

Hark in Thine Ear : Exploring the Radio Shakespeare

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Abstract. The Bard of Stratford-upon-Avon has been the subject of innumerable academic debates and multifarious cultural transmissions. Shakespeare's plays have been taught as part of the academic curriculum, adapted for diverse theatrical productions, theorized, as well as re-written and re-moulded according to cultural preferences re-shaping inter-disciplinary studies. All these have rendered Shakespeare as the icon of intellectuality and cultural elitism. However, as the distinctions between the intellectual and the popular have gradually blurred, his plays have been the inspiration of festivities and folk customs, myths, histories, parodies, burlesques and popular romances circulating across a wide range of media. As a medium of cultural dissemination, radio is a mobile and personal one; associated with the private domestic sphere, which is to be enjoyed within the comforts of the hearth and home. Listening to the radio has to be fitted in amidst the various domestic activities and mundane everyday conversations. This raises the very pertinent questions of how Shakespeare as an elitist cultural icon can be interpreted within the domestic structures. Does radio, as a cultural medium cater to the popular demands or does it constitute an alternative sub-culture overshadowed by the dominant theatrical adaptations? Or does it construct a separate discourse of high-brow culture and low culture within itself thereby creating a cultural hierarchy and problematizing the whole discourse of popular culture? This paper attempts to focus on these issues and also affirm the emergence of Multiple Shakespeares within this popular medium.

Keywords : Shakespeare; radio; domesticity; popular culture.

Is there a place where 'popular culture'
meets a 'streetwise Shakespeare'; where
'the people' meet 'the bard' and decide
to risk a blind date ? (Rutter, 249)

The face of Shakespeare has been interpreted as the icon of aesthetic traditionality, intellectualism and academic elitism. With the regular performances of his plays along with strictly academic pursuits and

incessant theorizations, it has now acquired the status of an open signifier, “a visual anchor for every connotation historically accrued by the name of Shakespeare.” (Lanier, 67) This has resulted in a plethora of cultural productions leading to appropriations, re-articulations, extensions, negations as well as parodies, burlesques and popular romances based on the Bard’s works.

With the advent of popular media like radio and television, there have been immense attempts to re-assess Shakespeare challenging the hegemonic branding of Shakespeare as an elitist icon. All these productions have endeavoured to reshape the plays, appropriating them according to the demands and preferences of their audience leading to the displacement of certain established conventions as well as shifts in meaning. This has surely enhanced social mobility for the ubiquitous face of the Bard and popularized Shakespeare, simultaneously earning the frowning wrath of puritans and priests of high-brow culture who saw in all these paraphernalia a propensity of the transgression of established cultural boundaries and trivialization of the traditional and authoritative artistic canons.

Radio as a popular cultural medium usually operates within the domestic personal space and occupies a much subordinate position in the cultural hierarchy than its privileged siblings cinema and theatre chiefly because it lacks a visual dimension. It is a mobile medium of cultural dissemination that reaches out to consolidating family bonds within the private and intimate sphere where listening to the ‘wireless hearth’ is sought for solace and comfort and has to be accommodated within the trivial daily ordeals and conversations. Over the years, radio has contributed to the Shakespeare archives by its multitudinous allusions and references to the Bard, by dramatizations of his plays, by several radio shows dedicated to him, and several adaptations and re-workings of his plays. As radio is an essentially auditory medium without a visual dimension, it provides ample thought to ponder on how radio has re-defined Shakespeare for an essentially private sphere. Some of these re-workings present alternative versions of his plays replete with meta-theatrical elements challenging the centralized hegemony of intellectual elitism. Interestingly enough, in spite of its myriad manifestations of the Bard and his works, radio as a potential contributor to the Shakespeare myth has remained elusive of acknowledgements and critical attention perhaps due to its having a limited audience and also catering to the

domestic sphere of everyday functions. The question arises how does this popular, domestic, essentially private and mobile cultural medium contribute to the already existing body of Shakespearean scholarship. Has Shakespeare, the subject of multifarious academic debates and multilateral theatrical productions, been trivialized for the demands of this popular private space? How has Shakespeare been re-constructed and re-structured in these dramatizations, adaptations and re-workings? Do they form an alternative sub-cultural domain existing within the periphery of dominant hegemonic mainstream culture monopolized by the academic intelligentsia and their theorizations and transform Shakespeare into a democratic cultural artifact de-limiting him from a restricted intellectual space? Or do they construct a hegemonic structure of dominant and subservient discourse within this popular medium itself thereby perpetrating cultural hierarchies and problematizing the whole notion of popular culture? This paper delves into some of the dramatizations and radio adaptations of Shakespeare's plays as well as radio shows to focus on these issues.

At first, since it is a wholly aural medium, the radio adaptations have appealed increasingly to a huge section of the audience, replete with the potential to become "the theatre of the mind" as suggested by Greinhalgh. (Greinhalgh, 100) Shorter time is required for rehearsal and production and scripts are read out rather than learned. Radio adaptations of Shakespeare's plays are not bound in by the restrictions of time and space, cutting across specificities relating to race and age. Lacking the visual dimension, the aural faculties constitute the aesthetics of radio drama and offer a rich stimulus of auditory imagination. Moreover, this intensely domestic medium also offers the performers a huge challenge of demonstrating their vocal skills since radio plays propel the dramatic action by the interaction of the voices of the actors who exist for the listeners only by the presence of their voices. William Stanton observes, "The radio play writes us, its auditors just as it is written – not by the invisible author, but by the interaction of the actors who have already disappeared, and sounds that play across and within our memories." (Stanton, 105).

The first BBC radio broadcast of Shakespeare on 16th February, 1923 chose the third scene of the fourth act of *Julius Caesar* which documents the quarrel between Brutus and Cassius. This scene has an unmistakable flavour of domesticity within the field of war since it is

located within a tent and refers to essentially domestic activities of drinking and sleeping and records accusations, estrangement and reconciliation between both the Roman generals. The scene begins with Brutus and Cassius retreating inside a tent, initially accusing each other of betrayal and conversing about political intricacies. However, soon political discussions are replaced by extremely personal confessions and sharing of private grief consolidating the domestic intimacy of the scene. The entire scene bears a close association with the everyday activities of the family and can be seen as a parallel extension of the private sphere within the play. Brutus and Cassius do not remain formidable Roman generals fighting a war: rather they become an extended projection of the listeners who identify themselves and can relate their own conversations and confessions of love, loss and self deception with the quarrels and reconciliation of the two Romans. This adaptation of the scene consolidates listening to Shakespeare's plays as a family event to be enjoyed at the wireless hearth in comfort within a larger family structure where the private world of the listeners almost merge with the private world of the characters turning the listeners into witnesses of the intimate conversations of the characters of the play, to some extent even eavesdropping. The Bard is privatized and transformed into a personal companion within the domestic sphere and an affiliation between the drama and the individualistic home entertainment experience is established, thereby de-centering the distance between the stage and the auditorium and eliciting a personal response from the listeners where all the temporal and spatial barriers are transcended.

This is exactly where practitioners of high brow culture were offended. They felt radio, as a disseminator of culture should endeavour to eliticise and intellectualise the radio audience by their Shakespearean broadcasts. The name of Shakespeare, as the hallmark of intellectual elitism was seen as a symbol through which radio could interrogate its location on the subservient fringes of the cultural hegemonic structures. On this note, radio adaptations aimed to reach out to a wider audience and to aspire towards the status of a truly "national theatre." Desert Island Discs, BBC Radio Show in 1942 was designed as an imagined escape from the warships of war and fears of Nazi victory. Celebrities from various spheres of life were marooned on an island and could choose their favourite eight records, along with one luxury item besides *The Holy Bible* and *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. As John Drakakis

suggests, the programme was a “relic of English bourgeois capitalism”, and the “very creation of an island ‘full of noises, / sounds, and sweet airs’ invokes *The Tempest*.” (Drakakis, 24) Here, Shakespeare becomes the cultural equivalent of the Bible and represents the values for which Britain believed it was fighting the war: Shakespeare is transformed to a marker of high culture which consolidates a separate national identity and a centralized, authoritative and homogenized presence in the radio space. Similarly, in the Orson Welles radio production of *Julius Caesar* on 11th September, 1938, the narrator was H. V. Kaltenborn who was a news anchor having the privilege to be an eyewitness and also a representative voice for CBS. Moreover, he was also the journalist-in-charge, reporting the developments of the Munich Conference at that time. By a deft maneuver, Welles situated his radio adaptation of *Julius Caesar* by the Mercury Theatre in both the present of the Munich Conference and the past of Shakespeare’s Rome upholding the national identity. His stage adaptation of the same play in the previous year located the play’s events in fascist Italy while for his radio production he asked his listeners to think of the rise of fascist dictatorship in Europe, all the while trying to transform the popular into the classical. Shakespeare becomes the very manifestation of the national and by extension a marker of the highbrow intelligentsia.

With time, radio shows and adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays have come to represent an alternative sub-genre within the radio space. A deeper probe reveals that the same demarcations about highbrow and low culture reverberates within this alternate sub-genre as well. Shakespeare’s ghostly linguistic possession embodying English language in all diversities, *The Routes of English* (BBC Radio 4, 3rd August, 2004) discuss Shakespeare in the episode of *The Power of English* asserting his linguistic hegemony as well as absorbing him within the fabric of everyday life and speech, blurring both cultural registers and resulting in “the popularization of Shakespeare along with other exemplars of high art” (Greinhagh, 177) chiefly to raise up the audience and eliticize the mass. It is precisely due to this desire of upward cultural mobility that for the entire month of April, Shakespeare turns into the ‘house dramatist’ for BBC which results in the rescheduling of other programmes to ensure that aural Shakespeare monopolize the air waves. All primetime slots are dominated by broadcasts of Shakespeare’s plays, talk shows on the Bard, and interviews of actors, directors and academicians associated with him as radio celebrates ‘Bardic mythologies’ in this invisible theatre of the

mind. Shaw's *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets* was scheduled as a birthday week production on 23rd April, 1939 with a new prologue written and spoken by Shaw himself. BBC Radio 3 broadcast Kenneth Brannagh's four hour long adaptation of *Hamlet* on 26th April, 1992 where Hamlet was voiced by Brannagh, the ghost by John Gielgud, Polonius by Richard Briers and Claudius by Derek Jacobi. It is interesting to note that Brannagh directed a full length version of the movie in 1996 retaining the same cast. The increasing convergence of these radio programmes with the stage and renowned theatre personalities constructs the non-Shakespearean items as a subservient 'other' and thereby proclaims and asserts a clear predominance of the Shakespearean 'self' within the wireless hearth.

It is an established fact that the Bard's plays have been subjected to every possible theorizations on the screen and stage adaptations which bear the unmistakable stamp of intellectual elitism. To adapt itself to the prevalent hegemonic structures, their 'impoverished sibling' resorts to the same parameters. J.I.M Stewart, a writer of detective novels under the pseudonym Michael Innes re-created two psychoanalytical derivations from *Hamlet* which were performed on the radio, *The Hawk and the Handsaw* on 21st November, 1948 and *The Mysterious Affair at Elsinore: A New Investigation* on 26th June, 1949. The first one is set in Denmark forty years after Hamlet's death, and is precipitated by a performance of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. It begins with two characters on the stage: a doctor and a boy sitting in a chamber in Elsinore, listening to stretches of *Hamlet* being performed by English actors for the king Fortinbras and his personal chamberlain Horatio forty years after the events of the Shakespearean play. Horatio is working on his book *Life and Letters of Hamlet, the Dane* and busy editing the details. The performance of the 'play- within-a- play' of *Hamlet* is intermingled with discussion of issues of the original play. The doctor muses and plays with the listeners on the issue on whether Hamlet was mad and whether he really loved Ophelia. Gradually, it is revealed that young Hamlet had noticed his father's adulterous relation with Ophelia's mother and he was not murdered but killed by an adder sting. The doctor diagnoses Hamlet as suffering from childhood trauma and starts his treatment which remains incomplete as Hamlet is shipped off to England. *The Mysterious Affair at Elsinore: A New Investigation*, the sequel to the former play, picks up the thread from here and reveals frightening, disturbing and uncomfortable truths

about all the chief characters of the original play. Fortinbras is exposed as the real villain of the piece who had usurped the throne with the aid of Horatio, his accomplice and both are criticized for destroying evidence by moving the bodies. It is revealed that Ophelia was pregnant and killed herself and that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were the bastard sons of Claudius who was executed by the murderous duo. Horatio's *The Life and Letters of Hamlet, the Dane* proves a disaster on publication.

In both these derivative plays, Innes attempts to question in dramatic form the possibility whether Hamlet would have acted in a different manner if he had a notion about all the psychological speculations that awakened in people's minds about him. Innes encounters a rational and psychological interpretation of Hamlet's predicament which he has been subject to in modern times. He "rewrites *Hamlet* so as to focus the possibility and the danger of a Freudian view of people." (Holderness, 133) The creation of an elitist sub-genre within the corpus of radio drama, with the application of prevalent theoretical interpretations strives to uphold the superiority of everything Shakespearean within the medium of the radio. Therein lies the dichotomy between radio as a popular medium and Shakespeare: on the one hand radio invokes Shakespeare to de-limit itself from the fringes of dominant hegemonic structures yet it constructs the same paradigms of cultural differences within itself centering around the Shakespeare icon.

Bertolt Brecht's radio adaptation of *Hamlet* was broadcast on 31st of January, 1931, but no text or recording of the play have survived: only some scattered texts provide us a glimpse of how Brecht wanted to introduce 'epic' qualities into Shakespeare's 'epic' structure and set the play as a paradigm for his own dramatic theory. For this adaptation, Brecht consulted the Schlegel- Tieck translation, editing it, abbreviating it and occasionally inserting and incorporating his own views and suggestions, either in verse or prose. In this abbreviated form for the essentially domestic and private medium of the radio, Brecht borrows the conventional practices particular to this medium and begins the play almost like a news bulletin with the announcer doubling as the narrator. Thus the play begins with the announcer:

We begin with the presentation of the tragedy *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* by William Shakespeare, a jewel of the medieval drama, telling 'Of carnal,

bloody and unnatural acts/ Of accidental
 judgements, casual slaughters/ Of deaths
 put on by cunning and forced cause/ and
 in this upshot, purposes mistook/ fallen
 on the inventor's heads.' as it says in the
 play. (Morley, 76)

This announcer's voiceover functions almost as an introductory preface to Brecht's version of his condensed *Hamlet*. The play begins two months after the marriage of Gertrude and Claudius with the ghost of Hamlet's father informing his son about his heinous murder and urging his son to avenge it where Brecht merges three separate speeches from the fifth scene of the first act ending with "Leave her to heaven." The announcer introducing the broadcast and the chief players, as also preparing the audience for the events that were going to unfold before them armed Brecht to disrupt the conventional semblance of a seamless dramatic flow. Moreover, since the radio requires no costumes, it enabled him to use the announcer as the narrator as well who makes an intervention into the narrative and often takes upon himself almost a choric function for the progress of the play: specially when this radio adaptation omits most of the fourth act and shifts from the closet scene to the graveyard scene with the speaker intervening into the text and commenting on the ongoing action which had to be abbreviated, "At this point we interrupt the progress of the tragedy, showing Hamlet in the graveyard, on account of the extraordinary report which the queen gives of Ophelia's death." (78) Brecht's interpretation of the text led him to replace and edit many of Ophelia's songs in the fifth scene of the fourth act and reject the hellish bloodbath at the end as he considered it to be irrational and not suitable of being performed in the modern theatrical space without alterations. This is foregrounded right before the commencing of the play by the announcer, "The ending of the work, represents as it does a family mass murder, is, of course, no longer suitable for the modern theatre because of its complicated and preposterous content." (Symington, 97) and the play concludes with lines penned by Brecht himself.

In his *What is an Author?*, Foucault observes that the name of an author does not simply refer to a specific historical person who lived and wrote "more than an indication, a gesture, a finger pointed at someone: it is the equivalent of a description." (Foucault, 105) Rather, attaching an author's name to a text or product simply predisposes us to interpret it in

a certain manner, and to expect certain themes, ideas or formal traits. Here, Brecht is the author of this adaptation of *Hamlet* as much as Shakespeare which marks the emergence of a new creation. For orthodox traditionalists, contributing one's own inputs to a canonical text was sacrilegious, it almost contaminated the essence of the original text and therefore reviewers called this radio adaptation of *Hamlet* disrespectful and Brecht was compared to "an adolescent who, for the purposes of melodramatic amusement, runs around the garden lopping off flowers." (Symington, 98). For the purists, every adaptation of Shakespeare's plays must portray the text in unadulterated form: texts may be abbreviated due to time constraints, but on no account must they include incorporations as they tend to trivialize the Bard and his association with cultural elitism.

It is interesting to note the ambiguous space that Shakespeare inhabits in this intensely private domain of popular culture. Popular Culture, standing as a binary to elitist 'high culture' has always invoked, affirmed and even enhanced Shakespeare's 'high' cultural location and association as the high priest of intellectuality which could be manipulated to articulate the 'popular' nature of their productions. Shakespeare has gradually emerged as radio's favourite sign of high culture for the "Reciprocal irony" as highlighted by Douglas Lanier. (Lanier, 97) Attaching the Shakespeare trademark to an inappropriate popular object renders it self-consciously ironic and simultaneously attaching the 'lowbrow' to Shakespeare renders all highbrow snobbery into a self protective parody. Popular culture resists and embraces Shakespeare with equal zeal, converting the entire site into a fertile ground for the multiplicity of Shakespeare. It marks the dual existence of two cultural registers converging into a nascent cross-cultural space which projects the paradoxical relationship of the Bard and popular culture. On the one hand, Shakespeare is the 'other' of the popular, he represents everything which popular culture is not: elitist, artisanal, intellectual: and yet he remains the prevalent indispensable mythic open signifier of its desire for authority, legitimacy, hegemony and upward mobility in the cultural hierarchies. Radio is no exception to it and even within it, Shakespeare continues to rule airwaves as the indisputable yardstick of cultural achievement, a symbol of the inherited hegemonic prejudices of highbrow and low culture, thereby reinforcing the ambivalent relationship between them and again validating and reinforcing the emergence and existence of Multiple Shakespeares.

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