

# Wild Adaptation

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## Abstract

One of the most vexed questions in the understanding of adaptation, and especially, for particular reasons, of adaptation of Shakespeare, is the question of definition. What is, or is not, an adaptation? (What is, or is not, Shakespeare?) While acknowledging the heuristic usefulness of attempts to define adaptation more or less narrowly (it is always interesting to see the specific ways things group together), these theses argue that there is an abiding need, an overriding need, to treat adaptation as a truly expansive and open field of study and activity, no matter how much this might militate against the disciplining of adaptation. Sophisticated analysis of adaptation must entail both systems of categorization and an openness to that which does not fit in these systems. Ultimately, however, the classifiable is no more than a provisional subset in the general and open field of adaptation. This essay explores what Fortier theorizes as "wild adaptation," a form of engagement with prior texts that cannot be policed and refuses containment by reductive definitional paradigms.

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## I

One of the most vexed questions in the understanding of adaptation, and especially, for particular reasons, of adaptation of Shakespeare, is the question of definition. What is, or is not, an adaptation? (What is, or is not, Shakespeare?) While acknowledging the heuristic usefulness of attempts to define adaptation more or less narrowly (it is always interesting to see the specific ways things group together), these theses argue that there is an abiding need, an overriding need, to treat adaptation as a truly expansive and open field of study and activity, no matter how much this might militate against the disciplining of adaptation. Sophisticated analysis of adaptation must entail both systems of categorization and an openness to that which doesn't fit in these systems. Ultimately, however, the classifiable is no more than a provisional subset in the general and open field of adaptation.

## II

My suspicion of classificatory regimes, especially those used for purposes of exclusion, has a deep pedigree in twentieth-century cultural theory: for instance (*inter alia*), in Jacques Derrida's

suspicion of genre, in Patrice Pavis's open semiology, in Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic becoming. Derrida sets against a law of genre that is "an authoritarian summons to a law of 'do' or 'do not,'" "a law of impurity or a principle of contamination" that projects "an open and essentially unpredictable series" (Derrida 1981, 51-53). Pavis writes that global systemization is "extremely problematic"; he stands for "a healthy state of suspicion about any universal model"; calling for a semiology that is "dynamic and provisional," he moves away from abstraction that smoothes out irregularities (Pavis 1982, 9, 204). For Deleuze and Guattari, becoming — and adaptation is nothing if not a continuing becoming — "is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 239). This history of suspicion goes both to the intellectual folly and conceptual leakage of an ordering that inevitably leaves something out, that allows less expansive insight than open, inductive exploration, and to the often unfortunate political consequences of systems of exclusion.

### III

I have long been drawn to Marshall McLuhan's aphorism, "Art is anything you can get away with" (McLuhan and Fiore 1967, 132-36). This is definition as provisional, actual, and inductive. I have found the predicate of this aphorism equally applicable to other notions. This is especially true, I think, of adaptation. "Anything you can get away with" implies not merely, or not primarily, a worldly cynicism concerning ultimate value or contingent human judgment, but more important, a recognition of that which is, of success, acceptance, survival, and actuality. "Adaptation is anything you can get away with" means that adaptation is what actually exists, what has been done, what becomes, what survives, rather than what does or does not fit an abstract schema or set of rules.

### IV

My own thinking about the expansiveness of studying "Shakespeare" was influenced many years ago by passages from two books. The first is from Graham Holderness's "The Shakespeare Myth" : "Shakespeare is, here, now, always, what is currently being made of him" (Holderness 1988, xvi). The second is from Gary Taylor's *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present*. In defining what he calls "Shakesperotics," Taylor writes, "It embraces everything that a society does in the name — variously spelled — of Shakespeare" (Taylor 1989, 6). For me, these have served as calls for openness and expansiveness in studying and thinking about Shakespeare. As open as these statements are, however, they each contain a limiting element that perhaps is not as easy to justify as might appear. Holderness refers to Shakespeare as "him," grounding that which is currently being made in a historically specific individual. That's fine as

long as we are not returning here to the originary consciousness and intention of the author. The originary Shakespeare was already a cultural formation, including an individual embedded in a certain society and set of traditions, a theater industry, a set of play texts, a reputation, etc. So really, Shakespeare is, here, now, and always what is currently being made of Shakespeare, or, using the logic of substitution: Shakespeare is, here, now, and always what is currently being made of what is, here, now, and always currently being made of Shakespeare. Obviously, this substitution can be repeated ad infinitum. It hath no bottom. Taylor's limitation is "in the name — variously spelled — of Shakespeare." So Shakespeare must be named as such in order to come under the rubric. But why? It is easy to conceive of some influence from Shakespeare going unnoticed — a stray paraphrase or quotation somewhere, for example. Perhaps it becomes a part of Shakesperotics when someone receives it as such — it wasn't so much done in the name of as it was received in the name of Shakespeare. That would make sense inasmuch as something nobody recognizes as in the name of Shakespeare will by definition fail to be recognized as something related to the study of Shakespeare. But once it is recognized as such, then it escapes its previous position as unrecognized Shakesperotics and comes into the light of the name. So, even before it was recognized as such, it existed in a potential state of Shakespeareanness? Or was it the very act of naming and recognizing that gives it this Shakespeareanness? In which case, anything named as such is Shakesperotic? Shakespeare is whatever you can get away with.

## V

In our collection *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, Daniel Fischlin and I focused on the groundbreaking work of Ruby Cohn in *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots* (1976) in order to demonstrate how even as elaborate a system of categorization as Cohn's is "ultimately untenable," inevitably producing anomalies in the attempt "to classify the possibilities of rewriting too narrowly" (Fischlin and Fortier 2000, 3). We wrote: "Adaptation as a concept can expand or contract. Writ large, adaptation includes almost any act of alteration performed upon specific cultural works of the past and dovetails with a general process of cultural recreation." We also positioned our own collection within a much smaller compass: "More narrowly, [adaptation's] focus in this anthology is on works which, through verbal and theatrical devices, radically alter the shape and significance of another work so as to invoke that work and yet be different from it" (Fischlin and Fortier 2000, 4). Here, we make a distinction between local, ad hoc, and provisional categorizations and the big picture of adaptation in general.

## VI

As is to be expected and desired, our terminology, definitions, and choices have not been without controversy. In *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century*, Richard Schoch distinguishes burlesque from "redactions, adaptations, or renderings": "While an adaptation is the play which it adapts, a burlesque represents the play it burlesques . . . Shakespeare burlesques are not Shakespeare because they do not iterate — but rather interpret — their precursory texts." In this regard, Fischlin and I are called to task: We "fail to distinguish between burlesque and adaptation, thus listing both David Garrick's 1772 radically altered version of *Hamlet* and John Poole's *Hamlet Travestie* under the overly inclusive category of *Hamlet* 'adaptations'" (Schoch 2002, 21).

As far as they can go, Schoch's distinctions are engaging — between being and representation, iteration and interpretation. Unfortunately, I don't believe they go very far. Is it possible ever to escape representation into pure being? Thus, in our work, Fischlin and I turned to the Shakespearean formulation that adaptation "is, and is not" Shakespeare. Can any iteration not contain interpretation? I would think, for example, that Charles Marowitz's *Measure for Measure*, which we included in our anthology, is being (as Schoch seems to mean it), representation, iteration, and interpretation all at once.

That our category of adaptation is "overly inclusive" is open to debate. Smaller categories are possible — although Schoch's own are simultaneously overly exclusive and leaky — but given the works we collected, and given our definitions of both adaptation writ small and adaptation in general, there is coherence in our inclusivity that Schoch fails to register.

## VII

Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, cites the passage from *Adaptations of Shakespeare* referred to earlier: "There is some apparent validity to the general statement that adaptation 'as a concept can expand or contract. Writ large, adaptation includes almost any act of alteration performed upon specific cultural works of the past and dovetails with a general process of cultural recreation' . . . But, from a pragmatic point of view, such a vast definition would clearly make adaptation rather difficult to theorize" (Hutcheon 2006, 9). The first thing to note is that Hutcheon's pragmatic position seems somewhat pusillanimous — we avoid something just because it creates difficulty? If a vast definition makes sense, then we should not turn away from it; and the central conviction of these theses is that on an important level a vast definition makes complete sense.

Hutcheon's own definition is markedly more narrow. Adaptation is both a process and a product: it is a "process of creation: (re)interpretation and (re)creation"; as a product, it is "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works" (Hutcheon 2006, 7). In some

ways, this is good. Hutcheon acknowledges the inevitable interplay of creation and interpretation in a way that Schoch does not. The notion of an adaptation as necessarily announced, however, leads to the same problems I discussed earlier, concerning Gary Taylor. Hutcheon uses *acknowledged* interchangeably with *announced*. But who announces or acknowledges? This cannot mean a simple return to authorial intention. Hutcheon also stipulates that an adaptation must be an "extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (8). Where is the line between extended and not-so-extended to be drawn? And what are those whose engagement is not so extended to be called, and why? Hutcheon works from a rather narrow notion of the work being adapted. She appears to mean a text in a traditional and literary sense — this play, this poem, this novel. In the case of Shakespeare, as we have seen through Holderness and Taylor, Shakespeare as text is more than just his plays and poems. An adaptation of Shakespeare is an adaptation of whatever has been made of Shakespeare. Finally, only certain kinds of engagements with texts are, for Hutcheon, adaptations: not sequels or prequels, since they are telling a different story (9), but spinoffs (171). This seems to be unnecessarily confining. It would, for instance, exclude from our collection John Fletcher's *The Woman's Prize*. But I fail to see a profound difference between a work that rewrites Petruchio and Katharina's wedding or adds scenes to their marriage and one that has Katharina die and Petruchio remarry. Where exactly is the line between the same story and a different story? Are we so interested in patrolling that line?

### VIII

Another adaptation that would not be an adaptation according to Hutcheon is Leon Rooke's *Shakespeare's Dog* (1984). It is not an extensive engagement with any work by Shakespeare. It is a piece of *faux* (one suspects) biography, which tells how Shakespeare finally leaves Stratford and starts his career in order to save his dog, Hooker, from the authorities. Hooker has poached a deer. The book is written in the first person from the perspective of the dog.

Certainly the novel contains many references to Shakespeare's works: "Bubble bubble toil and trouble" (Rooke 1984, 13), "young men will do it" (28), "where are your gibes, your gambols" (80), to point out but a few. Moreover, the novel is an explicit and extended critical interpretation of Shakespeare. According to Hooker, Will is strict in conformity and hates equality (34), "licking up his time's dogma as I would lick scented stick or glide my tongue over leg of mutton" (143). Shakespeare doesn't rail against his swinish age, he only tells it as it is. Hooker would like Shakespeare to be quite different: "I wanted him less romantic, less besotted with words' double-turning, less in conspiracy with what his epoch glommed was man and dog's natural configuration. Wanted him less easy with the conscience that called it moral to uphold that we

owed nothing to each other. I wanted railing and ranting. I wanted hot revolution" (35). Ulysses' speech on degree from *Troilus and Cressida* comes from Hooker and is laced with irony (34).

*Shakespeare's Dog* is an adaptation of Shakespeare, but not of one of his plays or poems. It is, *nonetheless*, an adaptation of Shakespeare. It is an adaptation of the biography, of the life-text.

## IX

*Shakespeare's Dog* is an example of an interesting subgenre of Shakespearean adaptation: apocryphal biography or apocryphal biographical etiology, imaginary reinterpretations of how Shakespeare became Shakespeare. See, for comparison, the film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) or Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* (1990), in which we are told that Shakespeare borrowed and corrupted the Gustav manuscript, which contained more comic and protofeminist versions of Shakespeare's tragedies. There is also the television cartoon show *Peabody's Improbable History* (1959), in which Mr. Peabody, also a dog, and his pet boy Sherman, travel back in time to watch Shakespeare steal from Francis Bacon.

*Shakespeare's Dog*, *Goodnight Desdemona*, and *Peabody's Improbable History* all share another interesting sub-element of adaptation: prolepsis. Michael Keefer has written about prolepsis in *Shakespeare's Dog*. Some of this we have already seen, in the way that Hooker anticipates many of Shakespeare's later famous speeches. Moreover, prolepsis runs counter to the simple sense of derivation that seems to be, for instance, at the heart of Hutcheon's understanding. Keefer sees the transgression of prolepsis as running counter to the idea of any particular order as natural (Keefer n.d., 20). In this way, Rooke's twentieth-century canine creation becomes the originator of Shakespeare's sixteenth-century words. And, as Keefer points out, "Remembering that the names Hooker and Rooke are a near-rhyme, we may uncover in this Shakespearean precursor a double identity: Elizabethan dog, to be sure, but also, proleptically, a very contemporary writer, whose voice retains a distinctive North Carolinian twang" (6). By this temporal play, the act of reinterpretation is given the authority of primacy, so it is no longer late-coming and beside the point, but the real deal.

In Rooke's prolepsis, the primary voice is a critique of all the conservative thinking that Shakespeare stood or has come to stand for: "a confirmed politico-religious radical, an active egalitarian, and a dog" (Rooke 1984, 18). Hooker stands for "the radical pantheism of egalitarian justice" (13). Hooker is, moreover, a poacher, a transgressor, who goes where he shouldn't and takes what doesn't belong to him. He is a creature of the commons and an enemy of property rights. Something like an adapter.

## X

That Hooker is a dog should be emphasized. Shakespeare is not Hooker's pet boy (and so not merely a giddy reversal of the status quo), but rather, "in these woods man and dog are one" (Rooke 1984, 22), and everything we think of as Shakespeare is a product/process of interspecies collaboration and creation. Boundaries are crossed, categories are transgressed, that which should not be mixed is mixed, degree is taken away. Shakespeare here is, in the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), "becoming animal," crossing the cultural landscape in a different way, not by the accepted roads, not following the fence lines, but tracking what exists wherever, through unpathed waters and undreamed shores.

In my past thinking about adaptation, I have intentionally avoided recourse to theories of natural selection and adaptation as any help in an anti-essentialist understanding of adaptation as a cultural phenomenon. I'm not sure anymore that one needs to be as wary as all that, to patrol these borders so carefully. In fear of what? Darwin, after all, speaks of using his terms (specifically "Struggle for Existence") "in a large and metaphorical sense" and wants to make manifest the "infinite complexity of the coadaptations between all organic beings" (Darwin 2004 1, 45). Deleuze and Guattari write, "A becoming-animal always involves a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity" (239); they call the sense of open-ended, rhizomatic (natural) adaptation "neoevolutionism." Adaptation is, quite literally, anything you can get away with. That is its only limit.

We might call this adaptation in the wild.

## XI

"Wild analysis" is Freud's term for work done in the name of psychoanalysis, but without the strict orthodoxy of training and method that Freud's school demands (Freud 2002, 1-9). Freud, although admitting that such wild analysis often does some good, is disapproving, since it undermines the psychoanalytic project as he defines it. Freud's policing effort, of course, turned out to be a monumental failure. How many more of us have made wild use of psychoanalysis, adapted it to our own ends, made it work for our needs, than have dutifully followed the dictates of the master? What was there ever to stop us? Those who try to police wild adaptation face a similarly unavoidable defeat.

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