

Unit: 29: Shakespeare and Popular Culture

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Shakespeare's modernity is reflected in his interaction with diverse cultural traditions. Local Shakespeares testify to his modernity by adapting to the various indigenous conceptions of modernity. As there is no universal model for modernity, what is claimed as modern in Shakespeare reception only complement his modernity.

Societies have been adapting Shakespeare across history according to their needs. Even Shakespeare's own company, the King's Men must have produced him differently. During the Restoration Period, Dryden adapted *The Tempest* with a female partner for Caliban, and Nahum Tate adapted *King Lear* without the Fool as the Restoration Society wanted. The Bowdler siblings adapted him for family reading and the Lamb siblings adapted him for young readers in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, new academic pursuits made scholars like Sigmund Freud find oedipal complex in Hamlet-Gertrude relation, and Karl Marx finds Timon's notion of money engaging. They all read Shakespeare selectively to justify their theoretical ends and the social requirements they addressed.

In this unit, we will be looking at the five units: Shakespeare and the Popular, Shakespeare and Popular Culture, Shakespeare in cinema and TV, Shakespeare in print, and Shakespeare in advertising.

Shakespeare and the Popular

Shakespeare's extensive charm and power are fully used by the contemporary time which exploited him in the pop culture. 'Pop' or 'popular' is a problematic one in the modern discourse as it cannot be defined and described with unanimous agreement. Several ingredients are mixed to prepare the different dishes of popular culture. It ranges from community to shared standards, to independent involvement, to approachability, and also to amusement and entertainment.

The dish of pop culture, sometimes, may stimulate our taste-buds to the 'mass-produced commodity'. This may lead us to the fear of the 'greatest common divisor'—a register used in the pages of pop culture. Pop culture is sometimes considered to be the opponent of the intellectual or the hegemonic culture which is accepted traditionally with untainted and principled art added with high moral values. Pop culture erects barriers against these traditional expressions marked through literature, paintings, music, fashion and also through the standards of the lower classes. In short, pop culture is a synonym for mass culture, constructed and manufactured by cultural agencies. All these ingredients can be found in plenty in Shakespeare's writings.

In pre-industrial western societies, pop culture was associated with low/mass culture, and it focussed on oral performances. It was organic and separated from the elite. This distance weakened over time with the introduction of mass media in the eighteenth century. Commercialization and commodification speeded up profit-seeking disturbing the apple cart of high culture. Pop culture started filling the void of the cultural demands of the liberated public. Food, fashion, values, performance, etc. underwent an unimaginable transformation. It promoted commercial products for mass consumption. The Elizabethans food and commercial recreations were similar to those in pop culture today. Shakespeare highlights the nuances of mass culture with dialogues like "I would give all my fame for a pot of ale" (5H 3.2) and Falstaff's comment "A man cannot make him laugh – but that's no marvel, he drinks no wine" (4H2. 4.3).

The older forms of popular culture were not specifically related to merry making and commercial activities alone. These were still cultural expressions of the people of the Elizabethan England and the common folk. Shakespeare had mastered the psyche of the mass. He was merely giving expression to the views of people ranging from the royal to labour class. His use of the elite/low binary and his mass grouping of some selected items are relevant in the discussions of pop culture. Pistol in Henry V asks the disguised king Henry V:

Discuss unto me; art thou officer?
Or art thou base, common and popular? (4.1)

Pop culture enables people to challenge the alternatives given to them by conventional patterns. TV programmes, musical performances, social gatherings, consumerist equations and attitude towards life strengthen their dream for a better world. This dream receives a safe landing runway in the lines of Shakespeare. Pop culture is also used to erase the stigma attributed to consumerism. Mass culture intermittently introduces indigenous festivities, ritualistic performances, and carnivalesque pageants to increase consumerism. It also revises these continually.

Pop culture had the pejorative stigma of mass consumerism. It could remain popular with the power of the masses. High culture accused it to be a morally degrading force that mechanically reproduced cultural icons. It was accused of fulfilling mass tastes and preferences meeting the craving for false necessities it engendered. The agents defending high culture projected it alone as true. The eulogy of such a parallel cultural production can be found in Shakespeare also.

Shakespeare has been interested as part of high culture, although he has not been so during his lifetime. He was part of the popular entertainment industry in Elizabethan England and mostly staged his plays outside the city walls—at The Theatre, and the Globe Theatre. It is true that in the latter part of his career, he moved within the city—to the Blackfriars and catered to the high society also. Even earlier, he used to get invited perform at the court and houses of nobles to stage his plays. Like Peter Quince in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, who hoped “to play in our interlude before the duke and the duchess, on his wedding-day at night”, the Elizabethan playwrights aspired to be rewarded by the nobility for plays and performances.

Shakespeare and Popular Culture

Moving Shakespeare into popular culture is an irony because he was part of the popular culture during his time. Although he was inducted into the high-culture when he started playing at the Blackfriars, he remained rooted in popular culture through the Globe Theatre which was frequented by the common people throughout his life. After his death, Shakespeare lost his popular appeal when the Restoration theatre edited and improved him. In the second half of the 19th century highbrow culture appropriated him through an imperial takeover and ascribed him high culture status to suit the political and cultural ends of the colonial regime. As his cultural makeover continued in the 21st century, his ‘elevation’ cause him to lose in ‘popularity’. While this was true in English, in translation, it was not so simple.

His plays resonated with many heterogeneous local cultures across the world and they assimilated him into their artistic and creative expressions like theatre and literature. His ‘elitist’ tag, however, continued to prevent the public from appreciating him from a deferential distance as an institution of the highbrow culture. It cut him off from their everyday life and it has been difficult for Shakespeare to enter into the many genres of popular cultural expressions easily.

Peter Sellars (1925-1980) surprised his interviewer when he described Shakespeare as a “great American playwright” (Moyers). Even 160 years before that, James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) had called Shakespeare “the great author of America” as the Americans had “just a good a right” as the Englishmen to claim Shakespeare because of their shared culture (Cooper 113). The early 19th century America promoted Shakespeare as part of the popular, and not of the highbrow and saw him as part of the popular like “magicians, dancers, singers, acrobats, minstrels, and comics”. That he was not reverentially distant but “familiar and intimate” can be seen from Alexander Duval’s (1767-1842) one-act melodrama of 1804 *Shakespeare Amoureux* (Smith R. P., 1941) as the story of a “poor, worried, stumbling young man in love with a woman of whose feelings he is not yet certain” (Levine 23).

Traditional theatres exploit the cultural signifiers added to Shakespeare localisations to attract young audiences to it. These integrate traditional forms with popular culture strategies to re-invent Shakespeare the high culture icon. Jyotsna Singh’s Study on how Kathakali artists use him to showcase Kathakali, Li Weimin’s study on the intertextuality between Shakespeare and Peking Opera, and Hyon-u Lee’s illustration of the use traditional yard techniques show this. Traditional theatres which use Shakespeare use his localizations localization to reinvigorate themselves by making theatre a site of negotiation between foreign Shakespeare and local theatre.

Advertising

Shakespeare is widely and creatively used in advertisements. These have used his lines, titles, images, concepts, works and his life itself for marketing their products. Most of these are anachronistic adaptations are creative and imaginative use of Shakespeare in modern contexts. He is used for marketing a variety of products and in diverse cultures.

An example is the 2003 Nextel ad which summarizes Romeo and Juliet in 30 seconds in an advertisement of a wireless service operator. It can be seen in the following link.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-cZtWefN8s>.

An advertisement for Levi Jeans shows a scene from A Midsummer Night’s Dream with a modern Titania and a band of local boys.

The Levi 501 Anti-Fit jeans ad (2005): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPYD4jyiObo>

The shooting of Hamlet is used to creatively advertise Spam Fingers, a light packed snack:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMwzCfVV_pw

Some other ads featuring Shakespeare or his plays are given below:

Klondike Ad <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pF9C48ccNHQ>

Redbull Ad <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzXgvC1fKBI>

Spaghetti Ad (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svTt0jBQTdA>)

Amul Ad: <https://amul.com/m/amul-hits?s=2017&l=12>.

ING Ad <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pc3YWNTqKGU>

In politics, Shakespeare is widely evoked for his political plays, themes, and lines in speeches, analysis and debates. He is a favourite of many politicians like Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was killed by the brother of the most renowned American Shakespearean actor, Edwin Booth

Some of the famous lines quoted by politicians widely are the following.

- “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown” (4H2 3.1);
- “My crown I am, but still my griefs are mine. You may my glories and my state depose but not my griefs; still am I king of those.” (3R 4.1.);
- “I think the King is but a man, as I am. The violet smells to him as it doth to me. The element shows to him as it doth to me. All his senses have but human conditions. His ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man.” (5H 4.1)
- “We must not make a scarecrow of the law, setting it up to fear the birds of prey, and let it keep one shape till custom make it their perch and not their terror.” (MM 2.1)
- “Th’ abuse of greatness is when it disjoins remorse from power.” (JC 2.1)
- “Think’st thou that duty shall have dread to speak when power to flattery bows? To plainness honor’s bound when majesty falls to folly.” (Lear 1.1)

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Shakespeare is often used by politicians.

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Music

Shakespeare has inspired all kinds of music over the centuries. His songs were popular during his period. The lyrics of most of his 90 odd poems set to music. Those like Desdemona's Willow Song and Feste's "O mistress mine" still prefer original tunes, and the most experimented ones are Ariel's "Full Fathom Five" (*Tmp.* 1.3.18-22), and "Where the Bee Sucks." (*Tmp.*). The "Fear no more the heat o' the sun" from *Cymbeline* is perhaps the most moving one. Shakespeare was also used for composing great musical operas. Verdi's *Macbeth* (1847) and *Otello* (1887); Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* (1867); Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet* (1868); Gustav Holst's *At the Boar's Head* (1924); Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Sir John in Love* (1828); Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1868); Aribert Reimann's *Lear* (1978) are examples.

Hip Hop Shakespeare Company is a band that uses Shakespeare's lyrical language and natural rhythms to create new hip hop pieces. Sonnet 18 is set to HipHop beat by Akala in this YouTube video. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31UDs7Iac>.

David Gilmour, the outstanding guitarist and vocalist with British rock band Pink Floyd, has a quite different version of Sonnet 18. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8Osse7w9fs>.

Conclusion

While Shakespeare gives the insights of the local culture into the local conception of modernity, local Shakespeares conflate contemporary concerns with those in Shakespeare. In this process, Shakespeare and local cultures mutually reinforce each other. Artists, critics and scholars create political and cultural discourses across critical boundaries and conceptual domains. Such negotiations have resulted in the re-invention and re-imaginings of modernity in multilingual and multicultural communities with protean identities.