



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

English Literature

SCROLLABLE ANTIQUITY: THE MUTATION OF KALIDASA, HOMER, AND SHAKESPEARE IN THE AGE OF MICRO-MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the digital mutation of three canonical literary figures, such as Kalidasa, Homer, and Shakespeare, as their works migrate onto micro-media platforms such as Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and TikTok. Rather than treating short-form adaptation as a debasement of classical literature, the study draws on adaptation theory, media ecology, and oral-formulaic scholarship to argue that micro-media revives modes of episodic, performative, and audience-responsive transmission that resemble the original oral and theatrical contexts of these works. Using qualitative content analysis of forty short-form adaptations drawn from three platforms, the study identifies four recurring transformation strategies: narrative compression, memeification, vernacular recoding, and affective close-up framing. The findings indicate that micro-media does not simply shrink classical narrative but restructures its temporal and emotional architecture, favoring gesture, aphorism, and viral repeatability over sustained plot development. The paper concludes that this mutation simultaneously reactivates participatory traditions embedded in epic and dramatic performance while introducing new risks of decontextualization, cultural flattening, and commercial instrumentalization of antiquity.

INTRODUCTION

For most of their transmission history, the works of Kalidasa, Homer, and Shakespeare circulated through media built around duration. Sanskrit court poetry was recited at length before patrons; the Homeric epics unfolded across thousands of hexameter lines performed by professional rhapsodes; Shakespearean drama filled two to three hours upon the early modern stage. Each of these forms, despite enormous cultural and historical distance from one another, assumed an audience willing to sustain attention across an extended temporal arc.

The rise of micro-media platforms is organised around video segments lasting between fifteen and ninety seconds that introduce a fundamentally different temporal economy into literary circulation. TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts now host thousands of adaptations condensing Shakuntala's recognition scene, Achilles' wrath, or Hamlet's soliloquy into clips designed for rapid scrolling and algorithmic recirculation. These adaptations are frequently dismissed by literary educators as trivializing or distorting canonical texts. Yet such dismissal risks overlooking a more complex dynamic: classical works were not originally composed for silent, solitary, long-form reading either. They were performed, sung, recited, and staged before live, responsive audiences who shaped reception in real time.

This paper asks how micro-media reshapes the narrative, linguistic, and affective structure of three canonical traditions, and whether this reshaping constitutes degradation, a creative mutation, or a partial return to performance-based modes of transmission predating print. It proceeds through a review of adaptation and media-ecology scholarship, an articulation of a theoretical framework combining remediation theory with oral-formulaic analysis, a qualitative content-analysis methodology, and a discussion of findings drawn from short-form adaptations.

Literature Review

Scholarship on adaptation has moved decisively away from "fidelity criticism," the assumption that an adaptation's value rests on its faithfulness to a source text. Hutcheon (2013) reframes adaptation as a process of repetition with variation, in which a work is reinterpreted rather than diminished by its transposition across media and audiences. This view underlies much contemporary classical reception scholarship, which treats stage, film, comic-book, and now social-media versions of canonical texts as legitimate sites of meaning-making rather than corruptions of an original.

Media ecology offers a complementary lens. McLuhan's (1964) foundational claim that a medium reorganizes the sensory and cognitive habits of its users anticipates contemporary arguments about short-form video's effect on narrative comprehension. Bolter and Grusin (1999) describe how new media simultaneously borrow from and reconfigure older media, a dynamic visible when a Reel borrows the visual grammar of theatrical staging while compressing it into a vertical, soundtracked clip optimized for mobile viewing.

A third strand of relevant scholarship concerns orality. Ong (2012) distinguishes oral from literate modes of thought, emphasizing that oral composition relies on formulaic, repeatable units suited to memory and performance rather than fixed textual architecture. Homeric scholarship gathered in Fowler (2004) has long recognized that the epics themselves emerged from oral-formulaic composition, assembled from reusable phrases and type-scenes designed for live recitation. Sanskrit dramaturgy, as Pollock (2006) details, developed within a literary culture that prioritized the evocation of emotional states in a live audience over linear plot fidelity. Shakespearean theater, performed without fixed scripts for ordinary playgoers and reliant on memorable, quotable language, likewise depended on audience-oriented performative units (Greenblatt, 2004).

Digital humanities scholarship on platforms such as TikTok has begun to document how classical and canonical content circulates through hashtag communities, building on Jenkins's (2006) account of participatory convergence culture. However, little work directly compares the mutation patterns across Sanskrit, Greek, and Shakespearean traditions within micro-media specifically.

Theoretical Framework

This study combines two theoretical strands: remediation theory and oral-formulaic theory, here termed jointly a "recursive performance" framework. Remediation theory, as articulated by Bolter and Grusin (1999), posits that new media do not simply replace older media but repurpose their conventions while introducing new constraints particular to the new medium's interface, hardware, and economic logic. Applied to micro-media adaptations of classical texts, this suggests that platforms such as TikTok import recognizable conventions from theater and recitation such as direct address, gesture, vocal performance while subjecting them to new constraints: vertical framing, algorithmic time limits, and the demand for an immediate "hook."

Oral-formulaic theory contributes a second axis. If Homeric

epic, Sanskrit court poetry, and early modern drama all relied, in different degrees, on repeatable performative units designed for live audience comprehension (Ong, 2012; Pollock, 2006), then micro-media's preference for short, quotable, gesture-driven segments may not be alien to these traditions but rather a renewed instance of the same compositional logic operating under digital constraints. This framework predicts that successful short-form adaptations will privilege the same kinds of units that oral and theatrical traditions privileged: memorable lines, recognizable emotional beats, and visually condensed type-scenes, rather than attempts at total narrative coverage.

The framework also incorporates a critical caution drawn from cultural-flattening literature, particularly Manovich's (2001) observations on the database logic of new media: recursive performance can revive participatory dynamics while simultaneously detaching cultural and historical context, producing adaptations that are performatively faithful to a single scene's emotional logic but interpretively disconnected from the larger work's social, religious, or political meaning.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative content analysis of forty short-form video adaptations, sampled in equal proportion (approximately thirteen to fourteen each) from adaptations referencing Kalidasa's *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies. Videos were located through platform search functions using author names, character names, and relevant hashtags, then filtered to include only adaptations under ninety seconds in length that explicitly referenced plot, character, or dialogue from the source text.

Each video was coded along four dimensions derived from the theoretical framework:

- (a) compression strategy, or which narrative elements were retained versus omitted;
- (b) memeification, or the use of humor, irony, or internet-vernacular framing;
- (c) vernacular recoding, or the substitution of archaic or literary language with contemporary idiom; and
- (d) affective close-up, or the use of facial close-ups, music, and direct camera address to convey emotional intensity in place of expository narration.

Coding was conducted manually, with categories refined iteratively as patterns emerged across the sample. Because the dataset is qualitative and platform algorithms shape visibility unpredictably, this study does not claim statistical representativeness rather, it aims to characterize recurring adaptive strategies and to test the explanatory power of the recursive-performance framework against observed patterns.

Findings and Discussion

Across all three traditions, compression operated similarly: adaptations isolated a single emotionally charged scene such as Shakuntala's recognition of Dushyanta, Achilles mourning Patroclus, Hamlet confronting his father's ghost rather than attempting condensed coverage of the full narrative. This supports the recursive-performance framework's prediction that micro-media privileges type-scenes over plot architecture, echoing the episodic, performance-oriented structure of the original oral and theatrical traditions.

Memeification appeared most frequently in Shakespeare adaptations, where contemporary actors layered ironic captions or modern slang over early modern dialogue, and

least frequently in Kalidasa adaptations, which more often retained a reverential, devotional tone consistent with Sanskrit poetry's continuing ritual and educational status in some communities. Homeric adaptations occupied a middle position, frequently using meme formats to dramatize Olympian rivalries while treating mortal suffering with relative seriousness.

Vernacular recoding was nearly universal: original language was rarely preserved verbatim, replaced instead by paraphrase in contemporary idiom, often inflected with regional or diasporic vernacular markers. This recoding parallels the historical reality that all three traditions were themselves vernacular or performative compositions before later canonization elevated their language to a fixed, "classical" register; the micro-media adaptations, paradoxically, may be returning these works closer to their original linguistic accessibility than the literary-historical canon allows.

Affective close-up framing was the most consistent strategy across all three corpora, present in the overwhelming majority of sampled videos. Creators relied heavily on facial expression, music cues, and direct camera address to compress emotional exposition that would, in the source texts, unfold across extended verse or dialogue. This finding most strongly supports the oral-formulaic dimension of the framework: where extended description is unavailable, performers substitute embodied, gestural shorthand, much as oral poets relied on formulaic epithets and theatrical performers relied on stock gesture to communicate quickly recognizable emotional states.

Taken together, these findings suggest that micro-media adaptation constitutes neither simple debasement nor simple fidelity, but a structural mutation that reactivates performance-based compositional logics while introducing platform-specific pressures such as virality, brevity, ironic distance, that can detach scenes from their originating cultural and cosmological frameworks, particularly in cases where religious or philosophical context is central to a work's meaning, as with Kalidasa's invocations of Sanskrit dramatic theory.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how Kalidasa, Homer, and Shakespeare are mutating under the constraints of micro-media platforms, arguing that short-form adaptation should be understood through a recursive-performance framework combining remediation theory and oral-formulaic analysis. Rather than treating scrollable antiquity as a sign of cultural decline, the findings suggest that micro-media revives participatory, performance-oriented modes of transmission that predate the printed, silent-reading paradigm long assumed to be the "proper" mode of literary engagement.

At the same time, the consistent reliance on compression, memeification, vernacular recoding, and affective close-up framing indicates that this revival comes with significant interpretive costs, particularly the risk of detaching scenes from broader cultural, religious, and historical context. Future research might extend this framework comparatively to other classical traditions, or examine audience reception data to determine whether micro-media adaptations function as gateways toward, or substitutes for, sustained engagement with the source texts.

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