

Seminar #40
Shakespeare and/in Canada
Jennifer Drouin (University of Alabama)

Qualified participants:

Andrew Bretz (University of Guelph)
Peter Kuling (Wilfrid Laurier University)
Elizabeth Pentland (York University)

Abstracts:

Andrew Bretz (University of Guelph)
“An Effigy of Empire: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Canadian Imperial Nationalism During the Second Boer War”

On October 31, 1899, as a part of undergraduate University of Toronto Hallowe'en celebrations, a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at The Princess of Wales Theatre on King Street West was interrupted by shouts from the gallery calling for the death of “Oom” Paul Kruger, the leader of the South African Republic, who had recently declared war on the British Empire. Papers tossed from the balconies accompanied the shouts and eventually the students raised and mutilated an effigy of “Oom” Paul himself. The student demonstration was not, in itself, seen as objectionable or surprising – a similar interruption by Trinity students at the October 25th convocation was lauded in *The Globe* as “Patriotic”. What was unusual to the Toronto newspapers who spent the next week decrying the demonstration was the students' lack of decorum at a Shakespeare performance. This paper will look at the tension between, on the one hand, how paratextual signifiers such as costuming choices, lighting, and the theatre space itself constructed the Hallowe'en 1899 performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as an imperial text, yet on the other hand, how Shakespeare as “high culture” moderated the ways in which individuals could express imperial allegiances.

The events surrounding the Hallowe'en performance and disturbance provide an insight into Canada's uncomfortable relationship with its own imperial inheritance and ambitions. Nineteenth-century Anglo-American ideologies of empire and expansion developed alongside the rising popularity of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* following its successful 1840 London revival by Madame Vestris. For British audiences, the sanitized, desexualized, cherubic fairies of the play became associated over the course of the century with aboriginal peoples, whose innocence necessitated paternalistic colonization. In Canada, the play as performance was largely unpopular until the 1880s, when the Transcontinental Railroad and the Riel Rebellions established Canada's imperial dominance over the prairies. Indeed, in 1888, one of the first performances of the play in Canada explicitly aligned it with national identity by renaming Bottom “the Beaver” and surrounding him with a group of indigenous fairies played by children. This alignment of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Canadian and British imperial projects may serve to explain why the students chose a performance of that particular play to enact their

patriotic violence, yet the condemnation of the event by the daily newspapers troubles the relationship between imperial identity, partially predicated on a sanitized vision of Shakespeare, and the enacting of violence against the colonized other. For the newspapers, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as a representation of paternalistic British culture and identity, ultimately could not be reconciled with the bald violence of a jingoistic imperialism.

Jennifer Drouin (University of Alabama)

“*Shakespeare au/in Québec: Building a bilingual, open-access anthology and database in collaboration with the Internet Shakespeare Editions*”

Shakespeare au/in Québec (SQ) is a bilingual, open-source, critical anthology and database. The project's primary objective is to contribute to Canada's digital economy by: a) digitizing and publicly disseminating Québécois adaptations of Shakespeare (most of which are currently unpublished) and related cultural artifacts; and b) critically editing and annotating these manuscripts in order to illuminate the Shakespearean intertext and Québécois cultural context upon which they are based. Similar to the *Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project (CASP)*, *SQ* will consist of: a) TEI-compliant XML editions of the adaptations compiled to date; b) a searchable database of each play's theatre history and production details, as well as multimedia image, audio, and video files; c) a bibliography of secondary sources on these plays, including production reviews; d) academic essays providing critical analyses of the plays; e) interviews with playwrights; f) writings on the literary and political history of Québec; and g) information about non-adaptations (such as direct translations, innovative stage productions, and titular allusions) and cinematic adaptations. *SQ*'s TEI-compliant XML texts will provide greater data usability than *CASP*'s PDF texts in two ways. First, the adapted French text will be cross-referenced with the Shakespearean source text in English within on-click pop-up bubbles. The Shakespearean cross-references will enhance the reading experience for francophones who are less likely to be familiar with the Bard's plays in English and therefore less likely to recognize which passages within each play are adapted from Shakespeare and which derive solely from the author's creativity. Second, all of the historical and political allusions will be annotated in pop-ups, just as they would be in the footnotes of a traditional print version of a critical anthology. *SQ* will be hosted on the servers of the *Internet Shakespeare Editions (ISE)* at the University of Victoria. Although *SQ* will look like a separate, stand-alone website, its database will be tied into the *ISE*'s database in order to allow the data from each project to speak to each other and to produce richer search results. This paper will discuss how the integration of *SQ*'s database with *ISE*'s existing database will be mutually beneficial, notably by showing some of *SQ*'s database content and how it contributes specifically Canadian material to *ISE*'s existing database. The paper will also discuss some differences between *SQ*'s and *ISE*'s database structures and attempt to propose work-around solutions.

Peter Kuling (Wilfrid Laurier University)

“*Much Ado About Nothing* as a Canadian history play: Single Thread Theatre Company's immersive historical space production at Spadina House in Toronto”

“The year is 1918, and our boys, a well to do troop of Toronto’s elite, have just returned from the war to the Estate of Messina.” (Show Program)

First performed in 2011 and remounted in 2013, Single Thread Theatre Company’s production of *Much Ado About Nothing* at the Spadina House Museum and Gardens in Toronto engages audiences with Canadian historical and national content during an interactive guided tour through Shakespeare’s comedy. Shifting partial elements into Canadian contexts (setting it in Toronto after World War I) and leaving some Shakespearean elements intact (Italian names like Don Pedro, Don John, and Messina), Single Thread’s unique palimpsestic twist on adaptation challenges spectators to interact with various texts throughout the evening. This paper explores some of the heteronormative and class-based routing of the play through the historic Spadina House. I’ll be looking at the added characters of Jarvis (The Footman) and Strings (The Housekeeper) who walk audience members through two different narrative paths and interact with them as the newest members of the serving staff. Both head servants use 1920s Canadian English despite moving through rooms filled with early modern prose and poetry. Also, during each performance one audience member has been afforded the opportunity to pay extra for an individual guided tour through the play with one of the maids. Spectators often see and hear other scenes happening in tandem across hallways and the grounds of the historical home. The play also imposes elements of Canadian literary and historical memory that culminate with Claudio, assisted by Verges and other characters from the play, reciting John McCrea’s “In Flanders Fields” lit only by torchlight on the house grounds. McCrea’s poem appears just before the wedding scene when Claudio believes Hero, whose name evokes the lost soldiers of WW1, to be dead. Audience members at the performance I attended spoke along with the actors in this performance moment of national loss. This pastoral moment of remembrance on the historic grounds of a home in Canada’s most densely populated cities creates a palimpsestic intertextual experience for audiences interested in Shakespearean adaptation. My paper will explore some of the ways spectators confront intertexts focused on language, gender, sexuality, memory, and nationalism in this multilayered production of a Shakespearean comedy set within the tragic context of Canadian history.

Elizabeth Pentland (York University)

“Queering the Frame: Chris Abraham’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”

This paper looks at the narratives that framed director Chris Abraham’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for Canada’s Stratford Festival in 2014. The 2014 Stratford season coincided with Toronto’s hosting of the WorldPride 2014 celebrations at the end of June. By accident or by design, the Stratford Festival last season offered several plays with explicitly queer content, including *Christina: the Girl King* by the Quebecois playwright Michel Marc Bouchard, and Chris Abraham’s *Dream*, which is performed by the guests at a garden party as a wedding gift for a gay couple. This framing device allows Abraham to “queer” the play itself in some significant ways: Titania is played by a beefy actor in drag, for example, and Lysander is played by a woman as a woman. The

production thus works to address (and, in Abraham's words, to "celebrate") in a timely way the contemporary "struggle for equal rights for same-sex couples" and "its transformative power." But if Abraham identifies gay marriage as a "new normal" in Canadian culture, he presents it in his *Dream* as part of his larger vision of a community that is committed to recognizing and embracing many kinds of diversity. At the same time, the framing narrative harnesses in a fresh way the meta-theatrical energies of Shakespeare's play-within-the-play, inviting audiences to reflect on their critical and affective responses to a community production that, like the course of true love, does not always "run smooth."