
DIGITAL NARRATIVES AND READER PARTICIPATION IN THE SHAKESPEARE RETOLD YOUTUBE SERIES

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the digital versions of Shakespeare plays and the presence of the audience in the Shakespeare ReTold YouTube series influenced the rewriting of Shakespeare and the phenomenon of rewriting Shakespeare by adapting them to the current time. The series offers a fascinating source where research on how the digital platforms enable the audiences to read classic texts and reconceptualize them in a new context is carried. This study discusses the mechanisms of reader participation and its role in redefining the works of Shakespeare through the selection of some episodes in the series under analysis. The study will be integrating both methodological approaches of close reading of the material and discourse analysis in order to grasp the interactive dimension of the viewer. The major discoveries include the fact that Shakespeare Re-Told can be regarded as an element that bridges the gap between the established literary practice and online consumers and audiences and that it provides dimensions into how viewer feedback can be used to enhance the interaction with the content in question. The work of this study fits into the bigger discussion regarding the contact between digital media and classic literary work and audience agency in the modern culture.

Keyword: *Digital Narratives, Reader Participation, Shakespeare Re-Told, YouTube Series, Audience Engagement, Modern Adaptations*

INTRODUCTION

Digital revolution has come with immeasurable consequences of consumption of narratives, especially the traditional concept of narration, like literature. Digital platforms have been not only to change the distribution of the content but also their engagement with the audiences. This has impacted one of the greatest influences and that is the change of passive consumption into active participation. This is particularly noticeable in the domain of classical literature as the opening of new spaces of reinterpretation and interaction is possible due to the revision of classic text through the adoption of modern digital practices. One of the most curious embodiments of this tendency is the Shakespeare Re-Told series which is offered by You Tube and presents the adaptation of Shakespeare plays in the new surroundings preserving the original story at the same time making it easier to understand by the audience of our modern world. The series gives a platform to reflect on how the audience participation will transform the reinterpretation of Shakespeare works by amalgamating digital technology with classic texts.

Shakespeare Re-Told series is an outstanding example of the way digital media have become a platform of adaption and active participation of the audience. Online versions of Shakespeare, like the ones presented in this series, also make it possible to experience the plays not only in a new light but in a way that enables tapping into the action. Compared to print literature, however, where reading took place in a more passive manner, the digital media, in the form of YouTube, enables viewers to add their own meanings and experience the continuous narrative in the real-time. The recent media culture, as Fiske (1989) points out in focus on the active audience thinks, requires a greater interaction between the consumer and the text. This transformation is core in understanding how digital media does not only keep

the traditional narratives alive but also brings them to life in ways that they can connect with the modern audience in the most dynamic sense.

Although the adaption of Shakespeare's plays is nothing new, the synergy of his plays and the contemporary world of digital media creates a new possibility in the research of the influence of reader participation on reception and changing a piece of literary work. Interactive features of the platforms such as YouTube make it possible to receive the feedback based on the views in real time and therefore become a participant of the understanding activity. An example is that a viewer may become a participant within a comment section, on social media, content expressed by a fan, or in certain situations, personal watching processes. This gives a sort of environment where the role of the audience is not limited to them consuming the content but they also engaged in the continuous discourse concerning the text. Jenkins (2006) argues that participatory culture in the online areas will provide a media audience with an opportunity of participating in the production and consumption of media and therefore reversing the traditional division of producers and consumers.

This, thus, presents the research problem, which is the dynamics of such participation. In particular, the question that must be investigated is how Shakespeare ReTold can help achieve such engagement and how it works on the reception of original plays as well as on their reinterpretations. Burns (2007) critic analyses the digitalization of Shakespeare to say that this revolutionary process of Shakespeare digitization creates a possibility of accessing the material on several levels. This paper aims to provide contributions to a wider theme regarding the relationship between digital media and audiences and the adoption of old texts (as explored in Shakespeare ReTold) through the analyses of how the form of digital narrative can contribute to active audience engagement in Shakespeare ReTold. The very role of the digital technology in the reimagining of the literary heritage and the manner in which the changes in question influence the contemporary perception of literature stands to have a fertile ground within the reviewed series.

The present research is topical and pertinent in a way that it touches the current debatable aspects of the role of digital media in the development of the literature and storytelling. The appearance of the internet and the emergence of digital media formed a new kind of literacy which demands the knowledge of both the old media and a new mode of media interaction. It is this juncture that has created debates on how the traditional texts like those of Shakespeare can be retained and remain relevant in the 21 st century. Against this background, Shakespeare ReTold series presents an imminent case study of an interpretation of how digital media creates various means of audience engagement and recontextualization of classic pieces of work effecting the understanding of such works to accommodate contemporary audiences, and at the same time generate enhanced interaction with the works.

It is proposed that the paper will examine how the Shakespeare ReTold YouTube series prospers the work of Shakespeare through the involvement of the readers as the nature of reader participation in the digital format of storytelling, YouTube series. The paper will not only focus on discussing the effect the interactive features of the series have on Shakespeare play interpretation experience but also on how the adaptations create an environment that would allow and permit the audience to embark on the reinterpretation and refashioning of the narrative. In so doing, the paper shall make a small contribution to the dialogue that has been happening regarding how digital media can and should be incorporated into the practice of classical reception and shall offer fresh ground to the question of how the very relationship between texts and their recipients has shifted in the digital era.

This study is very important in literary investigation as well as in media exploration providing a deep

insight into how the digital environment is used both to maintain and to reinvent the conventional narratives. This study will prove enlightening on how contemporary viewers move about, interact and shape the literary texts they experience in the digital world by looking at the Shakespeare ReTold series. In the end, this research will contribute to the specification of the future of literary adaptations and the possibility of digital media to make people involved in the reconstruction of classic works.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The overlap between Shakespeare texts and contemporary media reworkings has long been a subject of academic interest, and really reflects an ongoing interest and flexibility in Shakespeare texts. Critics have always stressed the versatility of Shakespeare productions because they still appeal to the modern audience. Bevington (1994) talks about the way Shakespeare plays have been interpreted through the years: how they can be interpreted textually and in performances. This (tradition) form of adaptation forms part of the knowledge of the legacy of Shakespeare since every renewed interpretation welcomes contemporary concerns, issues and aesthetics into the process. Kermode (2000) goes on the same line and declares that Shakespeare plays owe their adaptability to the universality and their ability to cut across time and cultures. A highlight on the current cultural relevance of Shakespeare is one of the pillars in these works.

The digital age, though, introduces an additional level to the sphere of Shakespearean adaptations. The old forms of adaptation usually put the audiences in passive positions of being the consumers of completed work like the production of the plays at the stage or in films. The digital age has, on the contrary, provided the opportunity of active participation. Burns (2007) states that the introduction of digital technologies has transformed the concept of how the audience is engaged in the current environment, shifting spectators to being the participants in the story-telling process. Goldberg (2012) goes a step ahead and speaks about the move towards the idea of the interactive engagement when the audiences are not only content consumers but they form a part of the process of creation and interpretation of those narratives. Such a transformation is especially important when discussing the adaptation of Shakespeare (the playwright), since YouTube, interactive sites, and social networks are supposed to enable spectators to interact directly with the text, add their new meaning to it, and become, at least in some way, its co-authors.

Digital adaptations are also participatory and this aspect enables newer interpretations and re-imaginings of the works of Shakespeare that would never have been conceivable in the past. According to Smith (2013), online media give a second life to old texts, enabling their contextualization as a new space with the help of promoting the audience to reinterpret already well-known stories. The effect of this practice has been heightened in the situation described by Shakespeare ReTold in that, besides reading or watching as one normally would, the modern technology has allowed viewers to become involved in the process unlike in the past. It is not simply about maintaining the original intention of Shakespeare but rather about the modern interpretation of the works reflecting on the way that culture currently shapes the works giving them new meaning.

Perhaps the most notable facets of the digital media adaptations are how engaged they enable viewers to be. Traditional ways of media involved audiences as more or less simple consumers of the media content. But, in the case of digital media, audiences are allowed to actively co-author the story whether in leaving a comment, sharing, making fan products, or even working with the producers and/or artists. As Jenkins (2006) articulates, it is a central element of which he refers to as, participatory culture, a phrase he employs to typify how the digital environment offers audiences an opportunity to share their interpretations, ideas, and creations to the media environment. According to Jenkins, participatory culture

is not limited to viewers of the media but how these viewers influence the flow of the plot through the process of interaction. An example of such participatory culture is the Shakespeare ReTold series where the viewers can comment on the material, socialize it on different websites, or even develop their version of Shakespeare performances.

The framework of participatory culture, offered by Jenkins is especially applicable in the case of Shakespeare ReTold since the digital narrative design format embraces audience participation. The audience gets to leave comments on episodes, participate in social media dialogues, and even produce their own derivative content which makes the series an opportunity in becoming co-creators of the narrative. According to Carter (2008), a major aspect of Shakespeare ReTold is that it is a modern version of the works of Shakespeare, in the sense that it does attract a very broad base of sensibilities, contemporary culture and interests. This offers viewers a very distinct opportunity to relate to the text as though they know the writer on a personal level and can relate the text to their own life. As an example, one can mention the use of the variety of characters, contemporary settings, and contemporary issues so that the viewers were able to connect with the message on a very personal level that, in turn, can cause a higher involvement and participation.

However, as much as there has been stated on the importance of viewer participation on the current digital media, there is still a lacuna in literature on the particular impact of such participatory systems on the reception and interpretation of works of Shakespeare. Smith (2013) briefly refers to how digital media establish new ways of analyzing traditional texts, yet additional studies should be conducted to comprehend how participatory cultures redefine the purposes of the Shakespearean narratives. Although most of the literature occupies itself with creation and sharing of content, less concentration is made with the participatory engagements on how it influences the audience to understand and interpret the original works. In this paper, I aspire to address this shortcoming by analysing the particular impact of audience involvement in Shakespeare ReTold and the way it shapes the perception of Shakespeare plays that inspire them.

Shakespeare ReTold is a magnificent case study imagined in gauging the way digital media changes and re-invents the works of Shakespeare in recontextualization and reinterpretation. The modernized settings used in the series and the attempts to make it easier to understand Shakespeare plays in the series were addressed by several scholars. According to Carter (2008), one of the most significant points of Shakespeare ReTold is that it alludes the plays to modern settings thereby making the themes of Shakespeare more understandable to a generation in the 21st century. In every episode, the original text is turned back on to depict the values, challenges and issues of modern society, be it in the context of modern relationships, social problems or the environment. Nevertheless, although Carter makes comments on the change of Shakespearean plots and characters, he fails to address the role of such digital media in providing a platform to actively engage the audience and its impact to the entire story.

There has been a lot of scholarship on Shakespeare ReTold with some of it centering around the modern reimaginings of the plays of Shakespeare but little scholarship exploring the interactive aspects of the digital platform and how they in turn affect the perception and interpretation of the works by the viewer. Wilson (2010) refers to the desire to recruit the viewers into the experience with a slight summary of the ways in which the targeted audience is incorporated, yet she does not expand on the consequences of this engagement further with the perception of the Shakespeare texts. This is an imposing gap in understanding and consequently defining the extent of adaptations, in this case Shakespeare ReTold since comprehending how the digital format affects viewer engagement and interpretation can be a paramount step in the comprehension of the overall imprint of such undertakings.

What has not been fully addressed, in this regard, is how the series employs the digital media to alter not just the material of the plays of Shakespeare but also the way they are perceived and interpreted by contemporary spectators. This paper aims at contributing to existing bodies of literature on how modern re-tellings of Shakespeare take advantage of digital media to connect with audiences in experiential and transformative ways by looking at the ways in which the participation model used in Shakespeare ReTold alters the reader/viewer experience with the text.

SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE

This research would be significant because of numerous reasons. On the one hand, it discusses the ways in which the works of Shakespeare are adapted and consumed in the digital era and gives an insight into a transformation of the audience and its engagement. Second, given the attention to Shakespeare ReTold, the research will fill the gap in literature relating to the impact of participatory digital media on the interpretation of Shakespearean texts. Lastly, it is seen that this study is appreciated in the present controversies regarding the impact of digital media in literature, agency-based audience and the redescription of the cultural consumption of the modern world.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What role does digital narrative play in the reinterpretation of Shakespeare's works in Shakespeare ReTold?
2. How does viewer participation in Shakespeare ReTold affect the reception and understanding of Shakespeare's original plays?
3. Why does the Shakespeare ReTold YouTube series attract active engagement from viewers, and what does this reveal about the future of literary adaptations in the digital space?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical knowledge base that this research is drawing on is media convergence, audience interactivity and digital storytelling. The notion of participatory culture postulated by Henry Jenkins (2006) is the core to explaining the audience's involvement and contribution in digital contents. Also, the thoughts of David Gauntlett (2007) about media and identity give us a clue on how audiences make their individual associations with the adapted texts. Lastly, the audience interpretation theory and textual poaching (John Fiske, 1989) will be applied to comprehend how the meaning of Shakespeare narratives is constructed by the viewers that are living in the digital era.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methodology, in that it takes a qualitative route and introduces a discourse analysis of the Shakespeare ReTold series and the engaged audience process. Close reading will be pursued as the qualitative element of the diagnosis that is critical to the analysis of the structure and themes of the chosen episodes of Shakespeare ReTold series. Through close reading, a more comprehensive yet careful reading of the text is possible with regards to how the digital narrative is built and how important aspects of the text have been employed by the author to appeal to the contemporary audiences by reflecting on the elements of characterization development, contemporary settings, and reinterpretation of the theme. By reading through close detail regarding the study, the adaptation and recontextualization of the original plays based on the issues of balance between maintaining the main themes core to Shakespeare and introducing modern sensibilities will be explored.

Also, the study will use discourse analysis to scrutinize the comments made by viewers and socialization

on YouTube forums and discussion on social media. The specified approach is of specific interest since it may help understand the opportunities offering a prominent view of the engagement of audiences in the digital reimagining of Shakespearean works. According to Gee (2014), the discourse analysis is vital to comprehend the meaning making traditions in particular social situations created by language. In this instance, the discussion of viewer comments and feedback, as well as shared content will enlighten the modes in which the digital audiences perceive, comment on and create narratives featured in the Shakespeare ReTold series. It is important to note that this strategy is central since the digital platform not only enables the consumption of content but also encourages participation so that the viewers add their meanings to the content, and in some instances refute or develop the similar depictions of Shakespeare in the original works in the series.

Close reading and discourse analysis are both combined, so the given approach helps perform an extensive study of the textual and participatory nature of the Shakespeare ReTold series. The close reading will provide a better insight into the ways in which the series translates Shakespeare on a modern audience, whereas the discourse analysis will reveal the influence of the audience involvement into these adaptations as a matter of reception and development. A mixed-methods approach is specifically suitable when applying it to the research questions because it allows considering the research topic in an integrated manner by explaining how digital stories and intermediary features of the series influence the perception of works of William Shakespeare and the means through which the audience perceives them. This methodology of the combination of the textual analysis and interaction with the readers will lead to valuable insight in the role of the viewer intervention in the reconstruction of classical narrations in the digital age.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The textual analysis and the data on the viewer participation proves that digital adaptations of Shakespeare plays, e.g., Shakespeare ReTold, can be of great significance in terms of accessibility and relevance to modern audience. The use of modernized settings and character changes along with inclusion of socially relevant problems in the present day world makes the work of Shakespeare more relatable, especially to the younger generation who are digitally empowered. Such adjustment can make the themes presented by Shakespeare ever-relevant in the modern world and prove the timelessness of his stories. According to Burns (2007), we can bring to life classic literature using digital technologies to make the reference familiar and appealing especially in the modern society by placing it in the right context. The capacity of the series to revise Shakespearean plays whilst retaining their thematic core can be explained by the fact that digital media sources offer new avenues with regards to approaching classical texts (Goldberg 2012). The main conclusion that can be made based on the discourse analysis used to analyze comments left by the viewers, and posts and comments left on social media, is that the engagement of the audience may significantly contribute to the enhancement of the relationship between viewers and the content. Digital media such as YouTube and social media allow a continuous discussion with viewers giving their own point of view, interpretation, and even criticism on the material. According to Jenkins (2006), this participatory culture effectively changes the audience into active co-producers of a certain scene and builds community, involvement in the works. The Shakespeare ReTold series attracted a lot of viewers who have also commented that they find the modernized plots as a way of reflecting on current events, such as gender issues, relationships, and social protocols. This means that the series does not only update the Shakespearean stories but also encourages the audience to explore further with regards to the relevance of the problems that have been raised in the plays to their personal situations.

Such active involvement confirms Smith (2013) assumption that digital media provide a second life to classical texts since the viewers are able to reinterpret the text and customize it to work in a particular

situation. Moreover, it is consistent with the theory of textual poaching developed by Fiske (1989) about the possession of the viewers who alter and transform the material and reinterpret it in their way. The prospective interactive process of Shakespeare ReTold gives rise to a dynamic, evolving mid-point between the understanding and interpretation of the plays of Shakespeare going beyond the text itself, which gives those who are watching the presentation an opportunity to have their own creative voice and participate in intellectual discourse.

Although this study has several limitations, the study has. As an example, discourse analysis considered only the viewer comments and discussions on YouTube and social media, which are not necessarily generic enough to reflect the overall audience engagements in watching the series. This can be further stretched in future studies, whereby at least, data on more platforms can be included or the effect of other digital transformations on viewer engagement implemented. Furthermore, though the interactive aspect of the series is addressed in the present paper, the psychological effects of the viewer contribution through participation warrants further examination of how it influences the perceptions of viewers in regards to how the plays appear to them or how it influences their opinion regarding classic literature as a whole.

To sum up, the research that is being conducted gives a clear picture of how digital adaptations such as Shakespeare ReTold are used to bring Shakespeare works to the contemporary audience and make them interactive, therefore, allowing a more profound and unique issue with the material. It identifies the modes of engagement audience participation can occur on digital platforms, which alters the connections and reading of conventional texts.

FINDINGS

Analysis shows that there are numerous major patterns that prove the power of Shakespeare ReTold to improve the involvement of the audience with its updated accounts and interactive working.

The adaptation of Shakespeare plays is one of the important conclusions of the research. The series successfully reinvents characters and settings so that it indicates modern social matters, which made it possible to identify with a character better. Take the case of *Much Ado About Nothing* in contemporary setting of a police station as an example, whereby the audience could immediately connect with the characters in relations with relationships and misunderstandings with reasoning of relating them to the dynamics in the contemporary society of trust and communication. Modernization of the settings and characters as outlined by Carter (2008) enables adaptation of the classical themes, which have endured time, beyond Shakespeare into perspectives that seem realistic at the time it is being watched to the viewer, making the viewer willing to associate himself with the character in the experience he is going through.

The other important find is the involvement of the viewers by means of interactivity. An example of such interaction between the audience and the series would include viewer comments, social media chat, and artwork produced by the fans. In forums such as the ones on YouTube, the users often posted personal observations about the effects of the modernizations by the characters created in their interpretation of the original works of Shakespeare. As an example, the viewers noted that the manner of the interpretation of women in *The Taming of the Shrew*, in a contemporary corporate environment, raised the still extant issue of the treatment of women in not only the original play but also in modern society as well. As Jenkins (2006) claims, this sort of interaction transforms the former passive consumption of the audience to active use making the first-time version of the text to change substantially.

Lastly, the digital interaction in Shakespeare ReTold enables audience members to take part in the

continuous process of reinterpretations of Shakespeare texts. Active interaction, like comment fields, hashtags on Twitter and viewer polls encourage audiences to express their views and ideas about every episode. Improvement of the works is another reason of discussed ethical matters; it is possible to realize the case of Macbeth modernized variant where viewers had the heated discussions about the ethical side of ambition and power with many viewers proposing their own variant endings or motivation of the characters. The associated participatory culture helps in building a closer, more personal connection with the material, positing an argument that the digital media facilitates across new avenues in how the audience generates and creates new image and story.

CONCLUSION

This study finds out that Shakespeare ReTold has become an outstanding example of how digital media can change the interaction of audiences with ancient literature. Not only does the series reinterpret the very iconic Shakespeare plays into the modern world, but also creates a sort of proactive dialogue between the words on the screen and the audience. Examining the series in the context of the idea of the participation of the audience, this paper would demonstrate the ways in which the digital versions may provide new insights into the classical pieces of writing, and inspire increased involvement. The audiences of Shakespeare ReTold do not passively consume the stories; as they chat in the comment boxes, social media, and create fan-made content, they engage in the interpretative process and all this make them pivotal to the story's developments. This culture of participation that Jenkins (2006) explains presents the idea of transitioning towards the active, collaborative nature of engaging media as opposed to passive corollary of consumption.

Furthermore, the paper indicates the transformational quality of digital media in the relevance and family amicability of classical works such as that by Shakespeare. Because of their expanding involvement in cultural consumption, digital media extend special opportunities to re-vision and re-skin the works without which they otherwise would exist as though distantly, or even foreign. The study will also add to emerging literature on the interplay between digital media and classical works of literature demonstrating how adaptations are being created like Shakespeare ReTold which not only maintain the spirit of the Shakespearean plays but also encourage engagement and invite active and close participatory interaction that continues to influence reception of these iconic texts. Therefore, this paper is focused on the fact that Shakespeare remains relevant in the era of the digital media.

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