THE AFTERLIFE OF SHAKESPEARE’S PLAYS: A STUDY OF CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATIONS INTO OPERA AND FILM

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ABSTRACT

This study considers the ways in which Shakespeare’s plays have been adapted in cross-cultural contexts from the nineteenth century to the present, specifically in Europe and India, through the media of opera and film. I bring into dialogue reception theory, adaptation studies, Shakespeare scholarship, musicology, film studies, and postcolonial theory in order to examine the mechanisms of Shakespeare’s reception in these two culturally diverse regions of the globe, and argue that there are significant parallels between European and Indian adaptations of Shakespeare. Despite the different cultural and political histories of the two regions, Shakespeare’s plays reached out to local audiences only when they were modified in order to make them relevant to the cultural and ideological concerns of the new audiences that were far removed from Shakespeare’s own. Moving away from understanding Shakespeare’s reception either in terms of the dramatist’s “universal appeal” or in terms of colonial instrumentality, as has usually been the case, I argue that such predetermined critical paradigms take away from what in Shakespeare various cultures have found truly valuable, truly affective. Moreover, I argue that the degree of transculturation, both with European and Indian adaptations, is greater when Shakespeare is adapted in media that involves performance, than when he is adapted in a purely verbal medium, such as translations. This process of indigenization through performance, one that I have termed “performative
transculturation,” has opened up fresh avenues of cross-cultural exchange over the ages. The works I examine in detail are Ambroise Thomas’ opera Hamlet, Giuseppe Verdi’s opera Otello, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar’s Bhrantibilash, a prose adaptation of The Comedy of Errors, and Vishal Bhardwaj’s films Maqbool and Omkara, based on Macbeth and Othello respectively.
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Introduction: Theorizing Cross-Cultural adaptations of Shakespeare

*Sweet Swan of Avon, what a sight it were
To see thee in our waters yet appear . . .*
- Ben Jonson

*The reason why classic plays should have survived is that people have been exploiting them or even abusing them . . . The exploitation of it has secured classic drama a foothold, as only what stimulates people may endure.*
- Bertolt Brecht

Shakespeare, the quintessential English poet and dramatist, has been read, acted, translated, adapted, and alluded to so often, and in so many different cultures, that his global reach is now generally assumed to be greater than that of any other author. Ben Jonson seems to have anticipated the dual nature of the posthumous reputation of his famous fellow dramatist in his poem, “To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare” which appeared in the First Folio of Shakespeare’s works:

Shakespeare is both England’s most celebrated poet (as the quotation above implies) and, as the same poem states, “he was not of an age, but for all time” (l.43). Jonson’s words have been taken to imply Shakespeare’s transcendence in both historical and cultural terms: indeed, these latter words seem true to the point of being a cliché in the present day. As Gary Taylor has observed, “Shakespeare provides the best specimen in English,

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1 “To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare: And What He Hath Left Us” (1623), l. 71-2.

2 “Was die klassischen Stücke am Leben erhält, ist der Gebrauch, der von ihnen gemacht wird, selbst wenn es Mißbrauch ist . . . Kurz, das Verkommen bekommt den klassischen Stücken, da nur lebt, was belebt” (Brecht 335-36; trans. and qtd. in Lin 18).

3 For a succinct overview of the many assumptions and misconceptions regarding Shakespeare’s global reputation, see Hawkes, “Shakespeare’s Afterlife” 571-81.
one of the best specimens in any language, for investigating the mechanisms of cultural renown” (5).

A closer reading of Jonson’s line, however, suggests that several assumptions are being tacitly made here. Jonson clearly saw Shakespeare as a dramatist of timeless significance, but in an age when England was just beginning its colonial exploits, could Jonson have also thought of Shakespeare’s work as something that could also transcend cultural differences? Could Jonson have also anticipated the rapid change in theatrical practices or changes of literary fashion, and its implications for Shakespeare’s posthumous reputation? If he did, would he have still regarded Shakespeare as the most universal among dramatists? Moreover, if Shakespeare’s plays are the classics among classics, do they, by the same token, get subjected to the “exploitation” or “abuse” that, according to Brecht, ensures the survival of classic plays? Is it Shakespeare’s work that people across the world get to know, or rather his name and aura? If Shakespeare’s plays have found worldwide audiences purely on their own merit, what is it about them that stimulates people all over the world? Is it their beauty of language, their plots, their themes, their stageworthiness, their adaptability, their cultural capital, or any combination of these factors that ensures their survival? Or are Shakespeare’s posthumous relevance and reputation inextricably tied to British imperialism, the emergence of English as the global lingua franca, and Shakespeare’s pre-eminence within the English literary canon?

If we assume that all these factors have their roles to play in ensuring Shakespeare’s posthumous reputation, then any study of Shakespeare’s reception across cultures should focus on, first, the ways in which Shakespeare’s reception has spread and second, on the outcomes of his reception in any given culture – in short, on the processes
and the products of Shakespeare’s reception. Other approaches have emerged from the comfort zones of simpler (and more familiar) metanarratives. As Dennis Kennedy has pointed out, bardolatry, the canonization of Shakespeare as England’s greatest literary icon, has led some Anglophone critics to look upon Shakespeare’s popularity in other countries as an example of his “universal appeal” (2). Such critics have generally focused not on the ways in which Shakespeare’s plays have been recast over the ages, but on either the closeness of an adaptation to Shakespeare’s original, or as Edward Pechter puts it, “the consistency of the response record” to Shakespeare (8; emphasis in the original). On the other hand, non-Anglophone critics such as Gauri Viswanathan have shown the imbrications of colonial rule, English education in the colonies, and the ways in which Shakespeare was used in the colonies as an important tool of cultural hegemony. Yet, to understand Shakespeare’s cultural capital within the binaristic logic of either his “universal appeal” or colonial instrumentality is to oversimplify the trajectory of adaptation of Shakespeare’s plays in non-English contexts, and to avoid examining Shakespeare’s reception in the receiving cultures on their own terms.

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4 Linda Hutcheon describes adaptations as both processes and products of a work’s engagement with a previous work of art (7-8); hence, adaptations are useful objects of study in any analysis of Shakespeare’s reception.

5 Examples of such an approach can be found in one of the pioneering books in the field, Ruby Cohn’s Modern Shakespeare Offshoots (1976), as well as Winton Dean’s chapter on operatic adaptations of Shakespeare in Hartnoll (1964), and Gary Schmidgall’s Shakespeare and Opera (1990), to cite just three examples.

6 My point here is that my primary focus will be on adaptations and the contexts in which they are made, rather than their Shakespearean sources and contexts. As I shall argue later in the chapter, there are many ways of engaging with Shakespeare within a given culture, since no culture is internally uniform; moreover, individual readers will bring their own perspectives to their reception of Shakespeare’s works.
While both of the previous approaches offer their own insights, their drawbacks are also considerable. The particularity of any later reading of a Shakespeare play lies in its departure from readings previously considered normative; hence, to examine only the consistency of the response record to a Shakespeare play is to overlook those precise factors that make the later reading critically significant. On the other hand, to read Shakespeare only as a tool of imperial cultural coercion is to analyze Shakespeare’s reception with an a priori agenda in mind, and while there is no denying the fact that Shakespeare was indeed used for colonialist ends, it is also important to examine how such ends were often subverted by the agency of indigenous critics, translators, performers, and adapters. As both cultural materialists and New Historicists have noted, the effectiveness of “the ideological forces of containment” is “never . . . total” (Dollimore, “Introduction” 15), nor are forces of subversion “entirely contained” (Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* 34; emphasis in the original). Viswanathan herself makes the important observation that her book *Masks of Conquest* examines “the ideology of British education quite independently of an account of how Indians actually received, reacted to, imbibed, manipulated, reinterpreted, or resisted the ideological content of British literary education” (11).

Newer critical paradigms are especially useful in analysing the politics of Shakespeare adaptations. For instance, in her introduction to *World-Wide Shakespeares* (2005), Sonia Massai has argued for the necessity of moving away from Foucauldian paradigms in order to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the politics of cross-cultural adaptations (5). Instead, she takes as a starting point Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the cultural field, since Bourdieu “provides a useful, alternative model to understand the
dynamic interaction between established modes of critical and theatrical production and
innovative strategies of appropriation” (Massai 6), one which allows the receiving culture
to avail of a number of positions within the field of cultural exchange rather than the
more limited agency allowed by a Foucauldian paradigm. Keeping such a paradigm in
mind helps one to understand why Sukanta Chaudhuri and Chee Seng Lim observe that
non-Anglophone productions of Shakespeare often “do not follow the expected lines of
demarcation” between East and West (xiii), while critical approaches have usually done
so. There is, therefore, a need for analysing Shakespeare’s reception that goes beyond the
universalist-imperialist dichotomy, and this can be done, I would argue, by examining
Shakespeare’s reception and the insights regarding cross-cultural exchange through a
study of adaptations, the products of Shakespeare’s reception in any given culture. I
focus especially on adaptations in performance media, for it is here that cross-cultural
exchange takes place at multiple levels (verbal, visual, musical, and so on), compared to,
say, translations meant for a reading public, where the exchange takes place at the verbal
level alone. I refer to the process of cross-cultural exchange through adaptation in
performance media as “performative transculturation.”

Theorists of adaptation such as Linda Hutcheon and Julie Sanders explore methodologies by which an adaptation can be
related to its literary sources, the cultural and ideological contexts in which it is created,
the generic conventions particular to the medium in which the adaptation has been made,
and the nature of reception arising out of the relationship between the audience/reader

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7 I define the term “adaptation” for the purposes of my dissertation in a later section of
this chapter.

8 Needless to say, I use the term “performative” in a very different sense from the one
made famous by J. L. Austin in his book How to Do Things With Words and subsequently
used by other theorists like Judith Butler.
and the medium of (re)presentation. Such an approach, one which combines historicist, formalist and reader-response perspectives, places adaptations of Shakespeare in a broader cultural matrix than hitherto employed, and also significantly increases the range and scope of adaptation studies by making it possible to locate Shakespeare adaptations in multiple intertextual frames, where Shakespeare’s play is only one of several texts to which such an adaptation can allude.

When a Shakespeare play gets (re-)presented anywhere, either as opera or theatre or film or in any other mode of performance, it needs to address the social and ideological concerns of that public if the performance attempts to be anything more than of historical interest. This presentation may uphold or subvert the ideological assumptions of the majority among the audience, but, to go back to Brecht, it has to stimulate them, nevertheless. In this study, I use the terms “indigenization” and “transculturation” specifically to refer to this process by which elements of an older text are reworked in order to make it relevant to new audiences. As I shall show through close examination of adaptations both from Europe and India, a greater degree of transculturation is to be found in those media in which a number of semiotic codes are simultaneously in operation, such as in theatrical, cinematic, or musico-dramatic performances, where verbal, visual, and musical codes come together. Since each semiotic code brings its own culture-specific conventions of representation and interpretation, taking the risk of defamiliarizing audiences from the representational conventions they are at home with is easier for the adapter when there are fewer codes and production costs are lower. Hence, a theatrical, cinematic, or operatic adaptation of Shakespeare is likely to show a greater degree of adherence to the cultural codes.
informing the receiving culture than, say, a printed translation, because of the presence of more semiotic codes in the former compared to the latter. This kind of transculturation through performance, one that I have termed “performative transculturation” is a good indicator of the ways in which texts inevitably change as they travel across different cultures. Cultures where the general public are open to radical artistic innovation, and/or where creative artists are free to do their work without worrying about issues of funding, may depart from the model of performative transculturation that I have outlined here, but even then it is unlikely that an adaptation will attempt subvert audience expectations both in terms of ideology and representational conventions. As Bakhtin and Sartre argue from their different theoretical premises, a work of art is always addressed to some kind of reader or audience the author has in mind, and even the most individual-minded adapter would have to place his work in a socio-cultural matrix, so some kind of transculturation is bound to happen in the process of adaptation.

**Defining “Anglophone,” “Cross-cultural” and “Intercultural”**

Of these three terms, all so central to my study, the term “Anglophone” is not as straightforward as it may seem. The word refers to both (1) a subject – an English-speaking person – and (2) a location – a region or country where English is spoken. Such a twofold definition may seem obvious enough, but there is much that is not considered in most usages of the word. At the level of the individual subject, does the term refer to one whose first language is English, or one whose first language may or may not be English, but who has the necessary linguistic competence? On the other hand, does the second definition make the majority of the world Anglophone, or only the United States,
the United Kingdom, current and former Commonwealth countries such as Canada, India, and Australia, where English is the (or an) official language? If we use purely linguistic denotation to distinguish between Anglophone and non-Anglophone Shakespeares, then any French or German adaptation should be regarded as cross-cultural, while an Indian adaptation in English should not. It may be argued that only a small minority of the population of a country like India – around 5% – can be properly considered Anglophone (Harish Trivedi “Anglophone/Non-Anglophone Shakespeares” 192-93), but even then in numerical terms these people exceed the English-speaking population of all other countries except the United Kingdom and the United States. What makes countries like India non-Anglophone, then, is not language at all but rather the absence (except through colonialism) of “a common historical and cultural inheritance shared by the West” (Harish Trivedi “Anglophone/Non-Anglophone Shakespeares” 193-94).

But even a culturalist definition of Anglophone cannot quite help us define the cross-cultural. The common historical and cultural inheritance of the West has given rise to differences over time, such that when we consider the critical reception of Shakespeare in Europe from the early nineteenth century onwards, the differences become increasingly significant. For example, the Renaissance led to the re-evaluation of Greek and Latin texts, and the dramatic literature in Latin was taken as a model by English dramatists of Shakespeare’s time, including Shakespeare himself. But the continuation of this inheritance took place along different lines in different European countries. In countries where neoclassical tenets had held sway (above all in France and, to a

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9 If we include those who use English as a third language in India, the percentage increases to about 8% of the total population, making India the second-highest country in the world after the United States in terms of English-speaking populations.
considerable extent, Italy), Shakespeare became a rallying point for dramatists such as Victor Hugo and Alessandro Manzoni who were keen to abandon what they perceived as the artificialities of neoclassicism and develop newer forms of drama. Similarly, cultural commonalities are of limited use as a starting point for analysis when we consider the operatic traditions of different European countries into which Shakespeare made his way through adaptations, for not only were these traditions considerably different from each other, they were also very different from the performance conditions in which Shakespeare’s plays were originally produced. In my chapter on Verdi’s opera Otello, the most acclaimed of all Shakespearean adaptations into opera, I show how the composer and his librettist Arrigo Boito were actually negotiating a variety of different European traditions – operatic, dramatic, and critical – in their adaptation. Thus, we need more inclusive definitions of the cross-cultural, particularly those that work outside of the dichotomous categories of Western/non-Western and Anglophone/non-Anglophone. Only then can we begin to understand the similarities and differences between adaptive strategies across different periods and cultures.

For the purposes of this study, therefore, I use the word “cross-cultural” to refer to both European and Indian adaptations of Shakespeare. When discussing nineteenth-century operatic adaptations of Shakespeare, I retain the term, since the linguistic, historical and cultural inheritance of the West changed considerably between the time Shakespeare wrote his plays and the time he came to be adapted on a regular basis throughout Europe. Consequently, my focus is on the ways in which these adaptations present new readings of Shakespearean plays informed by the critical perspectives and performative traditions current to the times and cultures in which they were created. My
use of the term “cross-cultural” to refer to Indian adaptations of Shakespeare is less contentious, since culturally the Indian subcontinent has always been different from seventeenth-century England. As I shall show, we can find features common to both European and Indian receptions of Shakespeare, but they have less to do with any shared cultural background than with the strategies of cross-cultural adaptation.

In an increasingly connected world, “cross-cultural” is often equated with “intercultural,” and a number of productions, such as the kathakali version of King Lear by David McRovie and Annette Leday, bear witness to the attempt at a two-way exchange of ideas that the word “intercultural” implies. Yet, since in reality cultures do not engage on an all-things-being-equal platform, attempts at intercultural exchange involving a fusion of different traditions of performance are often inherently problematic because audiences do not have equal knowledge of the multiple cultural conventions involved in the representation. As Hutcheon notes, since not all of the first audience of the kathakali Lear was familiar with the deep-rooted conventions of the highly stylized kathakali dance form, they ended up feeling mystified by the McRovie-Leday adaptation (151). One must keep in mind that it takes familiarity and training to understand the representational conventions of any given medium and any given culture, especially when these conventions tend to eschew realism. Nevertheless, the hegemonic presence of Western (and especially English and French) culture makes Western representational modes more well-known, more “normative” in a global context, and can give rise to the illusion that the conventions of, say, Western opera are inherently more graspable (i.e.,
universal) than those of, say, traditional Indian dance forms or the Japanese Noh. Such an assumption is incorrect, and one of the aims of my study is to show the importance of transculturation as a stepping-stone towards genuine cross-cultural exchange.

Although it is important to look beyond Shakespeare as a tool of cultural colonialism, it is neither possible nor desirable to depoliticize Shakespeare’s reception or adaptation, and it is important to locate cross-cultural Shakespeares in the asymmetric web of intercultural exchange in which Western Europe has occupied a central position and non-European cultures a peripheral one. This is one of the reasons why I chose to focus on adaptations from both Europe and the Indian subcontinent. Shakespeare adaptations from both Western and non-Western cultures are usually geared towards local audiences, assimilating Shakespeare to the cultural conventions of the national or regional milieu – as one sees in Ambroise Thomas’s Hamlet, a nineteenth-century French opera that I analyze more fully in Chapter 1, or Vishal Bhardwaj’s Maqbool, an Indian cinematic adaptation made in 2003, and which I discuss in Chapter 3. The latter is an

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10 In his preface to Foreign Shakespeare, Dennis Kennedy admitted that the volume ran the risk of “merely substituting” European approaches for Anglo-centric ones (xvii), but went on to make the questionable assertion that such a selection was inevitable since “most Shakespeare productions outside of English still occur in Europe, and European theatres have led the way in redefining performance models” (xvii-xviii). It is important not to convert individual interests or preferences into ostensibly objective observations, and the focus on European and Indian adaptations in this study arises not because they are more important than Shakespeare adaptations from elsewhere – I do not think they are – but from the limits imposed by my own linguistic and disciplinary competence. Indeed, I shall discuss in the conclusion how Shakespeare adaptations from other regions can provide perspectives on aspects of cross-cultural adaptations that have not been covered in the chapters to come. My point in this study is not to suggest which areas of cross-cultural exchange are more important than others – none are – but to show, by taking up Shakespeare adaptations in two culturally diverse regions of the world and analysing them from a shared methodological lens, new perspectives on the mechanisms of cross-cultural adaptations and, consequently, to question some of the critical assumptions that have traditionally informed the study of these adaptations.
instance of a cross-cultural adaptation that attempts to be *inter*-cultural, by presenting a story known to Western audiences using representational conventions with which Western audiences are less familiar, or even unfamiliar. Such adaptations, though apparently very different from Western performance traditions, are often meant for Western rather than native audiences. They often achieve limited success (such as the *kathakali Lear*), but at its best, the strategy can be brilliantly successful in arousing Western interest in other cultures. The most well-known case in this regard is that of Akira Kurosawa, whose Shakespeare adaptations have found great acclaim all over the world but a rather more qualified appreciation within Japan. The boundaries between cross-cultural and intercultural adaptations are often blurred, and what is of significance is that such adaptations of Shakespeare, while themselves belonging to the culturally marginal, find global audiences when none would otherwise exist (Chaudhuri and Lim xii-xiii). The effects of such cross-cultural adaptations of Shakespeare are, thus, twofold: while they make available a (marginal) global space for cultures peripheral to the Western centre, they also reinforce notions of Shakespeare’s “universalism” at the same time.¹¹

**Shakespeare, “Englishness” and Cultural Difference**

Shakespeare was a great adapter of texts from a wide variety of sources – classical authors such as Plutarch and Ovid, continental authors such as Boccaccio, Ariosto and

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¹¹ Hence, despite their apparent contradictory positions, both Denis Salter and Kate Chedgzoy are right about the cross-cultural impact of Shakespeare adaptations. Salter’s view is that Shakespeare re-sitings “merely seek to extend [Shakespeare’s] authority in seemingly ‘natural’ ways” (127), while Chedgzoy argues that Shakespeare “has allowed other voices to make themselves heard” (2).
Bandello, English authors such as Holinshed, Chaucer and others, as well as anonymous, popular sources, to suggest only a few. He adapted from a wide variety of sources, and in turn, was widely adapted. On the other hand, he also focused on English history and invented a new genre – the history play – to depict his versions of the histories of English kings. This genre, too, has been widely admired, especially in Germany. Moreover, Shakespeare’s canonization as England’s greatest writer coincided with the rise of imperial Britain, and the spread of his work undoubtedly has much to do with the global spread of English and the active promotion of his work at around the same time as exemplifying the greatest achievement by any English writer. Is it Shakespeare’s skill as an adapter, as someone who could add new and thought-provoking dimensions to stories already known across cultures, that has given rise to adaptations in turn? Or is it his “Englishness”? Critics have occasionally expressed surprise that the part of Shakespeare’s output that specifically deals with English themes has not won as much universal appeal as other parts of his output, whose sources go beyond the local:

It is true, of course, that by comparison with the reception of the histories [Shakespeare’s history plays] in Britain, the range of foreign productions [of the histories] may have been less extensive, thus paradoxically suggesting, not without a degree of truth, that the playwright’s unchallenged universal appeal is determined more by the sonnets, the comedies or the tragedies, than by material relating more directly to his own country of origin. . . . (Hoenselaars 16; emphasis mine)

There is, however, nothing at all paradoxical in the fact that audiences outside of England should not equate the specifics of English history, which form the subject-matter of
Shakespeare’s history plays, with the “universal”: the paradox lies in the assumption that what is most specifically English in Shakespeare is often assumed to also represent the universal. In fact, I posit that there is good reason to argue in favour of a dialectic between Shakespeare the nationalist playwright and Shakespeare the world writer, and that it is the latter Shakespeare that has successfully crossed cultural boundaries. For someone with “small Latin, and less Greek” compared to other Elizabethan dramatists like Ben Jonson (“To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare,” I. 31), Shakespeare was able to incorporate both local and foreign sources in the most imaginative of ways, whether or not he read the foreign ones in the original languages or in English translation. Some critics have gone so far as to suggest that Shakespeare’s cross-cultural appeal lies precisely in his ability to draw upon and, in turn, feed into diverse national-cultural sources (Chaudhuri and Lim xi), that is, on his own strengths as an adapter of diverse cultural material (Fischlin and Fortier 8).

This is, in fact, an important point whose implications are well worth considering. The table below lists the thirty-eight plays commonly regarded as comprising the Shakespearean dramatic canon, together with their genre, settings and principal textual sources:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Principal Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Romeo and Juliet</em></td>
<td>Tragedy</td>
<td>Verona</td>
<td>Brooke &lt; Boaistuau (Fr.) &lt; Bandello (It.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Coriolanus</em></td>
<td>Roman tragedy</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Plutarch (L.) + Livy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Titus Andronicus</em></td>
<td>Roman tragedy</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Ovid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Timon of Athens</em></td>
<td>Tragedy / Problem play</td>
<td>Ancient Greece</td>
<td>Plutarch, Lucian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Julius Caesar</em></td>
<td>Tragedy</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Plutarch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Macbeth</em></td>
<td>Tragedy</td>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>Holinshed, [?] George Buchanan (L.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hamlet</em></td>
<td>Tragedy</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Belleforest (Fr.) &lt; Saxo-Grammaticus; [?]Ur-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>Location/ Setting</td>
<td>Authors/ Sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troilus and Cressida</td>
<td>Tragedy</td>
<td>Troy</td>
<td>Hamlet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Lear</td>
<td>Tragedy</td>
<td>Troy/Cyprus</td>
<td>Chaucer, Lydgate, Caxton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Othello</td>
<td>Tragedy</td>
<td>Rome/Alexandria</td>
<td>Holinshed; several others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antony &amp; Cleopatra</td>
<td>Tragedy</td>
<td>Rome/Britain</td>
<td>Chappuy (Fr.) &lt; Cinthio (It.) &lt; Boccaccio (It.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cymbeline</td>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>Rome/ Britain</td>
<td>Thomas North &lt; Plutarch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All's Well That Ends Well</td>
<td>Comedy/Problem play</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Boccaccio (It.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As You Like It</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Thomas Lodge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Comedy of Errors</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>France/“Arden”</td>
<td>Plautus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love's Labour's Lost</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Syracuse</td>
<td>No known principal source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure for Measure</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Navarre</td>
<td>Whetstone &lt; Cinthio (It.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Merchant of Venice</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Venice</td>
<td>Ser Giovanni Fiorentino (It.), Silvayn (Fr.), Munday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Merry Wives of Windsor</td>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>W. Painter &lt; Ser Giovanni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Midsummer Night's Dream</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Messina</td>
<td>Fiorentino (It.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much Ado About Nothing</td>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>Phoenicia/Greece</td>
<td>Ovid, Apuleius, Chaucer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pericles (+ Wilkins?)</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Padua</td>
<td>Bandello (It.), Ariosto (It.), Belleforest (Fr.), Spenser Gower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Taming of the Shrew</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Unnamed island</td>
<td>Gascoigne &lt; Ariosto (It.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Tempest</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Illyria</td>
<td>No single principal source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twelfth Night, or What You Will</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>Verona/Milan</td>
<td>Barnabe Rich &lt; Bandello (It.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Two Gentlemen of Verona</td>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>Thebes</td>
<td>[?] Felix and Philomena (anon.) &lt; Montemayor (Port.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Two Noble Kinsmen (+ Fletcher?)</td>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>Sicily</td>
<td>Chaucer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Winter's Tale</td>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>Sicily</td>
<td>Robert Greene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King John</td>
<td>History play</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Holinshed, Foxe, Paris + Troublesome Reign of King John (anon., 1589)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard II</td>
<td>History play</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Holinshed, Hall, Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 &amp; 2 Henry IV</td>
<td>History play</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Holinshed, Hall, Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry V</td>
<td>History play</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Holinshed, Hall, Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1, 2 &amp; 3 Henry VI</td>
<td>History play</td>
<td>Holinshed, Hall, Daniel Rowley</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard III</td>
<td>History play</td>
<td>Holinshed, Hall</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry VIII</td>
<td>History play</td>
<td>Holinshed, Foxe, Speed, (?)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of these thirty-eight plays, only two, *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *The Tempest*, cannot be traced to any single principal source, though in the case of *The Tempest*, there are several texts, both English and Continental, that Shakespeare may have drawn on, such as Erasmus’s *Naufragium*, William Strachey’s 1610 eyewitness report of a real-life shipwreck in Bermuda, Montaigne’s essay *Of the Cannibals* and Ovid’s poem *Metamorphoses* (see Muir 278-80). If we set aside the ten history plays for the time being, we see that only four or five plays (*Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Cymbeline*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *As You Like It*) are set in England or the British Isles, and only six are extensively based on British textual sources: *Macbeth*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *King Lear*, *As You Like It*, *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, the last probably written in collaboration with John Fletcher. Even here, there are non-English intertexts to consider: Seneca or Ovid, for example, in *Macbeth* (Muir 211-212), Montaigne in *King Lear* (Muir 206), and Ovid in *The Winter’s Tale* (Muir 277).

On the other hand, the history plays, set in England and based mostly on English sources, have had a less extensive history of non-Anglophone productions and adaptations. Their *indirect* influence is considerable: German critics and scholars such as August Wilhelm Schlegel went on to regard these plays as among Shakespeare’s most important contribution to drama (Hoenselaars 20), while others took them as models for

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12 Whether the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* refers to the one in England or to the Ardennes in Flanders is also open to speculation. For an overview of the topic, see Dusinberre 46-52.
the creation of a German national-historical drama.\textsuperscript{13} They were also an influence on Sir Walter Scott, whose historical novels in turn proved extremely influential on other literatures.\textsuperscript{14} The history plays have also been extremely popular on English stages and some, notably \textit{1 & 2 Henry IV} and \textit{Henry V}, have been adapted as films (more than once) by the likes of Sir Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh.

Their direct influence has been considerably less, however. Ton Hoenselaars observes that “[w]ith the pursuit of the distinction between history and historiography, the Shakespearean history play has come to be identified as a genre in English and proto-British history mobilized to boost a Unitarian, right-wing myth of Britain” (15). Outside of England, the history plays have been ignored even earlier, and there are good reasons why scholars of foreign Shakespeare have focused less on the history plays and more on the comedies and tragedies and even his poetry. For one, the history plays have fared less well elsewhere either in terms of translations, foreign productions, or adaptations. By the 1930s, only \textit{1 and 2 Henry IV} and \textit{Richard III} among the history plays appear to have been translated into Indian languages (Poonam Trivedi, Introduction 17), although the bulk of Shakespeare’s output had been translated by then, and it had been nearly a

\textsuperscript{13} Richard Wagner, for example, was a great admirer of the history plays and was influenced by their example when writing \textit{Der Ring des Nibelungen} (1876) (Hoenselaars 23). Similarly, a Shakespearean influence, especially that of \textit{Richard II}, can be detected in Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray’s only full-length film in Hindi/Urdu, \textit{Shatranj ke Khiladi [The Chess Players]} (1977), about Indo-British political relations just before the Revolt of 1857 (Verma 285).

\textsuperscript{14} Sometimes the influence of Shakespeare along with that of the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott produced interesting results. One of the earliest exponents of the historical novel in Bengali, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894), wrote in the wake of Shakespeare’s \textit{The Tempest} his novel, \textit{Kapalkundala} (1866), which anticipates in some ways the twentieth-century postcolonial responses to the play. Chatterjee’s work is discussed in Chapter 3.
hundred years since Shakespeare had started being performed in India on a regular basis. None of the histories was translated into Bengali until 1962 (Das 57), although Shakespeare scholarship and productions, sometimes along lines “faithful” to the original, had long been in vogue, as I show in Chapter 3. Such a situation is not peculiar to India: in most European countries, too, the history plays have not travelled as well as the comedies and tragedies ever since Shakespeare started making inroads through his other plays around two hundred years ago. Although a succession of European operas from the early nineteenth century onward, especially in French and Italian, was based on the history of England,¹⁵ none of them was based on Shakespeare’s history plays. From as early as the seventeenth century Spanish drama featured themes from English history, but they, too, were not based on Shakespeare (Hoenselaars 19). Closer to our times, Sir Laurence Olivier’s film version of Henry V caused diplomatic tensions between the French and the English in 1947, although both countries had been united in their fight against Nazi Germany, while the first French production of that play took place in 1997, nearly 400 years after its first London performance (Hoenselaars 18). Hence, although Shakespeare may have virtually invented the genre of the history play (Danson 87), the plays themselves have crossed cultural boundaries far less successfully when compared to Shakespeare’s plays in other genres.

The reason behind this discrepancy lies partly in the nature of the Elizabethan theatre. Before the innovations of Inigo Jones, Elizabethan play stages had minimal visual props, putting the onus of description largely on the spoken word. Since dramatists

¹⁵ These include Gioachino Rossini’s Elisabetta, regina d’Inghilterra (1815), Ferdinand Hérold’s La gioventù di Enrico quinto (1815), Gaeteno Donizetti’s Anna Bolena (1830), Maria Stuarda (1835), and Roberto Devereux (1837), and Camille Saint-Saëns’s Henry VIII (1883).
of this period worked with the possibilities made available by the Elizabethan stages, it is important to keep in mind how they established a balance between the verbal and the visual aspects of their plays. In the case of the tragedies and comedies, Shakespeare used dialogue to make the same stage represent Denmark, Italy, France, England, fairyland, and so on, but nothing more specific so as to make the settings stand out in any way for his English audiences. Both the nature of the stage and the audiences Shakespeare was writing for made it necessary that the locales not become all-important. The stage could, of course, be used for powerful symbolic effects, but the minimal scenic props available to Elizabethan playwrights made them depend almost entirely on the power of words to create the setting and ambience. The history plays, however, provide an exception to the rule: here, the words are specifically geared to the evocation of an English setting and to the unfolding of the history of the English kings. The specificity of the location—Shakespeare’s own country—would not have limited the appeal of these plays to his contemporary audiences. Spectators would have readily identified with the subject-matter and, indeed, if Shakespeare had anything to worry about, it was political censorship. The specificity of the English settings of the history plays makes it nearly impossible for an adapter to change the location. Hence, this group of plays has been less amenable to transculturation, highly interesting as the plays are on other grounds.

The change of language involved in any translation or cross-cultural adaptation of Shakespeare results in a somewhat different relationship between the reader and the text than is the case with Shakespeare in English. Although Shakespeare enriched the English

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16 For an especially striking instance, consider Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus*, where Faust presents to the audience his numerous travels, from Papal Rome through courts of Europe, made possible by his magical powers, through verbal means alone.
language with phrases and expressions that have become proverbial, his English is significantly different from the various kinds of English spoken in the twenty-first century, even in England. As a result, Shakespeare’s language seems archaic even to native British speakers, something that does not happen with Shakespeare in contemporary translation. The problem remains even with “updated” Anglophone productions of Shakespeare’s plays, for the process of updating usually involves changes in setting, mise-en-scène, and so on., but rarely to the language of the plays. There is an underlying assumption that language is the inviolable expressive core of Shakespeare’s plays and, in the context of my study, a parallel can be found in the case of opera where, no matter whatever else gets changed, the musical score is rarely altered. The disjunction between the linguistic and visual codes (Elizabethan English vis-à-vis an “updated” setting) is never there in today’s cross-cultural Shakespeare, for the verbal translations are never archaic. As Gary Taylor memorably puts it, “for foreigners Shakespeare can always speak in the present tense” (317). While the rich textual complexity of Shakespeare’s poetry is inevitably lost in translation, something is gained in terms of linguistic immediacy and communication.

17 It has been argued, however, that Early Modern English is so very different from present-day English that “those who assert that huge numbers of words in modern English come from Shakespeare are seriously mistaken” (Crystal 77).

18 A rare exception that comes to mind is The Beggar’s Opera, with words by John Gay and music by Christoph Pepusch: both the words and music of the work have been altered by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, Robert Lepage, and many others.

19 There are good reasons why one may not wish to change Shakespeare’s words or, say, Richard Wagner’s scores. Although both these men wrote for the stage, Shakespeare’s critical and cultural capital is tied to his use of words as a dramatist, while, despite the fact that the composer wrote his own librettos, Wagner’s is tied to his work as a composer.
It can be argued that disjunctions like this between different semiotic codes operating in multimedia art forms such as theatre and film need not necessarily alienate audiences – indeed, they can be used very effectively\textsuperscript{20} – as long as audiences agree to accept them as ultimately secondary to an understanding of the larger issues of that adaptation. For example, a number of cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare in English, such as Baz Luhrmann’s \textit{Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet} (1996), relocate Shakespeare’s plays in the twentieth century while retaining the Elizabethan English of the original plays. This is generally not the case with other English-language films set in the distant past, where the language spoken is closer to modern-day English. Nor are such disjunctions present in the case of more thoroughgoing adaptations of Shakespeare, such as the musical \textit{West Side Story}, where setting, language and music are all decidedly of the twentieth century, or with non-Anglophone cinematic Shakespeare. And there is hardly a Shakespeare film in, say, Japanese or Russian, that updates the visual settings to the present while resorting to an archaic version of the target languages as an equivalent to the “archaic” feel of Shakespearean English. The disjunction between the verbal and visual styles, of which Luhrmann’s film provides an example, can be regarded as the result of (deliberately) partial indigenizations, for out of various semiotic elements only some are selectively altered, usually in the form of “updating.”\textsuperscript{21} The presence of the visual-verbal disjunction in most English-language Shakespeare adaptations into film

\textsuperscript{20} As I shall show in Chapter 3, the use of vernacular languages coupled with the use of European theatrical staging devices and modes of business organization worked towards the tremendous success of the nineteenth-century Parsi theatre in Bombay.

\textsuperscript{21} Such a strategy need not alienate audiences at all, as the presence of world-wide audiences for English-language films based on Shakespeare indicates.
may be inevitable, given the assumption that in Shakespeare’s plays, language is more important than other semiotic elements; yet, the case remains that in non-Anglophone theatrical and cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare, it is possible for the adapter to bypass the problems posed by semiotic disjunctions altogether by altering both language and setting.

Part of the increasing interest in and new focus on the study of cross-cultural Shakespeares is also tied to pedagogical issues (Chaudhuri and Lim vi). As a result of Shakespeare’s global spread, there are today more students of his work whose cultural backgrounds and perspectives are different from those traditionally assumed in Anglo-American Shakespeare studies. If the thrust of theory from the 1970s onward has been to become more self-reflexive about the hermeneutic assumptions made in traditional scholarship, or even to challenge them, then there needs to be, in the same direction, a broadening of focus in Shakespeare studies, such that new interpretive and pedagogical methodologies can be developed in order to accommodate scholarship focused on Shakespeare’s texts and contexts, as well as on cross-cultural perspectives. One could ask which cultures should be considered as providing “relevant” alternative perspectives, or whether there is a risk in making the discipline of Shakespeare studies broad to the point of unwieldiness. There can be the further objection that such issues really be addressed by Comparative Literature or Cultural Studies departments, but not English.

In reply to the first point, one can argue that pedagogic strategies should vary according to the student group under consideration, and that what is important is not

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22 In her review of E.J. Honigmann’s Arden 3 edition of Othello, Virginia Mason Vaughan points out that to write from “the position of a white, male English academic” is to forget that there are “readers and theatre audiences around the world who are not white and who might, perhaps, see the Venetians rather than Othello as the other” (479).
which cultural perspectives should be taken into account with regard to Shakespeare, but *how* any such perspective should be incorporated into the study of Shakespeare in the classroom. In most anthologies of cross-cultural Shakespeares, there are usually collections of essays focussing on a few select geographical regions: the G8 countries, often with the addition of parts of Eastern Europe, Israel, India or China, or other Anglophone or Francophone ex-colonies. Studies of Shakespeare adaptations from these latter regions often feed into a range of popular political perspectives that typically range from the fall of communism to postcolonial examination of British (or French) imperial coercion. As I have stated earlier, the focus on any region, rather than on methodology, results in the selection of adaptations that fit easily into critical a priori positions, and what could potentially be a new and exciting area of study ends up rehearsing the same paradigms. These paradigms are, of course, not invalid, but adaptation studies can be productively used to go beyond them.

With regard to the second objection, it can be argued that the question of teaching Shakespeare to multicultural students need not be confined to the disciplines of Comparative Literature or Cultural Studies. Nearly fifteen years ago, Mary Louise Pratt addressed the need to change scholarship and pedagogical strategies as a result of “globalization, democratization, and decolonization” (59). Since Shakespeare’s global spread has ensured that there are more readers and audiences than ever before whose mother tongue is not English but who can (and do) study Shakespeare as well as other World Literatures in English translation, the incorporation of Pratt’s insights into English studies and Shakespeare scholarship is all the more relevant in multicultural classrooms in the United States and Canada, as well as elsewhere.
Defining Adaptations and Appropriations

One of the most problematic definitions in any study of adaptations is the term “adaptation” itself, and depending upon the theoretical concerns in hand, the word may be interpreted in a variety of ways. As mentioned earlier, in her pioneering book Ruby Cohn employed the term “offshoot” to describe Shakespeare adaptations. As adaptation studies took a turn away from the discourse of fidelity, Cohn’s analysis, which examined adaptations in terms of proximity and distance from a singular, primary Shakespearean source-text, made way for newer approaches. Fischlin and Fortier, for example, valorized departures from the source-text(s) that an adaptation can provide, by defining adaptations as “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” (4). This definition refers to adaptation as product; their discussion of adaptation as process broadens the semantic range of the term, and makes it possible to regard a variety of products as adaptations – from critical commentaries (since they are intertextually connected to a source-text), to critical editions (Fischlin and Fortier 17; Harish Trivedi “Anglophone/Non-Anglophone Shakespeares” 198-200). Such a definition may be too broad-ranging, but given that adaptation is “a necessarily provisional category of study” (Kidnie 5), any attempt to define the term must necessarily be provisional. In fact, the first condition underlying the recognition of an adaptation as

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23 The strongest impetus in this new direction came from cinema studies (see, for example, the work of Robert Stam, Kamilla Elliott, and others). Some of these new developments started leaving their mark on Shakespeare studies as well: critical editions such as the Arden, Oxford, and New Cambridge Shakespeare started covering productions (theatrical, operatic and cinematic) in greater detail than before, while a series like Shakespeare in Production brought performance history to centre stage, showing how performers and major theatrical productions, in conjunction with academic criticism, helped shape critical opinion of Shakespeare’s plays.
an adaptation lies not in the texts themselves, but in the reader’s recognition of the extensive and sustained intertextual connections between texts (and/or text and performance), making it possible for him/her to read one as an adaptation of the other.

What makes a sustained intertextual connection between texts possible? As Linda Hutcheon has noted, most theories of adaptation assume that “the story is the common denominator, the core of what is transposed across different media and genres, each of which deals with the story in formally different ways and [through] different modes of engagement” (10). To focus on story alone when studying adaptations would mean reinscribing a neoclassical orthodoxy regarding the primacy of the story over other elements such as character, thought, diction, music, and visualization. This is a potentially problematic assumption, and provides one important reason for the inadequacy of a fidelity-based approach, since different cultures (or the same culture over long periods of time) have different representational conventions, some of them so strong that they require the adapter to make changes not only to the representation of the story, but to the story itself. Ducis’s version of Hamlet, a work I analyze in Chapter 1, offers one example, where Shakespeare’s play was radically altered (including at the level of the plot) in order to suit the conventions of French neoclassical drama (Heylen 30). In eighteenth-century England, Nahum Tate’s happy ending of King Lear enjoyed far greater popularity than Shakespeare’s own tragic one, even as Charles and Mary Lamb’s Tales from Shakespeare reduced for the consumption of children in nineteenth-century England the complicated plotlines of many of Shakespeare’s tragedies and comedies. Similarly, the conventions of Indian drama, in which the onstage depiction of tragic endings was not allowed, initially required nineteenth-century adapters to rewrite the
endings of the plots of several Shakespearean tragedies (Das 61), a subject I discuss in
greater detail in Chapter 3. We can notice a change of content when we compare a work
like Ducis’s *Hamlet* to Shakespeare’s play, because there are changes to the plot, and
these are not caused by the necessities of intermedial transfer or change of language
alone; rather, the change in plot is necessitated because of the different conditions of
reception in the receiving culture (in this case, the strict rules and conventions of the
eighteenth-century neoclassical French theatre).

Whether or not radical modifications occur because of deeply-entrenched
representational conventions in any given culture, or because of inflections caused by the
theoretical concerns of psychoanalysis, postcolonialism, feminism, queer theory, or a
combination of these, as is often the case in present-day adaptations, Shakespeare’s plays
still remain enriching intertexts to those audiences or readers of adaptations who know
both texts. The alterations, however, should not be dismissed or understood purely in
ideological terms. Any of four factors, usually interrelated, result in a wide range of
alterations to the Shakespearean text – linguistic (issues pertaining to translation), medial
(change from drama to any other art form), performative\(^{24}\) (culture and/or genre-specific
representational conventions), and ideological (the adapter’s own concerns, censorship
issues, and so on.) – and determine the final product of the adaptive process. As a result,

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\(^{24}\) There are differences between the medial and the performative as I have defined it
earlier in this chapter: the latter term is more deeply enmeshed in the imbrications among
culture, genre, and historical moment. When a plot narrated through words alone (such as
a novel or short story) is adapted as a play, there are certain inevitable changes that
transcend the culture-specific, such as the need for actors, a performing space, and a
spectating audience. But the codes of representation in the new medium will vary from
culture to culture, as well as diachronically in any given culture: these are changes at the
performative level.
we have a range of Shakespeare adaptations that define their relationship to Shakespeare’s plays in a wide variety of ways, whether it be one of homage (as in the case of Verdi’s opera, *Falstaff*), indirect allusion (as with the Bernstein-Laurents musical *West Side Story*), or contestation (as, for example, Aimé Césaire’s *Une Tempête*).

A number of adaptation theorists have made a distinction between “adaptations,” reworkings that stay closer to the source-text or texts, and “appropriations,” reworkings that stray far from their sources; others see adaptation as an inherently appropriative activity, and hence prefer the latter term. Among theorists of the former school, Julie Sanders makes an interesting distinction between “adaptation” and “appropriation” by suggesting that while an adaptation “signals a relationship with an informing source-text or original,” an appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain. This may or may not involve a generic shift, and it may still require the intellectual juxtaposition of (at least) one text against another that we have suggested is central to the reading and spectating experience of adaptations. But the appropriated text or texts are not always as clearly signalled or acknowledged as in the adaptive process. (26)

Sanders’s insight regarding the unannounced nature of certain forms of textual appropriation is useful, as it ties in with several other issues at hand. Some adaptations, such as the Hindi film *Angoor* (1982), an adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors* by the Indian director Gulzar, avoid announcing overtly the connection with Shakespeare,

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25 Fischlin and Fortier 3. As they point out using the example of Shakespeare sonnets quoted in greetings cards, the seizure of the original text implied in the term “appropriation” can take place without changing the original text at all.
because of the unpopularity of film adaptations of Shakespeare in India at this period.

Again, the note of contestation inherent in the term “appropriation” is useful especially in the case of works like Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* or Césaire’s *Une Tempête*, where, in the process of retelling, something more than a change of language, place or time (“transculturation,” to use Hutcheon’s term) takes place. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, for example, does retain an intertextual connection with *Rosencrantz*, but the degree of plot divergence in Stoppard is considerably greater than in other retellings, such as, say, the Grigori Kozintsev film adaptation of *Hamlet*. Indeed, in *Rosencrantz* and *Une Tempête*, there is more than just a change of emphasis resulting from a different point of view, or alterations to plot, setting, or medium of presentation.

At work in Sanders’s distinction between adaptation and appropriation is an underlying assumption that works that announce their relationship to previous texts (adaptations) are usually acts of *homage*, or stay close to being so, while more radical reworkings or departures (appropriations) tend not to announce their more contested or critical relationship with the Shakespearean text. But this need not always be the case, and Gulzar’s *Angoor* is just one of many examples that prove the contrary. A “decisive journey away from the informing source” need not always go hand in hand with a lack of acknowledgement of the appropriated text, or vice versa.

Another example, Kurosawa’s film *Kumonosu-jō* (lit., “Spider Web Castle,” 1957), known in the West as *Throne of Blood*, does not clearly acknowledge its relationship with Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in either its Japanese or English titles. Yet, despite the changes of language, place and time, names of protagonists, and medium (stage to film), the film adheres to Shakespeare’s plot closely enough for audiences
familiar with Shakespeare’s play to recognize the film as an adaptation, rather than as what Sanders would call an appropriation. By keeping its intertextual link with Shakespeare unannounced, *Throne of Blood* forgoes making use of Shakespeare’s cultural capital, but at the same time, it keeps Kurosawa in the central role of the auteur. Such a strategy has worked well with regard to the film’s critical reception, since critical commentary on *Throne of Blood* has taken recourse to the discourse of fidelity far less often than is the case with film adaptations of Shakespeare generally, and focused on Kurosawa’s role as an auteur instead.

In contrast, both *Rosencrantz* and *Une Tempête* take the “decisive journey away from the informing source,” yet the titles announce, albeit in a somewhat oblique manner in Stoppard’s case, the relationship of the plays with the Shakespearean sources from which they depart. In fact, they draw their power as revisionary readings of Shakespeare precisely by announcing their departure, by making radical changes to plot and point-of-view and alluding to Shakespeare through their titles. Hence I would suggest that of the aforementioned works, only Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood*, which stays very close to Shakespeare in terms of plot but does not announce its relationship to Shakespeare, is an adaptation in the way Sanders uses the term. The works by Stoppard and Césaire, whose plots depart considerably from Shakespeare and are more revisionary or contestatory in their reworking of the source material, should, in Sanders’s scheme, be regarded as appropriations, though they do announce obliquely their relationship to Shakespeare.

Hutcheon’s continuum model (170-72) provides a means of locating both adaptations and appropriations within a range of goals and strategies involved in the process of connecting a later text with a previous one. Forms of reworkings such as
translations or musical transcriptions, which seek to achieve complete fidelity to the
source-text, occupy one end of the scale (even if only as a theoretical ideal), while at the
other end lie spin-offs, prequels, and sequels, whose connections to the source-text are
much less sustained. In this model, adaptations can be seen to stay closer to the fidelity
end of the scale than appropriations, which appear further away from this end, but not as
far as spin-offs.

An adaptation may or may not signal its relationship to its principal source-
text(s), but there are also works that draw on the names of pre-existing works, although
they depart significantly from the stories of their source-texts, as my chapter on Ducis’s
Hamlet shows. Hence, it can be argued that both adaptations and appropriations can have
an extended and announced relationship with a prior text (Hutcheon 16); conversely, both
may depart from a source-text in terms of plot or in the avoidance of an announced
relationship with it. If we are to maintain Sanders’s distinction between “adaptation” and
“appropriation,” the plays of Dumas-Meurice and Ducis, and to a lesser extent, Thomas’s
opera should be regarded as appropriations, because of their significant alterations to the
plot of the Shakespeare play. Nonetheless, adaptations and appropriations differ only in
the degree of their closeness (or distance) from their principal source-text; hence, I will
use the term “adaptation” to refer to any work about whose relationship to a previous
text, whether announced or not, there is critical consensus, and which can be accessed in
a relatively stable textual form, such as a printed text, an audio/visual or audio-visual
recorded performance, a visual image, and so on.

There is another problem in drawing distinctions between “adaptation” and
“appropriation” in Sanders’s sense. Although Sanders does not valorize one term over the
other, in general parlance “appropriation” often carries negative connotations when compared with “adaptation,” both in postcolonial criticism and adaptation studies. In the latter context, this is, no doubt, partly due to due to the lingering presence of fidelity criticism: works that stray far from the original are to be regarded, _ab initio_, as inferior to those that stay closer to the original. My critical position with any kind of retelling – whether adaptation, appropriation, spin-off, parody, or any other term one chooses – is that it is of critical interest as long as it says something new. Hence, an imaginative appropriation is of greater critical interest than an unimaginative adaptation. To disagree with this position would imply letting in fidelity criticism through the back door, as it were.

When I choose to focus on adaptations that are available in relatively stable textual forms, I do so not in order to redefine the term itself, but to set limits on the kind of adaptations that I will examine in this study. By no means do I intend to suggest that other, less stable, textual forms such as theatrical performances are _not_ adaptations: they are, of course, and with good reason have been (and continue to be) the centre of focus in studies of adaptation of Shakespeare, even more so than film. Indeed, printed texts, such as a musical score or play-text, need to be realized in performance, unlike, say, a film, where a comparatively more stable textual form is viewed by audiences, making the former more “adaptogenetic” in the sense that they can be more readily altered in performance (Hutcheon 15). For the purposes of this study, however, I concentrate first

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26 As DVDs of films remind us, a number of variations is possible: fullscreen versus widescreen versions, censored versus uncensored versions, to cite but just two parameters. Nevertheless, it remains true to say that plays, operas, ballets, concert performances and other such “live” modes of presentation undergo greater variations than “recorded” versions such as films and CDs.
on those textual forms that are used as a basis for performance, and then on particular performances themselves, and this is partly because it is easier to ascertain the relationship between such textually stable adaptations and new cross-cultural interpretive communities of Shakespeare. I am, of course, aware that just as Shakespeare’s plays undergo performative transculturation, so do adaptations of his works. Productions of an opera like Verdi’s *Otello* usually depart from the stage directions followed in the first performances, just as productions of Shakespeare’s play *Othello* do. While it is possible to develop this line of argument to suggest that the very notion of a stable text is itself suspect (as it has, indeed, so often been done), I am ready to heuristically assume the notion of a “stable” text that is itself constantly changing in live performance.\(^{27}\)

As far as the methodology of this study is concerned, I focus first on Shakespeare plays and their adaptations as they were first performed, and then on the ways in which these performances underwent changes.

My working definition may sound the most provisional of all, but “adaptation” is indeed a provisional category. I know of people who have seen Vishal Bhardwaj’s film *Maqbool*, based on *Macbeth*, without recognizing it as an adaptation of Shakespeare. Their experience of the film would be enriched by their knowledge of Shakespeare, no doubt, but it was still possible for them to enjoy *Maqbool* as a *film*, and not as a *cinematic adaptation*. Again, in their operas *Otello* and *Falstaff*, Giuseppe Verdi and his librettist

\(^{27}\) Some source-texts are more stable than others. The musical scores of operas from the late nineteenth century onwards are, generally speaking, more stable than those from earlier periods (in which endings could be readily changed, “hit” numbers interpolated from one opera to another, and so on), or the texts of many Shakespeare plays. It is true that the textual histories of some Shakespeare plays are more fraught than others, but that does not make *all* Shakespearean texts “radically” unstable to the same degree.
Arrigo Boito did look beyond Shakespeare (to Ser Giovanni Fiorentino, for example) as well as to nineteenth-century translations by François-Victor Hugo. What, other than the reader’s own knowledge of other texts, determines what s/he is going to recognize as a potential source-text? The reason why we read Shakespeare adaptations as adaptations of *Shakespeare* is because it is he who provides the most culturally and historically significant of “prior” texts for comparison, but the connection must still be made by the reader. As Chaudhuri and Lim observe, both the reader’s own socio-cultural identity and the recognition of the Shakespearean intertext are central to the ways in which that reader relates to the political purport of Shakespeare adaptations (xiv-xv). To give an admittedly oversimplified example, it is possible to imagine that a Western audience

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28 Boito himself observed to his friend Camille Bellaigue, soon after the *Falstaff* premiere in 1894, that “Shakespeare’s sparkling farce is led back by the miracle of sound to its clear Tuscan source, to Ser Giovanni Fiorentino. Come, dear friend, to hear this masterpiece; . . . to spend two hours in the gardens of the *Decameron*” (Walker 502). It is interesting to note that the relevance of Ser Giovanni Fiorentino’s *Il Pecorone* was first pointed to Shakespeare scholars by Carlo Segre in 1911 (Oliver, “Introduction,” lviii n.3.) Clearly, Boito had more intertexts in mind when reading *The Merry Wives of Windsor* than English audiences had in 1894.

29 This word needs qualification: if a reader first knows of a Shakespeare play through an adaptation, then, in the experiential world of the reader, the Shakespeare play would seem like an adaptation, rather than the other way round. The historical priority of a text need not correspond with the reader’s experience.

30 A Bollywood film, *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988) featuring star-crossed lovers separated by unwilling parents, has been read as a free adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* (Lanier, “Film Spin-Offs” 285). However, the plot of the film equally recalls the legend of Layla and Majnun, which came to India from the Arab lands via Persia, and gave rise to a range of adaptations long before Shakespeare’s play became well-known in India: in the twentieth century alone, eleven cinematic adaptations of the legend were made in India between 1931 and 1992, all with the title *Laila Majnu*. How does one determine whether the primary intertext of *Qayamat se Qayamat Tak* is either Shakespeare or the Arabic legend, except by assuming that the answer will vary from person to person, since it is the reader, audience or spectator, who makes their own intertextual connections?
would readily recognize *Maqbool* as an adaptation of *Macbeth*, and focus on Shakespeare’s influence on other, non-Western cultures. An Indian audience may or may not recognize the Shakespearean intertext, depending upon their familiarity with Shakespeare, and when they do, they may either take *Maqbool* as a product of Western cultural hegemony, or focus on the way the film shows how the receiving culture can incorporate external elements into its own cinematic traditions, or focus on Shakespeare’s influence, if any, on Indian culture. One reader’s adaptation may well be another’s appropriation. What is incontestable is that the recognition of adaptation as adaptation is a function of the reader’s knowledge of other texts that s/he can relate and compare to the text in hand. The recognition of such “prior” texts varies from person to person. Moreover, even when a well-known source like Shakespeare is recognized by a reader as a significant intertext, the reader’s interpretation of the Shakespearean text and its relationship to the adaptation would vary, depending upon his or her historical and socio-cultural location. Consequently, it becomes essential to incorporate reception theories in any discussion of cross-cultural adaptations of Shakespeare.

**Adaptation and Reception Theories**

The reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss has observed that a “literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period” (1552). The ways in which literary texts are interpreted and analyzed change over time and space – indeed, the degree to which interpretations of a given text change is even greater as it travels across its home culture to a new one. As a result, it requires special critical methodologies to recover the “original” ways in which older texts were
understood by their first readers or spectators. Such processes of recovery of meaning are at best only partial, and this situation is even more so for authors like Shakespeare and his contemporaries, who are far removed in time from ours, and details about whose lives and ideological moorings are extremely difficult to recover. Even theatrical practice changed rapidly since Shakespeare’s death because of the Puritan interregnum and the closing of theatres, followed by the revival of a different kind of theatre during the reign of Charles II (Egan 30; Tatspaugh 524-25). Moreover, nineteenth-century methodologies of textual analysis, with their focus on literary texts as the manifestation of the author’s inner life, are difficult to sustain in the case of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, whose work was often collaborative, and to whom imitation of previous texts, as opposed to “originality,” was an important way of thinking about literary production (Fischlin and Fortier 4; Scragg 373). A combination of various factors has, therefore, ensured that every generation has had to interpret Shakespeare in the light of its own times. Hence, placing the reader/spectator at the centre of the process of interpretation can yield important insights in the case of Shakespeare’s reception and interpretation.

Although, as Terry Eagleton observed in the early 1980s, modern literary theory has moved from author-centred criticism in the nineteenth century, through the exclusively textual approach of New Criticism to “a marked shift of attention to the reader over recent years” (64), the implications of this pertinent shift of focus have not been followed to the fullest extent possible or desirable. For instance, reception theorists

31 It might be argued that I am using the word “literature” interchangeably – and problematically – with “drama.” But that is precisely my point here: several commentators on Shakespeare from the nineteenth century (Goethe and Coleridge among others) tended to see Shakespeare’s dramatic texts not as something that is fully realized, like a musical score, only in performance, but as self-contained literary texts whose greatest value is not as drama but as poetry.
have had to “call upon a determinate text (or sub-text) to prevent . . . a totally subjective and arbitrary reader response” (Holub 150). Such a problem arises from the theorist’s attempt to recognize a text as being both of its time, open to different interpretations with the passage of time, as well as transcending time (and, one may add, space). As Robert C. Holub observes,

[i]f we ultimately have recourse to features of a knowable text, then the suspicion can easily arise that reception theory has frequently changed only the critical vocabulary, not the way in which we analyze literature. Instead of the “spirit of the age,” we find the “objectified horizon”; in lieu of the ambiguity and irony in the text, we read about gaps and indeterminacies. (150)

Theorists like Roland Barthes have sought a solution to this problem by decentring the author and valorizing the play of various interpretations to which a text is inevitably subject (see, for example, his classic essay “The Death of the Author”); others, like E.D. Hirsch, have distinguished between “meaning” (the text as its author reads it) and “significance” (the text as read by others); yet others, such as Stanley Fish (2085-89) have argued that it is the reader who actively creates the text as s/he reads it, and that different communities of readers share certain “interpretive strategies” that lend certain common features to their interpretations which are most likely to vary at the individual level. The insights of Barthes, Fish and Hirsch can be modified and brought together to develop reception theory in new directions that are especially relevant to Shakespeare studies.

As a first step, it is necessary to recognize that the recovery of the “meaning,” in Hirsch’s sense, of Shakespeare’s texts is neither fully possible, nor does it need to be
valorized as the unattainable-yet-ever-sought-after goal. If classics retain their classic status because they stimulate new generations (as Brecht’s comment, quoted at the beginning of this introduction suggests), then what Hirsch would call the “significance” of a Shakespearean text should not be ignored in favour of its “meaning”; instead, we need to keep in mind both. Again, if the interpretation of any text varies from reader to reader, how are we to determine the Hirschean “significance” of a Shakespeare play? Fish’s notion of “interpretive communities” can be useful here. Any text, whether Shakespeare’s or that by any other writer, is bound to be interpreted differently in different social, cultural, and temporal contexts, but although individual readings are likely to differ, there are also going to be some shared interpretive assumptions that define an interpretive community as a community. Moreover, the Hirschean “significance” of a text assumes importance in direct correlation to its classic status. The more “classic” a text is, the more likely it will be reinterpreted (such as in the form of critical commentary or adaptation). In such a case, it is necessary to see how the “meaning” and the “significance” of the text are both related and different. The recovery of both the “meaning” and the “significance” of a text can at best be approximate, but the attempt to do so in the case of texts which have “transcended” their times because of the interpretive investment in them by later generations is necessary.

It is with regard to the distinction between the “meaning” and “significance” of texts that the texts of artistic works are different from other kinds of texts. Let us take the example of, say, marriage banns from Shakespeare’s times: their importance can be determined, among other ways, by deciphering their “meaning” and role in the social proceedings that characterized marriages in Shakespeare’s times. Their importance is
essentially as a means of reconstructing history. On the other hand, it would be almost impossible to unearth their Hirschean “significance,” since future generations have not made any interpretive investment in such texts. The importance of a work of art lies precisely in the variety of readings brought by its readers over time and space, and to try and ascribe a transcendent meaning is to deny the text those attributes that make possible a reading of it as a work of art. Barthes is correct when he says that the play of meaning engendered by a text is a measure of its artistic significance, but I do not agree with him that such play is a feature of language alone (or of the signifying system/s that the work of art in question employs). It is both a function of the text and the reader – hence, the text, its author, and its interpreter (the reader), are all equally significant.

Since interpretations of a text change with time and context, such changes need not be seen as completely subjective and arbitrary, as long as they can be seen as arising out of (or even defining) the social, ideological and cultural context in which the reader is situated and which, in turn, s/he in some ways defines. In other words, in the history of adaptation of Shakespeare, only those adaptations which, in some ways, define or are in the process of defining an “interpretive community” are of critical significance. Such

32 The notion of the “author,” of course, is a contentious issue. Barthes and many other critics have proclaimed the death of the author (and the birth of the reader), arguing that literary texts employ language, a signifying system that already has its well-established and inescapable conventions of usage, and whose meanings cannot (and should not) be confined to authorial intention alone. Such a polemical stance needs to be placed in its proper historical context: at a time when the quest for authorial intention held sway, such an assertion played its salutary role in breaking free from the excessive importance attached to the “author function” and giving the reader greater agency, but like any other polemical stance, it also has its limitations. Generations of readers, critics, and budding artists have detected (and often emulated) their favourite authors’ stylistic fingerprints at many levels, both verbal (such as choice of words, phrases, and imagery) and non-verbal (such as recurrent themes), and it takes a questionable degree of polemical intransigence to deny the presence of stylistic traits in the mature work of a creative artist of repute.
interpretive communities need not exclusively be the official literary institutions of any
given culture, but could develop around different performance traditions as well. How,
then, do we go about theorizing Shakespeare adaptation in the light of the reception of his
works?

The first step should, therefore, be the historicization of the reader, and the
second, the examination of the ways in which reader responses are related to the medium
of presentation, for reception theories could well be used to examine non-verbal texts. By
exploring the cultural and historical contexts in which works were created, theories of
cultural materialism enable us to understand, as far as possible, the ideological context in
which these works were born and what they meant to their first readers. This process of
historicizing the text can also be extended to the “reader” in any given age and place, by
examining the numerous ways through which the “reader” gets to know a text:
translations, performances, adaptations, critical commentaries, classroom teaching, and
so on. I place the word “reader” within quotation marks, for the term has specifically
verbal (and passive) connotations from which I wish to shift away. The process of
reading, whether it is of a text, or a performance, is the first step in the process of
engagement with a work of art. “Reading” itself is an interpretive process, and while it
often stops just at that level, that of the individual making meaning of a text, it can also
generate articulated responses, such as through published criticism of the text, or
translations of it, or even their creation of a new work of art in the wake of the old text.
As a result, an intertextual web is created, in which more readers participate and, in turn,
further enlarge the intertextual web. The further a Shakespeare adaptation is removed in
time and/or space from Shakespeare, the further it is enmeshed in an ever-increasing
intertextual web, and to attempt to link it with only the Shakespearean source is, obviously, pointless.

Since the process of interpreting is inseparable from the process of reading, the process of adaptation (in the widest sense of the term) is equally inseparable from the process of creating something in the wake of a new interpretation. Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier have such a definition in mind in their general introduction to *Adaptations of Shakespeare*:

Adaptation as a material, performing practice can involve both radical rewritings, and a range of directorial and theatrical practices, from the omission or addition of passages (or even scenes) to suit a particular director’s requirements to the creation of a material practice that takes into account the public demand for spectacle. . . . The notion of adaptation (from the Latin *adaptare*, to fit, to make suitable) implies a way of making Shakespeare fit a particular historical moment or social requirement. One of the other ways in which Shakespeare is made fit is through criticism, itself a form of adaptive undertaking by virtue of its intertextual dependence on a source-text. A related area that concerns adaptive practice has to do with how editorial practices that seek to stabilize or destabilize texts literally adapt Shakespeare, making him conform to a particular editorial vision. (17)

Hence, the afterlife of famous literary texts is inextricably linked with the process of adaptation. While personal circumstances differ from one individual reader to another, making each individual’s reading different from another’s, the dynamic interaction between the cultural context in which any reader is situated, and the reader’s relationship to it can be used to “objectify” what Jauss calls the “horizon of expectations” (1553), or
what we could call an “interpretive common ground” at any given point of time in any given culture. For instance, the interpretive possibilities that any audience can bring to a Shakespeare play can be estimated by examining the modes of textual transmission (translation, paratextual material including critical commentary), performance practice, critical responses to Shakespeare and/or the adaptation, and so on. In the case of adaptations, where an individual reader produces a work that reaches out to other readers situated in the same (shared) cultural context, there has to be a balance between the personal and the shared aspects of interpretation, since the adaptation, as product, has to find a place in the interpretive community, or be compelling enough in its individuality to create one. Our attempt to understand the mechanisms by which a later generation (or a different culture) comes to share an interpretive common ground with regard to a text temporally or culturally far removed from its own makes it possible to place the latter interpretation in the history of reception of the original text, and to “[free] the text from the material of the words and [bring] it to a contemporary existence” (Jauss 1552-53), without having recourse to a transcendent, timeless textual essence. Since temporally latter interpretations of any given text will inevitably be different from those by its first interpreters, any attempt to reconcile the two different potentialities of interpretation will obviate the need to come up with a timeless, determinate textual essence which, as I have argued, makes the centering of the reader’s role redundant. However, the potential methodological problem of ascribing interpretive validity to any individual reading, even if it is a “mis”-reading, can be countered by (1) taking into account only those readings

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33 I retain Jauss’s phrase, but interpret it differently – the horizon of expectations changes with interpretive communities from different periods and cultures, just as the horizon itself changes as one travels.
(critical commentary, translations, performances, adaptations and so on) that together define a moment when the original text is being redefined in the light of shared cultural and ideological assumptions at a different time and/or space, and (2) examining both the interrelation and the difference between these different readings, instead of eliding interpretative differences that accrue over time and across space.

It is a valid question to ask whether later readings of a text, if they are demonstrably different from “original” readings, should be considered a part of the reception history of the source-text. The answer is indeed “yes”: the examination of different interpretative traditions opens up ways of understanding how texts are transmitted temporally and spatially; it contributes to our understanding of the mechanisms of cultural transmission and, when texts cross over to different cultures, of aspects of the mechanisms of cultural exchange. An examination of the ways in which different readings of original texts give rise to new works, or prove influential in their own right, and is indeed necessary for understanding the process of reading and interpreting texts, whether they are verbal, visual or musical.34

Margaret Jane Kidnie makes the important point that adaptation theorists tend to assume that there is “a relatively stable distinction between work and adaptation” (4), and goes on to suggest that this is not the case. Writing about theories of theatrical adaptation, she observes: “The peculiar problems associated with an art form that exists

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34 Both critical works and adaptations are influential in this regard. A work like Aimé Césaire’s Une Tempête has transformed our reading of Shakespeare’s play, while Chinua Achebe’s commentary on Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness has changed the ways in which we read the novel. Of course, the writings of Césaire and Achebe are part of, and gave rise to, a larger discursive universe comprising Octave Mannoni, Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, not to mention others. New theoretical paradigms not only give rise to new adaptations of older works, but also affect the critical approaches we take in our readings of these works.
simultaneously in two media – text and performance – are not infrequently glossed over, usually in favour of reading performance as an inherently adaptive strategy” (Kidnie 6). Instead, she argues, it is time to understand things the other way round: there is no objective Shakespearean “work” out there: rather, our notions of the Shakespearean source-text are determined by theatrical productions, adaptations, editorial practices, and so on (7). Kidnie’s argument is important for a number of reasons. For one, it reminds us that some of the theoretical paradigm shifts in adaptation studies are centred on the novel/film debate, and that not all of the theoretical insights pertaining to this debate apply in the case of adaptations involving live performance media. Secondly, Kidnie’s point regarding theatrical adaptation can be extended to other performing arts as well, media that do not reach directly to the “reader” but require interpretive intervention, and hence exist as both text and performance. Novels can be read straight off the page; a film reaches its audiences directly. On the other hand, a play-text is fully realized only in performance, while printed musical notation is so specialized that it almost always requires performers to reach out to its audiences.35 Kidnie’s position, in fact, reinforces in some ways the theoretical assumptions that inform this study: we can never most fully understand the text of a Shakespeare play without some form of interpretive intervention, whether it be a performance, a critical edition, a film, or any other mode of presentation.

35 One can break down these sharp distinctions by arguing that novels can be (and often are) adapted into audiobooks, while plays can be (and often are) read as literature. The emergence of new media has also changed the relationship between a film and its audiences, as the menu on any film DVD attests (e.g., do we watch the fullscreen or widescreen version of a film?). Nevertheless, as long as we keep in mind the primary modes of relationship between these various media and their intended “readers,” Kidnie’s distinctions hold true.
Even New Historicist and cultural materialist approaches “produce” a historically-informed understanding of the Shakespearean text that is always subject to change.

It is, however, possible and indeed useful to maintain a distinction between a work and its later adaptation without ignoring Kidnie’s insight regarding how even the “original” is “produced” in ways analogous to the adaptive process. Both the Shakespearean source and its adaptations are “produced,” and the ways in which these are produced change over time and space. Verdi’s Otello is an adaptation of Shakespeare’s Othello and has its own history of performance and adaptation (and mediated presentation), albeit a less varied one. I also argue that an adaptation is always connected to the ways in which Shakespeare’s own text is “produced” in the receiving culture, either by making the adaptation conform to its cultural codes and ideological assumptions (as in Thomas’s Hamlet, which retain many of French neoclassical features of Ducis’s pioneering French version of the play) or, less frequently, by subverting them (such as Verdi’s Otello which, by and large, goes against the tide of nineteenth-century racialized representations of the title-character).

Adaptation theorists, like reception theorists, have attempted to decentre the text, not as much by placing the reader at the centre of the process of interpretation (although some, like Linda Hutcheon, Robert Stam, and Julie Sanders, have charted new and exciting theoretical ground by doing so), but by questioning the basis for the undue privilege assigned to historically prior, and hence “original,” texts. The most common strategy in this regard is to show that texts regarded as “original” can themselves be seen to be based on, or to echo, prior texts, thus pushing the point of origin further back in time. For example, most adaptation theorists will argue that a canonical text such as
Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is based on historically prior textual sources: François de Belleforest’s *Histoires tragiques* or, even further back in time, the *Historiae Danicae* of Saxo Grammaticus. Hence, to describe Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as the “source” or the “original” for later (and hence, ab initio unoriginal/inferior) adaptations is problematic, for Shakespeare himself is, strictly speaking, not “original.” Such an approach certainly has its merits, especially when it comes to strategically debunking older ways of looking at adaptations, such as through the lenses of fidelity criticism.

What such a theoretical manoeuvre misses out on is showing how “original” texts often make their way into new cultures through a number of intermediate texts that come temporally *after* the “original” text. For example, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* made its way into several European languages (Italian, Spanish and Dutch) in the latter half of the eighteenth century through the 1770 French translation of Jean-François Ducis, which provided the textual basis for further translations into these European languages. Ducis’s 1770 version made significant departures from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, departures that were reflected textually in the translations and dramatic and operatic adaptations based on these translations. From the point of view of textual transmission and the history of reception of *Hamlet*, then, Ducis’s translation, which comes temporally after Shakespeare’s play, is far more significant than Belleforest or Saxo Grammaticus, whose works are among *Hamlet*’s antecedents, and problematizes our quest for the originary. In terms of the analogy of the intertextual web, what this study is concerned with is not the “originary” centre but the ever-expanding patterns of evolution of the web.

Current adaptation theories are mostly unanimous in their rejection of the discourse of fidelity (which privileges historically “prior” texts), and it is time to take that
position as a given. On the other hand, shifting the focus to texts that contribute to the history of reception of canonical texts such as Shakespeare’s plays will enable us to understand better the complex and mediated nature of textual transmission and cultural exchange. Through this shift in temporal and spatial focus, adaptation theory, New Historicism, and reception theory can be brought together to examine the ways by which texts are transmitted through time or across cultures, how and why the “meaning” of any text gets altered in later times and different social settings, and why these new meanings, even when they depart from historically prior meanings of a text, are nonetheless inseparable from the history of the text’s reception.

The topic of textual transmission brings up a related question: why are certain texts read and reinterpreted over and over again by readers while others are not? One possible answer lies in Brecht’s suggestion that only those classics survive that can stimulate a range of new readings and, by extension, adaptations. The more stimulating the text, the more likely it is to have a rich history of critical commentary and of adaptations. Witness all the plays discussed in this study.

Shakespeare’s plays provide an ideal starting-point for understanding the mechanisms of cultural exchange, since Shakespeare’s global spread has been, for a variety of reasons, greater than that of any other author; and, as Julie Hankey has observed, any of his plays “is its perception at any given time” (12). In my study of Shakespeare adaptations, therefore, I will first examine how different generations and cultures have made significant interpretive investments in the plays I have selected. I shall then examine how adaptations, the visible textual traces of such investment, tell Shakespeare’s plays differently, creating new interpretive paradigms (or what Hirsch
would call “significance”). I shall move on to compare and contrast the potentialities of interpretation of the plays available to Shakespeare and his audiences with those potentialities of interpretation available to different interpretative communities in France, Italy, and India, through the adaptations selected in this study. Why do different communities across the world come up with different interpretations of Shakespeare’s texts, even when they read the same play? How are these different readings tied up to the ways in which global communities came into contact with their Shakespeare? As I shall show in my discussions, analyzes of Shakespeare’s reception, Shakespeare interpretation, and Shakespeare adaptation are, in fact, inseparable from one another.

Overview of this Study

The introduction followed by three other chapters are written them with a view to examine (1) the imbrications among political, cultural and ideological factors that shape the patterns of individual adaptations as well as a history of adaptations in any given culture; (2) the relationship between the medium of adaptation and the nature of indigenization; (3) the ways in which adapters deploy (or depart from) Shakespeare’s texts in the process of adaptation, creating new readings of the plays; and (4) the ways in which the creation of these new readings alters our perception of the original plays.

I have chosen to focus on nineteenth-century European operas and twentieth-century Indian films for a number of reasons. Of all the media into which Shakespeare was adapted in the nineteenth century, operatic adaptations have continued to survive in performance well into the twenty-first century. True, only a handful of them are performed with any regularity, and when they are, modern productions often change the
mise-en-scène of nineteenth-century productions. Yet the music and the libretto are hardly ever altered (except for abbreviation in performances of some of the operas). In addition, original stage directions can be recovered from scores, *disposizioni sceniche* and the like and so can act as a scholarly point of reference. Moreover, considerable relevant paratextual material from the nineteenth century onwards is available in the case of European adaptations: we have a good idea of the processes of textual transmission of Shakespeare’s texts leading to their operatic adaptations, of Shakespeare criticism which the operatic adapters either incorporated or opposed, of the ways in which operas drew on performance conventions of the spoken drama and incorporated them into their own well-established conventions, and of critical response to these adaptations through newspaper reports and critiques. In short, we have both relatively stable texts as products of adaptation and enough paratextual information to recover the processes by which the adaptations came into existence, thereby enabling us to understand how performative transculturation occurred.

Present-day adaptations of Shakespeare from India continue a tradition that began in the same period, the nineteenth century. An examination of Shakespeare’s reception history in India in that century shows both the strengths and the limitations of theoretical paradigms derived from Foucault, such as Homi Bhabha’s concept of colonial mimicry (239-41). Focussing on Shakespeare’s reception in Bombay (now Mumbai) and Calcutta (now Kolkata), I show that traditionally accepted binaristic differences between Westernized-progressive and traditional-regressive, or élite and subaltern, do not quite

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36 In contrast, nineteenth-century theatrical productions have not come down to us in any forms except oral or written-down records; moreover, such productions do not get revived in the present day.
hold when it comes to the ways in which Shakespeare was encountered in India. Despite
their English education, the Bombay-based Parsi élite led the way towards a complete
indigenization of Shakespeare through performative transculturation. On the other hand,
theatre directors from Calcutta adopted a wide range of adaptive strategies, ranging from
this kind of performative transculturation to those that stayed closer to Shakespeare’s
texts and contemporary British performance traditions (such as Girish Ghosh’s Bengali
Macbeth). Again, a Sanskrit scholar like Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar showed a deep
engagement with Western social and cultural mores, which found manifestation in his
pioneering work as a social reformer (he was successful in initiating widow remarriage in
Bengal) and in his influential work as a Shakespeare translator. Although no single
language or performance tradition within India played as important a role as did French
translations of and commentaries on Shakespeare in Europe, Vidyasagar’s adaptation of
The Comedy of Errors was further translated into other Indian languages and made
translators and adapters self-conscious about their adaptive strategies, as I show in
Chapter 3. Such a past accounts for the facts that binaristic distinctions between the East
and the West that still form the basis of postcolonial adaptations of Shakespeare can
provide only a limited perspective on the actual complexity of the responses to
Shakespeare from the nineteenth century onward, and that such binaristic distinctions are
often not encountered in adaptations themselves. By extension, my methodology suggests
that the grafting of popular political paradigms onto specific regions, such as Communist
suppression with regard to Eastern European productions, or a simplistic binarism
characteristic of many postcolonial studies, can account for only a part of an engagement
between different cultures, and that the multiple perspectives that my model takes into account can help present a more nuanced picture of cultural exchange.

It is because of my examination of both Europe and India in the light of a common methodological approach, and my focus on opera and film among performance modes (rather than theatre), that my study of cross-cultural adaptations of Shakespeare differs from much that has been published in the field. Because of the rich performance history of Shakespeare’s reception in England itself, many studies of Shakespeare adaptations focus on England or America, either chronologically (Jonathan Bate and Russell Jackson, Gary Taylor, Michael Bristol) or on a particular period of critical significance (Jean Marsden), or on the way Shakespeare has been appropriated into Anglo-American mass culture (Graham Holderness, Richard Burt, Barbara Hodgdon). On the other hand, some of the first collections of essays that attempted to place Shakespeare’s reception in an international context focused either on Europe (Dirk Delabastita, Zdeněk Stříbrný, et al.) or, when the focus was ostensibly wider, betrayed a Euro-Anglocentrism that limited the scope of the books (Dennis Kennedy, Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer). Notable exceptions in this regard are Sukanta Chaudhuri’s and Chee Seng Lim’s Shakespeare without English, which focuses primarily on theatre, and John Russell Brown’s New Sites for Shakespeare, which examines parallels between performance conditions in Elizabethan England and folk theatres in Asian countries. On the other hand, collections like Post-Colonial Shakespeares edited by Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin started moving away from the East-West binary that had for so long characterized much of the literature in this field, but still made a distinction between postcolonial and other Shakespeares when, in fact, my approach reveals certain common
features in the process of performative transculturation. All these studies, as well as others such as *Shakespeare and Cultural Traditions: The Selected Proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress, Tokyo, 1991*, are collections of individual essays. While these essays reflect the academic expertise of the contributors in these areas, the lack of an overarching methodological approach for the whole makes it difficult to relate each essay with the others.

Not surprisingly, in-depth studies of Shakespeare’s reception in a single country (e.g., Werner Habicht, Poonam Trivedi and Dennis Bartholomeusz, Minoru Fujita and Leonard Pronko, Tetsuo Kishi and David Bradshaw), or Shakespeare adaptations in a particular genre (opera, film, or novel, for instance) have provided fresh insights into the mechanisms of cross-cultural and intermedial adaptation (see Bryan Gooch, Daniel Albright, Russell Jackson, Robert Stam, Julie Sanders et al.). There is also a substantial literature that studies Shakespeare adaptations from feminist, Marxist and other critical perspectives. My overview here is not exhaustive, given the wide range of work done with regard to Shakespeare’s afterlife, but it does locate the principal critical works done in this field, and where within this field my work is situated.

The first of my chapters is on Ambroise Thomas’ *Hamlet* (1868), an opera whose significance in the nineteenth-century performance history of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is only gradually being recognized,\(^{37}\) and which is representative of a number of features shared by most European adaptations of Shakespeare into opera: their derivation not from Shakespeare’s own texts, but from translations made for theatrical performance in French

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\(^{37}\) This is taking place through more frequent performances, recordings and critical commentaries (including a discussion of the opera in the introduction to the Arden 3 edition of *Hamlet*).
and other local languages; the imbrications between local theatrical and operatic performance practice; the influence of continental criticism, and so on. In my analysis of the opera, therefore, I have examined the opera’s relationship to French translations of *Hamlet*, to French and English criticism on Shakespeare, to French theatrical and operatic traditions, to nineteenth-century theatrical performances of *Hamlet* in England and France, and to issues pertaining to intermedial adaptation from drama to opera. Finally, I discuss how the representation of Ophelia in the opera marks an important point in the representation of the character, both tying in with nineteenth-century representations of her and anticipating the emphasis placed on the Hamlet-Ophelia relationship in later productions and critical commentaries on *Hamlet*.

In my next chapter, on Verdi’s opera *Otello*, I begin by examining the special place of Shakespeare’s *Othello* in the history of nineteenth-century Italian theatre. I then analyze how the opera eschews, for the most part, racist readings of the title character, and instead incorporates the discourse of religious Otherness that is also present in Shakespeare’s play. This discourse is becoming increasingly important at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and present-day audiences are likely to interpret the play along new lines. I go on to discuss how the opera’s librettist, Arrigo Boito, kept in mind the subtleties of psychological characterization in Shakespeare, producing a libretto whose focus on the interiority of the characters furthered the development of opera along new lines. The score for the opera by Verdi, who was at the time already one of the acknowledged giants of opera, is one of his best, making *Otello* unique among operas based on Shakespearean tragedy. As an adaptation, Verdi’s *Otello* points towards the development of the *Literaturopier* of Debussy, Berg and Janáček, in which literary texts
came to be set verbatim to music (some abbreviation apart). The development of the
*Literaturoper* can, therefore, be traced back, via Verdi’s opera, to Shakespeare’s cultural
capital, and the paradigm shift it caused in the ways musicians and librettists started
adapting literary texts in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

In the fourth chapter, I analyze the various strands of Shakespeare’s reception and
adaptation in the Indian subcontinent from the nineteenth century onwards. In particular,
I examine the role of the nineteenth-century Parsi theatre, which played a vital role in
introducing Shakespeare to audiences in South Asia and elsewhere, both through tours
and, in its last days, through the newly-emergent medium of film. I then go on to examine
how the tradition of what I am calling performative transculturation is continued by some
Bhardwaj. These films were made in the wake of a number of Shakespeare-based films
that emerged in the 1990s, led by Kenneth Branagh’s popular Shakespeare adaptations,
and directors like Bhardwaj, keeping international audiences in mind, imaginatively
incorporate local traditions, both theatrical and cinematic, into a weave of intertextual
quotations from other, non-Indian films, in the process of adaptation.

My study, therefore, argues that, despite the different political and cultural
conditions in which European and Indian encounters with Shakespeare’s works have
taken place, there are some underlying similarities in the ways in which Shakespeare has
been received and adapted in Europe and India, similarities that become clearer once we
start examining the ways in which Shakespeare’s plays influenced, and were influenced
by, the cultural traditions of the receiving cultures into which they made their way from
the nineteenth century onwards. The study of the complex relationships connecting
Shakespeare to the myriad adaptations of his plays over time and across different cultures thus opens up fresh ways to reconceive the dynamics of cross-cultural engagements with Shakespeare’s works.
Chapter 1: Shakespeare’s Reception in France: The Case of Ambroise Thomas’s Hamlet

The reception of Shakespeare in Europe is intimately tied up with translations, adaptations and criticism of his play Hamlet, whose eponymous protagonist, by the mid-nineteenth century, “had begun his ascent to the pantheon of cultural icons . . . like Don Quixote and Faust” (Hapgood 22). What were the channels through which Shakespeare’s play reached other countries in Europe, and in what forms did it reach these countries? How did his play alter, or how was it altered by, theatrical traditions in European countries in which it was performed for the first time, centuries after its first performances in England?

While German commentators produced a valuable body of translations of and criticism on Shakespeare in general and Hamlet in particular, it was a French version that provided the basis for subsequent first translations of Hamlet into several European languages: Italian (1772), Spanish (1772), and Dutch (1777), as well as Swedish and Russian (Heylen 28-9). This was the Hamlet (1770) by Jean-François Ducis (1733-1816). The word “version” needs to be used with caution here, for Ducis, in an attempt to make Hamlet performable at the Comédie Française, made radical changes to Shakespeare’s plot and language, such that his version conformed to the strict neoclassical rules of the Académie Française. Ducis’s version was last performed by the Comédie Française in 1851.

Although Ducis’s Hamlet is not performed anymore, it generated a number of other French translations (some of them much closer to Shakespeare) as well as
adaptations. Of particular importance is the *Hamlet* (1847) by Alexandre Dumas père (1802-70) and Paul Meurice (1818-1905), which, like the version by Ducis, also underwent continual revision, and was last performed in 1932 (Heylen 60). Both the Ducis and Dumas-Meurice versions provided the basis for the operatic *Hamlet* (first performed in 1868) by the composer Ambroise Thomas (1811-96) and his librettists Jules Barbier (1825-1901) and Michel Carré (1822-72). It remains the only operatic adaptation of *Hamlet* to have survived, even if its own performance history has had its ups and downs.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the various interpretive communities that translated, adapted, and produced critical commentaries on Shakespeare in Europe from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards can be broadly divided into two categories. The first attempted to adapt Shakespeare such that his works conformed to French neoclassical aesthetics, while the other used Shakespeare as a means to move away from the same aesthetics. The second group, in which we could place opera composers like Berlioz and Verdi, have proven to be more influential in the long run, but in their day, they and their counterparts in the other arts (such as Victor Hugo, Alessandro Manzoni, and Eugène Delacroix) defined the exception rather than the norm when it came to Shakespeare: their readiness to celebrate Shakespeare’s mixing of different generic elements was by no means shared by all of nineteenth-century Europe. Understandably, critical attention has generally focused on this second interpretive community among Shakespeare adapters, but the first in some ways defined the norm for Shakespeare adaptation, at least in the initial stages. As I shall argue in this chapter, Thomas’s *Hamlet* is one of those Shakespeare adaptations that attempted to combine the
neoclassical tenets popular in France with a more Romantic conception of the play, and its significance for the purposes of this study arises from the fact that the opera reflects the tendency of the composer and his librettists to work within the limits imposed by contemporary generic, aesthetic, and critical paradigms. In this regard, Thomas’s *Hamlet* is closer to Rossini’s *Otello*, another work based on a Ducis version of Shakespeare in which neoclassical dramatic conventions coexist with elements of musical Romanticism. The significance of Thomas’s *Hamlet*, therefore, lies not in its “radical” nature (for which one has to turn to a Berlioz, a Verdi, or a Wagner), but precisely in the very opposite: works like it defined the norm against which we can measure the exception. We should, however, remember that although the Shakespeare-based operas of Thomas and Rossini do not overtly break away from convention, they are by no means run-of-the-mill either, as the successful revival of these works in recent years indicates. Indeed, I argue that Thomas’s *Hamlet* is an important adaptation of Shakespeare’s play – perhaps the only one from the nineteenth century that in some ways anticipated some of the twentieth-century readings of the play, while having its own performance history that continues to the present day. A study of the opera, therefore, illuminates several issues related to Shakespeare’s reception in Europe (and, more specifically, France), as well as those related to operatic adaptation.

Thomas’s opera, if not as frequently performed as some other operatic adaptations of Shakespeare such as those by Giuseppe Verdi, has had a mixed critical reception: praised by some, panned by others adhering to a discourse of fidelity that informed and
still informs much adaptation criticism, the opera was popular till the end of World War I, after which it disappeared almost completely from the operatic stage. However, from the 1980s onwards, it has come to be performed and recorded with increasing frequency in various opera houses in Europe, North America and Australia. The reasons behind the opera’s mixed reception history shed light on the ways in which music criticism and changing attitudes towards adaptations, especially those of a canonical author such as Shakespeare, directly affect the performance histories of operas based on Shakespeare plays. Verdi’s operas are central to the operatic repertoire, and Othello and Falstaff are among the greatest works belonging to his oeuvre. As a result, his operatic Macbeth, a comparatively more conventional work, gets regularly performed because of the cultural capital of the Verdi operatic canon. In contrast, Thomas left only one other work that is performed with any regularity, the opera Mignon, based on Goethe’s Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre. The survival of Thomas’s operas in the repertoire is, therefore, more dependent on changes in operatic fashions and to critical opinion than those of canonical composers like Verdi.

1 In this regard, it is interesting to note that the opposing pulls of a discourse of fidelity to the source play, on the one hand, and exigencies of intermedial adaptation, on the other, affected nineteenth-century operatic composers as well. For a discussion of the ways in which this opposition informs Verdi’s comments and compositional practice in his opera Macbeth, see Clausen, Macbeth 17-20.

2 The two exceptions in this regard are the mad scene for Ophélie in Act 4 (a favourite with sopranos) and, occasionally, Hamlet’s drinking song, from Act 2. During its post-World War I slump in popularity, it was kept alive, if only on the fringes of the repertory, by exponents of the title role – French baritones such as Victor Maurel, Jean Lassalle and Maurice Renaud, as well as the Italians Titta Ruffo and Mattia Battistini. Its present-day relative popularity too has to do with the championing of the work by a number of distinguished baritones, such as Sherrill Milnes, Thomas Hampson and Thomas Allen, as well as the increasing production of operas outside the traditional canon, the reasons for which I discuss later in this chapter.
In this chapter, I shall first trace the critical and performance traditions of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in France, focusing on the adaptations by Ducis and Dumas-Meurice, adaptations on which the opera itself is based, and their relationship to contemporary French drama. Next, I will examine how performative transculturation takes place by studying the ways in which adapters altered Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to align it with contemporary developments in French theatrical traditions while, at the same time, using Shakespeare’s increasing cultural capital as the basis for making reforms in French drama. I shall also examine performative transculturation at the intermedial level by analysing how the process of adaptation from spoken drama to sung drama affects the structure and content of Thomas’s *Hamlet*. In particular, I shall focus on Ophélie’s mad scene from the opera for its gendering of madness, a subject that Elaine Showalter discusses in her study of representations of Ophelia, and argue that the medium of opera “envoices” Ophélie in a way that makes the opera an important landmark in what Showalter calls Ophelia’s own history, the history of her representation (116). Finally, I shall account for the opera’s revival by studying how, in the late 1980s, changing critical approaches towards adaptations, coupled with a spate of adaptations of Shakespeare on film as well as increasing performances and recordings of operas outside the traditional canon, paved the way for the revival of Thomas’s *Hamlet*.

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3 The term is taken from Carolyn Abbate (225).

4 For example, Ophélie’s mad scene from Thomas’ *Hamlet* is discussed by Thompson and Taylor in the latest Arden edition of *Hamlet* (2006).
Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: A Brief Performance History

“Since adaptations engage the discursive energies of their time, they become a barometer of the ideological trends circulating during the moment of production,” writes Robert Stam with respect to film adaptations (45), but the comment holds true of adaptations more generally, including those by Shakespeare himself. Shakespeare took up the genre of revenge tragedy, which had been in vogue some time before the composition of *Hamlet*, most notably in Thomas Kyd’s *A Spanish Tragedy* (1587-9), and profoundly enriched it, capitalizing on his leading actor Richard Burbage’s skill in “transforming himself into his part” (Hapgood 9). The story of *Hamlet* itself changed as it passed through several hands, from the *Historiae Danicae* of Saxo Grammaticus through François de Belleforest’s *Histoires tragiques* (first published in 1570) and the anonymous *Ur-Hamlet* to Shakespeare. In the case of *Hamlet*, the presence of the First and Second Quartos (Q1, 1603; Q2, 1604-5), and the First Folio (F, 1623), and the textual differences between them, have problematized the notion of a stable source text, making adaptational “fidelity” to Shakespeare well nigh impossible. Consequently, performances of the play have been based on, broadly speaking, two textual approaches. The first, in which an abridged text was performed with individual variations, was popular practice in the theatre from the Restoration to the end of the nineteenth century. In the second approach, prevalent in modern productions, a conflated text has either been performed in full or has been trimmed to the desired running time and the director’s interpretative emphases (Hapgood 7-8).

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5 This overview is based on Hapgood 1-96.

6 For an overview of these changes, see Hibbard 6-14.
Although *Hamlet* in performance did not undergo much textual modification from the Restoration to the end of the nineteenth century, it nevertheless underwent considerable textual abridgement. Many scenes and characters were regularly omitted. For example, in the nineteenth century, even in England, Fortinbras was almost always left out altogether, and when Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson reinstated Shakespeare’s original ending at the urging of Bernard Shaw, it was a major innovation in the play’s performance history. Several speeches, some of them belonging to Hamlet, were also regularly omitted. Some of the changes can be linked to changing performing practices: for example, the Restoration saw both women actors tackling the parts of Gertrude and Ophelia, as well as the bowdlerization, so to speak, of parts of *Hamlet*. More importantly, as women rather than boys started performing Shakespeare’s female roles, they “created new meanings and subversive tensions in these roles . . . perhaps most importantly with Ophelia” (Showalter 116).

Changes in performance conditions were crucial in shaping critical responses. The apron stage of the Elizabethans was replaced in the Restoration and the eighteenth century by the proscenium arch; consequently, scene changes interrupted the flow of the action, and individual speeches and scenes became more prominent, leading Restoration and eighteenth-century commentators to be “primarily concerned with how the leading actor rendered particular speeches and scenes rather than with his overarching interpretative approach” (Hapgood 18). The Shakespearean text itself encouraged a different kind of engagement with the play, where a character’s consistency of behaviour in the course of the entire play was of crucial importance, and in the latter part of the eighteenth century, literary critics would engage increasingly in “character analysis,” the
emphasis being on the “careful differentiation of what is individual about Shakespeare’s characters and appraising the consistency with which this individuality is rendered” (Hapgood 18-19). The proscenium stage was, therefore, instrumental in effecting a growing gap between a text-based analysis of Shakespeare, on the one hand, and a performance-based approach, on the other – a cleavage that led Goethe in his article “Shakespeare und kein Ende” (1815) to declare that Shakespeare “belongs by necessity in the annals of poetry” and that “in the annals of the theatre he appears only by accident” (qtd. Bate, Romantics 76). With respect to English critics, Jonathan Bate neatly sums up the situation:

When Coleridge said that watching Edmund Kean act was “like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning,” he meant that Kean could only illuminate certain striking moments in a play – an understanding of the overall idea of it was dependent on the insights of the critic in his study or lecture room. (Jackson and Bate 93, emphasis in the original)

Because of the valorization of the verbal (logophilia) and the prejudice against visual representation (iconophobia) in Western culture (Stam 5-7), principles of textual criticism would often inform reviews of performances of Shakespeare in the nineteenth century. The reservations about Shakespeare as drama was even greater in the case of opera in a foreign tongue, where textual simplification and abridgement of a translated text were put to the service of a highly artificial mode of performance, with its own conventions of representation. However, the importance of live performance media, such as drama and opera, in popularizing Shakespeare can hardly be ignored, especially when their reach
and nature of influence was so very different from that of Shakespeare in print. Indeed, although opera and theatre have different dramaturgies, there are also convergences that enable creators of operatic adaptations to draw upon contemporary theatrical performance traditions when making their own operas. Thomas’s *Hamlet* is a case in point. To examine how Thomas, Barbier and Carré came to make their own adaptation of *Hamlet*, we need to consider the reception history of Shakespeare in France, through translations, performances and the critical responses to his plays.

**Hamlet in France**

A cross-cultural adaptation of a dramatist like Shakespeare arises from the transculturation of his work in the new (receiving) culture. To understand the process of transculturation, it is important to first study the critical context in which Shakespeare’s works were first received, and translations of his works, since translation – adaptation at the verbal level – precedes theatrical or operatic adaptation. Translation, according to Romy Heylen, is a teleological activity (24). Even before beginning to work on a translation, the translator has to keep in mind the objectives behind the translation. Heylen, therefore, classifies translation according to three categories: those in which the translator adheres to the cultural codes informing the source culture, thereby avoiding the attempt to transculturate the original work; those that negotiate and introduce a cultural compromise between the source and receiving cultures; and finally, those in which the translator adheres to the cultural codes informing the receiving culture, in which case the “translated original may or may not attain a canonized position or stay on the periphery

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7 Editorial principles have also changed dramatically from the publication of the First Folio to the present day. For a brief overview, see Maguire 582-94.
of the receiving culture” (24). Determining the cultural and socio-historical conditions behind a translator’s activity “offers a clearer insight into the mechanisms that allow translations to function in the receiving culture” (Heylen 25), as well as those of cross-cultural adaptations that take a particular translation, or translations, as their starting point. Similarly, the adapter, like the translator, also has to pitch the adaptation keeping in mind audiences as well as the representational conventions of the medium of the adapted product (Hutcheon 141). As we shall see, in the case of French translations of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, an awareness of the cultural and socio-historical conditions shows how intricately the various translations of *Hamlet* – and, by extension, theatrical and operatic adaptations based on these translations – mirror the different stages of Shakespeare’s reception by the French artistic and critical establishment.

It appears that there was little knowledge of Shakespeare in France before the eighteenth century, and it was principally Voltaire who, with his adaptation of *Julius Caesar*, translations of excerpts of some other plays of Shakespeare, and critical writings, first popularized Shakespeare in France. Voltaire’s love-hate relationship with Shakespeare is well documented (for example, Monaco 6 ff; Bailey 12 ff), but a few points may be emphasized. First, many contemporary English commentators also shared some of Voltaire’s reservations about Shakespeare, based on their acceptance of French

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8 For an overview of the reception history of Shakespeare in France in the eighteenth century, see Monaco 3ff.

9 See, for example, the comments of Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury: “Notwithstanding his [Shakespeare’s] natural rudeness, his unpolished style, his antiquated phrase and wit, his want of method and coherence, and his deficiency in almost all the graces and ornaments of this kind of writing, yet by the justness of his moral, and the aptness of his many descriptions, and the plain and natural turn of several
neoclassical ideas (Monaco 7); therefore, Voltaire was not exaggerating by much when he claimed that the English “saw as well as I the boorishness of their favourite author; but they sensed better than I his beauties which are all the more singular for being flashes which shine in the deepest of nights” (6). The qualified praise that he bestowed on Shakespeare in the same year, 1728, set the ground for Shakespeare’s initial popularity in France:

. . . [T]he inventive genius: he cuts a path for himself where no one has walked before; he runs without guide, art or rules; he gets lost in his course, but he leaves far behind him everything which has to do only with reason and exactness. So with Homer: he created his art and left it unperfected; it is still chaotic; but light glitters there from the very start and from every side. (6)

It was when Pierre Le Tourneur (1736-88), an influential translator of Shakespeare, suggested the English playwright as a model for real tragedy that Voltaire saw him as a real threat to French dramatic traditions:

What is frightful is that this monster has support in France; and, as the height of calamity and horror, it was I who in the past first spoke of this Shakespeare; it was I who was the first to point out to Frenchmen the few pearls that were to be found in this enormous dunghill. It never entered my mind that by doing so I would one day help the effort to trample on the crowns of Racine and Corneille.

(Letter to the Comte d’Argental, July 1776; qtd. in Voltaire 10)

Voltaire’s championing of Shakespeare from the late 1720s had already left its mark, however, and French adapters started quarrying Shakespeare for material, focusing in of his characters he pleases his audience, and often gains their ear without a single bribe from luxury or vice” (“Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author,” qtd. in McEvoy 42).
particular on the comedies. It was only with the Shakespeare translations by Le Tourneur and Pierre-Antoine de La Place (1707-93), and David Garrick’s extremely influential visits to Paris (1751, 1763 and 1765), that staged adaptations of the tragedies came to be produced.

The first of these was Ducis’s _Hamlet_. Ducis, who knew no English, based his version on the translation of the play by La Place, and, as noted earlier, his aim was to adapt Shakespeare’s play so that it conformed completely to the conventions of the receiving culture – the world of French theatre (Bailey 14). In a letter to Garrick, Ducis acknowledged that his aim was not so much to translate Shakespeare’s tragedy as to “create an interesting role for the queen who kills a king, her husband; and especially, to portray in Hamlet’s pure and melancholy soul a model of _filial love_” (14 April 1769, qtd. in Bailey 14; italics mine). Gertrude’s role was, therefore, much greater than Hamlet’s

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10 La Place’s _Le Théâtre anglois_ (1745) contained translations of what he considered the most striking scenes of _Hamlet_ and nine other Shakespearean plays; in each of the plays, the translations of these scenes were linked together by means of plot synopses (Heylen 26). Since these translations were not meant to be enacted, La Place could include onstage violence (swordfight, murder), as well as the supernatural element that could not be represented on the contemporary French stage. Moreover, Shakespeare’s blank verse became Racinian alexandrines in La Place’s hands.

11 Both Hector Berlioz’s symphony _Roméo et Juliette_ (1847) and Charles-François Gounod’s opera of the same name (1867) are based on Garrick’s version of the play (1750).

12 My overview is based on Bailey (1-23) and Heylen (26-44); Bailey’s book provides the fullest account of all the various French translations and adaptations of and works inspired by Shakespeare’s _Hamlet_ from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth. On Ducis’s adaptation, see also Monaco 69-83, and Raby 43-56.

13 Heylen has argued that this _tendresse filiale_ is a popular sentiment in the genre of bourgeois drama that was developing around this time, and that Ducis was attempting to bring elements of this genre into the overall framework of neoclassical French tragedy (36-41).
and just as important, as a result of certain changes in the plot. Heylen has gone so far as to suggest that Ducis’s 1770 version of Hamlet has, effectively, a different plot, as well as altered relationships between the principal protagonists, and pays heed to neoclassical considerations such as the unities of time and place (30).

In this version, Claudius, a nobleman wronged by Hamlet’s father, plots with Gertrude to kill the king. A willful accomplice in King Hamlet’s murder, she had, nevertheless, repented at the last moment and tried to warn Hamlet’s father of the impending danger to his life; after his murder, she acts as regent until the time Hamlet recovers from his mysterious madness. She has agency enough to defy Claudius, but her one singular thought is to make up for her crime and devote the rest of her life to Hamlet. By the end of the play, however, she is killed, as is Claudius, and Hamlet is crowned king. Such an ending was meant to “please an audience who expected tragedy to uphold virtue and draw a moral lesson” (Bailey 15). Gertrude’s adultery and role in the murder, as well as Hamlet’s accusation of Claudius, lack the ambiguity of their representation in Shakespeare’s play, because French drama of the time required clarity of motive behind the protagonists’ actions.

14 This is why it is open to question whether Ducis’s version should be regarded as an adaptation at all. I have addressed this question more fully earlier in the section on Adaptations and Appropriations in the Introduction.

15 Philip Edwards, however, argues that the following lines from Shakespeare’s play “unmistakably that the two [Claudius and Gertrude] had sexual relations before King Hamlet’s death” (Shakespeare, Hamlet 119, n. 46):

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,  
With witchcraft of his wits, with traitorous gifts –  
O wicked wit and gifts that have the power  
So to seduce – won to his shameful lust  
The will of my most seeming virtuous queen. (1.5.42-6)
Among the several changes, the cast is reduced to only seven characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Fortinbras and, surprisingly, Laertes being among those omitted; the Ghost of King Hamlet never appears onstage (he appears only in Hamlet’s mind), a decision Ducis regretted making, but felt compelled to do on account of French theatrical conventions of the time.\textsuperscript{16} Although Polonius, who becomes a co-conspirator with Claudius, is present, Ophelia becomes Claudius’s daughter, and she lives till the end. In presenting Hamlet as torn between love and duty, Ducis was bringing his adaptation in line with those of Pierre Corneille (Monaco 69), some of whose plays, such as \textit{Polyeucte} (1643), feature male protagonists faced with similar internal conflicts. The focus on family rather than politics, the observance of the unities of time and place, the hero torn between love and duty – all these features made Ducis’s \textit{Hamlet} very different from Shakespeare’s, but it also made the name of the play familiar to French theatregoers, aroused interest in Shakespeare, and made it possible for later generations to produce versions of \textit{Hamlet} that stayed closer to Shakespeare in terms of plot.

Two of Ducis’s changes made way, via the Dumas-Meurice adaptation, into Thomas’s opera: a tender scene between Hamlet and Ophelia at the end of Act 1 in Ducis’s version, and a dénouement that lets Hamlet live. (Thomas and his librettists, who clearly wanted their \textit{Hamlet} to relate to theatrical performances of Shakespeare, restored the tragic ending for a planned production at Covent Garden.) Another element of Ducis’s plot was modified by Thomas’s librettists, Barbier and Carré: in the opera, Polonius is a co-conspirator, as he is in Ducis, but Ophélie remains Polonius’s daughter, Nevertheless, his treatment of the supernatural came in for criticism: some, like Voltaire, thought the use of the supernatural element excessive, while others thought that making the Ghost visible to the spectators would have added clarity to Hamlet’s agitation and confused state of mind (Monaco 72-3).
as in Shakespeare, and it is Hamlet’s shocked discovery of Polonius as a co-conspirator that leads him to repudiate Ophélie.

If the Ducis, Dumas-Meurice and Thomas versions of *Hamlet* share a common interest in spectacle, a matter I shall discuss later in this chapter, there is another aspect of Hamlet that is common to both the versions by Ducis and Thomas. In neither version is Hamlet mad: he does not put on an “antic disposition” (1.5.173). Rather, he is sombre and lachrymose for the most part, as is the case with heroes of bourgeois dramas and Romantic heroes such as Chateaubriand’s René, whom he anticipates. Heylen has argued that Ducis’s Hamlet is a forerunner of the sentimental hero of bourgeois drama, represented by the works of dramatists like Diderot and Saurin (37), and that Ducis used his translation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in order to introduce a new French theatrical model, the bourgeois drama, into the precincts of the more conservative and elite Comédie Française, by cloaking his *Hamlet* in neoclassical garb (28). Ducis, then, alters Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in order to make it conform to neoclassical principles; at the same time, he also uses Shakespeare’s cultural capital as a means of effecting changes in French theatre.

Unlike Ducis, Le Tourneur in his prose translations (1776-83) stays much closer to the Shakespearean texts: his *Hamlet* (1779) restores, among others, the gravediggers (who were left out in Ducis) and the original tragic ending. Le Tourneur, who knew

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17 Both Bailey (69) and Peter Raby (188-9) state that while unlike Victor Hugo, who responded, among other things, to the language of Shakespeare’s plays, Dumas was more responsive to some of the “external effects” of Shakespeare.

18 Despite Voltaire’s volte-face in the 1770s regarding the merits of Shakespeare, the latter remained more commonly performed at the Comédie Française than any other eighteenth-century playwright, Voltaire himself excepted (Heylen 35), with 203 performances of *Hamlet* alone, in Ducis’ version (McMahon 15).
English well, left out only those passages where he felt the words were too vulgar for French tastes, or where the wordplay was too complicated; such passages were explained in his notes. It was Le Tourneur’s ability to negotiate successfully a cultural compromise between the source and receiving cultures in his translations that ensured their popularity, despite Voltaire’s later hostility towards Shakespeare. Significantly, Le Tourneur’s translations were meant for a reading public. It appears from the differences between Ducis, who intended his version of *Hamlet* to be performed, and Le Tourneur, whose translation of *Hamlet* was meant for readers, that in France, it was easier for translators to negotiate a cultural compromise between the source and receiving cultures, while it was more difficult for adapters for the theatre or the opera to make a similar compromise – they needed to transculturate their products more thoroughly in terms of the conventions of the receiving (i.e., French) culture. Given the higher financial risks of mounting productions, as well as the well-entrenched conventions of genre, form and performance in the theatre and the opera house, adaptations of Shakespeare for live performance required the adapters to adhere more to the cultural codes informing the receiving culture rather than those of the source culture. Therefore, when Dumas and Meurice made their version of *Hamlet*, they incorporated elements from the Ducis translation, even though Dumas admired Le Tourneur’s translation and knew it almost by heart (Bailey 69).

This is not to assume that the conditions of reception, or that theatrical or operatic conventions are themselves ahistorical, and therefore immutable. If Garrick’s visits to France facilitated the reception of Shakespeare’s tragedies, Charles Kemble’s Paris debut in 1827, with an English troupe, stunned French audiences, which included Dumas, Berlioz, and Victor Hugo; thus Shakespeare proved a major source of inspiration to the
French Romantics. But their engagement with Shakespeare was quite different from that of Ducis’s generation. Dumas remarked that “it was the first time I saw in the theatre real passions, giving life to men and women of flesh and blood” (qtd. in Showalter 119).

Berlioz summed up the Romantic reaction to Shakespeare when he explicitly pitted Shakespeare against neoclassicism: “I had to acknowledge the only dramatic truth . . . I could at the same time gauge . . . the pitiable narrowness of our old poetics, decreed by pedagogues and obscurantist monks” (qtd. in Barzun 67; emphasis mine). The Romantic response to Shakespeare is reflected not only in Berlioz’s Shakespeare-inspired works, but also in the paintings of Eugène Delacroix and plays such as Alfred de Musset’s Lorenzaccio (1834) and Alfred de Vigny’s Chatterton (1835). Delacroix painted many of the play’s scenes that had offended the neo-classicists, such as the Ghost

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19 Inspired by Harriet Smithson, the Ophelia in Kemble’s troupe, Berlioz composed the *Symphonie fantastique* (1830) and then married her in 1833. As his marriage fell apart, Berlioz composed a number of *Hamlet*-inspired works: the song “La mort d’Ophélie” (1842), and later the *Marche funèbre pour la dernière scène d’Hamlet* (1844) for chorus and orchestra (MacDonald, “Berlioz”). For the impact of Harriet Smithson on French audiences, see Raby, esp. 176-93, Showalter 119-20, and Bailey 68.

20 In addition to the works already mentioned, there is his two-act opera *Béatrice et Bénédict* (1860-62), set to his own libretto, based on *Much Ado about Nothing*. Peter Raby has suggested that, since Berlioz first conceived making an opera out of the Shakespeare play as early as 1833, the impetus could have come from “his first reciprocated love for Harriet” (191).

21 Raby is right to point out that both Berlioz and Delacroix expressed their admiration for Shakespeare through “forms freed from the restriction of words, or in forms to which words could be the adjunct and accompaniment” (190). This partly explains why their works escape censure based on fidelity discourse, so often applied to operatic adaptations of Shakespeare, in which words play a more important role.
scene, the play scene, the gravedigger scene, and Ophelia’s madness and death. These scenes were also to feature prominently in the Dumas-Meurice adaptation as well as in Thomas’s opera. In fact, if French neoclassical audiences found Ophélie an unnecessary diversion (Heylen 30), Dumas and Meurice brought her back into focus, influenced by the impact of the Kemble performances of 1827, with Harriet Smithson as Ophelia. In the Thomas opera, in fact, Hamlet and Ophelia would come to occupy centre stage.

Because of the Dumas-Meurice version, French critics became more open to the mixing of genres found in Shakespeare. The critic for the Globe, for instance, argued that the presence of the comic element in Hamlet, far from being incongruous in a tragedy, was actually inherent in the subject itself, while Charles Magnin found the grotesque so poignant and fused with Hamlet’s character, that he thought that the effect was far from comic (Bailey 68). Nevertheless, by the time the English actor Charles Macready toured Paris in 1844, the enthusiasm for Shakespeare had waned with the decline of the Romantic movement in France. As a result, when Dumas wanted to mount Hamlet, he found that no theatre was willing to risk the enterprise. Consequently, Dumas established a Théâtre Historique in 1847, which he inaugurated with his adaptation of Hamlet. Given the conditions in which he opened his theatre, it is reasonable to assume that Dumas deemed financial success essential. His adaptation had to be consonant with the cultural codes informing the receiving culture which, unlike in the 1820s, was not likely to be responsive to something radically different from well-established theatrical conventions it was familiar with. Hence, Dumas and Meurice chose to produce a Shakespeare

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22 For a list of Delacroix’s Hamlet paintings, see Johnson, Catalogue 204-5, and Bailey 61 and 62, n. 53. See also Lee Johnson’s essay “Delacroix, Dumas and ‘Hamlet’” for the influence of Delacroix’s paintings on the Dumas-Meurice adaptation.
adaptation that would capitalize on spectacle, as did Ducis earlier, drawing especially on scenes that had already been made famous by the Romantics, such as by Delacroix through his paintings, rather than emphasizing the psychological complexities of Shakespeare’s play. The conditions of production of theatrical adaptations explain, more than any other factor, why the “history of Hamlet in France during the rise and decline of the Romantic movement shows greater progress towards faithful interpretations in the study than on the stage” (Bailey 77).

The Dumas-Meurice Hamlet is in five acts and eight parts, each part designating a change of scene within the act. Most of the scenes take place in the King’s council chamber; the rest take place either on the castle platform, or in a room of the castle, or the graveyard. There are many modifications, transpositions and omissions of the original scenes. This Hamlet opens with the court scene, for example, and the love between Hamlet and Ophelia is established by a scene in which Hamlet declares his love to Ophelia to words taken from the love message read by Polonius to the King in Shakespeare’s original: as we shall see, in the opera this becomes an important love duet whose principal theme will also be quoted in Ophelia’s mad scene. However, as with the opera and theatrical productions in English in Shakespeare’s own country, Fortinbras is left out.

The Dumas-Meurice version was extremely popular with French audiences. In an otherwise favourable review, Théophile Gautier regretted the deviations from Shakespeare’s plot, especially the omission of Fortinbras:

[It must be said to the shame of human intelligence and its so-called progress, that what the court and the populace understood easily and approved of}
enthusiastically at the time of Elizabeth, had to be explained and prepared in advance for later ages. The seeming disconnectedness of scenes actually linked by the thread of a most rigorous logic, was shocking to finical minds. (Article of 20 December 1847 in *Histoire de l’art dramatique*, trans. and qtd. in Bailey 80; emphasis mine)

Gautier may have been arguing for the organic unity of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, for the “unity” of a work of art was a measure, since the nineteenth century, of its greatness. There are loose ends in many of Shakespeare’s plays, especially at the level of their plots, but it is also true that the “seeming disconnectedness” between the scenes in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was in no small measure due to the change from the apron to the proscenium stage, the effect of which, as noted earlier, was felt in much of eighteenth-century criticism in that the critics focused on individual scenes, as if the play was a succession of highlights, instead of analysing the play as a whole. Such a critical approach was countered by Coleridge and Goethe, whose stress on organic unity and character study led them to an overwhelmingly literary approach towards Shakespeare. What such critics often failed to do was to bring to their criticism an awareness of the changes brought about by the altered conditions of theatrical performances vis-à-vis those in Shakespeare’s time; indeed, it was difficult to adopt such an approach since the concern with theatrical performance practice during Shakespeare’s time would only begin towards the end of the nineteenth century, thanks to the pioneering scholarly efforts and theatrical innovations of William Poel and others.

It should be noted here that in the Dumas-Meurice version, Meurice was the primary translator, and Dumas “polished” the text, making several changes to both plot
and language which, over time, led to the two men having major differences regarding the liberties Dumas took with Shakespeare’s play. In 1864, Meurice revised the text of the play and restored Shakespeare’s original ending, hoping that his version, closer to Shakespeare’s play, would be performed at the tercentenary celebration of Shakespeare’s birth. It was finally performed in December 1867 (three months before the premiere of the Thomas’s *Hamlet*, on 9 March 1868), to immense critical success, prompting Dumas to argue in several articles that his own dénouement was better than Shakespeare’s (Heylen 56-7). The decision by Thomas, Barbier, and Carré to restore the tragic ending for their planned Covent Garden version could have been influenced in part by the success of Meurice’s own version of *Hamlet*.

For a number of reasons, the Dumas-Meurice adaptation of *Hamlet* became the principal basis for Thomas’s operatic adaptation. For one, the Dumas-Meurice version was still regularly performed in France at the time the opera was composed in the 1860s, making it the most well-known version of *Hamlet* to French theatregoers. Secondly, the Dumas-Meurice version, with its five-act structure common to French *grands opéras* as well, and its emphasis on visual splendour rather than verbal richness, facilitated the task of adaptation from spoken play to opera, partly because it takes more time to sing words than to speak them. Nevertheless, Hamlet’s monologue, “Être ou ne pas être” (Act 3, scene 1), while greatly abridged in the opera, stays closer to Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” monologue (3.1.56-90) as written by Shakespeare, than are the corresponding monologues either in the Ducis or the Dumas-Meurice versions. Indeed, the ways in which Thomas and his librettists try to achieve a balance between Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*,
the versions by which they were known in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century French theatre, and the French Romantics, demand closer critical examination.

*Hamlet by Thomas, Barbier and Carré*23

Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, the librettists of the opera, based their text on the 1847 version of the play by Dumas and Meurice (Bailey 97; Law 588). As noted earlier, the opera libretto is shorter, as it takes longer to sing than to recite words. The number of characters is reduced from about thirty in Shakespeare (and nineteen-plus in the Dumas-Meurice version) to fifteen in the opera (including the four actors in the play);

Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Fortinbras are left out. Parts of Ophelia’s songs that were deemed vulgar were also left out. Among the additions and alterations is the opening, which begins with the coronation scene, as in Dumas-Meurice. Moreover, in Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet names Claudius as the murderer only in the final scene; in

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23 Although it is now customary to name an opera only after its composer, and I will do so in this chapter for the sake of brevity, this practice tends to ignore completely the important role played by librettists as adaptors. As Patrick Smith has observed in his book *The Tenth Muse*, one of the common and oft-repeated errors of musicology is to credit only the composer for changes and developments in libretto-writing, “the foundations and influences of which lie not in music and music theory . . . but rather in the history of the written and the spoken word: in poetry and drama” (vii). The case in nineteenth-century France was quite different, where critics would often name the librettist(s) first, and then the composer (Speare 38), even as, by the mid-nineteenth century, librettos were losing their status as literature (Lacombe 107). It is true that in most cases, it is the music that plays the decisive role in the survival of an opera; nevertheless, operatic adaptations involve, in the overwhelming majority of cases, close collaboration between composer and librettist, and changes in libretto-writing need to be related to those taking place in the history of drama, especially because composers do not usually write their own librettos. Barbier and Carré, in fact, counted Thomas and Gounod as among those composers who were most amenable to suggestions from them (Speare 36). Moreover, as their libretto for Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette* also shows, Barbier and Carré were ingenious adapters — their role in adapting the Dumas-Meurice version of *Hamlet* to the conventions of French grand opéra should not be overlooked. Barbier and Carré’s method of collaboration is discussed in detail in Speare 21-56.
the opera, Hamlet does so in a public accusation in Act 2. Hamlet also discovers that Polonius is a co-conspirator with Claudius (Act 3), thus “justifying” his spurning of Ophélie in the scene that follows. This appears to contradict Hamlet’s line of reasoning in Act 5, where, speaking of Laertes, he says in an aside, “Le crime du père / Ne doit pas retomber sur le fils innocent” ‘The crime of the father / Must not be visited upon the innocent son’ (Barbier and Carré, trans. Bardoni 110). It could be argued that this is the observation of a more mature Hamlet, but whether or not he has undergone this process of maturation is not clear from the opera. What is certain is that his rejection of Ophélie on this basis paves the way for her death.

If their libretto intensifies the tendency, already present in the Ducis and the Dumas-Meurice Hamlet, to elaborate the love theme and elucidate the ambiguities in Shakespeare by the explicit statement of all the facts, Barbier and Carré occasionally do so by actually departing from the Dumas-Meurice version in certain plot details. For example, they try to explain Hamlet’s rejection of Ophélie by placing the nunnery scene just after the closet scene in which they show Polonius as Claudius’s accomplice in the murder of King Hamlet. Moreover, the closet scene is followed by Claudius’s prayer which shows him as a deeply repentant figure. Thus, although he remains a villain in the opera, he is more subtly characterized than in any other theatrical adaptation of Shakespeare in France until then; similarly, the opera’s repentant Gertrude, though in some ways reminiscent of Ducis’s Gertrude, is not killed in the end.

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24 In the Dumas-Meurice version, Act 4 begins with an echo of the (omitted) prayer scene, where Claudius expresses his remorse over his crimes. It is Polonius’s death, however, rather than his brother’s murder, that makes Claudius do so (Dumas 234).
As noted earlier, there are two endings to the Thomas Hamlet. While Hamlet lives on in the French version, after having killed Claudius at the instruction of his father’s Ghost (which appears like a deus ex machina at the end), in the Covent Garden version he dies after killing Claudius, hoping, in true nineteenth-century operatic fashion, to join Ophelia in death (the Ghost does not turn up in this version). This was no doubt in an attempt to make their adaptation acceptable to English audiences (Forbes 26). Curiously, this ending has never been performed on stage, not even at the Covent Garden premiere in 1869. For a performance in Sydney in 1982, the Australian conductor Richard Bonynge created a third alternative ending in which Hamlet dies of the wound inflicted on him by Laertes.

Although it would seem to modern audiences that the opera departs from the plot of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, locating the opera in the context of the two other principal versions produced on the French theatrical stage reveals that, despite the problems posed by the intermedial transfer from spoken play to one that is sung, the opera attempts to negotiate a subtle balance between the different performance traditions within which the opera is imbricated – that of Parisian grand opera, the French spoken theatre, as well as performance traditions in England of Shakespeare’s play, with which comparisons would be inevitable in an age when the discourse of fidelity held sway with regard to adaptations. All three works may be considered “appropriations” rather than “adaptations” because of their significant alterations to the plot of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, in case we wish to maintain Sanders’s distinction between the two terms. What is more interesting, however, is that all these works can be placed in a locus of interpretive

25 Thomas and his librettists did something similar with Mignon, which was given a tragic ending for performances in Germany.
strategies shared by French adapters, starting with Ducis, who departs most radically from Shakespeare, to Thomas and his librettists, whose opera stays closest among adaptations in live performance modes to Shakespeare. The distinction between “adaptation” and “appropriation,” then, are not as clear-cut as one may assume from a purely theoretical position. On the other hand, what unites all these versions of *Hamlet* with each other, as well as with the other adaptations discussed in this study, is a shared tendency to transculturate Shakespeare. If these French versions did not “write back” to Shakespeare, as many twentieth-century postcolonial and feminist reworkings of Shakespeare do, they nonetheless carried the burden of their authors’ own agendas. Ducis’s version strove to infuse French neoclassical tragedy with elements of the bourgeois drama favoured by the French public, while the Dumas-Meurice version strove to make *Hamlet* compatible with theatrical genres popular in Dumas’s time, such as the boulevard drama, a genre developed by Dumas in his own dramatic works (Heylen 48).

Although opera, like the spoken theatre, involves live performance, it is less amenable to modification, excepting generally the staging details. Music plays the single most important role in determining the pacing of the action of an opera and the tone of the actor/singer (who enjoys far less freedom than the actor in the theatre to change the tone of utterance of a sentence), and the style of the music itself is an indicator of the period in which the adaptation was made. Since words, melodic lines and musical structure are all thoroughly imbricated in each other, it is extremely difficult to alter words without affecting the music. Thus, while older nineteenth-century French adaptations of Shakespeare could be improved upon, updated or replaced by new ones,

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Thomas’s opera either has to be performed as it stands, or ignored altogether, save for the textual alternatives suggested by the composer, or a limited number of other minor cuts (usually established by performance practice). Thus, among the various intermedial adaptations of Shakespeare available to a modern audience, Thomas’s operatic Hamlet bears the strongest traces of nineteenth-century performance practice.

For Ambroise Thomas, Hamlet was not his first work based on Shakespeare, nor was it his last. In 1850, he composed an opéra comique, Le songe d’une nuit d’été, a comedy in which Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth and Falstaff appear as characters and which, according to Hervé Lacombe, “demonstrates how the French could retain only the amusing elements of a foreign source” (350). His last work for the theatre was a ballet fantastique, again based on Shakespeare, La tempête (1889). By the 1850s, Thomas had established himself as a competent composer of operas and ballets, and it was Charles Gounod’s opera Faust (1859), with a libretto by Barbier and Carré, that inspired Thomas to follow Gounod in broadening “the framework and tragic expressivity of opéra lyrique, a genre he and Gounod helped to establish, with Hamlet” (Lacombe 350).

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27 This was one of several French operas of this period that were set in England, and is discussed in Macdonald (“Outre-Manche”).

28 Morton Jay Achter argues that Thomas’s Hamlet should be considered “lyric, not grand, opera” (311). Lyric opera, or drame-lyrique, is regarded as being halfway between opéra-comique (which uses spoken dialogue) and grand opéra (which is sung throughout) in that it is larger in scale and more serious in intent than the former, and more intimate in mood than the latter (Achter 4-5). Many drames lyriques, such as Gounod’s Faust, were first performed as opéras comiques at the Théâtre de l’Opéra-Comique, after which the spoken dialogue was replaced with recitatives and thus made suitable for performance as a grand opéra at the Paris Opéra (Achter 6). However, some drames lyriques, such as Thomas’s Hamlet, were conceived for, and first performed at the Paris Opéra. It is true that, unlike the grands opéras of Meyerbeer and Halévy, Thomas’s Hamlet has a relatively smaller cast, and no exaggerated spectacle such as pitched battles and volcanic eruptions; its relative inwardness and intimate note are both
by Gounod’s *Faust*, he went on to adapt Goethe’s novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as *Mignon* (1866), with a text by the same librettists. In 1867, the composer told the music critic Eduard Hanslick that he had been working for six years on *Hamlet* (Forbes 21), a work the composer himself considered his masterpiece, rather than his more popular *Mignon* (Achter 256).

It could be that Goethe’s novel, which has an extended discussion of *Hamlet*, provided Barbier and Carré with the idea of making an operatic version of Shakespeare’s play. In any case, they also prepared the libretto for Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette* (1867), produced one year before Thomas’s *Hamlet*, and must have, therefore, adapted the two Shakespeare plays at around the same time. German critics, translators and dramaturges played an important role in promoting Shakespeare in nineteenth-century Europe, and it in line with Shakespeare’s play and with the spirit of *drame-lyrique* (Achter 311). Moreover, the focus on Ophélie also brings the opera closer to *opéras comiques* such as Bizet’s *Carmen* and Massenet’s *Manon*, both of which are centred on female protagonists and have tragic endings, something Thomas could only hint at in the French version of *Hamlet* (Achter 269, 272). But because Thomas’s *Hamlet* was conceived for the Paris Opéra, there are crucial elements that bring Thomas’s opera musically closer to the conventions of *grand opéra*: the spectacular choral scenes (which begin and close the opera), the supernatural scenes, central to the opera both dramatically and musically, the obligatory ballet, the use of recitatives throughout the work, all give it a grandeur more characteristic of *grand opéra*. Crucially, these also affect the opera’s dramaturgy. Most commentators agree, for example, that the last act of the opera (Act 5) is somewhat abrupt (e.g. Achter 312), and the action is wound up all too quickly. This is in no small measure due to the fact that, in contrast to *opéras comiques* and *drames lyriques* that employ spoken dialogue, the presence of recitatives throughout the work slows the dramatic pacing, and the presence of the obligatory ballet in Act 4 further delays the action, so that in an unabridged performance, the crucial last act begins after nearly three hours of music. Such durations of acts are more in line with the *grands opéras* of Meyerbeer than that of *opéras comiques*. 
is not surprising that composers who produced adaptations of works by German writers such as Goethe and Schiller often turned towards Shakespeare as well.29

**The Music for Thomas’s *Hamlet***

French music at the beginning of the nineteenth century was an arena of struggle over the influence of Italian and German styles, the former employing clear-cut melodies and putting primacy on the human voice, the latter making greater use of thematic development and transformations, making the orchestra an expressive instrument (Lacombe 298). German influence also spilled over to Italian opera as time passed, as I shall discuss in my chapter on Verdi. It is, nevertheless, reductive to see this interaction between different operatic styles only in terms of conflict. In the earlier part of the nineteenth century, for example, when composing his opera *Macbeth*, Verdi capitalized on the enthusiasm of Florentine audiences for what was termed in Italy the *genere fantastico*, associated with supernatural elements in the works of German opera composers Weber (especially his opera *Der Freischütz*) and Meyerbeer (*Robert le diable*), although it is in the *subject matter*, rather than the music, where the German influence is most clearly seen.30 With time, the German influence on the musical

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29 Other such composers include Berlioz (who, besides adapting Shakespeare, composed *La Damnation de Faust* based on Goethe), Verdi (several of whose operas are based on Schiller), and Arrigo Boito (who prepared the librettos for Verdi’s last two Shakespeare-based operas, as well as *Amleto* for Franco Faccio; Boito’s only complete opera for which he wrote both the words and the music is *Mefistofele*, based on Goethe’s *Faust*).

30 Contemporary Italian critical readings of Shakespeare’s play were also mediated by German influence. Carlo Rusconi, the influential Italian translator of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, added a translation of a lengthy excerpt from Schlegel’s commentary on the play, and so did the anonymous author of the preface to Ricordi’s printed standard
dimension of operas in countries with well-established traditions would increase, so that Verdi’s *Otello*, although it does not draw any thematic connections with operatic subgenres popular in Germany, nonetheless shows in its harmony and in its continuous music (through-composition) the composer’s answer to innovations made by Wagner, especially in his opera *Tristan und Isolde* (Taruskin 599-604).

While Verdi, in his *Macbeth*, took up only the subject matter of the *genere fantastico*, Ambroise Thomas responded to the genre in thematic and musical terms when he composed his *Hamlet*, and there were precedents in French performing traditions that enabled Thomas to do so. Berlioz, among the greatest nineteenth-century French composers as well as an ardent Shakespearean adapter, prepared the first “authentic” (and successful) French performance of *Der Freischütz* at the Paris Opéra, while Meyerbeer’s *Robert le diable* merged the fantastic genre with *grand opera*. There were dramatic precedents too. In the early nineteenth century, one of the popular theatrical genres was the *mélodrame*, and many of these adapted Shakespeare’s tragedies only because of their potential for effects. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was one of the victims, transformed, as it were, into a magic-show-cum-pantomime mixed with dancing and an infernal dénouement (Lacombe 296), and Jean-Baptiste-Augustin Hapdé produced a three-act *mélodrame, Les visions de Macbeth, ou les sorcières d'Ecosse*, which focused on spectacular visual effects (Lacombe 297). In highlighting the “fantastic” element in *Hamlet*, Thomas was capitalizing on this performance tradition, which paved the way for a positive audience response to the supernatural element, while at the same time aligning his work with the more highbrow performance traditions in which the Ducis translation libretto (1848) of Verdi’s *Macbeth* (Clausen, *Macbeth* 173 and n.). Verdi’s operatic adaptation of *Macbeth* was the first performance of the play in Italy in any version.
and the Dumas-Meurice adaptation held sway. And, in their own ways, Ducis and Dumas, by using Shakespeare in order to bring elements of the “lower” genre of the bourgeois drama into high tragedy, were attempting something similar in the field of spoken drama.

French theatre- and opera-goers were, therefore, prepared for Thomas’s opera in a way the first Italian audiences for Verdi’s *Macbeth* were not. Contemporary reviewers quickly recognized Thomas’s gift for creating a supernatural atmosphere by means of effective orchestration right from the opening prelude, and praised him for “a feeling for the fantastic that has rarely been encountered since the death of Weber” (Nestor Roqueplan, *Le Ménestrel*, March 22, 1868, qtd. in Lacombe 165). Thomas and his librettists structured the opera such that three distinct elements, the mysterious and the supernatural world of Hamlet and the Ghost, the pomp and grandeur of Polonius’s court, and scenes of a more lyrical nature, featuring Hamlet and Ophélie or individual characters alternated with each other. Thomas’s ability to use orchestral colour effectively to distinguish between these worlds, especially in an opera based on the principle of contrast between numbers, stood him in good stead. Indeed, as Elizabeth Rogeboz-Malfroy says of Thomas’s *Hamlet*, “le discours musical se base essentiellement sur le jeu des contrastes dans l’orchestration et les nuances” ‘the musical style is essentially based on the play of contrasts in orchestration and nuances’ (232-3).

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31 Such was not the case with Verdi’s *Macbeth*. Although Florentine audiences showed a genuine interest in the *genere fantastico*, elsewhere in Italy it was widely regarded as an un-Italian (*oltramontane*) topic, and the operatic elite responded negatively to the staging of witchcraft in that opera, although the musical influence of the German *genere fantastico* on Verdi’s *Macbeth* was negligible (see Clausen 75-8). This may also be the reason why German opera composers before Wagner, composers such as Weber and Heinrich Marschner, focusing as they often did on the fantastic and the supernatural, had a very belated, and somewhat limited, musical impact on Italian opera.
The opera begins with a dark prelude (while the curtain is still down), the musical material of which recurs (and is elaborated upon) in the so-called esplanade scene in which Hamlet meets the Ghost of his father: string tremolos in their lower registers predominate, underpinned by a rising-and-falling chromatic figure in the cellos and basses (vs 1. 1-8). The curtain then rises, for a festive scene in which the new monarch and his queen, Queen Gertrude, are greeted by the people: the brighter tones of brass fanfares here (4. 1-8 to 5.1-6) provide a strong contrast in timbre. Thus, while departing from the Shakespeare play, Thomas establishes by means of a symbolic contrast between the different sets of orchestral timbres, the binary between the murky inner world of Elsinore and its celebratory façade. This festive scene is followed by one featuring a pensive Hamlet professing his love to Ophélie; he tells her that what he wants to flee is not her but rather human inconstancy (Barbier and Carré, trans. Bardoni 48-9):

\[
Pardonne, chère créature, \\
Je ne t’accusais pas! \\
Ton âme chaste et pure \\
Se révèle dans ta beauté! \\
Ah! \\
Doute de la lumière, \\
Doute du soleil et du jour, \\
Doute des cieux et de la terre, \\
Mais ne doute jamais de mon
\]

\[32\] Since the Heugel vocal score does not provide bar numbers, I have used the following convention: page number. bar number(s) within that page, counting the first bar on each page as 1.
amour!

... 

Non, je ne fuyais pas!
Je fuyais l’inconstance humaine;

Ton image calme et sereine

Eût dans ma solitude accompagné mes pas!

Mais ta présence me console!

Mes pleurs sont moins amers par l’amour essuyés;

Et c’est assez d’une parole

Pour me retenir à tes pieds!

Forgive me, dearest,

I was not accusing you!

The purity of your chaste soul
Shines in the beauty of your face!

Ah!

Doubt that the light illumines,

Doubt that the sun shines by day,

Doubt that the sky vaults the earth,

but never doubt my love!

...

It was not you that I was fleeing,

But human inconstancy.

Your image, calm and serene,
Would have accompanied my lonely steps.

But your presence has consoled me.

My tears are less bitter for the love which dries them,

And a word from you suffices

To keep me here at your feet.\(^{33}\)

The melody of “Doute de la lumière” is one of the recurrent themes of the opera, the only one, in fact, that undergoes transformation, notably in Ophélie’s mad scene:

\(^{33}\) These words, spoken by Hamlet, are taken from his love message to Ophelia, and are read out by Polonius to the King in the original Shakespeare (2.2.115-18). This scene is placed at the end of Act I in Ducis’s version, and is also found in the Dumas-Meurice adaptation. Gary Schmidgall is right when he says that this makes Hamlet more a romantic lover like Romeo than the ironist or satirist he is in Shakespeare (318), but what appears a striking change to modern audiences was not so to nineteenth-century French audiences who saw the play staged only in the Ducis or Dumas-Meurice versions. Moreover, as Clausen points out, “the particular suitability of music for the expression of love is a standard critical topos” (\textit{Macbeth} 245), and accounts for the focus on love (rather than, say, political or class or economic issues) in the majority of nineteenth-century Romantic operas, including adaptations of Shakespeare by Berlioz, Gounod, Verdi and Otto Nicolai.

A new contrast is now established between the multitude of choral voices heard in the festive scene and the duo of Hamlet and Ophélie: the latter are shown right from their first entrance as figures isolated from the outer, public sphere of Elsinore. Moreover, the
festive scene provides the opportunity for large-scale musical development and for displays of splendour suited to the stage of the Paris Opéra. Théophile Gautier, in his review in *Le Moniteur universel*, showed his understanding of the different dramaturgical requirements of the operatic stage when he wrote of the coronation scene: “This portrayal on stage of an earlier event, which Hamlet often recalls with such bitter sadness, has the advantage of being clearer and of providing the musical opportunity for songs, choruses, and marches of dazzling colour, serving as a good contrast with the dark heart of the action” (March 16, 1868; qtd. in Lacombe 107).

The significance of the dramatically apt contrast of tone colour between the murky, menacing prelude and the celebratory opening scene is realized in the opera’s so-called esplanade scene (1.2), in which Hamlet speaks to the Ghost of his father. The esplanade scene opens with material from the opening prelude, which establishes the dark, foreboding nocturnal atmosphere through orchestral means (often by means of string tremolos in low registers), and the scene reaches a climax as the Ghost appears to Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus. The Ghost’s speech follows, and as Hamlet asks the Ghost, “Who is it I must punish?” the fanfares from the opening scene are heard (Ex. 2), played offstage by six trumpets34 before the previous, dark sonority returns, and the Ghost replies, “Écoute: c’est lui que l’on fête/C’est lui qu’ils ont proclamé Roi!” ‘Hark: it is he whom they are honouring/he whom they have proclaimed King!’ (Barbier and Carré, trans. Bardoni 62):

34 Since I use the piano score of the opera to illustrate musical details, I discuss details regarding orchestration from Rogeboz-Malfroy, *Ambroise Thomas ou la tentation du lyrique*. 
Ex. 2. Ambroise Thomas, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Finale (vs 78. 3-14).
Thomas succeeds remarkably well in producing a succession of dramatically apt musical numbers that contrast with each other and at the same time moves the narrative forward. He also juxtaposes musical contrasts within a number with telling dramatic effect, such as when the bright timbres of the trumpet fanfares from the castle ramparts (played offstage) suddenly disrupt the overall eerie atmosphere of the Ghost scene, featuring predominantly dark orchestral sounds. This juxtaposition of two contrasting musical planes is a specifically operatic device that Thomas deploys in dramatically apt ways throughout his *Hamlet*.

Another effective example of juxtaposition occurs in Act 2 of the opera. Hamlet invites the players to perform “The Murder of Gonzago” to a “Chanson Bacchique,” a song both sad and gay, with its pensive central section, in F-sharp minor (“La vie est sombre”), contrasting with the cheerful refrain in B flat major. After the performance of the play, Hamlet openly denounces Claudius, and a big Verdian ensemble in which different musical strands are juxtaposed – that of the frightened Claudius and Gertrude, the shocked courtiers, and Hamlet – concludes the act. Hamlet’s recall of the B-flat major theme from the “Chanson Bacchique” within the texture of the ensemble provides “a brilliant touch” (Dean, “Shakespeare” 167). While this drinking song may be seen as an unnecessary addition – after all, it is not based on Shakespeare – it has, nevertheless, a dramatically effective role to play in the opera.

If dark sonorities predominate in Thomas’s opera, in it there are also moments of magical sunshine. For example, in Act 2, scene 1 of the opera, as the King asks Hamlet why he does not consider travelling abroad, Hamlet answers that he does indeed contemplate such a thing, and asks: “[V]oyez dans le ciel ces nuages legers./ Comme une
nef d’argent ouvrant ses blanches voiles?” ‘Do you see the wispy clouds up there,/ like a silver ship with its white sails outspread?’ (Barbier and Carré, trans. Bardoni 70) (ex. 3). Thomas’s orchestral accompaniment, featuring arpeggios for harp in quaver triplets and by staccato notes on flutes, oboes, clarinets, is described by Rogeboz-Malfroy as “une écriture aérienne” (229), and Thomas creates a similar sonority in the final section of the mad scene for Ophélie in Act 4 (vs 304.1 ff):

35 Claudius’s request to Hamlet in the opera is in complete contrast to the play, in which he requests his nephew to stay back:

For your intent
In going back to school in Wittenberg,
It is most retrograde to our desire,
And we beseech you bend you to remain
Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye,
Our chiefest courtier, cousin and our son. (1.2.112-17)
Ex. 3. Ambroise Thomas, *Hamlet*, Act 2, scene 1 (vs 121. 4-11).

Thomas uses recurrent themes, but unlike the leitmotifs of Wagner, they do not combine with each other, and rarely undergo alteration in rhythm, intervallic structure, or harmonic basis, although they are stated in different keys, as examples 4a and 4b demonstrate. There are, nevertheless, variations in the instrumentation and harmonic
layout (though the chords almost always remains the same), as when the C-sharp minor theme marking Hamlet’s entry in Act 1 (ex. 4a), played by cellos over pizzicato strings, recurs in E minor in the scene for Hamlet, Claudius and Gertrude in Act 2, scene 1 (vs 118. 1-9) (ex. 4b), played by solo clarinet, bassoon and cellos over harmonies sustained by strings, horns and bassoons:

Ex. 4a. Ambroise Thomas, *Hamlet*, Act 1, scene 1 (vs 24. 9-17 to vs 25.1).

Thomas uses recurrent themes such that they get associated with the single, precise moment of their first appearance,\(^{36}\) whereas in Wagnerian music drama, “this original association is almost always multivalent” (Whittall). In this sense, compared to Wagner’s, Thomas’s musical discourse is less complex, less subtly allusive (either in purely musical or in musico-dramatic terms). Yet, when we keep in mind that French adaptations of *Hamlet* starting with Ducis strove to clarify the motives behind the protagonists’ actions, Thomas’s approach seems apposite,\(^{37}\) for his recurrent musical

\(^{36}\) For example, example 4a is played by the orchestra when Hamlet appears onstage for the first time; the “entrée d’Hamlet” at this point in the score is thus marked both visually and musically.

\(^{37}\) Thomas’s avoidance of Wagner’s compositional methods also has nationalist overtones. As Achter notes (65-6, 259-61), the lack of success of native French composers at the Paris Opéra between 1850 and 1870, coupled with the defeat of France
themes, too, seek to clarify the onstage action. A recurrent theme that illustrates this point is the one that first appears in the esplanade scene (ex. 5), as Hamlet promises to the departing Ghost, “Ombre chère, ombre vengeresse,/ J’exaucerai ton vœu” ‘Beloved shade, avenging shade,/ I shall obey your command!’ (Barbier and Carré, trans. Bardon 63):

Ex. 5. Ambroise Thomas, *Hamlet*, Act 1, scene 2 (vs 83. 5-10).

This theme, marking the covenant between Hamlet and the Ghost of his father, is heard for the first time in Act 2, scene 1. Later, Hamlet tells Claudius and Gertrude that

in the Franco-Prussian war, made the French pin their hopes on Thomas as “France’s answer to Wagner and Verdi” (261). Given the tremendous success of *Mignon*, there was a lot of anticipation surrounding the première of *Hamlet*. The latter’s success made Thomas “the foremost composer of French opera” (Achter 261); he became the director of the Paris Conservatoire in 1871 “as a rightful reward for the masterpieces that he wrote, [and] as a fine golden crown due to the most famous and the first of our living composers” (J.J. Weiss, qtd. in Achter 66).
he is going to present a troupe of players who will perform "conscientiously" before them. In an aside, as Hamlet asks his father to have patience – for he hopes (as in Shakespeare) that the performance of "The Murder of Gonzago" will make Claudius confess to his crime – the motif recurs, played by oboes and violas over a string tremolo, this time in G major, but over identical harmony (vs 124. 10-19). It is heard once more at the end of the closet scene (in Act 3 of the opera, vs 239. 2-5), after the Ghost, invisible to Gertrude but visible to Hamlet, asks him to spare his mother, but to remember him.

The intensification of mood or atmosphere by means of musical colour is one of the principal strengths of Thomas’s opera. But, as Clausen has noted, if operas intensify emotionally charged moments or the atmosphere or the musical profiles of some of the protagonists, they also, almost invariably, do so by reducing, simplifying or omitting other elements of the original play (Macbeth 239). Furthermore, he argues, "the concentration on the protagonists and the intensification of their emotionally most charged moments is combined with, indeed rendered [possible] by a heavy reduction of the social context in which Shakespeare has them act" (240). This also holds true of the operatic Hamlet, and it shows especially in the way the composer and his librettists handle the chorus, whose banal words provide no new perspective on the action, least of all those of a political nature, although the choruses are often musically impressive. Thomas’s incorporation of allegedly Scandinavian tunes in Ophélie’s mad scene or a cheerful Danish march (Act 2, scene 2) into the score does little more than add the

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38 Un troupe… qui joueront devant vous leur rôle en conscience” (Barbier and Carré 71). This section corresponds to Act 2, scene 2 of Shakespeare.

39 Shakespeare also asks for a Danish March before the beginning of the play-within-the-play (3.2.81).
occasional touch of “local colour”. In fact, the focus is mostly on Hamlet and Ophelia, making the opera, in effect, a love story.

The opera’s treatment of Hamlet as a domestic tragedy echoes, strangely enough, “the Anglo-American Hamlet [which] has often been read through Freud as primarily a domestic drama, with some productions to this day omitting Fortinbras and much of the play’s politics” (Thompson and Taylor 29), though in a very different way. In general, though, Clausen’s thesis holds true: in the opera’s limited discursive context (as well as those of the versions by Ducis and Dumas-Meurice), many of the other crucial themes of the play, especially those of a socio-political nature, cease to exist. For example, it is impossible to read Thomas’s Hamlet as “primarily a political play enacting the possibility of dissent from various forms of totalitarianism,” as has been the case with Shakespeare’s play (Thompson and Taylor 29). Graham Holderness’s thesis that Hamlet himself seems to straddle the idealistic, medieval world of chivalric heroism of his father, on the one hand, and the more modern, Machiavellian world of Claudius, on the other (“Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroes” 58-9), cannot be applied to the opera, for Claudius’s diplomatic skills are not within its purview at all. Again, Hamlet’s attitude towards revenge differs in the play and the opera. John Kerrigan, for example, argues that for Shakespeare’s Hamlet, what is more important than revenge is the need to remember his father, and that, although he knows that exacting revenge would satisfy him, Hamlet is, nevertheless, acutely aware of its pointlessness, for evil cannot be undone (184-91). Kerrigan further points out that in the last act of Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet’s father is simply not mentioned, even as, in striking contrast, Laertes remembers his father, Polonius, in his dying moments. Kiernan Ryan goes one step further and argues that in
Hamlet, Shakespeare “sabotages the revenge-play formula and thereby strikes at the social order whose validity the formula presupposes, and whose axioms it would otherwise smuggle through unchallenged” (qtd. in McEvoy 87). Thus, the reading of Shakespeare’s protagonist as the unwilling avenger, forced to live at the wrong place at the wrong time – the “rotten” state of Denmark (1.4.90) – does not hold true for the opera, or for the theatrical versions on which it is based.

In fact, the operatic Hamlet has no qualms either about obeying the Ghost – he never doubts that the Ghost is that of his father – or about the ethic of revenge. Indeed, as the Ghost appears in Act 5 of the opera, like the commendatore of Mozart’s Don Giovanni, in a final act of redressing moral ills, a decisive and prompt Hamlet obeys his father’s commands and dutifully kills Claudius. And finally, the opera closes on a note of jubilation, with Hamlet crowned king (in the Paris version, which is almost always the one performed), implying the restoration of moral and social order, though Hamlet’s own acute sense of loss of his beloved is underlined in the words and music of his last utterance in the opera. Hence, although the opera closes with trumpet fanfares, like the ones that opened Act 1, the eeriness of mood suggested by the music of the opera’s prelude (which recurred in the esplanade scene) is displaced both by the music and the action onstage at the end. Thus, interpretations of Shakespeare’s play that argue against linear readings, and instead point out the importance of “cyclical” or “recursive”

40 The opera’s stage directions remain curiously unhelpful regarding the timing of this scene. It presumably takes place at night, for, like Shakespeare’s Ghost, this one also has to leave by daybreak.

41 Expectedly, Marjorie Garber’s reading of Shakespeare’s Hamlet leads her to a diametrically opposite conclusion: she, too, draws a parallel between Mozart’s Don Giovanni and Hamlet, only to point out that it is Hamlet who gets petrified, metaphorically speaking, at the end (see Garber 140-43; Thompson and Taylor 31).
moments in the play, such as Terence Hawkes’s reading of *Hamlet* also do not apply to the opera version.

On the other hand, the opera’s departure from Shakespeare also results in interesting re-readings of some of the principal characters and relationships. Gertrude is much more sympathetically portrayed (even the Ghost specifically instructs Hamlet to spare her), and the opera represents her in a way that departs from Janet Adelman’s reading of Shakespeare’s Gertrude as a woman “less powerful as an independent character than as the site for fantasies larger than she is” (qtd. in Thompson and Taylor 30). As has been stated before, the operatic Hamlet does not reject Ophélie’s sexuality, as the words of their Act 1 love duet testify, and it is on learning that her father, Polonius, was a conspirator that Hamlet rejects her. He abandons this line of reasoning at the end, but alas, too late not to lose her forever. Such a reading of Hamlet is in refreshing contrast to the misogynist found in Shakespeare’s play, and whose misogyny has been echoed by critics such as Ernest Jones and T.S. Eliot (see Rose 95-118; Thompson and Taylor 30). In one respect, the opera elaborates on an aspect of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* that was eagerly picked up by nineteenth-century Romantics, in a way that strikingly anticipates the twentieth-century: the representation of Ophelia.

See Hawkes, esp. 310-12. Like Hawkes, however, the opera reads Claudius as a deeply compelling figure (see Thompson and Taylor 33). Given that censorship was strict under Louis Napoleon, and that it was only between 1870 and 1874 that theatre censorship was abolished (McCormick 108, 110), the opera could not have effectively explored the political implications of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* that Hawkes and others point out. Moreover, Barbier and Thomas were themselves conservative monarchists (Speare 54-5), and would have been unsympathetic to anti-monarchical readings of the play.
The Operatic Ophélie

Carol Thomas Neely has pointed out that Laertes’s words describing the mad Ophelia, “Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself/ She turns to favour and to prettiness” (4.5.183-4), as well as Gertrude’s narration of Ophelia’s death (4.7.163-82) “foreshadow later representations of it and representations of female hysterics as sexually frustrated and theatrically alluring” (325), a standard that “implicitly introduces conventions for reading madness as gender-inflected” (325). In the history of theatrical representations of Ophelia, her Romantic revival took off in France, as a result of the productions of Charles Kemble in 1827, with Harriet Smithson as Ophelia (Showalter 119), the influence of which I have discussed earlier in this chapter. Harriet Smithson became identified with Ophelia in French minds (Raby 177), and in other important respects she had a considerable influence on Shakespeare’s reception in France. As Jules Janin declared, as a result of Smithson’s success, the French realized that “the poet Shakespeare was in fact the inspired poet of the great tragic actresses” (Rachel et la tragédie 67; qtd. in Raby 178). This implies that tragedy was no more associated with exclusively male protagonists; instead, female actresses could also play important roles in them. Moreover, because of Smithson, Ophelia came to occupy a more central position in performances of Hamlet, at least in France. Delacroix not only “chose a female to represent Hamlet in his works” (Bailey 63, n. 54), but also made a lithograph in 1843 showing a scene that is found in Thomas’s opera but is only mentioned by Gertrude in Shakespeare’s play: a portrait of Ophelia drowning (Raby 181). 

43 Similarly, in England, John Everett Millais, whose work Delacroix admired, produced a striking painting of Ophelia drowning, whose influence can be seen as late as
Thomas’s opera, naturally, is influenced by these Romantic readings in its representation of Ophelia, though there are significant differences that arise from issues of translation and intermedial adaptation. Shakespeare’s primary mode of representing Ophelia’s madness is verbal: Neely notes that, through Ophelia’s “alienated speech,” Shakespeare “represents distinctions between female hysteria and feigned male melancholy in Hamlet” (323). Ophelia mourns her father’s death through a song (4.5.185-94), into which her other losses are absorbed (Neely 324). Since, in the opera, Polonius does not die, Ophélie’s mad scene dispenses with this theme. The focus, instead, is entirely on the bitter outcome of her love for Hamlet: as in Shakespeare, where her distribution of flowers has been symbolically read as a ritual symbolizing her lost love, deflowering and death (Neely 324-5, Showalter 117), Ophélie distributes flowers to village girls surrounding her (for this scene is set in a village):

Partagez-vous mes fleurs!(à une jeune fille)

A toi cette humble branche

De romarin sauvage.

Ah! . . Ah! . . (à une autre)

A toi cette pervenche.

Laurence’s Olivier’s film version of Hamlet (see Gervais 272, Thompson and Taylor 28, Rutter 307).

44 The directions in the libretto read: “Ophélie enters, dressed in a long white robe and bizarrely covered with flowers and vines intertwined in her dishevelled hair” (qtd. in Achter 299 n. 107). This is, curiously, close to the “sharply defined” conventions of representations of insanity on the Elizabethan stage, in which “Ophelia dresses in white, [and] decks herself with ‘fantastical garlands’ of white flowers” (Showalter 117).

45 In the opera, Ophélie’s mad scene is in rhymed verse throughout, and there is no contrast with Hamlet, who does not feign madness at all.
Ah! . . . Ah! . . .

Et maintenant écoutez ma chanson!
Let me share my flowers with you! *(To a young girl)*
For you a humble sprig of wild rosemary,

Ah! . . . Ah! . . . *(To another)*
Here’s periwinkle for you,

Ah! . . . Ah! . . .

And now listen to my song! *(Barbier and Carré, trans. Bardoni 103)*

She goes on to sing a song about the Wilis, who, in Slavonic mythology, are young brides-to-be who die before their wedding day. They rise from their graves at night, and make young men who come across them dance till they fall dead. Ophélie imagines herself to be one,\(^{46}\) exclaiming in her delirious state to Hamlet (who, she thinks, is present):

Ah! cruel! Je t’aime!

[. . .] Ah! cruel, tu vois mes pleurs! Ah!

Pour toi je meurs!

Ah, cruel one, I love you!

[. . .] Ah, cruel one, see, I weep! Ah!

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\(^{46}\) The legend, made popular throughout Europe by Heinrich Heine, was the subject of operas by Alfredo Catalani *(La Wally, 1892)* and Giacomo Puccini *(Le Villi, 1884)*, but it is mostly through the ballet *Giselle* *(1841)* by Adolphe Adam, that modern audiences know the myth. See Marian Smith 167-200. A possible reason for the reference to this myth in the opera is discussed below.
I die for you. (Barbier and Carré, trans. Bardoni 105)

In an act of supreme irony, just before she finally is drowned, Ophélie recalls the words and music of their Act 1 love duet (“Doute de la lumière”), in which Hamlet had promised her of his undying love. Critics have generally found this reference to the Wilis to be dramatically unnecessary. Winton Dean finds the inclusion of Scandinavian motifs and the “almost Griegian ballade in the mad scene, and the expansion of Ophélie’s part beyond the requirements of the drama” to be signs that “Thomas’s courage, or his artistic integrity, seems to have failed” (167). A more sympathetic Hervé Lacombe writes that it is “devoid of dramatic import, but is nicely set to music and furnishes a poetic moment” (108). The way the allusion to the Wilis is incorporated in the mad scene does seem to give it some dramatic validity. Furthermore, it is possible to account for the reference to the Wilis from another point of view, if we keep in mind a convention of French grands opéras that was eminently unsuited to any version of Hamlet, and to which Thomas and his librettists were forced to adhere. This was the customary ballet, and the presence of one

47 Thus, Valerie Traub’s observation about Shakespeare’s Ophelia holds true for Thomas’ Ophélie as well: “Ophelia’s death is as much an outcome of Hamlet’s rage as it is an expression of her grief, madness, or self-destruction” (64).

48 An innovative production can capitalize on the fact that in the final section of the mad scene, the offstage chorus hums a Swedish tune sung earlier in the scene by Ophélie, enabling the stage director to show her as being in a hallucinatory state of mind. In the 2003 London production of the opera by the Grand Théâtre de Genève, Natalie Dessay, the Ophélie of the production, had blood trickling down her dress, indicating that she was injuring herself (Thompson and Taylor 115); the DVD recording of the opera under Bertrand de Billy, taken from a production at the Gran Teatre del Liceu, represents her death in a similar fashion.

49 Achter points out that the source of the so-called Swedish tune (vs 293.8 ff to 294.6) sung by Ophélie is unknown, and surmises that it was so described because the original Ophélie, Christine Nilsson, was Swedish (301 n. 108).
in Thomas’s *Hamlet* has, understandably, been criticized (for example, Lacombe 108). Thomas was forced to provide, against his wishes, music for the expected ballet (Rogeboz-Malfroy 234). How, then, could he plan to integrate it into the overall structure of his opera, making the best of a bad job?

By replacing the “vulgar” songs of Ophelia with a reference to the Wilis and accompanying it by music of a dance-like character, Thomas and his librettists could have intended to evoke Adolphe Adam’s famous ballet *Giselle* as an intertext, one that was already present in the libretto and which neatly dovetailed at both dramatic and musical levels into their operatic *Hamlet*, as I have argued in the previous section. This intertextual strategy is lost on modern audiences because of the gradual separation of ballet (or, more precisely, the *ballet-pantomime*) from opera by the twentieth century, but

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50 Verdi, who himself went on to write ballet music for the French première of *Otello*, is reported to have said, “*Hamlet* and dance tunes!! What a cacophony! Poor Shakespeare!” (qtd. in Schmidgall 317). However, Achter points out its relevance, noting that since, in the directions provided by the libretto, snow was supposed to fall during the esplanade scene (1.2), the ballet, titled “La Fête du Printemps” (“The Festival of Spring”) “suggests an interval during which Hamlet’s actions could induce Ophelia’s own melancholia” (297).

51 See, for example, the 3/8 Allegretto (*mouvement de valse*) in B flat that occurs in the mad scene at two points (vs 289.9 ff and 301.1 ff). The “Scandinavian” tune of the ballad (vs 293.8 ff), too, has a dance-like character, and so has the “exotic” dance tune, with triangle, tambourine, and pizzicato string accompaniment over trills played by the flute, that alternates with it (vs 294.7 ff).

52 According to Clausen, an opera based on a Shakespeare play may not only intensify some of the Shakespearean elements at the cost of others, but also add “entirely new levels of meaning. At the most obvious level, enrichment springs from textual and musical hybridism. . . . [E]nrichment includes new intertextual complications generated by the activation, deliberate or not, of specifically operatic (or, more generally, specifically musical) audience memories” (*Macbeth* 242). Nineteenth-century French opera-goers would have strong memories of Adam’s ballet, the reasons for which are discussed below.
that was certainly not the case with nineteenth-century Parisian audiences at the Opéra.\textsuperscript{53} Marian Smith has argued that the few ballet-pantomimes that have survived in the modern repertory, such as Adam’s *Giselle*, have their narrative (i.e., pantomime) element severely cut in modern productions, resulting in the deployment of fewer non-dancing characters on stage as well as the omission of the relevant musical passages meant to accompany the pantomimed sections, but the narrative elements were there, for sure, in nineteenth-century productions. Like Thomas’s *Hamlet*, some of the music for Adam’s *Giselle* also evokes a mysterious, supernatural world, and Adam himself spelt the parallel between opera and ballet when he likened the Act I finale of *Giselle* to an operatic finale – possibly that of Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*, in which (as in Thomas’s opera and Adam’s ballet) the heroine “loses her mind before a crowd of sympathetic onlookers in a lengthy and riveting mad scene” (Marian Smith 168).

In many ways, Ophélie’s mad scene is typical – like other operatic mad figures, she is unable to recognize those around her, and she dwells on her memories in a state of hallucination, thinking that Hamlet is present. Two motifs from the love duet, therefore, figure prominently,\textsuperscript{54} and the dance rhythms, like that of other mad scenes, capitalize on a

\textsuperscript{53} See Marian Smith, esp. xi-xvii and 167-200. Composers such as Adam, Hérold and Thomas were known for their ballets as well as operas; moreover, many popular operas were often adapted as ballet-pantomimes.

\textsuperscript{54} The first, vs 26.7 ff to vs 28.9, recurs at vs 285.3 ff, and the second, the melody of “Doute de la lumière”, vs 30.2-11 (ex. 1), the only recurrent theme of the opera that undergoes rhythmic change, from 4/4 in the love duet to 3/4 in the final section of the mad scene:
representational tradition that links madness to dancing, and both to a loss of sexual inhibition (Clausen, *Macbeth* 133). Consequently, critics have read Ophélie’s mad scene’s dance rhythms and coloratura in terms of an implicitly sexualized hysterical syndrome (Clausen, “Shakespeare” 108 n.4). But whether the opera prepares the audience for the mad scene by showing her as someone having a “prior hysteric disposition” remains open to question, because the fragmentary, asymmetrical, rhythmically nervous musical idiom associated with Ophélie in the mad scene is not typical of the way she is characterized in the rest of the opera, as Clausen seems to suggest (“Shakespeare” 109).

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55 Given that Jean-Martin Charcot’s photographic records of hysteria come from the 1870s, it is tempting to assume that the cultural climate was conducive to such a reading of Ophelia. As Showalter notes, images of one of his patients, Augustine, frequently resemble the reproductions of Ophelia then available in wide circulation (122).

56 For example, David Charlton argues that “Ophelia’s character is limited by her *symmetrical*, short phrases over a static bass” (366, italics mine), an analysis that probably goes to the other extreme.
Whether or not the audience is encouraged to see Ophélie as a docile, virtuous girl or one with a prior hysterical disposition, opera as a medium does enable the audience to engage in a different reading, one which, as Carolyn Abbate puts it, “envoices” women:

What happens when we watch and hear a female performer? We are observing her, yet we are doing something for which there’s no word: the aural vision of staring. . . . Seeing a female figure may well more or less automatically invoke our culture’s opposition of male (active subject) and female (passive object). . . . But listening to the female singing voice is a more complicated phenomenon. Visually, the character singing is the passive object of our gaze. But aurally, she is resonant; her musical speech drowns out everything in range, and we sit as passive objects, battered by that voice. As a voice she slips into the “male/active/subject” position in other ways as well, since a singer, more than any other musical performer, enters into that Jacobin uprising inherent in the phenomenology of live performance and stands before us having wrested the composing voice away from the librettist and composer who wrote the score.

(254)

Abbate’s argument may seem to valorize music over drama, but there are several reasons to agree with her observation. From the very first performance, Christine Nilsson, the Swedish soprano who became the first Ophélie, “electrified the entire house,” so much so that it was feared that her mad scene would make everything else in the opera pale (Paul Bernard, qtd. in Schmidgall 319). And indeed, when the opera did drop out of the regular operatic repertoire, it was the mad scene (along with Hamlet’s drinking song) that continued to be regularly performed. Ralph P. Locke’s counterargument, that Abbate
“risks turning the female voice into a disembodied instrument (and thereby turning opera into a string of vocal concertos)” (qtd. in Clausen, Macbeth 256), needs to be tested against the realities of performance practice and audience response. For good or ill, audiences do respond to the concerto-like potential of Ophélie’s mad scene, and in a theatrical performance of the complete opera, where the scene is placed in a musicodramatic context, if Ophélie appears to be crushed by the various forces over which she has no control, the singer performing the role still has the potential to assert her artistry. Showalter’s observation that “the feminist revision of Ophelia comes as much from the actress’s freedom as from the critic’s interpretation” holds even truer for singers performing the role of Ophélie, owing to the nature of opera itself (116). By representing Ophélie’s madness as the result of Hamlet’s treatment of her, instead of locating it in her sexuality, as well as by “envoicing” her through the nature of the operatic medium itself, Thomas’s opera offers a reading of Ophelia that strikingly departs from, other nineteenth-century readings of Ophelia, and anticipates twentieth-century readings of the character.

**The Afterlife of Thomas’s Hamlet**

As stated earlier, Thomas’s opera fell into obscurity by the end of the First World War, and a few reasons can be suggested to account for it. Like Verdi’s Macbeth (and unlike Otello and Falstaff), Thomas’s opera is built on what has been called a “dramaturgy of contrasts” (Lacombe 107), in which the “characters function not so much as personalities, self-sufficient psychological entities, but rather as events, actor-agents in situations” (Powers 16). It is the situations, not the characters that determine the oppositions fundamental to the “dramaturgy of contrasts.” Yet, the choice of the situations and their
musical treatment in Thomas’s *Hamlet* is done with remarkable skill and finesse, so that the “dramaturgy of contrasts” on which this opera is built is not incompatible with a musical characterization of the psychological dimension of the protagonists, especially Hamlet and Ophelia, albeit in a limited way in the opera when compared to the drama.\textsuperscript{57} Nevertheless, the development of the through-composed operas of Wagner, and Verdi’s own variety of through-composition, especially in *Otello* and *Falstaff*, opened up newer and more effective means of musical delineation of the inner psychology of operatic characters in a way that made operas like Thomas’s *Hamlet* seem outmoded in comparison to later audiences. Moreover, Thomas’s opera, like Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette* and many of Verdi’s earlier operas, bear transparent signs of the adapters’ attempt to make a compromise with the cultural codes informing the receiving culture, an approach that, on the face of it, does not appear to place the composer’s individual artistic ideals over the dictates of convention.\textsuperscript{58} As Richard Taruskin has pointed out, such an approach was incompatible with notions of musical modernism for a trend-setting composer like Wagner (599). It was only when composers, Verdi included, articulated fidelity to personal artistic ideals, rather than audience expectations, as their artistic credo, that it became possible for composers to be considered modern, and their works of art to be subjected to serious critical attention by musicologists.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{57} This is in part because the individual numbers are skilfully linked to each other to form scene-complexes (Achter 324), often by means of sustained arioso passages (Charlton 365).

\textsuperscript{58} Even Thomas’s contemporaries seem to have noticed this when they praised him for being an intelligent assimilator of ideas, rather than for being an innovator (Achter 319).

\textsuperscript{59} As I shall show in Chapter 2, even the late Verdi was caught in a double-bind: like all other composers after Wagner, he was situated in a critical climate in which to be
On the other hand, three factors can be said to have helped the revival of Thomas’s *Hamlet*. First of all, as mentioned earlier, is the championing of the work by vocalists of international repute. Secondly, as David Littlejohn has observed, “the ‘standard repertoire’ of opera has never been larger or more diverse” than in the present day (27), ranging from Monteverdi to newly-composed operas. With operas from different periods and different styles available on CD and DVD, critics and audiences are better prepared to accept a wide diversity of singing styles, subject matter and forms within the broad category of opera, rather than approach the form from a pre-conceived, teleological perspective in which a work like Thomas’s opera represents a lower stage in the evolution of opera. The expansion of the canon, then, opens up the possibility for interested audiences to place operas in their proper historical contexts and, therefore, appreciate the virtues of a less frequently performed part of the operatic repertory, such as nineteenth-century French *grand opéra*, within the conventions of which Thomas and his librettists created their operatic *Hamlet*. Finally, with the rise of critical interest in adaptations and adaptation theory, unfavourable views of adaptations, based on a discourse of fidelity, have been increasingly challenged (Hutcheon 8-9; Sanders, *Adaptation* 13-14; Stam 7-8). The revival of Thomas’s *Hamlet* took place at a propitious time, the late 1980s, when there was also an increase of Shakespeare adaptations on film. While as readers and audiences of Shakespeare we should not, of course, ignore the “potentialities of meaning” that pertain only to Shakespeare’s plays (Clausen, *Macbeth* 14), given the fact that Shakespeare has been, and is being, adapted the world over, in different cultures and languages, we cannot dismiss adaptations of Shakespeare as innovative and unconventional meant being labelled an imitator of Wagner, while to stay true to one’s established style was to fall back in the march towards artistic progress.
secondary works. Nor can we ignore the complex ways in which adaptations have
themselves been crucial to the dissemination of Shakespeare. Since Shakespeare himself
was a master adapter of stories by others, we can regard the adaptations discussed here as
“form[s] of collaboration across time . . . culture and language” (Sanders, Adaptation 47),
collaborations that not only helped Shakespeare’s plays spread across Europe, but also
proved influential in the development of European drama and opera.
Chapter 2: Tradition, National Culture and Aesthetic Self-Fashioning: Verdi and Boito’s Post-Risorgimento Otello

Otello\(^1\) by Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), set to a libretto by Arrigo Boito (1842-1918) represents, in many ways, a case of operatic adaptation very different from Ambroise Thomas’s Hamlet. As I argued in the previous chapter, Thomas and his librettists strove to weave into their Hamlet pre-existing literary, theatrical, and musical traditions of nineteenth-century France. On the other hand, when Verdi started composing Otello, his penultimate opera, he was seemingly in a position of privilege few Shakespeare adapters had ever been in. He was a recognized grand maître of opera whose major works had already become part of the core operatic canon, and whose word was holy writ in the operatic life of Italy\(^2\) and much of the rest of Europe. He had been repeatedly persuaded to take up the Otello project by Giulio Ricordi, whose publishing house had strong connections with Italy’s most famous opera house, the Teatro alla Scala in Milan (Macnutt). Moreover, Ricordi had at his disposal for this project Boito, the most distinguished Italian librettist of the time,\(^3\) a composer in his own right, and one who in the 1860s had been among the most visible members of the Scapigliatura, or the Italian

\(^1\) Throughout this chapter, I write Othello and Othello to refer to Shakespeare’s play and its protagonist respectively and, similarly, Otello and Otello for Verdi’s opera and its hero.

\(^2\) Italian unification was completed only in 1870, but even before that date, Verdi’s reputation had spread to all the smaller constituent states that later converged to form the unified country.

\(^3\) Boito’s skill as a librettist brought out the best from composers: La Gioconda (1876) by Amilcare Ponchielli, and Mefistofele (revised version 1875), for which Boito wrote both words and music, are the only two Italian operas between Aida (1871) and Otello (1887) that have managed to establish themselves in the international operatic repertory.
avant garde. As is often repeated in Verdi criticism, a young Boito is supposed to have
denigrated the older composer (without naming him, of course);\(^4\) but by the 1880s Boito
was all too eager to recant. Verdi, on his part, made it known that he was working on
_Otello_ solely for his pleasure. At the time of composing, Verdi knew he was free from
many of the pressures faced by younger opera composers: the extreme necessity for
commercial success on the first night, on which would depend the possibility of future
performances; the fear that his opera might be regarded as falling short of Shakespeare’s
original; or the necessity of thinking in terms of conventional operatic structures and
conventions. This was a far cry from the pressures under which a much younger Verdi
had produced his _Macbeth_ (1847), his friend Ambroise Thomas his _Hamlet_, or Charles
Gounod his _Roméo et Juliette_ in all these cases, operatic and dramatic traditions, singers’
whims, venues and conditions of performance, and other factors had played their roles in
determining the ways in which the adaptation was conceived. It would appear, then, that
the mature and outstandingly successful Verdi, free from the constraints of time and
place, was finally in a position to adapt Shakespeare’s timeless masterpiece _Othello_ in a
way that best reflected his artistic temperament unencumbered by the dictates of
convention.

Was it really as easy for Verdi as the above account suggests? There were, in fact,
pressures and expectations of a different order, which made composing _Otello_ a unique

\(^4\) After the première of an opera by his friend Franco Faccio, Boito composed a Sapphic
Ode in which he claimed that Faccio would “cleanse the altar of Italian opera ‘now
defiled like the walls of a brothel’” (Budden, vol. 3:5). The deeply offended Verdi told
Tito Ricordi, “let him clean it and I will the first to come and light a candle” (Budden,
vol. 3:5), and it took a great deal of effort on the part of his son, Giulio, as well as the
self-effacing Boito, to make the later collaboration possible. For a thorough discussion of
the circumstances in which the opera was composed, see Budden, vol. 3:299-301.
challenge. Of all Shakespeare’s plays, *Othello* occupied a unique position in the theatrical and cultural scene in nineteenth-century Italy. Shakespearean actors from Italy, such as Tommaso Salvini (1829-1915) and Ernesto Rossi (1829-1896), who had distinguished themselves throughout Europe as interpreters of the title role, found their critical reception pre-determined and circumscribed by factors beyond their control. In the English-speaking world, they were usually regarded as capable of playing only “passionate” roles such as Othello that were considered to be more reflective of the so-called Latin temperament, instead of more pensive, introspective roles such as Hamlet, deemed better-suited for English and German actors. The pseudo-scientific racism that led to the stereotyping of Salvini and Rossi can be traced back historically to a long trajectory of racist discourse that goes back even before Shakespeare, and it is not surprising to find that these actors, especially Rossi, deeply resented the fact that such a discourse, in effect, predisposed audiences to accept only a few Shakespeare roles when performed by Italian actors (Carlson, *Italian Shakespearians* 135).

At the musical level, too, adapting *Othello* presented problems. Verdi found his style increasingly under attack, despite his undoubted fame. By the 1880s, Verdi’s exact contemporary and arch rival Richard Wagner came to be seen increasingly as embodying the most progressive elements in musical and operatic thought, to the extent that some contemporary Italian critics had started regarding Verdi and his aesthetic as outdated (Budden, vol. 3 263-292; Hepokoski, *Otello* 48-49; Taruskin 563-568). Verdi, in fact, had retired from operatic composition after the première of *Aida* in 1871 and faced the problem of being considered, irrespective of what he composed, as either old-fashioned
or, in case of the slightest whiff of innovation, an imitator of Wagner. Since Italian actors and opera stars often performed for the same audience groups, manipulating – even subverting – predictable critical responses of the kind outlined above was a challenge for leading nineteenth-century Italian Shakespeareans such as Verdi, and Shakespeare’s *Othello* provided a powerful site for such subversion.

Judging by nineteenth-century standards, Verdi and Boito’s *Otello* turns out to be deeply subversive in its treatment of race: the opera interrogates and, by and large, plays down a variety of racist interpretations of the character of Othello made popular in England by critics like Coleridge and in Continental Europe by translator-commentators like August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767-1845) and François-Victor Hugo (1828-1873). On the other hand, the libretto of *Otello* shares with Shakespeare’s play another discourse of Otherness – religious Otherness – which, in the play and in the opera, is based on a sharp distinction between Christianity and its Other, the Semitic religions of Judaism and Islam. Discourses of religious Otherness usually also have racial implications: as Étienne Balibar has argued, such discourses express a “culturalist” racism that finds contemporary expression in, for instance, French Arabophobia, and whose roots go back to theological anti-Judaism centuries ago (23-24). Developing Balibar’s insight, Julia

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5 This problem was also faced by Georges Bizet in France, who was accused of being “Wagnerian” by the majority of critics, until Nietzsche’s valorization of Bizet’s *Carmen* as the antidote to Wagner’s operas completely transformed Bizet’s critical reception. It is impossible to underestimate the ways in which the reception history of any work of art gets determined by the manner in which it gets co-opted in a larger critical discourse, then as well as now: as such, works could hardly speak for themselves, and the degree of success with which creative artists announced their aesthetic positions determined how their works were to be appreciated by critics and, by extension, the general public.

6 In this chapter, unless otherwise stated, I will refer to François-Victor Hugo (and not his father, Victor-Marie, the author of *Les Misérables*) simply by his last name.
Reinhard Lupton has argued that “Shakespeare’s *Othello* provides a canonical articulation of this protoracism insofar as the play fashions the Muslim in the image of the Jew according to the protocols of Pauline exegesis” (73). I will argue that historicizing Verdi’s opera will show that the discourse of religious Otherness is used to map cultural differences emerging in post-Risorgimento Italy as it made the transition from its traditional, cultural past, in which the Catholic Church played a leading role, to a newer, more cosmopolitan, and increasingly secular future. Hence, though the theme of religious Otherness is common to both Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Verdi’s *Otello*, the theme is woven into different kinds of discourses in the play and in the opera. It is necessary, therefore, to see Verdi’s adaptation as an independent work that creates different potentialities of meaning even when it draws upon the discourse of religious Otherness present in Shakespeare’s play, since Verdi’s opera is tied in with larger discursive networks associated with different interpretive communities, whose own social, cultural, and ideological moorings are different from that of Shakespeare, or his first audiences. For the same reason, further slippages in meaning can happen to both Shakespeare’s play and Verdi’s opera: present-day audiences are likely to interpret the discourse of religious Otherness in *Othello* or *Otello* differently from whatever Shakespeare and Verdi or their first audiences might or could have envisaged. As a result, neither the play nor the opera should be studied *exclusively* in terms of authorial intention, New Historicism, race, or gender. Instead, a combination of synchronous and diachronous approaches that enables one to trace changes in interpretive possibilities over time and space is necessary.
In this chapter, therefore, I first examine Otherness as it is presented in the play’s text, keeping in mind Elizabethan conventions of performance as well. As theatrical conventions changed, so did critical approaches, and my next areas of focus are the critical and theatrical modes through which Shakespeare’s plays and, in particular, *Othello*, reached Italian audiences. This leads to my analysis of the reasons why Italian actors such as Salvini and Rossi were exclusively associated with the role of Othello, especially in Anglophone countries, and I argue that Verdi and Boito’s decision to adapt *Othello* in a way that subverted traditional Italian theatrical interpretations provided a corrective to the stereotypes associated with Italian interpretations of the title role.

Related to this subversion is the highlighting in the libretto of the discourse of religious rather than racial Otherness, and I go on to explore the reasons why Boito did so. I also argue that the anti-clerical Verdi parallels the discourse of religious Otherness in the libretto with his own musical correlative, one that is best understood by placing the opera in the musical history of its times. Verdi musically characterizes the idealized, angelic Desdemona of the opera by associating her part with melody and the primacy of the human voice (features that Verdi associated with the traditional Italian musical “Self”), while he associates its musical “Other” (motivic development, declamatory singing, through-composed music, and other features deployed by nineteenth-century German opera composers, especially Wagner) with his villain Iago and, increasingly as he comes under Iago’s influence, Otello. However, Verdi does not present the character of Otello only as a tool in an ideological battle with the German operatic tradition; at the very end, he restores to Otello a tragic grandeur by musical means.
In the course of my study of Verdi’s *Otello*, I also examine what new interpretative possibilities Verdi and Boito open up, while eliminating others present in Shakespeare’s play. Specifically, I focus on Act 1 of Shakespeare’s *Othello* and argue that the omission of this Act in Verdi’s opera – necessitated by the process of compression involved in writing any libretto – makes *Otello* more vulnerable to adverse criticism than Shakespeare’s hero.

“Otherness” in Shakespeare’s *Othello*

In her book *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage*, Dympna Callaghan makes a crucial distinction between mimesis and exhibition. Mimesis, she argues, is a mode of representation that “entails an imitation of Otherness, and its dynamism results from the absence of the actual bodies of those it depicts, whose access to the scene of representation, therefore, needs no further restriction or containment,” while in the case of exhibition, people are set forth as display objects, “passive and inert before the active scrutiny of the spectator, without any control over, or even necessarily consent to, the representational apparatus in which they are placed” (Callaghan 77). It is useful to focus on the performance history of *Othello* in the light of the distinction between mimesis and exhibition because, from around the mid-nineteenth century onward many non-white and even non-Anglophone Italian actors experienced the tension between the two at first hand, when they attempted to perform the title role to primarily white, Anglophone audiences in England and North America.

Despite being by far the most numerous and conspicuous racial others in early modern England, Africans, including Moors, were always represented on the Renaissance
stage by white actors. In Shakespeare’s time, the role of Othello was never played by a black man, nor was Desdemona played by a woman. The great tragic actor Richard Burbage, who created the title role (Hankey 7), therefore, performed an act of mimesis whenever he played Othello. But, as times changed and Shakespeare’s play spread beyond the confines of the Globe theatre, performance conventions changed as well. Women gradually started playing Desdemona, while the title role was taken up by non-Anglophone and black actors. With these changes in performing practice, the dynamics of the relation between actors and their audiences altered remarkably. The role of Desdemona became highly sexualized, subjected to what Laura Mulvey would later describe in the context of cinema studies as the “male gaze.”

Similarly, depending upon their nationality or race, non-Anglophone and (especially) black actors performing the title role came to experience the tensions between mimesis and exhibition, as their performances became subject to analysis in the light of racist theories that proved to be stronger in conditioning audience and critical response than either Shakespeare’s text or the actors’ realization of it. In fact, playing Othello continued to pose problems for black actors well into the twentieth century: they continued to be sidelined, even as Shakespeare was valorized as a playwright of universal and timeless significance (Thompson 2). There were, of course, actors like Ira Aldridge who, through their extraordinary talent and determination to challenge typecasting, managed to create a space for themselves in parts of Europe around the mid-nineteenth century. Yet, by and

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7 This is clear from reports from the Restoration period by Richard Steele or Charles Lillie in magazines such as *The Tatler* or *The Spectator* (quoted in Hankey 17), or from the frontispiece to Nicholas Rowe’s 1709 edition of *Othello* (reproduced in Hankey 16).
large, black actors found it nearly impossible to break free of the racial prejudices that many a white nineteenth-century critic brought into the theatre.

In almost all such cases, the adverse criticisms that these actors had to face were due to the fact that, under the hostile eyes of unsympathetic audiences and critics, their mimesis became exhibition: “they [were] seen to be merely playing themselves” (Callaghan 91). Such a prejudice extended not only to black actors but, in varying degrees, also to actors in other parts of the world, such as India and, as we shall see, parts of Europe as well. Moreover, this prejudice was centuries old in Europe. In his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), for example, Robert Burton writes:

> Southern men are more hot, lascivious and jealous, than such as live in the North: they can hardly contain themselves in those hotter climes, but are most subject to prodigious lusts. Leo Afer [Africanus] telleth incredible things almost of the lust and jealousy of his Countrymen of Africa . . . and so doth every Geographer of them in Asia, Turkey, Spain, and Italy. Germany hath not so many drunkards, England Tobacconists, France Dancers, Holland Mariners, as Italy alone hath jealous husbands. (qtd. in Loomba, *Shakespeare* 94)

Leo Africanus’ extremely popular book, *Delle descrittione dell’ Africa*, from which Burton’s description is taken, goes back before Shakespeare: first published in Italian in

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8 A Bengali actor, Baishnav Charan Adhya (or Auddy), played the role of Othello in what appears to be the first recorded inter-racial performance of a play in India, at the Sans Souci Theatre in Calcutta in 1848. The British authorities, alarmed by the situation, decided to scuttle the performance by issuing a notice that prevented the actors playing the roles of Iago, Brabantio and Emilia from appearing onstage. Under such circumstances, the performance had to be cancelled, but the authorities were forced to withdraw the prohibition after a while because of popular pressure, leading to the successful debut of Adhya in the title role. The reviews of Adhya’s performance in the English-language press ranged from condescending praise and encouragement to hostility. For a discussion of this performance, see Chapter 3 and Chakravorty 191-92.
1550, the book was translated into French and Latin by 1556, and into English by 1600; it was, therefore, widely available in different European vernaculars by the time Shakespeare’s *Othello* was first performed. The creation of racial stereotypes, in this instance, is founded on the assumption that racial characteristics are determined by climatic conditions. This assumption was still present in the nineteenth century and formed the basis for the typecasting of Salvini and Rossi, as we shall see later.

Any analysis of Othello’s marginal status is incomplete without the examination of gender relations. It is easy to read Othello as a deeply flawed character with regard to his treatment of Desdemona, but if we are to historicize gender relations, we will find that Shakespeare’s *Othello* offers a fascinating critique of the pressures felt by both men and women as far as their socially determined gender roles were concerned. While male authority implied female subordination in public, recent scholars have argued that there was, in private, a strong companionate ethos (Foyster 2). Yet, the maintainance of the latter also served male interests, for, as Foyster puts it, it was a test of “manhood that . . . [men] should prove equally capable of managing their affairs” in both the public and the private sphere (4). Cuckoldry was assumed to result from men’s inability to assert sexual dominance over their wives (Foyster 5), and the way defendants could assert their innocence, or prove the other party wrong, was through a process known as “compurgation,” which required a person’s neighbours to vouch for her/his good standing; in other words, a person’s reputation could acquire legal standing in legal disputes (Foyster 11). If a person was “proved” to be a cuckold, he would be publicly humiliated in a range of rituals, among the most insulting being charivari, which were “loud, mocking demonstrations aimed at individuals who had offended community
norms” (Foyster 109). Women received worse punishments: these could range from social humiliation, such as the cucking or ducking stool to which she would be tied for public display, to physically painful punishment, such as being made to wear branks – iron collars which cut into the tongue (Foyster 112).

A man’s public reputation was inextricably linked to his control over his private life. For the lower classes, this could mean having good credit – both moral worth and monetary solvency; for the upper classes, it was “honour” (a word with less monetary connotations) that counted. Such a situation was not peculiar to England alone: it was also “of consequence in other early modern countries such as France, Germany, Italy, and Spain” (Foyster 6), and explains why the reading of Othello as a noble human being defending his honour held sway with Salvini and Rossi, who were, after all, active in nineteenth-century Italy rather than seventeenth-century England.

The position of power given to men also caused them to feel the pressure to assert their masculinity; hence, any threat to it, such as allegations of cuckoldry, was particularly galling. On the other hand, some aspects could be under some extent of personal control: control over one’s sexual urges, the ability not to get drunk, and the capability of retaining one’s sense of reason and good judgement. In this context, the success of Iago’s strategy – arousing the jealousy of Othello – is as simple as it is effective. Although it was a sign of weakness to admit one’s jealousy, several of Shakespeare’s characters do give voice to their jealousy, such as King Leontes in The

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9 According to a 1562 homily on marriage, women were “not endued with like strength and constancy of mind; therefore, they be sooner disquieted and they be the more prone to all weak affectations and dispositions of the mind, more than men be, and lighter they be and more vain in their fantasies and opinions” (qtd. in Foyster 29).
Winter’s Tale and Mr. Ford in The Merry Wives of Windsor,\textsuperscript{10} to name but just two examples from two different Shakespeare dramatic subgenres, romance and comedy. But Othello’s situation is different, since he has a sense of personal inadequacy arising from a number of factors: his racial identity in a world where to be fair-skinned was to be beatiful; his being older than Desdemona; and his being less socially sophisticated or handsome than his lieutenant Cassio. As pointed out earlier, from the beginning Othello is acutely aware of his precarious social position in Venice: he can expect only qualified acceptance as long as he provides selfless service to the state. Significantly, on being convinced of Desdemona’s adultery, Othello exclaims that his occupation is gone (3.3.358), though his private, compassionate self expresses itself indirectly from time to time, for example, as he cries out to Iago: “[B]ut yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!” (4.1.185). As Foyster observes, “[t]he pun on the word ‘occupation’ to imply both vocation and copulation shows that notion of ‘public’ and ‘private’ reputation were inseparable in this society” (115). Hence, for Othello, to lose his authority in the private sphere, and by extension, in the public one as well, would be more disastrous than for a Leontes or a Ford, individuals who are better integrated into their respective societies on account of their racial identity and social standing.

It is remarkable that the other male protagonist whom Iago’s successfully brings down in social standing – Cassio – is a victim of the discourse against drunkenness. All of Iago’s victims suffer because Iago is successful in convincing them that their reputation, an attribute that had strong private, public, and legal repercussionssions, is at stake

\textsuperscript{10} Verdi recognized the parallels between Othello and Mr. Ford, and made the music depicting the latter’s jealousy echo Othello’s. For a comparison between Otello and Ford, see Hepokoski, \textit{Falstaff} 166-68.
and he, Iago, is there to save it. The point here is not whether one should sympathize with Othello, but that the play brilliantly illustrates how the power of words could make possible both self-fashioning and its obverse, the undoing of others. Act 1 of Shakespeare’s *Othello* is crucial in this regard, as it provides the template for our understanding of the entire play, and to leave it out for the sake of compression while leaving much of the rest intact, as Boito did when writing his libretto, is to rupture Shakespeare’s finely-wrought imbrication of various social discourses.

Otherness in the play is not based only on the lines of race and gender: a discourse of difference between Christianity, on the one hand, and Judaism/Islam, on the other, provides another important category of Otherness in the play. Religion is, in fact, central to Othello’s identity. As Greenblatt puts it,

> [Othello’s] identity depends upon a constant performance, as we have seen, of his “story,” a loss of his own origins, an embrace and perpetual reiteration of the norms of another culture. It is this dependence that gives Othello, the warrior and alien, a relation to Christian values that is the existential equivalent of a religious vocation; he cannot allow himself the moderately flexible adherence that most ordinary men have towards their own formal beliefs. Christianity is the alienating yet constitutive force in Othello’s identity. (245)

Nevertheless, Greenblatt’s own observation that “the Moor at once represents the institution and the alien, the conqueror and the infidel” (234) provides a better entry point into the discourse of religious Otherness. What kind of (potential) infidel is Othello? A Gentile? A Muslim? It is here that Lupton’s reading is useful. She writes: “In

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11 The play has also been read in terms of a conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism. For a reading along these lines, see Watson 234-57.
Shakespeare’s Venetian plays, Christian-humanist discourse always operates as a universalism minus the circumcised, a set that excludes not the unconverted pagans of the New World but rather the Jews and the Muslims, strict monotheisms existing not far away but close at hand” (78; emphasis in the original). While in the early scenes of Shakespeare’s Othello, “the black Othello functions as the living symbol of Christian universalism,” he gradually comes under the influence of Iago, the embodiment of evil in the play, and whom Shakespeare roots in the “Old Testament ethos of historical ressentiment, seasoned by the damaged pride and nurtured spite of all the Cains, Ishmaels, and Esau’s passed over in the Bible for younger favoured sons” (Lupton 77; italics in the original). (Iago’s Credo in the opera is extremely important in this regard.) As a result of Iago’s influence, Othello is transformed and increasingly identifies “with a jealous justice that must be executed at any cost, a law driven by the fierce monogamy of an immoderate monotheism” (Lupton 79). The ethic of vengeance is associated with evil, on the one hand, and Judaism and Islam, on the other, for it goes against the Christian notion of forgiveness. Hence, Otello’s increasing insistence on vengeance in Verdi’s opera gets readily imbricated into the discourse of religious Otherness. Though, as I shall argue in detail later, the discourse of religious Otherness serves a different purpose in the opera, Otello’s anti-Islamic rhetoric, which Boito incorporates directly from Shakespeare, and Iago’s proclamation of faith in a cruel God (“un Dio crudel”) make this discourse susceptible to the loss of its specific function in the opera and, instead, to its absorption, especially in present times, into the mainstream discourse of “a generalized anti-Semitism,” to use Balibar’s phrase.
The conventions of performance on the Renaissance stage enabled a playwright like Shakespeare to evoke all these categories of difference (and also subvert them). A male, white actor in blackface could represent any non-white Other, and any such character could be the Other in both racial and religious terms. Othello as played by Burbage could have been thought of by the play’s first audiences as being both non-white (more specifically a Moor, light-skinned or otherwise) and non-Christian. Only Othello’s willingness to fight against the Ottomites (1.3.231)\textsuperscript{12} provides the first hint that he may be a Christian, and it is much later that Othello specifically aligns himself with a pro-Christian (and anti-Islamic) discourse:

\begin{quote}
Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that \\
Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites? \\
For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl. (2.3.151-53)
\end{quote}

The loss, with time, of the fluidity of the representational conventions of the Renaissance stage meant that more specific racist discourses gradually took over and informed performance practice and criticism of the play. As a result, by the time non-white actors took up the title role, a well-established racist discourse normally prevented them from being regarded as anything else other than exhibitions, in Callaghan’s sense. All they could expect, at best, was to play this one and only Shakespearean role.

The latter fact is significant in the context of this chapter, for it is not by coincidence that the only nineteenth-century adaptation of \textit{Othello} that is still performed in present times is an Italian one, the Verdi-Boito \textit{Otello}. It is also not coincidental that the nineteenth-century focus on the racial aspect of the play, represented most forcefully

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{12} Unless otherwise stated, all references to Shakespeare’s \textit{Othello} are from the New Cambridge edition edited by Norman Sanders.
\end{footnote}
(and problematically) in continental criticism by Schlegel and Hugo, and translated into performance by the contemporary Italian actors such as Tommaso Salvini and Ernesto Rossi, was subverted in the Verdi-Boito adaptation. In fact, there is also critical agreement over the fact that, compared to other nineteenth-century adaptations and interpretations, Verdi’s Otello by and large avoids the racial stereotypes that were evoked in nineteenth-century stage representations in England and Continental Europe, suggesting that Verdi and Boito were, at best, only partially influenced by the critical readings of Schlegel and Hugo. Why was this so? Was their decision to avoid, by and large, a racist reading of Othello tied up, in any way, to musical issues? Does the fact that Verdi and Boito radically departed from the conventions of Italian opera and of local performance practice of Shakespeare mean that the opera avoids performative transculturation entirely? If not, in what ways did they reflect cultural concerns of their time? Answers to these questions can only be found by examining the historical, cultural, and political contexts in which the opera was written, and to which it responds.

Interrelations between Theatre and Opera in Nineteenth-Century Italy

A brief survey of the Italian theatre and opera at the beginning of the nineteenth century will show that, first, the histories of the two art forms are more closely intertwined than in

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13 Because of their pan-European prestige as commentators on Shakespeare, the prefaces by Schlegel and Hugo were very influential, and were widely translated and printed in other European languages.

14 The popularity of these actors as interpreters of Othello extended all over Europe and reached even North America. The careers of Salvini, Rossi and the highly influential Italian Shakespearean actress, Adelaide Ristori, are discussed in Carlson’s Italian Shakespearians, especially 24-35, 47-59 and 128-135. Salvini, the one to receive the greatest critical acclaim among them, had a strong influence on the acting methods of Constantin Stanislavski (Carlson, Italian Shakespearians 183; Farrell 4).
other European countries, and second, that as art of all forms took on pronouncedly
nationalist overtones in nineteenth-century Europe (and, indeed in many other parts of the
world), Italian theatre and opera did so using sources from various other literary and
dramatic traditions: indeed, Shakespeare and Ibsen were central to the development of
Italian drama (Farrell 5). As such, Italian opera, even as it was nationalist in emphasis,
was capable of reaching out to audiences elsewhere in Europe on account of the diversity
of its literary sources. The reasons why Italian drama and opera developed in this unique
way are discussed in the section below.

Unlike other European countries such as England, Germany, France or Spain,
Italy did not have a golden age of drama, and there was no period in the history of Italian
drama when a number of extraordinary dramatists worked at more or less the same
period, as Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Marlowe and others did in Elizabethan/Jacobean
England, Lope de Vega and Calderón in Spain, Corneille and Racine in France, or
Goethe and Schiller in Germany (Farrell 1). This unusual feature in the history of Italian
theatre meant that spoken drama was by and large dominated by actors rather than
playwrights and also that Italian theatre tended to look outwards towards other European
playwrights (and, in the nineteenth century, even towards the Sanskrit playwright
Kalidasa) (Taviani 209), making it in some ways more open to non-indigenous influences
than other European theatrical traditions. Italian opera reflected the same catholicity of
taste: nineteenth-century Italian composers, especially Donizetti and Verdi, found
operatic material in works of authors from all over Europe – Tasso, Voltaire,
Shakespeare, Goethe, Schiller, Victor Hugo, Byron, and Sir Walter Scott, to name the
most popular ones. As a result, Italian spoken and musical theatre became sites where
“national” theatrical and dramatic traditions were built on a cross-cultural foundation, unlike German theatre (and, with Wagner, opera), which aimed to create a drama that was much more specifically geared to German myths, literature, and national history. The wide range of dramatic sources no doubt ensured that Italian opera retained its pan-European appeal, even when its musical ascendancy was being challenged by the musical traditions of other countries, especially Germany, specifically in the opera house and in the realm of instrumental music. An adaptation of a play of pan-European reputation such as *Othello* by a composer of Verdi’s stature, and at a crucial moment of Italian opera was, therefore, destined to occupy an important position in Italian—even European—cultural history.

There were striking parallels between spoken and sung drama in Italy: Italian singers and actors would perform excerpts from operas and plays respectively, in order to show their command over their art to the maximum possible advantage (Taviani 212). Yet, the notion of the centrality of the author gained ground both in the fields of spoken drama and opera in the nineteenth century, with the composer gradually assuming the responsibility for the artistic product in the case of opera. This was possible, no doubt,

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15 It should be noted in this context that, despite the increasingly important role played by German commentators and scholarship in promoting Shakespeare across Europe in the nineteenth century, there were no German-language adaptations of note, and that the plays of Shakespeare that were admired most in German-speaking lands were the history plays, works inextricably linked with British history and which have generally fared poorly in terms of cross-cultural adaptations. In addition, an anti-Shakespeare attitude also gained prominence from the mid-nineteenth century in Germany (Habicht 243-52).

16 Writing of the *Othello* première, Eduard Hanslick wrote: “It is understandable that all Italy should have held its breath. . . . But that the leading newspapers of France, England, Germany, and even America should have sent reporters to Milan in the middle of winter to report on its success, even to submit telegraphic bulletins act by act, was a striking sign of the times. . . . [W]here has there ever been a hundredth so much general European interest in a new opera?” (276).
because of Verdi, who initiated a number of changes. First, he changed the nature of collaboration between composer and librettist, usually by outlining the libretto in prose form, with specifications to the librettist regarding the kind of verses he wanted. Verdi, therefore, ensured that he was the primus inter pares in the collaborative act of operatic composition. From the early part of his career, therefore, Verdi had as strong a sense of artistic selfhood as had Wagner. These facts need to be kept in mind when we think of the enormous importance attached to the Otello première, the stylistic features of Verdi’s last two operas, and the nature of the Verdi-Boito collaboration: Boito definitely played a key role enabling Verdi to write a “modern”

17 This was in contrast to composers like Wagner, who wrote both the music and the texts of his operas, or French composers like Gounod and Thomas, who usually collaborated with their librettists on a more egalitarian basis (Speare 36). Verdi would depart from his norm when collaborating with Boito over Otello and Falstaff, because Boito had a high reputation for being a librettist of extraordinary literary culture and musical sensitivity, and also because he had a sense of “modern” opera that Verdi now wanted to write.

18 Traditionally, an Italian opera composer would cease to have control over his score once it was composed and rehearsed (Budden, vol. 1 4-5), and since they were comprised of individual numbers connected together by recitative, it was possible to interpolate “hit” numbers from previous operas into new ones. Yet, as early as 1844, Verdi refused to pander to singers’ demands for additional arias; three years later, with his opera Macbeth, Verdi began to prevent unsanctioned changes to his scores (Budden, vol. 1 4-5). From the 1850s, as Verdi’s publisher Ricordi started issuing vocal scores of operas soon after their first performance (Budden, vol. 1 5), the interpolation of hit numbers from other operas became less and less possible. Such changes gave the score of an opera (and, by extension, its composer) higher artistic status than before.

19 In Italy, the librettist was accorded a rather liminal artistic status. On the one hand, he was a poet, an author of melodrammi, and his name would be prominently displayed in playbills. Yet he was expected to show little originality, produce librettos as quickly as possible, and not hesitate to use stock phrases and expressions even more indiscriminately than composers might. Such conditions of production ensured that Italian operas tended to be rather formulaic, compared to operas from other countries. In such a context, Verdi’s demand for “new subjects, new forms” was more radical than it now seems (Budden, vol. 1 21).
opera, one which focussed on the interiority of the protagonists rather than on action and spectacle, but his role in this regard has been somewhat overemphasized, as I shall argue later.

Italian was a language “employed by educated people for reading and writing,” while a variety of dialects were in fact spoken by the people of the peninsula, across all social classes. Correspondingly, there were two different kinds of theatres, those that used Italian, and those that employed dialects (Taviani 215). The presence of a wide spectrum of dialects of Italian in the theatre, coupled with the absence of a strong tradition of written, literary drama, ensured that “the impact of foreign writers on the Italian stage, whether Shakespeare in the Romantic age or Ibsen in the early modern period . . . was decisive” (Farrell 4-5). This was possible also because of the enterprising role played by actors such as Rossi, who commissioned translations of Shakespeare, such as the one of *Othello* (1852) by Giulio Carcano (Carlson, *Italian Shakespearians* 20), that proved influential in the long run. Moreover, in most cases, both Shakespearean actors from Italy and Italian opera composers and librettists knew or consulted the same translations of Shakespeare, replete with the same critical commentaries, usually those of French or German writers in translation. Moreover, Italian singers and actors generally performed in the same theatres when touring abroad (such as Drury Lane in England), most likely to the same audiences; in fact, the popularity of Italian singers did much to create a demand for Italian Shakespearean actors such as Tommaso Salvini in England

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20 In his preface to his translation of *King Lear* (1843), Carcano presented Shakespeare as a dramatist of pan-European significance. He argued that while Italy rediscovered the genre of tragedy for the rest of Europe, Shakespeare “saw in tragedy what it could be at this time, the most powerful revelation of our individuality, the representation of humanity itself in action,” which made him “in a certain sense the poet presaging modern Europe” (qtd. in Carlson, *Italian Shakespearians* 20).
(Carlson, *Italian Shakespearians* 51). Naturally, audiences expected both kinds of performers to share certain interpretive approaches when performing *Othello*. By the same token, Italian actors and singers could expect similar responses to their interpretation of the title role, for, as I argued earlier, English and American critics had set notions about what Shakespearean roles suited Italian actors, based on their “Southern” temperament. It is not surprising that Verdi would use his enormous prestige in European culture to create an *Otello* that challenged the stereotypical expectations of Italian actors by Anglophone critics, something the actors resented but were unable to overcome by themselves. To understand the ideas that European and American audiences expected Italian actors to bring to their interpretations of the role of Othello, it is necessary to examine the reception of Shakespeare and the modes of textual transmission of *Othello* in Italy.

**Shakespeare’s Reception in Italy**

The trajectory of Shakespeare’s reception in Italy paralleled that of France, with some significant differences. First, as discussed in the previous section, Italian theatre and Italian opera were more closely interconnected than in Germany or France; hence, the two dramatic forms have a shared history of Shakespeare’s reception and performance. Secondly, as Italian dramatic aesthetics were deeply influenced by French precepts, Shakespeare’s reception gradually resulted in the formation of two major interpretive communities just as it happened in France, with a conservative majority that still adhered to neoclassical precepts, and a smaller but, in the long run, more influential group that,

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21 This necessarily summary section is largely based on material from Carlson, *Italian Shakespearians* 11-23.
like the French Romantics, rejected those precepts and embraced Shakespearean drama. Thirdly, it was the advocacy of Shakespeare by famous actors such as Salvini and Ernesto Rossi and composers like Verdi that Shakespeare’s plays gradually came to be accepted by Italian audiences. Performative transculturation was the principal means of making Shakespeare reach out to mass audiences, but it had more qualified success in Italy than in France. Fourthly, Italian actors and singers made touring central to their careers, and the interpretive communities they reached out to were more varied than those of their counterparts in other European countries, since they were spread over Europe and North America. Moreover, Italian performers had an added incentive to succeed with international audiences. The story of Shakespeare’s reception in Italy was, therefore, not just confined to interpretive communities in Italy alone: the ability to negotiate audience preferences, prejudices, and responses from all over Europe and North America were central to the careers of Italian actors and musicians.

Because of the strong French cultural influence on Italy throughout the eighteenth century, Italian responses to Shakespeare were also influenced by the ambivalence of French writers such as Voltaire towards Shakespearean drama. Indeed, despite the high regard in which Shakespeare was held by the famous dramatist Carlo Goldoni or the London-based Italian critic Giuseppe Baretti, French neoclassicism held the upper hand, for records show that eighteenth-century performances of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* proved extremely popular with Italian audiences when they were given in versions translated from French versions (such as that by Jean-François Ducis) that altered the plays to conform to eighteenth-century French tastes. Versions that stayed closer to Shakespeare were less successful; one such example is the *Hamlet* performed by the
Italian actor Antonio Morrocchesi in the translation of Alessandro Verri (1815) which, if not free from faults, did not constitute a rewriting of the play along neoclassical lines. By the turn of the nineteenth century, leading Italian dramatists such as Vittorio Alfieri, Ugo Foscolo, Vincenzo Monti, and Giovanni Pindemonte, were praising Shakespeare, though not without reservations. Alessandro Pepoli, the only Italian dramatist of this period to wholeheartedly accept the Shakespearean juxtaposition of the tragic and the comic, the high and the low, prose and verse, wrote a play, *Ladislo* (1796) along Shakespearean lines, but it had only moderate success.

The challenge thrown by Madame de Staël’s essay “Sulla maniera e la utilità della traduzioni” (1816), in which she urged young Italian writers to turn to Shakespeare and other English and German writers as role models, resulted in Alessandro Manzoni’s beginning to write, two months later, the verse tragedy *Il Conte di Carmagnola*, “under the influence of Shakespeare,” as Manzoni himself put it (Carlson, *Italian Shakespearians* 17). Her provocative essay is seen to have precipitated a crucial debate between the Classicists and the Romantics (Tomlinson 43-45), but some of the debate regarding the value of neo-Classical precepts had already begun, both in France and in Italy (such as in the earlier essays of Baretti, who published his later articles from England). Indeed, as in France, Shakespeare’s plays became embroiled in the debate regarding the acceptance or the rejection of neo-Classical dramatic conventions. One of the participants in this debate, Michele Leoni, published translations (mostly in verse) of fourteen of Shakespeare’s plays, between 1819 and 1822. Although Leoni was unwilling to depart radically from neo-Classical tenets and continued the earlier practice of modifying Shakespeare, his decision to include translations of prefaces to the plays by
August Wilhelm Schlegel put Italians in touch with the most influential among continental critics on Shakespeare.

Despite the championing of Shakespeare by Manzoni, who had displaced Voltaire as the leading influence on Italian intellectual life, audiences took their time in accepting Shakespeare, because Shakespeare’s case had not yet been won in the Italian theatre. As late as 1842, Gustavo Modena, the leading actor of the day, was not successful in his staging of Shakespeare, and it was his protégés Alemanno Morelli (with Hamlet), Rossi and Salvini, who finally achieved success with Shakespeare on stage. Part of their success was due to the excellence of Carcano’s translations but even then, it was mostly through the persistence with which Rossi and Salvini continued to perform Shakespeare that audiences gradually came to accept, and even demand, performances of some of the plays by around 1870 (Carlson, Italian Shakespearians 22). Even then, the popularity of Shakespeare seems to have been somewhat cultish: some, but by no means the majority of dramatists and actors, composers and librettists, seem to have admired Shakespeare’s plays. The ever-cautious theatrical and operatic management, afraid of commercial failure in the financially insecure world of the Italian theatre and opera business, was always worried about the commercial viability of Shakespeare, and it required the star power of a Rossi or a Salvini or a Verdi to put Shakespeare on stage. The greater financial insecurity of Italian theatres compared to French or German ones, coupled with the eclectic nature of the repertoire and the importance accorded to the leading actors meant that both theatrical and operatic stars found it difficult to break away from

22 Although the situation was much better in England, it is interesting to note that F. B. Chatterton, manager of Drury Lane from 1863 onwards, remarked that “Shakespeare spells ruin and Byron bankruptcy” (Carlson, Italian Shakespearians 50).
conventions. Moreover, they depended considerably on tours to supplement their income and fame and, in some cases, took the opportunity to mount productions of plays like *Coriolanus* that were too expensive to be staged in the financially unstable world of Italian theatre (Carlson, *Italian Shakespearians* 55). Since, by the mid-nineteenth century, Shakespeare had come to be regarded as a major playwright at least in France, Germany, and Italy, not to mention England and North America, his plays provided an effective vehicle for showing off an actor’s histrionic capabilities to new audiences. Indeed, there is reason to suppose that actors, composers or theatrical managers chose to adapt or perform Shakespeare with pan-European, or even international audiences in mind, just as modern-day filmmakers continue to adapt Shakespeare with a mind to reach out to global audiences.  

The spread of Shakespeare’s plays into non-Anglophone countries from the nineteenth century undoubtedly facilitated performances across languages and cultures.

It is now clear why Rossi and Salvini would focus almost exclusively on Shakespearean roles for their international tours. Salvini’s Othello drew all kinds of audiences in Europe and North America, but his other performances drew only the cultural élite and, where there was one, the local Italian population (Carlson, *Italian Shakespearians* 49). In contrast, Rossi was, by common consent, the lesser actor and consequently, received a more mixed press, but some of the criticism directed at him by a number of English and American critics was due to the fact that his repertory was more varied than Salvini’s and brought out the critics’ prejudiced notions regarding his

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23 Such tours were also undertaken by German, Russian and Indian companies as well, but not as frequently or extensively as Italian ones.

24 One of the few exceptions was Salvini’s interpretation of Hamlet, which was widely praised by the great nineteenth-century reformer of Shakespearean staging, William Poel (Carlson, *Italian Shakespearians* 51).
suitability to perform a wider range of Shakespearean roles. Some English reviewers, recalling that even Salvini was inadequate as Hamlet, suggested that such “northern” roles as Hamlet and Lear were beyond the temperament of the Italian actors, their technical prowess and acting notwithstanding (Carlson, Italian Shakespearians 130). Rossi was equally underappreciated in North America, where he had focused on Hamlet and King Lear above all, in order to avoid competition with Salvini, who offered mostly Othello to his audiences. In his review of Rossi’s interpretation of the role of Hamlet, the then highly influential critic William Winter wrote in the New York Tribune:

*Hamlet* and the other great Shakespearean works exist in their integrity nowhere outside of the English language – unless, perhaps, in the German. The English ideals of them are the right ideals of them, and the English method of acting them is the right method. The foreign actors who come here ought to deal with what they really understand, and give the great works of their own literature, with companies speaking their own language. (qtd. in Carlson, Italian Shakespearians 135)

Thus, although the degree to which they faced opposition and prejudice was much less compared to black actors such as Ira Aldridge, the grounds on which the Italian Shakespearean actors were deemed inadequate to perform Shakespeare (except the “jealous” or “passionate” role of Othello) were racial – they were not “quintessentially English or at least Nordic” enough to perform Shakespearean roles that were, nevertheless, “timeless” and “universal” in their scope (Carlson, Italian Shakespearians 135). As mentioned earlier, the basis for such a racist stereotyping went back to the early seventeenth century and even further back in time, when Italians were classified with
Africans, Turks, Spaniards and other allegedly passionate “southern” peoples. Rossi was, naturally, galled by criticism of this kind, particularly because he had learned a variety of Shakespearean roles and had, indeed, written about them as well, unlike Salvini and Adelaide Ristori, who specialized in Othello and Lady Macbeth respectively, and confined themselves almost exclusively to these roles when performing Shakespeare abroad. In a letter he wrote to The Times, Rossi insisted that his interpretations were based on careful readings of the text and that they were as valid as traditional English ones, but responses remained negative. Dispirited, Rossi returned to Paris, and then went to Russia, places where he was much more successful.  

Nineteenth-Century English and Continental Interpretations of Othello

It is an irony, then, that it was through the explicitly racist reading of August Wilhelm Schlegel (in Leoni’s translation) that many Italian readers were introduced to Othello, and even more of an irony that Italian actors based their interpretation on racist assumptions even when faced with a stereotyping that was based on an age-old tradition of associating the “Southern” temperament of Italians, Spaniards, and Africans with excessive passion and lust. Since nineteenth-century English and European criticism on Othello was dominated by race-based discourses, these actors had no alternative

Ira Aldridge, who performed Shakespeare both in big cities and small towns all over Europe (including Russia, where he performed in Russian), was able to create a space for himself in parts of Continental Europe, because of his excellent portrayal of marginalized Shakespearean figures, especially Othello and Shylock (the latter in whiteface): his sympathetic portrayal of the latter in one Russian town led a delegation of Jews to officially thank him for his performance (Kujawinska-Courtney, “Aldridge” 116). He met with far greater hostility on British and American stages, and was barred from playing Shakespeare “in the legitimate London theatres” (Kujawinska-Courtney 105). See also Hankey 53-56.
interpretive strategy to take recourse to, one that would enable them to bypass the race-based discourse and, at the same time, reach out to audiences throughout Europe and North America. The recurrent question as to the exact nature of Othello’s blackness may have been triggered, in part, by the Romantics’ “concern with nationality and ethnicity, the local and the particular” (Kujawinska-Courtney, “Aldridge” 107), and Schlegel’s view was that Shakespeare made a “fortunate mistake” in making Othello, who must have been “in every respect a negro!” (qtd. in Bate, Romantics 479). According to Schlegel, Othello’s assumption of the civilized ways of Venice was only superfluous and that “the mere physical force of passion [put] to flight in one moment all his acquired and mere habitual virtues, [giving] the upper hand to the savage over the moral man” (qtd. in Bate, Romantics 479). Such an assumption also informed Victor Hugo’s reading of the play (see Bate, Romantics 496-497).

On the other hand, a different kind of racism is to be found in Coleridge’s reading of Othello, who wrote that Othello had to be a Moor, for, in his words, “it would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable negro. It would argue disproportionateness, a want of balance, in Desdemona, which Shakespeare does not appear to have in the least contemplated” (Bate, Romantics 483). Coleridge’s views were echoed and elaborated by François-Victor Hugo, whose translation of Othello was the basis for Boito’s libretto.26 Like Coleridge, Hugo also insisted that Othello could not have been black, but had to be an Arab, a member of a race with a glorious past, and thus his marriage to the Caucasian Desdemona was “the

26 Although Boito knew some English and, at some point, consulted an English text of the play, there is Boito’s own remark to Blanche Roosevelt as well as internal, textual evidence to show that it was the 1860 edition of Hugo’s translation that Boito primarily consulted (Hepokoski, Otello 24-25).
sympathetic fusion of these two primordial types of human beauty, the Semitic and the Caucasian type” (qtd. in Hepokoski, *Otello* 170). As Julie Hankey has observed, “[t]he only way the nineteenth-century theatre could get rid of the beast in Othello was first to deny his jealousy and then to de-sex his love” (42). To make Othello a tawny Moor rather than the black savage was an essential first step, as it were, in the ennobling of Othello, as Coleridge and other like-minded critics saw it.

These two different, but influential readings of *Othello* from nineteenth-century Europe shared the racist assumption that a black Othello must necessarily be inferior to a lighter-skinned one, but they engendered two different readings of the character of Othello. Where Schlegel, focussing on Othello’s blackness and alleged atavistic savagery, presented him as a fundamentally negative character who murdered Desdemona because of the uncontrollable jealousy and violent rage characteristic of his race, Hugo read *Othello* as a play of honour and that Othello’s decision to kill Desdemona could be separated from the “demands of moral justice and revenge” (qtd. in Hepokoski, *Otello* 170). A similar point was made by Salvini, who wrote: “Othello loves Desdemona and kills her because she is untrue to the laws of honour, and not for hate or jealousy; [. . .] it is the indignation of the honest man which impels the Moor to sacrifice his love, his adoration, his worship for Desdemona” (qtd. in Carlson, *Italian Shakespearians* 76). As mentioned earlier, such notions of male honour informed Shakespeare’s England as well.
Rossi’s interpretation of Othello, on the other hand, did not draw upon his sense of “honour” as a justification for Desdemona’s murder. Rossi presented his Othello as being relaxed throughout Act 1 (which he presented uncut, unlike Salvini), even during Brabantio’s warning about his daughter’s equanimity (again, unlike Salvini). He is, however, quick to pick up on Iago’s insinuations about Desdemona’s infidelity, so much so that the San Francisco Chronicle (16 April 1882) observed that Rossi’s Othello “seemed to be on stage for the purpose of being made jealous” (qtd. in Carlson, Italian Shakespearians 157). Such a quick volte-face on Othello’s part would suggest that Rossi was, despite himself, influenced by the Schlegelian reading in which, once Othello’s jealousy is aroused, a fall into the primitive, bestial self is inevitable.

Rossi’s reading did have its interesting points, though. He presented Othello’s defence of his own actions in Act 1 by speaking directly to the audience, with his back to the Doge and the Senators (Carlson, Italian Shakespearians 156): one wonders whether it was Rossi’s way of suggesting that racial issues, having not improved much between sixteenth-century Venice and nineteenth-century Europe, required Othello to defend his actions to the public at large. Moreover, Rossi seemed to have been more interested than Salvini in presenting, as much as possible, all the causes behind Othello’s jealousy (Carlson, Italian Shakespearians 159). His representation of Desdemona’s murder was apparently so violent that it drew protests from audiences (Carlson, Italian Shakespearians 160). This violence made way, close to the end of the play, for a moment of tenderness when Rossi’s Othello, unlike Salvini’s, held Desdemona lovingly in his

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27 It is almost impossible for us, or, for that matter, any of Rossi’s contemporary audiences, to ascertain the true range of his interpretation of Othello, as he was more prone to experiment with his roles than Salvini (Carlson, Italian Shakespearians 155, 157).
arms before killing himself in remorse – a detail echoed in Verdi’s opera, and one that led critics to regard this as a more moving rendition than Salvini’s ending (Carlson, *Italian Shakespearians* 161).

In fact, Salvini’s and Rossi’s interpretations of the role of Othello had more similarities than differences. Both maintained that Othello’s passionate side needed to be highlighted in performance. Consequently, they presented on stage an Othello who could be, at times, disconcertingly violent. Their underlying assumption that Othello was guided more by emotion than by reason linked their interpretations problematically with both overtly racists readings like that of Schlegel, and with the Nordicist discourse of Otherness that drew distinctions between Anglo-Saxon and Southern “types” within Europe. On the other hand, both tried to nuance their representation of Othello in different ways within the limits of firmly-held patriarchal assumptions, Salvini by emphasizing the underlying “honour” at the root of Othello’s actions,28 Rossi by attempting to show as much as possible the various motives that led to Othello’s jealousy, and by showing Othello as capable of a tenderness even in the last moments of his life. It is, therefore, more likely that both Rossi and Salvini picked up ideas from the critical interpretations of both Hugo and Schlegel in varying degrees. This was inevitable, since other interpretive approaches were not available to them. In contrast, Verdi’s *Otello* belongs to the world of opera in which, since the mid-nineteenth century, tragedies of love became increasingly popular, and to which the story of Othello could easily fit in.

28 Among the changes Salvini made to his role was his omitting of Othello’s eavesdropping scene (Act 4, scene 1), which he regarded as being “unworthy of the noble Othello” (Hepokoski, *Otello* 168).
If the stereotyping of these Italian actors by Anglophone critics was much less compared to that faced by black actors of genius such as Ira Aldridge, it is still true to say that even among Europeans within Europe, the politics of race and representation played an important part in suggesting which Shakespearean roles were deemed to be best performed by English actors, and which could be tried by actors “outside” the English acting traditions. A reading of Othello along non-racial lines, seen at work in Verdi’s opera, could play an important role in changing such perceptions. This is because Italian opera and spoken theatre overlapped at various levels, as we have already seen: star actors, singers and composers had a pan-European reputation; these actors and singers often performed at the same venues and drew upon the success of each other to draw similar audiences, comprising the élite of leading European cities, when performing abroad; they all depended on the translations and commentaries on Shakespeare by a select group of French, German and Italian scholars, critics, and translators; and finally, actors and opera singers often took cues from the acting styles of each other. It is, therefore, not surprising that when Giulio Ricordi, Italy’s leading music publisher and powerful Milan-based impresario, began to persuade Verdi to come out of his self-

29 As Carlson has observed (Italian Shakespearians 175-6), despite the oft-repeated assertion that there were many essential differences between the Italian/Latin/Southern and English/American styles of acting, there were many shared features common as well – the dominance of the star, the readiness to alter the Shakespearean texts of the plays to give prominence to the star, and the careful conception and execution of moments of high drama (“the points”), to mention only a few. Such similarities make the so-called distinctions look quite arbitrary.

30 In addition to publishing practically all the major operas of Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Puccini, the Casa Ricordi also ran Italy’s first regular musicological and critical journal, the Gazzetta musicale di Milano, which promoted the Catholic Church-led Sacred Revival in post-unification Italy, whose relevance in the context of Verdi’s Otello I discuss in greater detail later in this chapter. See Richard Macnutt, “Ricordi.”
imposed retirement and produce a new opera, he suggested Shakespeare’s *Othello*, a play that, because of the success of Salvini and Rossi, international audiences had already come to associate with Italian actors.

**Shakespeare’s Othello and Verdi’s Otello Compared**

Bernard Shaw was, in characteristic fashion, being provocative when he said that “the truth is that instead of *Otello* being an Italian opera written in the style of Shakespeare [sic], *Othello* is a play written by Shakespeare in the style of Italian opera” (qtd. in Schmidgall xii), but his remark appears less paradoxical when placed in the context of the history of Shakespeare performances by nineteenth-century European actors, so firmly was *Othello* associated with Italian actors. Henry James, for instance, declared the last two acts of Salvini’s Othello as “the finest piece of tragic acting that I know” (174). It is, then, especially interesting to note that, despite Boito’s close familiarity with the Hugo translation, the opera departs significantly from those interpretative suggestions offered by Schlegel and Hugo that influenced Salvini and Rossi. Boito was unconvinced by Hugo’s argument about Othello’s race, and thought that Othello could be either black or a fairer-skinned Moor. In his libretto, in fact, Boito emphasizes rather than obscures Otello’s blackness and Desdemona’s acceptance of it: “Ed io vedea fra le tue tempie oscure/ Splender del genio l’eterea beltà” ‘And at your dark temples I saw/ The ethereal beauty of genius shine’ (Boito 444; Weaver, *Librettos* 445).

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Boito’s alteration extends the reversal of a racist trope already begun by Shakespeare. In Cinthio’s *Gli Hecatommithi*, Disdemona accuses Othello of being prone to anger and revenge on account of his being a Moor, while Shakespeare’s Desdemona, addressing the question of Othello’s jealousy, says: “I think the sun where he was born/ Drew all such humours from him” (3.4.26-27). Boito’s Desdemona finds beauty not just in Othello’s
of the racist language, and the bits that remain are mostly spoken by his Iago, who is also more misogynistic than others. There are a couple of points where even Otello falls back into a racist black-and-white binarism while Desdemona, the symbol of purity and Christian love in the opera, never does so: when replying to Desdemona’s question as to what exactly her crime was, Otello replies, in an ironic reversal of her words, “Il più nero delitto/ Sovra il candido giglio della tua fronte è scritto” ‘The blackest crime/ Is written on the white lily of your forehead’ (Boito 476; Weaver, Librettos 477; emphasis mine).

In his desire to focus on the theme of sexual jealousy, Boito left out Act 1 of Shakespeare’s Othello; instead, taking a cue from 1.3.244 ff of the play, Boito wrote a love duet for Otello and Desdemona at the end of Act 1 of the opera, in which he made the couple recount the story of their courtship and, in the process, summarize Otello’s pre-Venetian history. The way in which this act of compression is achieved may appear rather awkward (why would a couple, on their wedding night, discuss how they came to know and love each other?), but Boito may have got the idea from Act 1 of Shakespeare’s The Tempest in which Prospero informs Miranda, years after their actual arrival, why and how they came to be on the island. Moreover, the text of the duet is based on passages from the play itself (e.g., Othello’s speech from 1.3.127 ff, Desdemona’s from 1.3.244 and parts from Othello’s and Desdemona’s conversation in 2.1.174 ff). Most importantly, such an abridgement allowed the creators to open the

32 I refer to the part where Desdemona explains to the Doge and other Venetian senators how and why she fell in love with Othello.
action with a highly dramatic storm.\footnote{Samuel Johnson also believed that the compression of the play along such lines would have made \textit{Othello} a better play: “Had the scene opened in Cyprus and the preceding incidents been occasionally related, there had been little wanting to a drama of the most exact and scrupulous regularity” (qtd. in Woudhuysen 248).} More crucially, though, this alteration results in a simplification of the representation of the racial tensions and misogyny of sixteenth-century Venice in which Shakespeare situates Othello and Desdemona from the beginning, and that the protagonists vainly strive to overcome.

Shakespeare’s Othello is crucially aware of his liminal social status in Venetian society. For instance, he observes almost immediately upon his first entrance that he knows how his marriage will not normally be accepted by the Venetians and, given the impending war with Turkey, it is only his utility to the Venetian state that will ensure his safety: “My services which I have done the signiory/ Shall out-tongue his complaints” (1.2.17-19). It is probably one of the reasons why Shakespeare chose to set the play in around the time of the Turkish siege of Cyprus, though Cinthio, Shakespeare’s source, does not (Emrys Jones 50). The Doge, too, in assuaging Brabantio, describes Othello’s marriage in ambivalent terms (1.3.200-206), and does not depart from the negative connotations of blackness when defending Othello: “If virtue no delighted beauty lack, /Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (1.3.284-285). Such a setting, coupled with Brabantio’s warning to Othello that his daughter, having duped him, may deceive Othello as well (1.3.287-288), is crucial for the purposes of establishing how the latter, on account of his race, is only qualifiedly accepted in Venetian society, while the highly unusual nature of his marriage leaves him potentially vulnerable to insinuations as to its
instability in the private sphere of his family as well. Moreover, as we have seen, in the
Elizabethan context, a man’s “honour,” his ability to exercise effective control over both
the private realm of his family and the public realm of his social self, was inextricably
linked to his reputation among his peers. Iago’s strategy of suggesting to Othello that he
was being cuckolded by Desdemona serves to play with Othello’s worst possible fears:
for Othello, to be cuckolded was to lose his honour in private life and, by an extension
possible in the Elizabethan context, in the public sphere as well. As a result, to be duped
by Desdemona meant for Othello losing control over his authoritative public self as well:
in effect, his hard-earned liminal status in Venetian society would be forever lost.
Othello’s jealousy, though far from acceptable to modern audiences, can at least be
accounted for when analyzed in the light of Elizabethan and Jacobean notions of
masculinity.

Hence, critics have rightly observed that Boito’s omission of most of the material
of Act 1 of Shakespeare’s Othello “conceptually diminishes” the operatic Otello
(Hepokoski, Otello 172), for, as Budden notes, an Othello who “is naturally more prone
to jealousy […] no more commands our sympathy than a natural miser or lecher”
(Budden, vol. 3 305). In Act 3 of the opera, after Otello has insulted Desdemona in
public, the Venetians relate Otello’s blackness to his negative attributes (Boito 498;
Weaver, Librettos 499), but, because of the absence of the context provided by Act 1 of
Shakespeare’s Othello, it suddenly seems that the opera does support the Schlegelian
reading of Othello as a character gone “primitive” and being condemned justly for it.

34 As Loomba points out (Shakespeare 103), the Venetian state may have been willing to
accept Othello on account of the necessity of Othello’s service, but it was not possible for
Brabantio to agree, causing tension between the interest of the state and the family in an
age when the two were often equated in political discourse.
Nevertheless, as Boito’s character sketches in the production book for *Otello* shows, he was not concerned with elaborating either the racial tensions or the misogyny of Shakespeare’s play. Verdi, too, focused on the exploration of love and jealousy and objected to any kind of stage-costume for Otello that highlighted his Otherness (171). Because of his decision to de-emphasize Otello’s colour both in the opera’s language and visual details, Verdi objected to the costumes for Otello that were modelled on those of Cetywayo, a Zulu king captured by the British in 1879. In fact, he and Boito “took extraordinary care that their Otello not embody a *savagery that would make him seem alien to audiences in Italy or the rest of Europe*; rather, he was to embody the savagery that every man in those audiences might imagine himself capable of in Otello’s circumstances” (Parakilas 375; italics mine). The paradox is that, as the performance and critical history of *Othello* in the nineteenth century shows, European audiences *did* in fact expect an Othello who betrayed at least some degree of savagery or Otherness, especially from Italian actors.

One may wonder why an Othello who displays visual markers of Otherness must also behave in a primitive fashion. Or, to put it the other way round, why must the process of de-emphasizing racist readings of Othello be necessarily accompanied by the playing down or omission of visual markers of his Otherness? In this regard, Verdi and Boito and, indeed, many others perhaps did not quite transcend the prejudices of their times, but the decision of composer and librettist to have a black Otello who retains a

35 The one exception to this is Desdemona’s line, “Ed io vedea fra le tue tempie oscure/ Splender del genio l’eterea beltà,” discussed earlier. It is interesting to note that Otello’s line “Forse perchè ho sul viso/ Quest’atro tenebro” ‘Perhaps because on my face/ There is this darkness’ (Boito 460/ Weaver, *Librettos* 461) becomes a secondary part of an ensemble (Parakilas 375).
tragic dignity and commands audience sympathy to the very end,\textsuperscript{36} makes their operatic adaptation radical for its times.

The opera’s downplaying of visual and theatrical markers of Otherness is supported by the absence of musical exoticism in the score.\textsuperscript{37} It is true that certain details regarding the staging were picked up by Verdi and Boito from the interpretations of Salvini and Rossi, but on the whole the opera is about neither “honour” nor the “barbaric” in Othello – rather, it is best described as a tragedy of love. Given that several major strands of continental criticism on \textit{Othello} were axiomatically racist in their hermeneutic discourse on the play, and were influential in shaping the interpretations of theatrical actors of international repute, Verdi and Boito’s decision to focus instead on sexual jealousy and the ways in which it destroys the love relationship was refreshingly different.\textsuperscript{38}

Verdi’s observation to Giulio Ricordi that, “Othello, now warrior, now passionate lover, now cast down in the filth, now as ferocious as a savage, must sing and howl” has

\textsuperscript{36}I keep in mind the musical characterization of Othello. It is imaginable that an audience may interpret the opera in terms of its text and stage action alone, but, given the traditionally accepted role of music in opera, the affective power of music has to be taken into account for a full interpretation.

\textsuperscript{37}Because of the requirements of the Théâtre de l’Opéra-Paris (where \textit{Othello} was first performed in 1894), Verdi had to compose a ballet, for which he employed some oriental-sounding music. Verdi was, however, emphatic that this ballet was never to be performed anywhere else and, indeed, discouraged its publication along with the rest of the score (see Budden, vol. 3 399-406).

\textsuperscript{38}From a feminist point of view, both the play and the opera are deeply problematic. Indeed, the very structure of the plot of Shakespeare’s \textit{Othello} presents an interpretive crux – any sympathetic reading of Othello implies a tacit acceptance, or even sympathy for, his misogynist fears, while, on the other hand, any sympathy for Desdemona would make Othello a “gull,” as Loomba puts it (\textit{Shakespeare} 100). Verdi’s \textit{Othello}, too, shares the same problem. For a reading of the changes in the characterization of Desdemona in Verdi’s \textit{Othello}, see Clausen, \textit{Macbeth} 251-53.
led to the suggestion that the readings of Schlegel and Hugo were not quite lost on him (qtd. in Hepokoski, *Otello* 96-97). Boito cryptically referred to his writing of the Otello libretto as “manufacturing chocolate” (Budden, vol. 3 301), and James Hepokoski has discussed the ways in which both librettist and composer were influenced by these readings and theatrical performances based on them (*Otello* 165-69). I argue in this chapter that Verdi’s specific instructions regarding the way Otello should sing his part springs from his concern that Italian opera, in its attempt to move away from traditional *ottocento* structures, was taking the wrong direction by emulating the declamatory, “unvocal” style of Wagner. Yet, since interpretive possibilities are not confined to authorial intention alone, it is quite imaginable that Verdi’s first audiences read a racial subtext made familiar by Salvini and Rossi, where a cultural-musical one was most probably intended by the composer and his librettist. After all, Italy had already started its colonial ventures in Africa and, as Hanslick noted, the *Otello* première helped dispel the negative mood created by disastrous losses suffered in the same year by Italian forces in Abyssinia (276). We do not know what Verdi’s thoughts regarding Italian colonialism were around this time, but in a conversation with Italo Pizzi in 1896, he condemned both British presence in India and Italian presence in Africa (Martin 261n 20).

Even if Verdi had wished to represent Othello as the racial Other, one aspect of his musical style would have made it extremely difficult for him to do so. Whether or not Othello’s anger arose from his “barbaric” sense of sexual jealousy or his fierce sense of honour, it could be represented only by depicting him as being in a state of heightened passion compared to the other characters: this is how Salvini and Rossi portrayed Othello. But Verdi’s musical style – even his highly innovative late style – was best suited for
depicting heightened emotional states. Hence, unlike in spoken drama, all the other characters of his opera – not just Otello, but Desdemona, Iago and the rest – sing in a musical idiom whose strength lies in intensity of expression rather than understatement (Hepokoski, *Otello* 172).\(^{39}\) The very nature of Verdian opera would make an interpretation fully along the lines of Salvini or Rossi extremely difficult, if not completely impossible.

Moreover, Verdi was responding, in his last two works, to the work of his exact contemporary Wagner, who in his operas deployed a continuous web of orchestral music that reflects the emotional states of the characters onstage or comments upon the action. Wagner’s richly expressive and finely nuanced musical commentary made it possible to depict musically the interiority of operatic subjects in ways that were unprecedented in their subtlety and scope. Verdi’s two late Shakespeare adaptations, composed after the death of Wagner in 1883, mark a break with his previous style:\(^{40}\) in these works, Verdi eschews conventional closed musical forms (such as arias) that were predominant in his earlier works, and instead opts for a continuous web of orchestral music.\(^{41}\) In the case of nineteenth-century opera, however, the musical representation of exotic figures like

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\(^{39}\) Indeed, only Claude Debussy with his *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) has been able to make extremely effective use of musical understatement in opera. In *Pelléas*, Golaud, another tragic, passionate character racked by sexual jealousy, is surrounded by others whose understated emotions throw into relief Golaud’s tormented emotional state.

\(^{40}\) In his entry on *Otello* in Grove Music Online, Roger Parker writes: “We should . . . preserve a sense of distance between *Otello* and Verdi’s earlier operas, a fact that renders even more remarkable Verdi’s creative energy and capacity for self-renewal during the last years of his life.”

\(^{41}\) Sections of *Otello* (such as the love duet with Desdemona, “Venga la morte”) have been seen as specifically alluding to Wagner’s epoch-making opera *Tristan und Isolde* (Hepokoski, *Otello* 174; Taruskin 597-606).
Othello usually involved breaks in the musical texture; overtly exotic pieces in opera, usually restricted to choral and instrumental numbers, would not play an organic role in the musical work as a whole. In fact, they would often be excerpted and played in orchestral concerts to arouse interest in the new opera and give the music new life in the concert hall (Locke 127). Exotic music was not favoured by Italian audiences in general; moreover, such an idiom would have hindered Verdi’s search for new modes of musico-dramatic continuity. Given Verdi’s aesthetic aims in Otello, stylistic considerations alone would have worked against a reading of the character of Otello that required the composer to underline musically Otello’s racial Otherness.

Boito does incorporate, at two crucial moments in the opera, the language of Otherness that is there in Shakespeare’s Othello: it is, however, the language of religious rather than racial Otherness. Hepokoski writes that the impact of Otello’s first, grand entrance in Act 1 (“Esultate!”) is crucial, for “it is only here – and fleetingly – that we perceive an unflawed hero” (Otello 173). Otello’s first words at this point are: “Esultate! L’orgoglio musulmano/ sepolto è in mar; nostra e del ciel è gloria!” ‘Rejoice! The Mussalman’s pride/ Is buried in the sea, and the glory is ours and heaven’s!’ (Boito 426; Weaver, Librettos 427). On his second, equally majestic entry after the drunken brawl involving Cassio, Otello asks: “Son io fra i Saraceni?/ O la turchesca rabbia è in voi trasfusa/ per sbranarvi l’un l’altro?” ‘Am I among the Saracens?/ Or has Turkish fury filled you./ That you tear each other to pieces?’ (Boito 440; Weaver, Librettos 441). As I pointed out earlier, Shakespeare’s Othello clearly aligns himself with an anti-Islamic rhetoric only in Act 2, scene 3. In contrast, Otello’s “Esultate!” is situated at the beginning of his first, heroic entry – his moment of greatest glory – rather than in the next
act because Boito left out Shakespeare’s first act. As a result, the discourse of religious Otherness which is also present in Shakespeare’s play, gets foregrounded, but without the other tensions established in Act 1 of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. What is the result of Boito’s retaining in libretto such references that clearly identify the Muslim, rather than the person of color, as the “Other,” and why does he do so? In what ways does this affect the opera’s representation of Otherness? How does this tie in with Shakespeare’s own play? These are important questions, for, as I would argue, religious Otherness plays a central role in Verdi’s opera, and ties Verdi’s opera to Shakespeare’s play, written nearly three centuries earlier, in ways that need further analysis.

**Otello and Sacred Revivalism in Post-Unification Italy**

James Parakilas, one of the few musicologists to take up Boito’s treatment of religion in *Otello*, has stated that Boito reconfigured the conflict of the story of Othello in religious terms (371), and that he substituted the language of religious difference for racial difference (373). Such a move was, in fact, extremely unusual, for even Rossini’s opera *Otello* (1816), the most famous of all musical adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Othello* before Verdi’s opera displaced it, tackled the issue of race more directly, though not in

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42 The foregrounding of religion over race in the process of “Othering” is interesting, for, in our world, a reverse process is in operation today. It is racial difference that also implies religious difference: it is the fact of a person being Arab, African, or South Asian that automatically makes her/him fall under suspicion, so that whether the person is Hindu, Muslim, or Christian becomes secondary. In the nineteenth century, however, racial difference did not imply religious difference. This topic is too varied and complicated to be discussed here, but, to provide just one example, some variants of the discourse of Aryanism linked Indian religion and culture of India with that of Europe, while grouping together Judaism and Islam, the Semitic religions, as Christianity’s Other.
Schlegelian terms. On the other hand, Boito, having removed the trope of racial difference, replaced it with the language of religious Otherness, highlighting especially the differing attitudes towards religion on the part of men and women (Parakilas 375). In this reading Otello was more susceptible to Iago’s machinations because, unlike Desdemona, whose stronger sense of belonging to the community derived from her connection to the church, he lacked the deep sense of connection to a community (Parakilas 376). Parakilas concludes that Verdi and Boito “turn the Othello story into a nineteenth-century opera of gender difference mapped by different modes of religious expression” (376). An examination of the cultural politics of post-unification Italy shows that Parakilas’s observations can be further extended: in the opera, religious “Otherness” is tied to issues of Italian cultural identity as well.

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, as European culture was being increasingly informed by a spirit of national identity, there was a growing trend in post-unification Italy to “instil a sense of nation into art and everyday life,” accompanied by a “nostalgia for a vanished golden age of Italian artistic history, and an ever more energetic revival of historical artistic forms and styles” (Basini 159). The formation of the Third

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43 A more direct Schlegelian influence can be discerned in Franco Zeffirelli’s film version of Verdi’s Otello in which Otello, after killing Desdemona, burns the cross and performs what seems an African ritual (Parakilas 374). Zeffirelli also adds to this process of exoticization by incorporating excerpts such as the “Arabian Dance” from Verdi’s ballet music for the Opéra-Paris production, music that Verdi emphatically stated should be left out from performances of his opera (Citron 77).

44 In her discussion of the religious role of women in nineteenth-century Italy, Michela De Giorgio has written: “The religious practices of women were more fervent and women were more observant than men. The synthesis on the national level of quite varied regional behaviours could have confirmed the hypothesis that three out of four practicing Catholics were women” (169). Boito maps this difference between men’s and women’s attitudes towards religious matters onto the opera.
Republic in Italy in 1870 resulted in the passing of a law that allowed the Pope to rule the Vatican, but the city itself was incorporated into the nation. The severe curbing of the political powers of the Italian Church over this period led it to increase its efforts to carve a new space for itself in the cultural and religious spheres of Italian society, rather than in politics. In this regard, Father Guerrino Amelli declared that “the history of music is the most beautiful panegyric of our religion and our country” (qtd. in Basini 141). Religion and politics could, thus, come together in the realm of music, and this combination of nationalism, religion, and high art engendered by Catholic revivalism has been described as being the strongest influence on the late ripening of Verdi’s art (Basini 159). True, Verdi returned to Church music over and over again, starting with the Requiem Mass for Manzoni, and followed it up with several other smaller religious works. It is also true that Verdi is on record saying, “[l]et’s go back to the past, it will be a step forward” (qtd. in Basini 146), and followed it up by promoting the career of Giuseppe Gallignani, editor of Musica Sacra, and a staunch proponent of the view that Italy could review its musical tradition only by going back to its heritage of sacred choral music exemplified above all by the works of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (Basini 144, 149).

The inspiration behind Verdi’s Requiem itself was, however, not religious; as Basini has herself observed, “[t]he Verdi Requiem at the Malibran performed a decline in veneration of liturgy and the transference of that reverence into a different, secular site” (Basini 137). The openly anti-clerical Verdi would go on to make a brilliantly parodic

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45 The appreciation of Palestrina and other Renaissance composers of sacred church music was not confined to Verdi or the Italian revivalists alone. Among other musicians who valued this body of work very highly indeed were the French composers Charles Gounod and Vincent d’Indy (who opened the Schola Cantorum in Paris in order to teach Gregorian chant and Palestrinan polyphony to students), the Hungarian Franz Liszt and the Austrian Anton Bruckner.
quotation from the Requiem Mass in his opera *Falstaff* (L. and M. Hutcheon 923), in a context that is neither nationalistic and patriotic, nor reverential. Moreover, he seems to have partially ignored his own precepts regarding going back to the past musically: having advocated a return to vocal music and to the voice as the primary medium of expression in opera, Verdi proceeded to compose a String Quartet (1873) and in his two last Shakespeare operas (1887, 1893), put far greater emphasis on the contributions of the orchestra than in any of his previous operas. Why was there an apparent disjunction between precept and practice on Verdi’s part? Hepokoski sums up the situation thus:

Verdi might well have been prepared to write his own concise, melodic, and theatrical version of a “symphonic” or “motivic” opera . . . but he was unwilling to be obliged to defend the procedure against simplistic charges of Germanic influence. All of this touches on the central paradox of Verdi’s later years, the gap between his written opinions and his own musical practice. . . . Verdi’s private and public polemics against the rise of Germanism in Italy, the insistence on the Italian traditions of melody, and so forth, were essential tactics in his own—seemingly contradictory—move towards a more complex opera. By emphatically rejecting Germanism in print . . . he may have been working both to construct an acceptable self-image and to blunt the arguments of those who were suggesting that he was now sacrificing to foreign gods. (*Otello* 49)

In the context of the double-bind facing Verdi – that of being regarded either an old-fashioned nationalist or a culturally rootless imitator of Wagner – a break between a professed artistic position and actual practice was indeed necessary. Only by such a process of artistic self-fashioning could Verdi compose as he wished to, and at the same
time, steer critical responses along lines he preferred. With hindsight, it is essential to separate the conservative image Verdi projected to the public, and the far more experimental spirit he revealed in his creative work; the recognition of such a disjunction, one which obviously implies reading Verdi’s stated artistic Credo with a degree of scepticism, will enable us to better account for several unusual features of *Otello*’s music.

Verdi was, in fact, more open to extra-national influences of his own accord than has generally been supposed, and he was able to incorporate a wide variety of influences in his personal idiom throughout his career, perhaps never more so than in his last years, when his conservative public voice was at its strongest. All throughout his career, Verdi drew on a wide variety of literary sources – Italian (Grossi), French (Hugo, Dumas), German (Schiller), and English (Shakespeare, Byron). His choice of *Macbeth* (1842) was a courageous one, for Shakespeare was only beginning to be accepted on Italian stages, and the opera, with its supernatural elements, belonged to what was called the *genere fantastico*, an operatic subgenre that was typically regarded as un-Italian. His last two Shakespeare operas carry the experimental spirit of *Macbeth* much further: in *Otello* Verdi abandons set pieces in favour of a continuous web of music (as Wagner and other German composers had been doing), while in the equally through-composed *Falstaff* Verdi presents a mosaic of different styles, some of which (like sonata form) lay completely outside operatic traditions, while introducing other, church-based styles in the most unlikely of contexts, as is the case with the parodic quotation from the Requiem Mass. Verdi, ostensibly the last and greatest representative of the Italian old guard, in fact

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46 As noted earlier, Molena, the greatest actor of the 1840s, had failed with his Shakespeare performances a few years before the premiere of Verdi’s *Macbeth*.
continually reinvented himself in his choice of operatic subjects, musical form and style even in his old age: only Claudio Monteverdi and Leoš Janáček among Western composers showed comparable creative vigour in their old age. Thus, it is important to recognize that Verdi’s active participation in the Church-led Sacred Revivalism was based on cultural rather than religious grounds, and Verdi the anti-ecclesiastical composer remained his old, cosmopolitan, experimental self, especially in his last two Shakespeare-based operas. In complete contrast, Wagner shows maximum stylistic variety and eclectic choice of literary sources in his first three operas, all of which he later disowned.

It is true that Boito was able to help Verdi make a decisive shift in his views regarding operatic adaptation. In the case of Verdi’s early Macbeth, there was a fundamental distinction between Shakespeare’s play and Verdi’s opera. As Harold Powers puts it, “in Shakespeare’s Macbeth, as in his Othello, it is the deterioration of the principal character that drives the play; in the operas, striking situations in the drama become visible and verbal pretexts for striking musical pieces” (17-18). Verdi’s Macbeth is centered on striking situations and the opportunities they provide for musically contrasted set pieces; Otello, however, is quite different, for Boito led Verdi away from conceiving the adaptation in terms of a series of contrasting set pieces, as was the norm with Verdi previously, and instead enabled him to focus on portraying Othello’s

47 These are the Weberian fantasy-opera Die Feen, based on Carlo Gozzi, the Auber-Donizetti inspired Das Liebesverbot, based on Shakespeare, and the Meyerbeer-influenced grand opera Rienzi, based on Bulwer-Lytton.
psychology through music, words, and action. As a young man, Boito was a prominent member of the Milanese movement known as the *Scapigliatura* (“unkempt ones”), and was considered a progressive, both as musician and poet. Like some other members of the movement, Boito hoped to rejuvenate Italian culture through the assimilation of foreign influences such as Wagner and Baudelaire. Since he is best remembered for his early work as composer, poet, librettist and critic (the opera *Mefistofele*, his translations of German opera librettos into Italian, his championing of instrumental music), this view of Boito as a radical has persisted, and it is true that he was instrumental in developing with Verdi a new mode of operatic adaptation that paved the way for the *Literaturoper* of Debussy, Dukas, Berg, and others. On the other hand, as Basini points out, it was through Boito that Verdi, who had always had a troubled relationship with the Catholic Church, got involved in the Church-influenced cultural revivalism (148-49).

Unlike Verdi, however, Boito’s stakes in the movement were different, though even his concern was not as much with religion *per se* as with the relationship between

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48 For example, when Verdi, thinking in older terms of operatic construction (the dramaturgy of contrasts), suggested to Boito that in Act 3, Otello should be shown as suddenly going off in a battle against the Turks, in order to propel the drama forward, Boito replied:

> Otello is like a man moving in a nightmare, and under the fatal, mounting domination of this nightmare he thinks, acts, suffers, and commits his dreadful crime. Now if we conceive an event that must necessarily rouse and distract Otello from such a tenacious nightmare, we thus destroy all the sinister spell created, and we cannot arrive logically at the denouement. (Letter to Verdi, 18 October 1880, qtd. in Weaver, Verdi-Boito *Correspondence* 7)

Verdi, understandably, took heed of his librettist’s more “modern” concept of opera, and abandoned his original plan, something he was normally not wont to do. Boito’s comments are strongly reminiscent of A.C. Bradley’s reading of Othello as a man whose actions are determined by the grip of sexual jealousy from which he cannot escape, and of Desdemona as an infinitely sweet and suffering girl, whose devotion to Othello is absolute. Bradley’s *Shakespearean Tragedy* was first published in 1904, long after the opera was first performed.
the Catholic Church and Italian culture. Around the same time Boito was getting Verdi involved in the Sacred Revivalism movement, many Italians felt that a “thoroughly secular and scientific education was a powerful tool, perhaps the most powerful tool the new state could wield” in order to counteract “the traditional influence of the Church over Italian cultural, political, and economic life” (Pancaldi 154). The Church never proscribed Darwin or Lamarck, and certain Catholics even tried from the beginning to reconcile evolutionism and traditional religious beliefs (Pancaldi 165). The increasingly important role of science in the rapidly changing Italy of the 1860s and ’70s, however, seems to have been a concern for the now older Boito. Some poems from his collection *Il libro dei versi* (1877), a collection of sixteen poems written between 1862 and 1867, illustrate Boito’s tendency to problematize the presence of Science in a world of Nature and Art. In “Case Nuove” (“New Houses,” 1866), Boito responded to the modernization of Milan by writing a poem in which he nostalgically recreates “the past by means of references to the world of nature, classical mythology and domestic simplicity” and contrasts it with the erection of new houses, which “heralds the end of old forms which will be replaced by those of emptiness and materialism” (O’Grady 36). In “Lezione d’anatomia” (“Lesson in Anatomy,” 1865), Boito describes an anatomy lesson in which the body of a young girl is being dissected. The professor’s scientific lecture is contrasted with a poetic contemplation of the girl’s natural, youthful beauty, finally resulting in the dismissal of Science and a return to the beauty of Nature:

Scienza, vattene

Co’tuo conforti!

[. . .] Perdona o pallida adolescente!
Fanciulla pia,
Dolce, purissima,
Fiore languente
Di poesia
Begone Science,
With your consolations!
[. . .]
Pardon, o pale adolescent
Pious young girl,
Sweet, most pure
Languid flower
Of poetry. (O’Grady 46-47)

It is possible to observe in these volumes of poetry the recurrence of the binaries of life and death, tradition and modernity, art and science. Moreover, as O’Grady observes, Boito’s choice of the words “Scienza, vattene” in “Lezione d’anatomia” recalls the words of Christ (“Begone, Satan”) (47). Boito, therefore, seems to have regarded modern Science as a violent, amoral force in conflict with Art as well as with the ethical certainties of a society where religion provided a mainstay.

Boito’s involvement in Church-based Revivalism, then, was triggered by nostalgia for a society which he felt was rapidly losing its religious and cultural heritage under the destructive impact of science. As a result of Boito’s influence, the anticlerical Verdi strove to place the tradition of vocal religious music from Palestrina onwards at the centre of Italian musical identity as the country became increasingly secular from the
1870s onwards. Boito’s hostility towards science could only be exacerbated by the fact that those opposed to the cultural and spiritual influence of the Church over society were using science as a means to achieve their ends. In this context, Iago’s Credo, which Budden, like many other Verdi scholars, has described as “high-flown nonsense” (vol. 3 318) makes sense especially when we read it in the background of the conflict between science and religion in nineteenth-century Italy, and Boito’s own views regarding the rapidly-changing cultural landscape of his Italy:

Credo in un Dio crudel che m’ha creato
Simile a sé e che nell’ira io nomo.
Dalla viltà d’un germe o d’un atòmo
Vile son nato . . .
E Credo l’uom gioco d’iniqua sorte
Dal germe della culla
Al verme dell’avel.
Vien dopo tanta irrisïon la morte.
E poi? La morte è il nulla
E vecchia fola il ciel.
I believe in a cruel God who created me
Similar to Himself, and whom I name in my wrath.
From the baseness of a germ or an atom,
Basely I was born . . .
And I believe that man is the plaything of unjust fate
From the germ of the cradle
To the worm of the grave.

After so much derision comes Death.

And then? Death is Nothingness

And heaven an old wives’ tale. (Boito 448-50; Weaver, Librettos 449-451)

In his poem “Dualismo” (1864), Boito had played with the possibility of subverting the Creation story by replacing God with a “demented chemist” as Creator; here, in Iago’s Credo, the Creation story invokes a cruel God. Since Iago, like a non-believer, equates Death not with the afterlife, but with “nothingness,” and in addition adds that heaven is mere fiction, it is possible to read Iago as one who symbolizes Boito’s concept of the non-believer emerging in contemporary Italy, a country that he feared ran the risk of losing its artistic roots.49

Moreover, Iago, a non-believer, “believes” in a cruel, unforgiving God who, as I have mentioned earlier, has been long associated in the anti-Semitic Christian imaginary with the Abrahamic (Judeo-Muslim) God. In fact, it is only when we recognize how discourses of religious scepticism and religious Otherness are imbricated in the libretto that we can explain why the operatic Iago can deny the afterlife while professing his belief in a cruel God. Just as Italian men, unlike Italian women, were seen to move away from the moral, cultural, and religious moorings traditionally provided by the Church,50

49 Boito’s description of Iago in the production book supports such a reading: “Every word spoken by Iago is on the human level – a villainous humanity if you like, but still human” (Budden, vol. 3:328).

50 Niccolò Tommaseo, for example, wrote in the Catholic journal Italian Woman: “The Italian woman, capable of inspiring others, wisely obedient and commanding when necessary, is the guarantee for us of a less harsh destiny. Wherever men are more corrupt and weak, the women are less weak and less debased” (qtd. in Giorgio 172).
so Othello, under the influence of the sceptical Iago, increasingly insists on vengeance, associated with the Abrahamic God,\(^\text{51}\) instead of forgiveness, the attribute of the Christian God.\(^\text{52}\) For the same reason, Desdemona remains the epitome of kindness and forgiveness – her Ave Maria is, therefore, the antithesis to Iago’s Credo. As far as I can ascertain, Boito does not deploy this language of religious Otherness to target any actual Jewish or Muslim group in Italy; instead, he uses the language of religious difference as a metaphor for the erosion of Christian values taking place within late nineteenth-century Italy, an erosion that deeply disturbed him because the Church had for centuries played a leading role in promoting and shaping Italian culture.\(^\text{53}\)

\(^{51}\) Such a conflict between the “vengeful” Abrahamic God and the “forgiving” Christian God features prominently once again in *The Merchant of Venice*, another Shakespeare play where “Otherness” is marked in religious terms; in the case of *Othello*, the performance and critical history of the play has focused on Shakespeare’s radical representation of race to such an extent as to obliterate from memory the role of religious difference in the play. Lupton observes that “[i]n the typological schemes of the Renaissance, Islam represents a double scandal, the catastrophic bastardization of both Christian universalism – through the seductive danger of the Islamic world mission – and Jewish particularism, represented by Muslim allegiance to ritual laws and to an Abrahamic monotheism without Christ” (74).

\(^{52}\) Such readings have been extended to Shakespeare’s play as well. Lupton, for example, writes of “Othello’s increasing identification with a jealous justice that must be executed at any cost, a law driven by the fierce monogamy of an immoderate monotheism” (79), while Loomba observes that “the jealousy that tears Othello apart manifests itself as a division between his Christian, loving, rational self, and the Muslim identity that erupts and disrupts it” (*Shakespeare* 96). Although I argue that the discourse of religious Otherness are tied with different ideological concerns in Shakespeare and Verdi, it is also possible to see that this discourse may be read in new ways by present-day audiences, because new meanings accrue to this age-old discourse in altered historical and cultural conditions.

\(^{53}\) Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg has drawn convincing parallels of Englishmen like John Ruskin and William Morris with Boito and his brother Camillo, a noted architect and novelist: all of them felt the “need to bridge the opposition between industrial development and the decline and destruction of older architectonic forms” (112), to which could be added the now-endangered form of Italian opera.
To highlight Otello’s gradual change into vengefulness, Boito creates two instances in the opera – for which there are no parallels in Shakespeare – where Desdemona unsuccessfully asks Otello for forgiveness and is denied it (Hepokoski, *Otello* 179). Moreover, in Act 4, shortly before she is killed by Otello, Desdemona sings an Ave Maria which, like Iago’s Credo, does not follow the traditional liturgical text, but which expresses the Christian virtue of forgiveness:

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Ave Maria, piena di grazia, eletta
Fra le spose e le vergini sei tu . . .
Prega pel peccator, per l’innocente
E pel debole oppresso e pel possente,
Misero anch’esso, tua pietà dimonstra.
Hail Mary, full of grace, chosen
Are you among brides and maidens . . .
Pray for the sinner, for the innocent,
For the weak and the oppressed and for the mighty,
Also wretched, display your mercy. (Boito 506; Weaver, *Librettos* 507)
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The choice of an Ave Maria for Desdemona is interesting in the light of the fact that in Italy “Catholicism of the nineteenth century was expressed in the female gender” (Giorgio 169). Boito’s surrounding Desdemona with what has been called “devotional iconology” (Hepokoski, *Otello* 180), therefore, has less to do with his leanings towards the aesthetics of decadentismo (as has been sometimes stated) than with his desire to highlight the symbolic conflict in the opera between belief/forgiveness, associated with Desdemona, and non-belief/vengeance, associated Iago, and as the opera progresses,
Otello; it is this conflict that finally destroys the latter. The chorus which opens Otello is strongly reminiscent of other operatic choruses that represent beleaguered religious minorities (Parakilas 371), and when Otello, a Moor, emerges as the saviour, armed with anti-Islamic rhetoric, Boito shows the protagonist as staunchly endorsing, despite his non-European origins, a Christian worldview ensuring peace and harmony.

If Otello’s entry in Act 1 after the opening chorus shows him as a saviour of Christian virtues under threat from an outside, Islamic aggressor, Act 2 shows Otello’s own worldview under the influence of the insidious enemy, Iago, whose Credo is of central importance in this regard. Nineteenth-century operatic credos were usually employed for proclamations of faith, or for recruiting people from one religious faith to another (Parakilas 376-77). Iago’s Credo performs both functions: it proclaims his atheism, and it marks the beginning of his influence over Othello. Under Iago’s influence, Othello loses his spiritual moorings. As Boito writes of Otello in the production book:

Reason and justice govern Otello’s actions up to the moment at which Iago (who seems honest and is reputed to be so) succeeds in gaining an ascendency over him . . . The whole man changes: he was wise, sensible, and now he raves: he was strong and now he waxes feeble; he was upright and now he will commit a crime; he was strong and hale and now he groans and falls about and swoons like one who has taken poison or been smitten by epilepsy⁵⁴ . . . Otello should undergo,

⁵⁴ Boito realizes this onstage by showing, at the end of Act 3, Iago pointing to a prostrate Otello and saying “Ecco il leone!” Although in the opera, this gesture shows nothing more than Iago’s personal victory of sorts, a memory of Shakespeare’s Act 1 can help us see the significance of this gesture in terms of class as well, for Iago, like Mosca in Ben Jonson’s Volpone, hates to work under the master to whom he is assigned.
phase by phase, all the most fearful torments of the human soul – doubt, fury, spiritual overthrow. (Budden, vol. 3 328)

In Boito’s view, for Italy to free itself rapidly from the spiritual control of the Catholic Church that had traditionally inspired the greatest works of Italian art was to undergo spiritual overthrow; hence the loss of spiritual moorings also meant the loss of cultural identity in the newly-unified nation. Since, in the opera, women are associated with different degrees of belief, elements of Mariolatry reinforce the image of Desdemona as passive, idealized epitome of womanly perfection, while even Emilia, a far more honest figure in the opera than in Shakespeare’s play, also tries her best to oppose Iago from the beginning and proclaims her belief in God:

Vinser gli artigli
Truci e codardi.

Dio dai perigli
Sempre ci guardi.

His [Iago’s] grim and cowardly
Claws overpowered me.

God guard us always

From dangers. (Boito 462; Weaver, Librettos 465)

55 Despite Boito’s decision to focus in his libretto on the ways in which Iago arouses Othello’s jealousy, he removed Iago’s insinuation that Desdemona deceived her father in marrying Othello (3.3.208), a remark that, in Shakespeare’s play, ties up remarkably well with Brabantio’s warning (1.3.288-289) to reinforce Othello’s fears regarding his marriage. Boito again dismissed the significance of those lines in a conversation with Blanche Roosevelt (Hepokoski, Otello 179), showing how committed he was ideologically to represent Desdemona as an embodiment of Christian perfection.
Otello’s soliloquy in Act 3 of the opera shows the protagonist expressing his despair, under the malign influence of which he decides to banish any idea of clemency when it comes to Desdemona (Boito 478; Weaver, *Librettos* 479). Boito lets Iago escape at the end of the opera, acknowledging that the changes Iago has triggered can only be lamented, not reversed.

Boito’s adaptation, therefore, brings to the fore the ways in which the conflict between Christianity and the other Abrahamic religions forms a discourse of Otherness that runs through Shakespeare’s *Othello*, but which had been forgotten because of what Lupton calls the “current color-based approach to the play, in which the scandal of ‘monstrous’ miscegenation inherited from the nineteenth-century racial Imaginary has come to govern *Othello*’s economy of differences” (74). In the present day, when notions of religious difference are becoming increasingly important in society, especially in the form of Islamophobia, it is likely that performances of the Verdi-Boito adaptation will again bring back to mind, at least for some audiences, the pervasive nature of Islamophobia as a form of generalized anti-Semitism in Western culture. The resurfacing...

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56 Parakilas makes the interesting observation that Iago and Otello “justify their conspiracy as the will of a vengeful God: the last words of their oath are ‘Dio vendicator!’” (379).

57 Lupton adds: “Whereas for the modern reader or viewer a black Othello is more subversive . . . in the Renaissance scenes a paler Othello more closely resembling the Turks whom he fights might actually challenge more deeply the integrity of the Christian paradigms set up in the play as a measure of humanity” (74). Callaghan has argued that, in Shakespeare’s time “blackface concealed under the sign of negritude a host of ethnicities ranging from Eskimo to Guinean” (78), and that it was only with the tawny Restoration heroes of Aphra Behn and Dryden that the exotic began to be considered separately from blackness in stage representation (79). Therefore, the fluidity of representational conventions of Otherness on the Elizabethan stage by means of blackface made it possible for Shakespeare, unlike his later interpreters and adapters, to evoke *both* racial and religious Otherness at the same time (78).
of the religious conflict in Shakespeare’s *Othello* once again in Verdi’s opera, composed nearly three hundred years later, happens not from an attempt at total fidelity to Shakespeare on the part of the composer or the librettist – it would not be possible if the opera had to have any contemporary relevance – but from the deployment of a shared code of religious/cultural Otherness that is common to both Shakespeare’s England and the rapidly changing intellectual and moral landscape of nineteenth-century Italy.

**Musical “Otherness” in Verdi’s *Otello***

The reason why it is possible to make a reading of the opera based on parallels between religious and cultural difference is because of the ways in which Verdi’s score also supports this reading at a musical level. I have already discussed why Verdi who, with the score of *Aida*, had shown his mastery over the kind of “Oriental” exoticism made popular by French composers such as Félicien David, Reyer, and Bizet, avoided the idiom in *Otello*.\(^{58}\) Otello’s Moorish origins and the discourse of Judaeo-Muslim Otherness would have made such an idiom ideal for the opera. Yet, in the opera, is it Otello or Iago who is the true Other? As my reading of the libretto suggests, Otello is not the true Other at all, for it is Iago rather than Otello who has made the decisive break with “traditional” Italian values. The absence in Verdi’s score of an “Oriental” idiom conventionally associated with the non-European Other only reinforces such an interpretation. Hence, the discourse of religious Otherness is not to be taken literally, but should be read instead as metonymic of cultural Otherness. In this section, I argue that while Boito makes these two male

\(^{58}\) As noted earlier, the only exception is the ballet music, based on themes from David’s exotic *ode symphonique, Le Désert* (1844). Zeffirelli’s decision to include this music in his film version profoundly alters Verdi’s characterization of Otello.
protagonists embody attitudes and traits that are clearly removed from traditional “Italian”
religious, social, and cultural values, Verdi makes the musical idiom associated with them
reflect features that are far removed from traditional Italian operatic music. These features
are not that of musical Orientalism, for Iago is not the exotic Other. Instead, the musical
tropes Verdi uses to represent Iago’s Otherness are those usually associated with the
German operatic tradition, especially Wagner.

There are good musical reasons to support such a reading. Hepokoski has observed
that in Otello, the pezzi (set pieces) that “touch the conventions of the Italian past most
decisively” and form the “principal ‘Italian’ identifiers around and through which the more
‘progressive’ motivic drama is spun” are usually embedded within a network of developing
orchestral motifs that enable smooth, “symphonic” transitions (Otello 140-141). These
pezzi, based on the old Italian lyric form (aa’ba” or variations thereof), are often used to
depict “naiveté or, particularly, to evoke the bitter irony of loss” (Hepokoski, Otello 141).
Not surprisingly, Verdi’s music for the “consistently honest, ingenuous, and direct” chorus
(Hepokoski, Otello 141) often fits into this traditional lyric form in places like the victory
chorus (Act 1), the Act 2 homage chorus to Desdemona (a part of the opera where Boito is
bringing in elements of Mariolatry), as well as within Desdemona’s Ave Maria. By way of
contrast, in the Act 3 duet between Otello and Desdemona (“Dio ti giocondi, o sposo” ‘God
rest you merry, O husband’), the aa’ba” pattern is sundered by Otello’s accusing
Desdemona of infidelity (“vil cortigiana,” ‘vile courtesan’). Hepokoski further observes
that “Otello’s desecration of the form parallels his now-explicit rejection of Desdemona’s
innocence” (Otello 142). Similarly, as Otello moves away from Christian virtues and
becomes unforgiving and vengeful under Iago’s malign influence, Iago’s motivic,
declamatory, musical idiom – all of them musical characteristics identified by the majority of nineteenth-century critics as “Wagnerian” – increasingly inform Otello’s own music from Act 2 onwards (Hepokoski, *Otello* 145). Only the return of the bacio motif at the point of Otello’s death brings back the traditional Italian melodic idiom associated with the prelapsarian Otello of the first act, and restores tragic sympathy for him.

It is clear, then, that Verdi’s binaristic contrast between the traditional Italian pezzi and the continuous, motivic, “symphonic” music that evokes the through-composed textures of German operas, parallels the ways in which Boito establishes a binaristic contrast between the traditional, religious worldview of Desdemona and the chorus, on the one hand, and those who are responsible for rupturing it, on the other – “critics” like Iago and, under his influence, Otello. Melodic writing of a traditional Italian cut is especially associated with Desdemona (who, unlike Otello, is always at the centre of the community and is loved by it), especially in scenes such as in the Ave Maria, where she is associated with true Christian faith.\(^{59}\) If Boito found in the coming apart of the religious fabric of contemporary Italian society the beginning of the destruction of its culture, Verdi saw in the adoption of German musical techniques and aesthetics the abandonment of what he seemed to consider “essential” Italian musical values.\(^{60}\)

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\(^{59}\) Parakilas suggest that the orchestra in the Ave Maria functions, in effect, as a chorus, and finds a parallel between this scene and the opening chorus, both “expressing the solidarity of a politically beleaguered religious community” (385-86). Through the Ave Maria, in which Desdemona makes a comment about her own fate (Parakilas 386-87), the religious/traditional and the personal effectively come together before being finally quashed by Otello.

\(^{60}\) Verdi’s advice to younger composers was to go back to the past for models for the future (Basini 146); he went on to praise the young Puccini’s emphasis on melody in his first opera *Le Villi*, but expressed reservations about the predominance of the “symphonic element” in the opera (Budden, vol. 3 274). The fact that Verdi himself was writing
The move away from traditional *ottocento* operatic structures, however, does not make Verdi’s last two Shakespeare operas “Wagnerian.” First and foremost, Verdi’s preference for Shakespearean tragedy and comedy, rather than any mythological theme with historical-nationalist overtones makes his last two operas most obviously un-Wagnerian. Moreover, *Otello* is through-composed in a way different from anything in Wagner, with two different idioms juxtaposed against each other: the lyrical, melodic idiom associated with traditional Italian music (and with Desdemona) as opposed to quasi-symphonic music, characterized by prominent orchestral textures, the substitution of melodic lines by short motifs, and declamatory vocal parts, all of which could be associated with German opera (and with the evil Iago). *Otello*, as I have suggested, is caught between the two idioms.\(^\text{61}\) This juxtaposition of different idioms is a Shakespearean device of which Verdi was the great musical master: as Richard Taruskin has shown with regard to *Rigoletto*, Verdi could also juxtapose tragic and comic music to create powerful moments of dramatic irony (583-91). Finally, Verdi, like Shakespeare, tended to engage creatively through-composed operas with a pronounced emphasis on the orchestra can be accounted for when we recognize that there is an ideological subtext at work, as expressed in his binaristic distinction – in principle – between German and Italian musical traditions:

> Our young Italian composers are not good patriots. If the Germans, proceeding from Bach, have come to Wagner, they do so as good Germans, and all is well. But when we, the descendants of Palestrina, imitate Wagner, we are committing a musical crime and are doing a useless, nay, harmful thing.” (qtd. in Taruskin 563)

\(^61\) Verdi’s own comments regarding the performance of the three principal roles suggests that the juxtaposition of these idioms carried, for him, an ideological charge:

> Desdemona is a part where the thread, the melodic line, never stops from the first note to the last. Just as Iago must only declaim and snicker (*ricaner*). Just as Otello, now warrior, now passionate lover, now cast down in the filth, now as ferocious as a savage, must sing and howl . . . Therefore, the most perfect Desdemona will always be the one who sings the best. (Letter to Giulio Ricordi, 1887, qtd. in Hepokoski, *Otello* 96-97; emphasis mine).
with the literature and music of different cultures, even when he was, on the face of it, a staunch nationalist. He was, therefore, the ideal cross-cultural adapter of Shakespeare in nineteenth-century Europe.\textsuperscript{62}

By the same token, it would be reductive to read Verdi’s move away from traditional \textit{ottocento} structures only in terms of an ideological polemic against the “foreign” art of Wagner.\textsuperscript{63} Both dramatically and musically, \textit{Otello} focuses on the interiority of its eponymous hero: the abandonment of alternating set pieces of action and contemplation in favour of through-composition enables Verdi to depict musically Otello’s interiority in a way that parallels Boito’s focus on the “inner drama.” In the hands of the mature Wagner and the Verdi of \textit{Otello} and \textit{Falstaff}, the representation of selfhood in opera underwent a paradigm shift, and some of the credit should also go to Boito’s extraordinary skills as a librettist. As Sandra Corse puts it, “opera during the course of the nineteenth century changed from being a social experience in which eighteenth-century or Enlightenment attitudes predominate to a genre in which the modernist concept of the self finds frequent expression in a theatrical experience encompassing drama and music” (\textit{Operatic Subjects} 11). In their own ways, both Wagner and Verdi made this transition possible.

The additional contribution of Verdi and Boito lies in the fact that they revolutionized the mechanisms of operatic adaptation, moving away from the dramaturgy

\textsuperscript{62} Taruskin sums up the situation thus: “Only because of Wagner (and the rampant “1870 Germany” he represented) did Italian and French musicians, whatever their level of patriotism, feel the need to become stylistic nationalists” (567).

\textsuperscript{63} Indeed, a number of musicologists have noted parallels between Wagner’s \textit{Tristan und Isolde} and the Love Duet of \textit{Otello} (Taruskin 563-605; Budden, vol. 3 355; Hepokoski, \textit{Otello} 174).
of contrasts that form the basis of operas like Verdi’s *Macbeth*, Thomas’s *Hamlet* and
Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette*, and instead developing a new kind of through-composed
opera based on established classics of Western theatre. Wagner was himself a master
adapter, especially with regard to myth and, in the context of English literature, left his
mark on writers like Joyce and T. S. Eliot; yet his musical successors were not as adept in
their treatment of mythical subjects. In contrast, by showing new ways of adaptation of
the classics of European drama, Verdi and Boito, along with the Russian composer
Modest Mussorgsky, enabled the development of the *Literaturopera*, a twentieth-century
operatic subgenre which comprises some of the most frequently performed operas by
composers such as Debussy, Richard Strauss, Dukas, Berg, Janáček, Britten, Henze, and
others. *Otello* and *Falstaff*, the cross-cultural adaptations of England’s greatest dramatist
by Italy’s greatest operatic composer and librettist, thus helped in the transformation of
the genre of opera itself.

**Conclusion**

As an adaptation of Shakespeare, *Otello* by Verdi and Boito presents several points of
interest. In a century in which adaptations were almost unanimously regarded as
“secondary” in the negative sense of the term, their opera successfully managed to avoid
being regarded as such. Much of the reason for its success is Verdi’s music, the affective
power of which has been seen to match Shakespeare’s (Dean, “Verdi’s *Otello*” 96);
moreover, compared to other nineteenth-century adaptations and performances (and some
twentieth-century ones), the opera significantly departs from contemporary racist
interpretations of the play, suggesting that it is indeed possible for artists of extraordinary
vision to transcend, by and large, the conceptual limitations of their time. Despite omitting Act 1 of Shakespeare’s play, thereby losing much of the complexity of characterization of Othello, Boito nevertheless produced a libretto that focussed on the interiority of the protagonists, and that was therefore remarkably different from those of the traditional Italian number opera based on the dramaturgy of contrasts. And Verdi, at the height of his powers, created a musical score of unparalleled richness that gave voice to this complex interiority. These virtues are strong enough to keep Otello in its rightful place among the most admired of operas, and among the most successful and influential Shakespeare adaptations ever made.

Boito’s incorporation of the language of religious difference found in Shakespeare’s Otello may prove to be increasingly provocative, although, as far as I can ascertain, Verdi and Boito did not intend to associate the theme of religious difference with any particular group of Jews or Muslims, or Judaeo-Islamic beliefs or traditions for that matter, in mind. For Boito, the erosion of religious values spelt the decay of traditional culture in a post-Risorgimento Italy willing to embrace a modernity that also brought with it cultural and spiritual uncertainties. Hence, despite his strong anti-clericalism, Verdi too accepted the language of religious difference, and provided a musical metaphor by juxtaposing Italian and German operatic styles in ways that reinforced Boito’s reading.

As Verdi’s Otello, like Shakespeare’s play, travels to all parts of the world, this language of religious difference will probably draw more critical attention than the opera’s treatment of race and gender. Since Boito, for reasons outlined earlier, did not eliminate the anti-Islamic rhetoric (specifically directed against the Turks), the opera is likely to draw different responses from different interpretive communities in an increasingly globalized
world. It may have one kind of impact upon present-day Cypriot Christians, and/or another
kind upon people of the Muslim faith, for the opera offers no counterbalance against
Otello’s impassioned anti-Islamic and anti-Turkish rhetoric at the moment of his first entry.
Indeed, the problem is compounded by the fact that a convincing utterance of the anti-
Islamic rhetoric is essential to the establishing of Otello’s heroic stature before he
succumbs to the temptations of Iago, who personifies evil. Some modern productions have
already started exploring this hitherto-neglected and provocative new angle. For example,
in its 1998 production of *Otello*, the English National Opera “packed away the usual 15th
century seaport trappings of Verdi’s 1887 variation on Shakespeare’s theme and moved the
setting forward to a barbed-wire shrouded military camp in modern-day Cyprus, where the
Christian and Islamic worlds still confront each other today” (Levy). Describing the
production, designer Tom Philips observed that “Otello may or may not be a precise
historical figure, but he certainly belongs to the geopolitical framework of Shakespeare’s
day, and Verdi’s and our own” (Levy). The language of religious difference has evidently
persisted and taken on new meanings in different contexts, even as readings of race and
gender have altered present-day interpretations of the play, and with them, adaptations.

Does *Otello*, like its Shakespearean predecessor, endorse what Balibar has called
cultural racism based on religious difference? It would be hasty to reply in the affirmative,
for the answer to that question lies not in the presence of the language of racial or religious
difference *per se*, but in the ways in which the sense of difference ties up with larger
discourses, depending upon the context. The reader’s own interpretive investment is crucial
in this regard. For Ben Okri or Hugh Quarshie, Shakespeare’s play is disappointing on
account of the representation of race (Hankey 2-4); for Ania Loomba, the play shows
Othello trapped in a discourse of religious and racial Otherness (Shakespeare 92); while for Emily Bartels, the play does leave some room for Othello to define himself (177). Compared to Shakespeare’s play, Verdi’s Otello is, unfortunately, more open to racist readings of the kind outlined by Schlegel and Hugo variety due to the imbalance created by the omission of Shakespeare’s Act 1. On the other hand, while Michael André Bernstein’s notion of “backshadowing” – the tendency to understand previous periods, events and historical attitudes in terms of our current, present-day values – sounds a proper note of caution, it is easy to become glibly relativistic: Shakespeare, Verdi and Boito may have had things other than biological or religious/cultural racism in mind, but the play (and even more so) the opera may seem deeply disturbing to present-day Africans, African-Americans, and Turks, for whom it is neither desirable nor possible to have recourse to an exclusively historicist reading and forget their own historical and cultural contexts, contexts that make them distinct interpretive communities.

It is here that bringing together cultural materialist approaches and reader-response theory can help chart the ways in which both Shakespeare’s play and Verdi’s opera are likely to be understood in the light of different interpretive paradigms that accrue over time and space. Fredric Jameson’s famous imperative “Always historicize!” emphasizes the need to locate the interpretative possibilities of the play and the opera, as were available to the authors and their contemporary audiences: such an approach enables us to try and understand what the works in question could have, or could not have, meant to their contemporaries. For example, the way in which religious Otherness became metonymic of cultural difference in Verdi’s Otello was simply outside the possible range of interpretations for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and for obvious reasons. It is,
therefore, important to remember that while the opera *Otello* may, on the face of it, seem to be a particularly faithful adaptation in the way it highlights the theme of religious Otherness hitherto ignored by other commentators, performers and adapters, placing the opera in its larger cultural and historical contexts would require this theme to be interpreted in a different way from that in Shakespeare’s play. By the same token, both works are equally open to further (re-)interpretation.

Verdi and Boito were readers of the play before they became adapters, and as their opera shows, their interpretation of the play, in the light of their own times and concerns, informs their adaptation. Readers, whether they are critics, adapters or simply “passive” recipients, cannot but bring new interpretive possibilities, especially those that speak to their own conditions, priorities, and value systems. Informed readers can enrich their understanding by placing different interpretations palimpsestically, in relation to one another; but such an approach also implies that none of the various possible interpretations by various interpretive communities – of Shakespeare’s play, of Verdi’s opera, or a modern-day production of either, in which the director plays an increasingly important role – can be prioritized over the other. By valorizing certain readings and rejecting others, it is always possible to give *Othello* and *Otello* pride of place in a museum of politically correct masterpieces that “transcend” time and place; but it is perhaps a more enriching experience to see them as works that are both satisfying and disturbing in the ways they speak differently to different generations, and to try and understand how and why that is the case.
Chapter 3: Shakespeare’s Reception and Adaptation in India: From the Nineteenth Century to the Present

The complexity of the reception of Shakespeare in India from the nineteenth century onwards is in no small measure due to the fact that the spread of the English language in India, a fundamental prerequisite for the transmission of Shakespeare’s plays in their original language, was by no means uniform throughout the Indian subcontinent. Moreover, literacy levels in the Indian subcontinent were extremely low during the nineteenth century (Modhumita Roy 85, 101), hence commentaries on, and translations and performances of Shakespeare in Indian regional languages played an important role in forming indigenous interpretive communities that imbibed a highly transculturated Shakespeare. Indeed, these channels of Shakespeare’s reception played a far more significant role than the colonial classroom, whose aim, as I shall argue, was to produce a small, Anglophile élite. Leading urban metropolitan centres of nineteenth-century India such as Calcutta (now Kolkata) and Bombay (now Mumbai) had access to English education earlier than other parts of the country, which meant that Shakespeare, when produced in non-urban centres, underwent at least translation into local languages, if not complete transculturation, when performed on local stages for local audiences. Even in these major cities, responses to Shakespeare were by no means similar or uniform. It is perhaps necessary, therefore, to recognize that no single place in India can serve as a

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1 For pragmatic purposes, by this term I refer to the current nation state, although, by the end of the nineteenth century, British rule had extended to parts of the subcontinent now known as Pakistan and Bangladesh.

2 Although there were performances of Shakespeare earlier in the Indian subcontinent, these were sporadic ones with negligible impact, and do not form the basis of my study.
benchmark or model for understanding or theorizing the various aspects of Shakespeare’s reception in India from the nineteenth century to the present.

Because Shakespeare’s works were systematically introduced and taught in India to a small, English-educated élite in the nineteenth century by the British colonial establishment, critical responses to Shakespeare have had a different trajectory of reception from that in Western Europe, where engagement with Shakespeare has been almost entirely in terms of the receiving culture, and has never involved the imposition of a foreign culture by a colonizing power. Indian responses to Shakespeare have, on the other hand, been characterized from the very outset by their diversity, from whole-hearted acceptance (by both sections of the Anglicized Indian élite and those who, while not supportive of the British Empire, found much to learn from Shakespeare), through comparativist approaches, in which Shakespeare was compared with classical Indian literature (some of these approaches displaying nationalist and counterdiscursive tendencies) (Poonam Trivedi, Introduction 20), to full-scale transculturation, especially in performance.

In the twentieth century, the greatest theoretical impetus behind rethinking Shakespeare’s reception in India has come from postcolonial critics. Scholars like Gauri Viswanathan have examined how Shakespeare was made part of an English literary curriculum that was adapted to suit the “administrative and political imperative of British rule,” and how these imperatives “charged that content with a radically altered significance, enabling the humanistic ideals of enlightenment to co-exist with and even support education for social and political control” (Masks 3). Viswanathan points out that changes in British educational policies, along with the gradual removal of Indians from
offices of responsibility from the late eighteenth century onward, produced a colonial subject who “was reduced to a conceptual category, an object emptied of all personal identity to accommodate the knowledge already established and being circulated about the ‘native Indian’” (Masks 11). In her study, therefore, she examines “the ideology of British education quite independently of an account of how Indians actually received, reacted to, imbibed, manipulated, reinterpreted, or resisted the ideological content of British literary education” (Viswanathan Masks 11, my emphasis).³

³ For a succinct overview of English education in India, and for a discussion of the reasons why increasing numbers of Indians from different social classes started learning English in the nineteenth century, see Modhumita Roy 83-109.

It is necessary, in fact, to distinguish Shakespeare as introduced to Indians by the English through educational channels from the history of Shakespeare adaptations in India, as the latter involves, in addition to the study of the ideological ends to which Shakespeare was used, an examination of the ways in which Indians themselves asserted their agency by transforming Shakespeare through translations, performances, and adaptations. Postcolonial critics seem to have, on the whole, understood Indian responses to Shakespeare as a function of British colonial education, but such a focus only offers a narrow (and partial) view of a rather more complex history of cultural exchange and blurs the important distinction Viswanathan makes at the very outset of her study: the distinction between the use of Shakespeare by British colonialists and the agentic transculturation of Shakespeare by Indians themselves, through translations, commentaries, and adaptations.

Unfortunately, in the majority of historiographies of Shakespeare’s reception in India, this important distinction is forgotten. For instance, it has been argued that...
Shakespeare, above all, “kept alive the myth of English cultural refinement and superiority” (Singh 446), and that “critical and pedagogical discourses in the Indian academy continue to be shaped by the myth of the universal bard – a myth that reveals and perpetuates a ‘complicity between indigenous and imperial power structures’ in the postcolonial era” (Singh 447). Such a reading oversimplifies the reception of Shakespeare in India by focussing only on a small native Indian élite, whose influence on Indian society and cultural matters was negligible. Moreover, such a premeditated position on cultural exchange in the colonial context also erases, under the pressure of a theoretical paradigm, the complexity and variety of indigenous responses. In the words of Poonam Trivedi, the riposte to such criticism by Christine Mangala Frost, which “reinstated . . . a greater area of agency” to the Indians, “brought the debate full circle” (Introduction 20).

Unfortunately, in her attempt to counter such one-sided and reductive theoretical paradigms, Frost, too, perpetuates clichés belonging to the opposite camp, so to speak. For example, she writes:

The ready acceptance of Shakespeare during the Raj cannot be adequately accounted for either in terms of cultural crawling or of imperialist coercion.

Shakespeare, along with other British drama, reached India at a time when there was little by way of theatre except for folk drama; and the fare the folk-theatre offered was a medley of all-too-familiar didactic tales rehashed from the epics and the *puranas*, or a crude pot-pourri of song, dance, mime and farce that hardly qualified as legitimate drama. Shakespeare answered to a desperate need for
intellectual and psychological stimulus, and Shakespeare in performance became a catalyst for theatres in the vernacular. (93)\textsuperscript{4}

Such counterarguments, too, are problematic for different reasons. Works based on folklore and native dramatic or artistic forms have, in Western contexts been regarded as hallmarks of modernism or as means of nationalist expression (consider, for instance, the “primitivism” of Paul Gauguin and Igor Stravinsky, or the folk-inspired music and plays of Béla Bartók and W.B. Yeats). Such “Primitivism” is, of course, never “primitive”: it is readily accepted as a modernist aesthetic stance taken by leading Western creative artists. In the Indian context, too, whether or not the use of folk material robbed the plays of aesthetic complexity should be determined only after examining the products themselves. Therefore, the question of whether or not traditional Indian drama was stagnant in the nineteenth century cannot be answered solely on the basis of the fact that it drew upon folk material, deemed ab initio inferior. Moreover, Frost’s thesis also raises certain questions that go unanswered in the course of her argument. Why, for instance, were adaptations of Shakespeare in general successful, while “vernacular productions that made no concession to Indian expectations seldom succeeded,” as she herself observes (94)? Was it the “real” Shakespeare or an indigenized one that found ready acceptance in nineteenth-century India? How were Indian dramatic traditions altered, if at all, by the example of Shakespeare’s drama? Only when these questions are answered will it be possible to assess the nature and extent of Shakespeare’s influence. Moreover, if, as Frost asserts, Shakespeare’s plays have the potential to appeal at the level of myth (95), then their appeal to non-Westernized Indian audiences lay perhaps not so much in their radical

\textsuperscript{4} Not unexpectedly, Frost concludes: “It is hard to imagine the thriving modern theatres in many Indian states without their colonial heritage” (99).
differences from the plots of native Indian drama, but rather in their underlying similarities. This latter line of argument, in fact, is much more plausible than the view that the appearance of Shakespeare’s plays on Indian stages resulted in a sudden emancipation of native traditions in dire need of progress.

What both Singh and Frost share, despite their very different critical positions, is the tendency to leave out the diversity of local responses, as is evident from translations and adaptations into Indian regional languages, and the histories of cross-cultural exchange that lie embedded in them. Admittedly, unearthing these is a difficult task. Unlike European adaptations from the nineteenth century, those from India are very hard to get hold of. Scores and recordings of several nineteenth-century European operatic adaptations, as well as translations and related criticism are readily available, but the texts of most of the Bombay-based Parsi theatrical adaptations, for instance, are either lost or extremely difficult to access. However, archival work is being done, and once nineteenth-century Shakespeare translations and adaptations are made available in critical editions that provide artistic and historical contexts,5 the picture will become clearer. Because of the wide diversity of Indian languages, such a project must necessarily be a collaborative one. In this chapter, however, I do suggest, based on insights provided by some of the most important nineteenth- and twentieth-century primary sources that are currently available and on the fissures within the prevailing critical approaches, why we need to develop new methodologies for understanding Shakespeare’s reception in India.

The methodological approach taken in this study, however, enables us to compare Shakespeare’s reception in nineteenth-century Europe with his reception in nineteenth-

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5 These should include information on whether a translation was made for reading audiences or theatrical performance.
century India and find, in the midst of overall differences, one significant parallel. Shakespeare’s plays reached out to local audiences through translations meant for a reading public, for sure, but even more so through live performances, in which a greater degree of transculturation can be observed. The processes and products of transculturation, of course, differed since there were different interpretive communities in India and Europe, and a number of factors led to the diversity of these groups, even within these regions. For instance, eighteenth-century French audiences used to seeing neoclassical dramas on stage were attuned to an adapted Shakespeare different from the one to which nineteenth-century French Romantics responded. In turn, both differed from interpretive communities of Shakespeare in, say, nineteenth-century Italy, not least on account of differences in language and performance traditions. Similarly, the absence of a single unifying language across the Indian subcontinent in the nineteenth century, and varying literacy levels (usually related to economic differences), ensured that there were different interpretive communities in the Indian context as well. Consequently, Shakespeare adaptations from India, too, show variations which call for explanation. Hence, as I shall argue later in this chapter, the English-educated Indian élite read and appreciated a Shakespeare very different from the one which the masses came to know through indigenized performances in local languages. Sometimes, the same interpretive community could adopt quite different interpretive strategies depending upon context. As students in Elphinstone College, the future entrepreneurs of the Parsi theatre in Bombay presented performances that stayed close to Shakespeare, but the same people adopted a more indigenizing approach when building up a repertory comprising Shakespeare, Arabic-Persian and Hindu legends, and vernacular stories. Adaptation plays an important
role in the reception history of an author and his works in any new interpretive
community, and it holds true in the Indian context as well.

Whether or not indigenization of foreign works takes place in any culture depends
upon a number of factors, such as whether or not the receiving culture has had a history
of intercultural exchange, and whether these exchanges, if and when they took place,
resulted in translations and adaptations by those interested in engaging with works from
other cultures. In India, from the time Shakespeare was introduced, his work was
translated, indigenized, adapted, and performed, partly because India had a long tradition
of adaptation of other literary and dramatic works, and partly because there were people
who were willing to indigenize Shakespeare. Hence, we need not read the Indian context
of Shakespeare’s reception as illustrating a Fanonian unfolding of a historical trajectory
of reception, in which wholehearted emulation of the colonizer’s culture in the earliest
stages is followed by an equally intense rejection, leading to a final stage characterized
by the receiving culture’s balanced engagement with the culture of the colonizer. This is
because, as I stated earlier, the Indian subcontinent’s history of engagement with
Shakespeare showed the overlap of all three attitudes from the very beginning.

There is, however, one point of striking contrast: as I show later in this chapter,
some nineteenth- and early twentieth-century translators and adapters did feel that the
engagement with Shakespeare would change over time, but their view was quite the
opposite of the one suggested by the Fanonian model. They felt the need to indigenize
Shakespeare initially in order to arouse the interest of audiences and readers, and then
gradually introduce translations and adaptations that stayed closer to Shakespeare’s texts.
These translators were neither culturally colonized subjects, nor were they “mimic men.”
They were aware of the unequal nature of cultural “exchange,” but they were willing to engage with Shakespeare’s plays as they believed that Indian (and other) cultures should also be similarly studied by everyone, including their colonial masters, as part of a larger process of creating a world vision. They did not feel that the engagement with Shakespeare would automatically imply the erasure of their own culture, and hence sought to create a model of cross-cultural adaptation that avoided both the uncritical acceptance of, and organized resistance to new, foreign influences. Such an attitude can be accounted for by the fact that the Indian subcontinent had a history of translation and adaptation of previous literary texts, not just the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* but also many Arabic, Persian, and indigenous sources. Indigenized versions of Shakespeare’s plays sought to bring them closer to the kinds of drama and literature Indian audiences and readers were familiar with, and helped vernacular audiences relate to the plays. As negative audience responses to “authentic” performances of Shakespeare show, such an engagement was not possible unless Shakespeare’s plays underwent transculturation.\(^6\)

The “impure,” indigenized, nineteenth-century stage adaptations of Shakespeare played a far more central role in the process of intercultural exchange at a significant cultural moment in Indian history than has been generally recognized, and a critical re-examination of Shakespeare translations and adaptations made from the nineteenth century onwards India is, therefore, necessary. The process of performative transculturation – by which I mean the additions and alterations done to Shakespeare’s

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\(^6\) In this regard, it is important to note that Shakespeare, as performed on nineteenth-century British stages, was often far removed, both textually and in terms of performance conditions, from those in Elizabethan times. Thus, even the most authentic Shakespeare nineteenth-century Indian audiences could have possibly known would be at a far remove from our present-day notion of “authentic” Shakespeare.
plays when adapted to performance modes in a different culture (drama, traditional dance forms, or film, for example) – played a vital role in presenting a less alien Shakespeare in India. True, Shakespeare’s reception in India was conditioned by colonial education, but it was not the sole channel by which Shakespeare’s plays became known; moreover, its undeniable power in shaping the critical opinion of the élite did not spill over untrammelled into the vernacular theatres as well. Given the various modes and channels of engagement with Shakespeare available to Indian readers and audiences, it is impossible to maintain either the view that Shakespeare’s plays were exclusively tools of cultural colonization used by British colonial educationalists, or that they completely overhauled Indian dramatic traditions. The truth lies somewhere in between: Shakespeare’s plays were altered in performance and, as I shall argue later, Indian drama was also influenced to an extent by the form and content of some of his works.

What, then, need to be studied and theorized afresh are the various hues of Indian responses to Shakespeare. We need not, and should not, focus only on the so-called “Macaulay’s children” – they were neither the majority, nor were they meant to be, as Macaulay’s own words in his Minutes on Indian Education reveal:

> It is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons,

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7 A view of Shakespeare as a reformer of dramatic traditions is equally popular (and just as inaccurate) in European contexts. Although the first generation of French Romantics attempted to popularize such a view of Shakespeare, their advocacy of the subversive qualities of the plays gradually lost its edge by the 1840s. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, even in Germany, where Shakespeare’s works were more wholeheartedly received than in any other nation in continental Europe, a powerful anti-Shakespeare counterdiscourse arose later in the nineteenth century (Habicht 243-52).
Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.

Even if Macaulay sought to create – and succeeded in creating – a group of mimic men, the body of knowledge brought by the English, whether literary, scientific, or political, spread far beyond this élite group, a substantial portion of it through translations made by Indians, as I shall argue later in this chapter. Indeed, as I stated in my introduction, not more than 5 per cent of the Indian population uses English exclusively as a first language even now (Harish Trivedi “Anglophone/Non-Anglophone Shakespeares” 193), and the percentage was far less in the nineteenth century, when English literature could be studied in the original language only by a small Indian minority. Hence, the role played by vernacular-language translators, adapters, and performers in presenting an indigenized Shakespeare is far more significant than has been recognized generally.

Indian literary critics and scholars should, therefore, pay greater heed to the central role played by those adapters, who facilitated the engagement with Western ideas among different Indian communities without becoming “mimic men” themselves. Indeed, it rests precisely on these critics to resist the bracketing of large, non-Western cultures under a broad postcolonial rubric. The histories of cross-cultural encounters in various parts of the world are remarkably diverse; hence, critical attention needs to shift from the policies of the colonizer to the ways in which these policies were resisted by those whose cultural histories their colonizers sought to erase. In fact, the hegemony of English
writing is by no means over. Macaulay has had his present-day successors, some of them Indians writing in English, who have taken the opportunity of capitalizing on the far greater international attention given to them, because of their choice of the world’s *lingua franca*, as a means of privileging their own work over that of writers using native languages.⁸ In the Indian context, therefore, literary criticism should provide a corrective by placing Indian-English writing within a flourishing tradition of literary writing in native languages, which has a broader readership both within India and abroad. If Indian writers in English have been responsible for bringing Indian literature to international limelight in the past twenty years or so, it is up to Indian literary critics to place their work in the larger literary scene within India.

In this regard, redrawing the literary map of nineteenth-century India is crucial, since this is the time when Indian writing was contending with a number of foreign influences. A number of European writers, above all, Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, Sir Walter Scott and the English Romantics poets, were decisive influences on native Indian writing. Homer and Milton played an important role in the development of the epic along new lines, as Datta’s *Meghanadavadha* [*The Slaying of Meghanada*] shows; Scott’s historical novels led to the development of the Indian novel in the works of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and others; and the English Romantics were a strong influence on

⁸ See, for example, Rushdie’s neo-Macaulean observation that Indian writing in English represents “the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books” (Rushdie and West x). To dismiss Rushdie’s observation as being merely “provocative” is to miss out on the larger agenda: Rushdie’s summary dismissal of other serious Indian literature in vernacular languages only serves to consolidate his own reputation as the best among Indian writers of all time (making the proviso “in English” redundant). Nabaneeta Dev Sen quickly pointed out the striking parallel with Macaulay, and concluded with biting irony that “[w]e always bow to the supreme wisdom of one who reads no Indian language” (qtd. in Huggan 64).
Rabindranath Tagore. Shakespeare was more readily transculturated into Indian literary and theatrical traditions that were already flourishing or developing, and for precisely this reason his work is important in this present study of cross-cultural exchange featuring performative transculturation.

In this study, therefore, I shall begin by comparing and contrasting the reception histories of Shakespeare in the cities of Calcutta and Bombay, either of which is often taken as representative of nineteenth-century Indian responses to Shakespeare. I argue that the English-educated population of Calcutta, the capital of British India, by no means wholly identified themselves with British culture; rather, along with their promotion of Shakespeare, they also concentrated their intellectual and organizational energies on the parallel projects of reviving Bengali and Sanskrit-based classical Indian drama. In Bombay, the Westernized Parsi community formed the Parsi Theatre, for which they produced indigenized adaptations of Shakespeare (among others), and performed an eclectic dramatic repertory throughout the Indian subcontinent and beyond (such as parts of Africa, the Far East, and even England), thus playing a pivotal role in introducing a transculturated Shakespeare to new global audiences.

In my study of Shakespeare adaptations in these cities, I draw on, but also modify, some of the observations of Jyotsna Singh, Sisir Kumar Das, and Ania Loomba regarding the roles played by the Bengali élite and the Parsi theatre in introducing Shakespeare to new global audiences. In addition, by drawing on comments by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Indian translators and adapters from these cities as well as from elsewhere in India, I show that they felt that indigenizing Shakespeare was necessary for initiating the process of intercultural exchange, one that would eventually lead to a
“world vision.” Consequently, they attempted this process of indigenization concertedly all over India, with remarkable awareness of the nature of their cultural project.

I go on to examine the transition of the Parsi theatre into film and its adaptations of Shakespeare (among others), as it made this transition in the early part of the twentieth century. The tradition of adapting Shakespeare on film has continued in India to the present day, excepting one fallow period following Indian independence in 1947 until about 1980 or so, to the present day. The wave of cinematic Shakespeare adaptations emerging from India from the late 1990s onward, therefore, forms the subject matter of the concluding section of this chapter. By and large, these twentieth-century Indian adaptations do not “write back” to Shakespeare, unlike many postcolonial writings, such as those from the Caribbean, and which are therefore valued in the academia precisely on account of their powerfully subversive counternarratives. However, if we are to look afresh at postcolonial literature by re-focusing our attention on literary and artistic works that arise from intercultural exchange and show various strategies of indigenization, then we have this largely unknown and interesting body of Shakespeare adaptations to examine and theorize anew.

**English Education and Shakespeare in Nineteenth-Century Bengal**

There were two reasons why the British introduced English education in India: in order to run the administration more inexpensively using native officials, and to create an élite that would be, to repeat Macaulay’s much-quoted phrase, “Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” Such a group was meant to act as a bridge between the British and the rest of the Indian population.
English, therefore, was meant to serve both a functional purpose and a cultural one. In Bengal, the functional importance of learning English was quickly recognized; the cultural response was, in contrast, more ambivalent. As Modhumita Roy observes, at the ideological and cultural levels, there was a variety of responses in Bengal to English-language education (84-85). A minority group emulated British cultural and social mores; another group was decidedly against British influence of any sort, and therefore espoused a regressive conservatism, while a third group regarded the English language as a window to a new world and therefore advocated English-language education. English education, then, created more than just mimic men or reactionaries. From the very outset, there was an influential group that was interested in the possibility of selectively imbibing the new body of knowledge and thought British education had to offer. The leaders of this latter group were Raja Rammohan Roy (1774-1833) and Ishwarchandra Sharma (1820-1891), better known as Vidyasagar, whose influence in the fields of social and religious reform, education, and politics transformed all aspects of Bengali society and even extended to other parts of India.\(^9\) It is important to note that the desire for reform cut across class barriers: Rammohan Roy, the founder in 1828 of the Brahmo Samaj, a reformist Hindu religious group to which the rich and influential Tagore family belonged, was a part of Calcutta’s wealthy landowning class, while Vidyasagar was born to a poor Brahmin family that had migrated to Calcutta during his childhood for economic reasons. Despite their very different backgrounds, Rammohan and Vidyasagar were united in their desire for socio-religious reform (such as the banning of sati and then widow remarriage), the development of Bengali literature through the adaptation of

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9 See, for example, Gandhi’s laudatory article on Vidyasagar, which he wrote in Gujarati for his newspaper *Indian Opinion* (September 16, 1905; rpt. in Bandyopadhyay 21-25).
works from a variety of sources, both Indian and foreign, and the incorporation of new European knowledge into school curricula, without the abandoning of traditional Indian knowledge. In addition, Rammohan campaigned for the freedom of the Indian press and, as a journalist, pointed to the economic exploitation of India by the East India Company. In the long run, the influence of Rammohan Roy, Vidyasagar, and other fellow reformists was much greater than either that of the British-mimicking minority or the conservative reactionaries; hence, it is the role of the reformists in facilitating cross-cultural exchange in the light of changing British attitudes towards Indian culture and Indian education that needs to be analyzed in detail.

The increasing intervention of the British in matters of Indian culture and education played a major role in shaping the development of Indian drama and literature in the nineteenth century. Starting from the latter half of the eighteenth century, British involvement in Indian languages and literature resulted in the development of Indian-language printing presses (Vinay Dharwadker 170). This led to the revival of ancient works from Sanskrit literature, as well as their translation and publication in English. As this body of literature gradually gained in prestige with the development of philology and the recognition of Sanskrit as one of the principal Indo-European languages, British interest in native Indian languages declined (Vinay Dharwadker 170-71). However, the establishment of Indian-language printing presses meant that European and Sanskrit plays were now being translated and published in Indian languages; these dramas were also adapted for theatrical performances in various parts of India. For example, when the first

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10 In order to reach out to the widest possible public, Rammohan wrote in Bengali, English, and Persian. He also wrote a pioneering grammar of the Bengali language in English (1826), thus founding the basis, however tentative, for a two-way cultural exchange.
private Bengali theatre, built on the lines of the Western proscenium model, opened in 1831, the first performance featured scenes from *Julius Caesar* and Bhavabhuti’s Sanskrit play *Uttararamacharitam* (Poonam Trivedi, Introduction 14).

Abhijit Sen argues that Sanskrit theatre, in fact, became a rallying point for Bengali nationalists, who encouraged the translation and performance of Bengali adaptations of Sanskrit drama (204-5). Among these nationalists were the affluent Bengali élite, such as the Tagore family, who also patronized the performance of Shakespeare plays in English. As pointed out earlier, the desire to revive a “national” culture while being open to foreign influences was by no means limited to the English-educated Bengali élite classes. An eminent Sanskrit scholar such as Vidyasagar, who also wrote a Bengali primer that is still in use today, wrote *Bhrantibilash*, a very popular translation of *The Comedy of Errors* into Bengali prose that was translated into other Indian languages and later adapted for the stage; it was made into a film as late as 1963 (Vidyasagar’s work and its adaptations are discussed in detail in Verma 276-78, as well as later in this section.) The nature of the multiple cultural projects in which élite families such as the Tagores as well as Sanskrit scholars such as Vidyasagar were involved supports Ania Loomba’s view that binaristic categories such as “élite” or “Westernized” on the one hand, and “nationalist” or “folk” on the other, are reductive in the context of nineteenth-century India (“Shakespearean Transformations” 110, 122).

However, new developments started taking place in the nineteenth century, as a result of which the relationship between English and local languages would be severely strained. Institutions like the Hindu College, established in Calcutta in 1817, imparted English-language education to upper-class children, and Shakespeare began to be taught
in classrooms only to those who could afford a very expensive education.\footnote{As Modhumita Roy points out, the fees at Presidency College, the name by which the Hindu College was known since 1854, was “Rs. 12 per month at a time when monthly lower-middle-class salaries did not much exceed that figure”) (97).} This was followed by the infamous Education Act of 1835, which privileged English as the language for administration and education, resulting in a gradual but decisive shift in academic curricula in favour of English and European literature over Sanskrit and other Indian literatures. The dramas of Shakespeare, who, by the nineteenth century, had come to be regarded in England as the country’s greatest literary icon, played an even more central role in the curriculum of colonial English education. The British administration followed up these developments by abandoning Persian as the court language after 1837, giving preference to Indians proficient in English applying for government jobs, and by teaching professionalizing courses exclusively in English. Bengalis were quick to realize that English-language education was necessary, and Christian missionaries were there to offer much-needed tuition in English (Modhumita Roy 97-98). While the missionaries aimed to produce converts to Christianity, middle-class Bengalis were willing to stretch their resources in order to attain English education as a means for getting jobs. English literary culture was far from accessible to the majority of the native population, and the majority of even those who studied English outside of the élite schools had, by and large, economic rather than cultural imperatives in mind. Shakespeare in English was accessible only to those who had the leisure to read him, or perform him in amateur classroom productions. If Shakespeare’s plays had to be performed in commercial theatres catering to large audiences from different socio-economic backgrounds, they obviously had to be transculturated.
It is now clear why such changes engendered “a schism… between the English-speaking élite and the vernacular-speaking masses” (Poonam Trivedi, Introduction 15), leading to a diversity in the reception of Shakespeare at various levels, from the academic/textual in classrooms to the highly adapted, translated/transculturated Shakespeare on the vernacular stages in India. Such stage adaptations ranged from those involving simple indigenization of names and places, through those which relocated the plays in specific periods of Indian history, to that which totally transculturated the plays into traditional folk-influenced theatrical forms, often by means of the addition of songs and dances, simplification of plots, and the omission of characters.

Sisir Kumar Das has observed that, by the time translations of Shakespeare began to appear, he was already a cultural icon for a section of the English-educated Indian élite who proposed new models of Western-influenced drama, and presented a defence of their imitation of Western models by citing the influence of Greek and Roman models on European vernacular theatres (48). Their main aim in translating Shakespeare was to introduce his plays to the masses that did not know English (or enough English). But their faithful-to-the-original translations did not form the major channel of propagation of Shakespeare to the non-English-speaking audiences. “Faithful” stage productions of Shakespeare, such as the Bengali adaptation of *Macbeth* (1893) by the most famous among nineteenth-century Bengali actors Girish Ghosh, failed at the box office in Calcutta (Saubhik Datta 180), while Indianized adaptations such as *Hariraj* (after *Hamlet*), *Prabhabati* and *Soudagar* (both adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice*) by minor figures proved quite successful in the same city (Chakravorty 195). Ghosh, in fact, was so embittered by the failure of his adaptation that he commented: “If Shakespeare
himself came to Bengal, the Bengali spectator would not understand him” (qtd. in Chakravorty 195). Nevertheless, the failure of Ghosh’s *Macbeth* is particularly striking, for it is in Calcutta that British influence on the nineteenth-century Indian élite is assumed to have been the most pronounced.

It would appear that the reach of “faithful” translations and adaptations of Shakespeare was limited in Calcutta, while the Parsi theatres of Bombay presented a thoroughly transculturated Shakespeare from the outset. In other words, while British colonial education was hegemonic in its aims and aspirations, its effect was not as far-reaching as has often been supposed. There were undoubtedly authors in various regional languages who tried to use Western models in general and Shakespeare in particular for a variety of purposes, such as incorporating verisimilar tendencies in Indian drama, or to critique traditional social malaises (Das 50). The extent of influence of these dramatists – social or otherwise – is open to question, but without any attempt on the part of Indians themselves to engage with Shakespeare, the process of reform could not have even begun. It is also necessary to recognize that “national” culture in nineteenth-century India was not identical with anti-colonialist or nationalist ideologies but, instead, comprised many different strands, as a consequence of which “the *multiple* relationships to the dominant alien culture that can and do exist within any ‘colonized’ society” need to be

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12 Ghosh worked meticulously on the translation, taking nearly seventeen years to come up with the final version, and backed it with décor and costumes that received generous praise from the English press for their “admirable reproduction of all the conventions of an English stage” (qtd. in Abhijit Sen 207). It is interesting to note that even Ghosh, in his apparently “faithful” staging of Shakespeare, subtly introduced a subversive element by drawing parallels between Macbeth’s rule and that of the British colonial administrators (Saubhik Datta 180). Homage and subversion could, indeed, go hand in hand: Ghosh’s *Macbeth* clearly demonstrates that it was possible for a nineteenth-century Indian adapter of Shakespeare to separate the plays from the British imperial project.
understood and theorized anew (Loomba, “Shakespearean Transformations” 110; emphasis in the original).

Because of the multiple social and cultural levels at which English and Indian cultures interacted, Shakespeare was understood and adapted in a variety of ways right from the beginning. This was, no doubt, partly because Shakespeare was a dramatist, and his plays could be appreciated not only through textual study, but also through adaptation into a variety of indigenous performance modes. Indeed, as noted earlier, India has had a long tradition of adaptation, which facilitated such a process of reception. Poonam Trivedi has noted that “in the Indian literary tradition, adaptation is an accepted practice which allows rewritings to co-exist without challenging the status of the ‘original’ urtext. . . . Just as the Sanskrit epics had been reworked in the regional languages, so was Shakespeare adapted into local cultures” (“Macbeth” 53). Das, too, argues:

A tradition of literal translation existed in India. . . . Yet what predominated was a free translation, or transcreation. The Indians kept their ancient texts alive by this mechanism, without disputing the sanctity of an ‘original’ or urtext. A large number of adaptations of Shakespeare in the nineteenth and in the early twentieth

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13 A history of adaptations of the epics Ramayana and the Mahabharata, has been part of Indian vernacular literature for centuries, and some notable ones are by women: they include, for example, retellings of the Ramayana from proto-feminist perspectives in the sixteenth century (by Chandrabati in Bengali and Molla in Telugu) to Marxist ones in more recent times (such as the Telugu writer Raganayakamma’s Ramayana Vishavruksham, 1974-76) (Dev Sen).

14 The term “transcreation” has been regularly employed by the Indian scholar and translator Purushottam Lal to underline his view that any act of translation necessarily involves creative decisions on the part of the translator. The Telugu writer and translator Malathi Nidadavolu argues that the term “transcreation” is best applicable to cross-cultural translations.
centuries are part of this tradition. Its aim was to transmit Shakespeare across cultures in the same way the Sanskrit epics or Persian tales found a place in every Indian home. (60)

Moreover, unlike in Western culture where adaptations were considered secondary or derivative from the nineteenth century onwards, Indian vernacular translations and adaptations of these epics have had the status of original and, in some cases, authoritative texts (such as the versions of the Ramayana by Tulsidas and Krittibas) (Seely 32). It is, therefore, not surprising that when Shakespeare’s plays were introduced by the British, indigenized adaptations would form a major mode of engagement.

Vidyasagar’s Bhrantibilash and its Adaptation into Film

A discussion of Shakespeare’s reception in Bengal would not be complete without a study of the most famous translation-adaptation of Shakespeare from nineteenth-century Bengal, Vidyasagar’s Bhrantibilash (1869), based on The Comedy of Errors. When Vidyasagar wrote his prose translation, Bengali prose was only beginning to be used as a medium of literary expression, and he sought to create a corpus of Bengali prose literature by making straightforward adaptations of Indian and Greek fables, Sanskrit and English drama, moral tales from various sources and so on.\(^\text{15}\) In hindsight, Vidyasagar’s highly formal, Sanskritized prose ("Sadhubhasha") seems old-fashioned and rather quaint an idiom for a play whose only virtue, according to the author’s own prefatory note, lay

\(^{15}\) For an annotated bibliography of Vidyasagar’s writings, see Bandyopadhyay 59-64.
in its genuinely comic moments (5). But from an historical perspective, Vidyasagar’s work was a pioneering effort, and needs to be placed in the light of his larger work as an academic.

The prose format of Vidyasagar’s translation has led critics to suggest Charles and Mary Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare* as a possible source (Bose 58), and some details, such as the paragraphing of the first chapter, and the mention of Duke Menaphon right at the beginning, suggest an awareness of the *Tales*. However, Vidyasagar made a close translation of most of the dialogue in Shakespeare’s original (practically all of which was left out in the *Tales*), and the removal of the narrative sections in *Bhrantibilash* would result in a version suited for theatrical performance. Vidyasagar observed that the changing of proper names in fiction does not pose any problem, unlike non-fictional genres such as histories and biographies (5); hence, for the sake of indigenizing the play, he provided a new set of names for his characters, and also changed the setting. Shakespeare chose the name of his setting – Ephesus – very carefully, such that a

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16 Sudipto Kaviraj suggests that Vidyasagar attempted to give Bengali a distinctive identity by moving away from its Sanskrit roots while, at the same time, he could not give up the grandeur of the “high style” of formal Bengali, which was close to Sanskrit. Kaviraj’s observation that Vidyasagar’s Shakuntala and Sita “were somewhat more sombre and mournful than the original heroines of Sanskrit texts” (383), also holds for *Bhrantibilash*. On the contrary, it can be argued that Vidyasagar did intend his work to be taken more seriously than Shakespeare’s play: he describes *The Comedy of Errors* as a *prakashan*, or farcical work, and uses the word *bilash*, with its connotations of pleasure, to describe his own adaptation. For an analysis of Vidyasagar’s strengths and limitations as a translator, see Kaviraj 382-83; for an overview of Vidyasagar’s literary writings and their role in the development of Bengali prose, see Bose 56-62.

17 Rammohan, too, played a parallel role, though he confined himself to bringing out the first Bengali translations of Western scientific texts, in addition to tracts pertaining to religious and social reform.

18 He is mentioned at the end in Shakespeare’s play (5.1.368).
Christian subtext could be read into the play.\textsuperscript{19} In contrast, as a result of Vidyasagar’s changes, the religious subtext is lost (and Vidyasagar’s version does not carry any Hindu connotations). In fact, Vidyasagar’s choice of play may have been because of the fact that the plot of \textit{The Comedy of Errors} is so improbable that its setting becomes immaterial, making indigenization rather easy.\textsuperscript{20}

In one respect, though, Vidyasagar makes important changes: it is with regard to the characterization of the women in the play, especially Chandraprabha (Adriana) and Bilashini (Luciana). Their first scene, which begins the second chapter of \textit{Bhrantibilash}, shows the unmarried Bilashini repeating patriarchal notions of a good wife, one who readily defers to the will of her husband, which Chandraprabha counters by a reasoned and passionate defence of women’s expectation for equality of treatment. She ends by telling Bilashini: “Once you have married, you can suffer the domination and tyranny of men with far greater ease than I do” (17). Vidyasagar never depicts Chandraprabha as a shrew, unlike her Shakespearean counterpart, Adriana, who is one right from the beginning of \textit{The Comedy of Errors}. Vidyasagar also rewrites the scene between the Abbess and Adriana (5.1.38-167), removing completely the Abbess’s admonition of Adriana’s shrewish temperament, which Charles and Mary Lamb retain in their retelling (\textit{Tales} 256-58). The Abbess herself gets a larger part in the closing scene, which is considerably more elaborate than in Shakespeare, and while \textit{The Comedy of Errors} ends with a touching scene for the two Dromios, Vidyasagar ends with Chandraprabha taking

\textsuperscript{19} See the preface to the New Cambridge edition of \textit{The Comedy of Errors} 10-20 for a discussion of the religious subtext of the play.

\textsuperscript{20} As Ros King notes in the New Cambridge introduction to the play, problems arise in the theatre only when directors go for representational rather than abstract sets (6).
the lead in the new order, one in which the errors of identity have been resolved. While Shakespeare’s play attempts to present the possibility of “reconciliation through an acknowledgement of difference” (Preface to The Comedy of Errors 11; emphasis in the original), Vidyasagar’s Bhrantibilash shows that such reconciliation is possible only through the establishment of equality between the sexes. The author’s work as a social reformer, especially with regard to women’s rights, thus forms the essential subtext in what is basically a light-hearted retelling of Shakespeare’s play in Bengali prose.

By choosing The Comedy of Errors, Vidyasagar showed that he was well aware of his limitations, for more complex levels of engagement with European literary texts is evident in Bengali literature from the 1860s. A greater play of Shakespeare such as The Tempest was taken as the basis for a radical reworking by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, whose first major novel, Kapalakundala (1866) engages with the themes of Shakespeare’s play (and subverts them). Set in a strange, uninhabited island, the novel Kapalakundala fuses the characters of Caliban and Miranda in the heroine Kapalakundala, over whom Nabakumar, the hero, and her foster father, the Kapalik, try to have control. The novel is set in a period of Mughal expansion in India, and Bankim draws parallels between Mughal and European colonization in his novel.21 Similarly,

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21 Tagore, too, read The Tempest in ways that anticipate postcolonial readings, as his 1902 essay comparing Kalidasa’s Shakuntala with Shakespeare’s play shows:

[T]he principal theme of The Tempest is the conflict and strife to dominate. There Prospero, ousted from rule over his own kingdom, establishes stern rule over nature by the power of magic. When a few creatures reach the shore of the island after somehow escaping death, they too engage in conspiracies, betrayals and attempts at assassination, to dominate over what is virtually a desert island. By the end, their efforts have been stayed; but no one can say that they have finally ended. Demonic nature falls silent, like the persecuted Caliban, out of fear, oppression, and lack of opportunity; but its fangs and talons still bear venom. Everybody gains what is due, but that is only an external gain. It might be the goal
Michael Madhusudhan Datta’s epic poem *The Slaying of Meghanada* (1861), starts from the assumption that the Aryans invaded ancient India, just as the Greeks invaded Troy, or the British present-day India, and makes deliberate intertextual allusions to *Paradise Lost* and *The Iliad*. This is to describe the political dimension of *Kapalakundala* and *The Slaying of Meghanada* rather crudely, but the point I am trying to make here is that these writers, who engaged with Shakespeare and other canonical European authors, were able to do so on their own terms, and that while they imbibed European influences, they were far from being depoliticized mimic men. It is, therefore, essential to assess their contribution to Indian literature and to cross-cultural exchange in the light of their works, rather than through a pre-existing critical position.

Despite its limitations, Vidyasagar’s *Bhrantibilash* was, in fact, quite an influential work: it was translated into other Indian languages, as I shall show later, and also made into a Bengali film in 1963. This film, made less than twenty years after Indian independence, capitalized on Vidyasagar’s rather than Shakespeare’s cultural capital, but in some ways it is indebted to both *The Comedy of Errors* and *Bhrantibilash*, and in fact goes a step further in its intertextual allusiveness. Although the film retains the names of characters as they appear in Vidyasagar, it updates the setting to an unspecified town near Calcutta, and reworks many of the details. Somedatta (Egeon) is omitted, and it is the mother who sends her son and his servant for a trip to the town where their twins exist. Chandraprabha veers between shrewishness and submissiveness, while her sister

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of a mercenary community; it cannot be the final outcome of a poetic work. (qtd. in Supriya Chaudhuri 229)

22 See Seely 3-67 and Supriya Chaudhuri 223-36 for critical analyses of *The Slaying of Meghanada* and *Kapalakundala* respectively.
becomes a sprightly, witty girl who makes it easy for the Calcutta-based Chiranjeeb 23 (Antipholus) to fall in love with her. However, since the film is set in modern times, there is no King, and some of the actions, such as the jeweller giving Chiranjeeb an expensive chain without taking a receipt strains the credibility of an already-improbable plot even further, given the movie’s half-hearted attempt at realistic representation.

Interestingly, the film capitalizes on a parallel between Indian and Greek mythology, which makes it hark back not only to Shakespeare but to his second major source, Plautus’s *Amphitruo* (Preface to *The Comedy of Errors* 11). In Plautus’s play, Jupiter turns himself into Amphitruo in order to have an adulterous relationship with his wife, Alcmena, while Mercury, disguised as Amphitruo’s slave Sosio, guards the door. In the film, Bilashini finds her brother-in-law Chiranjeeb at a fair, where both watch a puppet show before she notices him and drags him home. The puppet show narrates the mythical tale of Ahalya, wife of the poet-sage Gautama, whom Indra, an important god in the Hindu pantheon, seduces by appearing in the form of her husband. This tale forms part of the *Ramayana*, and different versions of it exist in different retellings of the epic. Thus, both Vidyasagar’s *Bhrantibilash* and its 1963 film adaptation have at least three intertexts in addition to the ones to which they overtly announce their relationships: *Tales from Shakespeare*, the *Ramayana*, and Plautus’s *Amphitruo*. A study of any adaptation, especially a cross-cultural one, needs to take into account the possibility of it having multiple intertexts, given the adaptation’s location in a different culture and period.

23 In the film version, the Antipholus brothers actually have slightly different names – Chiranjeeb and Chiranjeet – which sound almost identical when quickly pronounced. As in Vidyasagar, but even more so here, there is an attempt at a certain degree of psychological verisimilitude: Chiranjeeb and his twin suspect quite early on that the confusion in identities must be due to the appearance of some twin whose existence they are not aware of.
As the brief description of the two versions of *Bhrantibilash* shows, the film, not surprisingly, displays a greater level of indigenization when compared with Vidyasagar’s prose retelling. The principal male roles were played by Uttamkumar, a very popular Bengali film star, and Bhanu Banerjee, who specialized in farcical roles. The female leads were Sabitri Chatterjee and Sandhya Roy, actresses known for their skills in portraying comic characters. The film was evidently made with their skills in mind, and although it was quite successful in its time, it became dated rather quickly. The film does show that performative transculturation usually involves a greater degree of indigenization, but in this particular case, its excessive dependence on the conventions of Bengali popular cinema of the 1960s also resulted in it being quickly forgotten, as the cinematic conventions which the film relied upon rapidly went out of fashion.

**Shakespeare in Calcutta Theatres**

An analysis of the history of theatres in Calcutta in the light of British educational policies confirms the view that it could not have been possible for producers to present Shakespeare’s plays for mass audiences without making them undergo performative transculturation. The first English theatre, the Playhouse, was set up in Calcutta in 1753, followed by the New Playhouse (also known as the Calcutta Theatre) in 1775 as well as a number of other smaller ones, run mostly by English amateurs. English-language education was not available to the majority of Bengalis at this stage. A new and much more important event was the foundation of the Chowringhee Theatre, co-founded in 1813 by H. H. Wilson, a well-known Sanskrit scholar, D. L. Richardson, who was also famous for his lectures on Shakespeare, and Tagore’s grandfather Dwarkanath, famous
for his patronage of the arts. Despite enjoying patronage from a succession of English Governor-Generals, the theatre was put up for sale in 1835, when Dwarkanath Tagore bought it for a huge sum and re-organized it. Four years later, it was completely destroyed by a fire. That same year, 1839, another theatre was established in Calcutta, the Sans Souci Theatre, where English drama, mainly Shakespeare, continued to be performed. By now, members of the Bengali élite could study English language and literature, while the majority of Bengalis were either unable to study English, or did so only for economic reasons. A few years later (1848) a Bengali actor, Baishnab Charan Adhya, performed the role of Othello to positive reviews, the first time the title role was played by an Indian (the rest of the cast was English). However, by 1849, financial difficulties forced this theatre to close down as well: this is not surprising, since, as mentioned earlier, after the Education Act of 1835, the gulf between the English-speaking Bengali upper class and the Bengali-speaking majority widened, depriving English-language theatres of whatever little public support they could have garnered. Thus, although these were the heydays of British colonialism in India, the last professional English theatre in Calcutta closed down about a century after the first one was established (Majumdar 263), at a time when Indians were being forced to learn English in order to avail themselves of the lower-level government jobs that were now being made available to them.

However, in English-medium schools set up by the East India Company, a tradition of Shakespeare performances by students sprang up from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Prasanna Kumar Tagore established a Hindu Theatre in 1831, where students, who had otherwise only studied Shakespeare in the classroom, found a platform
to perform the plays. Thus, there was a relatively short period of overlap between the introduction of English-language education and the activity of professional English theatre in Calcutta. English-language performances of Shakespeare in Calcutta were, by and large, amateur, student-led affairs and, given the closing down of English professional theatres, do not appear to have reached out to large audiences.

The first Bengali public theatre, the National Theatre, opened in 1872 (a private one opened in 1831, as mentioned earlier), and a number of others opened in its wake, some of which, like the New Star Theatre (1888) and the University Institute Mancha (1891), are still operational today. These theatres reflected Western influence in their décor, stages and galleries, while plays written for these theatres, such as those by Tagore, Madhusudan Dutt, Dinabandhu Mitra and Dwijendralal Roy, exhibited at least some knowledge of Shakespeare (Majumdar 265). However, Shakespeare’s plays were rarely performed in Bengali translation, so that for the non-English-speaking part of the population, Shakespeare “remained an immense but shadowy influence rather than a presence” (Majumdar 265). The failure of the adaptation of by Girish Ghosh’s Bengali Macbeth in Bengali translation, discussed earlier, shows that translation and staging alone did not endear Shakespeare to Calcutta audiences: indigenization was equally necessary.

Hence Amarendranath Dutta, a disciple-turned-rival of Ghosh, achieved popular success by making a complete indigenization of Hamlet into Hariraj (1896), which continued to be performed for over a decade.24 Even translators had recourse to

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24 While in Bombay the Parsi theatres inevitably indigenized Shakespeare in the process of adaptation, adapters in Calcutta veered between making “faithful” adaptations and freely indigenized ones. The preference of the producers to opt for thoroughly transculturated adaptations, and to use European theatrical props and modes of theatrical
indigenizing strategies. In 1895, Hemchandra Bandopadhyay, who translated *Romeo and Juliet* into Bengali, wrote:

I have tried to present the story of the play of Shakespeare and the essential features of the characters in a native mould to suit the taste of the readers of my country. I cannot say how successful I have been. But I believe that without adopting such a method no foreign play will ever find a place in Bengali literature, which will be denied nourishment and advancement. After a period of such exercises, faithful translations of foreign plays and poems will find acceptance in Bengali literature. But for now, for some time to come, I believe, this method is indispensable. (qtd. in Das 66)

It is, perhaps, through literary translations and adaptations of Shakespeare that Calcutta-based adapters of Shakespeare exerted some influence on the reception of his works in the rest of the subcontinent. Moreover, Bengali translators and adapters of Shakespeare clearly articulated the ways in which they transcultured Shakespeare and their reasons for doing so. Translators and adapters from other parts of India were influenced by the strategies of their Calcutta-based colleagues.

**Indigenizing Shakespeare in India: Shared Adaptation and Translation Strategies**

D.V. Gundappa, who made the first Kannada translation\(^{25}\) of a Shakespeare play (*Macbeth*) that stays close to the original (Guttal 110), outlined his goals as a translator;

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\(^{25}\) It is difficult to ascertain the specific purposes for these translations: whether they were meant for reading or for performance is a question that needs to be determined on a case-
his remarks bear out Hemchandra’s view that translation strategies will change over time. Writing in 1936, more than forty years after Bandopadhyay, Gundappa argued for the need for a close translation of Shakespeare. At the same time, Gundappa was conscious of the fact that the Indian appreciation of Shakespeare had been quite a one-sided affair:

It is my intention to represent the world of Shakespeare as far as possible as it really is and not merely to tell the story. . . . I believe that this is necessary for the enhancement of Kannada literature and the sensibility of the Kannada people and for the broadening of their vision of the world. If human civilization and peace are to last, it is of foremost importance that the different races of the world attain a world vision. In order to achieve this the people of the West should read our epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata [as] sympathetically as we must acquaint ourselves with their poetic tradition. (qtd. in Guttal 110; emphasis mine)

Gundappa here articulates the richly variegated middle ground of Shakespeare’s reception in India in the nineteenth century, one which has played a much more important and representative role in defining the nature of India’s encounter with Western culture, and which has been inadequately theorized or historicized. Moreover, the way his remark ties up with that of Hemchandra shows that there was a shared vision among Indian translators regarding the ability of translations to promote a “world vision.”

The first phase of translations was marked by the adaptation of Shakespeare to suit Indian tastes: as such, names were Indianized (as can be seen in Vidyasagar’s Bhrantibilash), and plots were self-consciously altered by the translators (through the by-case basis. Only then will it be possible to better understand the dynamics of Shakespeare adaptations in India. However, the observations made in this section generally apply both to translations meant for reading as well as to those meant for performance.
addition or omission of material). Collections of translations, such as the twelve-volume Bengali translation of Shakespeare (1896-1903) by Haran Chandra Rakshit, the Hindi Shakespeare in six volumes (1912-14) by Gangaprasad, as well as Tamil ones (by Venugopala Charyar *et al*), were mostly in prose (some of the Tamil translations employed verse) and were chiefly concerned with presenting the plots of the plays in a readable third-person narrative form (Das 52-53). In this context, it is not surprising that there were a large number of translations of Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare* 26 (Das 52). Sometimes translations such as Vidyasagar’s *Bhrantibilash* paved the way for translations into other Indian languages, such the Kannada translation of the play from the Bengali by B. Venkatakacharya, who employed the same title as Vidyasagar (Das 54).

As we have seen, such a mode of transmission of Shakespeare into indigenous languages, not directly from English, but from another vernacular translation based on the English original can be found in the nineteenth-century European context as well, exemplified in the influential French translations of Shakespeare by Le Tourneur or the adaptations by Ducis; a similar role was played in the nineteenth century by German commentaries on Shakespeare, which were often appended to translations of the texts of Shakespeare’s plays in a third European language. However, the reason that no single Indian language (or languages) consistently provided the basis for other local-language translations is because, in the Indian subcontinent, there was no language that had enough cultural

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26 This also holds true for China, where, in the early phase of Shakespeare translation in the first decades of the twentieth century, Lamb’s book was used as the source for adaptations, later followed by “actual” Shakespeare on Chinese stages; the names of some of the Chinese adaptations of a play like *The Merchant of Venice* closely parallel the names of some of the Indian translations (Das 71 n 24). The popularity of Lamb as a source for Shakespearean material indicates that it is the plots of Shakespeare’s plays that provided the basis for adaptations, at least initially.
capital to shape the patterns of Shakespeare’s reception into other Indian languages over a sustained period of time. This is an important point to keep in mind, for it undermines Ania Loomba’s claim that the Parsi theatre provided the template of Shakespeare’s reception throughout the Indian subcontinent. India was not linguistically unified in the nineteenth-century;²⁷ nor were some of the other prominent local theatrical forms of the subcontinent, such as the Bengali jatra or the Malayali kaliyattam influenced by the Parsi theatre – indeed, these local theatrical traditions are flourishing even today, while the Parsi theatre made its transition into film in the early twentieth century. Had Parsi theatre been as influential all over India as Loomba claims (“Shakespearean Transformations” 116), the significant differences between all these performing traditions would have diminished over a period of about 150 years when, in fact, no such change took place.

In India, the most frequently translated plays of Shakespeare were some of the tragedies (Othello, Macbeth, and Hamlet, in particular) and comedies (The Merchant of Venice, the most popular Shakespeare play across all Indian languages, followed by The Comedy of Errors). As with cross-cultural Shakespeare elsewhere, the history plays were far less frequently translated or performed, because they deal with specific English historical backgrounds and do not readily lend themselves to transculturation. Only 1 and 2 Henry IV and Richard III appear to have been translated into any Indian language by the 1930s, by which time the bulk of the rest of Shakespeare’s corpus of dramatic writing had been translated into Indian vernaculars (Poonam Trivedi, Introduction 17).

²⁷The Parsi theatre performed Shakespeare in three languages spoken in North/Western India – Hindi, Gujarati and Urdu.
It seems quite accurate to say, as Das does, that “one of the main reasons for the popularity of Shakespeare in India is the story, the ingenuity of the plot” (57), and many translations made alterations either through expansion or trimming, in order to highlight a particular aspect of the play. The tragedies presented a conceptual problem: unhappy endings, while not uncommon in Indian non-dramatic literature, were not permitted on stage. However, because of the similarity of the plot of Romeo to Indian myths such as that of Radha and Krishna, Laila and Majnun, and Devdas and Parvati, it was possible to “create a space for the accommodation of a new literary genre” (Das 61). Thus, the development of tragedy on the Indian stage could take place because Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet could be readily indigenized by Indian adapters, who saw the parallels between the plot of the play and other popular Hindu and Arabic-Persian legends that had already been successfully adapted into Indian languages, and were willing to incorporate the new genre of tragedy into Indian dramatic traditions.

Shakespeare in Bombay: The Parsi Theatre and the Early Hindi Film

The state of English-language education in nineteenth-century India was very different from what it is at present. Calcutta was the centre of British India till 1911, but in the nineteenth century, it was the capital of India and of the Bengal Presidency, which

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28 Other theorists of adaptation, such as Linda Hutcheon (10), have also pointed out that in Hollywood, for example, the focus is usually on the story; it is, therefore, a strategy of adaptation across cultures.

29 As I have stated in my introduction, a modern-day film such as Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak, whose plot alludes to both Romeo and Juliet and the tale of Laila and Majnun, deeply problematizes the notion of a unitary textual source.
was the largest in the country, combining the present-day West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Orissa, and the entire country of Bangladesh. As David Ludden notes,

[in 1911, Calcutta’s English-literate population was half again as large as Delhi’s and five times that of Madras and Bombay combined. Calcutta was a regional city that spoke directly to London. . . . For the empire’s metropolitan elite, Calcutta’s English-literate public activists represented Indian native society most immediately and forcefully. (185)

As we have seen in the previous section, even in nineteenth-century Calcutta, there was a wide discrepancy between the cultural moorings of those who were educated in English language, and the far smaller subgroup among them who appreciated English culture and literature, as a result of which translators and adapters of Shakespeare took recourse to varying degrees of indigenization and performative transculturation in order to reach out to a wide readership/audience. Since the English-literate population in nineteenth-century Bombay was far smaller, it was inevitable that the Parsis, the most “Westernized” community in Bombay, would take recourse to performative transculturation when presenting Shakespeare for local audiences. There were, in fact, other issues of cultural identity also at work in nineteenth-century theatres in Bombay, which also added to the impetus to transculturate Shakespeare, a point I shall discuss in greater detail later in this chapter.
Parsi\textsuperscript{30} theatrical companies sprang up as a result of the establishment of the Bombay Theatre in 1849, where plays were produced by Englishmen and English-educated Indians and Parsis. The diversity of the repertory of the Parsi theatre – English drama, tales from Arabian and Persian folklore, the \textit{Mahabharata}, and original plays – and the freedom with which their playwrights freely transcultured Shakespeare point to the limited success of British colonial education in the formation of an English-educated Indian populace that would eventually reject their own culture. The shareholders, actors, managers and directors of the Parsi theatres, having been taught at Elphinstone College to revere Shakespeare, chose to adapt Shakespeare freely along the lines of local performing traditions, following Samuel Johnson when it came to the theatre:

\begin{quote}
\textit{The drama’s laws, the drama’s patrons give,}
\textit{For we that live to please, must please to live.}\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

By 1853, the example of the Parsi theatre led to the formation of a similar “Hindu Dramatic Corps” whose aim of producing similar plays in Marathi. In due course, the Parsi theatre groups and the Marathi ones started to influence each other. As mentioned earlier, these companies have been deemed significant, although not unproblematically, in the formation of a “national culture” because of “their widespread influence all over the country, as they performed in many languages and were intricately connected with the

\textsuperscript{30} The term Parsi refers to “Zoroastrian émigrés from Persia, long settled in India but distinct as a community on account of their religion, their wealth and their supposed Westernization” (Loomba 114). Having settled in Gujarat, they started speaking the language of that place, and some of their earliest plays were in that language as well as in English. Gradually, they started using Hindi and Urdu for their plays. For a full discussion of their choice of languages and sources, see Hansen, “Languages on Stage” 381-403.

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Prologue at the Opening of the Theatre in Drury Lane} (1747), qtd. in Malick 94.
birth of Indian cinema” (Loomba, “Shakespearean Transformations” 116). While the influence of Parsi theatre in Hindi, Urdu, and Gujarati-speaking parts of India is undeniable, its pan-Indian influence was in all likelihood less extensive because the languages in which the theatres presented their plays – Hindi, Urdu, and Gujarati – were not spoken by the majority in the East (modern Bengal and Assam) or in southern India (especially in Tamil Nadu, where the use of Hindi as a national language still meets with strong opposition). However, performers of local forms of theatres in these places (such as the Bengali jatra and the Malayali kaliyattam), did not travel as far as the Bombay companies, which toured extensively: Khurshedji Mehrvanji Balivala’s troupe, the Victoria Natak Mandali, traveled to Rangoon and Singapore (1878), Mandalay (1881, by royal invitation) and London (at the 1885 Colonial Exhibition, where they were not very successful but were congratulated by Queen Victoria) (Gupt 159; Loomba, “Shakespearean Transformations” 114).

The Parsi theatre drew on a wide variety of sources for their plays. Initially, they drew on Persian legend and Zoroastrian themes in order to emphasize their religious, cultural and ethnic roots. The language of performance was usually Gujarati, as the Parsis had settled in Gujarat and adopted the language, as well as Urdu, and this was unlike in Bombay theatres such as the Hindu Dramatic Corps (Hansen, “Languages on Stage” 391). They soon started adapting Arabic and Hindu legends and stories, including the Arabian Nights and the Mahabharata,32 as well as a substantial number of Shakespeare’s plays (Kapur 339-40), which formed a core component of the repertories of the Bengali

32 It can be argued that the use of such a wide variety of sources, as well as their extensive tours in India, the Far East, London, and parts of Africa, made the Parsi theatres the most cosmopolitan and prominent of all theatrical troupes across the Indian subcontinent.
and Marathi theatres as well (Loomba, “Shakespearean Transformations” 118). As contemporary accounts of nineteenth-century Parsi theatre and Marathi productions of Shakespeare suggest, these performances were in the form of Indian folk and popular theatrical traditions: performances would often begin with hymns to the Hindu gods, songs and dances would be added constantly, the actors’ costumes would often combine features of Western and Indian attire, and so on, even when the plays themselves were performed unchanged.  

Shakespeare’s plays were part of a larger repertory of plays derived from Indian or middle-Eastern sources, and were performed before audiences who were, by and large, not familiar with English literary culture. It was, therefore, necessary for the playwrights of the Parsi theatre (as well as others) to transculturate the plays.

The performance texts would often take great liberties with Shakespeare – a Marathi version of Measure for Measure “ends with not only the message of upright government, justice and chastity but a wish for the uplifting of the Motherland” (Loomba, “Shakespearean Transformations” 121). As Girish Ghosh had done with his Bengali production of Macbeth, the Parsi theatre playwrights also used Shakespeare as means for expressing anti-colonial sentiments. Thus, both free theatrical adaptations of Shakespeare as well as ones that stayed closer to the original texts could take liberties bordering on the subversive, making it difficult to make a clear-cut separation between theatrical practices that reflected a British imperial, cultural hegemony, on the one hand, and Indian resistance, on the other. Consequently, as Loomba points out, “in comparison with some

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33 See, for example, the account of a six-hour performance of Cymbeline in Marathi as noted by an Englishman named Littledale (qtd. in Loomba, “Shakespearean Transformations” 119-21).
others, this was not a self-consciously political theatre . . . . It eluded categories such as ‘élite’ or ‘Westernized’ on the one hand and ‘nationalist’ or ‘folk’ on the other; rather it was both the product and the producer of a hybridity that was the hallmark of urban colonial India’ (“Shakespearean Transformations” 121-22).

As I suggested earlier, a reason for Shakespeare’s thorough transculturation in Bombay-based theatres is that Shakespeare formed only part of the Parsi theatre’s eclectic repertory. It was certainly a vast enough repertory for the Parsi theatre to avoid Shakespeare entirely during their tour of London, for example: it was a wise decision since their performances of Shakespeare were so very different from those of the English. It is also interesting to note that in London, a translator summarized each scene for the spectators (Gupt 159). The Parsi Theatre could have adopted a similar procedure when presenting plays in parts of India where the local population spoke none of the languages they normally used for performance. Tamil theatre companies seem to have borrowed heavily from the Parsi theatre in terms of organizing their companies as businesses, in using props borrowed from the Victorian stage, in using Western musical instruments, in the nature of costumes, and in the casting of women performers (in addition to the extant tradition of male actors playing female roles) (Seizer 52-53). Vijaya Guttal notes that students and teachers at the Maharaja College, Mysore, started performing Shakespeare in Kannada, inspired by the example of the Parsi theatre (109); he does not, however, analyze the nature of the influence, especially with regard to similarities or differences between their methods of adapting Shakespeare. Indeed, it is extremely difficult to answer this latter question unless the theatrical texts used by the Parsi theatre become

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34 The presentations are listed in Gupt 159.
more generally available. As far as stage productions go, Calcutta-based theatres showed a similar dependence on Western stage props and conventions: this could be either the result of the influence of performances by the Parsi theatre in Calcutta, or, more likely, the influence of the British stage, since both the Bengali and the Parsi professional theatres started to flourish in the 1870s, in cities where British theatres flourished previously and influenced the workings of the indigenous theatres.

Unlike in the Bengali theatre, where Shakespeare adaptations ranged from commercially unsuccessful adaptations that stayed close to Shakespeare (such as Girish Ghosh’s *Macbeth*) to more freely transculturated ones, Parsi theatre companies took the latter route right from the beginning: according to Das, Parsi theatre used Shakespeare merely as a very useful commodity for entertainment, and “was criticized strongly by the dramatists in different parts of the country” (52). There was an inseparable gulf between the Parsi theatre’s productions of Shakespeare, with its focus on dazzling theatrical effects and songs, and the critical perspectives of Shakespeare scholars in India, who continued to be engaged with the printed Shakespearean text that was completely altered on the popular theatrical stage; such scholars, adopting a discourse of fidelity, condemned the work of the Parsi theatre, as a result of which, despite its popularity with the general public, according to Das, it is “now totally forgotten; its history now consists of a few fragments of text” (55). Das’s verdict is rather too severe, because the Parsi theatre did

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35 The costumes, too, were usually a hybrid between Indian and Western attire, imparting to the actors a theatrical look also found in early Indian cinema (Loomba, “Shakespearean Transformations” 121).

36 In her foreword to Gupt’s *The Parsi Theatre*, Kathryn Hansen notes that many of the old printed play-texts of the Parsi theatre, which were not available to Gupt and other commentators, are in fact available in the British Museum and the India Office Library
not disappear as much as it made a very successful transition into the most popular art form of the twentieth century: cinema.

After the screening of the first motion picture in India in 1896, films became increasingly popular, and it was quickly recognized that cinema spelt the end for the theatre as the principal mode of entertainment. Hence, former drama financiers, managers and actors of the Parsi theatre quickly switched over to the new medium, bringing with them both the older repertory and the older style of acting (Loomba, “Shakespearean Transformations” 126). Charles Jasper Sisson saw this trend in a negative light, and compared the “Occidental” medium of film unfavourably with the “indigenous” Shakespeare produced by the Parsi theatre (Sisson 25). Although the tradition of traveling Shakespeare in India was kept alive between the 1940s and early 1960s by Geoffrey Kendal’s troupe “Shakespeariana,” made famous by the Merchant-Ivory film Shakespeare Wallah (1965), film displaced theatre as the medium for cross-cultural adaptations with the largest audiences.

As the Parsi theatre transitioned into film, they continued to draw on Shakespeare, and early twentieth-century films made in Urdu/Hindi include adaptations of The Merchant of Venice, The Taming of the Shrew, several versions of Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet, both of which were popular on the Parsi theatrical stages, as well as those of more infrequently-performed plays, such as Cymbeline, Measure for Measure, Antony

(Foreword ix). Since the majority of scholars agree that Parsi play-texts are very difficult to get hold of, except in fragmentary form (e.g., Das 55), it is safe to conclude that the printed play texts were either available in small numbers or not properly preserved, either as the result of low critical esteem accorded to the plays (as Das and others would argue), or else, because the managers of the individual companies attempted to guard the play texts as closely as possible from reaching other rival companies. A combination of both factors cannot be ruled out either.
and Cleopatra, Pericles. Interestingly, two of the history plays were also made into film – *Richard III* (a very free adaptation) and *King John* (where the links to Shakespeare, both in terms of plot and language, are more extensive) (Verma 270-72). Most of these films were based on free Urdu translations of the plays that were probably performed by the Parsi theatres. As Verma observes:

> The Parsi theatre, which was the source for all the Shakespearean films mentioned above, was itself greatly influenced by Shakespeare, but the influence was less a matter of taking over a worldview or moral vision and more of one professional playwright borrowing plots and situations and other tricks of the trade from another. The more serious translators and adapters of Shakespeare in Hindi were often beset by the anxiety of influence. . . . In contrast . . . the Parsi theatre dramatists showed no such humility or anxiety. (272)

Indeed, in terms of language, the Parsi theatre indigenized Shakespeare by using a “rhyming prose” style dating back to early nineteenth-century Hindi/Urdu literature, which enabled the dramatists to weave original lines of verse into familiar quotations from Urdu poets (Verma 272). Other features of these early Indian film adaptations in

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37 Since very few of these theatrical texts are extant in complete form, the connections are, to some extent, conjectural. It is unclear, for example, if in the process of making a film, the adapters altered the theatrical texts to any extent.

38 Promila Puri has shown that in five different Hindi translations of *Hamlet*, the translators worked out new solutions to problems of indigenization and attempted to distinguish their own translations from previous ones (Das 66). Poonam Trivedi also notes that one Hindi translator of *Hamlet* (1963), Amrit Rai, took up the challenge “in the belief that the ability to translate the ideas and emotions of Shakespeare is a touchstone of a language’s maturity and capability” (Introduction 17). As Kaviraj’s comments on Vidyasagar’s work as translator suggest (383-83), Vidyasagar may have had similar notions in mind when he made his translations of Shakespeare, Kalidasa, and other canonical texts, both Indian and foreign.
Hindi/Urdu include the highlighting of theatrically effective scenes, the intermingling of comic and tragic elements, and the liberal use of songs (Verma 275).\(^{39}\)

In general, however, vernacular translations of Shakespeare in Bengali and Hindi and performances based on them managed to avoid “the excessively rhetorical style of the Parsi theatre” (Verma 276). Moreover, Tamil filmmakers have produced the maximum number of Shakespeare adaptations into film in India in the last fifty years or so: *Shylock* (1940), *Katakam* (*Cymbeline*, 1947), as well as adaptations of *Twelfth Night*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Taming of the Shrew* (*Arivali*) and *Romeo and Juliet* (*Das* 71 n 23). From the southern state of Kerala, there has also been Jayaraaj Rajasekharan Nair’s much-acclaimed film, *Kaliyattam* (1997/8), an adaptation of *Othello* in Malayalam.\(^{40}\) The absence of these diverse traditions of filmmaking and Shakespeare adaptations from critical accounts of Shakespeare studies in India makes one wonder why the Parsi theatre and its successor, the Bombay film industry, have been increasingly regarded as representing the quintessentially “Indian” response to Shakespeare, when it is clear that there have always been a greater variety of responses across various Indian cultures? Does such a reading risk endorsing a kind of hegemony within the Indian context? The answers to these questions will become clearer when we consider the phenomenal rise of the “Bollywood” film and its relation to the film adaptations of

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\(^{39}\) However, a Hindi film from a somewhat later period, Kishore Sahu’s *Hamlet* (1954), though based on a translation for the Parsi theatre by Mehdi Hasan Ahsan, stayed closer to Shakespeare, featured only a few songs and avoided comic interludes entirely (Verma 275). Sahu, who had a university degree in literature and adapted several other films based on European literature, used Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet* (1948) as an intertext (Poonam Trivedi, “‘Filmi’ Shakespeare” 150).

\(^{40}\) This film, which transposes the issue of race into one of class and caste in rural Kerala, also draws upon the indigenous folk-theatre forms known as *theyyam* and *kaliyattam*. For a discussion of the film, see Poonam Trivedi, “‘Filmi’ Shakespeare” 151-53.
Shakespeare by Vishal Bhardwaj, who began his career as a composer of Bollywood film scores and has gone on to become one of India’s widely-acclaimed young directors.

**Contextualizing Bollywood**

Since the early twentieth century’s film adaptations of Shakespeare by the erstwhile actors and managers of the Parsi theatres, Indian cinema has undergone many changes. There has been a steady growth of other regional-language cinemas in at least eight regional languages: Hindi, Bengali, Oriya, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, and Marathi. If Hindi films outnumber other regional-language productions and earn the maximum revenue from the Indian diaspora,\(^{41}\) films made in other regional languages, especially Bengali, Malayalam, and Tamil, have garnered as much, if not greater national and international critical recognition at film festivals in India and abroad. Moreover, within Hindi cinema, as well as in the rest of the country, commercial cinema was balanced by a tradition of making art films developed as part of a movement variously known as “parallel cinema” and the “Indian New Wave.”\(^{42}\) The Indian Government supported this enterprise from the 1960s to the 1990s, and the decline of government support coincides with the rise of the Bollywood film industry to prominence both within the Indian diaspora and in certain sections of the academy. It is only from the early 1990s

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\(^{41}\) For figures, see Mishra 4-6.

\(^{42}\) The Indian New Wave began initially in Bengali cinema (with Satyajit Ray), and was soon followed by Malayalam and Kannada cinema. Ray and the Malayali filmmaker Adoor Gopalakrishnan are still considered to be among India’s greatest film directors.
that Bollywood, the name given to the commercial film industry in Bombay, has gathered international recognition: this is in large measure because of the promotion of Hindi as a national language, resulting in increasing revenues from the Indian diaspora, which has enabled Bollywood filmmakers to advertise their work more effectively to an international market and to a section of the academy increasingly interested in popular culture and celebrating cultural difference. In fact, the Bollywood industry has so much strength in terms of capital and, increasingly, academic support, that it is possible to see the industry as exerting a hegemonic grip on other traditions of filmmaking in India, as well as on filmmakers working within the industry.

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43 For the origin of the word, see Mishra 1-3 and Rajadhyaksha 28-29; Rajadhyaksha suggests that it is best to see Bollywood as “a more diffuse cultural conglomeration involving a range of distribution and consumption activities from websites to music cassettes, from cable to radio” and not just as the film industry itself (27). Mishra notes that “[a]gainst Bombay/Hindi Cinema, Bollywood is read very much as an early ’90s phenomenon and hence just over a decade old” (6).

44 Bhaskar Sarkar has written that “the myopia that reduced ‘Indian cinema’ to the oeuvre of Satyajit Ray in an earlier period continues in a different guise” (35). Ray was, of course, not India’s sole art filmmaker, and there is a seriousness of purpose that distinguishes films by serious filmmakers such as Ray, Shyam Benegal, Gopalakrishnan, and others from those of mainstream Bollywood which, as Ashish Rajadhyaksha has pointed out, often presents a “‘feel-good-happy-ending’ romance that carries the tag of ‘our culture’” (36). There is no doubt that Bollywood has been more commercially successful than Indian art films. Should the commercial popularity of Bollywood be, in itself, sufficient criterion for assuming that it alone is the only representative of the “true” Indian film? By the same token, Sidney Sheldon should be more truly representative of English literature than Shakespeare. A point made by Richard Dawkins with regard to pop music is equally applicable to the Bollywood industry and its champions within academia, as well as to popular culture generally: “Whereas other genres of art criticism betray some preoccupation with style or skill of performance, with mood, emotional impact, with the qualities and properties of the art-form, the ‘pop’ music sub-culture is almost exclusively preoccupied with popularity itself. It is quite clear that the important thing about a record is not what it sounds like, but how many people are buying it” (219; emphasis in the original).
Maqbool and Omkara by Vishal Bhardwaj

Bhardwaj’s films need to be seen in this context. In making Maqbool, Bhardwaj has openly acknowledged he aimed to go beyond Indian audiences: as he says, he “wanted to touch a chord with international audiences, so there were many commercial considerations” in adapting Shakespeare (interview with Raja Sen). He has succeeded very well indeed in attracting international attention: Maqbool (2003), based on Macbeth, and Omkara (2006), based on Othello, are among the first Indian film adaptations of Shakespeare to have been screened at several international film festivals, and to have received critical attention. Both films are discussed in Daniel Rosenthal’s 100 Shakespeare Films (2007), published by the British Film Institute. Maqbool has also been studied by Shakespeare scholars and adaptation theorists such as Poonam Trivedi, Douglas Lanier, Anthony R. Guneratne, and Carolyn Jess-Cooke, and Nandi Bhatia has recently written on Omkara. The importance of Bhardwaj’s two Shakespeare adaptations lie in the fact that they are Bollywood films striving to extend the range of Bollywood viewership through their literary sources and cinematic allusions, which go beyond the purely Indian context; as such, they are among the most ambitious postcolonial adaptations of Shakespeare into film to have been made in recent years.

Maqbool is set in the criminal underworld of modern-day Bombay (now called Mumbai). Two corrupt policemen predict Maqbool’s rise to power by means of horoscopes, and their prophecy is fulfilled once Maqbool kills Abbaji (Duncan), the head

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45 Born in Meerut, a small town in Uttar Pradesh, Vishal Bhardwaj began his career as a composer of Bollywood film scores and has, in fact, directed only four films so far, all to considerable acclaim. One of his earliest mentors was the writer-filmmaker Gulzar, who had made one of the most commercially successful adaptations of Shakespeare, Angoor (1981), based on The Comedy of Errors: they later collaborated on Omkara. See Verma 276-78 and Alter 20-25.
of a crime family who treats Maqbool as if he were his own son. Additionally, Maqbool is deeply in love with Abbaji’s mistress, Nimmi, who successfully instigates Maqbool to kill Abbaji after the latter’s daughter decides to marry Guddu, the son of one of his lieutenants, Kaka (Banquo). The policemen predict that Maqbool will be safe as long as the sea does not enter his house, but this is what happens, metaphorically, as customs agents foil a vital smuggling deal at the port. Later, a demented Nimmi dies after giving birth to a child – whether it is Abbaji’s or Maqbool’s remains uncertain, though Nimmi insists that it is Maqbool’s. When Maqbool, attempting to take his newborn son and fleeing away from the country, sees the child being taken care of by Guddu and Sameera at the hospital, he decides not to continue this life of violence and vengeance. Instead, as he emerges from the hospital, he is killed by Boti, another gangster who has joined hands with Guddu against Maqbool, their common enemy. In the memorable final shot, Maqbool’s dying impressions are conveyed by a gradually reddening screen as noises of commotion gradually fade into nothingness.

Critical reception of the film has ranged from that of qualified admiration to generous enthusiasm. Poonam Trivedi and Douglas Lanier have found qualities in this adaptation of *Macbeth* that make it stand out among the film adaptations of Shakespeare’s play – its economy of narration, its focus on the Abbaji-Maqbool relationship that makes Abbaji’s murder even more loaded than would be the case if Abbaji were not a father-figure to Maqbool, its ingenious recasting of the witches as a pair of corrupt policemen having connections with the underworld, and, perhaps most significantly, the recasting of the love between Maqbool and Nimmi as a forbidden romance. Indeed, Maqbool, Abbaji, Nimmi and the others are all caught in a web of
ambition as well as of sexual desire. Maqbool is driven to kill Abbaji as much by his love for Nimmi as by his resentment of the idea of having to serve under Guddu, who would become the heir to Abbaji’s gang through his marriage to Sameera. Such complex motivation leads to his murder of Abbaji on the night before Guddu and Sameera’s wedding. On the other hand, Nimmi’s hatred of Abbaji is triggered by their age difference (Abbaji is old enough to be her father and she feels repelled by his appearance), and also because Abbaji has acquired a new mistress. Furthermore, Maqbool is strengthened in his resolve to kill Abbaji once he learns from the corrupt policemen that in all likelihood, Abbaji himself killed his mentor in order to head the gang. Consequently, after Abbaji himself gets murdered, there is little doubt in everyone’s mind that Maqbool is the killer, and the members of the gang soon regroup, isolating Maqbool in the process.

The murder of Abbaji more than halfway through the film, and the relatively quick move to the dénouement has been seen by some as creating a structural imbalance (Rosenthal 123); but this can be understood as the consequence of the radical reworking of the relationships tying Abbaji, his mistress, and her lover Maqbool. In fact, as Douglas Lanier has observed, the half following Abbaji’s murder “closely parallels Macbeth in plot, motifs and character” (Lanier “Film Spin-Offs” 217), and the changes, when they are there, are there with good reason. For example, Shakespeare’s banquet scene is replaced by a meeting of Maqbool’s gang from which Guddu and Kaka (Fleance and Banquo) are missing. When Kaka’s dead body is brought back, only Maqbool thinks that Kaka is alive and looking at him, and gets visibly disturbed. Maqbool’s fear of Kaka’s gaze is tied to Abbaji’s murder scene, in which Abbaji dies looking at Maqbool. (His
blood splashes over Nimmi, who then, like her Shakespearean counterpart, becomes increasingly obsessed with imaginary bloodstains.

Another brilliant reworking is that of the recasting of Maqbool’s downfall with the foiling, by the port authorities, of Maqbool’s attempt to offload contraband, and their subsequent raid of his home. The coming of the sea is the film’s suggested parallel with Birnam Wood, a parallel that, given the setting in Mumbai, would have had to be abandoned if any literal transposition had been attempted. Finally, recasting Shakespeare’s witches as a pair of bumbling but strangely savvy policemen helps Bhardwaj recast the supernatural element of Macbeth such that it ties up with the very real setting of his film – crime and criminalized politics – conveyed in Maqbool in a realist idiom.\(^{46}\)

Bhardwaj underlines the cyclical nature of violence as well as the redemptive potential of the play by making small but telling changes to the plot. For instance, Maqbool is strengthened in his resolve to kill Abbaji once he learns from the corrupt policemen that in all likelihood, Abbaji himself killed his mentor in order to head the gang. (Shakespeare’s Duncan, on the other hand, has no such murky past.) Consequently, after Abbaji himself gets murdered, there is little doubt in everyone’s mind that Maqbool is the killer. Almost all of them are initially worried as to how to avoid betraying their true thoughts – only Kaka is convinced, after much persuasion by Maqbool himself – that he is innocent. Hence, other members of the gang soon regroup, isolating Maqbool in the

\(^{46}\) In his film, Bhardwaj recasts the role of prophecy considerably. When the policemen predict to Maqbool that he will get enmeshed in a love affair, he already knows that Nimmi is in love with him; their prediction that Maqbool will take over Abbaji’s gang in a few months’ time is likewise greeted by Maqbool with a smile. In most cases, their prophecies spell out what can already be understood either in terms of the motives of the individuals or what the policemen call the “restoration of balance in the universe.”
process, and finally kills him. However, the film does not offer a uniformly bleak vision. Instead, it also explores the possibility of escape from violence not in a return to order – things remain unchanged in the Bombay underworld – but at a personal level, in the act of Nimmi’s newborn child being taken care of by Guddu and Abbaji’s daughter, an act of humanity that transcends gang rivalries. This is in contrast to most adaptations of *Macbeth* which, like Polanski’s film, either emphasize the cyclical nature of violence, or, like the adaptations of Davenant and Verdi, depict a final, positive change at a social level, from anarchy to order. But even Guddu and Nimmi’s collective act of kindness can be read differently. The “most unkindest cut of all” (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* 3.2.174) has always come from the most unexpected quarters – from Abbaji as he killed his mentor, and from Maqbool as he killed Abbaji, the person who brought him up like his son. Will it be the same with Guddu, the new leader of the Bombay underworld, and his adopted child?

Though the film claims to be only a “loose adaptation” of *Macbeth* (Poonam Trivedi, “‘Filmi’ Shakespeare 153), it actually employs a range of strategies to incorporate the Shakespearean text in audio-visual terms: the film takes up a cue from Lady Macbeth’s statement, “The raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements” (1.5.36-8), and uses the cawing of crows as commentary at key moments in the film (Poonam Trivedi, “‘Filmi’ Shakespeare” 155). There are other examples, too, especially in the section from the wedding preparations to Abbaji’s murder the following night. Maqbool is seen as cooking food for the guests in a huge cauldron as he plots the murder. Later on in the day, a little before the murder, he

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47 All references to the play are from *Macbeth*, ed. A. R. Braunmuller (New Cambridge Shakespeare).
hallucinates that blood is coming out of the cauldron, an image that provides further incitement for the act he plans to commit. Thus, while Bhardwaj departs from Shakespeare at a literal level, he nevertheless is able to bring together the cauldron and dagger scenes of *Macbeth* in a way that shows his deep understanding of their significance and his ability to incorporate them in his radically new setting. The policemen’s prediction of rain that is extremely unusual for the time of the year comes true and creates a suitably tense atmosphere right before Abbaji’s murder. At the same time, the scene also translates into cinematic terms the Shakespearean technique of mirroring an upheaval in the moral order by an unnatural upheaval in the natural order. Bombay mafia dons, the film suggests, constitute the true rulers of the state, with their strong behind-the-scene presence in various aspects of life, from politics to the Bollywood film industry itself.

For Indian audiences, *Maqbool* is one of a recent bunch of gangster films set in the Bombay underworld; it departs from Shakespeare’s language and settings, and makes intertextual allusions to Bollywood as well as works of filmmakers from other countries. For example, Bhardwaj is likely to have been influenced in his choice of setting by Ram Gopal Verma’s gangster film, *Satya* ['The Truth'] (1998), for which he had composed the score. On the other hand, he is an avowed admirer of the films of Akira Kurosawa: like the latter’s *Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Ran* (1985), Bhardwaj’s *Maqbool* and *Omkara* also successfully relocate the settings of Shakespeare’s plays. Other influences include Quentin Tarantino (interview with Raja Sen), and Luc Besson’s *Léon* (1994), whose ending, it has been suggested, is “borrowed shot-for-shot” at the close of *Maqbool* (Jess-Cooke 178). Indeed, *Maqbool* can also be intertextually linked with Francis Ford
Coppola’s *The Godfather* (1972), another film that employs Shakespeare as an intertext (Jess-Cooke 177). The nature and scope of Bollywood films are changing rapidly, and Bhardwaj is one among several filmmakers working in Bombay who have departed from the conventions of the formula Bollywood film of say, the 1970s and ’80s. The setting of *Maqbool* – the Bombay underworld – is sharply etched, and it plays a much more important role than the stock urban or (idealized) rural settings of many previous Bollywood films. Bhardwaj’s attention to details of setting is paralleled by his focus on linguistic minutiae: the characters in *Maqbool* use a spectrum of language, from Hindi slang and colloquialisms spoken in Bombay (popularly called “Mumbaiya Hindi”) to Urdu. There are visual images, too, that reinforce Bombay’s cosmopolitanism, albeit in the seedy premises of the underworld: in *Maqbool*, Muslims and Hindus freely interact with each other, as in the wedding procession, where Abbaji’s daughter gets married to Guddu, his Hindu henchman’s son.

Mukul Kesavan has argued that Urdu brought with it “an array of expressive conventions in a standard idiom” and that its “systematic appropriation of Persian models created a self-consciously literate audience, responsive to dramatic utterance and allusive cues, while Hindi was apprenticed to Sanskrit, a language divorced from secular usage for centuries” (248). The use of Urdu in Bollywood film therefore made possible the nostalgic evocation of the culture of the Urdu-speaking élite of India (251), an aristocratic culture that started crumbling with the arrival of British colonialism.48 The Parsi theatre often deliberately evoked this culture, and many of the films made in Bombay in the earlier part of the twentieth century by members of the erstwhile Parsi theatrical

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48 This crucial turning point in Indian history is the subject of Ray’s film *Shatranj ke Khiladi [The Chess Players]*.
companies had Urdu titles. Bhardwaj’s film evokes this culture, but with a difference. The late 1990s, when Bollywood’s connections with its criminal underworld, controlled mostly by Muslims, were exposed, provided a topicaly relevant setting for Bhardwaj’s film. What Kesavan calls “Islamicate” culture (246) now carried, in Bhardwaj’s film, allusions of both past glory and current decadence. Does this make Maqbool one of those more recent Bollywood films that, according to Chadha and Kavoori (131-45), present the Muslim as the demonized “Other” in Indian cinema? It is not an easy question to answer. On the one hand, the fact that Kaka and Boti, the only relatively loyal gangsters in the film, are also practically the only Hindus among the lot, does indeed suggest that an anti-Muslim subtext is at work. On the other hand, Omkara, set in an equally murky rural Uttar Pradesh, features only Hindu criminals. It could, therefore, be argued that the setting of Maqbool – the Bombay underworld – demanded a new approach towards the depiction of “Islamicate” culture in Indian film, but it is a point that can be challenged.

Bhardwaj’s attention to detail is among the hallmarks of a small and experimental new group of Bollywood filmmakers who have departed, at least in part, from the conventions of mainstream Bollywood films. One of them, Ram Gopal Verma, in films like Satya and Company, provides critiques of urban corruption, just as Bhardwaj does in Maqbool, while keeping it an adaptation of Macbeth. In fact, one of Bhardwaj’s greatest strengths is his ability to indigenize Shakespeare successfully, almost in a virtuoso manner and not without humour, at the levels of setting, plot, language and generic conventions, without ignoring the complex ethical questions raised by Shakespeare’s play. Bhardwaj’s gift for indigenizing Shakespeare and making strategic allusions to both Shakespearean imagery and other films, both Indian and international, sometimes gets the
better of him in *Maqbool*, which is less tragic than *Omkara*. But this is a subjective observation – audiences are likely to find pleasure in both films, though the pleasures offered are of different kinds.

With his next Shakespeare adaptation, Bhardwaj successfully achieves another kind of transformation. *Omkara* recasts one of the central themes of *Othello* – racial difference – into that of caste difference, but, as I shall later show, even this theme paves the way for the examination of another important co-ordinate – that of gender. The reworking of the race question in *Othello* into one of caste in *Omkara* is particularly appropriate to the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, where the film is set and where caste-based demagoguery still plays a vital role in local politics. In this film, Omkara, a small gangster, and his henchmen Ishwar Langda (the Iago figure) and Kesu (Cassio), commit political crimes for the local politician, Bhaisaab (the “Doge” figure in the film). As the film opens, Langda hijacks a wedding procession at the behest of Omkara and takes away the bride, Dolly (Desdemona), from the bridegroom Rajju (Roderigo). Her father brings the matter to Bhaisaab, but Dolly tells all that she came away with Omkara of her own volition, leaving her father publicly shamed.

When Bhaisaab makes Omkara the candidate for the local elections, Omkara, in turn, appoints Kesu over Langda as his successor in the party. This sequence of events bitterly disappoints Langda, who hatches plot after plot to avenge himself on both of them. Langda engineers simultaneous intrigues to have Kesu dismissed as Omkara’s successor and to avenge himself upon Omkara for the perceived slight. Langda begins by insinuating that Kesu and Dolly are having an illicit love affair, making use of a *kamarbandh* (the equivalent of the handkerchief in Shakespeare’s play), a piece of
traditional jewellery worn around the waist, carelessly dropped by Dolly and picked up by Langda’s wife, Indu (Emilia). By the time of their wedding night, Omkara is convinced of Dolly’s illicit love affair, and smothers her to death, while Langda makes an unsuccessful attempt to shoot Kesu. Hearing gunshots, Indu enters the room where she finds Omkara sitting next to Dolly’s corpse. Indu notices the *kamarbandh* and mentions stealing it, and the facts become clear to them. In horror and remorse, Omkara lets Langda go but Indu slashes her husband’s throat and Omkara commits suicide. The movie closes with Omkara lying dead on the floor and Dolly’s dead body swinging above his.

Here, too, Bhardwaj reworks Shakespeare’s play with minute attention to detail. In a murky world where he, like his henchmen, participates in arm-twisting and deception, Omkara is not easily duped. Bhardwaj, in an interview, said: “In the original, Othello is too dumb; he believes everything Iago says. Here, he double-checks. So, I’ve made Iago even smarter, to counter those situations” (interview with Raja Sen). He also makes the death of Omkara less tragic than Othello’s and, instead, makes Indu’s murder of Langda the climax of the film. At another level, Bhardwaj transposes race as a matter of caste and skin colour, as already discussed earlier. So, while Omkara is the chosen one for Bhaisaab and has the high regard of all his crew, there is the fact that he is a dark-complexioned “half-caste” while Dolly is an upper-caste girl of exceptionally fair complexion (hence beautiful, according to North Indian notions of beauty). The twin facts work to undermine some of Omkara’s security and assuredness and prove significant in the development of his jealousy. Coupled with this is the idea that Dolly has completed her graduation and was Kesu’s college mate, such that the two share a kind of
camaraderie (they speak in English occasionally and she learns an English love-song from Kesu), a camaraderie in which Omkara, the uneducated rustic, can have no part. Unlike Shakespeare’s Othello who, despite his protestations to the contrary, can eloquently speak for himself, Omkara is genuinely taciturn. Moreover, he is dark and rugged, more so than the rakish Kesu who is known among the men for his ways with women.

Indeed, while race has no role in the film, even the element of caste is underplayed. Instead, the film foregrounds an aspect of Othello that has been relatively less explored: the theme of misogyny. A range of misogynist attitudes gets amplified in Omkara as comprising that universe which sustains male crime, criminal politics, and those codes of honour that blur the line between honourable gangsters and violent husbands. This misogyny, which underscores Dolly’s fractured relationship with her father, also runs through Bhaisaab’s anti-women jokes at Omkara and Dolly’s wedding and the philandering of an otherwise charming Kesu; and it lies at the root of Omkara’s tragic jealousy. What recourse do women have in a culture that fetishizes them as objects of beauty and piety and, simultaneously, vilifies them as sexual devils? In the figure of Indu (Emilia), Bhardwaj depicts a spirited woman, and through her earthy, even crassly sexual verbal ripostes to the men who laugh a little too much at the expense of women, he presents one face of counter-attack: humour. Bhardwaj does not use a translation of

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49 Bhardwaj retains Brabantio’s line, “She has deceived her father and may thee” (1.3.288-289) in a way so as to highlight the compellingly destructive power of misogyny. Dolly’s father comes with his car, separating Omkara and Dolly, and utters his warning to Omkara, as his helpless daughter watches from the opposite end.

50 Julie Hankey notes that the part of Emilia came to be regarded as embodying “a smart degree of virago spirit” towards the late eighteenth century (33), and that her speech, “A halter pardon him!” (4.2.129-43), had some impact on contemporary audiences (33).
Desdemona’s ripostes found in Shakespeare’s *Othello* – which make her much more “real” than the idealized figure found in nineteenth-century productions and adaptations such as Verdi’s opera – but transfers her resilience and intelligence to the Emilia figure (Indu), a figure who is sidelined because she is not only a woman, but an ordinary one at that, lacking Desdemona’s beauty and her intelligence. Because Bhardwaj focuses on Indu, an intelligent woman who feels more strongly than Dolly the frustration of being marginalized, the point where she murders her husband after discovering the truth makes for a gripping climax, and the logical culmination of the action. Indu in *Omkara*, like Chandraprabha in Vidyasagar’s *Bhrantibilash*, is a much more articulate figure than their Shakespearean counterparts Emilia and Adriana, both of whom are painfully aware of the limits imposed on them socially on account of their gender.

Ultimately, the film suggests that women’s covert resistance through humour is inadequate, and reparation is achieved only when Indu, horrified at her husband’s devilry, hacks him to death in a sudden burst of anger. The relationship between the women, Dolly and Indu, suggests a kind of bonding more abiding than the ones that tie the men in their varied relationships, where the conflict between self-interests is more the norm than the exception. Although violence in the criminal underworld connects both films, the differences between the settings of *Maqbool* (Bombay) and *Omkara* (rural Uttar Pradesh) are just as sharply delineated. The marriage scene of *Omkara*, for instance, provides a

However, it is only from the 1980s onwards that Desdemona and Emilia have gradually come into focus in performance history of the plays, partly because, as Hankey puts it, Shakespeare left them “lightly sketched,” thereby making the characters “particularly open to novelistic development” (99-100). *Omkara* is in line with this relatively new area of focus in the play’s performance history, though Indian precedents for strong Shakespearean heroines are not to be found in any adaptation of *Othello*, but rather in a work like Vidyasagar’s *Bhrantibilash*. 
point of contrast with the one in *Maqbool*: the one in *Omkara* makes use of detail that marks it as a marriage between Hindus taking place in a village in Uttar Pradesh. As well, there is a sharp difference in the language spoken in the two films. While *Maqbool* reflects the use of different speech genres within Hindi (especially “Mumbaiya Hindi”), for *Omkara*, Bhardwaj himself recorded many speeches for the actors, especially for Langda/Iago, so that the correct dialect spoken in Uttar Pradesh could be reproduced in the film (interview with Raja Sen). Again, while in *Maqbool*, the police are shown to be in collusion with the underworld whose leaders often finance Bollywood films, in *Omkara* the underworld is shown to produce the politicians of the state. Through these differences, Bhardwaj shows the different ways in which the criminal underworld operates in Uttar Pradesh, the state where he grew up (and Mumbai, where he now works), while sustaining a close parallel with Shakespeare’s *Othello*.

Notwithstanding his scrupulous attention to such realistic detail, Bhardwaj does liberally draw upon well-known Bollywood conventions, one might add, with remarkable popular success. For example, in *Omkara* and *Maqbool*, there are a couple of what are called “item numbers,” sexualized songs with racy imagery and suggestive lyrics. These are well-integrated with the plot of the film, but the one in *Omkara* is too meticulously choreographed, and seems odd in a film that otherwise attempts to be scrupulously realist in its means of expression. In contrast, there is a scene in *Omkara* where Kesu teaches

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51 They are “songs inserted into a film, primarily to titillate the audience” (Alter 134). *Maqbool*, too, features Bollywood trademarks such as “family scenes of festivity and weddings, catchy music, dances, and songs” (Poonam Trivedi, “‘Filmi’ Shakespeare”, 153-4). Both films have fewer musical numbers than most Bollywood films, and most of these numbers are instrumental rather than vocal; both these features point to a change in musical conventions when compared with the average Bollywood film of a decade earlier.
Dolly a Stevie Wonder song, “I just called to say I love you,” where the actors sing wrong notes and Kesu plays the guitar all too imperfectly, making the scene both (intentionally) comic and realist in technique. This kind of contradiction in representational conventions might well be explained away as a filmmaker’s compromise between commercial and art film, but in the context of his first two films, which avoid such well-established Bollywood conventions, and the interviews in which he has discussed his preferences as a filmmaker, the recourse to the “item number” in *Maqbool* and *Omkara* suggests an uneasy relationship with the conventions of the Bollywood film and the compulsion of market economics (interview with Raja Sen). In a globalized world that equates Bollywood with Indian cinema, in no small measure because the powerful Indian diaspora and the well-oiled publicity machines of the Bollywood industry actively promote such a view, it is impossible for a filmmaker making films in Hindi to escape from the hegemony of Bollywood itself. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha has observed,

… while Bollywood exists for, and prominently caters to, a diasporic audience of Indians, and sometimes (as, for example, with Bhangra-rap) exports *into* India, the Indian cinema – much as it would wish to tap this ‘non-resident’ audience – is only occasionally successful in doing so, and is in almost every instance able to do so only when it, so to say, *Bollywoodizes* itself⁵² . . . (2003, 29; italics in the original)

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⁵² Bhardwaj has managed to achieve this as well, with some success. When *Omkara* was screened at Cannes, a book by Stephen Alter, *Fantasies of a Bollywood Love Thief*, pertaining to the making of *Omkara* was also released. Anecdotal in tone and written for an international audience, the book advertised the links of Bhardwaj’s film to the traditions of Bollywood, in sharp contrast to Bhardwaj’s far more guarded observations
Bhardwaj also betrays an uneasy relationship with his Shakespearean source, although he overtly announces the relationship of *Maqbool* and *Omkara* with Shakespeare, he has also asserts that his films are only loosely based on the plays in question (interview with Vijay Singh). This could be for a variety of reasons: firstly, adaptations of Shakespeare are still often subjected to the discourse of “fidelity” (which tends to regard adaptations as essentially “secondary” or “derivative” works). Another reason for distancing the film from Shakespeare may lie in the fact that, in the Indian context, cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare have fared better when their relationship with Shakespeare has gone unannounced. Bhardwaj’s avowed interest in reaching out to wider audiences makes Shakespeare a safe choice for source material, although such a choice also opens his works to comparison with other adaptations of Shakespeare made all over the world for nearly a century, some of them acknowledged classics of cinema.

Bhardwaj’s films have much to offer to those who are interested in transculturated Shakespeare. The ingenuity and thoroughness with which Bhardwaj and his scriptwriters relocate Shakespeare’s plays in new socio-cultural settings are without parallel among Shakespeare films (even Kurosawa sets his films in Japan’s historical past); but such ingenuity is not the be-all and end-all of his films. Bhardwaj is able to realize the tragic potential present in his two films – for instance, the sincere but doomed love between

on Bollywood conventions in his interview with Raja Sen. Such an apparent contradiction should not cause surprise: as I have stated in the introduction, works from globally marginal cultures tend to find international audiences only when they take up a familiar, Western theme that is well known to audiences all over (such as the plot of a Shakespeare play), and recast it using conventions that appear exotic to them.

53 The most commercially successful Hindi film based on Shakespeare, Gulzar’s *Angoor*, does not state its relationship to *The Comedy of Errors*, though it has Shakespeare winking at the audience at the end of the film. Similarly, as pointed out earlier, the Bengali adaptation of the play, *Bhrantibilash*, mentions Vidyasagar but not Shakespeare.
Maqbool and Nimmi (the only genuine relationship in *Maqbool*, paradoxically a “forbidden” one), or the fraught relationship between Omkara and Dolly (and even more, Langda and Indu) in *Omkara*. Bhardwaj’s two Shakespeare adaptations can safely be placed among the most significant films produced in India in recent years; equally, they are among those few global cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare that have successfully indigenized Shakespeare without abandoning the richness and complexity of the original plays.

The commercial and critical successes of both *Maqbool* and *Omkara* suggest that perhaps Bhardwaj has managed to wed two audience blocs that are allegedly divided in their patronage of the art film and the popular Bollywood film. His comments about his films are, on the face of it, somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, he says: “If you’re even a little intelligent, you can’t go wrong by adapting [Shakespeare’s] work.” On the other, Bhardwaj asserts his right to have a free hand with his material:

> [M]y intention is not just to adapt the play. My intention is to adapt it and make it look like an original work. After a point, I forget that Shakespeare has written this. I start believing that I [can] change everything. That’s how I do it.”

(interview with Raja Sen)

Given Bhardwaj’s uneasy relationship with both the fidelity discourse associated with canonical authors like Shakespeare, as well as the conventions of Bollywood cinema, fully departing from which is almost impossible for an Indian director aiming for international viewership, Bhardwaj’s statements are both curious and explicable. In the Indian context, there is, in fact, nothing new about taking liberties with Shakespeare, as the history of adaptations of his plays demonstrates. Indeed, the more faithful the
adaptation, the less “original” it would be deemed by modern Indian viewers, and Bhardwaj can freely assert his right to indigenize Shakespeare. It is, therefore, all the more ironic that Bhardwaj can only hint at the hegemony of Bollywood cinema, whose conventions he is uneasy with but not quite free to ignore, for Bollywood has become synonymous with Indian cinema, to both the majority of the Indian diaspora and, by qualified extension, to the world at large.

**Conclusion**

The cultural and political landscape of nineteenth-century India was vastly different from that of Europe, as a result of which the processes and products of transcultural adaptations of Shakespeare in these two geographical locations become interesting in their own, very different ways. This is not to say that Shakespeare was as adaptable as any other author. The adaptability of Shakespeare’s work is also, in large measure, due to the fact that he wrote largely for the theatre, a performance mode in which interpretive decisions always have to be made afresh. Moreover, since little of his life is known, it is far more difficult to determine his authorial intentions than in the case of, say, nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, whose intentions can be guessed, to some extent, by the study of paratextual materials such as diaries, letters, prefaces, and so on. The unstable nature of the texts of those plays that are available in multiple versions, and the decisive break in performance traditions between Shakespeare’s death and the reopening of the London theatres in 1642 meant that, for later generations, there is no easy recourse to authorial intention in textual and interpretive matters, whether it be in England or anywhere else in the world.
Consequently, engagement with Shakespeare is possible at a variety of levels, ranging from attempts to interpret his works by historicizing his life and times, at one end of the spectrum, to transcultural adaptations of his works, at the other. It is true that the spread of Shakespeare was made possible by British imperialism, but it would be unfair, both to Shakespeare and scholars and adapters of his works, to foreground the imbrications between imperialism and Shakespeare’s cultural capital to the point of overlooking the many instances where this political and economic hegemony could be, and indeed was, overcome or subverted at the cultural level. True, it was, and still is, a politically, socially and economically unequal world, and inequalities in these areas do have strong cultural ramifications, but this does not mean that the intellectual and artistic contributions of politically marginal cultures should be ignored or essentialized by those very critics who are supposed to speak for them.

It is, therefore, necessary in the context of Shakespeare and postcolonial studies that the focus shift from the hegemonic oppression of the colonizer to the subversions and oppositions of the colonized. In particular, it is necessary to examine the ways in which, despite political and economic marginalization, colonized subjects, such as those in nineteenth-century India, kept alive the possibility of cultural exchange. One of the most significant strands in postcolonial studies of Shakespeare is that politically charged counternarratives and adaptations that “write back” to Shakespeare have been privileged over other approaches. In the case of Indian literature, we have seen how Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Michael Madhusudan Datta, and Rabindranath Tagore were among those pioneering writers and critics who read Shakespeare and other European texts in politically charged ways long before it became fashionable to do so; indeed, their
prescience has, paradoxically, kept their intellectual engagement with European and English literature out of current critical focus. Paying critical attention to art and criticism that foreground the political (in the contestatory sense of creating counternarratives) is valid – indeed necessary – but such an approach becomes problematic when the “political” is defined in narrow ways, limiting the area of critical focus. An adaptation of *Othello* from ex-colonies such as India or the Caribbean, with a focus on love and jealousy rather than racial tensions is unlikely to draw the attention of postcolonial critics because the “political” relevance of such works lie allegedly only in issues of race.\(^{54}\)

Recognition of the “uniqueness” of such postcolonial adaptations is usually predicated on the acceptance in the academy of a predictable and premeditated critical position. If the term “postcolonial” implies that the colonial encounter is the decisive moment in the formation of cultural identity in formerly colonized nations, to the extent that any pre-colonial cultural identity becomes secondary at best, then the usefulness of the very term needs to be seriously questioned. Why must the identity of the postcolonial reader, translator, adapter or critic be conceived as a prefabricated function of his or her status as colonized or ex-colonized? Did they have no identity, no desire or means for artistic expression until they were colonized? Or, on the other hand, if any Indian critic were to be interested in Shakespeare and his period, rather than in narratives of native resistance, should this automatically mean that s/he exemplifies the “colonial double-bind” for having loved Shakespeare while living in India, as Harish Trivedi seems to suggest (Harish Trivedi, *Colonial Transactions* 25)? Is it necessary or desirable that critics,\(^{54}\)

\(^{54}\) For example, an overwhelming majority of criticism on Caribbean adaptations of Shakespeare focus almost entirely on *The Tempest.*
postcolonial or otherwise, should champion the art and culture of only those countries whose passports they carry?

At the other end of the critical debate, Shakespeare scholarship still tends to play down the role of translators, adapters and critical commentators in the dissemination of his work. Some, like Ton Hoenselaars (16), find it surprising that Shakespeare’s history plays have not been found to be of universal appeal by a portion of the world (in fact, the overwhelming majority) which does not share, or identify with, England’s linguistic, cultural, and above all, political past. These critics have also been slow to recognize the importance of non-English, non-theatrical adaptations of the plays, and have kept them, at best, at the outermost margins of Shakespeare studies: operas (mostly in European languages rather than English, with the exceptions of those by Benjamin Britten and Samuel Barber) and non-English cinematic adaptations of his plays have generated much less criticism than, say, the English-language Shakespeare films by Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh; the exceptions in this regard are composers like Verdi and filmmakers like Kurosawa and Kozintsev, whose high standing in their own fields (and not just as Shakespeare adapters) has ensured continued critical attention on their films.

As Ania Loomba has rightly pointed out, those who have canvassed for a change in English literary studies in India away from its colonialist bias also need to recognize that replacing Western literature by “Indian” or “Third World” texts “will not undermine existing ideological or critical orthodoxies” and that, consequently, “it is necessary to resist both the colonial hangover surrounding Shakespeare and this easy polarity between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (“Shakespearean Transformations” 138). Indeed, while it is necessary to celebrate cultural difference, it is also necessary to remember the ways in which, however
provisionally, different cultures have attempted to reach out to each other across time and space. A study of the cultural and historical conditions in which Shakespeare was adapted all over the world bears irrefutable and repeated proof of this humanist endeavour.

Shakespeare’s reception in India has, understandably, become inseparable from the hegemonic tendencies of nineteenth-century British colonial education. In contrast, the reception history of Bertolt Brecht, the most important influence on twentieth-century Indian (and especially Bengali) theatre is not marked by any such discourse regarding cultural hegemony. Even those well-known dramatists who have rejected Brecht as a model (Utpal Dutt and Badal Sircar, for instance) have never raised the question of hegemony, or of Brecht’s cultural foreignness, because they chose to learn from him (or ignore him) of their own volition.\textsuperscript{55} Shakespeare’s critical afterlife in India, however, is likely to remain clouded because of the fact that his plays were made central to the project of cultural colonialism. However, it is also possible to see the positive side of Shakespeare’s reception in India, once we foreground the agency of nineteenth-century indigenous translators and adapters of his works, and see in present-day Indian adaptations of Shakespeare a continuation of their legacy. It is time to give due critical recognition to the work of these pioneering translators and adapters, for it was they who began the process of spreading Shakespeare beyond the confines of the colonial Indian classroom.

\textsuperscript{55} For a discussion of the influence of Brecht’s ideas on modern Indian theatre, see Aparna Dharwadker 365-74.
Conclusion

The examination of non-Anglophone adaptations of Shakespeare in the light of the interaction between a number of factors such as translations and critical commentaries on Shakespeare, on the one hand, and performance traditions (such as those of opera, drama and film), on the other, throws new light on the mechanisms of intercultural exchange, in general, and on Shakespeare reception in India and Europe, in particular. Neither in Europe nor in India did Shakespeare’s plays reach readers and theatre audiences without undergoing transculturation in order to make them consonant with the cultural and ideological concerns of the new geographical spaces in which they were performed. This is especially true of Shakespeare reception from the nineteenth century onward, as the British empire spread to all parts of the world.

Although it is impossible to underestimate the role played by British cultural imperialism in the global spread of Shakespeare, it is also important to recognise that in the nineteenth century, neither British colonies like India nor European nations like France and Italy were passive consumers of Shakespeare. In these and other places Shakespeare reception was not just “top-down”: processes of indigenisation, in fact, transformed Shakespeare’s plays and their performance histories even as different cultures embraced the new literary and theatrical possibilities opened up by Shakespeare’s work. Such a process is especially notable in the performing arts, a process I have termed “performative transculturation.” A study of the mechanisms of performative transculturation not only is useful to the study of Shakespeare reception but also, more generally, is pertinent to the role played by the performing arts in facilitating
cultural exchange. Through my comparative analysis of Shakespeare reception and adaptation in India and Europe, I offer reasons why we need to move away from understanding Shakespeare reception either in terms of the dramatist’s “universal appeal” or in terms of colonial instrumentality, as has generally been the case, and to focus instead on the ways in which cultural exchange is facilitated by the process of adaptation.

It is all too easy to celebrate the process of performative transculturation as a marker of the individual agency of adapters of any given culture, but there are problems in such an approach as well, for hegemony should not be understood exclusively in terms of a British-vs.-Other paradigm. In the eighteenth century, performative transculturation of Shakespeare in the European context (translation apart) generally meant the alteration of his plays to suit the neoclassical unities of time, place, and action. By the early nineteenth century, however, the situation had reversed: as I have shown, Shakespeare was now a rallying point for a number of Romantics such as Victor Hugo, Eugène Delacroix, Hector Berlioz, Alessandro Manzoni, and Giuseppe Verdi, all of whom sought, in their own ways, to bypass what Berlioz was to call the “pitiable narrowness of our old poetics” (qtd. in Barzun 67). Instead, these artists embraced the intermixing of genres characteristic of Shakespearean drama, a merging which they all felt was truer to life (Showalter 119). With the continental Romantics, therefore, Shakespeare’s cultural capital became an important tool in their individual agendas for cultural reform. While an opera like Thomas’s *Hamlet* combined, with a remarkable degree of success, the neoclassical themes and conventions of a previous era (such as the avoidance of representation of death on stage, the protagonist caught between duty and love, etc.) with a Romantic approach (such as the “envoiced” heroine, the musical evocation of the
supernatural, and so on), an even more markedly Romantic tendency, characterised by a more thorough break with the conventions of the past, is represented by Berlioz, Verdi, and others, whose mixing of different genres – tragedy and comedy, opera and dramatic cantata – has been studied in detail by Daniel Albright in his books *Berlioz’s Semi-operas* and *Musicking Shakespeare*. Thus, in the nineteenth century, while Shakespeare was being transculturated at a number of levels by European opera composers, the performative conventions of the neoclassical unities that figured so prominently in eighteenth-century adaptations were now ignored by some of the most influential adapters of Shakespeare. The modes of performative transculturation of Shakespeare in the European context changed remarkably between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Similarly, modes of performative transculturation also change with place, but perform an equally important role: the term, in fact, describes very well the reason why Indian adaptations of Shakespeare achieved popular success in the nineteenth century. Given the times, such a process was an important means of bypassing the textbook Shakespeare taught in colonial classrooms, and engaging more directly with his plays within the larger context of local performance traditions and ideological concerns. The role of the Parsi theatre in this regard is vital, and forms an important section of my chapter on Indian Shakespeare. Like European opera, the Parsi theatre, too, focused on spectacle and songs, and took several liberties with Shakespeare’s text. But the importance of both lies elsewhere: they were the two principal modes of adaptation by which Shakespeare’s plays, however transformed, reached new audiences in Europe and the Indian subcontinent. Moreover, while the best of nineteenth-century European
operatic adaptations are still performed, the Parsi theatre established a number of conventions of the Bollywood film, whose filmmakers have continued to adapt Shakespeare, with one notable break between the 1950s to the 1980s.

The films *Omkara* and *Maqbool* by director Vishal Bhardwaj revived Shakespeare adaptation in the Bollywood film industry, and both films are remarkably successful in their relocation of Shakespeare at a number of levels: setting, language, and representational conventions. However, there is also a flip side to performative transculturation as seen in Bhardwaj’s films. Art filmmakers from India such as Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Adoor Gopalakrishnan have had limited audiences even in India for their serious films. Ray himself admitted that there were limitations on the degree to which he could expect to experiment because of the tastes of his essentially conservative public. As he told fellow filmmaker and critic, Chidananda Dasgupta, “I wouldn’t dare to make experiments like that [i.e., avant-garde films] . . . not because I don’t appreciate them, but because I never want to go above the heads of my audience. You must go slowly to raise the level of appreciation” (qtd. in Cardullo 44). While Ray primarily had Bengali audiences in mind, Hindi filmmakers have faced similar problems. The increasing popularity of Bollywood films, coupled with the decline of sponsorship of independent filmmakers by the National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC), both from the early 1990s, have led independent filmmaker like Ketan Mehta to move away from making art films, through attempts at incorporating Bollywood

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1 Ritwik Ghatak, whose oeuvre consists almost entirely of experimental films, never found commercial success, and even Ray’s principal source of income was as an extremely popular writer of science fiction and detective stories for children. Two of the latter were made into films: these, as well as a couple of musicals for which Ray composed his own scores, were among the most commercially successful Bengali films of all time, and far outstripped in popularity Ray’s more serious and ambitious films.
conventions in films like *Maya Memsaab* (1992), to making purely commercial ones such as *Aar Ya Paar* (1997). The pressure to adhere to the conventions of Bollywood films has irked Bhardwaj and some of his colleagues: as noted in Chapter 4, Bhardwaj has described Bollywood films as “kitschy,” while another filmmaker, Madhur Bhandarkar, dismissing Bollywood conventions as “candyfloss,” has nevertheless admitted to working within these conventions in order to create something more thought-provoking than the average Bollywood blockbuster (Alter 126).

A consequence of the change in film sponsorship is that new and independent filmmakers from India often have to toe the line on the conventions of Bollywood, which are often seen as going against Western notions of cinematic art (Rosie Thomas 116-31; Vasudevan 29-50). This is not so much because these filmmakers wish to go against Western cinematic aesthetics but because they are faced with the choice of either realising their vision in isolation, or of reaching out to a ready (and ever-increasing) global market for Bollywood films, even if it requires following whatever the current conventions of Bollywood are. In such a situation, some of the strategies of performative transculturation adopted by Bhardwaj, Bhandarkar, and other directors of Hindi-language films seem to be the only way out for ambitious Indian filmmakers, but it is equally important to note that there is a double hegemony – that of Bollywood in addition to the Anglo-American conditions of reception of international Shakespeare – that present-day Indian filmmakers have to face when making Indian films that also aim for an international market. On the positive side, Bhardwaj’s films are part of a developing trend in Bollywood where the mass appeal of the genre is being used to discuss issues of class and changing social mores more than had been the case till the late 1990s. Indeed,
while there was relatively little change in style in Bollywood films made between the 1970s and the late 1980s, there is much more formal and thematic experimentation going on at present.

The presence of transculturated Shakespeare can, therefore, signify a number of things, depending upon the context. At the most basic level, it shows the agency of the adapters of a later period in making Shakespeare “fit” new audiences. However, because the process of performative transculturation increases the intertextual web between the Shakespearean source and the product of adaptation beyond the verbal level alone, the aesthetics and politics of such a process are rather complicated. In the early nineteenth-century European context, Shakespeare was at the cusp of an aesthetic debate between neoclassicists and Romantics, who therefore adopted almost diametrically opposite modes of performative transculturation, while in the context of contemporary Bollywood, Bhardwaj’s Shakespeare adaptations show both the pros and cons involved in “Indianising” Shakespeare.

Similarly, extending the methodology used in this study to other cultures can yield interesting insights regarding Shakespeare adaptation. For example, if we extend our focus to the Caribbean and the Far East, we shall find both striking similarities and equally striking contrasts in the patterns of Shakespeare reception and adaptations that call for theoretical explanation. For example, because the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent were European colonies in the nineteenth century, they are often seen through a non-differentiating postcolonial lens, even though Caribbean adaptations of
Shakespeare often tend to “write back,” while Indian adaptations, in general, do not. On the other hand, European, Chinese, and Indian adaptations of Shakespeare show similar patterns of textual transmission and performative transculturation, such as their dependence on secondary translations or adaptations in the form of short stories as the basis for further adaptations (Das 52). Moreover, adaptations from these places share the common tendency to make Shakespeare’s plays conform to the cultural conventions of the receiving culture, thereby making them popular with new, local audiences.

Akira Kurosawa’s Shakespeare adaptations present another intriguing case of performative transculturation. His Shakespeare films have been subjected to considerable criticism in Japan, while they have been rather more unequivocally praised elsewhere, this despite the fact that Kurosawa’s cinematic style is deeply indebted to Japanese painting and theatrical forms such as the Noh. Is it that Kurosawa, while using Japanese performance and artistic modes, reads the plays in ways that have more to do with Western critical traditions than indigenous Japanese conventions? For example, in the scenes leading to the murder of the Duncan figure, we see only the face of Macbeth/Washizu (played by Toshiro Mifune), while Lady Asaji/Lady Macbeth is heard as a voice-over. Mifune’s acting style is deliberately rooted in Japanese theatre, but what probably strikes non-Japanese audiences is the subtlety with which Kurosawa problematises the notion of agency here: is it Washizu/Macbeth who, right from the beginning, has it in him to kill his lord, or is it his wife who is egging him on to commit the murder? If the former reading is true, shall we understand the voice-over as

2 Important exceptions in this regard are the readings of The Tempest by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore, whose relationship with Shakespeare I have discussed in detail in Chapter 3.
something occurring in Washizu’s mind? Mifune’s masklike face also reinforces the interpretation that Washizu has a violent core right from the beginning (Richie 117). For Japanese audiences who are better attuned to the nuances of Noh theatre, Kurosawa’s use of Noh conventions may seem to depart from tradition; indeed, as Yoshimoto observes, “[d]espite its use of Noh and other types of traditional Japanese art, *Throne of Blood* has little to do with the affirmation of Japaneseness” (269). If that is true, then in the case of Kurosawa, performative transculturation – the re-presentation of *Macbeth* in “Japanese” cinematic terms – departs from its usual function of making Shakespeare’s play readily relatable to Japanese audiences. Instead, Kurosawa’s representational conventions, relatively unfamiliar to non-Japanese audiences, may be performing an *estranging* effect in two different ways for two different audience groups: for Japanese audiences, Kurosawa’s unconventional use of well-established Japanese theatrical conventions perhaps has the effect of defamiliarising – even alienating – audiences, while for international audiences, the unfamiliarity of the representational conventions makes them more conscious about the ways in which the methods of representation in a given medium can (and do) shape readings and interpretations of any given work. Such a double function of Kurosawa’s cinematic technique, Japanese in origin but highly individual in the way Kurosawa uses it, perhaps accounts for the unusual trajectories of reception of Kurosawa’s films in Japan and abroad.

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3 Yoshimoto cites an unnamed Japanese critic who made the sarcastic comment that “*Rashomon* was internationally recognised as a masterpiece because the foreign audiences could see it with subtitles, while Japanese audiences had to struggle with the incomprehensible lines of the actors” (267). It seems to be a common complaint with Japanese film critics that Kurosawa is too Western a filmmaker in terms of his aesthetic sensibilities, while for international audiences Kurosawa is the quintessentially Japanese filmmaker, more so than equally acclaimed Japanese filmmakers like Yasujirō Ozu.
My brief reading here of Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* only highlights further the fact that interpretations of cross-cultural encounters really require collaborative work between experts from a multitude of disciplines sharing a certain methodological approach. Books on global adaptations of Shakespeare usually tend to be comprised of individual essays showing a diversity of critical concerns and methodological approaches. However, comparing and contrasting Shakespeare reception and adaptation across different cultures through a common methodological lens is much better suited for a more comparison-based understanding of how patterns of cross-cultural exchange and adaptation show similarities and differences in various world cultures.

I see this study, therefore, as a starting-point for a larger book-length or multi-volume project that has the potential to contribute to both Shakespeare scholarship and the developing field of adaptation studies in the humanities. Such a study will be, on account of its very nature, challengingly interdisciplinary: Shakespeare scholars, translation theorists, creators and critics of film, drama, opera, musical and other performance media, all need to come together in a project that calls for the synthesis of their individual areas of expertise, for Shakespeare’s reach has been far beyond the confines of a single discipline, and so has the work of some of his best adapters. To do full justice to this area of research, it is important to balance formalist and contextual approaches, and it is necessary to move away from the all-too-frequent tendency to use works of art as a means for sociological analysis, as well as from the analysis of Shakespeare’s work only in terms of the culture or the genres in which he worked. Notions of hybridity and cultural mimicry are simply not adequate to account for Shakespeare adaptation in the colonial context: while they do address a certain kind of
response, the colonial world has been, and continues to be, too complex for former European colonies – a huge portion of the world characterised first and foremost by cultural, historical, and social diversity – to speak in a unified postcolonial voice whose only relevance seems to be in the academy.

By the same token, it is irrelevant to hunt only for commonalities of response across cultures from a Shakespearean perspective: Shakespeare’s plays, more than those of any other English dramatist, have resonated across cultures well enough for adapters to “exploit” them for over two centuries, as Brecht put it, but on their own terms. The variety of response may be too large to grasp, but ignoring that diversity is not the right solution. Shakespeare scholarship is as old as Shakespeare reception, but the focus has been on Shakespeare’s text, Shakespeare context, Shakespeare’s language, Shakespeare’s drama, and Shakespeare’s critics. Even the strong impact of theory from the 1970s has not really provided new methodologies for studying Shakespeare’s afterlife, where the focus must necessarily move away from the Shakespearean centre without abandoning Shakespeare altogether. Such a move is necessary, for the afterlife of Shakespeare’s work has been ensured by a wealth of gifted creative artists and scholars from all over the world. The publication of the First Folio (1623) of Shakespeare’s work by John Heminges and Henry Condell was in some ways symbolic: unlike Ben Jonson, who had his own works published, from the very beginning Shakespeare’s work was loved and preserved for posterity by others. But with time and space, the response has become too complex, although the agency of preserving – or contesting – the Shakespearean heritage (or heritages, to be more accurate) has rested upon individuals from a later time. The spread of different Shakespeares across the world has become possible because of the
work of adapters, translators, critical commentators, performers and so on, work which
was very different from that of Shakespeare himself. Moreover, the global audiences that
are now familiar with their Shakespeare know a very different one from the “Sweet Swan
of Avon” encountered by the first Elizabethan audiences over four hundred years ago.
Shakespeare’s latter-day audiences are too diverse for any single scholar to speak for all
of them, but part of the strength of adaptation studies of Shakespeare inheres precisely in
this diversity. Instead of writing back to previous critics, one can now get involved in
new, collaborative, and genuinely interdisciplinary research, and in the process
understand the different Shakespeares that different performers, adapters, and audiences
from all over the world have come to know. It is time to give their wealth of experience
and their perspectives a more central position in Shakespeare scholarship.
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