

ATINER's Conference Paper Proceedings Series

ART2016-0004

Athens, 18 January 2017

Shakespeare: A Case against Modernization

Laura Wayth

Athens Institute for Education and Research

8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10683 Athens, Greece

ATINER's conference paper proceedings series are circulated to promote dialogue among academic scholars. All papers of this series have been blind reviewed and accepted for presentation at one of ATINER's annual conferences according to its acceptance policies (<http://www.atiner.gr/acceptance>).

© All rights reserved by authors.

ATINER's Conference Paper Proceedings Series

ART2016-0004

Athens, 18 January 2017

ISSN: 2529-167X

Laura Wayth

Associate Professor, San Francisco State University, School of Theatre and
Dance, USA

Shakespeare: A Case against Modernization

ABSTRACT

It is the death of Shakespeare as we know him. A major U.S. theatre company proposes to "translate" Shakespeare's major works into modern English to make the language more accessible to a modern audience for its upcoming season. All over the internet, sites translate the work of the Bard into a way that is easily digestible to the modern era. Modern English translations of Shakespeare's work are now as widely available as the original works themselves.

This perceived need- to "dumb down" Shakespeare for a modern world starts with the education of the modern actor.

Actors who are well trained in handling Shakespeare's verse transcend the barriers of time and anachronistic language and references; the trained Shakespearean actor makes his/her meaning crystal clear to the audience; no translation necessary.

If our actors are trained to handle the language effectively, the call for translations lessens, keeping the world's greatest poet's language intact.

In this paper I investigate the call for modernization of Shakespeare and address the tools that can be developed in the actor's tool kit to mitigate and, eventually, I hope, eradicate this need. The call to modernize Shakespeare's texts is a call to attention to educate and train the modern actor.

On October 1, 2015, The Oregon Shakespeare Festival, one of America's oldest and most respected Shakespeare festivals, announced that it had enlisted several well-known playwrights to "translate" a selection of Shakespeare's plays into contemporary English. The goal was to make Shakespeare's language more accessible to a modern audience. By updating the language, the artistic directors hoped that the plays would speak more readily to contemporary theatre goers.

It is to be expected that tinkering with the words of the world's greatest playwright would draw a considerable amount of fire. It is amazing how this move by a major Shakespeare festival has shaken up the Shakespeare world, passionately dividing those in favor of and those dead-set against modernization. Traditionalists, like world-renown Shakespearean James Shapiro, believe modernizing the plays to be a big mistake. "By changing the language in a modernizing way," he claimed, "it just doesn't pack the punch and the excitement and the intoxicating quality of the original language"¹

Oregon Shakespeare Director of Literary Development and Dramaturgy Lue Douthit and Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) Artistic Director Bill Rauch responded to such claims by stating that modernizing Shakespeare's work was not a move that is disrespectful of Shakespeare's language and the plays' intentions, but an exciting way to challenge the work for a modern age. He responded to critics of the move by stating that, "OSF is undertaking a bold, not sacrilegious, experiment."²

Those who defend the move to modernize Shakespeare's language state that the outrage expressed by many scholars over modernization is misguided. Their argument is that Shakespeare himself was an innovator, and that he changed and altered language in order to speak most effectively to the audience of his time. Shakespeare believed in the fluidity of language, and as such he, more than any other writer, molded and invented language in his time.

Scholar Sheila T. Cavanagh, a defender of the move to modernize claimed, "the organization (OSF)- which is known for experimentation- is simply participating in larger, centuries-long tradition of molding, melding and adapting Shakespeare's original texts..."³ Audiences do not object to other "modernizings" of Shakespeare plays, "setting, costuming and theoretical conceptualization of his plays are fair game for innovation".⁴ Why then is it not welcomed by so many to "innovate" and change the text itself? Why is it off-limits to change and adapt Shakespeare's language?

Here is where it is necessary to make a distinction between adaptation and modernization. In an adaptation of Shakespeare's work, the adapting artist takes the essence of Shakespeare's play and creates a new artistic work that is

¹ Pollack-Pelzner, Daniel. "Why we (Mostly) stopped messing with Shakespeare's Language". *The New Yorker*. Web. 6 October, 2015

² Cavanagh, Shelia. "Does 'Translating' Shakespeare Into Modern English Diminish His Greatness". *The New Republic*. Web. 28 October, 2015

³ Cavanagh

⁴ Cavanagh

based on its characters, themes and story structure. An adaptation, then, is a work that is *based* on the original work, but never pretends to be a substitute for the original work. It is an entirely new creation.

In contrast, a “modernization” *does* stand in for the original work. A modernization is not a play based on the original work that is something new, but an updated version of the play which substitutes for the original. If we were to adapt Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, it would be clear that the work that we were presenting was based on the story of *Hamlet* but not a stand-in for *Hamlet* itself. But by calling the work a “modernization”, we are somehow saying that the original work is antiquated and no longer speaks to us, so it must be changed and improved upon, remedied and replaced. A modernization, therefore, functions as a surrogate or replacement for the work.

To change the language of Shakespeare’s works, to “update them”, to paraphrase the work is quite different territory than an adaptation. “Modernization” of Shakespeare’s plays is not acceptable, and here is why.

We are taught, as responsible theatre practitioners, that the playwright’s word is sacred. It is our job, as actors, as directors and as designers to represent the playwright’s work to the best of our ability. If a theatre were to change the words of a more contemporary playwright (i.e. a playwright who was alive or a playwright whose estate kept tabs on the productions) the theatre would be fined, the show would be closed and, in some cases, the theatre would be shut down. This is the homage that we must pay the playwright and the respect that the work of the playwright deserves. Mr. Shakespeare is a long-gone Elizabethan, but we owe the same professional respect and courtesy to him that we would afford to any modern playwright.

We would not dream of monkeying with the work of other great artists. We would not re-write a movement of Rachmaninoff’s piano concerto number three to make it easier to play, nor would we change a Puccini aria to make the last note easier to sing. Such thoughts would never be entertained because we are taught to respect the work of the composer; i.e. that it is the job of the artist to serve the composer’s work. Why then would we change the playwright’s words to make Shakespeare’s work more accessible to a modern audience? Somehow, because he speaks to all of us, we feel that we all “own” Shakespeare; that it is our right to mold his words to fit our modern ears. It *is* true, though, that audiences are not always understanding Shakespeare. So something *does* need to be done. But is it Shakespeare’s language that needs to be changed? Is the problem that our modern audience just doesn’t understand the words?

The fault, I believe, lies not with our audience or with the work itself being somehow linguistically outmoded, but with our actors and directors. The answer is not modernization, but training. The responsibility lies with actors and those who train actors to uphold the principles of heightened text in order to make Shakespeare’s language accessible to a modern audience. If Shakespeare is deemed “unclear” and “not understandable” to our audiences, it is not that our audience is lacking, and it is not that Shakespeare’s language is no longer resonant to a modern ear, it is that our modern actors and directors

are not connecting with the text, as it has been created, in a way that transmits Shakespeare's meaning into the hearts, minds and bodies of our audiences.

When Shakespeare's language is not understood by an audience, the problem is usually that actors are not following the rhythmic pulse of the language. As such, they are not breathing where the thought is, driving language through to gain the proper momentum, and pausing to change direction of thought as Shakespeare wrote it. When a well-trained actor of Shakespeare delivers the text, we are rarely at a loss to grasp its meaning. Few, I believe, have walked away from a soliloquy performed by Dame Judi Dench or Kenneth Branagh and wondered what it was about. The meaning reaches the audience because the meaning is fully alive within the actor. The actor navigates the poetic text as it was created by the playwright, and the meaning unfolds and is transmitted to the audience; the work of the playwright is fully illuminated.

It is crucial to understand that yes, there is a problem. Audiences are not always understanding Shakespeare. I am grateful that the steps taken by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival have brought this issue forward for all of us to confront. But modernization is not the answer. Do not change the language to accommodate our lack of skill. Rather, take the identification of this problem as a call to action for theatre artists—those who train actors, those who direct actors, those who coach actors, and actors themselves—to do better, to train better, to connect to poetry rather than to throw it away. It is what our greatest playwright, undoubtedly, deserves.