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Adaptation, appropriation, or what you will

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This essay examines the dominant terms currently in use in studies of Shakespearean rewritings (adaptation and appropriation), reviews their recent critical histories, and considers their theoretical advantages and drawbacks. The essay concludes that at the current moment, both terms are apt and useful and suggests a model for articulating their relationship to one another.

Keywords: offshoot; rewriting; literary property; authorship

I say adaptation, you say appropriation!
I say transcoding, you say remediation!
Adaptation! Appropriation! Transcoding! Remediation!
Let's call the whole thing off!
(with apologies to George and Ira Gershwin)

After Jan Kott declared Shakespeare our contemporary in 1964, critics quickly turned their attention to twentieth-century rewritings of Shakespeare and gazed back as well at versions of “Shakespeare” from previous centuries. Ruby Cohn’s Modern Shakespeare Offshoots (1976) judged that the best Shakespearean reworkings have a strong moral purpose, are generally provocative, and frequently desire to “modernize the bard” (390). Most, given Cohn’s focus on twentieth-century drama, are not realistic. Cohn concludes: “It might seem appropriate to close the book with a ritual incantation – that Shakespeare towers above subject and style of adapters; that when realism and non-realism, when burlesque and politics and experiment have had their day, Shakespeare will rise like a pristine phoenix. In the meantime, he is tramping among us here on earth, engaging creative artists in dialogue” (392).

Despite its final, and perhaps ironic, deference to Shakespeare’s “genius,” Cohn’s book began the process of legitimating Shakespearean re-writings as an artistic genre. Her appreciation for both the political and aesthetic contributions of the “offshoots” she studied gained traction in the early 1990s, with the advent of feminist, psychoanalytic, materialist, multicultural, and postcolonial approaches to Shakespeare. Within the US academy, for instance, there appeared Marianne Novy’s edited collection, Women’s Re-visions of Shakespeare (1990), followed by Cross-Cultural Performances (1993) and Transforming Shakespeare (1999). Other studies included Novy’s Engaging with Shakespeare and Peter Erickson’s Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves (1991).

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The proliferation of multiple labels for comparable events was characteristic of the period and has continued, for instance, with studies of Remaking Shakespeare (Aebischer, Esche, and Wheale 2003) and Collaborating with Shakespeare (Henderson 2006). While this list by no means exhausts the body of work relevant to this field of study, we have focused on books whose titles testify to a collective effort to describe and define the ways in which Shakespeare and other entities (whether producers, receivers, or institutions) interact with one another. There continues to be a steady stream of scholarly work devoted to defining Shakespeare’s relation to what Cohn called “offshoots,” but theoretical discussion within Shakespeare studies has settled finally on two terms, often regarded as opposed to one another: adaptation and appropriation.

To some extent, the distinction between these terms depends on a historical contingency: adaptation became prominent because of its use in film studies, appropriation because of its association not only with cultural materialist Shakespeare studies of the 1980s but also with ongoing studies of art, collecting, and the internet in a global context. The terms originate within different cultural spheres and are influenced by the praxis and attendant discourse from these spheres. What a scholar studies, where she publishes, influences her terminology. More important to this discussion, however, are the evolving theoretical constructs of adaptation and appropriation and their underlying assumptions.

**Adaptation**

Within Shakespeare studies, probably the most-cited book related to this subject is Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation*. While acknowledging the genealogical tie of adaptation studies to the vocabulary of film criticism, Hutcheon seeks to reverse both the restriction of analysis to film and novels and the inevitably denigrating belief in an adaptation’s “belatedness” and derivative status. Hutcheon begins her investigation with the premise that experience of adaptations may well precede knowledge of their so-called “originals,” so that adaptations develop in multiple versions, “laterally” rather than “vertically” (xii). Hutcheon considers adaptation to be a subgenre of “intertextuality”: “we experience adaptations (as adaptations) as palimpsests through our memories of other works that resonate through reception with variation.” Thus, an adaptation is “a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary” (8, 9). While much of her book is devoted to debunking the notion that texts have more expressive and symbolic capabilities than other media, Hutcheon retains intertextuality as her governing metaphor, with the audience itself being characterized as a textual palimpsest.

Hutcheon works to articulate a relationship between her favoured term, adaptation, and appropriation. She considers adaptation, somewhat paradoxically, as “an act of appropriating and salvaging, and this is a double process of interpreting and then creating something new” (20). Presumably “appropriating,” which exists syntactically in tandem with “salvaging,” is both interpretative and creative, but this point is not developed further, leaving undetermined the relation of the two processes. Hutcheon also builds bridges between adaptation and appropriation by embracing a range of motives for adaptation, from tribute to contestation, which, as is discussed in the next section, have been associated with appropriation as political practice (93). She also widens her embrace to include what she calls the “more suspect” “personal and thus idiosyncratic motivations, despite the increased focus on individual agency in feminist, postcolonial, ethnic, and
queer studies” (94). This gesture, as well, takes us closer to appropriation studies because it aligns with the more microscopic focus on human agency that attends such discussions as Jean Marsden’s notion of appropriation as “seizure for one’s own purposes.” Hutcheon also attends to “indigenized” and “transcultural” adaptations, which are often treated as appropriations because of their political content and contexts, but although she acknowledges that “adapters across cultures probably cannot avoid thinking about power” (152), an important topic in appropriation studies, the taxonomic imperative remains paramount. In sum, Hutcheon hews to what Julie Sanders, following Gerard Génette, calls an “open structuralism” (18) that makes texts rather than cultural processes its primary focus.

One interesting development of many ideas in Hutcheon’s work, although she is not cited directly as a theorist of adaptation, is Douglas Lanier’s proposal for a Shakespearean “rhizomatics.” In a 2010 essay, Lanier meditated on the “mutations of cultural capital” in Shakespearean adaptations, largely by way of educational imperatives, from the Shakespeare films of the 1990s to the graphic novel and global Shakespeare productions in different media. His point is that while a focus on individual works continues to be a critical imperative, tracing the peregrinations of collective Shakespeare adaptation can reveal large patterns of production and consumption not discernible in studies of individual works or authors. In a more recent essay, Lanier develops more fully the concept of the Shakespearean “rhizome,” drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in A Thousand Plateaus: like Aristotle, Lanier says, Deleuze and Guattari explore a process of becoming, but without the *telos* that for Aristotle produces stable structures:

> [...] the dynamic process of “becoming” is for DG not governed by any teleology, end-point or final form; we do not become our way into a pre-ordained state of being or maturity. Rather, the radical nature of ever differing-from-oneself, a process of endless “becoming,” which for DG governs every aspect of existence, obliterates all conventional notions of “being.” To posit a still point of structure, form, value or meaning, to assert identity, is perceptually to arrest the flux of becoming-different, to misperceive stability within what is in fact the fluidity of ceaseless change, or to attempt to impose structure (typically a binary one) upon non-unitary multiplicity. (27)

Lanier’s appeal to the rhizome counters the residually structuralist emphasis on genre and family resemblances in *A Theory of Adaptation*, but also develops further Hutcheon’s and Gary Bortolotti’s later speculations about the structural homology between biological and cultural adaptation. In their exploration of biological and narrative adaptation as “replication with a difference,” Bortolotti and Hutcheon consider models for the “success” of narratives beyond fidelity to a (superior) source, alternative constructions that might include such things as reputation, dissemination, or even chance transmissions. In the end, however, Bortolotti and Hutcheon hedge their argument by conceding that while natural selection involves no agents, cultural selection does; allowing purpose and intentionality back into their argument via the rear door, they fail to escape the paradigm defining adaptation as a transaction between individual authors or texts.1 Lanier’s rhizome, on the other hand, becomes and continues becoming without discernible agency, a model that fits quite well his chosen example of *Strange Illusion* as a barely recognizable adaptation of *Hamlet* for which there is no hope of establishing a family tree. At the same time, however, the choice to “zoom out” from individual texts to focus on becoming or even more abstractly articulated processes of cultural adaptation runs the
risk of erasing altogether the agents, from Aimé Césaire to Emily Dickinson, who had populated the intellectual landscape in emerging histories of Shakespearean adaptation/appropriation from the 1980s. Under the sign of the rhizome, the author, if not dead, certainly loses agency and much potential for making a political difference, even in a small way.

**Appropriation**

In 2006, Hutcheon ended *A Theory of Adaptation* on an optimistic note that gives adapters and adaptations a fairly broad cultural scope: “The adaptive faculty is the ability to repeat without copying, to embed difference in similarity, to be at once both self and Other” (174). It will be this gesture of fluid transitions between self and other that proves a central crux in theoretical explorations of appropriation. Almost all discussions of Shakespearean appropriation begin with the following sentences from Jean Marsden that were published in 1991:

Associated with abduction, adoption and theft, appropriation’s central tenet is the desire for possession. It comprehends both the commandeering of the desired object and the process of making this object one’s own, controlling it by possessing it. Appropriation is neither dispassionate nor disinterested; it has connotations of usurpation, of seizure for one’s own uses. (1)

While Marsden’s statement obviously seems tinged with a post-structuralist zest at the prospect of subverting established hierarchies, her statement is often misread as limiting the study of Cohn’s “offshoots” to cases that involve literary property and therefore as being inapplicable to less contestatory relations of artistic production and consumption. The legal image of “seizure for one’s own uses,” which in syntactic context stands against dispassionate and disinterested attitudes, also sends some critics who wish to distance their critical investigations from cultural politics in search for what might at least seem to be a more neutral label. Both attitudes, we suggest, are misguided. The notion of literary property is important to appropriation as a process, but not simple or monolithic. Neither are the patterns of encounter that here are described as “abduction” and “theft.”

Post-Marxist studies of literary authorship, following Foucault, concede that “discourses are objects of appropriation,” a form of ownership that is imbricated with what he calls “penal appropriation.” Texts, “books, and discourses” become attached to authors when discourse is deemed transgressive and therefore subject to punishment (211–12). Thus, the privilege of owning literary property exists only in relation to the dangers those texts pose to their authors. There is here a give and take, albeit one fraught with much danger, that is crucial to the concept of appropriation. Accordingly, Christy Desmet writes, “The word ‘appropriation’ implies an exchange, either the theft of something valuable (such as property or ideas) or a gift, the allocation of resources for a worthy cause (such as the legislative appropriation of funds for a new school)” (4). Pointing to definitions 1 and 3 of “appropriation” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Desmet characterizes Shakespearean appropriation as an exchange that is two-directional, if not necessarily equitable to all parties. This definition is bolstered by appeal to Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of dialogism, in which the word “is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object” (Desmet 8, quoting Bakhtin 279). In an oft-quoted sentence, Bakhtin declares that “the word is always half someone else’s,” capable of being *taken*
(Marsden’s “seizure for one’s own purposes”) but also set aside as linguistic capital for future use. This is consistent with Marx’s own use of the word “appropriation” to mean not only that which the Communist Party might take from capitalists, but also (and more importantly for our purposes) the benefits and monies that wage-earners take home. Marx wrote:

We want in no way to abolish this personal appropriation of the products of labour used for the reproduction of life itself, an appropriation that leaves no pure surplus that could give power over another’s labour. We want instead to transform the miserable character of this appropriation through which the worker merely lives in order to increase capital, and only in so far as it suits the interest of the ruling class […] All the objections which are directed at the communist mode of appropriation and production of material products have been extended to the appropriation and production of intellectual products. (14–16)

Anne Fairchild Pomeroy, in her commentary, puts it beautifully: “When Marx uses the term [appropriation] generally, it carries the sense of any and all human relatedness to the objective world: from building a table, to savoring a meal, to reading a book, to appreciating something of beauty, to loving another person. In fact […] all of human living always involves appropriation” (48). Pomeroy’s analysis reminds us that the root of the word “appropriation” is the Latin proprius, belonging to, with the a- prefix denoting an approach towards. To appropriate something is to make it one’s own, part of oneself, not just one’s property. This back-and-forth – which has been defined more specifically as a rhetorical “oscillation” – creates a space for an “interested” identification among readers, viewers, and writers. To appropriate Shakespeare is to make it part of one’s own mental furniture as well as to extend the solitary self out towards the broader world of Shakespeare and what Shakespeare touches.

To the extent that appropriation is intrinsic to building a self, it is ethical as well as political in import. In their introduction to a recent edited collection, Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin imagine an ethics of appropriation rooted in Emmanuel Levinas’ concept of a shared selfhood created by face-to-face encounters between self and other. They suggest that Shakespeare (the ostensible object of appropriation) and the appropriating text/author move back and forth between the object and subject positions. Pomeroy’s analysis of Marx might suggest a different direction in which the theorizing of appropriation as “any and all human relatedness to the objective world” might point: toward Bruno Latour’s network theory, which thinks less about relationships between discrete objects than of networks of relationships constituted by agents, both human and non-human. The tension between these two theoretical trajectories nevertheless enables a negotiation between what Desmet has called “small time Shakespeare” – the more personal and personally political engagements with Shakespeare studied, for instance, by the authors in Novy’s edited collections – and the more “distant reading,” to appropriate a term from Franco Moretti, called for by Lanier’s rhizomatics.3

Reconsidering appropriation as a two-way street that cultivates agents as well as Foucault’s subjected subjects articulates well with the history of appropriation studies of Shakespeare. Over the past 30 years, the label appropriation has become associated almost exclusively with the disciplining, indeed overpowering, mechanisms of cultural institutions and large-scale commodification in the age of late capitalism – what Michael Bristol has called “big-time Shakespeare.” By contrast, cultural materialism of the 1980s, while it focused on Shakespeare’s role within institutions, often upheld the possibility of constructive intervention into, if not subversion of, those powerful institutions. For
instance, Alan Sinfield’s introduction to the second part of *Political Shakespeares* (1985) expressed serious scepticism about the project of reclaiming Shakespeare from conservative ideologies and institutions: “It may be that we must see the continuous centering of Shakespeare as the cultural token which must be appropriated as itself tending to reproduce the existing order.” He still concludes his essay, however, with a hope for political intervention in cultural institutions. Similarly, Jonathan Dollimore’s introduction to the first part of the book identifies power structures as producing (illusory) effects of subversion through “appropriation,” but also this possibility: “appropriation could also work the other way; subordinate, marginal, or dissident elements could appropriate dominant discourses and likewise transform them in the process” (12). Through its recent exploration of the ethics as well as politics of appropriation, the field of appropriation studies is poised to complicate (and in some sense to recuperate) a sense of the political in which, as the feminist saying goes, “the personal is political.”

**What you will?**

The tangled relations, both terminological and historical, between adaptation and appropriation have led some critics to embrace enthusiastically, if often uncritically, the proliferation of terms for such phenomena. Such a gesture has a certain appeal, for as structuralism taught us, a proliferation of terms for comparable events means many smart minds at work on the same problems. Choosing one or the other of those terms that rise to the top, on the other hand, has the appeal of simplicity, the comfort of putting everyone on the same page without need for further argument. But as we hope to suggest through the foregoing look at critical history and recent developments in the study of appropriation and adaptation, the dialogue should not stop with either of these pragmatic solutions. As Bortolotti and Hutcheon’s exploration of the homology between biological and cultural selection concludes, the “success” of dominant terms is revealing and, in the case of adaptation v. appropriation, potentially significant for that point at which critical tradition meets evolving artistic practice and media.

While a focus on film in Shakespeare criticism over the past decade has perhaps made adaptation the favoured term, appropriation is now enjoying a comeback, if the 2014 meeting of the International Shakespeare Conference is a reliable barometer. This may have something to do with the renewed interest in media and genres beyond film, from poetry to manuscripts and from literary sources to song. It might have something to do with the fact that it has been 20 years since the landmark texts of Shakespearean cultural materialism were published. And it may have to do with the term’s aptness for the newest forms of digital media. Julie Sanders, for instance, connects appropriation to the practice of musical sampling, while Siobhan O’Flynn’s Epilogue to the second edition of *A Theory of Adaptation* attends more fully to Shakespeare adaptations in social media.

Pertinent as well are new complications for the concepts of literary property and authorial identity that have emerged along with the new media and with the global expansion of Shakespeare studies. On the one hand, there is the celebration of appropriation as theft and replication that has been communicated through writings as varied as Lawrence Lessig’s *Code 2.0* and Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Uncreative Writing*. On the other, there is a continued focus on appropriation in art studies (acknowledged as a special terminological case by the *OED*) and in legal/political explorations of “cultural appropriation.” Discussions of cultural appropriation return us to the politicized context of appropriation’s cultural materialist origins while broadening the scope of analysis in
the direction suggested by Hutcheon’s analysis of indigenised adaptations. As Rosemary Coombe’s analysis of collective authorship in controversies over indigenous peoples’ ownership of cultural properties in Canada has shown, the notion of property in the sphere of art and culture continues to be examined legally in ways that challenge both the Romantic myth of authorship and the Lockean system of property on which copyright law has and continues to be based (see Coombe, “The Properties of Culture” and The Cultural Life of Intellectual Property).

Studies of cultural appropriation have also helped to complicate our sense of appropriation as an ethical practice. James O. Young, in his analysis of Cultural Appropriation in the Arts, articulates conditions under which cultural appropriation is clearly wrong: when it involves clear theft, when it causes cultural harm, and when it is profoundly offensive to the appropriated culture. But for the most part, he argues, types of cultural appropriation are not only widespread, but also benign. Pablo Picasso’s appropriation of African motifs, Shakespeare’s appropriation of other cultures’ stories, and Herbie Hancock’s appropriation of pygmy cultures’ music are all cited by Young as benign appropriations. Shakespeareans would certainly disagree with his judgment that Shakespeare’s representation of Moors and Jews is a neutral form of “subject appropriation,” but Young troubles successfully the simplistic equation of appropriation with “theft” by examining case studies in which ownership is complex and tangled. This suggests that we might reconsider both categories, property and individuals, as they pertain to discussions of Shakespeare adaptation and appropriation.

How, then, to articulate anew the relationship of appropriation and adaptation as cultural possibilities without resorting to the laissez-faire position of “what you will”? To date, there have been several thoughtful attempts to articulate taxonomic distinctions between the terms. Thomas Cartelli, in 1999, defined the difference between adaptation and appropriation according to the attitudes and political dispositions of the re-maker. Appropriations generally work for the interests of the appropriator and against the interests of the work or author being appropriated. Adaptations, by contrast, have more of a “tributary” relationship to the original, “feeding off” the latter’s “fame or prestige” (15). Julie Sanders, in her indispensable guide to Adaptation and Appropriation, defines appropriation as having a greater distance from the so-called source than do adaptations, along with a possible shift in media. Appropriation, in Sanders’ taxonomy, may be the edgier category, as it moves between the extremes of homage and plagiarism.

The work of defining boundaries for both adaptation and appropriation by Cartelli, Sanders, and others, can provide a starting point for continued conversation about how adaptation and appropriation, as both concepts and practices, engage with one another. Hutcheon helpfully characterizes adaptation as a “continuum of transcodings.” We might go further and put adaptation and appropriation, as what Kenneth Burke would call “god terms,” on a larger continuum with one another, as the terminological slippage within much critical discourse seems to call for. We suggest that the difference between adaptation and appropriation, from a theoretical and historical perspective, proves to be a difference in degree rather than kind. Coming to grips with this relationship involves what Richard A. Lanham’s Economics of Attention has defined, through a neologism, as the trope “oscillatio,” a constant shifting in perspective that corresponds to equally dynamic shifts in motive, whether of producers, consumers, or institutional regulators of Shakespeare’s cultural capital.5 Such a spectrum would accommodate both the digital expansion of Shakespeare studies and the continuing political discourse around authorship and property. Crucially, such an oscillation would be responsive to context,
as Coombe, following theorists such as Martha Minow and bell hooks, articulates: “cultural, gender, racial, and ethnic identities of a person are not simply intrinsic to that person, but emerge from relationships between people in negotiations and interactions with others” (Coombe, 266).

(In)Conclusion

That the need for such a context-sensitive matrix to define the relation between adaptation and appropriation as attitudes remains crucial may be shown from an anecdote that circulated in the 1990s, in which African American poet Maya Angelou, as a child, decided to recite Portia’s “Quality of Mercy” speech to her church congregation, despite family resistance at her choice of a white author. In her study of Shakespeare’s role in Victorian literary canonization, Tricia Lootens recalls Angelou’s account of the story in a talk given in 1990:

As a child, Angelou reports, she was driven into silence by sexual abuse. Around the time she was beginning to speak again, she decided to deliver Portia’s “quality of mercy” speech before her congregation one Sunday. Over the protests of adults who wanted her to honor an African-American writer instead, she succeeded in doing so. She knew, she explains, that the part was written for her. She had taken it, and no one was ever going to take it away. (96)

In a 1989 MLA talk, by contrast, Marjorie Garber referred to the same story but focused on Angelou’s declaration that Shakespeare was a black woman, a quotation that had been extracted previously by Lynne Cheney from Angelou’s 1985 talk in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and cited approvingly, if mistakenly, as a piece of bardolatry in Cheney’s conservative 1988 report, Humanities in America. Cheney’s choice of representative anecdote, as Garber rightly notes, was certainly a “preemptive strike at the race–class–gender crowd” (249), and in her own exploration of “Shakespeare as Fetish,” Garber focuses instead on the “ironic fact that Angelou’s original choice of presentation piece […] is spoken by one of the few Shakespearean characters openly to disparage a black man for his race and color” (249). Garber’s main point is that Cheney finds “Angelou’s appropriation of Shakespeare as a black woman” acceptable” only because of “the fact that this is only a figure, an allegory” (249, emphasis in original). And so Garber implicitly disapproves of what she sees as a sentimental gesture by the poet, an appropriation that is neither apt nor justified, given its merely figurative status. Two stories, two Angelous – one remembered, one doubly (or triply) ventriloquized, in which the poet alternates between appropriator and appropriated. These two anecdotes are not necessarily in opposition to one another, but the contrast between their interpretations highlights the malleability of appropriation for producers and audiences. In replication with a difference, as Hutcheon defined adaptation, context is all.

Shakespeare has become more central than ever to debates over the ethics of appropriation during the twenty-first century because Shakespearean adaptation remains one of the few legal avenues for creative appropriation by independent knowledge-workers after the Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998. For this reason, rather than shutting down the conversation by forcing a choice between “adaptation” and “appropriation” as useful labels in Shakespeare study or by abandoning theoretical analysis altogether, we should explore the oscillation between these concepts as attitudes toward artistic production, consumption, and social regulation. In other words, we can’t either “call the whole thing off” or settle for “what you will.” Let’s keep writing and
talking; the field variously called Shakespearean adaptation or appropriation is, in fact, a hybrid whose motives and context shift as surely as the night follows day.

Notes
1. Tellingly, most of the many definitions for “adaptation,” with the exception of biological adaptation, depend on agency, purpose, and direction. See, in particular, definitions 2a, 3a, and 5 in the Oxford English Dictionary.
2. For a response to this construction of the term appropriation, see Holderness.
3. See Desmet: “‘Big-time Shakespeare’ serves corporate goals, entrenched power structures, and conservative cultural ideologies. ‘Small-time Shakespeare,’ which emerges from local, more pointed responses to the Bard, satisfies motives ranging from play, to political commitment, to agonistic gamesmanship” (2).
4. It is worth remembering, as well, that other books with different critical politics, such as Michael Dobson’s The Making of the National Poet and Jonathan Bate’s Shakespearean Constitutions, nevertheless engaged with both the authors who people influential collections like Alternative Shakespeares and Political Shakespeares and with other critics from the decade who were examining rewritings of Shakespeare. See, for instance, Dobson 11–13 and Bate 1–9.
5. For discussion of oscillation as a concept useful to examinations of Shakespeare in new media, see Desmet and Iyengar.

References


