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Heather Talbot

Brigham Young University - Provo, heathertalbot1@gmail.com

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Heather Talbot

Dr. Gideon Burton

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Folklore-in-the-Making: Analyzing Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Adaptations as Folklore

“Lie there, my art,” Prospero tells Miranda in *The Tempest* as he prepares to tell her the story of how and why they ended up on their magical island (Shakespeare 1.2.25). Prospero is telling Miranda a tale, a tale she is a part of, a tale in which he has shaped their environment and their lives to be what he wants them to be. Miranda is “his art,” a part of his creation. In that moment she is a culmination of his story. He has created the events on the island to lead up to the moment when he will tell her their tale and then bring it to a dramatic close. Throughout *The Tempest*, Shakespeare reminds his audience that what they are experiencing is a carefully crafted story that defies and questions reality. Miranda, whose whole life has been directed by Prospero's magic, has been shaped to fit into the fantasy that he has created; She is as influenced by his magic as the sprite, Ariel. Like everyone and everything on the island, Miranda is both a part of Prospero's story and his audience. Just as Prospero's influence shaped Miranda's knowledge of the world, folklore helps shape the culture of its audience. At the same time, just as Miranda was an essential part of his story, the stories of folklore are strongly influenced by the lives and beliefs of its audience. Through Prospero, Shakespeare reveals story to be an instrument of creation. By analyzing *The Tempest* in the context of folklore, we can understand the role of adaptation in keeping Shakespeare's works vital and vibrant to a modern audience.

Benjamin Botkin, a folklorist who pioneered many of the theories used in folklore study today, considered folklore to be a living entity that is constantly evolving (Mizer). He did not

believe that folklore study should be separated from its continued use among the folk who created it (Hirsch 1). Because of this, and his work with the government, many scholars of his day accused him of watering down the study of folklore, but Botkin's approach gave his work a greater audience among non-academics and made his ideas, and the folklore of the United States, more accessible (Rudy). Similarly, while some may consider modern interpretations and adaptations as diminishing Shakespeare's works, it is important to remember, that like folklore, Shakespeare wrote his plays for the people, not for academics. And like folklore that is ever evolving, adapting Shakespeare can give his works back to the people.

Shakespeare was familiar with the art of adaptation. *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*, all use folklore of various cultures as source material. While Shakespeare for the most part kept his plays true to their sources, he changed and enhanced key details to create literary masterpieces that brought out new and nuanced themes that the original stories did not (Cutitaru 64-5). Through Shakespeare, stories that might have been lost to time have become tools to understanding humanity in modern society. *The Tempest*, however, is a story original to Shakespeare. Though the seed of the play came from a letter from William Stachey describing the real shipwreck of the *Sea Venture* off the coast of Bermuda in 1609, this description provided the idea for the setting and circumstance, not the meat of the story ("The Tempest," DS). The outcast sorcerer with his magical books, his beautiful naïve daughter, the indebted sprite, and the monstrous slave are all characters of Shakespeare's imagination alone.

Although unlike folklore, which is a purely oral tradition, *The Tempest* has a written script, it still maintains the ability to adapt. Shakespeare seemed to be aware of this and wove meta commentary throughout the play about the magic of story and imagination to carry a story beyond the words of a single author, especially through performance. Like folklore,

Shakespeare's plays were meant to be performed, not read. An audience interacts differently with a performance than with the written word. Because performance is dependent on many different people, actors, directors, costume and set designers, to create the interpretation of the written word, it is more adaptable. But a play is meaningless without an audience. Prospero understands this. When Prospero asks Miranda, "Dost thou attend me?" as he begins to share with her the story of how and why they ended up on the island, he is anxious that she is listening (Shakespeare 1.2.78). His anxiety is evidenced in his repeated inquiries into her attention throughout the telling of his tale. It is vital to him that she is listening to the story. He needs her as an audience, or the story is meaningless. Just as Prospero creates the storm, and commands the elements on the island, he is the author of all that happens there. But without an audience to hear and to witness his feats, the whole world of the island falls apart.

It is through performance that both Shakespeare's plays and folklore can be adapted to fit the needs and interests of the audience. It is also through performance that the audience is entertained, and when the audience is entertained, the story lives. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, definitions of the word entertain include; to receive a guest and offer hospitality, to occupy or engage one's time or attention, and to maintain or keep up appearances ("entertain"). *The Tempest* entertains in all of these ways, both theatrically and meta-theatrically. The audience of the theater is welcomed into the theater, their attention is delightfully diverted, and the appearance and spectacle of the premise of the play is maintained. Prospero's audience, a literal captive audience consisting of Miranda, Ferdinand, Antonio and the other men on the ship, are likewise welcomed onto the island, in the middle of the story, with varying degrees of hospitality. Each of Prospero's audience members is occupied and diverted as suits Prospero's purposes, and through Prospero's magic and with Ariel's help, fantasies are created and

maintained which both frighten and delight, but always keep them a step removed from reality. In addition to these forms of entertainment, folklorist Victor Turner points out the etymology of the entertainment, meaning “to hold in between (121).” *The Tempest* holds within its words and performances the relationship between performance on stage and performance in life, between imagination and reality, and between immutability and adaptability.

Prospero’s world could not exist without his books. They are what he “prize(s) above [his] dukedom. (Shakespeare 1.2.165-8)” He treasured them more than the kingdom he seeks revenge for, the dukedom he may have deservedly lost due to his neglect. He prizes them above the sustenance of life that Gonzalo provides. This is because his books are what make it possible for him to create his world. Without the magic of his books his world is bleak and without imagination. But it is through books, the written word and the magic they contain, that his world becomes a place of wonder. When Prospero is told that Miranda and Ferdinand have fallen in love and wish to be married, he is happy for them, but not as happy as they “who are surprised with all (3.1.95).” Miranda and Ferdinand’s love can’t surprise Prospero, for he is at least partial author of it. His magic has made their love possible. Yet, Prospero admits that his books distracted him from his responsibilities as the Duke of Milan, and he did not notice the power hunger of his brother and missed the warning signs that Antonio was turning against him. The magic of his books kept him from engaging in the world of reality. Instead of using what he learned to be a better Duke, he became absorbed in them and did not share his magic. In the end, his “library was [not] dukedom enough (1.2.109-10).” He did not balance his magic with his responsibility, he lived in words and not in action. Much like a folktale, the story must be shared, or it loses its power. A story that lives is not complete with words on a page. The story must be spoken aloud and acted out before it is real, before the books’ magic is complete. Just as

the study of folklore is constantly shifting between the written and spoken word, as academics record it to study it, and folklore is adapted in subtle ways with each individual performance (Botkin xxii), Prospero needed to live both in the world of the written word, and the world of living people. While it is a standard reading to interpret Prospero's books and magic as the magic of the theater and the magic of words, I contend that Prospero's story also represents the need to share the written words and to allow them to disseminate, creating a new legend. Just as Shakespeare adapted and continued the lore of *Hamlet* and other stories, the story of the Tempest would extend beyond the world of the Globe Theater and become a new lore to sink or swim in the tides of time.

The other two inhabitants of the island, Ariel and Caliban, represent the opposing forces of adaptability and stagnation, imagination and dullness. Prospero asks Ariel, "Hast thou, spirit, / Performed to point the tempest that I bade thee? (Shakespeare 2.1.93-4)." Ariel as the spirit of imagination on the island, does Prospero's bidding, waiting for the day he will be set free. Once he is set free, the island, and therefore the lore it creates, no longer lies within the constricts that Prospero sets for it. The story itself is set free, to change, to adapt, to have a life of its own. Ariel represents the spirit of story, of folklore that is a living, ever changing entity, that can only be held down by a script, by an unchanging set of language, for so long. Any folklore that resonates with the folk will continue to grow with the culture that espouses it and if its truths are universal, will spread beyond the confines of a single culture (Botkin xxii).

Opposing Ariel's imagination and mutability is Caliban. Caliban has received the gift of language from Prospero, but he is not grateful. All that he has taken away from this gift is the ability to curse. Words are not the gift to him that they are for Prospero, in part because it is through the power of Prospero's words that he is bound to serve Prospero. He "must obey, His

art is of such power (Shakespeare 1.2.373).” Caliban laments that the magic of words has not pulled him from baseness but made him a hated slave. Ultimately language was not enough to raise him above his base nature, so instead of making him more than he was, they bound him down. Not all stories are set free. Some are forever tied to the ground, lacking the truths or adaptability to continue. Caliban is the story that is trapped, that is not told and retold, that is full of baseness and lacks enduring morality. It is the story that can’t be adapted to let go of misogyny, racism, or cruelty as a central focus.

If some of Shakespeare’s works cannot be adapted against socially unacceptable morals like these, they may fall out of favor, and eventually fall out of the canon of practiced literature. The context of Shakespeare’s words is constantly shifting and if it cannot adapt, either through interpretation or adaptation, the words will be lost to literary history. *The Tempest* survives in part because while the character of Caliban can be interpreted as a bigoted caricature of a slave, in recent years the play has been reimagined as a post-colonial condemnation of slavery and colonization, meeting the morals of our day. Another adaptation of *The Tempest* that updates Caliban’s character is Margaret Atwood’s *Hag-Seed*, a novel that was written as a commissioned work in a series of Shakespearean adaptations. In the book, a group of prisoners who perform *The Tempest* reimagine Caliban’s ending. They decide that Caliban is actually Prospero’s son, conceived with Sycorax, which explains his initial kindness to him. But when Caliban assaults Miranda, Prospero turns against him, overlooking the good in him. But the men in *Hag-Seed* decide that after the events of the play, Prospero regrets his treatment of Caliban, brings him back to Milan, cleans him up, helps him to become a star musician (Atwood 271-2). This redemption arc for both Prospero and Caliban helps to erase some of the problematic elements of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, allowing the story to continue as a cultural staple. As Bodkin argues,

while historic folklore should be studied to understand a culture and where it comes from, they should not be used as an excuse to perpetuate moral errors, but to learn from them (xxvi). *Hagseed* does this by acknowledging the moral flaws in *The Tempest*, and then providing a way for the characters to grow past those flaws. Rather than glorifying out-moded values, it teaches the reader how to change the future narrative of racism and colonialism.

Understanding *The Tempest* as folklore and understanding the metanarrative of the power of story and the need to pass it on, can explain Prospero's seemingly sudden change of heart at the end of the play. Just as folklore often trends toward a happy ending, once the spectacle is complete, Prospero realizes what he wants isn't revenge but reconciliation and resolution. He is tired and ready to end his part in the lore of the island. His books and his magic have drained him, and he no longer desires to hold onto control of the island or the people around him. The revenge was merely a dramatic way to get there, a means to an end. Prospero acknowledges that when Prospero returns to Milan, "Every third thought shall be of [his] grave (Shakespeare 5.1.309)." Once Ferdinand and Miranda are married, his story will have complete resolution, and he will no longer be needed. With his death, the final ties the lore has to him be released. Though the resolution feels abrupt, the most important elements and morals of the story have been told, and as Prospero releases his powers to the wind and seas and sets Ariel free, he gives Ariel the power to do what he will with the island, with the story, to let Ariel's imagination carry the story forward.

Both Shakespeare's works and folklore endure in an everchanging world when new imagination takes hold of it and finds a way to move it forward. One reason is because they adapt to that changing world. Folklore may be adapted into animated movies or video games. Shakespeare can also adapt to a wide variety of media, some faithfully preserving the text and

some daring to not include Shakespeare's language. The works of Shakespeare "thereby becomes a collection of narratives highly mobile from context to context, verbal style to verbal style, genre to genre, media platform to media platform (Lanier 107)." Our world has become an increasing visual world, so Shakespeare has become more visual too. In the 1991 movie, *Prospero's Books*, directed by Peter Greenway, the language is set aside in order to focus on vivid imagery, of which the plot is not the point (Ebert). While Greenway's approach may not create an enduring legacy or become mainstream, it is an example of a turn towards greater experimentation with Shakespeare's works and of an artist taking Shakespeare someplace new and unexpected.

Complete reimaginings are not the only way to adapt Shakespeare. The way a play is performed can add new light understanding his work. In Gregory Doran's Royal Shakespeare Company performance of *The Tempest*, the final scene gives insight into Prospero's character as he lets go of his magic and sets the island free. Prospero gives Caliban his broken staff, giving up the magic. Caliban, the unimaginative one, throws it to the ground, not knowing what to do with it. Ariel says a reluctant and sad good-bye, even though freedom has been all he has wanted, he seems unsure what to do with it yet. When Prospero gives his final speech, the stage, filled with the spectacle of lights and digital technology is reduced to a single spotlight on Prospero, his magic gone, bare, and alone, having passed along the mantle of the island. It is time for someone else to tell the story. Prospero's final words ask the audience to set him free.

When Prospero is set free, so are all of the inhabitants of the island, including the unimaginative Caliban. In Hag-seed, the protagonist, Felix, realizes that with the prisoners reimagining of Caliban's fate, Caliban is no longer confined to the structure of the play. "Caliban has escaped the play. He's escaped from Prospero, like a shadow detaching itself from its body

and skulking off on its own (Atwood 279).” Adaptations give a story a chance to take on new possibilities, allows characters to develop new dimensions, and can give a plot more depth. Yet, adaptations can take a story far from what the author intended. They can create an entirely new story. So, do adaptations bolster the original story or do they undermine it?

There is debate among Shakespeare scholars whether taking Shakespeare’s language out of Shakespeare sacrifices what makes his work special or spreads appreciation for his works by making them more accessible (Gamboa 27). I believe that Shakespeare’s language is remarkable and should be preserved for its incredible artistry and craftsmanship as much as possible, but that it can be adapted to be made more understandable to more people. One genre that achieves this balance is graphic novels. This genre continues a trend of putting Shakespeare’s words into visual form. It allows the author to control the emphasis and tone through style, panel size, and placement (Lanier 110). Graphic novels broaden the audience of Shakespeare, bringing it back to the people. They visualize the words that many find difficult to understand.

Shakespeare is a magician of words, words that weave stories in ways the world has valued for over four hundred years. His mastery of language deserves the emulation it has received, but not all of his words reflect the values of our current society. While I believe that the Shakespeare’s linguistic wizardry, universal themes, and characters who reflect a keen understanding of the complexity of human nature, deserve a continued place in the literary canon, perhaps not all of his works are equally deserving of emulation. Can we preserve the story and the language of Shakespeare without passing along outdated morality? How do we reconcile the misogyny in *The Taming of the Shrew*, or the anti-Semitism in *Merchant of Venice*? The answer can only exist through adaptations in performance, editing, or translation into new

genres. If these issues cannot be resolved through adaptations, perhaps, it is time for some Shakespearean stories to be lost to history.

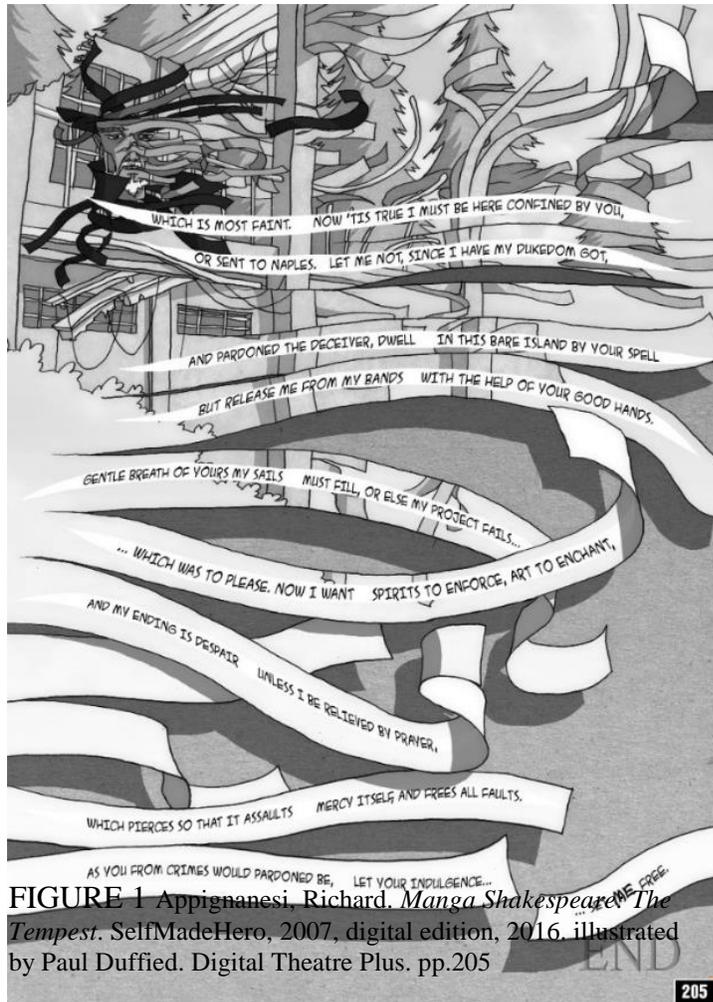


FIGURE 1 Appignanesi, Richard. *Manga Shakespeare: The Tempest*. SelfMadeHero, 2007, digital edition, 2016, illustrated by Paul Duffied. Digital Theatre Plus. pp.205

In Richard Appignanesi *Manga Shakespeare: The Tempest*, as Prospero delivers the epilogue, Prospero is pictured unraveling into ribbons of words released to the wind, ribbons that resemble Ariel's ribbon-like form (see figure 1). Prospero disappears with the story he has created. The words and the story they contain are set free. It is the audience in the end that has the power, that holds the key to the spell. The audience, the people, the folk, decide the fate of the story. Will it be held to the confines of the author's script?

Will it be set free to adapt to be repeated and passed along, to adapt, or will it die out when the script is gone? It is our stories that unite us, as a culture, as humanity. The stories we let go of when they no longer reflect our values, the stories we choose to keep, the stories we choose to adapt, all of these stories determine who we are and who we want to be. Under the guise of Prospero, Shakespeare asks his audience to consider what kind of story *The Tempest* is, then releases it to the fate we give it.

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Figure 1