


Shakespeare's Animal: Caged in a Production Ghetto

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Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things.

— Roland Barthes¹

hen Roland Barthes discussed myths in this way he opened issues that problematized Shakespeare. How does one stage Shakespeare in an era where traditional myths and rituals have lost their meaning? How does one revive the primitive archaic power of Shakespeare when our society has enveloped itself in a thin but impenetrable veneer of civility? What does the mythic nature of Shakespeare mean to us now? In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes explained that the first or original sign becomes a signifier of another or new sign that is then attached or associated with a new concept or signified. Thus, understanding the notion of myth is rooted in sign systems and cultural significances. In Barthes' logic, if one could strip away the layers of signs, an object could be clarified. But Laurence Coupe argued that Barthes' work was impossible, that a cultural icon like Shakespeare is inseparable from associated myth systems. "Barthes is implicitly claiming to be able to demystify the forces which hold others in thrall and so, presumably, transcend them."²

If Shakespeare cannot be separated from myths, is it possible that the form of myths surrounding Shakespeare for political or cultural purposes might be altered and manipulated? Can Shakespeare be resurrected as a network of such new associations or myths that have new meanings and symbolize new sign systems? Thus, does Shakespeare really exist for us as such a cultural sign? The myth of Shakespeare and how the myth is understood or transferred is largely an aspect of how the culture sees and reflects the personage, the work, the construct that is Shakespeare. We know that each generation finds its own version of Shakespeare, but now the Shakespeare symbol systems upon which our inscribed Shakespeare image rests are being tested and interrogated. Such

re-examinations of Shakespeare may alter accepted meanings of the plays, transformations occasioned by the shifting cultural landscape of the texts.

How radical are these reinterpretations of Shakespeare likely to be? French philosopher Baudrillard argued that real events are slowly giving ground to simulations. In "*Simulacra and Simulations*," he makes the argument that maps are no longer drawn from real territory, but that the simulation, the map comes first: "Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—it is the map that engenders the territory."³ For Baudrillard, these simulations overwhelm or recreate the real in a hyperreal world that displaces that which we formerly assumed to be real. As Baudrillard views our culture of television, one can see in the mythologizing and ritualization of Shakespeare that he is becoming a simulation, a map first drawn and then applied over the territory we designate as Shakespeare. In the end, he is less a real and living playwright. That is, often when we see a production "in Shakespeare's name," we may have appropriated the text to a completely unrelated modern concern.

Naturally, Shakespeare has always been utilized to speak to the current culture, but the purpose has mostly been to serve the plays in some fashion. Now cultural jockeying may unseat the play's principle position of speaking for Shakespeare. Sexuality, gender, ethnicity, political agenda may be more forcefully foregrounded as an unimpeachable context. For example, Peter Brook reflected on his own radically cut *King Lear* in film form:

It would be absurd to try to include all the elements that make up a five hour Lear in the theatre. So we tried to evolve an impressionistic movie technique, cutting language and incident to the bone, so that the total effect of all things heard and seen could capture in different terms Shakespeare's rough, uneven, jagged and disconcerting vision.⁴

This idea of myth leads to the era we live in now where Shakespeare is progressively "ghettoized." Ghetto. To ghetto Shakespeare raises all sorts of interesting and disturbing images: racism, marginalization, extermination. It is a troubling concept. Yet by a variety of recent practices we could argue that the Bard might be endangered by our desire to present him as relevant and contemporary. This is not to say that such efforts are wrong or in vain, but that such accounts of Shakespeare as we have popularized him might direct popular opinion of Shakespeare to be rewritten in wholly trivial and long-term debasing manners.

Such arguments are not misinterpreted authoritarianism, as “dead white male” Eurocentric elitism, but rather question, as Stuart Hall questions, the proliferation of meanings that a text can contain. For Stuart Hall’s political and aesthetic purposes, he raises the issue in “Encoding and Decoding” that polysemic interpretations of a text are possible. Clearly Hall can marshal such arguments to legitimize textual readings by the “other” that interrogate the dominant. But even Hall admits that such polysemic readings, though widely varied, are not innumerable. He defines only three means of decoding (although the third, to decode in a “globally contrary way,”⁵⁵ does leave multiple means available to the clever decoder). Today we see Shakespeare utilized for everything from cookbooks to management manuals. In Douglas Lanier’s clever discussion of the proliferation of business applications of Shakespeare studies, he muses to alarmists that “the Shakespeare corporate-management manual is merely one more variation on the proverbialization of Shakespeare that has been at work for more than two centuries.”⁵⁶ Such contextual readings of Shakespeare provide colorful teen films such as DeCaprio’s *Romeo and Juliet*, but often reduce the plays to simplistic if colorful stagings and readings.

Shakespeare needs audiences, and there is nothing particularly objectionable about appealing to a mass audience. Shakespeare’s company reportedly appealed to mass tastes by trimming lines and speeding up play acts. This author has served a Goth *Cymbeline* with music by Billy Idol and other punk rockers, placed an all-female *Julius Caesar* in an office complex, rendered a Kabuki *Titus* (with onstage sex, stick fights and twelve blonde actors dyed Jet Li black), and mounted a hippie *Winter’s Tale* with Leontes as a nerdy computer student. Rather than concerning ourselves with questions of legitimacy or tastefulness in the staging of Shakespeare, there is a deeper concern with the issue of creating rooted interpretations that can restore connection to the play’s meaning and text. Some variations reveal more than others.

Some problematic viewings involve failures to find codes that are relevant to a large segment of the populace. On August 2, 2003, National Public Radio ran a story concerning Missouri prison inmates who had recently performed *Hamlet*. The prison posse were touted as having understood both murder and the consequences. For them, the story was relevant. Perhaps this is more difficult for the uninitiated. Kenneth Branagh has offered several adroit retellings of the Bard that are, for the most part, conservative, modernist, thematic, and possibly durable. Branagh represents a fairly orthodox reading of the plays (given some

fanciful interweaving of art deco pop in *Love's Labors Lost*). Despite positive critical responses, will audiences continue to receive pleasure from Branagh's classicism?

The question of appeal has prompted the latest variety of "teen Shakespeare." Baz Luhrmann's 1996 charged *Romeo and Juliet* upped the volume and the imagistic tempo of Shakespeare's early play to arrive at a film that was often loud, shrill, hysterical and ultimately annoying. As written, Shakespeare's protagonists simply fail to be particularly engaging. Consistently upstaged by characters like Mercutio, the apothecary, and the Nurse, this hyperdrive mall-in wasn't helped by acid tabs or wild west gun play. In this sense, ghetto-izing Shakespeare by producing something kitsch is worrisome because it might make the Luhrmann version the only rendition a young person has seen or may ever want to see. Disney's *Lion King* or *Jungle Hamlet* layered the text with Disney marketing sugar, imposed Elton John tunes, applied African backdrops, and the senatorial voices of James Earl Jones and Jeremy Irons. Ethan Hawke's *Manhattan Hamlet* is a gen-x corporate vs. punker ode, while *O* transforms *Othello* into an after school special on stalking and jealousy. Such productions might discourage investigation of Shakespeare or limit the plays to only clearly transparent readings.

But perhaps there is something to Disney Shakespeare beyond kitsch. After all, Disney studios did contribute animations to one of the more successful interpretations of Shakespeare, 1956's *Forbidden Planet*. Here the effort involved rooting Shakespeare in a form or concrete sign system that was something a bit more substantial than the Rodney King "why can't we all just get along?" anthem of *Pocahontas*. *Forbidden Planet's* success is in the anthropological mythology of the Krell, the dominant design of desert landscape architecture, and the eerie void of emptiness known as the creature from the Id. Now in essence, *Forbidden Planet* is as silly as any of the above-mentioned versions of Shakespeare, but it has endured and remained a popular offshoot of *Tempest* variations largely because it connects to the conflicting cultures through-line of Shakespeare's post-colonial tale. The Krell perish because, like Frankenstein, they struggle with intellect, emotion and the dangerous world of the irrational.

This contextualizing of the colonial theme, the suggestion that the indigenous natives weren't wise enough to rule themselves and needed the intervention of earthlings, reflects Edward Said's vision of *Orientalism*. A culture of domination assumes it inherently knows more than the subjugated culture and has the implicit right to rule and govern that culture. "The Orient was almost a European

invention," Said wrote, "and had been since antiquity a place of romance."⁷ In some ways, through its dark context of corrupted powers of science, *Forbidden Planet* is a darker, more savage version of Shakespeare's wedding masque. Here, Prospero must ultimately pay a price for magic/science and knowledge of the unknown, as envisioned here, a dark and sinister version of incest. In the era of Konrad Lorenz's *On Aggression*, published in the sixties,⁸ *Forbidden Planet* was a fitting compendium of mid-century politics and aesthetics, Freudian, Frank Lloyd Wrightian, Cold War Separatist, and deeply secretive and paranoid.

So, in this case, a contextualized Shakespeare can bring resonance and understanding not only to Shakespeare, but also to themes of that era, if there is an effort to focus on specific intellectual questions and not simply to graft fashionable fashions onto the hulk of the script. Stephen Greenblatt explored the problem of approaching the text as one quintessential thing in *Shakespeare Negotiations*. His metaphor is apt since meaning in Shakespeare is always collectively negotiated. The act of theatre, he writes, is a collective intention stemming from a society's prejudice concerning what constitutes art. "Instead we can ask how collective beliefs and experiences were shaped, moved from one medium to another, concentrated in manageable aesthetic form, offered for consumption."⁹ Thus, Greenblatt argues that societies create meaning for a play by social and temporal ties rather than through any inherent value in the text itself.

In the sixties, scholar Jan Kott wrote a study called *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*, which effectively argued that the violent and turbulent sixties was a perfect mirror to Shakespeare's savage times. He wrote of *Titus Andronicus* that "such a Shakespeare belongs to the Renaissance and at the same time is most modern indeed. He is violent, cruel and brutal; earthly and hellish."¹⁰ In stark contrast to our infatuation with machines, progress, and technology, the past (particularly a dark past beyond our technological roots) seems quite suggestive and powerful, perhaps because the past is veiled and unknown. It is a culture that can't be totally circumscribed and explored. Where distant and remote cultures today can be hunted, situated, viewed, and dissected, the past, by virtue of its temporal wall, remains endlessly mysterious and in this way holds a permanent fascination for the present society that otherwise can hold and absorb anything currently available. These workings of the Bard that return to tribal and archaic forms seem especially fit and capable revisitations. They are evocative in the best sense. Returning to mythic and primal cultures may be a particularly

valuable way to, as Brecht would say, historicize the plays and thus render their issues in interesting frames of interrogation. Of course, this technique is not new. The Romantics found a strong kinship with Shakespeare exhorting his use of elements, man's natural state, and the position of the uberman superhero that overcame melodramatic situations and antagonistic forces. French Romantic actor Talma wrote, "[H]e whose soul is not susceptible to the extremes of passion will never rise to excellence as an actor."¹¹

Such primal readings might be fallow but for the fact that they provide serious cultural reflection. Shakespeare remains the ultimate privileged Western author representing Eurocentric values and attitudes of aesthetic superiority, but the works can produce converse readings that simultaneously rend the fabric of that culture. Many productions produce this critical effect, but in Welles' "voodoo" *Macbeth* of the thirties, Mnouchkine's Asian-spirited *Richard II*, and Taymor's aboriginal *Tempest* and archaic Roman *Titus*, we see the savage fury of Shakespeare as an assault upon his own western culture. This positioning places Shakespeare not just as the standard bearer of Westernism's force, but also as its sharpest critic.

The young Welles, at 21, crafted his *Macbeth* for the WPA to popularize the classics. As Richard France points out, for Welles, and this is significant, Shakespeare was always a part of the popular tradition and really wasn't to be treated as literary texts but as corporeal stage works. Myths describe a teenage Welles carrying a bag of Shakespeare plays to a mountaintop or the palace of an Arab Sheik. Other stories suggest that his mother taught him to read using *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. However imprinted, Shakespeare remained a lifelong, indelible force in his way of conceiving the world. France writes, "Shakespeare never had that deadly imprimatur—high art. Instead Welles became the quintessential groundling enjoying above all else that 'passion torn to tatters.'"¹²

When conceiving his *Macbeth*, Welles made a deep commitment to the concept of diversity, to enfranchising not only the African-American actors involved in this revolutionary American performance, but also the audience that had been handed years of denuded Shakespeare. Mostly, Welles sought to restore the energy and sacredness to the work. Since Welles had believed (as did his contemporary Artaud) that Western culture, with its emphasis on material pleasure, machines, and work reduction, had drained the life and vibrancy out of people, he decided to seek that theatre of cruelty that Artaud had found in the ritual dancers

and theatre of Bali. However, Welles found his inspiration in the culture of the Caribbean, thus the trivializing description of the work as a "voodoo" *Macbeth*. But Welles, did not conceive the Caribbean, Haiti, 1820, as merely some formulaic symbol of western superiority. This was not Conrad's *African Heart of Darkness* that wiped out 2000 years of African history to replace it with shallow eighteenth-century conventions of a primitive barbaric region. No, Welles' conception provided an alternative landscape, methods of knowing, and contrasting culture to that envisioned by the West. Here magic is an agency used to understand and control the world. France writes, "[T]he play's universe is drenched in magic. In Welles' hands the natural world ceases to exist entirely, and all is pure sorcery."¹³

Magic's agency gives access to a world run by mental and psychological aberration. The set of the flowers, trees, and jungle landscapes is markedly similar to a surrealist landscape of the time, with no sense of hiding the bizarre labyrinthine world of arching tree limbs and the primordial fire. The use of sounds (drums) and vibrant colorful flower backdrops to suggest nature, plus the contrast of colonialists versus native costuming, explain the power of Welles' conflict of cultures. The witches, here the natives in tribal regalia, reject the colonizer, and the interloper—here *Macbeth*—is simply unable to penetrate the mysteries of the land, the people, and the culture. He is more a victim of his own misunderstandings than of any magic done by outside agencies. A chilling representation of this anti-colonialist theme is the scene where the lords and ladies of Dunsany are dancing to a Lanner waltz that is slowly drowned out by the sound of tribal drums. "They reach their crescendo," writes France, "after the transition from the dancers in the palace to Hecate standing silhouetted against that strange light."¹⁴ Magic triumphs over civilization or the incarnation of Western values.

Welles' innovation might be termed the carnivalesque today. Thanks to the vogue of Mikhail Bakhtin's work, the carnivalesque qualities of literature and performances that were labeled or ghettoized as popular have been uplifted in more recent examinations and are progressively merging with the formal canon. For example, David K. Danow's *The Spirit of Carnival* reports that a carnivalesque operation "supports the unsupportable, assails the unassailable, at time regards the supernatural as natural, takes fiction as truth, and makes the extraordinary or magical as viable a possibility as the ordinary or real, so that no true distinction is perceived or acknowledged between the two."¹⁵

Ariane Mnouchkine's 1981 production of *Richard II* brought an intercultural spirit to Shakespearean production through design, costume, tribalistic ritual, text used as clan allegory, and cultural emulation. To begin with, Mnouchkine freely mixed elements of Elizabethan and Japanese style costuming to make statements about civilization, clan warfare, and the true nature of power, government, and savagery. Bamboo, sticks of thin timber and billowing cloths created the scenic design. Mnouchkine was seeking to create an English medieval court not unlike the Japanese feudal society represented in *Shogun*: "Kicking high, and chanting in elevated speech, accompanied by cymbals and gongs, her actors burst through the accepted conventions of Shakespearean playing."¹⁶

It is this "bursting through" that is the essence of avoiding the "ghetto process," to avoid seeing Shakespeare as only a dead tradition, to avoid the normalization of Shakespeare into Brook's estimation of "the deadly theatre" or rendering the work as inert ritual without meaning or "body." Here Mnouchkine, for historical, design, and performance reasons, finds strong links between Asian and Western styles of performance. Brecht remarked on this historicizing, this alienation effect and how it creates a more demanding theatre that draws audiences: "but for the historicizing theatre everything is different. The theatre concentrates entirely on whatever in this perfectly everyday event is remarkable, particular and demanding of inquiry."¹⁷

In Julie Taymor's 1986 *Tempest*, the Prospero character speaks and works with many puppets and non-human figures. Taymor writes, "How does an actor play pure spirit, beyond male or female, appearing or disappearing upon command?"¹⁸ Taymor's response was to create Ariel through a disembodied mask that could move and fly, but was not rooted to a simple individual. Like Welles' *Macbeth*, the play is about magic and magical ways of conceiving the world. Taymor's remarkable mask work effectively created a context to show this other world, this primordial time of precognitive understanding. Partaking of the play's elements of post-colonial angst, she covered Caliban in clay: "[T]he rest of the actor's nude body was coated with cracked blue-black clay, which gave the impression of parched earth. His body was beautiful, muscular, and athletic."¹⁹ Here Taymor was influenced in her design of the character by the "masks of the mud men of new Guinea."²⁰ The image of Caliban in near nudity, with a mud-stained body, rippling muscles, and round mud-man tribal-mask headdress was striking as his body literally emerged from the ground. This was no longer a play about a magician and a monster, but a

representation of natural magic and natural man against colonizing forces.

The proper state of affairs was this world of magic surrounding us. To harness and control such powers was shown in Ariel and Caliban to be a sin against natural forces. Prospero himself uses many exciting scenic effects. His wand produces a magic circle on the floor. The *tempest* is portrayed through stick puppet ships and people reminiscent of the shadow puppets of Javanese theatre. Even Prospero's long, rough robe acts as a scenic effect, producing a sweeping whirlwind that reflects how this estranged scientist can now control the elements through his magic.

Taymor arranged her Prospero as a strong stage metaphor. The prologue "sets forth the principles of Prospero's theatre. He is the master puppeteer, the stage director of the events to take place. Prospero's tool is light, consciousness, introspection and understanding."²¹ But Taymor has a dichotomous relationship with her protagonist. He is the center of action and acts as the director, manipulating the work from within; yet he is also the subject of estrangement, vexed order, and darkening command. What makes him powerful and controlling almost makes him mad. There is more of Conrad's Kurtz in such a Prospero than there is a benign father figure.

Recently, Taymor re-savagized Shakespeare with her tribal rendition of Disney's treacle-dabbed retelling of *Hamlet*, re-titled and reset in Africa as *The Lion King*. Taymor's focus on puppets, masks, dance, and tribal costuming made the experience commercial, yet more evocative than the cuddly kids' movie. Lately, with the assistance of Anthony Hopkins' brooding presence, she explored the psychic recesses of the Shakespeare's libidinous *Titus Andronicus*. The play and its modern direction encounter subjects of miscegenation, blood revenge, rape, sodomy, torture, and sadism. Most troubling is the character of Lavinia: disfigured and raped, she wanders the play like a specter. Many critics have been troubled by Shakespeare's oafish brutalizing of the character almost to the point of dark parody of atrocity.

Helene Cixous argued that the paradigm of violence in Shakespeare was directed distinctly at women and that women, by viewing and nourishing Shakespeare, were participating in their own enslavement: "If I go to the theatre now, it must be a political gesture, with a view to changing ... its means of production and expression."²² Indeed, the use of gloves and balletic dance movements provide Taymor with a way of transforming the psychic violence against women, here in the guise of Lavinia, into restorative

gestures; and Lavinia, fragmented, victimized, lame, and doomed, emerges as one of the film's most complicated creations. Hopkins, like Caliban, wears mud make-up, but here the painted blue cobalt face reveals a cold heart, deadened soul, and a blood feud over reason.

The design splendor reinforces the idea of a decadent and savage Rome. Saturninus has a pleasure orgy palace with Greek erotic art adorning the walls and giant breasted floats to allow the hedonists a moment's rest. Shadow shows and illusions vie with events of atrocity. The portrait that emerges is Gibbons' Roman culture in decline. Historical and archeological references broaden and surround the play, but fiercely compete with a mixture of costumes and filming styles that suggest an ancient and modern world at war. Indeed, Taymor may be saying that through images of racism, misdirected terrorist violence and authoritarian capitalism, the modern world mirrors the ancient one.

While we cannot say conclusively that productions of such culturally rooted, but largely commercial styles are the only way to relieve Shakespeare's ghetto-ization, they do provide a continuing and convenient juxtaposition of the modern and the ancient, the familiar and the unusual, the prosaic and the arcane. The issue of whether modernist or postmodernist productions corrupt Shakespeare, engendering either trivialized or marginalized performance art readings, or continue to render Shakespeare as privileged untouchable high culture icon still remains. We can say that such performance projects further diversify Shakespeare and leave the works open, provoking and possibly attainable to future generations looking for entry. As Greenblatt mused, Shakespeare is inevitably a reflection of cultural manifestations and neuroses, "the symbolic embodiment of the desire, pleasure and violence of thousands of subjects."²³ And finally, in *Reinventing Shakespeare*, Gary Taylor warned us that "a history of Shakesperiotics becomes, inevitably, a history of four centuries of our culture."²⁴ As in a Hollywood Biblical epic that seems historically authentic at its opening, but appears remarkably dated in a year, Shakespeare's depth usually eludes a mere production.

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 110.
2. Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London: Routledge, 1997), 157.
3. Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulation," *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1988), 166.

4. Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point* (New York: Perennial, 1989), 206.
5. Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993), 508.
6. Douglas Lanier, "Shakescorp Noir," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 53.2 (2002): 160.
7. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979), 1.
8. Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966).
9. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 5.
10. Jan Kott, *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* (New York: Norton, 1974), 352.
11. Quoted in Toby Cole and Helen Crich Chinoy, *Actors on Acting* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1970), 186.
12. Richard France, *Orson Welles on Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.
13. France, 30.
14. France, 33.
15. David K. Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1995), 3.
16. Dennis Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 286.
17. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 97.
18. Eileen Blumenthal and Julie Taymor, *Playing with Fire* (New York: Abrams, 1999), 122.
19. Blumenthal and Taymor, 122.
20. Blumenthal and Taymor, 122.
21. Blumenthal and Taymor, 115.
22. Helene Cixous, "Aller a la mer," in *Twentieth Century Theatre, a Sourcebook*, ed. Richard Drain (London: Routledge, 1995), 134.
23. Greenblatt, 4.
24. Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (New York: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 1989), 6.