

Challenging Imperial Hegemony: The Sam Wanamaker Production of Richard II

Yashita Kandhari

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The Sam Wanamaker Production Company put on a revolutionary production of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, with a cast composed entirely of women of color, at the Globe Theater in London this year. This performance is truly subversive as it resists imperial cultural hegemony and hierarchies of power. Shakespeare is a cornerstone of British literary tradition and his plays continue to be taught and highly regarded across countries that were a part of the erstwhile British Empire. Scholars have shed light on how British imperialism is not only political but also cultural.¹ The British presented their own literature, education, and ways of knowing as being superior and above those that were accessible to the people they colonized. The fact that women of color would one day perform Shakespeare was unimaginable, let alone in the Globe Theater where his plays were originally performed by a cast composed entirely of white men.² This production of *Richard II* shows us how performance can be used as an act of protest and that through performance, we can critique existing hierarchies of power and learn how to act out a better future.

Understanding the space that Shakespeare occupies in the countries of the past Empire is crucial to understanding the significance of the Sam Wanamaker performance. As part of their imperial project, the British replaced the traditional educational systems of the countries in the Empire with their own systems of education. Educational institutions were one of the primary

1. Jyotsna Singh. "Different Shakespeares: The Bard in Colonial/Postcolonial India." *Theatre Journal* 41, no. 4 (1989), 447. doi:10.2307/3208007.

2. *Richard II, in Shakespeare in Perspective, Season 1, Episode 2*. Directed by Barbara Derkow. BBC Worldwide.
<http://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1902519811?accountid=10427>.

ways through which the British asserted their dominance. Their literature, culture, and ways of knowing were presented as being superior. The closer people were to English educational and cultural practices, the higher they were able to rise in society. This led to the glorification of English literature and culture, the legacy of which is felt across the previous colonies even today.

Shakespeare continues to be studied and idolized in countries that were a part of British Empire: “Shakespeare has been relentlessly naturalized in all these countries as a universal, timeless, and non-canonical genius...”³ His plays are translated into many different languages, adapted for a number of stage performances, and are often re-imagined and re-interpreted by people who write and produce literature, theater and cinema inspired by the plot of his plays. Scholars assert that Shakespeare belongs to everyone, because he has been embraced by people in so many different countries who are able to relate to and interpret his plays across different locations and in different cultural contexts.⁴ This idea of Shakespeare belonging to everyone stems from the fact that he has been taught for generations in countries across the Empire.

Before the Sam Wanamaker performance of *Richard II*, there was a talk hosted for audience members about the significance of the production. Cast members provided the audience with the historical context to explain why and how women of color were performing Shakespeare. They explained how Shakespeare continues to be taught and revered in countries

3. James C. Bulman, ed. *Shakespeare, Theory and Performance*. Florence: Routledge, 1995, 117.

4. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin eds. *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*. London: Routledge, 2003, 4.

that were a part of the British Empire. Shakespeare now belongs to their cultural traditions as well, and in enacting his characters on stage the actors make that clear.

The universality of Shakespeare's plays can be explained by the fact that the script of the play does not determine its meaning, the meaning of a play depends on the adaptation of the text by a cast as well as the audience's interpretation. The same play can be interpreted and performed in several different ways that are subject to location, time, space, and cultural and social context.⁵ Performance theory conceives of and understands performance as a complex network of signs open to cultural interpretation.⁶ The bodies performing different roles create new meanings of the characters and the storylines they perform. The body can be seen "as a natural symbol, a site of circulating, intersecting, clashing meanings."⁷ The body of the actor is extremely important in performance and performance studies because it acts as a locus which the actor uses to create meaning. The body "establishes person," and in doing so establishes markers of race, class, and gender that affect the way that the audience views the performance.⁸ Different bodies, or different actors playing the same role can create varied meanings of the same character with the same script. The body is a "*site*, a point of transaction and intersection of discourses,"

5. Wang, I-Chun. "Intermedial representations in Asian Macbeth's." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13, no. 3 (2011). *Literature Resource Center* (accessed April 3, 2019). <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A268403892/LitRC?u=nclivedc&sid=LitRC&xid=9c2a1ed3>

6. Bulman, 9.

7. Bulman, 33

8. Bulman, 37.

meaning that through their body, actors are able to perform and act out the narrative of the play.⁹ The body represents the actor themselves and also provides the actor with the tool to represent the character they are performing. In a woman of color performing Shakespeare therefore, she represents herself on stage and also embodies a character that was originally written to be for the body of a white British male, one that was considered to be superior to her own.

Performance theory can be applied in understanding contemporary productions of Shakespeare in the postcolonial space. It is clear that in adaptations of plays, the body of the actor who is chosen to perform is important. The body of the actor changes the possible meaning and interpretations of the text or the play. “Performance, as Clifford Geertz recognizes, is a way of interpreting ourselves to ourselves; performance of the “classics” necessarily threatens to become an act of transgression, in which the cultural tradition embodied by the text is forced to tell a new story.”¹⁰ Thus, different cultural adaptations of Shakespeare represent different interpretations of his text and signify a change in imperial power dynamics.¹¹ Each adaptation of a play into a performance creates new meanings and can be interpreted in different ways. The Sam Wanamaker production of *Richard II* creates new meanings out of it and signifies a change in imperial power dynamics as it is a way for the women to claim Shakespeare as their own and create new meanings of his work.

9. Bulman, 122

10. Bulman, 26

11. I-Chun Wang. “Intermedial representations in Asian *Macbeth*’s.” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13, no. 3 (2011). *Literature Resource Center*. Accessed April 3, 2019.
<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A268403892/LitRC?u=nclivedc&sid=LitRC&xid=9c2a1ed3>

Productions of Shakespeare are put up in countries across the world, so while having a cast of people of color performing Shakespeare is something that is not new, the fact that the cast is women of color is revolutionary. Women performing male characters serves to deconstruct the idea of an authentic identity. Another example of a female Richard II is in Deborah Warner's production of Richard II where she cast Fiona Shaw, a female identifying actor, as Richard II. This decision was controversial and received a lot of antagonism from critics who claimed that the role of Richard II could not be played by a woman. According to Shaw and Warner, however, Shakespeare's work is "not about the nature of gender, it's about the nature of being."¹² Warner felt that Fiona Shaw was the best actor for the role, the fact that she identified as a woman did not matter. This idea connects to Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender. Her theory states that gender is not something that is inherent or essential but is socially constructed and performed. This means that gender is a set of patterns of behavior that are repeatedly performed and passed down over generations.¹³ "Because gender is a process that is materialized on and through the body, it is possible to unmake it and expose the ways in which it works to create cultural fictions of identity."¹⁴ This is proven by a woman performing the role of a man: she is able to perform masculinity and destroy the notion that it is something authentic and essential. This shows us how the patriarchy is arbitrarily and socially constructed, the differences in power between men and women are not because of inherent or essential

12.Klett, 176.

13.Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge Classics. New York: Routledge, 2006: 189. Accessed April 29, 2019. doi:10.4324/9780203824979.

14.Klett, 179.

differences. Women of color performing the role of men deconstruct patriarchal power dynamics even further as white masculinity is least accessible to them. They are at the bottom of the social hierarchy being even below men of color.

A woman performing the role of Richard II also deconstructs the idea of kingship. Kingship is one of the main themes of the play, and the plot makes it evident that the of the Sam Wanamaker production company was very intentional in choosing to perform Richard II out of other plays Shakespeare has written. The play highlights the qualities a person needs to be a good king and centers around the fall of Richard II from the throne.¹⁵ The fall of the King is symbolic of the fall of the British empire and their decline in power. The British Empire, which once seemed strong and infallible, fell apart. The British King was supposed to be divinely ordained with the right to rule. The King was regarded as being superior and as possessing inherent qualities which made him a fit ruler. Adjoa Andoh, a black woman, disrupts imperial power hierarchies in her role as Richard II in the Sam Wanamaker production. Acknowledging the history of slavery in the West, having a black woman occupy a position of supreme power is extremely subversive.

The Sam Wanamaker production reflects the evolution of British identity over time and has been described as a “post Empire reflection on what it means to be British.”¹⁶ One of the legacies of its massive British Empire is the migration of a large number of people from the

15. William Shakespeare. *King Richard II*. Dover Thrift Editions. Dover Publications, 2015. 2015. Accessed April 29, 2019. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/davidson/detail.action?docID=4523324#>

16. “Richard II.” *Playbill*. Accessed April 24. <http://www.playbill.com/production/richard-ii-shakespeares-globe-sam-wanamaker-playhouse-2018-2019>

countries they colonized. These migrants have now lived in Britain for several generations. The definition of what it means to be British has changed over time to encompass the changing nature of its people. A cast of women of color performing a Shakespeare play represents this new identity as Shakespeare can be understood to be emblematic of Britishness. The play is performed at the Globe Theater, which is where Shakespeare's plays were originally performed. During those days, the cast was composed entirely of white men and to have a cast composed entirely of women of color truly reflects the evolution of British identity over time. The costumes and the music used in the play are inspired by the traditional music and clothing from their native countries, which adds to the uniqueness of the production. The body of the actors signifies the "person who both represents and is represented;" the bodies of the women who act in this play represents their postcolonial identity and the roles they perform represent characters that are a part of the literary canon of the British which was regarded as being superior.¹⁷ By performing Shakespeare, the women they are claiming the British culture as their own. By wearing traditional costumes and by including traditional music from their cultures in the soundtrack, they modify the play to represent their new postcolonial identity. This identity is the product of migration, decolonization, and globalization¹⁸ and is a blend of native cultures and the cultural influence of the British.

This production reminds us that "theatrical performance can reflect but it can also refract; it has the potential to re-inscribe and enforce dominant social paradigms, and to challenge and

17. Bulman, 45

18.. Michael Billington. "Richard II review-women of color's blazing show reflects our current chaos." *The Guardian*, March 7, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/mar/07/richard-ii-review-lynette-linton-adjoa-andoh-sam-wanamaker-playhouse>

reimagine those paradigms.”¹⁹ This performance of Richard II has an extremely powerful affect. Through their performance, these women represent a new future with changed power dynamics and new relationships of power. If women of color can claim an icon that belonged to the same people who colonized and exploited their people and their countries, then it is possible for us to rise against currently existing power structures. Their performance is extremely potent: by performing these new power hierarchies, the women are creating them and bringing them into existence.

19. Klett, 194.

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