

WHY DO QUÉBÉCOIS AUTHORS REWRITE SHAKESPEARE?



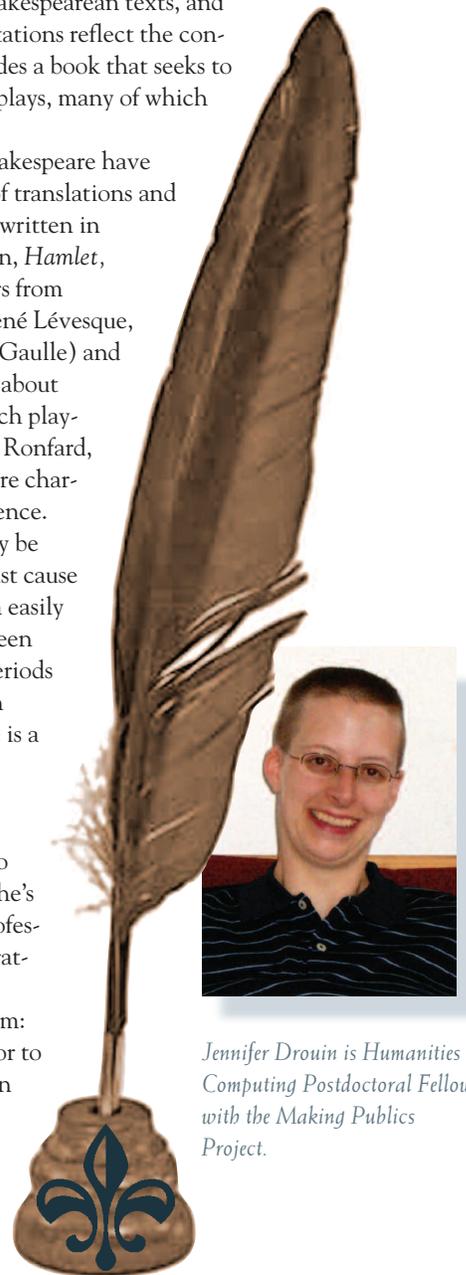
It is a common expression in Québec to speak of “la langue de Molière” and “la langue de Shakespeare”. Yet, in a Québec which prides itself on still speaking Molière’s tongue, it is especially puzzling to find a remarkably rich history of adaptations of Shakespeare.’

Why do contemporary Québécois playwrights appear so interested in rewriting Shakespeare instead of Molière, what changes do they make to the original Shakespearean texts, and how do the differences between Shakespeare’s plays and the adaptations reflect the concerns of contemporary Québec society? My research project includes a book that seeks to answer these questions as well as an anthology of several of these plays, many of which remain unpublished today.

Since the Quiet Revolution, more than thirty adaptations of Shakespeare have been written in Québec – not to mention an impressive number of translations and innovative stage productions as well. All of these adaptations are written in French, except a few which are bilingual. The first such adaptation, *Hamlet, prince du Québec*, by Robert Gurik in 1968, mapped the characters from Shakespeare’s play onto the major political figures of the time (René Lévesque, Pierre Trudeau, Lester Pearson, Jean Lesage, and even Charles de Gaulle) and accurately predicted the roles they would come to play in debates about Québec nationalism. Many more adaptations have followed by such playwrights as Normand Chaurette, Michel Garneau, and Jean-Pierre Ronfard, to name but a few. A significant percentage of these adaptations are characterized by a nationalist discourse in favour of Québec independence.

Why Shakespeare then? More so than Molière, Shakespeare may be appropriated by Québécois playwrights in support of the nationalist cause for three reasons. First, the indeterminacy of his texts makes them easily malleable to their political purposes, just as his plays have often been used in service of various political agendas across different time periods and cultures. Second, Shakespeare has made what McGill English professor Michael Bristol calls “the big time”; that is, Shakespeare is a celebrity. Third, while in English-speaking nations Shakespeare might be more difficult to adapt without drawing the criticism of desecrating a classic, in Québec it’s Molière who is the more sacrosanct of the two and the more risky author for a playwright to tackle. Since Shakespeare isn’t part of the French literary canon, he’s fair game for playwrights to adapt playfully. As McGill English professor Leaneor Lieblein has observed, the irreverent, and hence liberating, attitude that Québécois playwrights have adopted towards Shakespeare can be summed up in their common nickname for him: “le grand Will”. In Québec, Shakespeare is *grand*, a big-time author to revere, yet Québécois playwrights are not afraid to bring him down to size, to make him their own, and to develop an affectionate relationship with him on a first-name basis.

JENNIFER DROUIN



Jennifer Drouin is Humanities Computing Postdoctoral Fellow with the Making Publics Project.