

Research on the Way Shakespeare Influenced Modern Theater—Taking the Orphan of Zhao by James Fenton as an Example

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ABSTRACT

As an important part of the world's drama culture, Shakespeare's plays have a huge and far-reaching impact on the development of the drama of all countries. It became an important link of culture and communication in the world and a source of inspiration for drama creation. By seeing or reading modern plays, we can easily figure out lots of elements that will remind us of one or some of Shakespeare's works. The Orphan of Zhao is an ancient Chinese play created in the Ming dynasty about a story that happened in about 591BC, which is also the first introduced and most famous play in the western world. This paper focused on the drama the Orphan of Zhao created by James Fenton for RSC in 2012 and the musical adaptation of it by the Chinese director Xu Jun to analyze the Shakespearean elements in it, to explore the profound influence of Shakespeare's works on modern and contemporary theatrical works and dramatic adaptations. The paper mainly talked about the female friendships and the songs in both Shakespeares and Fenton's adaptation and also the work of these two elements in the play's construction, story's development and the theatrical stage representation.

Keywords: Shakespeare, James Fenton, the orphan of Zhao, Royal Shakespeare Company, Modern theatre

1. INTRODUCTION

The Orphan of Zhao is written by an ancient Chinese playwright Ji Junxiang and was first introduced to the western world by Voltaire's *The Orphan of China* (l'Orphelin de la Chine) [1], which made it familiar and popular among Europeans. As a story of revenge, it is also called the Chinese Hamlet [2].

This adaptation of the Orphan of Zhao was written by James Fenton and directed by Gregory Doran. It played in the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon from November 2012 to March 2013 [3]. In 2019, the Chinese director Xu Jun adapted this play successfully into a musical in Shanghai.

The adaptation was firstly released in recent years and the critics and scholars mainly talked about the comparison of Eastern and Western theatres and ways to adapt a traditional Chinese story. As for the play by Ji Junxiang, a lot of scholars have already compared the Orphan of Zhao with Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear. However, it seems that few people would like to talk

about how has Shakespeare influenced this adaptation. Why would RSC choose the Orphan of Zhao? Why would a musical adapted by a Chinese story written by a British playwright be so popular in China? How do the Shakespearean elements in the adaptation play an important role? Through analyzing two details in the adaptation which related to Shakespeare's work (The females' friendship in a *Midnight's Dream*, *Othello* and it is in the adaptation and the role of songs and singers in Shakespearean and the adaptation.), this paper will try to solve out the impact of Shakespeares on the modern plays and the modern ways to apply the Shakespearean elements in the theatre nowadays, especially on the adaptation of the Orphan of Zhao.

2. THE FEMALES' FRIENDSHIP

2.1 The Females' Friendship in a Midsummer night's Dream, Othello and it is in the Adaptation.

Friendships in Shakespeareans are usually difficult to be described as mild or idyllic. No matter the relations between lovers or friends, they are more or less affected by betrayals, contradictions or conflicts, which will certainly bring about dramatic conflicts and affects the trend of the story. But among these betrayals and conflicts, one kind of friendship stands out: the romantic and gentle friendship between the female characters.

In a *Midsummer night's Dream*, one of the root causes of Oberon and Titania's conflicts is the ownership of the Indian boy. And one of the most beautiful parts of the play is to describe a character that's never occurred, that is the friend of Titania, the Indian boy's mother.

The beautiful lines were written like:

And in the spicèd Indian air by night
Full often hath she gossiped by my side
And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,
Marking th' embarkèd traders on the flood,
When we have laughed to see the sails conceive
And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind;
Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait,

Following (her womb then rich with my young squire),

Would imitate and sail upon the land

To fetch me trifles and return again,

As from a voyage, rich with merchandise (2.i.128-139)
[4]

The scene is one of the most charming and idyllic ones in the play to describe the romantic time Titania spent with the Indian woman on the beach in the night, although they are maid and master relation and even different races. And after the death of the Indian woman, Titania brought the boy back to the wood and raise him herself.

In *Othello*, Shakespeare had also described such a relationship, which is the friendship between Emilia and Desdemona. Although the main betrayal in the story was between their husbands Iago and Othello. Emilia and Desdemona are more like friends but not maid and master. They will discuss the topic of love and betrayal of husbands in the world and take care of each other. And in the final moments, when Othello killed Desdemona, we see, Emilia was the only character to participate in the scene at this tragic moment. Before Desdemona's death,

the two female characters sing a prophetic elegy together (Sing willow, willow, willow. 4.iii.43-62[5]), and Emilia is the first one to discover Desdemona's death. At the end of the story, Emilia, who had been allowed to steal for her husband, betrayed him, declared justice, and also met her death. Although the main emotional development of the story is from Othello's point of view, from Desdemona's view Emilia is not just her servant, but more of an empathist and a caregiver. In this play with complex emotional clues, Emilia was the only one who put her emotions below Desdemona's, and she was also the only one who stands on Desdemona's side and tell the world truth when everyone is outraged by Iago's behavior. It can be said that in *Othello's* story, every emotion is seduced, except the one between these two women.

In Fenton's works, we can find the striking consistency between the female friendships in it and the two friendships mentioned above. Fenton's work created a character that did not exist in history or in Ji Junxiang's story, but played an important role in the drama: the princess's maid. In scene seven of the first part of the *Orphan of Zhao*, it is the maid who took Cheng Ying to the princess, and in scene thirteen it is also the maid who withstood the torture of Tu'an Gu, and died in the cage after the arrival of Cheng Ying. We can find the similarity on both of the friendships mentioned above, they were master-maid relationships, they were to some extent, one of the people who know the truth, and the ends of them were dead. In their death, all contain the responsibility brought by the friendships, the responsibility also to some extent determined the story exhibition.

2.2. The Role of Female Friendship in the Theatre

In all three plays, the world is dominated by male and royal power, a common setting in mainstream works. Under such a background, women, as the secondary sex and bound beings, are often unable to fight through their own efforts, to change their own ending with strategies and means, and will not become the leading role of the drama. In this way, female characters need the assistance of another role to rebel with. As their rebellion is often against the power of husband and royalty, in this context, the most appropriate role is their maid. In an environment where women were constrained, maids became the people who knew them best and were closest to them.

From the perspective of the stage art, female friendship seems to be a corner for the audiences to rest in the tense drama, especially in the tragedy. In the long and complicated plot, the audiences might be afraid to watch the great test of heart, death and betrayal. And in this kind of female friendship, the audience can be allowed to trust the characters. They watch the wind blow the sails on the golden sands of the night, bathe and sing before they die, and care for each other's children. They

are soft, calm symbols of motherhood and divinity, neither betraying nor relinquishing responsibility.

In drama, people need some breathing space, some singing, trust, and and sweetness. They need something to let themselves believe that there is still a chance, hope and truth in the complicated plot oppress the protagonist, the friendship of the characters and some little roles make connections between role and role, also let the mood of the plot is more diverse.

2.3. *The application in the Orphan of Zhao*

In Fenton's *the Orphan of Zhao*, he created a new role as the maid of the princess, and this description technique has been fully applied. The princess's maid is a small role without a few lines, but it is she would Cheng Ying and princess, Cheng Ying and Tu'an Gu connected. When the maid first appeared, her mission was to bring Cheng Ying into the palace, in addition to the princess, she is the only insider, but also the only person the princess fully trusts. The loopholes of the original story are filled by her rise. Who assisted Cheng Ying to enter the palace? When Cheng Ying and Gongsun Chujiu were discussing countermeasures, who hindered Tu'an Gu's steps to discover the truth? These details did not appear in the original script, but in Fenton's adaptation, Cheng Ying played the leading role, and these details are crucial to the logic and integrity of the play.

At the same time, the friendship between the princess and the maid is also the only comfort in the first part of the thriller, heavy slaughter plot. Unlike the other characters who die for the orphan, the maid and the princess were unaware of Cheng Ying's plan and that the orphan survived. Others perhaps died for Zhao, for revenge, but the maid was for the children of her master and the desire of the princess to sacrifice, it made one think of the final resistance of Emilia. In these two stories, two small roles regarded friendship as a nobler thing than life. It is because of this great feeling and sense of responsibility, that justice and truth can be revealed. In their friendship and the maid's sacrifice, Gongsun's plan can succeed.

3. THE ROLE OF SONGS AND SINGERS IN SHAKESPEAREANS AND THE ADAPTATION

3.1. *The scene of songs in Cymbeline, Othello and the adaptation*

Unlike the dramatic works of ancient Greece and other ancient plays, although his language is rhymed and poetic, the concept of chorus and singers rarely appears in Shakespeare's play. However, songs sung by characters often appear in Shakespeare's work. This paper takes the funeral song for Imogen by Guiderius and Arviragus in *Cymbeline* and the song before

Desdemona's death in *Othello* mentioned above as examples to analyze the application of songs in Shakespeare's works and Fenton's *the Orphan of Zhao*.

Guiderius and Arviragus, unaware of Imogen's gender and the family relationship between her and themselves, held a funeral ceremony for her and sang the same song they said they sang at their mother's funeral. In this scene, only the audience knows the truth, and this misunderstanding makes this chapter especially beautiful:

'Fear no more the heat o' th' sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone and ta'en thy wages.
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust...'
(4.i.332-353) [6]

Similarly, in *Othello*, there is also a song like that, namely the willow song she sang the night Desdemona was killed by her husband mentioned above, which she also learned from others. According to her lines, this song is sung by her own mother's maid that implied the fate of the maid. After the betrayal of love, she also got the end of death. The song appeared in much the same way as the *Cymbeline*, and also as a symbol of tragedy.

Ballad-singer appears as a single character in Fenton's work. Four poems appeared as the titles of the first and last four acts of the second part, and another verse appeared as a lullaby sung by Cheng Ying's wife. 'The earliest version of the play have word text for arias where the music has been lost', the poems are written for 'establish the idiom of the play' [7] explained by Fenton.

3.2. *How the Songs Play an Important Role in these Stories*

Poetry is an inheritable literary form. In literary and dramatic works, it is often learned rather than originally said by characters. From the perspective of dramatic structure, emotions and plots often appear in symbolic meaning in poetry, rather than being expressed by the characters in the first-person perspective. It is more like commenting on the current plot development or hinting at the subsequent plot from an outsider. Because of this feature, it is normal to find storytellers who are independent of the story in musical works, such as the poet in the French musical *Notre Dame de Paris* or the conductor in the Russian musical *Anna Karenina*. In *Cymbeline* and *Othello*, both songs foreshadow what is to come, in *Othello* the tragedy of death is clearly foreshadowed in poetry, and in *Cymbeline* the undeveloped kinship of the siblings. Different from other literary works, it is difficult to correctly convey

information to the audience by non-physical elements, such as fate, thinking and psychology, because they need to be presented to the audience in entity on stage. Since drama cannot hint at the plot in any other form of writing, the song becomes an integral part of the structural integrity of the story.

At the same time, due to the rhyme and aesthetic value of the song, it can replace the lines and provide opportunities for the characters to express their strong feelings. Sometimes, the characters themselves are not allowed to speak all of their inner thoughts. Songs use lyrics and melody to become the transmission medium of hidden emotions. Just as the music plays a role in other art forms, melody and lyrics can adjust the audience's emotions and the tone of drama in the fastest way, it is an irreplaceable form of stage expression.

3.3. *The Application in the Orphan of Zhao*

The positions of the four poems are very special, and they are the key to the logical integrity of the play. When talking about the new poems he has written for the play, Fenton said, 'it was like making a suspension bridge, the songs are like the uprights and the play is slung between them'. This is a very important point. In the play which is not that long, the story begins with the whole family being killed by Tu'an Gu, and it is impossible to give a detailed explanation about the cause of the story. It spans as long period as sixteen years, and those sixteen years literally take place in the characters' actual lives: Cheng Bo has grown up, Cheng Ying has aged, and the emperor is sick. But the audience experiences only a few brief scenes. In such a group story, no character has the power or the authority to explain to the audience the changes that time brings.

In the opening act of the second scene, the Ballad-Singer sings:

Only One Man knows who you are,
How many heroes have died for you
And whose blood it is your fate to spill.
Be on your way.
Be a child for one more day.
One whom you love your blood dooms you to kill
One whom you love your blood dooms you to kill
(2.16.28-35) [8]

This song is connected with the final scene in the first part of the general Wei will be a coming war song. This plot was the biggest change in the story, the main character changed from Cheng Ying to Cheng Bo himself, the justice is from passive to active, waiting is enough, revenge is about to begin and the child's blood will become the fate he shall not escape. Ballad-singer

then appears as the narrator of the story and as the call of the blood itself to inform the audience of this transformation.

At the same time, the two songs at the beginning and the end of the play also play such a role. Four poems appear in extremely special positions as bridges to connect the whole story, making the structure of the play becomes a complete logical line from several parts.

It is worth mentioning that in the musical adapted by Chinese director Xu Jun, the role of Ballad-singer does not appear. Instead, Cheng's son, the soul, plays the role of the narrator throughout the whole play, repeatedly singing several songs that highlight the fate of the character and the development of the story. This paper will not analyze and discuss this adaptation, but as Fenton talks about the similarity of this work and Shakespeare's association 'There's a ghost comes in to remind one of the protagonists that there's this issue unresolved', no matter the singer or Cheng's son, they all make the expression of the drama richer and makes the whole work integrated.

4. CONCLUSION

Starting from two details, this paper discussed the elements that are identical with Shakespeare's works and Fenton's work from the application of Shakespeare, element analysis and Fenton's application. The two elements can be found more not only in Shakespeare's works, but also in contemporary theatrical works. At the same time, there are more Shakespearean elements in the Orphan of Zhao, such as the transition between tragedy and comedy mentioned by Fenton himself, which is similar to King Lear, and the revenge plot with Hamlet discussed by a lot of scholars. Focused on Shakespeare's influence on modern drama, this paper only analyzed the new elements in Fenton's adaptation. Shakespeare's influence on modern drama goes far beyond that. This paper only explored the details and did not delve into the cultural theories behind Shakespeare's influence. However, both Shakespeare himself and the Orphan of Zhao still have endless literary value worthy of further exploration and further study.

No matter from the perspective of the story structure or emotional expression, Shakespeare as early as a few hundred years ago, provided a sophisticated resolution strategy for modern drama writers. How to use these skills and select these elements, how the inheritance of Shakespeare's great achievement at the same time carry on the innovation of modernity is the problem needed to be solved by the dramatists all over the world. Fenton's work is just one small island in a long line of Shakespeare's influence, which still gives us a taste of Shakespeare's power around the world.

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