

ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY'S #DREAM40:  
TEACHING SHAKESPEARE THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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*Royal Shakespeare Company apresenta #dream40:  
Ensinando Shakespeare através das redes sociais*

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ABSTRACT: William Shakespeare is one of the greatest authors of the English language and is present in multiple school curricula. However, reading Shakespeare in classrooms can be a challenge for both teachers and students. In schools, adaptations from literature to social media platforms, such as *#dream40*, a production by the Royal Shakespeare Company, remain not fully explored. In this paper, this production is presented as a possible ally in the effort of bringing the English canon closer to the students' reality, making the Bard more engaging and accessible, since this production uses mechanics that are part of most students' daily lives on social networking platforms, such as the hashtag that appears in the title of this production; besides, *#dream40* is closely aligned with our contemporary paradigm of worldview.

KEYWORDS: Adaptation. Shakespeare. Intermediality. Social media. #dream40.

RESUMO: William Shakespeare é um dos autores mais importantes da língua inglesa e faz parte de inúmeros currículos escolares. Porém, ler Shakespeare em sala de aula pode ser um desafio para alunos e professores. Adaptações da literatura para as redes sociais, como é o caso de *#dream40*, uma produção da Royal Shakespeare Company, permanecem pouco exploradas em ambientes escolares. Neste artigo, essa produção é apresentada como uma possível aliada no esforço de aproximar o cânone inglês da realidade dos estudantes, tornando o Bardo mais atraente e acessível, já que se trata de uma produção que usa de mecânicas que fazem parte da rotina da maior parte dos estudantes nas plataformas de redes sociais, como a *hashtag* que aparece já no título dessa produção, além de ser intimamente alinhada a nosso paradigma contemporâneo de visão do mundo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Adaptação. Shakespeare. Intermedialidade. Redes sociais. #dream40.

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## 1 Introduction

Reading Shakespeare in the 21st century may be a challenge, a challenge that is even greater in the classrooms' environment, especially if English is not the students' native language. Having this in mind, this paper focuses on *#dream40*, an adaptation from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in a partnership with Google's Creative Lab in 2013. Aiming at great audience's participation, this production used a very innovative storytelling technique accompanying it with a traditional reinterpretation of the play, attempting to please both the more conservative and the open-minded portions of its audience. Considering how social media websites are still underused when it comes to education, a production that unites literature and social media is worthy of attention. *#dream40* may be a teacher's ally when introducing and bringing Shakespeare's works closer to the students' contexts, a step that may be of fundamental importance in making *A Midsummer Night's Dream* approachable to students who may feel daunted by the Bard.

## 2 *#dream40*

The play was performed on a weekend in 2013, from 21 to 23 of June, and it was split in two parts. The first part was performed on Google+, a discontinued social network owned by Google whose service used to be very similar to Facebook – the platform of choice is certainly due to Google's Creative Lab being RSC's partner on this production. In *#dream40*'s programme, the audience was invited to actively participate, which included creating and interpreting minor characters in the play: "Pick some lines, bring them to life. You can invent a whole new character and play along for 3 days, or write one witty newspaper headline. Or draw a comic, or bake cupcakes, or do a dance, or knit one of the characters a scarf" (GOOGLE+; ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY, 2013a). Moreover, for those who were "feeling in need of some help", the producers uploaded some suggestions on an official community on Google+ in which people interested in taking part of the three-days performance discussed, shared ideas and prepared themselves during a period of two weeks. Some of the suggestions included choosing songs, creating "memes" with specific lines of the play, sharing their "*#bestdream*", writing alternative endings, among others. When the performance finally started, the content

created by the audience was selected and shared in a profile created for Robin Goodfellow, *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* beloved character best known as Puck. In this adaptation Puck plays a major role, being as charismatic as the character from the source text. He is also responsible for bringing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* closer to the audience's context, provoking what Gerard Genette calls "movement of proximization", in which "the hypertext transposes the diegesis of its hypotext to bring it up to date and closer to its own audience (in temporal, geographic, or social terms)" (1997, p. 304). For instance, Puck mentions various contemporary cultural products, such as the television series "Doctor Who" and the reality show "The Voice". The second part of *#dream40* was a live performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which the producers adopted a very reverent posture toward the source text, remaining very "faithful" to the so-called "original". For this reason, it is the first part of the performance that interests the most when discussing how this sort of production can be utilized in the context of classroom and is also when *#dream40* is remarkably unique.

The audience's interaction is certainly a distinguishing feature in this production, starting from its title, which includes a hashtag. Lankshear and Knobel elucidate how this feature works on Twitter, but their description can be generalized to social media platforms in general,

Prefixing a word or phrase with a hashtag (#) automatically groups together all posts that include the same hashtagged word or phrase. For example, many television shows spark viewer-generated commentary on Twitter while the shows are airing. Tweeters can use the hashtag feature and the name of the show (e.g., #GhostHunters, #TopGear) to join in a conversation with others about the show. Twitter also uses these hashtags to identify topics 'trending' on the service, too (e.g., #Wikileaks, #2011predictions). (LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2011, p. 57)

Therefore, in every social media that features hashtags (e.g., Google+, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram), the choice of having a hashtag at the beginning of its title makes automatic the grouping of every publication that contains the hashtag featured in the title of this production. Considering the importance of the role played by the audience, featuring a hashtag in its title is certainly a useful innovation.

For those who did not witness the performance in real time, or wanted to revisit it, an

interactive timeline was produced and published some months later, conforming to Janet Murray's expectation regarding the future of storytelling in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*: "perhaps, in time, role-playing might experience a Homeric transition: a consolidation of a collectively improvised tradition into a simple repeatable work" (1997, p. 278). To produce this timeline, that is coherent and unified – characteristics that, according to Murray, are associated with great fiction (1997, p. 276) – the production elected some publications officially created for *#dream40* alongside with some publications by audience members, which were organized and presented side by side, along with a theatrical audio recording of the text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Even though one can consider that the timeline produced is "coherent and unified", it is certainly not in the same way of traditional storytelling. The audience is advised to do the following: "Listen to the play but feel free to hit pause whenever you'd like to explore the digital world spun around it. There are news sites, gossip, blogs, podcasts and even websites for the local pub and nunnery" (GOOGLE+; ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY, 2013b). Certainly, one can ignore such advice and watch the timeline in a linear way; however, if one decides to follow the many links that are part of the timeline, they would have a completely different experience. It would probably not feel coherent and would certainly not be unified. The timeline consists of publications on Google+ organized in a linear order, accompanied by the audio recording of rehearsals for the play: it is the coherent product of a rather chaotic performance. However, the live aspect of the performance must be highlighted as it was not only of major significance, but also ephemeral, as it usually is when it comes to role-playing storytelling (MURRAY, 1997, p. 278). Even though the producers developed and made the timeline of the performance available, the website went offline a couple years after its publication. The timeline endured more than interactions in social media usually do, but it was ephemeral, nevertheless.

Within the field of Intermediality, adaptations have been considered a specific phenomenon, regarded by Irina Rajewsky as a variety of medial transposition (2005, p. 51) and classified by Lars Elleström as an example of transmediation (2014, p. 11). Yet, according to Linda Hutcheon, "in both academic criticism and journalistic reviewing, contemporary popular adaptations are most often put down as secondary, derivative" (2006, p. 2). Regarding this portion of critics, Robert Stam states that there are still critics who rely on "fidelity" when

discussing how successful a specific adaptation is and are, thus, subscribing to the notion that literature is superior to other media:

By adopting an intertextual as opposed to a judgmental approach rooted in assumptions about a putative superiority of literature, we have not abandoned all notions of judgment and evaluation. But our discussion will be less moralistic, less implicated in unacknowledged hierarchies. We can still speak of successful or unsuccessful adaptations, but this time oriented not by inchoate notions of “fidelity” but rather by attention to “transfers of creative energy,” or to specific dialogical responses, to “readings” and “critiques” and “interpretations” and “rewritings” of source novels, in analyses which always take into account the gaps between very different media and materials of expression. (STAM, 2012-2013, p. 194)

Thus, Stam argues for a criticism that does not subscribe to media hierarchies, an idea that is less subversive regarding filmic adaptations, which have certainly gained much popularity and academic respect over the last century. However, when it comes to adaptations to social media, a new trend that many people have never even heard about, it is important to acknowledge that there still much to be investigated in regard to the aesthetic value of these productions; the fact that the *#dream40's* timeline, which contains an unabridged audio recording of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, can be seen as a very accurate illustrated audiobook of Shakespeare's play makes the production approachable even for those who are suspicious of social media's potential for fiction and storytelling in general.

Even though authors such as Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation* duel against the idea of adaptations being regarded as inferior works, this is a notion that still prevails in our society: “disparaging opinions on adaptation as a secondary mode — belated and therefore derivative — persist” (HUTCHEON, 2006, p. XIII). For instance, some critics of Shakespeare's adaptations have strong opinions and are vocal about their feelings in what regards fidelity. Some, as Deborah Cartmell, consider that “reverence for the text and the author” are “prerequisites” to a successful Shakespeare adaptation (1999, p. 37), and *#dream40* does not go against this controversial statement. When it comes to fidelity to Shakespeare's play, Tom Uglow, from Google's Creative Lab, claims in a straightforward manner that the producers knew from the beginning that “the play itself would be sacrosanct” (2013). In other words, even though the digital moment of the performance was very originative, encouraging people to

create new characters, leading to a certain demystification of a text that is usually held in high esteem, the producers planned from the start that in its second part, the play script would be performed as a sacred text. Without choosing sides, *#dream40* is at the same time very creative and very reverent; it welcomes and promotes change at the same time that performs the source text for a live audience in its most traditional form.

Furthermore, as stated by Robert Stam, adaptations of literary texts can teach us not only about the medium in which they are produced, but also about Literature: “adaptations, in this sense, make manifest what is true of all works of art – that they are all on some level ‘derivative’. And in this sense, the study of adaptation potentially impacts our understanding not only of film but of literature as well” (2012-2013, p. 194). In this way, using an adapted version of Shakespeare in Literature classes can inspire debates regarding concepts of “originality” and “influence”, and also to explain how unregulated the notion of authorship was in Shakespeare’s times. There is much to gain when a source text and its adaptation are taught side by side:

With adaptation, a source work is reaccented and reinterpreted through new grids and discourses. Each grid, in revealing aspects of the source text in question, also tells us something about the ambient discourses in the moment of reaccentuation. By revealing the prisms and grids and discourses through which the novel has been reimagined, adaptations grant a kind of objective and palpable materiality to the discourses themselves. (STAM, 2012-2013, p. 189)

Therefore, *#dream40* can even be used to shed light on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Not only to make students less afraid of Shakespearean texts, but for actually showing how the playscript works as an actual “plan of action”. Moreover, if one considers that any adaptation is a “reading”, which “suggests that just as any text can generate an infinity of readings, so any novel can generate any number of adaptational readings which are inevitably partial, personal, conjunctural, interested” (STAM, 2012-2013, p. 188), *#dream40* occupies the privileged place of being the product of many diverse “readings”, as it is not only what its creators made of it, but also the product of its participative audience and their multiple readings.

### 3 An adaptation that mirrors our paradigm in worldview

Ready-made classifications do not embrace #dream40 in its complexity. However, when it comes to the paradigms for “thinking, acting, and organizing life” as presented in *New Literacies* by Lankshear and Knobel (p. 52, 2011), it is easy to see that #dream40 is certainly much closer to the “Postmodern/post-industrial/knowledge society” paradigm than it is to the “Modern/industrial” paradigm (LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2011, p. 53). In fact, #dream40 is exemplary as a possibility of storytelling that works as a mirror for this paradigm in worldview. For instance, #dream40 is “multiple” as opposed to “singular/uniform”, due to its multimedia nature; it is “dispersed” and “distributed” as opposed to “monolithic” and “localized/concentrated”, the narrative was diffused within Google+, as a result of being performed by multiple characters, each one in his own profile; it is “dynamic/fluid/flexible” as opposed to “stable/fixed”, because there was an eminent possibility, until the very end, that a new character created by the audience would appear – it was not possible to control the realm of possibilities that surrounded #dream40; it is “non-linear” as opposed to “linear” since, even though the characters followed some linearity, once again, the products of the audience creation and interaction cannot possibly be controlled; finally, it is “joint/collaborative/collective” as opposed to “individualized”, because even when only the work done prior to the performance itself is considered, it is impossible to regard #dream40 as a product of individual effort. Many people were involved in this production: as we are reminded by Murray, theatre is a collaborative medium, as it already was in Shakespeare’s time (1997, p. 276). All things considered, #dream40 is the fusion of a canonical literary text to a paradigm that is straightly aligned with the society we live, especially when considering that today “people see the world from many perspectives” and “our default norm for life trajectories is complex and non-linear” (LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2011, p. 53).

#dream40 was built within the mechanics of social media, a universe that is familiar and part of the context of those who are school-aged. As adaptations from literature to social media borrow from an environment with which students are mostly familiar, they may be used to enhance the connections between students and literary works. Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets are not the most beloved readings between teenagers; on the contrary, as Geoff Spiteri states in *Shakespeare Matters: A Little Knowledge Is a Dangerous Thing*, “in a recent survey

commissioned for the National Year of Reading, teenagers were asked what their most and least favourite things to read [...] top of the most loathed reads was homework, with the runner-up spot taken by the collected works of one William Shakespeare” (2009, p. 5). Thus, students tend to not be fond of assigned readings in general, but they reject Shakespeare’s work, in particular, even more. The students mentioned in the research quoted by Spiteri are native speakers of English: Shakespeare’s plays can be even more intimidating to students for whom English is not their primary language. If excluding Shakespeare from the English Literature classes’ curricula is not desirable — due to the utmost influence of this author in the English language, culture, and identity — teachers must consider new approaches to Shakespeare’s plays in classrooms.

When it comes to the Bard, any attachment to the written media is anachronic. After all, Shakespeare’s plays were created to be performed, and not to be read. In addition, the plays were not supposed to be a demonstration of Shakespeare’s vast vocabulary or his knowledge of Latin. As stated by N. F. Blake in *The Language of Shakespeare*, “Shakespeare is not a learned poet who wants to parade his learning. Latin words are not used for mere exhibition and are Latin tags or learned allusions. In this his work differs conspicuously from that of a dramatist like Ben Jonson” (1993, p. 25). The Bard used the language from “his native Warwickshire, and in the heart of his adopted London: its streets and taverns, shops and stalls, docks and yards, noble homes, court-houses, churches, brothels, prisons, public spaces filled by processions and ceremonies and hanging, and of course, in its theaters” (DUNTON-DOWNER; RIDING, 2004, p. 44). Therefore, if contemporary readers face some hardships when reading his plays, that is more related to the fact that the plays were written four hundred years ago than to an intentional use of flowery language. To be introduced to Shakespeare by means of performances of his playscripts is not to take a shortcut.

Still, a teacher may ask: can social media websites really be used with didactic purposes? In the preface of *The Plugged-in Professor*, Sharmila Ferris and Hilary Wilder discuss in favour of using social media in classrooms:

We should consider the question of whether social media have a place in education. The fundamental question indeed is whether social media are a relevant and useful tool for learning. The importance of social media in our lives is indisputable, and undeniably there is a growing interest among



educators in the potentials of social media in the classroom. At the same time, social media are evolving so rapidly that it is a challenge to determine what works best to promote which specific learning goals. It is our opinion that while social media pose challenges for teaching and learning, they also offer opportunities that justify exploration of their affordances. Social media can expand opportunities across a wide range of higher order learning: communication, collaboration, research, information literacy, critical thinking, and creativity, among others. Social media have the potential to help our students learn at many levels. (FERRIS; WILDER, 2013, p. XVI)

In other words, social media websites already have an indisputable place in our daily lives, but their place in classrooms is still under inquiring, especially when it comes to how they could be used for educational purposes. However, the educators' interest in using these tools in classrooms is growing. Even though it can be challenging, the authors consider that the opportunities that are expanded by the use of these tools make them valuable enough, and are worthy of facing the challenges that may appear. Some arguments are especially convincing:

The rapid growth of technologies places them in a state of high interpretive flexibility (Brent, 2005) meaning that such tools are particularly amenable to shaping by educators. This makes a pedagogical focus to social media particularly meaningful and necessary today. We feel that clear and effective instructional purpose is essential in shaping social media technologies for educational use. (FERRIS; WILDER, 2013, p. XVIII)

We live in a time in which social media is quickly changing. New tools are appearing on a daily basis and few will become successful. Google+, for instance, did not achieve the expected success and was discontinued. Times such as ours, according to Ferris and Wilder, present great opportunities for educators to work with technologies in development, as the tools are still being shaped. May the educators be among the ones who will shape these tools, they will turn to be more suitable for educational purposes.

The educational potentials of social media, when considered in conjunction with students' attraction to social media, lead us to conclude that we should seize the opportunity and take advantage of the unique habits of our students. Careful and considered use of social media by educators becomes an important way to give larger meaning to technologies that are used primarily for social and entertainment purposes. (FERRIS; WILDER, 2013, p. XVII)

Considering that many adolescents and undergraduate students are heavy users of social

media, and usually associate these websites with entertainment, working with social media adaptations, such as *#dream40*, is to take advantage of a previous attachment they may have in regard to these platforms, and may overcome the aversion some students present regarding Shakespeare's language and plays.

#### 4 Final Remarks

With no further ado, *#dream40* is a rendition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that unites innovative storytelling with a feeling of reverence, providing an excellent opportunity for a first contact with the Bard's works. The weekend in which *#dream40* was played on a digital stage in a very unceremonious way serves as encouragement to students to read Shakespeare, demystifying an author who is not only considered a father of the English language but is still also a major influence in English culture and identity. Moreover, bringing Shakespeare to a digital stage was a "movement of proximization" that brought the *diegesis* of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* closer to contemporary audiences not only in temporal or geographic terms, but also by means of paradigms in worldview. All things considered, adaptations from Shakespeare plays to social media platforms, like *#dream40*, can be a valuable tool in classrooms, helping educators in a battle that is worthy of fighting for: teaching the Bard in the 21st century.

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