

## The Bard in the Bollywood: A Study of Cinematic Adaptation and Appropriation

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### Abstract

The journey of Shakespeare's play from text to screen via theatre has rendered him increasingly global and fluid across various cultures, breaking down England's monopoly over Shakespeare. Shakespeare has been ceaselessly alluring the movie makers with his varied plots and layered characterization. His plays with amusing stuff - love triangles, comedy, melodrama, twins and mistaken identities and without legal and copyright hassles have lent themselves very easily for screen adaptations. Besides Akira Kurosawa's *The Throne of Blood* (Adaptation of *Macbeth* 1957) and *Ran* (adaptation of *King Lear* in 1985) in Japanese feel and flavour, up team of bollywood films also echo, resemble and adapt Shakespeare, *Do Dooni Char* (1968, Gulzar re-adapting from Bengali film *Bhrantibilas* which is an adaptation of *Comedy of Errors*), *Angoor* (1972, Gulzar's adaptation of *Comedy of Errors*), *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988, Mansoor Khan adapting *Romeo and Juliet*), *10ml Love* (2010, Sharat Katariya adapting *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), *Ram Leela: Goliyon Ki Rasleela* (2013, Sanjay Leela Bhansali adapting *Romeo and Juliet*), to name only a few. However it is only Vishal bharadwaj's trilogy of Shakespearean adaptation which gained enough national and international praise. As Shakespeare travels across the globe of different geo political and cultural space and in varied filmic, he acquires many meanings contributing to other 'Shakespeares, improved Shakepeare'. With focus on Bharadwaj's trilogy- *Maqbool* (adaptation of *Macbeth* in 2003) *Omkara* (adaptation of *Othello* in 2006) and *Haider* (adaptation of *Hamlet* in 2014) the paper makes foray into adaptation and appropriation, the two fundamental aspects of film making. It also attempts answers to questions like -how Bharadwaj adapts and appropriates shakepearean plays to fit them into the particularised sociological and political issues of /in India? Can such cinematic adaptation of Shakespearean plays be still Shakespeare? What forms functions meaning and significations Shakespeare acquires when transported to different space and time?

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## Introduction

Shakespeare in India was a colonial import of the English in the mid nineteenth century. Shakespeare's studies were institutionalised in colonial curriculum for promoting cultural and colonial hegemony over the native Indian tradition. By the early twentieth century educated elite middle class Bengali babu, 'Bhadralok' (Girish Chandra Ghosh, Tagore, Utpal Dutt) started staging Shakespeare for the Bengali audience. The history of Indian adaptation of Shakespearean text tells that the practise of such adaptation started with parsi theatre which adapted Shakespearean plays into a variety of local languages. As parsi theatre morphed into Bombay talkies, it retained elements that arguably trace backs to Shakespearean songs, dance and idea of forbidden love and separated twins. Bollywood seems to be bluntly Shakespearesque in its temperament. Many movies like *Dil Bole Hadippa* (based on *Twelfth Night*) *Ishqzaade*, *Ishaaq* and *Ramleela* are adaptations of Shakespearean love saga *Romeo and Juliet*.

## Problems and Possibilities of Adaptation and appropriation

Adaptation and appropriation are two fundamental aspects of adapting text for film making. The Latin root of the word adapts is 'adaptare' which means to 'make fit'. A work of adaptation transposes / casts a work of specific genre into another generic mode to make a text relevant and comprehensible to new audience via the process of 'proximation and updating' (Sanders, 2006, 18). Adaptation is an acknowledged transposition which offers an extended engagement with a work and which can be identified something creatively distinct from the source text. It involves adjustment and alteration of the source text in the target cultural context.

When a text is adapted for a film it is trimmed to counter the issue of time and space and this shortening may lead to quality compromise. Often the author's intention is overlooked and reader's participation is also limited contrary to the process of reading where a reader has the liberty to participate in shaping the meaning of the text, in cinematic adaptations the director becomes the reader who trims, graft and, prune the text according to his own vision.

Linda Hutcheon studies the process of adaptation in book, *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006). She suggests that adaptation can be studied from "three distinct but interrelated perspectives" (7). She remarks that adaptation can at first be studied as a, "formal entity or product", secondly as a "process of creation", and thirdly it can be studied as a "process of reception" (7-8). Hutcheon further observes that adaptation is "a form of intertextuality" (8). Gerard Genette in his celebrated work, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*

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(1982), made a detailed study of the palimpsestuous nature of the text, which focused on the interaction between the texts. He appreciated this interaction, and encouraged intertextuality for promoting artistic expression. Thus, it may be concluded that an adaptation is, “a derivation that is not derivative— a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing” (Hutcheon 9).

Another very useful process in filmmaking is that of Appropriation’. Julie Sanders, while delineating with the aspect of ‘appropriation’ suggests that, this process deals with the source-text by appropriating it into a different blend of cultures. She says that this transformation might involve generic instability and that, “the appropriated text or texts are not always as clearly signalled or acknowledged as in the adaptive process. They may occur in a far less straightforward context than is evident in making a film version of a canonical play” (Sanders 26). Shakespeare believed in appropriation himself because he appropriated many folktales, legends and myths in his plays. He was greatly inspired by writers like Ovid and Plutarch.

## **Techniques of cinematic adaptations.**

Innumerable cinematic efforts are being made globally to cherish Shakespeare’s writing. Captivating adaptations of literary classics and revolutionary celluloid advancements have altered the experience of watching movies. The visual senses are rapidly stimulated by perception of images on screen rather than through the conventional reading process. Thus, the scope of cinema, irrespective of geographical or cultural diversity has earned massive popularity, and has also amalgamated with the social fabric. E. Ann Kaplan in her essay, “Fanon, trauma and cinema” affirms that:

...cinema functions like night dreams and daytime fantasies to permit regression to infantile stages inadequately worked through. It functioned as temporary wish-fulfillment the better to enable people to carry on their physically burdened lives .... Cinema could function like Freud’s mourning process— to accommodate people to loss of the object. (150)

Watching the plays of Shakespeare as movie adaptations is a visual treat that transports the audience to a cinematic utopia for a couple of hours. Visual of the film replaces the verbal of the text . In the words of the adapter-novelist John North in Louis Begley’s novel Shipwreck (2003), “[T]hrough images film conveys a vast amount of information that words can only attempt to approximate...but approximation is precious in itself, because it bears the author’s stamp” (Hutcheon 2). Though cinematic adaptation is an offshoot of popular culture that celebrates mosaic multiplicity, merging hierarchies and blending genres, questions of fidelity pervade the unconscious of the motion picture of a trans-genre adapted text, confirming Tagore’s thoughts “[C]inema is still playing second fiddle to literature” (qtd. in Hutcheon1).The sexual suspicion in Othello is conveyed through figurative language. The songs

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like naina thag lenge (The eyes will con you), O sathi re convey the theme of sexual suspicion much like in Othello similarly in Maqbool the metaphorical Language and figures are used to convey the supernatural dimension of Shakespeare ex; the two corrupt cops are akin to the witches in Macbeth similarly the coming of the birman wood is conveyed through the seas

## ‘Recycling Shakespeare’: Macbeth in Mumbai

Bharadwaj transplants the Shakespearean tale of ambition and avarice in the film (genre), in the murky underworld Mumbai (setting), Hindi/Urdu (language). *Maqbool* is set in the criminal underworld of modern-day Bombay (now called Mumbai).<sup>2</sup> Two corrupt policemen (the equivalent of the weird sisters) predict Maqbool's rise to power by means of horoscopes, which Maqbool manages to do by killing Abbaji (the Duncan figure), the head 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 gives the hand of his daughter, Sameera, to Guddu (Fleance), 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, so to speak, as customs agents foil a vital smuggling deal at the port and raid Maqbool's home with the intention of arresting him. Instead, the customs agents find the dead body of Nimmi, who has, in the meanwhile, given birth to a child; whether it is Abbaji's or Maqbool's remains uncertain. When Maqbool, attempting to take his newborn son and flee 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 with Guddu against Maqbool as 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 qualified admiration to generous enthusiasm. Poonam Trivedi (2007) and Douglas Lanier (2007) 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 (i.e., Duncan-Macbeth) 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 weird sisters as a pair of corrupt policemen having connections with the underworld, and, perhaps most significantly, the recasting of the love between Maqbool and Nimmi (Macbeth and Lady Macbeth) 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 at 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 Maqbool's murder of Abbaji on the night before Guddu and Sameera's wedding. On

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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 is murdered, there is little doubt in anyone'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 after the film begins and the relatively quick move to the denouement have been seen by some as creating a structural imbalance (Rosenthal 2007, 123); but this can be understood as the consequence of the radical reworking of the relationships tying Abbaji, Nimmi, and Maqbool. In fact, as Lanier has observed, the second half of the film, following Abbaji's murder, "closely parallels *Macbeth* in plot, motifs, and character" (Lanier 2007, 217). Those who see *Maqbool* with Shakespeare in mind will note the ingenuity and thoroughness of Bhardwaj's adaptive approach. For example, the 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 so becomes 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 like her Shakespearean counterpart, becomes increasingly obsessed with imaginary bloodstains. Another brilliant reworking is the recasting of Macbeth's downfall with the foiling, by the port authorities, of Maqbool's attempt to offload contraband and the 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 Bombay, would have had to be abandoned if any literal transposition had been attempted. Shakespeare's supernatural dimension is interestingly recast in metaphorical terms, even as the very real setting of crime and criminalized politics is conveyed through a realist idiom.<sup>4</sup>

Adapters of *Macbeth* have often reworked the play's ending. While some (such as William Davenant and Giuseppe Verdi) have emphasized a return from chaos to order, others (such as Roman Polanski and Eugène Ionesco) have depicted a cyclical pattern of violence. Bhardwaj, uniquely, treads a middle ground. On the one hand, he realizes the redemptive potential of the play not in a return, at a social level, from anarchy to order — the Bombay underworld remains corrupt and violent — but at a personal level: Nimmi's newborn child is taken care of by Guddu and Sameera in an act of humanity that transcends personal and gang rivalries. But even this reading can be undermined by the film's repeated suggestion that the unkindest cut of all has always come from the most unexpected quarters — from Abbaji, who killed his mentor, to Maqbool, who kills the person who brought him up as a son.



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Though *Maqbool* claims to be only a "loose adaptation" of *Macbeth* (Trivedi 2007, 153), the film actually employs a range of strategies to incorporate the Shakespearean text in interesting, visual ways. For instance, the day before Abbaji's murder, 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 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 a radically new setting. The policemen's prediction of rain, which 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 presence in various aspects of life, from politics to the Bollywood film industry itself. Indeed, Abbaji makes Maqbool responsible for negotiating deals with Bollywood stars as a reward for his loyalty.

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 setting is accompanied by a focus on language: the characters in *Maqbool* use a spectrum of language, from Hindi slang and colloquialisms spoken in Bombay (popularly called "Mumbaiya Hindi") to Urdu, reflecting the fact that Bombay is perhaps India's most cosmopolitan city, where people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds live and work together. There are visual images, too, that reinforce this cosmopolitanism, albeit in the seedy premises of the Bombay underworld: in the predominantly Muslim world of *Maqbool*, Muslims and Hindus cooperate with each other.<sup>5</sup> Such 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 such director, Ram Gopal Varma, in films such as *Satya* (1998) and *Company* (2002), provides critiques of urban corruption, just as *Maqbool*, while remaining an adaptation of *Macbeth*, also does. In fact, one of Bhardwaj's greatest strengths is his ability to successfully indigenize Shakespeare at the level of setting, plot, language, and generic conventions without diluting the complex issues raised by Shakespeare's play.

Bhardwaj's use of some Bollywood conventions in *Maqbool* may be as much a matter of choice as of compulsion. The presence of Bollywood trademarks such as "family scenes of festivity and weddings, catchy music, dances, and songs" (Trivedi 2007, 153-54), including an "item number,"<sup>6</sup> is all the more strange for a filmmaker who has dismissed mainstream

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Bollywood as kitschy (interview with Raja Sen, "Today *Othello*" 2006). 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 itself . . . (, 29; italics in original).

## **Othello in the Moor of Meerut**

Bhardwaj contextualises *Othello* to the ground level politics of Uttar Pradesh, the lead Omkara played by Ajay Devgan plays a Bahubali or a political fixer for a local politician. The narrative is quite securely rooted in the setting of Uttar Pradesh which not only accounts for the characters but also provides the messy setting of local corrupt politics. The film dwells on the complexity of human relationships. Instead of putting things as black and white, the film brings out the grey area. While in the context of British empire, the Bard is also a token of Englishness, that could be used to justify British colonialism, Bhardwaj's project can be described as an attempt of post-colonial rewriting and therefore a possible revision of Shakespeare's position within a postcolonial India. This he achieves by appropriating Shakespeare's masterpieces and situating them to Indian cultural contexts and hence points to the possibility of finding common grounds. While race is a central theme in *Othello*, caste is given the same prerogative in *Omkara*. This has to do with the parallel that can be drawn between race and caste and also the centrality and peculiarity of caste system to India. However the director transgressed only to some extent. Instead of making the dark complexioned Omi Shuklaa Dalit, he portrayed him as a half caste while the female lead Dolly Mishra played by Kareena Kapoor is a Brahmin. But as the film moves ahead, the jealousy of love becomes the main focus as opposed to caste. Another factor that takes centre stage is power and ambition. The character of Iago played by Saif Ali Khan and called Langda has multiple shades. Langda Tyagi is married to Omkara's sister and hence he has family. Being a second lieutenant, he is also the rightful heir to Omkara. But when it comes to choosing an heir, Omkara chose a young urban educated boy Kesu played by Vicky Oberoi. He hoped Langda would understand the tactical move of portraying an educated young guy as the successor. The film pushes to the furthest point a victim exposition of Langda when it seems he is going to receive the ceremonial plate but it is finally handed over to Kesu. The scene showing Langda crowning himself after the ceremony with his own blood as he looks at himself in the mirror, has a purpose of presenting

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a more sympathetic Iago. Billo, a free spirited dancer is also given good screen time. It is through these characters that Bhardwaj Indianised the Shakespearean play. The film then moves on to show how Langda capitalizes on the insecurities of the jealous lover Omito pave his own way for power and dispose of Kesu, his rival. He played on the supposed treachery of Doli towards Omi by manipulating a certain series of event. Even Doli's father told Omkara that a daughter who can cheat her father can never be loyal to anyone. All this was used by Langda meticulously to serve his own purpose. While the temporal and spatial context of Omkara is pretty farfetched in local politics, there are few converging points. Langda believes that Kesu is not even deserving of what he got in the same way as Iago thinks of Michael Cassio who has no real battle experience. Iago also makes up about a false affair between Desdemona and Cassio. All this leads to Cassio being killed but when Othello discovers the misunderstanding he does not kill Iago, rather leaves him to a life of pain and despair. Similarly Omkara on discovering his mistake instead of punishing Langda, plunges a knife in his own chest and kills himself. While both Othello and Omkara is about ambition manipulating jealousy and distrust, there are few points of divergence in the two stories. While Iago suspected Othello of having cheated with his wife, Langda's wife is a sister of Omkara. So Omkara is not a lascivious manipulative person. Rather his only mistake has been choosing Kesu over Langda overlooking Langda's own political ambitions

## **Hamlet in the wounded valley of Kashmir**

Bhardwaj reimagines and recontextualises hamlet and his problems in the insurgency hit Kashmir. The plot of Haider can be summed up thus: The film starts portraying Kashmir during the Kashmir conflict in 1995. Hilaal Meer (Haider's father), a doctor agrees to perform an appendicitis operation on the leader of a separatist group at his house. On the next morning, during a crackdown he is accused of giving refuge to terrorists and is taken away by Indian army. Haider, (Hamlet) a poet and research scholar who is pursuing his research in "The revolutionary poets of British India" in Aligarh Muslim University comes home in Anantnag after getting the news of his father's disappearance and finds his house in ruins. He finds his mother, Ghazala (Gertrude) having an affair with his uncle Khurram (Claudius). Being shocked at his mother's infidelity he begins the search for his father in various police stations and detention camps with the help of his journalist fiancée, Arshia. When Haider was about to lose hope for not getting any clue of his father Arshia encounters a stranger named Roohdaar who asks her to inform Haider that he will provide information about Hilaal Meer. Roohdaar narrates the story of his imprisonment with Hilaal in the same detention centres. He conveys the fact that his father is dead and it was his father's wish to avenge his brother Khurram for his betrayal and to leave Ghazala for god's justice. Being indecisive of what he should do, Haider re-enacts the show of his uncles' betrayal through the 'mousetrap' or the



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play within a play, here through the performance of the song “Bismil” enacted in the Martand sun temple after the marriage of Ghazala and Khurram. Haider gets caught while trying to murder Khurram who was in his prayers; and Arsia’s father Pervez Lone set Haider to be murdered by Salman and Salman (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) but luckily he escapes. When Haider meets his mother, Ghazala she tells him that she had disclosed about terrorists hiding in their house out of fear to Khurram unknowing that he was an informer of the Indian army. Meanwhile Arsia’s father traces them in their ruined house and tried to shoot Haider but shooting at Pervez’s head he escapes. Depressed at her father’s death in the hands Haider goes to the graveyard where his father was buried, he contemplates about the inevitability of death along with the grave diggers. In the meantime he saw Liyaqat, Arsia’s brother in the graveyard and deduced that the dead body must be of Arsia’s and ran towards her. A fight takes place between Haider and Liyaqat where the later dies. Meanwhile Khurram arrives there with armed forces and a gunfight takes place. When Khurram was about to blow the hideout, Ghazala intervenes and requests a chance to convince Haider to surrender. She tries to convince Haider that revenge only begets revenge but he was determined in avenging his father’s death. She kisses Haider and steps outside wearing a suicide vest. Before Khurram and Haider reaches her she pull the pins of the hand grenades causing her death and leaving Khurram heavily injured. Lamenting her mother’s death finally when Haider goes on to take revenge at his uncle by shooting him in his eyes he is reminded of his mother’s last words and leaves him. Khurram being his legs amputated at the blast begs Haider to kill him to set him free from the guilt and treachery but Haider leaves him.

## Reprocessing Shakespeare

Bhardwaj reprocesses Shakespeare in varied ways for his cinematic adaptation. Haider’s subversive soliloquy at Lal Chowk articulates the unsung stories of civilian disappearances. Interestingly enough, the scene of the monologue is shot using grayer shades, mostly greyish. The initial line given to Haider is a reworking of Shakespeare’s “To be or not to be: that is the question” in Act III, Scene I – “Hum hain ke hum nahin/ Hum hain to kahan hai/ Aur gaye to kahan gaye” (Do we exist or do we not? If we do, then where? If not then where have we gone?) It requires the talent of a master-mind to imagine the Hamletian dilemma in the lives of the Kashmiris. The quintessential Shakespearean question turns out to be the hushed up howls of the Kashmiris whose right to self-determination, at odds with the hegemonic intent of the state, produces a cauldron of violence and nihilism that matches the anguished utterances of the Shakespearean tragic hero. It is here, Haider’s story becomes the life-haunting narratives of thousands of Kashmiris and Bhardwaj attains the height of universality the Bard possesses. Haider’s voice becomes the call of conscience which has remained buried deep within the practised complacency of a terror-stricken marginalised existence. Through the matrix of Shakespeare and the apparent mumbling of raving Haider,

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Bhardwaj exposes the bleeding wounds of a postcolonial nation state. Such remarkable episodes highlight how Bhardwaj uses Shakespeare's own concerns about state and authority in Hamlet to a telling effect in his portrayal of Kashmir which acts as the lifeline of the adaptation. This is again evident from the simulation of the 'play within a play' episode from Shakespeare, where the representation soaked in the flavours of Kashmir is a manifestation of the traditional folk dance Dumhal, performed in the valley by Wattal tribes. Bhardwaj successfully employs the folk structure to provide Haider the occasion of enacting a living replica of the disappearance-murder-incest riddle right in the celebratory function of his mother's re-marriage.

Both adaptation and appropriation are collaborative process and forms of intertextuality which revises, updates any work of art. Ben Jonson's famous observation that Shakespeare 'was not of an age but for all time' need not be taken to endorse the hoary old claims for his universality but rather as an indication that he remains available to subsequent ages to adapt and adopt as they wish as Marsden notes "each new generation attempts to redefine Shakespeare's genius in contemporary terms, projecting its desires and anxieties onto his work."

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