

## SHAKESPEARE 2.0: THE BARD REMIXED FOR THE NEW MEDIA AGE

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**RESUMO:** Inovações tecnológicas, como a fotografia e o cinematógrafo, provocaram mudanças e inovações no campo das artes no séc. XX, inclusive na literatura e no teatro. Atualmente, devido à web 2.0, estamos vivendo a Renascença Global, ou seja, a forma como criamos e nos comunicamos está mudando. Portanto, é coerente que o campo das artes também esteja passando por um período de transformações contundentes. O status canônico de Shakespeare e a disponibilidade de suas obras proporciona solo fértil para adaptações nessa nova mídia, a internet. Recentemente, a peça Romeu e Julieta foi adaptada para o Twitter (rede social e servidor para *microblogging* que permite aos usuários enviar e receber atualizações pessoais de outros contatos em textos de até 140 caracteres). A adaptação consiste em um projeto da Royal Shakespeare Company em conjunto com a empresa Mudlark, uma produtora de programas de entretenimento para celulares. O projeto modernizou a história de Romeu e Julieta para a Inglaterra contemporânea. Os amantes e outros quatro personagens – Tebaldo, Mercúcio, Frei Lourenço, e Ama – participaram de uma performance que durou cinco semanas (de 10 de Abril de 2010 a 12 de Maio de 2010). Os personagens são interpretados por atores da Royal Shakespeare Company e atuam “tuitando” 24 horas por dia durante essas cinco semanas, no que provavelmente tenha sido uma das primeiras performances “ao vivo” na internet. A obra de Shakespeare sempre serviu de fonte para diversas adaptações e apropriações e cada geração adapta a sua obra projetando as ansiedades e os desejos próprios de uma época. Consequentemente, os arquétipos shakespearianos são reforçados ao reaparecer em diferentes contextos, cruzando fronteiras culturais e históricas.

Palavras-chave: Shakespeare; adaptation; new media

**ABSTRACT:** *It is commonly acknowledged that technological innovations, such as photography and the cinematographer, have triggered changes and innovations in the arts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including literature and theatre. Nowadays, due to the advent of web 2.0, we are living a period of Global Renaissance in which the way we create and communicate is changing. Therefore, it is undeniable that artistic expressions are going through a massive wave of transformation. Shakespeare's canonical status and the availability of his works provide fertile ground for adaptations in this new medium, the internet. Recently the play Romeo and Juliet has been adapted to Twitter (a social network and server for microblogging that allows users to send and receive personal updates from other users in text form with up to 140 characters). It consists of a Royal Shakespeare Company project in connection to Mudlark, a cross-platform production company. The project modernized Romeo and Juliet's story to contemporary England. The “star-crossed lovers” and other four main characters – Tybalt, Mercutio, the Nurse, and Laurence Friar – participated in a performance online for five weeks – from April 10, 2010 to May 12, 2010. The characters are brought to life by actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company that performed their roles by “tweeting” on what might*

*be one of the first “live” performances on the internet. Shakespeare’s works have always been a great source of material for adaptations and appropriations and each generation adapts his works by projecting their own anxieties and desires into them. As a result, Shakespearean archetypes are reinforced by frequently reappearing in diverse cultural contexts, enduring across cultural and historical boundaries.*

Keywords: *Shakespeare; Adaptation; New Media.*

Technology influences the way society creates and communicates, it has great impact over artistic expressions, and literature is not an exception. From Gutenberg’s printing press to the invention of the personal computer and the widespread use of internet, literature has gone through major transformations throughout the ages.

The book ruled as the favorite mean of mass communication for centuries; newspapers had around 200 years to innovate; even the cinema held all the cards for 30 years before being rapidly followed by the radio, then the television, and later by the personal computer. In each innovation, the gap that kept the past at a distance became smaller, more attenuated. [...] The outbreak of means of communication in the 20<sup>th</sup> century allows us, for the first time, to apprehend the relation between form and content, mean and message, engineering and art. A world ruled by a single mean of communication is a world ruled by itself. We cannot evaluate the influence of a media when we do not have anything to compare to.<sup>1</sup> (JOHNSON, 2001, p. 8-9)

Writers and playwrights have always realized the importance of the way people communicate, and they have always worried about the influence of technology over their form of expression. Therefore, it is possible and probable that literature is being influenced by this new medium, the internet. In the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we’ve seen the incredibly fast development of computers, turning into essential everyday tools.

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<sup>1</sup> O livro reinou como o meio de comunicação em massa preferido por vários séculos; os jornais tiveram cerca de 200 anos para inovar; até o cinema deu as cartas durante 30 anos antes de ser rapidamente sucedido pelo rádio, depois pela televisão, depois pelo computador pessoal. A cada inovação, o hiato que mantinha o passado á distância ficou menor, mais atenuado. [...] A explosão de tipos de meios de comunicação no século XX nos permite, pela primeira vez, apreender a relação entre a forma e o conteúdo, entre o meio e a mensagem, entre a engenharia e a arte. Um mundo governado exclusivamente por um único meio de comunicação é um mundo governado por si mesmo. Não se pode avaliar a influência de uma mídia quando não se tem com o que compará-la. (JOHNSON, 2001, p. 8-9) [my translation]

Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we've been observing the growth of the use of internet and the massive changes that it has promoted – new ways of interaction, communication, and expression. According to Eric McLuhan (2011)<sup>2</sup>, every period of technological innovation is accompanied by a renaissance, which is actually a result of the internalization of a new technology. The 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century lived a renaissance that lasted two centuries which was promoted by the advent of the printing press leading to a democratization of information and changes in the educational system. According to McLuhan (2011), since the 19<sup>th</sup> century technological innovations have continually emerged promoting the renaissance of our time, the first Global Renaissance.

If previous technological innovations triggered changes and innovation in literature and theatre, then the Virtual Revolution should not be different. We are now living a Global Renaissance due to the advent of web 2.0. The internet might change the way we think dramatically, but firstly it has already changed the way we perceive the world, the way we show objects, thus the way we see things. Having this in mind, how do the innovations in the field of technology, more specifically, the internet, influence the reading and writing of literature nowadays? How does the process of this new form of adaptation work? How can we, literature researchers and scholars, deal with this new intersemiotic translation? According to Hutcheon (2006, p. 126), “Genre and media ‘literacy’, as it is often called, can be crucial to the understanding of adaptation *as adaptation*.”, in other words, viewing adaptation as a respectable form of expression with its own specificity.

However, the polemics revolving around adaptations, and the questioning of their value as a reputable form of expression is quite recent and it probably became stiffer due to massive technological innovations that occurred in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a special concern about the ability or even the necessity of being “original”. A certain anxiety has been growing towards issues of plagiarism and imitation. Futurism, Cubism, Dada, Pop Art blossomed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as an answer to this attempt of controlling the essential element of art: appropriation. Jonathan Lethem affirms in his article, *The Ecstasy of Influence: a Plagiarism*, that “[...] appropriation, mimicry, quotation, allusion, and sublimated collaboration consist of a kind of sine qua non of the creative act, cutting across all forms and genres in the realm of cultural production.” (Harper’s Magazine, 2007) Alluding, appropriating, adapting, borrowing (to mention just a few terms) is intrinsic to the nature of artistic creation.

In the essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1920) T.S Eliot states that “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone”. Eliot’s statement is closely related to the concept of intertextuality, a term first coined by Julia Kristeva (1967), deriving it from her knowledge of Mikhail Bakhtin, and in particular his concept of “dialogic imagination”. In *Theory of the Text* (1981, p.39), Roland Barthes affirms that “any text is an intertext”, suggesting that previous or surrounding texts are always present in new literary works. Later, Gérard Genette in *Palimpsests* (1982) develops the notion of transtextuality and its sub-categories, including the notion of hypertextuality: “any text is a hypertext, grafting itself onto a hypotext, an earlier text that it imitates or

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<sup>2</sup> Eric McLuhan’s closing speech at SEICOM 2011 (XI Seminário Internacional da Comunicação at Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul).

transforms” (GENETTE, 1997, p.12). In short, the concept of intertextuality means that no text stands alone, no text is unique or original but rather uses the foundations of a literary past as surface for the creation of new material thus promoting an ever-expanding textual web. In other words, texts “feed off each other and create new texts” (SANDERS, 2006, p. 14), forming an infinite textual tissue.

One of the greatest examples of remarkable intertextual relations is Shakespeare’s works. For instance, most modern tales of “forbidden love” are seen as having been based on *Romeo and Juliet*. However, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* a tale of “star-crossed” lovers is already told and it is part of Roman mythology – the well-known story of Pyramus and Thisbe. Shakespeare might also have been inspired by the *Ephesian Tale*, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, by Xenophon; Masuccio Salernitano’s story of Mariotto and Gianozza called *Il Novelino* from 1476; Luigi da Porto’s novel *Historia novellamente ritrovata di due Nobili Amanti* from 1530; and finally the 1554 *Novelle* by Matteo Bandello which was later translated into French in 1559 by Pierre Boaistuau and entitled *Histoires Tragiques (Histoire de Deux Amans)*. However, the most likely source for Shakespeare’s inspiration for writing *Romeo and Juliet* might come from the narrative poem *Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (1562) by Arthur Brooke. On the other hand, there was a trend among writers and playwrights to publish works based on Italian tales. Therefore, Shakespeare might also have been familiar with William Painter’s 1567 collection of Italian tales titled *Palace of Pleasure*, in which it is presented a version in prose of *The goodly History of the true and constant love of Rhomeo and Julietta*.

Nevertheless, other researches reveal that a Spanish play titled *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*, which was later retitled *La Celestina*, written by Fernando Rojas in 1499 (possibly even earlier) might also have been one of the sources for *Romeo and Juliet*. The play was translated to Italian in 1506, to German in 1520, to French in 1527, and to English in 1536 by Johan Rastell, around 67 years before Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet*. (LISBOA, 1960, p. 18-30) One of the reasons for scholars believe that *La Celestina* might have influenced *Romeo and Juliet* is the proximity of the balcony scene, in which the characters, Calisto and Melibea, meet to consummate their love.

Does Shakespeare lack originality since he borrows ideas from other writers and playwrights? T.S. Eliot wrote in *The Sacred Wood* (1920) that “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.” Shakespeare’s status as a canon does not come from the originality of his stories (one may also argue that there is no such thing as originality) but rather *how* the stories are told. Shakespeare’s greatness lies in his ability to transform, rewrite, rearrange, re-vision, rework, refashion and re-evaluate, expanding the network of textual relations. Undoubtedly, “Shakespeare was himself an active adaptor and imitator, an appropriator of myth, fairy tale and folklore as well as of the works of specific writers as varied as Ovid, Plutarch and Holinshed.” (SANDERS, 2006, p. 46) Obviously, the Renaissance era understood appropriation and imitation in different terms. They had a far more open approach to literary borrowing in comparison to our era of copyrights and property laws.

His status as a canon may also come from the great number of adaptations his works have been going through along the centuries. Julie Sanders affirm that

“Adaptation becomes a veritable marker of canonical status, citation infers authority.” (2006, p.9) In one hand, adaptation perpetuates the survival of a canon, because it demands on the part of the reader, or spectator, knowledge of the references to the earlier work(s). On the other hand, it contributes to its constant reformulation and expansion, by re-visioning the work with fresh eyes, and, sometimes, subverting the source text. Shakespeare’s availability to subsequent generations promoted the redefinition of his works in contemporary terms.

Each generation adapts Shakespeare’s works as they wish, projecting their own anxieties and desires into them. For instance, the Broadway adaptation *West Side Story* relocates the story of Romeo and Juliet to the 1950s New York context, highlighting the issue of racial prejudice against Puerto Ricans. In a recent adaptation of *Hamlet* to the cinema, directed by Michael Almereyda and released in 2000, the prince of Denmark is transported to contemporary New York. In this version, Hamlet is the heir of his father’s empire, the Denmark Corporation. Other examples are the adaptations of his works to teenage audiences, such as *O* (2001) – a version of *Othello*, which takes place in a boarding school and has as its background the almost exclusively white basketball team – and *10 Things I hate about you* (1999) – a version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, which is set in high school.

Recently the play *Romeo and Juliet* has been adapted to a new medium – Twitter (a social network and server for *microblogging* that allows users to send and receive personal updates from other users in text form with up to 140 characters). It consists of a Royal Shakespeare Company project in connection to Mudlark, a cross-platform production company. The project modernized *Romeo and Juliet*’s story to contemporary England. The “star-crossed lovers” and other four main characters – Tybalt, Mercutio, the Nurse, and Laurence Friar – participated in a performance online for five weeks – from April 10<sup>th</sup> 2010 to May 12<sup>th</sup> 2010. The characters are brought to life by actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company that performed their roles by “tweeting” on what might be one of the first “live” performances on the internet.

The availability of Shakespearean works for rewriting “means that they are texts constantly in flux, constantly metamorphosing in the process of adaptation and retelling.” (SANDERS, 2006, p.62) As a result, Shakespearean archetypes are reinforced by frequently reappearing in diverse cultural contexts, enduring across cultural and historical boundaries. Thus, characters such as Romeo and Juliet are “[...] continuously evoked, altered and reworked, across cultures, and across generations” (SANDERS, 2006, p.64), and, for this reason, they can be considered archetypes of forbidden love.

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