledbelly sounds like a dry and defeated academic. At the conclusion, she experiences a triumphant epiphany: she realizes that she is an “Author” (with a capital “A”); a golden hand rises up with a message that confirms the realization; and the pen behind her ear turns to solid gold (87-88).

The narrative arc of this play as a whole starts and ends in Constance’s university office; but as the first act concludes the action descends through a rabbit hole (actually, a wastepaper basket) into a surreal space where Constance enters into Shakespeare’s texts. There she finds characters revised by MacDonald: an Amazonian Desdemona; a domesticated Romeo and Juliet. By Act III, Constance herself has been reconceived as Constantine, a cross-dressed male figure. In the process of these Jungian metamorphoses, she gains the self-confidence to interpret Shakespeare’s plays according to her own lights, and thus she becomes “the Author.” Moreover, the author of this modern play demonstrates a comic cycle of change by using early modern theatrical devices in carnivalesque abundance, from dumb shows to blank verse to cross-dressing and doubling. The play opens with three dumb shows, occurring simultaneously, followed by the Prologue spoken by a Chorus in blank verse (5-6). Although the action starts with three fully developed scenes in two acts, following Constance’s transition from one reality to another, it picks up speed in the Shakespearean dimension as the nine short scenes in Act III follow in quick succession. MacDonald adopts Shakespeare’s method of composing in scenes and applies it in a unique way, distinguishing the two worlds of her own comedy.

If MacDonald relies on Jung to challenge Shakespeare’s characters and genres, Djanet Sears turns to music and to recordings of significant moments in African-American history. Sears’s title, *Harlem Duet*, hints at these two components of her play, as well as the dialogue she means to have with Shakespeare. The Prologue and most of the twenty scenes in two acts begin with both music and black voices. As the drama opens, the stage direction specifies: “*the cello and the bass call and respond to a heaving melancholic blues. Martin Luther King’s voice accompanies them*”(21). As it closes, “[a] *berlyne blues improvisation of ‘Mama’s Little Baby’ cascades alongside a reading of the Langston Hughes poem ‘Harlem’*”(114). In between the music constantly modulates into new forms, adding a distinctive element of continuity to the drama.

Harlem Duet draws on Shakespeare’s *Othello*, making prominent use of the name “Othello” and the symbolic prop of a handkerchief; occasionally it quotes Shakespeare’s text. In this version of the tragedy, an African-American woman is the protagonist. As Sears herself describes her rewriting: “It is a tale of love. A tale of Othello and his first wife, Billie. [...] [T]his is Billie’s story” (14-15). A white

woman, Mona — short for “Desdemona” — will become Othello’s second wife: the audience hear her voice, see her arm and hair, but never view her face. Sears tells Billie’s story in three distinct narratives against three historical backdrops: 1860-62 (years leading to the Emancipation of the slaves); 1928 (year belonging to the Harlem Renaissance); and contemporary Harlem. In each narrative the conclusion is tragic, madness or death, as the play “explores the effects of race and sex on the lives of people of African descent” (14). Sears deconstructs Shakespeare’s tragedy and reassembles parts of it in three discontinuous stories. The narratives in *Harlem Duet* do not follow any recognizable order in relation to one another or the play as a whole. As they intersect unpredictably, they create an impression of fragmentary and deceptive events which may replicate what Sears perceives as the African-American experience.

These two Canadian plays belong to a total of twenty or so recent Shakespearean adaptations in which women dramatists have probed feminist issues. Scattered through the decades which led from the late twentieth century to the early twenty-first, the women’s scripts originate in English-speaking countries: Great Britain, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. If some of these adaptations are clearly comic and others incline towards tragedy, the most powerful experiment with genre and form. The plays by MacDonald and Sears should be linked with other innovative adaptations by women: for example, *Lear’s Daughters* (1987), by The Women’s Theatre Group and Elaine Feinstein; *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* (1993), by Paula Vogel; *Lear* (2010), by Young Jean Lee; and *Desdemona* (2011), a collaboration between Toni Morrison (American Nobel Prize laureate) and RokiaTraoré (Malian singer and songwriter), with American stage director Peter Sellars. As the titles indicate, most of these plays take a tragedy as their point of departure. Since men often dominate the genre, which tends to marginalize women, subverting a Shakespearean tragedy allows the modern rewritings to centre on the rights of disempowered women.

Aftermath of *The Tempest*

Together, the feminist plays can be grouped chronologically with other genres which have dealt with similar issues in different forms, such as fiction and poetry. Dramatic adaptations which centre on postcolonial matters resist such neat groupings, both with one another and with nondramatic genres. Most of them originate with one play, *The Tempest*, which became a subject of interest in Central and South America during the 1890s, a time of conflict between Spain and the United States. Various writers — in Nicaragua, Uruguay, Colombia — alluded to or drew on *The Tempest* in an array of genres: essays, manifestos, a journal, poetry. They focused

on questions of political authority as articulated in Shakespeare's play, especially through the relationship between Prospero and Caliban. Since the 1950s, writers from the Caribbean and Africa have adapted both *The Tempest* and Caliban. Again, the genres vary, from essays and novels to drama and poetry. Leading this mid-twentieth-century reassessment of Shakespeare's play, Octave Mannoni analysed the revolt in Madagascar with an important document written in French: *Le Psychologie de la colonisation*, 1947-48 (translated into English as *Prospero and Caliban*, 1956). Mannoni argued that Caliban, the colonized, needed firm control; but the writers who followed Mannoni identified with Caliban and rehabilitated the character. According to scholars, the period 1957 to 1973 in Africa and the Caribbean was "marked by a rush of anticolonial sentiment" and a preoccupation with *The Tempest* (Nixon 557). A majority of the colonies won independence at the time, events coinciding with the civil rights movement in the United States and the student revolts of 1968.

Clearly, artistic and other discourse deriving from *The Tempest* concerns not only questions of what constitutes individual power, but also questions of what constitutes state power. Addressing the latter, it extends beyond the scope of most women's adaptations in more than one way: a chronology that stretches from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century; a geography that embraces more than half of the world's continents; and a range of languages including French and Spanish, as well as English. Seven dramatic adaptations cluster between 1969 and 1998, no two from the same country.

The first of these plays is also the best known, having been produced in diverse sites from New York to the West Indies. Originally written in French, Aimé Césaire's *Unetempête* premiered in 1969 and was later translated into English as *A Tempest*. The subtitle reads: "Based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: Adaptation for a Black Theater"; and the list of "CHARACTERS" specifies:

As in Shakespeare

Two alterations:

Ariel, a mulatto slave

Caliban, a black slave

This version identifies one addition: "Eshu, a black devil-god" (n.p.). But it contains several, starting with a metatheatrical episode for which a stage direction instructs:

Ambiance of a psychodrama. The actors enter singly, at random, and each chooses for himself a mask at his leisure.

Like a director, the Master of Ceremonies suggests roles for the actors and calls for

the stage effects of “a storm to end all storms” to begin the production (1).

The action unfolds in ten scenes unevenly divided among three acts. For instance, the two scenes of Act I mimic the first two scenes of Shakespeare’s play: a short, explosive sinking of the ship and a long, expository introduction of the characters on the island. By comparison, three relatively short scenes compose Act II, the initial one an invention which allows a debate about means to achieve freedom from Prospero between Caliban and Ariel. In this sequence and Act III, the modern play departs from the order of the scenes in Shakespeare’s. Césaire’s conclusion differs strikingly from the original: figures and traditions from Caribbean culture upset Prospero’s plans, and in the end Prospero remains on the island.

As a whole, the structure of Césaire’s adaptation represents his challenge to Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, which is an elegant narrative seemingly under Prospero’s control. Close reading of the earlier script reveals a magician/artist in conflict with himself; but Césaire seems to view Prospero in one dimension, a European invader who experiences his power by tyrannizing over those he has subjected. Césaire’s Prospero loses his grip when Eshu disturbs his entertainment for Miranda and Ferdinand: “Power! Power! Alas! [...] My power has gone cold” (49). As the play closes, Caliban promises to crush Prospero’s world, because Prospero lacks the will power to leave:

I’m sure you won’t leave.
You make me laugh with your “mission”!
Your “vocation”!
Your vocation is to hassle me.
And that’s why you’ll stay,
just like those guys who founded the colonies
and who now can’t live anywhere else. (65)

With this adaptation, Shakespeare’s *Tempest* becomes a confrontation between Prospero and Caliban, colonizer and colonized, mediated at some points by Ariel. The closing lines suggest that Caliban wins the contest:

In semi-darkness Prospero appears, aged and weary. His gestures are jerky and automatic, his speech weak, toneless, trite.

...

In the distance, above the sound of the surf and the chirping of birds, we hear snatches of Caliban’s song:

FREEDOM HI-DAY, FREEDOM HI-DAY! (68)

Almost two decades later, Philip Osment's *This Island's Mine* (1988), a Gay Sweatshop production, makes *The Tempest* an analogue for his portrayal of oppression by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government; and both Great Britain and the United States represent colonial oppressors. This script requires eight actors to perform nineteen roles, three of the parts — Prospero, Caliban, and Miranda — from Shakespeare's play. References to *The Tempest* begin with Osment's title, which comes from Caliban's famous speech in Act I Scene 2; they continue with moments of rehearsals and finally performance of Act I, Scene 2, the last a quotation of the entire fifteen-line speech beginning "This island's mine" (119-20).

In Osment's appropriation, Shakespeare's *Tempest* becomes a play-within-a-play, a paradigm informing the action which takes place in the course of thirty-four short scenes. If *The Tempest* observes the unities of time, place, and action, *This Island's Mine* tells several stories which intersect. The modern play centres these narratives on families, multiplying the two small units of *The Tempest* into various configurations subject to contemporary pressures, especially discrimination based on sexual orientation, social class, race, and religion. In the late twentieth century, Osment finds disturbing correspondences in the subjection of Caliban; and Shakespeare's magical island becomes an England feeling stress not only from its own prejudices, but also from its fraught relationship with America. That failed bond is personified in the decision of Miss Rosenblum, a refugee in London from Vienna, not to elope to the United States during World War II with Stephen, a returning GI.

Like the best of the women's plays, Osment's adaptation gains its power from experimenting with genre and form. The dramatist specifies in an "Author's Note": "This play is written in a mixture of narrative and dialogue and any production has to be flexible enough to incorporate both these styles" (83). The two styles appear on the page as a kind of free verse; and one modulates into the other without warning, even in a very brief speech. Here is Miss Rosenblum in conversation with Martin, one of her boarders.

But the old lady halts him,
Pinching his arm in a bony grip:
"Do not think it cannot happen here!" (88)

Characters fluctuate between a fictional mode and a theatrical one; changing impressions distance the audience from events and individuals in a Brechtian way. As the fourth wall shifts, witnesses to Osment's play are constantly forced to alter their perceptions of the action and to engage with its meaning.

In its artfulness, Osment’s *This Island’s Mine* supports the conclusion that what recent political adaptations lack in numbers, they compensate by means of intellection and originality. They constitute an important current in the latest popular rewritings of Shakespeare for theatre, a postmodern channelling of the plays into the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. By “specialists” I mean the editors of and contributors to the international quarterly journal *Modern Drama*, published since 1958, and Myron Matlaw, who compiled *Modern World Drama: An Encyclopedia*, published in 1972. This definition was challenged in 2003 with a collection of essays, *Modern Drama: Defining the Field*, edited by Ric Knowles, Joanne Tompkins, and W.B. Worthen.
2. This was also the title of a book explaining Pound’s critical method.

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