

01. The Adaptability of Adaptations Seminar Abstracts

Ved Dutt Arya

The “Merry War” Between Translation and Adaptation: Adapting Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* as “Raai Ka Pahaad”

Adaptation is often (mis)taken as translation. While translation scholars like John Milton see “translation and adaptation as fundamentally different processes” (Raw 2), others like Ritta Oittinen question whether “we [can] really tell the difference between adapting and translating?” (44). Similarly, adaptation scholars like Linda Hutcheon suggest that adaptations are “translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions” (16), but they also assert that “[a]daptations engage in a wider variety of cultural tasks than the metaphor of translation can explain” (Leitch 71). This ambiguity is even more acute in the Indian context: scholars who have studied translations and adaptations of Shakespeare in India often switch between the two terms without qualifying either of them (Thakur 96, 98; Das 54). How do we understand the relationship between adaptation and translation then? Is adaptation a kind of translation, or translation a kind of adaptation? And if they differ, how does each distinctively participate in acts of textual and cultural transformation? To answer these questions, this paper takes a practice-based approach to Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* to explore how adaptation is intricately, and inevitably, tied up with the notion of translation. Drawing from my own experience of adapting *Much Ado* as “Raai Ka Pahaad,” a Hindi theatre adaptation set in Rajasthan in India, the paper argues that adaptation is, if not a translation in-itself, ultimately translational. My aim here is not to elide one into another, but rather to show the complexity of their relationship that not only sheds some light on adaptation’s proclaimed relationship with translation but also enriches the understanding of translation as well. I contend that in an adaptation translation functions in multiple registers, crossing linguistic, stylistic, and generic boundaries. Adaptation shows the plurality that is inherent in the notion of translation, a plurality that can be observed in the understanding of translation in a multilingual and multicultural context like India.

Elizabeth Burow-Flak

Zara as Resilient Titania in Backman’s *Anxious People*

This essay considers Zara in Fredrik Backman's novel *Anxious People* as an unacknowledged Titania figure in a recent tradition of hopeful representations. Backman’s popular fiction, best known by *A Man Called Ove*, humorously portrays ordinary people triumphing over isolation and brokenness. *Anxious People*, made into a Swedish TV series in 2021 and soon to be a movie starring Angelina Jolie, portrays the aftermath of a bungled bank robbery when the would-be thief flees into a real estate open house and takes prospective buyers hostage. Zara, a bank administrator, appears too wealthy for the property and does not conceal her loathing for the prospective buyers. She only becomes recognizable as Titania when—if at all to the casual reader—events drive her onto the balcony of the apartment for sale. In that scene, she

becomes attracted to Lennart, an actor who had been hired to disrupt the showing and who joins her clad in nothing but underpants, socks, and the headpiece of a furry rabbit costume. Zara's embodiment of Titania meets Sarah Olive's definition of "incidental" appropriation. That is, the novel's allusion to the most iconic scene in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* meets the definition of "incidental" that Olive quotes from the OED as "occurring . . . in fortuitous or subordinate conjunction with something else of which it forms no essential part." Olive elaborates that "unlike adaptations of the plays or biopics of Shakespeare's life," incidental appropriation does not "seek to rework [Shakespeare's] plays or his life story in any holistic way," yet neither is the reference entirely random.

The novel, first published in Swedish in 2019 (*Folk med ångest*), shows characters overcoming anxiety about their purposes in life amid late-stage capitalism. As the fairies in *Midsummer* remain unseen to the humans they control, so, too would Zara remain invisible to ordinary people—had guilt over her ruin of everyday lives not driven her, in a process that the novel eventually reveals, to attend showings of balcony apartments. Unlike Titania, however, Zara reigns single. Her biggest purchase, she admits, is "distance" from others. With no Oberon in the picture, the Shakespearean iconography in the balcony scene notably lacks manipulation. No love juice clouds Zara's eyes, nor does any jealous partner hold sway over her. Her attraction to Lennart thus functions both in line with her power—she doesn't *need* to date anyone—and her surprise at someone who is curious enough to seek her out, unswayed (as only an actor in white tights and a rabbit head might be) by her disdain.

This essay recognizes Zara in a continuum of Titanias from the twenty teens including in Julie Taymor and Emma Rice's stagings and Russell Davies' film version. These performances, which showcase Titania's sexual desire, Oberon being cuckolded by his own jest, and Titania leaving Oberon in favor of Hippolyta, pave the way for Backman's Zara. Feminist among characters who already accept queer motherhood and women in positions of top leadership, Zara finally addresses her complicity in the system that is causing everyone anxiety. In so doing, she not only exercises control over her own future but also takes on a harmful system, abandoning what she must and helping to repair some of its damage. This essay evaluates how among self-actualized and survivor Titanias, Backman's Zara transitions from "feel-good" Titanias of the twenty teens to a resilient character who, by opening herself to empathy, succeeds in feeling *better*.

Jonathan Burton **Aggrecultured Shakespeare**

My paper explores *Sonnet's Shakespeare*, a collection of 154 poems by Sonnet L'Abbé. The poems in this collection initially appear to be unremarkable blocks of text, until you discover that each contains within it the whole of Shakespeare's numerically corresponding sonnet. Unlike erasure poetry that strikes out words from an existing piece of writing to make a poem from what's left, L'Abbé's poems are "aggrecultured," or grown around and through the original

Shakespearean text. Each is written by intertwining new letters, words and spaces in between and all around the letters of Shakespeare's poems. In other words, Shakespeare's sonnet remains, in order, within L'Abbé's poem, but broken up, blended in, and operating in the service of L'Abbé's postcolonial feminism.

I will consider how L'Abbé's poetry's comments on the project of reusing literary materials produced in what might be considered the crucible of racial capitalism. As L'Abbé explains, "I wanted to create a form that evoked my relationship and resistance to a dominant culture that had taught me its language, ostensibly inviting me into its community, but which had also hypervisibled/invisibled my body and effectively muted my speech." Her term "aggrecculturing" refers to both the cultural aggressions and resistances processed in each poem, the aggregative process of adding letter-by-letter to Shakespeare's work, and also the sense that this work occurs in a postcolonial space, rooted to the past but in a continuing negotiation that sees beyond Shakespeare's field of vision.

Walter Cohen **Shakespeare's Global Adaptation**

My title designates both a subjective and an objective genitive. Subjective: Shakespeare adapts from a global, or at least Old World, literary heritage. Objective: Shakespeare is adapted globally. Shakespeare's own adaptations extend back through Italian literature and theater from the 14th to the 16th century, and from there to North African as well as Southwest and South Asian predecessors. In the sonnets, this reverse chronological path leads to Petrarch, Occitan lyric, and the Arabic poetry al-Andalus (Muslim Spain), itself in turn indebted to the long prior tradition of Arabic poetry. In the plays, the route is via the 16th-century Italian theater to Boccaccio, and from there through earlier Arabic, Persian, and South Asian tale traditions. In addition, these different routes connect Shakespeare by analogy (shared sources) to literature and theater not only in other European languages but also in Hebrew, Ge'ez, Chinese, and Japanese. The road forward from Shakespeare includes theatrical adaptation from the 1590s to the present, 17th-century revolutionary prose, and above all prose fiction as early as the Restoration but especially after 1750, with an increasingly international, even multicontinental, reception, though long limited to the European languages. With the sonnets, the record of adaptation remains Anglophone much longer. Only in the mid-19th century does translation/adaptation begin in earnest, first in European languages but in time globally. Inferences from this record include:

1. The combination of geographical, historical, and generic variability of Shakespearean adaptation in both senses of the genitive—a variability that encourages the construction of explanatory models;
2. The extreme limitations imposed by a nationalist, monolingual (Anglophone) approach;
3. The ordinariness of Shakespeare in this respect—borrowing from and transmitting to world literature and theater; and

4. The ideological malleability of Shakespeare, but with a predominantly norm-breaking tendency.

Michael D. Friedman

“Wear the brightest socks you can find”: *Fortysomething* and the Gulling of Malvolio

The British television series *Fortysomething* (2003), adapted by Nigel Williams from his own novel of the same name (1999), ran for only one season of six episodes. The novel quotes *Twelfth Night* once, but it is permeated by allusions to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Moving from fiction to television, Williams severely reduces the book's references to *Dream* and confines them to Episode 4 of the series, while he enhances and transforms the nature of *Twelfth Night's* function solely within Episode 3. The televisual medium's drive for some sense of closure at the end of each episode seems to have impelled Williams to compartmentalize his borrowings from Shakespeare and to use them as one-time plot mechanisms rather than as structuring devices for the series overall. In addition, Episode 3 of the series adapts the gulling of Malvolio in a such way that *Twelfth Night's* depiction of the harsh treatment accorded to mentally disturbed individuals is softened and, ironically, comes more in line with the sympathetic care actually offered to those afflicted with madness in the Early Modern period. *Fortysomething* does not quote directly from Shakespeare at any point, which may explain why the series' adaptation of elements from *Twelfth Night* have gone hitherto unnoticed.

Patrick Harris

Inappropriate Shakespeares

This paper takes a polemical stance against using the term “appropriation” in both theatrical reviews and scholarly discourses of Shakespeare productions. The use of appropriation by scholars has largely failed to gloss the connection the term has to property and to notions of “propriety”, to name who “owns” Shakespeare or to attempt an articulation of what “proper” Shakespeare looks like. Especially because scholars have most often used the term appropriation to refer to productions of Shakespeare that are not in English, that are staged by populations in the Global South, that have predominantly non-White casts (especially in White-majority nations), that cast women in most or all roles, or that create space for queer representation, scholars are often silently disclaiming these already marginalized artists as “Shakespeareans”. At the same time, reviewers frequently call out “inappropriate” Shakespeares in ways that give rise to and reify unfounded allegations of offensive sexual prurience, gratuitous violence, vague insinuations about “woke” infiltrations of long-standing institutions, and broader (often nondescript) anxieties about “messing” with Shakespeare. By analyzing the compounding issues that emerge in thinking of Shakespeare's plays as properties with in/appropriate forms of production, this essay argues that “appropriation” counterproductively and prejudicially positions

adaptations as somehow outside of the discourse of Shakespeare's plays and makes them especially susceptible to devaluation as a result.

Elizabeth Kolkovich
Shakespeare's Masques as Adaptations

My paper tests the limits of "adaptation" as a framework for studying metatheatrical moments in Shakespeare's texts, specifically masques. When I started writing about these moments, I considered using other terms (e.g. appropriation, transposition, remaking) but landed on "adaptation" as the best way to describe what Shakespeare was doing when he inserted masques into his plays. In my paper, I explore the term's affordances, especially how it enables us to understand Shakespeare as a proficient and sometimes resistant reader of court masques and their potential uses. I also consider the limitations of using a single term to describe both Shakespeare's insertions of masques and modern rewritings of these scenes.

Shakespeare understood masques as tools for reifying existing social structures; they separated insiders from outsiders and defined cultural ideals regarding race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class, and physical ability. When Shakespeare adapted this elite form into public-stage devices, he sometimes accepted and sometimes critiqued these ideals. Prospero's masque in *The Tempest*, for example, embraces patriarchal and imperial hierarchies. It teaches Ferdinand and Miranda to maintain the systems they have inherited and to reproduce white, able-bodied Europeans. But modern stage and film adaptations of this scene have emphasized its openness to alternative political messages. I conclude with a brief discussion of Prospero's masque in mainstream British and Indigenous productions of *The Tempest*. These productions demonstrate how masque adaptations can inadvertently reinscribe hierarchies based on race and disability (using spectacle and wonder to implicate the audience in the play's politics) or amplify marginalized voices (inviting audiences to rethink cultural norms).

Alfredo Michel Modenessi
***Los Colochos Teatro*, or "No Fear Shakespeare" for Real**

The Mexican theatre company *Los Colochos Teatro* started in 2010. Throughout 2011 they developed their most successful show to date: *Mendoza*, an adaptation of *Macbeth*, which opened in Mexico City in 2012. In 2014 *Mendoza* was awarded the "Off" prize at the Almagro Festival, the prime forum for early modern theatre in Spain. Ever since, it has performed to great acclaim in numerous countries.

I've been friends with *Los Colochos* almost from the start. I've frequently attended their workshops, rehearsals and shows; enthusiastically share in their visions and ways; and have modestly served as their textual advisor – especially during the study and research stages of their Shakespeare adaptations, which, apart from *Mendoza*, include *Nacahue* (2016, from *Romeo and*

Juliet), *Silencio* (2020, from *Othello*), *Reina* (2022, from *King Lear*), and *Tuta* (2024, from *Titus Andronicus*). All five they perform regularly, sometimes as a series. Although all its members participate freely in productions outside the company, *Los Colochos* have stayed together as an independent company for fifteen years – unusual in Mexico – by preserving their collective identity and goals.

I recently wrote a chapter on *Mendoza* for Ruben Espinosa's collection *Shakespeare / Skin* (Arden, 2024), and I hope to eventually write a piece on each of the other four productions. My paper will try and provide entry points for *Nacahue* and *Silencio*. So far, I only know that each piece will seek to corroborate what I've already said about *Mendoza*, i.e. that *Los Colochos*' adaptations are thoughtful articulations of Shakespeare's art and themes with Mexico's realities and artistry, resulting in austere but deeply significant, richly imaginative stage experiences where the appropriated goods and their offshoots see eye to eye.

L. Monique Pittman

Citing Shakespeare as Soft Power in Netflix's *The Diplomat*

Shakespearean citations across popular culture constitute an archive difficult to characterize. Not whole-cloth adaptations nor even appropriations, the Shakespearean citation or cameo often defies analytical purchase beyond the instinct to note and perhaps catalogue. However, I want to contend that such ephemera contribute actively to the cultural stature of Shakespeare while also affording creatives the opportunity to contest that very cultural preeminence. Indeed, these citations constitute a form of cultural soft power that should be forensically examined. To that end, this seminar paper will trace the Shakespearean citations found in Netflix's geopolitical thriller, *The Diplomat* (2023-Present), which chronicles the power-brokering of its titular US Ambassador to the Court of St. James's, Kate Wyler (Keri Russell). As the narrative unfolds amidst a seeming terrorist attack on a UK military vessel, the teleplay spotlights the avoidance of armed conflict by means of negotiation and the sway of soft power influence. For a drama set primarily in London, it will come as no surprise that Shakespeare makes the occasional cameo appearance, notably through the voice of the fictional UK Prime Minister Nicol Trowbridge (played by the LAMDA alum Rory Kinnear). Though Shakespearean half-lines occur in other moments throughout the series, perhaps the most provocative citation takes place when Kinnear's Trowbridge delivers Cleopatra's epitaph for Antony while the US Ambassador manages fallout from the recent death of the US President. In this moment, three empires meet--the Roman, the British, and the American. As empires wane, the series suggests, soft power operates to extend a thinned-out form of diplomatic influence. In this case, what might seem an inconsequential Shakespearean citational performance actually operates to reckon with the fragility of imperial power, past and present, by using the Shakespearean as a soft power gambit when hard power no longer prevails.

Adam Rzepka and Lucia Scheckner

“Put on my crown”: Adaptation and Authoritarianism in *Antony and Cleopatra*

This paper, co-written by Adam Rzepka and Lucia Scheckner, takes John Adams’s 2022 opera adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* as a vivid case study for the powerful and persistent political function of adaptive lineages in theater. We trace how the representation of Antony and Cleopatra—from classical authors such as Plutarch, Cassius Dio, and Virgil, through Shakespeare’s early modern stage, to Adams’s recent opera—take shape in response to crises of political myth-making.

Each era has taken up these lovers in order to re-stage its political anxieties as a struggle over the capacities of a particular genre and medium: first historiographical writing, then popular tragic performance, and finally twenty-first-century operatic spectacle. As each new form refigures the Antony and Cleopatra story’s essential contradiction between visceral, personal affect and the vastness of imperial scale, it renews the perpetual problem of political agency for its particular historical moment.

In 2025, amid heightened U.S. anxieties about democratic backsliding and the weaponization of both mainstream and social media, Adams’s adaptation becomes not only a drama of political alliances but also an inquiry into how political narratives are constructed and circulated as propaganda. The opera’s Brechtian use of multiple, cross-critical media within the total spectacle exposes for audiences the very processes by which power scripts history, as well as the potential for artistic forms—and ultimately audiences—to resist and rewrite those scripts.

Our argument centers on the uncanny echoes of early modern performance conditions in the opera’s application of Brechtian estrangement to sweeping fantasies of power that read today as fascist ideology—a striking internal dismantling of the idea of opera as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. As in the early modern public theaters’ revelatory installations of world-bestrident figures on unworthy scaffolds, Elkanah Pulitzer’s stage direction of Adams’s work immerses audiences in the urgent and unstable passions of political alienation that characterize both the ancient story and our present moment.

Laryssa Schoeck

Innovations in the Ska Shakespeare Musical *The Big Life*

This paper examines the Shakespeare musical, *The Big Life* and considers how the musical’s book, music, and lyrics negotiate and reimagine the Shakespearean source material to create a piece which provides new sociopolitical perspectives on Shakespeare and innovates the musical theatre form in doing so.

The Big Life is an adaptation of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* by Paul Sirett and Tameka Empson which tells the story of Caribbean immigrants arriving in England on HMT Empire Windrush and setting out to establish themselves in London in the 1950s. With music by composer Paul Joseph, *The Big Life* was the first ever ska musical. *The Big Life* opened at the off-West End

Theatre Royal Stratford East (TRSE) in 2004, with a second run at TRSE in 2005. It premiered at the Apollo Theatre later in 2005, becoming, according to the TRSE's then-artistic director, Philip Hedley, "the first Black British musical in the West End." 20 years later in 2024, the musical was revived at TRSE, with updates to the script referencing the 2018 Windrush scandal, becoming even more relevant in the context of the UK's "hostile environment" immigration landscape in recent years.

Drawing on interviews with the show's book writer and lyricist, Sirett, and composer, Joseph, this paper interrogates the adaptive approaches and musical innovation in the 2004/2005 productions of *The Big Life* as well as the updates to the 2024 production of *The Big Life*. As this paper will demonstrate, the collaboration between the musical's creatives resulted in a work which innovates Shakespeare by enhancing and adding depth to *Love's Labour's Lost* through its Windrush-era context, while innovating the musical form by using a ska music score to give voice to its Shakespeare-inspired characters in an authentic and radical way.

Barbara Sebek
Messing with Medea

My paper considers varieties of adaptation on a continuum from deliberate gestures of "drawing heavily," "closely following," or "embellished paraphrasing" (all terms used by editors of *The Tempest* in their notes on Prospero's Golding's Ovid-echoing speech before he abjures his rough magic) to radical recontextualization of narrative and dramatic materials. I explore how Golding's Ovid's Medea haunts *The Tempest's* and other plays' sidelong glances at feminized figures of magical power like Sycorax, arguing that Miranda as much as Sycorax aligns with different aspects of the Medea figure. I conclude with a look at Luis Alfaro's appropriation of Euripides's Medea in *Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles* (2015), a play that does not follow the itinerary through Ovidian and Shakespearean Medeas. A central question animating my discussion: What are the limits of such a grouping of texts? How do different versions of Medea stories and references explode the trope of women as property or prize?