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INTRODUCTION



Accessing Shakespearean drama through (re)translation and audiovisual adaptation in the twenty-first century

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ABSTRACT

This special issue offers insights into translational and adaptive practices through which Shakespearean drama is reinterpreted and disseminated today. Given their diverse understanding of accessibility, contributors discuss readability and performability of early modern drama texts as well as the needs of audiences with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in the twenty-first century. Intralingual translations or English rewritings tend to be made for purposes of education and social inclusion, and also to remove geographical and temporal distances between stage and film adaptations and their audiences. At the same time, interlingual translation and retranslation practices highlight localisation strategies through which translation flows of Shakespeare's plays have long facilitated community engagement. The editors of this special issue also intend to promote views of accessibility to adaptations as a form of media content in its own right, referring specifically to audiovisual translation practices that assist viewers with visual and hearing impairments, such as sign language performances, subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing or audio descriptions.

KEYWORDS

Accessibility; Shakespeare; rewriting; intralingual translation; interlingual translation

Recent developments in adaptation studies, audiovisual translation and retranslation studies, as well as the spread of concerns about accessibility and inclusiveness in academic and professional circles, have called attention to the variety of intercultural and multimodal transfers of meaning in Shakespearean drama. This special issue intends to explore a range of translation practices that shape and promote Shakespeare scholarship in the twenty-first century from various points of view. Such practices have, either explicitly or by implication, the common goal of making Shakespeare accessible to audiences who would have difficulties or would not feel comfortable in approaching Shakespeare's plays in more "traditional" ways. While shifting attention from the performability of drama texts to addressing the needs of audiences with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, accessibility may be perceived in different ways.

The accessibility of Shakespearean drama often implies intralingual translation, also defined as rewriting, that has long made his plays available to English readers and audiences beyond his own age, and tended to “effectively replace the original, or rather, function as the original for many people” (Bassnett and Lefevere 1998, 10). Nevertheless, even the concept of *the original* may raise reasonable concerns on academic grounds. Shakespeare’s friends and colleagues who collected and promoted the publication of his works in print made important decisions about the texts of the plays that resulted in remarkably different versions of stage narratives. While comparing, for instance, the 1608 quarto and the 1623 Folio versions of *King Lear*, one may conclude that only about ninety percent of these texts coincide in details, while approximately four hundred lines are absent from one version or the other (Urkowitz 1980, 3–4). Thus, from a philological point of view, the play *King Lear*, widely assumed to be a stable and familiar text, is in fact a conflated version, and scholars in the twenty-first century are still fascinated with tracing the origins of these early modern prints (Salkeld 2021, 3–4). Given this degree of variation, editors and publishers of Shakespeare’s plays were the first to rewrite his works.

Shakespeare scholarship, however, has witnessed rewritings that cross even generic conventions. Perhaps one of the most iconic mediations of this kind was the *Tales from Shakespeare* in 1807, a very successful attempt by Charles and Mary Lamb to make Shakespeare available in prose for nineteenth-century child-readers. This book was seen as an example to be followed by other adaptors even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whose short narrative retellings eventually reduced and abridged Shakespeare’s plays in the manner of fairy tales (Tosi 2025, 79–80). Given a temporal distance of 400 years, editors and scriptwriters today remain strongly interested in updating his early modern use of English for both young and adult audiences. This operation becomes manifest in various ways.

On the book market, easy readers offer simplified texts that are void of archaic expressions and widely used as study aids by students, a topic that the article by Mary Wardle addresses in detail in this special issue. Contemporary adaptations also demand rewritings, but the degree of changes made to Shakespearean drama depends on a wide range of artistic concepts. Julian Fellowes, the scriptwriter of *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Carlo Carlei in 2013, claims that, besides offering a traditional and romantic film narrative to young viewers, their film adaptation “wanted, too, to make it immediate and accessible and new, and with all this in mind, it seemed right to clarify and at times to simplify the text to let that new audience in” (Fellowes 2013, vii–viii). However, his script not only simplified the text of the play but also modified its versification to Fellowes’ own liking. For instance, when in Shakespeare’s play Friar Laurence shares the judgement of the Prince with Romeo, saying: “A gentler judgement vanished from his lips: / Not body’s death, but body’s banishment,” scriptwriter Fellowes transforms these lines into a rhyming couplet: “His

judgement has more pity than you dread. / He seeks to have you banished, and not dead" (Fellowes and Shakespeare 2013, 172).

That Shakespeare's language needs to be simplified and made accessible to a larger readership is also evident in many pedagogic approaches to his texts, such as, for example, in guidelines addressed to beginning actors, especially those who do not have an academic background. As theatre director Joe Sumsion contends, it is the development of "a demystifying approach for actors in their understanding of how to perform Shakespeare" (Sumsion 2018, n.p.). He goes on to state: "Many of UCLan's [University of Lancashire] actors arrive with raw talent but lack the familiarity with and assuredness towards Shakespeare which others often gain through a privileged secondary school education" (ibid.). The concept that, depending on one's academic education and on one's social background, Shakespeare can become more or less accessible, or *de facto* accessed, is echoed by Lancashire actor Christopher Eccleston, who attributes the fact of not being offered many Shakespearean roles in his career to his working class, north-of-England background. "I think the people who run some of the big established theatres, particularly in London, they [*sic*] associate Shakespeare with white, middle-class men," Eccleston says (cited in Jones 2018). Although much has changed in the fight against such discriminations in the last few years, the idea that Shakespeare's texts are "naturally" more accessible to actors and audiences with more extensive academic backgrounds is still relevant today.

Contemporary stage adaptations with an overtly inclusive approach also promote the emergence of a different type of hypertextuality when they provide special services for a wider range of theatre-goers. The increasing demand to serve the needs of the blind and partially sighted (BPS) viewers has also led to the intralingual augmentation of Shakespeare's wording. The creativity of audio describers may even become an added value to stage adaptations, as in the case of the 2006 production of *Hamlet* by the Hart House Theatre in Toronto, Ontario. During the play, describer Paul Leishman performed all audio descriptions in iambic pentameter to stylistically fit Shakespeare's wording (Udo and Fels 2009, 180), an idea that resembles the example cited above from the film script by Julian Fellowes.

Rewriting Shakespeare in contemporary English may also be the result of intentions to record, broadcast or stream adaptations performed on stage, so that both movie and television screens provide viewers with access to them, and thus remove geographical distances between stage productions and their audiences. Livecasting Shakespeare performances to global audiences on a large scale started in 2009 with the NT Live project of the Royal National Theatre, which was followed by RSC Live of the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2013 (Stone 2016, 628). These streamed performances, which film and mediate live theatre productions, influence both broadcast and dramaturgical conventions. For instance, intervals are filled with different kinds of paratexts, including

pre-recorded short films, advertising slides, presenter monologues, and live interviews (Sharrock 2022). In this special issue, Christine Schwanecke discusses the multimodal stagings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in digital realms by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2013 and 2021, as well as their digital paratexts aiming at inclusivity and interactivity with viewers who enjoy performances in their homes.

Accessibility, however, gains another sense when we study stage adaptations in languages other than English, particularly when we consider that interlingual translation and retranslation practices have contributed significantly to Shakespeare's plays for centuries. Undoubtedly, the majority of these translations have been commissioned by directors to facilitate stage adaptations that meet local needs in various languages and cultural settings that, due to their global spread, often involve postcolonial concerns of appropriation. This perspective on Shakespeare scholarship has been extensively explored by authors who have highlighted that tragedies are adapted on modern stages more often than other Shakespeare plays (Dobson and Estelle 2017, 4) but, at the same time, it also seems that "the field is moving towards nuanced studies with *academic accents owned*" (Minier et al. 2024, 5; italics in the original).

Such academic accents that highlight the relevance of Shakespeare to local communities are undoubtedly manifest in the article by Murat Ögütçü in this special issue, who surveys the adaptation of *Richard III* by director Okan Bayülgen in Turkey. The role of interlingual rewritings becomes even more significant when co-cultural groups evidently benefit from Shakespeare adaptations. İrem Ceren Doğan and Oğuzhan Ayrim focus on Kurdish and Armenian translations of *Othello* and *Hamlet* and conclude that these rewritings bear traces of cultural negotiations between minority communities and mainstream Turkish society. Taking a similar but more distant historical stand, Hongbin Tan overviews Chinese translations of the *Merchant of Venice* in Shanghai in the early twentieth century to highlight localisation strategies through which translation flows of the play facilitated community engagement with public discourses on education. Sociolinguistic concerns of translation also have the potential to contribute to our understanding of how local interests shape Shakespeare's wording. Current academic interest in the dramaturgical and aesthetic function of sociolects is exemplified in the paper written by Margherita Dore, who studies the Neapolitan dialect used by Trinculo and Stephano in the 2022 Italian stage adaptation of *The Tempest* by Alessandro Serra and its standardisation in English surtitles displayed during the performance.

A special combination of global and local concerns emerges when film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, intended to entertain masses of audiences all over the world, enter specific cultural contexts through different forms of audiovisual translation practices, including lip-sync dubbing, voiceover, or subtitling. In such cases, Shakespeare's plays adapted for the screen can be made more accessible even when they retain much of the original dialogue, but many

studies show that the simplification of the original early modern English is almost the rule in audiovisual translations of Shakespeare into various target languages. One can take the Italian dubbing of one of the most celebrated adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*—Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 *Romeo + Juliet*—as a case in point. The film was clearly conceived for the so-called MTV generation, a term usually referred to the adolescents and young adults of the 1980s and 1990s. In the Italian dubbed version, however, the dialogue is subjected to more significant manipulation, seemingly as a way to address an even younger demographic. Such a *modus operandi* reflects a broader tendency within Italian dubbing practices to expand the potential audience through various simplifying strategies (Ranzato 2016). In the original film, in spite of all omissions and interpolations, the dialogue remains recognisably Shakespearean. The audience of the original version is thus exposed to the linguistic complexity of Shakespeare’s language and can appreciate his words in a form that is only minimally altered, while Italian viewers are presented with a domesticated and simplified version in which the complexity of early modern expressions is significantly reduced (Ranzato 2011). This type of dubbing adaptations can alter the relationship between images, dialogue and sounds. In the original version of Luhrmann’s film, visual elements are there to support the audience’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s dialogue, including passages containing, for example, allusions and wordplay. In the “billiards scene,” for instance, Romeo, played by a young Leonardo Di Caprio, speaks to his cousin Benvolio of his love for Rosaline, using language full of sexual innuendos (Ranzato 2011, 578–579). By simplifying and rendering the dialogue more explicit, dubbing modifies the balance between images and spoken words that characterises the source film.

This process of simplification, which at times also results in a certain degree of banalisation, may help explain the reaction witnessed during a screening of *Romeo + Juliet* (as reported in Ranzato 2011, 580). At the end of the film, when both protagonists die, a young member of the audience in the crowded cinema could be heard screaming in surprise and frustration, questioning why the story had been allowed to end in such a way. Such a response suggests that the adaptive strategies adopted by dubbing director Tonino Accolla effectively reached the intended audience, transposing Shakespeare’s play into more familiar and accessible language.

Beyond approaches that benefit from seeing accessibility as intralingual or interlingual rewriting of Shakespearean drama, the multimodal considerations have also become widespread in professional circles by the twenty-first century. Thus, the editors of this special issue intend to promote views of accessibility to adaptations as a form of media content in its own right, referring specifically to audiovisual translation practices such as sign language performances, subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing, audio descriptions, and more. These practices reveal innovative intersections between Shakespeare philology, disability studies, and accessibility studies.

Although the first sign language performances of Shakespeare in Anglophone countries can be traced back to the mid-1980s, their academic discussion remains limited (Bradbury 2022; Llewellyn-Jones 2012; McDonnell 2017, 2025). This is partly because such practices, while more widespread than in the past, are still implemented only by companies which have the financial means to support them. One of these is The Royal Shakespeare Company (Royal Shakespeare Company n.d.), whose audio-described performances, available via radio headsets, are preceded by a live commentary giving details of all the visual aspects of the show and by an introduction which gives information on the set, costumes and characters. In a sense, this exemplifies multimodal rewriting with the purpose of accessibility, as does the policy of having the British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter wearing a costume and interacting with the actors onstage. BSL was also employed diegetically in a historical 2018 RSC production of *Troilus and Cressida*, directed by Gregory Doran: Charlotte Arrowsmith, who played Cassandra, was the first deaf actor to use this language in a mainstream Shakespearean show (Ragni 2026). The strong connection between accessibility techniques and rewriting is made evident in another production, in the performance of *As You Like It* at the @sohoplace theatre in London, in which deaf actress Rose Ayling-Ellis played the role of Celia with a mix of British Sign Language, Sign Supported English, and physical gestures (all, in turn, rendered accessible for non-BSL speaking audiences by subtitles on screens). Duke Frederick's lack of care and consideration for his daughter is highlighted by his refusal to communicate with Celia in her own terms, which in this production includes code-switching from sign language to speaking aloud. In contrast with the Duke's attitude, when Oliver falls in love with Celia, he chooses to communicate with her through sign language, that is, by learning to speak as she does (Surmawala 2023, n.p.). This shows how, in this particular rewriting of the play, accessibility techniques have been interwoven in the adaptation. In this issue, the article by Vicente Bru García on subtitling music for the d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing (SDH) in theatrical recordings of Shakespeare's plays on digital video-on-demand platforms demonstrates how the study of such accessible translation practices expands our understanding of the cultural dynamics shaping Shakespeare's legacy today.

Taken together, the articles collected in this special issue give us a glimpse of the wide range of translational and adaptive practices through which Shakespeare continues to be reinterpreted and disseminated, through various declinations of accessibility, in the twenty-first century. Thanks to such diverse accessible retellings, any elitist notion that one needs training to enjoy his plays is rendered obsolete and shows the role of both intra- and interlingual translation flows in keeping his legacy alive through centuries and across culturally diverse audiences and communities.

Notes on contributors

Judit Mudriczki is Associate Professor at Károli Gáspár University, Budapest, Hungary. She received a PhD in Literature and Cultural Studies from Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary. She is the author of the monograph *Shakespeare's Art of Poesy in King Lear: an emblematic mirror of governance on the Jacobean stage* (L'Harmattan, 2020), and her recently coedited collections include *Diversity in Narration and Writing: The Novel* (Cambridge Scholars 2022) and *Code-switching in Arts* (L'Harmattan, 2023).

Irene Ranzato is Associate Professor at Sapienza University, Rome, Italy. She holds a PhD in Translation Studies from Imperial College London. Her publications include the book *Translating Culture Specific References on Television–The Case of Dubbing* (Routledge, 2016) and many co-edited collections e.g. *Linguistic and Cultural Representation in Audiovisual Translation* (Routledge, 2018), *Reassessing Dubbing: Historical Approaches and Current Trends* (Benjamins, 2019), *The Palgrave Handbook of Multilingualism and Language Varieties on Screen* (2024) and *English Classics in Audiovisual Translation* (Routledge, 2024). She is currently editing, with Jorge Díaz Cintas, *The Routledge Handbook of Audiovisual Translation Studies* (forthcoming).

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