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English 382

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Analyzing Amateur Adaptations

History has proven that human nature find it necessary to make ‘things’ out of other ‘things’: swords from metal, boats from wood, diverse musical instruments with a few specially-crafted strings. This compelling desire to create also lies within man’s propensity to form stories out of mere words. Perhaps the greatest ‘wordsmith’ of all time was William Shakespeare, globally-known playwright and poet. His works have spawned countless renditions of remakes and reinterpretations attempted by masterful directors, writers, and artists. While professional adaptations of the great Bard’s works prove to be an asset in teaching and analyzing Shakespeare, however, the true creative interpretations belong to the novice writers. It is they who truly continue bringing a fresh outlook on William Shakespeare, using such diverse literary tools as fanfiction to reach an end to their means. Relying upon the unique subcategory of writing that fanfiction has become allows these amateur writers to both borrow the common practices of professional adaptations and demonstrate a completely individual take on recreating one of the famous works. In order to understand how these beginning writers use the adaptations, however, it is necessary to review the different styles available.

Professional Adaptations

In modern culture today there is a strange mixture of contemporary, new work and the increasingly-popular reinventing of old materials. The movie theaters are flooded with remakes

of comic book superheroes stories; bookshelves are being filled with retellings of the classic fairytales. This same fascination can be attributed to Shakespeare: his works are receiving a modern makeover by way of stage, film, and graphic novel. Each of these mediums remain unique to the contemporary preference for professionally-done adaptations of timeless tales. The one most long-lasting and historical, that of the stage, continues to be in the forefront of reinterpreting Shakespeare.

Live theatre presents itself as the most natural revenue for changing and remaking a work like one of Shakespeare's plays. Not only does the director have the right--and even the expectation--to come up with his or her own concept for the play, the performance can actually shift nightly based on audience reaction and possibly fumbling by way of the actors. A major adaptation to a Shakespeare play can even redefine the right of determining who the writer is: Shakespeare, or the adapter. Cary M. Mazer presents this exact possibility in her article "Not Not Shakespeare: Directorial Adaptation, Authorship, and Ownership".

Mazer uses the example of Joe Calarco's adaptation *Shakespeare's R&J* to explain the possibilities of making a reinterpretation so vastly different from the original as to make the adapter the rightful owner to this new work. Calarco's interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* transformed from the basic retelling when he was instructed to use a five member, all-male cast. He eventually creates a play-with-a-play to explain why these boys (set with a boarding school) would be doing something so peculiar as acting out bits and pieces from Shakespeare's work (Mazer 26). In addition to demonstrating the complexities of defining authorship to an adaptation--in the end Calarco is awarded the royalties for his play, the adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*--Mazer also proposes "open-source adaptation", meaning "like open-source computer

software, it accretes intricacies, extensions, and new forms as other writers and craftsmen add to it and change it; and the more it is transformed and added to, the more it ceases to belong to any one individual” (37). This new adaptive premises then becomes something akin to scholarship, growing into a completely new creation as people discuss and debate the addition of new levels of depth.

The adaptation of Shakespeare to film has both similar and different approaches and responses when compared to theatrical reinventions. The question of directorial authorship again comes into question with film, because the film director also makes conceptual decisions about theme and cutting scenes. Film differs from stage, however, because there is not usually the opportunity or desire to collaborate and continually change the adaptation. Instead, directors and screenplay writers concern themselves with representing their project in a manner more fixed to the modern taste. Douglas Lanier illustrates this when he writes in his paper “Recent Shakespeare Adaptation and the Mutations of Cultural Capital” about the popular 90’s preference, or “rhizome”, to “bring Shakespeare in line with late twentieth-century visual culture and in the process loosen the equivalence between Shakespeare and text” (106). Lanier says that the film industry did this “updating” of Shakespeare with three methods: no longer requiring that Shakespearean language be a necessary element to film interpretations, resituating the play in a new time period and/or setting, and bringing in specific elements meant to entice the youth ruling the film industry (106-7). This professional adapting demonstrates the diversity possible within recreating Shakespeare. In some cases, the only element of Shakespeare necessary could be a plot device, such as dressing as a boy or have two conflicting families affecting the happy ending between two lovers.

Film does not remain the only medium to question the “transferability” of Shakespearean work; Lanier went on in “Recent Shakespeare Adaptation” to discuss the increasingly popular category of Shakespeare in the graphic novel world. Recreating works of Shakespeare in forms of graphic novels, comics, and manga gives perhaps the most creative license to the artist when compared to other professional adaptive mediums. This happens primarily for one specific reason: the creator of the graphic novel has more “‘directorial’ control of the visualization, since one is not working with actors’ performances and production designers’ concepts as raw materials” (Lanier 110), unlike in film or with the stage. This, in turn, allows the artist the opportunity to fully direct his or her vision alone, placing the characters in whatever environment he or she so chooses. The adaptation becomes something that is both Shakespeare’s and the artist’s.

Another category of adaptation lies with the television, specifically (similar to the graphic novel) that of animation. Gregory M. Colón Semenza argues in his article “Teens, Shakespeare and the Dumbing Down Cliché: The Case of *The Animated Tales*” that the cartoon series remains an exemplar adaptive form because it manages to address Shakespeare in a concise, simplified form without taking away from the themes or concepts the original playwright meant to convey. Semenza states that “*The Animated Tales* appears to construct its audience as pre-political, pre-historical, and, most problematically, pre-psychological. The wider reality, though, is that these films are not intended for literature professors who will meticulously evaluate them in relation to the Shakespearean source texts” (44). This announcement represents the current attitude toward adaptations of Shakespeare: they are not always meant to correlate the direct message. Rather, an adaptation requires only that creative license allows for some new idea to be

presented.

One of the most common methods of professional adaptations—spanning all four of the previously-discussed mediums—relies upon the use of burlesque. In “*The Real Thing?* Adaptations, Transformations, and Burlesques of Shakespeare, Historical and Post-Modern”, Manfred Draudt defines “burlesque” as drawing “attention to dissimilarities with the original”. He also says “whereas adaptations were generally regarded by contemporaries as improvements upon Shakespeare, burlesques were often emphatically rejected by critics in the past” (Draudt 292). This statement demonstrates the difference between “the past” (considered to be the early to mid-1800s) and modern day. The stylistic changes to Shakespeare occurring today—removing Shakespearean language in films or relying on the visuals of graphic novels to represent the entire action of the play—would have been considered inappropriate and crude in times before. In this period of time, however, the adaptive changes draw little negative reaction. The ability to find a new way to recreate Shakespeare has become a desirable skill. Thus, an amateur writer’s ability to add a twist to an original Shakespearean plot or relate a character’s reflection on an action or scene in the play, while certainly burlesque, has developed into a driving purpose of fanfiction.

Fanfiction’s Place in Literature

Before an analysis of how fanfiction, or a “fanfic” (considered as both an abbreviation and a slang term), can be used to further the creation of adaptations, it seems necessary to understand what exactly a fanfic entails. A full, complex understanding of fanfiction would be too extensive for the purposes of this paper, but a simple definition can be explained. Dictionary.com defines a “fanfic” as being “fiction written by fans of a TV series, movie, etc.,

using existing characters and situations to develop new plots.” This means that any fanfiction is also an adaptation of the subject it is originally based upon.

While it is perfectly acceptable to put a fanfic out to be read (many websites are available for this purpose), it is not legal to officially publish a fanfiction. The characters, setting, and plot used to create the work are copyrighted and protected. Thus, by restraining a writer from having it published, the intended author remains an amateur. The status of “amateur” does not necessarily define his or her skills as a writer in any negative light; many Shakespearean fanfic “amateurs” produce work on a level equal to professional adapters.

Fanfiction and Shakespeare

The category of Shakespearean fanfiction, present on nearly every website devoted to the collection of these amateur writings, allows for the freedom to create entirely original works. The fanfics can cover any aspect of Shakespeare—from his historical plays to his personal history, from his sonnets to parodies of Hamlet’s famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy. The genres continue to be open to any interpretation, allowing amateur writers to develop a work completely separate from any other. Common practices in fanfics for creative license include the stories “adding” a scene to a play or changing the entire ending to the script. The following examples demonstrate both the freedom of genre choice and creative license.

Modern Day Ghosts, a fanfiction written by an author using the pseudonym Aibari, is an extension to the Shakespeare play *Hamlet* following the conclusion of the original work. Although somewhat comedic in its dialogue—the story itself revolves a conversation with the ghost of Hamlet and Horatio—the short drabble also doubles as a sentimental character analysis of Hamlet. Aibari uses creative license in a number of ways during this additional scene. Among

others, the play has been “updated” to modern times, talking of the use of guns and publishers attempting to write Hamlet’s tale (Aibari 2). The language is also modernized, as commonly found within film adaptations. A final note analyzing the fanfiction reveals this: the author has chosen to follow only the points to the original play that are relevant to the moment being displayed.

The second work of fanfiction, titled *The Seussification of Romeo and Juliet* and written by the pen name *sarahmariehudak*, shares this trait of duplicating only what the author chooses. The short story uses a clever turn on a Shakespeare play written as a Dr. Seuss book; to keep with the nonsensical feel of such a book, much of the original story receives cuts or becomes abbreviated. The author also takes creative license by making an originally-tragic work into a piece of comedic parody. Evidence of this can be seen in the use of nonsense words—“bumb-aloon” (*sarahmariehudak* 11) and “Tybalt-di-dybalt-di-dybalt-di-doo” (66)—and the juxtaposition of the characters’ names—calling Juliet “J” (31) or “Julie” (38) and Romeo “Romy” (36). Finally, the most evident reason the fanfiction stands as a viable adaptation comes from the author choosing to change the entire ending:

Everyone stares, baffled, as Juliet awakes,

And Tybalt and Mercutio! It was all a fake!

The families decide to end the silly feud.

(Sorry the ending is changed but the old one was crude.

A happier ending is quite due.) (115-19)

This complete disregard for what the author originally had to say repeatedly presents itself as a

common trait found both within fanfiction and adaptations done by professional means.

The Purpose of Shakespeare Fanfiction

While the above examples prove the valid nature of fanfiction as adaptations, it does not answer the question of how an amateur writer can hold a greater power over the evolution of Shakespearean writing than that of a professional. Using the scholars' own words to demonstrate the importance of adaptation, the following two points will argue the necessity of amateur writers found creating fanfiction. These points discuss: the need to stretch the potential of how Shakespeare can and should be adapted, and the eventual result an amateur's writing can have the Shakespeare community in the years to come.

Talking of burlesque in the modern world, Draudt has said "burlesques ... have become a well-established genre ... What was once an intrinsic feature of burlesques, the reversal of genre, can nowadays be found also in adaptations and 'productions' of Shakespeare" (304). This shows a telling feature of the Shakespeare world today, because it presents the evolutionary change of adaptations developing into broader and broader demonstration of artistic stylizing within Shakespeare works. Fanfiction, although an amateur level of production, also falls under this category as the writers go about creating new ways to represent characters and rewriting the classic Shakespeare clichés with never-before-seen methods. If the world of Shakespeare adaptation is meant to keep up with the changing opinions on what is and isn't correct when recreating classic works, fanfics are a necessary tool. Fanfiction remains the most basic, creative outlet of adaptation without any need to stick to a set script or preset design.

Fanfiction also presents as the natural beginning to any adaptation, training the amateurs to formulate a unique idea meant to twist the original product into a new creation all their own.

When discussing the potential of the animated Shakespeare series—perhaps the closest medium to fanfiction possible from a professional because of its relation to a younger audience, a shared characteristic of fanfics—Semenza states that “The most basic benefit of such analyses would be a more appropriate recognition of the extraordinarily creative and productive insights that many of these films are capable of generating in young ... audiences” (39). This tendency toward the creative hints at the potential young Shakespearean adapters could possibly have. Fanfiction provides the perfect outlet for exploring their concepts of Shakespeare interpretations.

As is every other revenue of adaptation, from film to animation, fanfiction requires development and learning within the amateur. Fanfic writers do not start off immediately as excellent, thorough writers, especially in the Shakespeare field of fanfiction adaptation. A long period of exposure to fanfiction, by way of readers commenting on the amateur’s work and reading the works of others, can positively influence the writing style and adaptation process they employ. This progression remains crucial because these amateurs will someday move on to developing professional adaptations and evaluating Shakespearean works on a more scholarly basis.

Professional adaptations and professional adapters have a crucial role in this point and time. Through stage, film, and television these adapters demonstrate the current contemporary analysis of Shakespeare’s works, situated to look at the here and now. As the burlesque nature of Shakespearean adaptation gradually fades by way of changing social standards into what represents the norm, professional adaptations follow this rapidly evolving process. But it is the amateur writers of today, the ones creating new adaptations of the Bard’s work—perhaps even without conscious understanding that they are doing so—that continue to push the edge on

Shakespeare interpretations and reinventions. Fanfiction writers have the benefit of not having to follow any established rules or guidelines, free to create their works with any genre or license they so choose. With this freedom, amateur authors develop a more pronounced method of interpretation towards Shakespeare, able to perform in-depth character creation (and thus analysis) and adaptation that points towards a scholarly nature. What amateur fanfiction writers are today will eventually become the professional scholars and adapters of tomorrow.

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practices of professional adaptations and demonstrate a completely individual take on recreating one of the famous works. In order to understand how these beginning writers use the adaptations, however, it is necessary to review the different styles available.

Professional Adaptations

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time. Through stage, film, and television these adapters demonstrate the current contemporary analysis of Shakespeare's works, situated to look at the here and now. As the burlesque nature of Shakespearean adaptation gradually fades by way of changing social standards into what represents the norm, professional adaptations follow this rapidly evolving process. But it is the amateur writers of today, the ones creating new adaptations of the Bard's work—perhaps even without conscious understanding that they are doing so—that continue to push the edge on Shakespeare interpretations and reinventions. Fanfiction writers have the benefit of not having to follow any established rules or guidelines, free to create their works with any genre or license they so choose. With this freedom, amateur authors develop a more pronounced method of interpretation towards Shakespeare, able to perform in-depth character creation (and thus analysis) and adaptation that points towards a scholarly nature. What amateur fanfiction writers are today will eventually become the professional scholars and adapters of tomorrow.