

TALKS FROM THE CONVENTION

Shakespeare and the Politics of Tradaptation

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Our roundtable at the 2022 MLA Annual Convention, “Shakespeare and the Politics of Tradaptation,” emerged as a collaboration between the MLA forums TC Translation Studies and TC Adaptation Studies. We hoped to explore the intersections of these two fields through the lens of tradaptation, a critical framework that acknowledges that many works cannot be described exclusively as either translations or adaptations. While our initial call for papers did not focus specifically on Shakespeare, the submissions we received reflected the particular resonance of this term for Shakespeare studies. The resulting roundtable—which featured presentations from Jill Bradbury, Sujata Iyengar, Nedda Mehdizadeh, Anandi Rao, Niyanta Sangal, and Cynthia Shin—demonstrated that tradaptation is vital to conversations about Shakespeare because his works have been translated and adapted widely and have played a key role in imperial projects. The participants offered nuanced perspectives on Shakespeare’s place in national, regional, and colonial traditions, and they revealed the manifold ways in which tradaptation can complicate the binary thinking that until recently has dominated discourse surrounding both adaptation and translation: original and derivative, faithful and irreverent, local and global. They also called attention to the risks of cultural appropriation and the need to remain accountable to the communities that tradaptations seek to represent and engage.

The term *tradaptation* was first coined by the Québécois playwright Michel Garneau to characterize his 1970s and 1980s translations of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, and *Coriolanus* at the height of the Québec nationalist movement. The portmanteau was intended to capture the fact that, in the process of translating the plays into Québécois French, Garneau adapted them to fit a Québécois context and sensibility as well. This dual process, for Garneau, reflected the double colonization of Québec and the marginalized, often denigrated status of Québécois French in relation both to Parisian French and to English.

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Tradapting Shakespeare presented an opportunity to resist such linguistic oppression. “It was on the stage,” Leaneore Lieblein notes, “that many literary artists chose to display with love and flaunt with defiance the abjection and abasement of an oppressed québécois people and turn its language from a source of shame to a source of pride” (258). By translating Shakespeare into Québécois, Lieblein argues, Garneau “problematized the notion that translations . . . could be transparent or ideologically neutral” and acted on “the adapter’s impulse to impose his own vision upon Shakespeare” in insisting that Québécois could be a vehicle for canonical works (266–67). As Jennifer Drouin has demonstrated, many Québécois playwrights have followed in this tradition, drawing on their linguistic heritages to “embrace cultural hybridity, appropriate Shakespeare’s canonical authority, and legitimize their local struggle for national liberation” (3). Now adopted by artists and critics around the world, the term *tradaptation* remains especially relevant in places where linguistic difference—as it is experienced in everyday life and represented in performance and literature—is bound up with national, colonial, and racial politics.

We became interested in tradaptation through our collaborative research and editorial work on multilingual Shakespeare appropriations in the United States–Mexico borderlands. Just as Garneau sought to reflect on the double colonization of Québec by tradapting Shakespeare into Québécois, the playwrights we study create tradaptations of Shakespeare’s plays to attend to the multilayered colonial histories and present multilingualism of the United States–Mexico borderlands. Language has become a key site of political and cultural negotiation in the borderlands, in which Spanish functions both as a colonial language and as the language associated with racialized Mexican Americans. Border residents have been subject to what Gloria Anzaldúa describes as acts of “linguistic terrorism”—attempts to eradicate Indigenous languages and delegitimize hybrid language practices that have emerged in the region (65–66). As Anzaldúa writes:

For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for

a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castillian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both. (63)

Borderlands Shakespeare plays filter Shakespeare through these multiple border languages, and Shakespeare is transformed in the process. Plays such as Tara Moses’s *Hamlet, El Príncipe de Denmark* and Bernardo Mazón Daher’s *Measure for Measure | Medida por medida*, for example, emphasize moments in which characters move between Spanish and English within the same scene and often within the same sentence. These translanguing moments affirm the linguistic practices of border residents as well as the political and cultural dynamics that make a given language legible or illegible in various contexts. In the borderlands, moreover, language is racialized. As Jonathan Rosa argues, ideas of race and language are intertwined in perceptions of Latinx difference, as “languages are perceived as racially embodied and race is perceived as linguistically intelligible” (2). To translate Shakespeare’s plays into the language of racialized peoples is also to adapt them, to rewrite them to center the concerns and lived realities of communities of color.

Our roundtable continued this work of expanding beyond Garneau’s Québec. Participants discussed Shakespearean tradaptations that engage with Hindi, “Hinglish,” Urdu, Japanese, Persian, and American Sign Language. In an effort to foster conversation among participants and attendees, we began with a series of framing questions interrogating the usefulness of tradaptation as a critical concept, its potential to disrupt linguistic hierarchies, and its relation to identity, embodiment, and access. We also asked participants to consider why Shakespeare figures so prominently in discussions of tradaptation and what this prominence might illuminate or obscure about practices and theories of tradaptation more broadly.

These questions prompted a robust conversation about the relation of adaptation and translation, offering valuable insights into multilingual and multicultural reproductions of Shakespeare in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

As the roundtable participants showed, tradaptation opens new lines of inquiry, asking us to reconsider the boundaries and intersections of adaptation studies and translation studies—fields that have been central to discussions of Shakespeare’s afterlives. Focusing on tradaptation reminds us that neither translation nor adaptation is neutral, especially in colonial contexts in which the so-called target language or languages carry markedly different valences from the original one. Shakespeare tradaptations often challenge colonial, white, and Anglocentric canons, and they disrupt power structures that perpetuate the global hegemony of English. Many tradaptations, moreover, resist the impulse to homogenize national culture in their appropriations of Shakespeare, instead presenting local subcultures that are both specific and dynamic. These works cross and unsettle the boundaries of both the nation-state and canonical authority, thereby exposing fantasies of textual fidelity and of linguistic and racial purity.

Traditions and Transgressions in Shakespeare Tradaptation

Our roundtable participants explored histories, theories, and practices of tradaptation as they focused on texts and performances arising from diverse linguistic, cultural, and geographic contexts. Many of their presentations emphasized the place of tradaptation within colonialism and anticolonial resistance. In her discussion of an anonymous eighteenth-century Persian tradaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* called *Mussulman and the Jew*, for instance, Nedda Mehdizadeh elucidated the complex struggles over language, power, and authority that were enacted within the Persian tradaptation and subsequent 1786 transcription and partial translation of the text back into English by Thomas Munro, a Scottish soldier who had learned Persian as an officer in the East India Company. Mehdizadeh underscored the role that language learning and translation played

in colonizing projects. “By mastering local languages,” she explained, “these European colonizers shaped the narrative through acts of translation. The native, therefore, would become legible, knowable, and governable, allowing the colonizer to assume and assert an authority that he had granted to himself” (“Shakespeare”). Mehdizadeh suggested that while the Persian tradaptation challenges English hegemony, Munro’s transcription and translation reassert European power, presenting the Persian text as simply derivative of Shakespeare. Finally, Mehdizadeh raised important questions about the ethics of storing texts such as *Mussulman and the Jew* in archives such as the Folger Shakespeare Library that privilege English language and literature. In this case, the majority of those who can read the Persian text may not have access to it, and many English speakers may take Munro’s transcription as authoritative.

Tradaptations destabilize not only English cultural and linguistic dominance but also national languages and the politics that surround them. In her presentation on Bornila Chatterjee’s *The Hungry*, a 2017 Hindi film that tradapts *Titus Andronicus* for a present-day New Delhi context, Niyanta Sangal argued that tradaptation can disrupt the homogenizing projects of the nation-state to highlight regional or subaltern languages, politics, and aesthetic traditions. Chatterjee’s film, Sangal contended, uses Urdu, Hindi, and English to decenter Shakespeare and to emphasize the voices of residents of North India. This multilingualism challenges the nationalist investments of many Bollywood films, which often take Hindi as a national language and Hinduism as a national religion. *The Hungry*, Sangal noted, resists this nationalism by telling regional stories and by presenting English and Hindi as only two of several languages spoken in North India. As with many tradaptations, *The Hungry* thematizes and heightens attention to the topics of translation and imperial language politics, featuring selections from Edward FitzGerald’s 1859 English translation of Persian quatrains (*rubáiyát*) attributed to Omar Khayyám (1048–1131) and early-twentieth-century Urdu couplets by the polyglot poet Muhammad Iqbal. By including FitzGerald’s colonial English translation

and Iqbal's poetry in Urdu within her retelling of Shakespeare's *Titus*, Chatterjee highlights the complex role that literary texts, translations, and adaptations continue to play in the workings of empire. Further, *The Hungry* speaks to a larger effort to center and preserve lingual heritages that are threatened with erasure by global and national power structures. Tradaptation thus becomes central to the work of creating Indian Shakespeares that do not simply recenter Shakespeare's (and, by metonymy, Britain's) dominance or reinforce the power of the Indian nation-state but that indigenize Shakespeare, using his plays as "merely the outlines in which we find local Indian narratives" ("Shakespeare").

In keeping with the focus on Indian filmic engagements with Shakespeare, Anandi Rao explored the potential for queer tradaptations to disrupt nationalist languages and politics as well as heteronormative modes of understanding the relationships among texts. Rao examined the Indian film *Noblemen* not so much as an adaptation of its most obvious source, *The Merchant of Venice*, but as an iteration of, and response to, the Indian web series *Romil and Jugal*, a retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*. *Noblemen*, she suggested, uses the strategies of tradaptation to reject homonationalist visions of the nation-state, in which, as theorized by Jasbir Puar, tolerance for gay and lesbian subjects signals the legitimacy of national sovereignty (336). While *Romil and Jugal* uses the tragic ending of *Romeo and Juliet* to critique the legitimacy of the nation-state that cannot accommodate love between two men, *Noblemen* instead emphasizes the disruptive revenge of its queer protagonist. In Rao's view, this ending challenges the homonationalism of *Romil and Jugal* by showing that queerness can never be fully incorporated into the disciplinary structures of the nation.

While tradaptation is indeed a useful concept for examining these two texts that move between Hindi and English, Rao offered the term *anuvad*—the Sanskrit-derived Hindi word for translation—as a productive alternative. As defined by Monier Monier-Williams, *anuvad* refers to the practice of "saying after or again, repeating by way of explanation, explanatory repetition or reiteration with corroboration or illustration" (38). Reading *Noblemen*

through the framework of *anuvad* demonstrates how translation is an adaptive practice, one that is iterative and multidirectional and creates new forms of textual kinship outside traditional notions of reproduction. As Jeffery Masten has argued, "Philology's investments in phallogology—more precisely, its self construction *through* normative languages of sex, gender, reproduction, and the body—are evident at least since the Renaissance" (18). This sexually normative language is especially prominent in conversations about translation and adaptation, where questions of fidelity, derivation, and reproduction have traditionally been paramount. Rao's presentation revealed the potential of tradaptation to interrupt and interrogate heteronormative textual relationships as well as nationalist projects that imagine themselves to be sustained through heteronormative lineages.

Further demonstrating the power of tradaptation to disrupt unidirectional understandings of the relationship between source texts and reiterations of them, Cynthia Shin emphasized the volatile textual dynamics that shape *Metal Macbeth*, a Japanese film by Gekidan Shinkansen. Shin described the film's opening scene, in which two of the witches chant from different translations and proceed to argue over which is preferable, while the third witch introduces the possibility of *Tomorrow's Joe*, a famous manga series about a boxer who rises in the ranks, as a translation of *Macbeth*. The third witch's suggestion, Shin argued, implies that this "seemingly irrelevant manga deserves an equal footing in the debate about translation" ("Shakespeare"). Unable to resolve their debate, the witches throw these texts into the cauldron, and it is from this mixture of texts that *Metal Macbeth* emerges. As Shin explained, "In *Metal Macbeth*, it is not Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that comes back to life; it is Gekidan Shinkansen's *Macbeths*, born not only from two Japanese translations of *Macbeth* but also from Japanese subculture." Shakespeare's play is decentered in this admixture of distinct Japanese texts. In this way, the production metatextually calls attention to its own status as a tradaptation and suggests that translations themselves become the most important source texts for Shakespeare productions in non-anglophone

contexts. Moreover, the addition of *Tomorrow's Joe* and the film's broader setting within the Japanese heavy metal scene suggest that Japanese cultural forms supersede the original contexts of Shakespeare's "Scottish play." Like Sangal and Rao, Shin showed how the intertextual and multilingual nature of tradaptation can destabilize both Shakespeare's cultural supremacy and national hegemony.

Sujata Iyengar's presentation focused on two recent retellings of *Pericles* to illuminate the reality that the movement of texts and languages often occurs as a result of the displacement and migration of people. Theatrum Botanicum's 2005 promenade production of *Children of the Sea* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival used the narrative of Shakespeare's play to feature Sri Lankan orphaned survivors of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami alongside professional Sri Lankan actors. Similarly drawing on *Pericles's* depiction of exile, family separation, and maritime migration, Cheek by Jowl's 2018 French-language production of *Périclès, Prince de Tyr* replaced the choric figure Gower with French radio voice-over that reported on the fate of migrants washed ashore. For Iyengar, tradaptation is an especially appropriate mode for reproductions of a late tragicomedy such as *Pericles*. In these cases, Iyengar suggested, tradaptation is not limited to shifts in language but also involves the incorporation of new cultural and geopolitical elements into the many formal modes at work in Shakespearean tragicomedy, which relies on "mixed and multiple language[s]" to reconcile jarring oppositions in the tragicomic mode. As Iyengar argued, tradaptation exposes "the blurred boundaries between 'straight' translation and 'free' adaptation and acknowledges the ideological underpinning of even the most faithful-seeming of translations" ("Shakespeare"). Her presentation revealed, moreover, that tradaptation can also perform reparative work, helping to redress not only the harm caused by the colonial imposition of canonical Western works but also the trauma of war, sexual violence, and environmental disasters.

Jill Bradbury extended the roundtable's exploration of tradaptation and embodiment to address the complexities of incorporating American Sign Language (ASL) into Shakespeare productions and,

in doing so, raised urgent questions about access and the politics of representation. While sign language interpreters are often employed exclusively for the purpose of making productions accessible to deaf audiences, recent productions have incorporated sign language, and sign language interpreting, within the plays themselves. In such cases, sign language shapes and creates meaning in the performance, leading to new and sometimes problematic adaptations of the Shakespearean text. Sam Gold's 2019 Broadway production of *King Lear*, for instance, not only cast deaf actor Russell Harvard as Cornwall but also, as Bradbury explained, drew on his deafness "in its emphasis on themes of miscommunication and isolation" ("Shakespeare"). Cornwall was not just played by a deaf actor, in other words. His character was also depicted as deaf within the world of the play, and his language practices therefore rendered the production an ASL tradaptation. However, as Bradbury powerfully argued, deaf tradaptations that capitalize on the semiotic potential presented by deaf people and ASL or other sign languages can also have negative consequences for deaf audience members. This is especially true if deaf characters are not played by deaf actors. As Bradbury explained:

If hearing actors who sign on stage have no prior experience with ASL, their sign production may be unclear even with intensive practice. They are also unlikely to master essential grammatical features of signed languages, such as facial expressions, intonation, and prosody, in the typical rehearsal time span. The result can be stage ASL that is difficult for deaf audiences to understand, if not incomprehensible. ("Shakespeare")¹

Thus, attempts to incorporate deafness at a thematic level can compromise accessibility for deaf audiences. Directors and actors can also fall, unintentionally or not, into negative stereotypes about deafness and deaf language practices. Bradbury thus issued a warning about the dangers of employing the languages of marginalized communities without centering members of those communities. Tradaptors must consider the access needs of audience members and remain accountable to the communities they represent.

Tradaptation in the Here and Now

Considering tradaptation in the ways outlined by our roundtable compels us to engage with the complexities of language politics and to reckon with the role that Shakespearean editors, teachers, theater practitioners, and critics play in sustaining language hierarchies throughout the world. Doing so also presents an opportunity to think critically about everyday language practices, many of which are translingual, and to examine the ethics of representing such practices in works of literature and performance, particularly those that draw on canonical Western texts. In their emphasis on local languages, translations, and art forms, the tradaptations discussed in our roundtable decenter and sometimes even supplant Shakespeare. “The original will always haunt the tradaptation,” Mehdizadeh noted, “but the tradaptation draws new lines of orientation toward and away from the original that dislocates the original from its primary position, making meaning accessible in numerous ways” (“Shakespeare”).

In their polyvocal multiplicity, tradaptations often point not back to Shakespeare but rather to complex regional, local, and subcultural politics and art forms. Studying their rich intertextuality reveals that these works are situated within intricate webs of cultural production in which Shakespeare is rarely at the center. Because they are by definition multitemporal, moreover, tradaptations activate the past to contribute to present-day political conversations and to imagine possible futures. As Susan Knutson contends, “tradaptations have intentions with respect to the past and the future, but they intervene in the here and now” (113). Like the works they discussed, Bradbury, Iyengar, Mehdizadeh, Rao, Sangal, and Shin made vital interventions in the here and now, affirming the need for multiple

and often intersecting scholarly approaches, embodied knowledges, and transnational perspectives to illuminate the generative work of tradaptation.

NOTE

1. A longer version of Bradbury’s presentation was published soon after the convention (see Bradbury).

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