

## Shakespeare and Modernism

1996-1999

Cette demande vise le renouvellement de la subvention d'équipe obtenue pour 1993-1996 et consacré à Shakespeare dans le théâtre. La prochaine étape de notre projet de recherche consiste à étudier de plus près le rapport entre d'une part, l'interprétation shakespearienne et d'autre part, le modernisme et le post-modernisme au théâtre à travers le prisme de leur évolution en Grande-Bretagne, sur le continent européen et en Amérique du Nord. Nous nous intéressons aux nombreuses formes que revêtent les interactions entre l'oeuvre de Shakespeare et de notre propre culture. Les recherches que l'équipe entend mener s'intéresseront à l'impact du modernisme sur l'interprétation shakespearienne, sous l'angle des ramifications esthétiques et politiques de cet important mouvement. Nous avons également l'intention d'étudier les développements théâtraux subséquents dans les mouvements avant-gardistes du milieu du siècle et dans les transformations post-modernistes des textes shakespeariens.

The dialogue that eventually results in a theatrical production necessarily requires complicated negotiation and compromise between the demands of the play-text and the exigencies of the moment of its performance. At times directors and actors attempt to resolve this tension in favor of the author's meaning, as they struggle to understand the play in its historical context. This is in fact the course of action recommended by Brecht: "What really matters is to play these old works historically, which means setting them in powerful contrast to our own time." The "Elizabethan Methodist" movement, although modernist in its commitment to textual integrity, was strongly historicist in its attempts to reconstruct functionally the features of the Elizabethan-Jacobean stage. This impulse is apparent as early as William Poel's production of *Measure for Measure* [1893], which used costumed spectators on the stage in order to visually represent actual conditions in Shakespeare's own theatre. William Poel, Harley Granville-Barker, William Bridges Adams, and Nugent Monck all worked from the premise that historical fidelity to Elizabethan staging practices would permit the essence of the play to reveal itself. Modified historicism has had continuing importance in the area of costume design for Shakespeare throughout the twentieth century. The work of Motley and of Tanya Moiseiwitsch are important examples of this trend. The deliberate primitivism of Peter Brook's film version of *King Lear* suggests an alternative model of historicist production. Here the aim is the archaeological reconstruction of the time of the story, rather than that of Shakespeare's own culture.

More typically modernist productions of Shakespeare have moved away from the historicist preoccupation with fidelity of representation. Theater directors also began to feel more free to focus on formal content and structure without attempting to bring their productions into line with public morality. Where earlier directors like Beerbohm Tree and Henry Irving saw their theatres as institutions for edification and popular morality, modernist directors like Poel focused on the formal qualities of Shakespearean works--

space, structure, language, and above all visual style. Gordon Craig's design for *Hamlet* at the Moscow Art Theatre [1912] is a pivotal moment in the development of modernist Shakespeare in a European context. Craig used this production to put into practice both his own ideas and those of Adolphe Appia. The emphasis here was on visual simplicity and formal unity achieved through the use of three-dimensional scenery as opposed to painted flats.

The modernist impulse in Shakespearean production was often frankly elitist, at least in the British context. Poel, like a number of modernist aestheticians, painters, and poets addressed his work to an intellectual elite. Lawrence Levine has argued that towards the end of the nineteenth century an emerging taste community of privileged elites adopts the preference for taking Shakespeare seriously, and that this preference entails a strong intolerance for the characteristic forms of popular art. It may well be that the rejection of a popularly accessible Shakespeare by cultural elites was on the whole nothing more than the snobbery of newly wealthy social groups. For modernist critics like Van Wyck Brooks, T. E. Hulme, and T. S. Eliot, however, the preference for elite and exclusive art forms was something more than just supercilious dismissal of popular taste. Modernism was in some respects a movement to defend high culture against the threatening encroachment not of traditional popular culture, but of a commercialized mass culture of pulp fiction, film, and other media.

The rejection of popular culture and vernacular sensibilities in theatrical modernism also might entail a broader refusal of political valences in the production of Shakespearean drama. Modernist productions under William Bridges Adams were ostensibly purely aesthetic essays showing timeless and essential human behavior set in an abstract Elizabethan/Jacobean stage space. His production of *Coriolanus* [1926] opened only weeks before the General Strike, arguably the most significant political event of the decade, but Bridges-Adams insisted that the production remain non-partisan. But as Dennis Kennedy has observed, Bridges-Adams "very resistance to the partisan content of *Coriolanus* can be read as a conservative political act" [Kennedy, pp. 126 - 127]. This tacit conservatism at times became somewhat more sinister. The erratic relationship between modernism and Fascism during the 1920's and 1930's found occasional expression in productions of Shakespeare, most notably perhaps in productions of *The Merchant of Venice*.

The modernist orientation to Shakespearean production was not exclusively formalist in its concerns. A number of directors became interested in the way the plays might speak directly to the interests of a contemporary audience through the self-conscious application of specifically modern psychological or social paradigms. The influence of Freud was strongly apparent during the administration of Tyrone Guthrie at the Old Vic. Guthrie admired Freud and he consulted with Ernest Jones for his productions of *Hamlet* and *Othello*. Guthrie's *Othello* and *Coriolanus* explored the homo-erotic and homosexual valences of these works in vivid and controversial ways. Orson Welles' productions in the mid-thirties of *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and, again, *Coriolanus*, focused less on the sexual psychology of characters and more on the contemporary political valences of the plays. Welles drew his inspiration for interpretation and stage design from newsreels chronicling the rise of Mussolini and Hitler, the fall of Ethiopia, and the burning of the

Reichstag. More recent examples of this trend are Michael Bogdanov's *Measure for Measure* at Stratford, Ontario [1985] and Silviu Purcarete's *Titus Andronicus* at the Craiova National Theatre in Roumania [1993].

The various high modernist productions have encouraged even more radically experimental and contestatory approaches to Shakespeare in performance. Peter Brook's controversial production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1970 seem determined not only to challenge received ideas about the Shakespearean play-text, but also to contest the very nature of theatre as an institution. The notoriety of this production probably exceeds its supposedly radical character. Nevertheless, Brook's work has been important in the development of post-modern transformations of Shakespearean works. The post-modern aesthetics of irreverent quotation and pastiche is already evident in works such as Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* [1967]. This work marks the explicit repudiation of high modernist concern with the formal integrity of the work. The post-modern impulse to alter Shakespeare's works radically has been described by Alan Sinfield as "creative vandalism." This radically original theatrical creativity is evident in Heiner Müller's *Hamletmaschine* [1983], Margaret Clarke's *Gertrude and Ophelia* [1987], Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona, Good Morning Juliet* [1990], Norman Chaurette's *Les Reines* [1991] and Robert Lepage's *Elseneur* [1995]. The exclusivity of high modernist theatricality has also been challenged by developments within contemporary popular culture. Franco Zeffirelli's recent *Hamlet* and Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, along with Disney's *The Lion King*, represent what might be termed a "new populism" in Shakespearean performance. Avant-gardiste and post-modern Shakespeare has also found a wide audience through films such as Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* and André Fortier's *Une Histoire Inventée*. As these examples make clear, Shakespeare as the exemplary high cultural icon continues to interact with contemporary popular culture in diverse ways. His work crosses over to a wide range of taste publics and is not limited in its appeal to an elite audience.

This project led to an international conference on "[Shakespeare and Theatrical Modernism](#)" in 1997.