

Transnational Shakespeare: Salman Rushdie and Intertextual Appropriation

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Abstract

Through "Yorick" and *The Moor's Last Sigh* Salman Rushdie maps the ever-present hybridity between, and, significantly, within literary texts and the cultures that produce and receive them. Thus, Rushdie's postmodern, metafictional palimpsests ironically reveal how Shakespeare's literary endurance and global iconic status depend upon the revisions, adaptations, and appropriations of his work. Recognizing the cultural, historical, linguistic, and literary multivalency of Rushdie's "Yorick" and *The Moor's Last Sigh* prompts a move away from the restrictive binary structures that oppose canonical texts to counter-discursive ones and suggests, instead, an intertextuality that actualizes the interstitial spaces and interconnectivity characterizing transnational appropriations of Shakespeare's plays. Rushdie's intertextual re-construction of Shakespeare — spanning as it does histories, geographies, time periods, literary genres, and cultures — destabilizes the principal binary that governs much of postcolonial Shakespearean discourse: the canonical/appropriation partition that divides the iconic Shakespeare of the West from the "local" reimaginings of the rest. Because of the fragmented quality of Rushdie's Shakespearean references, neither "Yorick" nor *The Moor's Last Sigh* offers the reader a straightforward retelling; instead, Rushdie's metafictional narrative style highlights the volatility of the Shakespearean text itself.

Introduction

Current work regarding Shakespeare in the postcolonial context — most usually collected under the rubric of appropriation — reimagines the texts within an indigenous, "local" frame. Traditionally, such uses of Shakespeare's work have been viewed through an either/or paradigm: either they are seen to be subversive transgressions of the iconic source text, or they are evocations of a colonialist or neo-colonialist mentality. This methodological mode promotes a binary construction that restricts our understanding of Shakespeare's iconicity as it continues to evolve through the appropriations of and references to his texts. Salman Rushdie's use of Shakespeare in "Yorick" and *The Moor's Last Sigh* constructs an intertextual web of literary and

cultural referents that precludes the drawing of easy binaries. In both the short story and the novel, Rushdie's deployment of Shakespeare, both narrowly through textual reference and, more broadly, by exploiting Shakespeare's global cultural capital, serves neither to reify the Bard's canonicity nor to establish his own counter-discursive credentials. In this paper, I argue that Rushdie's use of Shakespearean play texts creates intercultural, intertextual narratives that resist the binary logic that haunts most contemporary appropriations of Shakespeare. Challenging counter-discursivity complicates the traditional literary and theoretical affiliations between Rushdie's fiction and Shakespeare's plays by redressing the center/margin axis.

A part of Rushdie's *East, West* short story collection, "Yorick" uses a postmodern narrative to call attention to Prince Hamlet's childhood and his relationship with the court jester. *The Moor's Last Sigh* is a novel about the cultural, national, political, historical, and even geneological identity of its narrator, Moraes Zogoiby, known as the "Moor." In his efforts to make sense of his present, the Moor relates his family history going back nearly four generations. Set primarily in Bombay and Cochin, India, the book's intertextual, postmodern narrative suggests that cultural purity is a fictional construct. Juxtaposing "Yorick" with *The Moor's Last Sigh* emphasizes the main thrust of this essay, which is to foreground Rushdie's merger of intertextuality and transnationalism through his appropriation of Shakespeare.

Rushdie's push back against the traditional center/margin relationship that governs discourse and counter-discourse is rooted in Mikhail Bakhtin's framework regarding narrative theory. In Rushdie's texts we see the struggle between Bakhtin's "authoritative" and "internally persuasive" discourses. Bakhtin's "authoritative discourse" is a discourse "located in the distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. . . . Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. It is a *prior* discourse," while "internally persuasive discourse" is a discourse that is "half-ours and half someone else's," one that "does not remain in an isolated and static condition," but instead is "freely developed, applied to new material, new conditions; it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts" (Bakhtin 1981, 342 and 345-46; emphasis in original). Rushdie situates the authoritative "prior discourse" — Shakespearean texts — within an intertextual and an inter- and intra-cultural literary milieu and creates an "internally persuasive discourse." Such a juxtapositioning of narrative discourses forces an acknowledgment of how Shakespeare's language carries with it the ever-multiplying "tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life" — tastes and contexts that now include its postcolonial, cross-cultural, and intertextual afterlives (293). Gerard Genette explicitly echoes Bakhtin's argument: "Narrative consists less of a discourse than of some discourses, two or more,

whether one thinks of Bakhtin's dialogism or polylogism" (1988, 11; emphasis in original).¹ Rushdie further complicates both Bakhtin's dialogism and Genette's multiple discourses through his deliberate intertextuality. References to other texts, narrators, and characters problematize the narratological binaries of story/discourse and mimesis/diegesis.

Genette's "triad" — his distinction between "story," "narrative," and "narrating" — provides a useful frame for Rushdie's works. Through "Yorick" and *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie deliberately draws our awareness to each of these components in order to disrupt the traditional constructs that espouse the immutability of the Shakespearean text. Focusing attention not only on the story and the narrative, but also on the act of narrating itself allows Rushdie to create a fluid narrative space in which stories/texts/narratives circulate, conjoin, and alter one another, suggesting that the hybrid story and the hybrid condition is not exclusively a consequence of postcolonialism, but as much a part of Shakespeare's work as it is Rushdie's. Juxtapositioned "against the background of normal literary language, the expected literary horizon" — in this case, the language of Shakespeare and the criticism surrounding it — Rushdie's works enter into "a conscious relationship with this normal language and its belief system" and are "set against them dialogically" (Bakhtin 1981, 314). "Yorick" and *The Moor's Last Sigh* interact with the Shakespearean texts and their attending criticism, resulting in a "dialogic tension between two languages and two belief systems" (314). Through the intertextuality and inter- and intra-culturalism of "Yorick" and *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie maps the ever-present hybridity between, and significantly within, literary texts and the cultures that produce and receive them. The consequent hybridity from this dialogical tension firmly situates both texts within Homi Bhabha's "Third Space," which "makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process [that] challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force" (Bhabha 2004, 37). Thus, Rushdie's postmodern, metafictional palimpsests ironically reveal how Shakespeare's literary endurance and global iconic status depend upon the revisions, adaptations, and appropriations of his work.²

Shakespeare appropriations constitute a major part of what has, since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, become the "postcolonial canon." Postcolonial appropriations of Shakespeare's plays exemplify Kathleen Ashley and Veronique Plesch's observation in "The Cultural Processes of 'Appropriation'": "What the concept of appropriation stresses, above all, is the motivation for the appropriation: to gain power over. Because of its associations with power, the term [. . .] had a negative charge when it was first popularized within cultural studies" (Ashley and Plesch 2002, 3). The postcolonial Shakespeare seam has been a rich vein for writers and critics, as well

as for actors and directors seeking to "gain power" over a colonial discourse that used literature, particularly Shakespeare, to solidify its social and political ideologies.³ Resituating the plays within an indigenous or localized frame, Derek Walcott's *A Branch of the Blue Nile* (1986), Salih Tayeb's *Season of Migration to the North* (2003), Suniti Namjoshi's "Snapshots of Caliban" (1989), and Salim Ghouse's jatra-infused production of *Hamlet* are all examples of the persistent appropriation of Shakespeare's plays (1992).⁴ Critical discourse considers each of these works as a deliberate and direct response back to the Shakespeare canon; Shakespeare's works are thus positioned as "source texts" while Walcott's play, Saleh's novel, Namjoshi's poem, and Ghouse's production are all tagged as contestatory, counter-discursive appropriations.

In *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations* (1999), Thomas Cartelli offers a corrective against the potency of the counter-discourse model, noting that reimagining Shakespeare "may be expressly oppositional in orientation; [. . .] contestatory of Shakespearean drama's underwriting of class-based or imperialist agendas; or merely critically or creatively responsive to the force or authority exerted by texts like *The Tempest* in fixing the relationship of master and slave, colonizer and colonized, lord of culture or capital and immigrant laborer" (Cartelli 1999, 1). Cartelli goes on to catalogue the different types of appropriation: "confrontational" — that "which directly contests the ascribed meaning or prevailing function of a Shakespearean text in the interests of an opposing or alternative social or political agenda"; "transpositional" — that "which identifies and isolates a specific theme, plot, or argument in its appropriative objective and brings it into its own, arguably analogous, interpretive field to underwrite or enrich a presumably related thesis or argument"; and "dialogic" — a mode "which involves the careful integration into a work of allusions, identifications, and quotations that complicate, 'thicken,' and qualify that work's primary narrative line to the extent that each partner to the transaction may be said to enter into the other's frame of reference" (17-18). In this case, regardless of how a work references or uses Shakespeare — whether it be "confrontational," "transpositional," or "dialogic," to use Cartelli's language — the Shakespeare text remains fixed as the established source text. According to this paradigm, all appropriations, adaptations, retellings, and revisions are subordinated to what is presented as the immutability of the Shakespearean source. As Donald Hedrick and Bryan Reynolds write in *Shakespeare Without Class*, "the theoretical mechanisms of adaptations are explored less often, and the term 'appropriation' tends to enforce a neutralizing sense of transformation or tone that implies some 'normal' function of the Shakespearean text in typical acts of cultural domination" (2000, 6).

In *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), Linda Hutcheon furthers this critique by faulting the "morally loaded rhetoric of fidelity and infidelity used in comparing adaptations to 'source' texts," arguing that the critical methodology underpinning such a rhetoric proscribes the contemporary revision to a lesser, even derivative status (Hutcheon 2006, 31). Within the context of postcolonial studies, Bhabha charges that the use of such rhetoric is "a familiar maneuver of theoretical knowledge, where having opened up the chasm of cultural difference, a mediator or metaphor of otherness must be found to contain the effects of difference" (2004, 31). Trapped by this strategy of containment, "the Other text is never the active agent of articulation [and] loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse" (31). This essay argues that Rushdie's deliberately intertextual narratives, with their manifold literary and cultural references, challenge the presumed immutability of Shakespeare. "Yorick" and *The Moor's Last Sigh* are "multilaminated" — works that are "directly and openly connected to recognizable other works, and that connection is part of their formal identity [and] hermeneutic identity" (Hutcheon 2006, 21). Through this intertextuality, the division between the source text and the appropriation is blurred and even negated.⁵ Rushdie's narratives thus open a space through which Bhabha's "Other text" can achieve agency and articulate its own discourse. Such a move frees Rushdie's texts from playing an exclusively counter-discursive role, and, equally significant, it also challenges the assumed stability — and presumed superiority — of Shakespeare's works.

Recognizing the cultural, historical, linguistic, and literary multivalency of Rushdie's "Yorick" and *The Moor's Last Sigh* prompts a move away from the restrictive binary structures that sets canonical texts against counter-discursive ones and suggests, instead, an intertextuality that actualizes the interstitial spaces and interconnectivity that mark the transnational appropriations of Shakespeare's plays. Rushdie's fiction evades definitive classification because of its postmodern preoccupation with self-referentiality, linguistic word games, and cultural interplay;⁶ foregrounding the intertextual composition, however, opens a space through which to investigate how the interleaved texts remap historical and narrative authority — what Ian Smith calls the "splitting of the sign and the referent, the separation of the aesthetic from the cultural" (2002, 11). Because of this "split," the cultural authority invested within and transmitted by the Shakespearean references is challenged, interrupting established meaning and disrupting Bhabha's strategy of containment and Hutcheon's status hierarchy. Additionally, Rushdie's intertextual re-construction of Shakespeare — spanning as it does histories, geographies, time periods, literary genres, and cultures — destabilizes the principal binary that governs much of

postcolonial Shakespearean discourse: the canonical/appropriation partition that divides the iconic Shakespeare of the West from the "local" reimaginings of the rest. Because of the fragmented quality of Rushdie's Shakespearean references, neither "Yorick" nor *The Moor's Last Sigh* offers the reader a straightforward retelling; instead, Rushdie's metafictional narrative style highlights the volatility of the Shakespeare text itself. It is this last point that is especially significant for the purposes of this paper. Rushdie's postmodern narrative strategies foreground the multiple literary and historical sources present within the Shakespearean text to remind us of Shakespeare's own debt to earlier narratives and of the Bard's adaptive skills. For example, remembering that the Hero and Claudio plot in *Much Ado about Nothing* most likely traces back to Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, the second book of *The Faerie Queene*, and *Fedele and Fortunio*, or that *Othello* can be sourced back to Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* prompts us to see the hybridity extant within the Shakespearean text.

A "Yorick" *Hamlet*: Appropriation and Chronology

In "Yorick," Rushdie connects seventeenth-century Shakespeare to eighteenth-century Laurence Sterne to a postmodern author-narrator via the character of Yorick. Drawing a literary affiliation between the long dead court jester from *Hamlet* and the parson from *Tristram Shandy*, Rushdie challenges the hierarchy of literary and cultural knowledge. Using a host of narrative strategies, Rushdie subtly shifts the epistemological relationship between *Hamlet* and "Yorick" from its traditionally linear mode to one that suggests a more lateral and circulatory trajectory. "Yorick"'s self-referential narrator, fragmented structure, and historical "reversals" allow the story to sidestep the restrictive cuff of literary linearity that would otherwise pigeonhole it as a contemporary appropriation, using *Hamlet* as its source or originary text. Rushdie's narrative strategies and structural circularities explode the traditional linear model destabilizing the appropriation/source text binary and constructing a narrative that promotes historical alterity and hybridity within an Occidental, not a postcolonial, context.

A figure in both *Hamlet* and *Tristram Shandy*, Rushdie's Yorick plays the protagonist of his own short story. Yorick also moves from Shakespearean play text to eighteenth — century novel to postmodern short story. As Julie Sanders writes in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, "the movement into a different generic mode can encourage a reading of the Shakespearean text from a new or revised point of view" (2005, 48). Unlike dramatic texts, which "offer broader perspectives on scenes and events than the single point of view of a film camera or a first person narrator in a novel," prose can "adopt a radical slant on a play simply by choosing to focus in on a single character and their reaction to events" (48). Rushdie's tale redirects our attention from *Hamlet*,

Claudius, Gertrude, and the Ghost to the relationship between the court jester and the boy prince — a common enough move in postcolonial appropriations — but unlike traditional postcolonial appropriations, the story does not give Yorick his own voice. Instead of relinquishing narrative authority to Shakespeare's long dead character, Rushdie employs a first-person, authorial persona to tell the tale. This author/narrator's digressions, repetitions, direct addresses, and relentless self-editing highlight the creation of the text and consequently force us to acknowledge the narrative's fallibility. "Yorick," like *Tristram*, challenges "the normal and canonical system of fiction," in which "the author is not supposed to be making up, but reporting" (Genette 1988, 15). Rushdie deliberately calls attention to the constructedness of the narrative by constantly reminding his readers that they are not simply reading a story, but experiencing the telling and/or creation of that story. Through phrases such as "I say again in case you have forgot my purpose," "on with my story," "as I had begun to say," and "did I not tell you, have I not just this moment set down [. . .]," Rushdie's story is as much about the composition of narrative, Genette's "narrating act," as it is about the content of that narrative.

Rushdie does not simply parallel or appropriate *Hamlet*; rather, he foregrounds how the play operates both as a material text and a renowned work of literature. "Yorick" is about "both the tale of the vellum itself and the tale inscribed thereupon" (Rushdie 1995b, 64; emphasis added). Suggesting that "Yorick's saga" contains a "voluminous history," Rushdie punningly calls attention to the "voluminous" scholarship devoted to the textual history of *Hamlet*, as well as to the critical discourse attendant to the play. Using the language of textual editing — abbreviate, explicate, annotate, hyphenate — Rushdie sets "Yorick" alongside traditional editions of the play. It is the narrator's "present intent" to "explicate, annotate, hyphenate, palatinate, & permanganate" this textual history (64). Rushdie's strategy recalls the copious number of *Hamlet* editions that collectively dispute the notion of a singular text. By suggesting that "Yorick" is another, alternative edition, Rushdie challenges the "completeness" of any edition of the play. Thus, "Yorick" operates less as a postcolonial appropriation of *Hamlet* than as a contemporary heir to textual editing practices. Positioning "Yorick" as a postmodern example of an edition of *Hamlet* also inserts the short story within the historical tradition of Shakespearean scholarship. Such a narrative strategy stretches "Yorick" 's roots back to Nicholas Rowe, Alexander Pope, and Lewis Theobald: editors whose work continues to mediate our own, contemporary reading experiences with Shakespeare's texts. Rushdie's implied question is: If, today, there can be an Arden *Hamlet*, a Signet *Hamlet*, and a Riverside *Hamlet*, why not a "Yorick" *Hamlet*?

"Yorick" uses a frame narrative structure that allows Rushdie to employ diverse writing strategies and styles: postmodernist fragmentation, dramatic scenography, iambic pentameter, and

self-referential narrativity all push against one another. The fragmentariness of Rushdie's narrative style subtly recalls the now-lost fragments of various earlier texts (such as Thomas Kyd's so-called *Ur-Hamlet*) that may have influenced Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Readers familiar with the textual history of *Hamlet* know that the First Quarto, the Second Quarto, and the First Folio all offer different versions of the play. As Frank Kermode admits in his introduction to the play for *The Riverside Shakespeare*, "The history of the text of *Hamlet* is very complex. Techniques of scholarly inquiry grow more subtle, but as yet they have achieved no certainty on some issues crucial to the task of editing *Hamlet*" (Kermode 1997, 1137). Reminding readers of the complicated textual history of *Hamlet* challenges the assumed fixed purity of Shakespeare's text and positions what is traditionally considered to be the "source text" as an appropriation of other, earlier work.

Another strategy that Rushdie uses to challenge the notion of textual stability is to juxtaposition contemporary dialogue against iambic pentameter. Modern linguistic construction is interspersed with Elizabethan verse to reflect the concurrently unfolding narratives. The jester, for instance, speaks in verse: "O, a! What whoreson Pelion's this, that, tumbling down from Ossa, so interrupts my spine?" when he is rudely awakened by the boy prince (Rushdie 1995b, 67). The narrative breaks off as the narrator wonders whether a court fool would (or could) use such language: "I interrupt myself, for there occurs to me a discordant Note: would any man, awakened from deepest slumber [. . .] truly retain such a command of metaphor and classical allusion as indicated by the text?" (67). The narrator's suspicions regarding a court jester's abilities to employ such metaphoric language parallel the doubts of those individuals who challenge Shakespeare's authorship of the plays because of his alleged lack of formal learning. The narrator's conclusion that "It may be that the vellum is not wholly to be relied upon in this regard; or it may be that Denmark's fools were most uncommon learned. Some things may never be known" similarly recalls the difficulties of establishing the "pure" text of *Hamlet* (67-68).

Although Rushdie explicitly challenges the accuracy (and authority) of the vellum, elsewhere he foregrounds the literary source that underpins Shakespeare's tragedy. Reversing the usual trajectory of most Shakespeare appropriations that locate themselves in the present, Rushdie pushes his narrative further back into Denmark's past and draws a direct line between "the bardic Hamlet" and "Amlethus of the Danes" to emphasize the literary sources behind Shakespeare's play (Rushdie 1995b, 65). The reference to "Amlethus" recalls the ancient Norse legend that is the basis of the Hamlet story. In addition to the legend of Amlethus, Rushdie draws on the authority of Saxo-Grammaticus's *History of the Danes*, which contains the foundation of *Hamlet*. The narrator's admission that this story will provide "a full exposition of why, in the *Hamlet* of William Shakespeare, the morbid prince seems unaware of his own father's real name" stresses

the text's ambiguous genesis (64). Paradoxically, the very specificity of the phrase "the *Hamlet* of William Shakespeare" implies the possible existence of other *Hamlets*. Through "Yorick," Rushdie suggests that the familiar Shakespeare play text is itself a fissured hybrid and not the absolute source it has been constructed to be.

The Moor's Last Sigh: The Transnational Identity and Intertextuality

Similarly, in *The Moor's Last Sigh* Rushdie again foregrounds literary, historical, and narrative hybridity and challenges the binary logic that subordinates the appropriation of Shakespeare to a counter-discursive status. In this sprawling, expansive novel, geographic, and cultural displacement complements the temporal dislocations to construct a narrative that breaks free of the limiting paradigms of containment and binary logic. *The Moor's Last Sigh* has received much more critical attention than "Yorick," and the affinities between the novel and Shakespeare's works have been noted by other critics. My focus here is not to promote the novel as a palimpsest, but rather to explore how the qualities of the palimpsest challenge notions of discourse and counter — discourse as they are used in Shakespeare studies and to dismantle the hierarchical divisions between them. As in "Yorick," Rushdie once again exhibits Bakhtin's dialogic tension and Genette's distinctions among story, narrative, and the narrating act to achieve a literary agency for his work. Deploying an astonishingly wide array of intertexts that by turns conjoin and conflict with one another, Rushdie articulates a fragmented hybridity⁷ that reflects literary, cultural, and national identities free from the totalizing essentialism of orderly binary structure.⁸ The Shakespearean characters, quotations, themes, and allusions (along with references to other writers and texts) create manifold textual layers, overlaps, and echoes that provide a shifting literary canvas that allows Rushdie to explore how narrativity constructs (and presses) upon identity. Drawing principally upon *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello*, the novel's intertextuality provides Rushdie with a linguistic and textual flexibility through which he destabilizes entrenched constructions of individual, literary, cultural, and national identity.

The intertextual, interethnic identity that Rushdie constructs for his narrator actualizes the intercultural identity of the literary text and the nation-state. Jyotsna Singh writes, "*The Moor's Last Sigh* further demonstrates [Rushdie's] preoccupation with the postcolonial Indian nation-information . . . [Rushdie's] vision of a shifting, hybrid landscape goes against the grain of totalizing narratives of both colonialism and nationalism" (1996, 169). Employing Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia advances the idea of the postcolonial Indian nation as a "shifting, hybrid landscape." Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as the "internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of

generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and passing fashions, languages that serve the various sociopolitical purposes of the day, even the hour" (Bakhtin 1981, 262-63). As in "Yorick," Rushdie again employs a first-person narrator in *The Moor's Last Sigh*; Moraes Zogoiby, known as the "Moor," reflects the multiple voices of the Indian nation's minority communities, Bakhtin's "internal stratifications." Like Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, the Moor constructs concurrent identities — at once individual and national — through narrative. The intertextual composition of the narrative actualizes the Moor's — and India's — interethnic, intercultural, and fragmented sense of self. The Moor's blended identity — characterized by his Jewish father, Catholic mother, and magical birth — immediately opens the possibility of a multivalent cultural experience.⁹ The racial and cultural hybridity located in the novel's primary figure precedes British imperialism and promotes a more elastic identity that crosses the traditional colonial/postcolonial boundary.

Constructing his narrative around and through Shakespeare's texts, Rushdie's novel uses the literary and cultural frames of *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice* to clear a literary and historical space through which to express the individual stories of Abraham, Aurora, and the Moor, as well as the collective history of India's Jews.¹⁰ Abraham Zogoiby, the father of the Moor, is a descendent of the Jewish spice merchants of Cochin. Abraham's desire to marry Aurora de Gama — a Catholic who is of the "wrong-side-of-the-blanket descent from the great Vasco de Gama himself" — triggers his mother, Flory, to recount the history of Kerala's Jewish community (Rushdie 1995a, 70-73). Flory's memory rests on history and "the longer memory of the tribe. . . . [T]he White Jews of India, Sephardim from Palestine, arrived in numbers (ten thousand approximately) in Year 72 of the Christian Era" (70). But like all stories in the novel, the veracity of this one is challenged. Abraham contradicts his mother's memories, retorting that "Black Jews had arrived in India long before the White, fleeing Jerusalem from Nebuchadnezzar's armies 500 and eighty — seven years before the Christian era" (71). These countering claims expose the fissures within historical narratives and challenge narrative's authority.

Flory's refusal to accept the Catholic Aurora as her daughter-in-law evokes *Romeo and Juliet* as Rushdie uses Shakespeare's famous "star-cross'd lovers" to tell the story of Abraham and Aurora. Rushdie does not relocate *Romeo and Juliet* to Cochin just to give the play "Indian color." Rather, the narrative recalls *Romeo and Juliet* in order to complicate the traditionally received reading of Shakespeare's play. Rushdie references *Romeo and Juliet* precisely because it "stands as a cultural ideal that shapes our social understanding about what love should be" and because "there is probably no expression of love, public or private, that is not in some way indebted, albeit

unknowingly, to the idea of love promulgated by this text" (Callaghan 2003, 2). While it is tempting to read Abraham and Aurora as Indian counterparts to Romeo and Juliet, Rushdie is not seeking to reaffirm the transcendent nature of love as it is constructed in Shakespeare's play. The reader's temptation to locate the affair between Abraham and Aurora in the realm of timeless love story is challenged by the novel's focus on Juliet's central question from act two, scene two: "What's in a name?" For Shakespeare's Juliet, Romeo's name "is no part of [him]" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.43, 48).¹¹ On the balcony, Juliet's answer to her question, "That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet," suggests that a name carries no importance — and more crucially for Rushdie's purpose — that a name signifies nothing besides itself (43-44). *The Moor's Last Sigh* shatters the notion that a name is but another word as Abraham delves deep into his ancestry, forcing the ethnically exclusive Flory to acknowledge the Arabic family name, El Zogoybi. Abraham uses the name as proof that he himself might be a descendant of Moorish Spain, not the White Jews of Flory's story. Although Abraham echoes Juliet's sentiment that names do not matter, the narrative offers another version of the Abraham and Aurora story to suggest that names and histories do make a difference. The Moor's ethnically mixed identity tracks back via his mother to Vasco de Gama and via his father to a union between "the dispossed Spanish Arab and the ejected Spanish Jew" (Rushdie 1995a, 82). Rushdie's transposition of "What's in a name?" suggests a linguistic slippage that allows the line to resonate in multiple directions, reflecting the cultural plurality that the novel espouses.

Abraham's refusal to acquiesce to Flory's wishes precipitates the novel's metaphoric reversal of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: Abraham rejects Judaism and embraces Aurora's Catholicism. The Moor, a child of this Jewish father and Catholic mother, directly references *Merchant* in his commentary regarding his father's decision. Abandoning Flory, Jewtown, and Judaism, Abraham

walk[ed] away from his race, looking back only once. *That for this favour, He presently become a Christian*, the Merchant of Venice insisted in his moment of victory over Shylock, showing only a limited understanding of the quality of mercy; and the Duke agreed, *He shall do this, or else I do recant the pardon that I late pronounced here. . . .* What was forced upon Shylock would have been freely chosen by Abraham, who preferred my mother's love to God's. He was prepared to marry her according to the laws of Rome — and O, what a storm that statement conceals! (Rushdie 1995a, 89-90; emphasis in original).

Rushdie's novel dialogues with *The Merchant of Venice* to reconfigure the play's literary and cultural status. Recalling Shylock's forced conversion to Christianity at the insistence of

Antonio, Rushdie's intertextual commentary challenges the established and deeply entrenched attitudes that celebrate Christian, i.e., Western, commitments to tolerance and respect and, in the contemporary jargon of the academy, multiculturalism and diversity. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie foregrounds the Christian Antonio's circumscribed understanding of "mercy." The Duke, representing the Christian state, wholly supports Antonio's dictum, threatening to "recant the pardon" if Shylock does not renounce Judaism and convert.

But Rushdie's narrative does not simply invert the Christian/Jew binary, nor does it handily substitute Hindu and Muslim for Christian and Jew; to do so would reify the very paradigms that Rushdie seeks to challenge.¹² As he did through his use of *Romeo and Juliet*, Rushdie uses *Merchant* to suggest that as stories travel across time, geography, and culture, they accumulate attributes to become a fluid, intertextual composite. Abraham, as Shylock the victim, later in the novel morphs into a victimizer, turning to mass murder, gangsterism, and terrorism. Rushdie's continued assault on the victim/victimizer binary results in a textual link between Shylock and Flory. Bindu Malieckal writes that a "jubilant Flory gloats very much like Shylock in the court scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, 'an oath, an oath, I have an oath in heaven. . . . I stay here on my bond'" (2001, 163). Giving Shylock's words to Flory recalls the vengeful Jew of act four of *Merchant* rather than the sympathetic, victimized Jew of the "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" speech (*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.1.64). Using *The Merchant of Venice* to dismantle the victim/victimizer binary complicates the binary logic that anchors much of the literary criticism surrounding the play.¹³ *The Moor's Last Sigh* casts a shadow back over *The Merchant of Venice*; by directly identifying Abraham with Shylock the victim and then by linking Flory and Abraham's later activities with Shylock the victimizer, the novel foregrounds how Shakespeare's character embodies multiple — and perhaps hybrid — identities. Rushdie's appropriation allows for a reassessment of the play's oppositional binaries; besides Shylock and his dual roles, other characters and instances are also reconfigured when read through this appropriative lens.

Locating Portia's "quality of mercy" speech within Rushdie's appropriative frame reveals its duplicitous rhetoric. The inherent virtue of mercy is introduced at the very start of the scene by the Duke when he expresses pity for Antonio:

I am sorry for thee. Thou art come to answer
A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch,
Uncapable of pity, void and empty
From any dram of mercy. (*The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.3-6)

The word "mercy" is repeated throughout the scene. Portia later describes mercy as being "twice blest" and says, "We do pray for mercy, / And that same prayer doth teach us all to render / The deeds of mercy" (200-12; 202). She also identifies mercy as "an attribute to God himself [. . .] / When mercy seasons justice" (195, 197). Allowing Rushdie's appropriation to influence our reading of Portia's speech and, more broadly, the scene's representation of mercy complicates both the rightness of Portia's cause and the attributes of mercy itself. A deliberate attentiveness to the linguistic multivalency reveals how mercy does indeed possess a "quality" that can be manipulated and withheld. Between them, Portia and the Duke use the word thirteen times, mostly to urge Shylock to relinquish his bond and exhibit virtuous clemency towards Antonio. Having defeated Shylock's bond for a pound of Antonio's flesh, however, Portia also denies him his money, repeatedly declaring "He shall have nothing but the penalty," "[He] shall have nothing but the forfeiture," and "He shall have merely justice" (322, 343, 339). Earlier in this scene, Portia had counseled the Jewish moneylender to "season" his desire for justice (or revenge) with mercy, but now that their roles are reversed and she has triumphed, she denies him mercy's grace. Ironically, by refusing to "season" her own justice with mercy, Portia denies herself the very grace she had encouraged in Shylock. Rushdie's editorial gloss that Antonio, the "Merchant of Venice show[ed] only a limited understanding of the quality of mercy," applies presciently to Portia and the Duke, as well.

Foregrounding the Venetians' "limited understanding" of mercy opens a space through which to examine the rhetorical doublespeak inherent in the scene. According to Portia, mercy is "twice blest: / It blesseth him that gives and him that takes" (*The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.186-87), but read through Rushdie's appropriative mode, mercy is "twice blest" because Christian Venice, through its control of the courts, can demand that Shylock show, or "give," mercy, but Venice can also deny or "take," mercy. Through its self-serving construction of mercy, Venice is blessed by receiving mercy and blessed again by withholding it. In Rushdie's retelling, it is not mercy that is "twice blest"; rather, it is Venice. Framing *The Merchant of Venice* through Rushdie's retelling foregrounds the rhetoric's Christian tilt.

Rushdie's appropriation of *Othello* elaborates on the pattern he had established with his evocations of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. Here, he further emphasizes the role that narrative and narrating play in the construction of identity. As with *Hamlet* in "Yorick," Rushdie's use of *Othello* in *The Moor's Last Sigh* stresses his concerns regarding how stories are told and who tells them. In challenging the supposed reliability and authenticity of the narrative text, Rushdie elides Othello's story with the story of his own Moor to highlight the relationship between the narrative's subject and the narration itself. The parallels between Shakespeare's Othello

and Rushdie's Moor are too explicit to miss. First, there is the sameness between *Othello's* title and Moraes's nickname, Moor. Second, Othello and Rushdie's Moor both "lov'd not wisely but too well" in their bonds with Desdemona and Uma, respectively (*Othello*, 5.2.344). Third, both are marginalized figures in their respective societies — Othello by reason of his race, and the Moor because of his blended ethnicity and physical deformities. (The Moor's right hand is badly misshapen, "the fingers welded into an undifferentiated chunk, the thumb a stunted wart [Rushdie 1995a, 146].) And, fourth, the ethnic identity of each character is highly contentious. Othello is a Moor, and depending on whether we consult the Folio or the Quarto text, compares himself to either a "base Judean" or a "base Indian"; Rushdie's Moor is part Jewish, part Catholic, descends from the sultans that once ruled Moorish Spain, and is born Indian.

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie evokes both the character of Othello¹⁴ and the material text to draw our attention to the fissures that underlie all texts. Storytelling is an important trope in both *Othello* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*; exploring the narrative strategies of the novel opens alternate readings of the play.¹⁵ Both works contain numerous references to the power of narrative and the act of narration. Shakespeare's Othello and Rushdie's Moor engage in self-narration which, in Genette's words, results "with the narrative act initiating (inventing) both the story and its narrative, which are then completely indissociable" (1988, 15; emphasis in original). Othello, we know, wooed Desdemona through his stories. Brabantio, Othello says, "Still question'd me the story of my life" (*Othello*, 1.3.129). Enchanted by Othello's tale, Desdemona would "come again, and with a greedy ear / Devour up [Othello's] discourse" (1.3.149-50). The Duke refers to Othello's story as a "tale" (171). Moraes, too, has a tale to tell. Like Othello, Moraes also shares with us his lifestory: "Mine is the story of the fall from grace of a high-born cross-breed: me, Moraes Zogoiby called 'Moor'" (Rushdie 1995a, 5). Unlike Othello, Moraes offers multiple, competing, often contradictory versions of his story; he gives the "approved and polished family yarn," but also promises to offer "alternative versions[s] by and by" (78).

Rushdie deliberately calls attention to the other versions of the Moor's story to pull these unapproved and unpolished accounts out of the margins of narrative and history; consequently, Rushdie's narrative strategy complicates the center/margin binary and contests the alleged authority of the narrative. Destabilizing this binary principle allows the "margin" to escape its traditional construction of representing, in Kalpana Seshardri-Crooks' phrase, the "constitutive outside" where "an intimate alterity [. . .] marks the limit of power" (2000, 13). The emphasis on multiple versions and competing accounts challenges the presumed cohesion of the narrative. The numerous, conflicting versions suspend the reader in a state of uncertainty that problematizes the solidity and

authenticity of the text and complicates our conviction in the firmness of the narrative act itself. As in "Yorick," in *The Moor's Last Sigh* Rushdie employs a range of postmodern, metafictional strategies to disrupt the accepted authority of texts. Allusion, intertextuality, digression, parody, humor, unreliable narrators, and authorial interjections all work to interrogate the notion of a single, totalizing narrative. Reading *Othello* through the contextual frame of *The Moor's Last Sigh* similarly challenges the source text/appropriation binary and prompts us to question just how Othello's story will be told. Rushdie's reworking of *Othello* suggests that instead of a singular, cohesive narrative, Othello's story will circulate via fragments and allusions.

More so than most Shakespearean characters, Othello engages in Genette's narrating act in order to construct his identity. Early in the play, his words explain his wooing of Desdemona to Brabantio, who believes his daughter to have been won by sorcery. Othello tells "How [he] did thrive in [Desdemona's] love / And she in [his]" through his stories (*Othello*, 1.3.125-26). Othello defends himself, saying, "This [story] is the witchcraft I have us'd" (169). More significantly, the tale he tells of far off lands, cannibals, and the fantastical "Anthropophagi" introduces him to the audience as an exotic figure. In re-reading Othello's stories as instances of self-fashioning, Sabine Schulting suggests that through his "mastery of language," Othello "constructs himself as the Other, the object, of European colonial discourse" (1996, 7). Like Rushdie's Moor, Othello serves as both the narrator and the narrated subject.

Othello engages in self-narration elsewhere in Shakespeare's play, most significantly during the final moments of the last scene. After Othello is stripped of his command, he asks that his Venetian captors

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
Of one that lov'd not wisely, but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
Like a base [Indian], threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdu'd eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinable gum. Set you down this;
And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,

I took by th' throat the circumscribed dog,
 And smote him — thus. (*Othello*, 5.2.342-56)¹⁶

In this final speech, Othello recounts the tragic events that have led him to this juncture and like Moraes, he is simultaneously participant, observer, subject, and narrator of the action that surrounds him. The speech uses both first and third-person perspective to delineate Othello's errors in judgment. Othello refers to himself as "I" and "me" before switching to the more distanced, third-person "one." Throughout this speech, his language suggests that he is narrating — for the final time — his life story. His instructions to the Venetians are quite explicit: he tells them to "Speak of me as I am." He asks that they not modify his story: "nothing extenuate." Finally, he advises them what to write: "Set you down this." He also recounts his actions in an effort to "fix" his identity upon his death. The language of this speech reveals the play's use of narration and storytelling as a rhetorical device that foregrounds Othello's difference. Fittingly, the play's last words belong to Lodovico, who must "straight abroad, and to the state / This heavy act with heavy heart relate" (*Othello*, 5.2.370-71). This dramatic conclusion, however, ruptures the possibility of narrative closure. Lodovico's aim to return to Venice so that he can "relate" this "heavy act" implies that the telling of this story is yet to come. Othello's eulogistic narration of himself is but one version. Other narrators — writers, actors, directors, and critics — will supply other accounts and revise and retell his story.

Examples of such reconsiderations are plentiful. In 1693, Thomas Rymer asks: "Shall a Poet thence fancy that [the Venetians] set a Negro to be their General; or trust a Moor to defend them against the Turk" and argues against a "Blackamoor" heroic figure (1956, 134). A little over a century later (1812), Samuel Taylor Coleridge confidently concludes that Othello must have been a Moor — and not black — because otherwise, "it would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable negro" (1960, 42). Jumping forward to the twentieth century, M. R. Ridley's now infamous introduction to the 1958 Arden edition of *Othello* maintains that the "trouble" with Othello results "from a confusion of colour and contour" (1958, li).¹⁷ Overt appropriations of Shakespeare's play similarly revise, retell, and relocate Othello's story. Salih Tayeb's *Season of Migration to the North* (1970) evokes *Othello* in the life story of the novel's protagonist, a Sudanese Arab Muslim, Mustafa Sa'eed. Like Othello, Sa'eed murders his white wife, but subsequently rejects English society's characterization of him as Shakespeare's tragic figure, asserting that far from being a "noble Moor," "Othello was a lie." In another, more recent example, the three-act *Harlem Duet* (1997) by Djanet Sears uses *Othello* to highlight America's racial struggles. Each text revises Othello's story through retelling it.

Appropriations, adaptations, and retellings serve dual and contradictory roles. They recall Shakespeare's texts, thus reifying Shakespeare's cultural capital while simultaneously challenging and resisting the iconicity represented by that capital. In "Yorick" and *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie's use of Shakespeare recasts the iconic Bard as an interstitial figure, one who speaks to the continued endurance of colonialism as well as the emergence of postcolonialism, globalization, and transnationalism. The nascent rise of these discourses problematizes prevailing literary classifications anchored along a nation-based axis. Shakespeare's plays have traveled across centuries, cultures, and geographies to reach Yorick and the Moor through the voice of a postcolonial, Indian-born, British-educated writer. The contemporary contexts of Shakespearean drama actualized by Rushdie's fiction render inadequate exclusively "national" constructions of literary discourse. "English literature," Stephen Greenblatt argues, was "always an amalgam of Scottish, Irish, Welsh, Cornish, and other voices of the vanquished, along with the voices of the dominant English regions" (2001, 52). Rushdie's fictions blur the categories of the "vanquished" and the "dominant," the "indigenous," and the "foreign," the West and the rest, offering instead a more complex narration in which the multivalent agency accorded the plays through their re-imaginings suggests instead that Shakespeare's iconicity is a fluid signifier in an increasingly inter-, intra-, and multi-cultural global discourse.

Notes

1. Dialogism refers to the concept that texts are in constant, even inevitable, contact with other texts and writers. Polylogism refers to multiple or competing systems of logic.
2. Appropriation implies a political element, whereas adaptation is less linked to the political. See Julie Sanders's *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2005).
3. For a more detailed examination of the uses of British literature during colonialism, see Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* (1989), Sara Suleri's *The Rhetoric of English India* (1993), and Chris Baldick's *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848-1932* (1987).
4. In *Local Shakespeares: Proximations and Power*, Martin Orkin writes, "By 'local' I mean here what characterises each reader who comes to the text, in terms of her or his place and time, what is within that place epistemologically current, the particular institutional position or struggles within which she or he is situated or which she or he is actively engaged or, again, the particular knowledges and ideologies she or he exemplifies or legitimates" (2005, 3). My focus here is not restricted to the individual reader of the text; rather, I am using the term "local" to draw attention to the binary classification that governs how Shakespearean discourse tends to

categorize Western productions/interpretations as iconic, canonical, or universal, whereas non-Western ones are marginalized as "regional," "postcolonial," or local."

5. For a discussion regarding the connections between contemporary issues of adaptation and the concepts of *imitatio* and *aemulatio*, see Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), 20.
6. For a discussion regarding postmodernist narrative strategies in Rushdie's early work, see M. D. Fletcher, ed., *Reading Rushdie* (1994).
7. Ania Loomba discusses *The Moor's Last Sigh* and a 1996 production of *Othello* done as a dance-drama in the kathakali style "in order to suggest that discussions of colonial or postcolonial hybridities must pay attention to locations and an attention to non-European histories" (2005, 144). She argues that while Rushdie's "revision restlessly searches the globe for histories and motifs which foreground the question of difference, the other uses centuries of stagecraft to reach out and mould difference in its own image" (1998, 155).
8. For a more detailed study of Rushdie's poststructuralism, see Sabrina Hassumani's *Salman Rushdie* (2002).
9. The Moor is born after only four-and-a-half months. He says, "from the moment of my conception, like a visitor from another dimension, another time-line, I have aged twice as rapidly as the old earth and everything and everyone thereupon" (Rushdie 1995a, 144).
10. For a more detailed examination of Jews in India, see Dora Ahmad's "'This Fundo Stuff is Really Something New': Fundamentalism and Hybridity in *The Moor's Last Sigh*" (2005).
11. All references to Shakespeare's plays are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (1997).
12. Mona Narain uses the destruction of the Babri masjid in December 1992 as her point of departure in her argument that in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie challenges the violence that characterizes the Hindu/Muslim binary in an effort to advance "a different, re-imagined history of India through the palimpsest of the early modern antecedents of its Jewish and Catholic protagonists" (2006, 5). She goes on to note that "Rushdie's turn to an allegorized early modern history as a means to cope with a failed, counterfeit, contemporary history is in fact significantly similar to the deep tensions over the problems of origin and meaning within Renaissance historiography itself" (10).
13. Examples of critical interpretation that foreground the play's "oppositions" include: Samuel Ajzenstat's "Contract in *The Merchant of Venice*" (1997), Thomas McKendry's "Gypsies, Jews, and *The Merchant of Venice*" (1988), and Mark Edwin Andrews's *Law Versus Equity in The Merchant of Venice: A Legalization of Act IV, Scene I* (1965).

14. Jonathan Greenberg also raises the similarities between Othello and Rushdie's Moor, particularly the textual controversy surrounding "Indian" versus "Judean" in 5.2.347, in "'The Base Indian' or 'The Base Judean?': *Othello* and the Metaphor of the Palimpsest in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*" (1999). Unlike Greenberg, however, who reads *The Moor's Last Sigh* "as a novel of an artist's development" and reads Othello's last speech as one that "provides a hidden key to interpretation of the tale of Rushdie's own Moor" (94), my focus here is to examine how Rushdie's appropriation of *Othello* impacts how we read Shakespeare's play. In effect, my purpose is to blur the traditional discourse/counter-discourse trajectory by allowing Rushdie's Moor equal agency with Shakespeare's.
15. See Gerard Genette's *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982) for a discussion regarding transgeneric appropriations.
16. Rushdie never quotes Othello's final speech, so it is impossible to know whether he favored "Judean" or "Indian." For consistency, I am using "Indian" here as that is the text in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, and all other Shakespeare quotations have been taken from that edition.
17. For a detailed discussion of race and the bedroom scene, see Michael Neill's "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*" (1989).

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