

# Shakespeare and Politics Between Media: Introduction

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## The Politics of Returning

The cultural landscape as we approach the third decade of the twenty-first century is saturated with remediations of and returns to existing media properties.<sup>1</sup> As staples of an especially persistent and pervasive literary and dramatic canon, Shakespeare's works have been subject to centuries of this treatment. The politics of returning to Shakespeare are particularly visible in adaptations that attempt to mitigate the biases of the originals, like *Ten Things I Hate About You* (Junger, 1999) and *Lear's Daughters* (The Women's Theatre Group, 1987), or to find new targets for them, as in Richard Loncraine's *Richard III* (1995), which remodelled medieval violence as 1930s European fascism, or Greg Doran's *Julius Caesar* (2012), which situated Roman power struggles in a vaguely defined "African" country. In these cases, theater practitioners and filmmakers undertake their returns to Shakespeare's texts with an awareness that they have ethical responsibilities to that text, but also, more urgently, to their audiences. In turn, audiences have ethical responsibilities in their returns to Shakespeare to recognise the voices that are silenced, the agencies that are elided, and the narrative disciplines that are, rightly or wrongly, meted out in those texts.

Whether these practitioners fulfil their responsibilities is, of course, another question: from our perspective in 2019, *Ten Things I Hate About You* shows its "postfeminist" faultlines, since it, like *The Taming of the Shrew*, requires its protagonist to be silenced; and Doran's *Julius Caesar* looks clumsy and ignorant in its displacement of Roman violence into an African continent imagined as an amorphous mass. This special issue therefore presents papers on topics across the range of media that adapt, appropriate, and interpolate Shakespeare's plays in order to tackle questions of gender and race that have become urgent in their contemporary political environment. In doing so, the essays address the need for more meaningful interdisciplinary dialogue around the politics of Shakespearean remediations. Each essay comments on one or more remediations of one of Shakespeare's plays, considering them as products of the politics of their moments of creation, but also as subject to the politics of their temporally displaced audiences, who often initiate further remediations in their efforts to make sense of their own political moment and perspective.

The title of this special issue, "Shakespeare and Politics Between Media," does not imply that these essays are all concerned with Shakespeare's depictions of political processes as they have been remediated. Though certain essays address Richard's use in *Richard III* of direct address and the potency of a political appeal for empathy in *Sir Thomas More*, the issue's central concern is not with the politics depicted in the plays, but with the politics of returning to Shakespeare from the perspective of the present moment. The essays in this issue therefore address the political stakes of remediation, particularly the power dynamic between audience and media. They represent an understanding that the personal is political, including when it comes to media creation and consumption; they look at ways that Shakespeare adaptations may become entangled with issues which are, today, deeply politicised: particularly race and gender.

### Between Media

In addressing these interactions "between media," the essays respond to recent trends in the study of Shakespeare adaptation by shifting the focus from the output (a film, a performance, a comic) to the *process* of remediation, looking at the networks of influence that connect texts to films, stage productions, literary criticism, documentaries, viral videos and Twitter memes. They are not constrained to recent remediations, but put cultural works from the 1960s to the present day in conversation with each other in order to map the history of remediation against developments in feminism and critical race studies.

A key term in all the essays, therefore, is remediation — defined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999) as "the representation of one medium in another" (45). Bolter and Grusin use "remediation" to discuss shifting relationships between viewer and content as managed by mediating apparatuses, including forms of online media dissemination which were in their infancy twenty years ago. They comment on the layering effect produced by remediation: the old medium haunts the younger one, failing to be entirely effaced. Habits of consumption may linger from one medium into its successor, or equally, audiences accustomed to online media approach older media like theater and film with altered expectations.

Twenty years on, Bolter and Grusin's analysis of immediacy and hypermediacy remains useful as a model for understanding remediation, and the political and ethical questions raised by remediation still feel urgent. For instance, how do adaptations of Shakespeare in a variety of media challenge or reassert their contemporary political and interpretive biases? How do these media record interpretations of plays, and how are they subject to ephemerality, change and decay as they are revived or re-read in new contexts? How do separate Shakespearean remediations interact with each other? How do they alter, fragment, or reify Shakespearean texts? Collectively, the

papers in this special issue put pressure on the relationship between remediation, adaptation, and appropriation in relation to ongoing social and political movements. A wide range of approaches to an array of media allows the authors to examine connections between the way Shakespearean content is communicated and the way its meaning evolves. When Shakespeare's plays are moved between media, they may also change genres, develop different thematic and political concerns, or find new audiences. Crucially, each movement forces a consideration of how the Shakespearean play interacts with the present of the remediation.

Despite the range of media encompassed within this special issue, there remain certain theoretical through lines to consider. In addition to Bolter and Grusin's approach to remediation, the issue is informed by adaptation studies, which has moved well beyond what Linda Hutcheon calls "fidelity debates" (2006, 7) to encompass a wider range of concerns. Rather than worrying over the "authenticity" of a given iteration to its source text (an approach that often re-entrenches imperial and/or heteropatriarchal authority over such texts), we aim to ask what can be gained by arguing in the spaces between instances, fragments, adaptations, and borrowings across media.

The distinction that Bolter and Grusin make between "immediacy" and "hypermediacy" is especially active here. The logic of "immediacy" is that the medium should be invisible in the finished product, treated as an "Albertian window" which the audience can look or read *through*; "hypermediacy" by contrast "privileges fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity and . . . emphasises process or performance rather than the finished product" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 28-30). The work featured in this special issue follows Bolter and Grusin's lead in considering the politics of remediation. Citing Laura Mulvey and Luce Irigaray, they note that immediacy may be aligned with the male gaze (1999, 79-80). Similarly, Lindsay Smith, writing on focus in photography, discusses the "colonizing gaze" of sharply focused images (1998, 30). While the appearance of immediacy might empower the audience, putting them in a position of surveillance over the source material, it might also make that audience more vulnerable to the emotional and political weight of what they watch, invested as it is with a kind of authenticity that nudges at the "real."

Hypermediacy too could have ambivalent effects: the content is fractured and diffused, delivered perhaps with a knowing wink, or with layers of metatheatricity. Often, hypermediacy grants viewers, readers, and audiences a degree of control to direct their own encounter with the content: to click through to different nodes, or to direct their own partial experience of a work. This allows audiences to selectively "opt out" of the work's content, but increased participation might also invite the viewer to be complicit in the content, its narrative, and its effects. Many of the papers in this special issue play in the spaces *between* media and comment upon the visibility or

tangibility of those media in relation to particular iterations of Shakespeare, and in doing so, they pay particular attention to the connections between mediation and power.

The relationship between immediacy and hypermediacy colours a number of active debates in Shakespeare studies and in literary and drama studies more broadly. The rise of televised, live-streamed, or cinecast theatrical performances, for example, raises new questions about the relationship between audiences and variously mediated 'live' performances (Aebischer, Greenhalgh, and Osborne 2018; O'Neill 2017). Meanwhile, 'old' media like theatrical performance are fragmented and circumscribed by participants' and audiences' use of digital technologies and social media, so that their liveness becomes supplemented by online temporality — characterised variously by simultaneity, ephemerality, and belatedness.

### Remediation as Remedy

Remediation changes the interface between Shakespearean material and its audience. Responding to a rich body of existing work on Shakespearean remediations (including Desmet and Sawyer, 1999; Kidnie, 2009; Fischlin [ed.], 2014; Kirwan and Carson [eds.], 2014), the papers in this special issue ask how altering that interface might also change the audience — who they are, how empowered they are, how much they can participate, how they hold the content and its creators to account. In this respect, the papers also take up Bolter and Grusin's invitation to scrutinise the etymological link between "remediation" and "remedy": papers analyse how remediations might fix, cure, resolve, disinfect, or recover the play. Remediations might seek to do justice to underrepresented figures, or to turn subtext into text. For instance, Vanessa Corredera's essay approaches *Get Out* as a slant adaptation of *Othello* and as a potential corrective to performances and adaptations that attempt to marginalise the racial politics of the play and its entanglement in histories of racism. Carol Thomas Neely pursues the historical development of sexual assault and abuse, and especially incest, as a mutable theme through more than half a century of remediations of *King Lear*. She traces the tandem movement between technological advances that allow such crimes to become public and the affordances of new media, which affect the visibility and repercussions of incest when it is raised in iterations of *Lear*.

But papers also recognise that the politics of remediation are not always progressive: moving Shakespeare's plays and characters across media can re-entrench hegemonic readings, accentuate power dynamics, or subject characters (especially female characters and characters of color) to objectification and fetishization. Lauren Eriks Cline addresses this potential directly in her analysis of Ira Aldridge's career as it has been remembered, revised, and re-imagined for audiences of the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, and in Corredera's work we can read the long history of

*Othello's* racism and its influence on popular culture. Shakespeare's works are usually remediated from a position of privilege; their cultural capital is such that remediations are often designed to reward familiarity and punish audiences who are new to Shakespeare by excluding them from jokes and allusions. In general, remediations frequently perform the power dynamics of the networks and institutions that produce and consume them. L. Monique Pittman's essay reassesses some of Kevin Spacey's Shakespearean work in order to think about the ethics of historiography and the power of celebrity to control a narrative. Stephen O'Neill's contribution also examines the role of celebrity in a speech from *Sir Thomas More* going viral as contemporary political commentary.

In their engagement with the politics of remediation, all of the essays are in conversation with current work, in Shakespeare studies and beyond, that moves away from identity politics as a separate category and seeks to integrate critical race studies, gender studies, and disability studies into the critical mainstream. Important work in this area includes Ayanna Thompson's *Passing Strange*, Kim F. Hall's *Things of Darkness*, Carla Della Gatta's work on Latinx Shakespeare, Ambereen Dadabhoy's research linking Renaissance and present-day prejudices, and Alexa Alice Joubin and Elisabeth Rivlin's edited collection on *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, among many others. The Shakespeare Association of America's Shakespeare Futures and NextGenPlen initiatives aim to incorporate these politics into the structure of the field, making space and creating plenary session platforms for work that might previously have remained marginalized in the context of the conference and the field more broadly. The hashtag #shakerace has remediated this conversation by bringing it beyond the confines of an academic conference and into the Twittersphere, where it frames and organizes conversations across a range of Shakespeare-related tweets. More recently, #RaceB4Race has entered the conversation, with the hashtag broadcasting, continuing, and remediating conversations that take place during and between in-person symposia funded by Arizona State University's Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

### Historicizing Remediation

Each essay is also concerned with the historical contingency of interpretations available at a given moment. Changing contexts produce their own kinds of remediations: Shakespeare's plays become overlaid with the concerns of the present moment; they accumulate critical baggage in their passage through history. Pittman re-reads *House of Cards*, *Richard III*, and the documentary *NOW: In the Wings on a World Stage* in the aftermath of recent conversations about power dynamics and ethical consumption of media provoked by #MeToo. Neely's essay takes a long view, across a series of remediations of *Lear* — her work elaborates a concern shared by several of the essays

regarding the ways in which an interpretive strand may take hold and endure from one remediation to the next.

In this way, the special issue as a whole takes up Will Stockton's challenges to the supposed methodological singularity of both presentism and historicism in Shakespeare studies, and suggests instead (as Stockton does) a productive dialogue between the two that "sustain[s] both as viable and vibrant critical practices" (2006, 292). Where presentism becomes useful here is in its ability, as Mick Mangan puts it, to "reverse the chronology of causality, to ask questions about the influence of the present upon the past" (2008, 195). This reversal prompts considerations of positionality: our recognition of ourselves as, in some ways, remediating the remediations through our critiques and, as such, subject to the same problems of contingency that affect the creators of the works explored in these essays.

The historical scope of the special issue therefore reflects the contributors' efforts to think with, through, and against media history. The accelerating pace of technological innovation in the nineteenth century is in many ways the historical starting point for the hypermediated cultural landscape underscoring these essays. From the opening of the first panorama in 1793, through the inventions of the photograph, stereograph, and phonograph and eventually the first displays of moving pictures in 1895, the century obliged successive generations of audiences to become accustomed to new configurations of visual, aural, and narrative information. Eriks Cline's essay, reading nineteenth-century performances of *Othello* alongside Lolita Chakrabarti's 2013 play *Red Velvet*, examines remediations of Shakespeare for a Victorian audience, considering as well how Chakrabarti reimagines those spectators and their racial biases for a modern audience in *Red Velvet*. Considering remediation in a twentieth-century context, Neely discusses canonical and counter-cultural instances of Shakespeare performance and criticism from the 1960s to the present, noting the effects of the sexual revolution and politically-charged director-led theater (alongside rapid technological change) on a more permissive and confrontational approach to adapting and remediating Shakespeare.

The twenty-first-century focus of the other contributions reflects the increased cross-pollination between media in the digital age. O'Neill traces the digital network of quotations that have found a series of contemporary resonances for the "strangers' case" speech from the collaborative play *Sir Thomas More*; Corredera and Pittman address remediations whose reception was conditioned by online discussion. They are also concerned with the "transformative" activities of fan audiences and participatory audiences via social media. In this respect, they draw on an

emerging body of critical work on Shakespeare fandom: work by Louise Geddes, Valerie Fazel, Stephen O'Neill, and Geoff Way is instructive here.<sup>2</sup>

The essays examine remediations between texts, performances, films, and social media; in their attention to these representations they insist upon the critical and ideological stakes of such movements. The relationship between remediation and remedy, then, is not understood to be merely etymological. Remediation may allow entirely different audiences to access Shakespearean content, or it may restructure the relationship between audience and content such that the viewers can more easily interact, comment, and speak back. The essays in this special issue aim to understand these remediations *both* as changes to the delivery mechanisms through which we access Shakespeare's works *and* as adaptations that take into account the concerns and ideals of a new audience; their key intervention, and a central argument of the special issue as a whole, is an insistence on the interconnectedness of these two processes. In effect, they propose that an interpretive lens or a shifted point of view can be considered a kind of mediating apparatus, since these things have a similar capacity to be transformative.

### Notes

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2. See, for example, Fazel and Geddes, "'Give me your hands if we be friends': collaborative authority in Shakespeare fan fiction," 2014; O'Neill, *Shakespeare and YouTube: New Media Forms of the Bard*, 2014; O'Neill (ed.), *Broadcast Your Shakespeare: Continuity and Change Across Media*, 2017; and Way, "Social Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet*, Social Media, and Performance," 2011).

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