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RE-IMAGINING SHAKESPEARE: A *TENDER THING*

One of the legends most often recounted about Shakespeare is that, when he wrote, he “never blotted out a line” – that the words in his plays came to him spontaneously, as if perfectly formed, immutable and unimprovable. The idea that Shakespeare’s words are in some ways sacred remains common today: we sometimes hear actors and theatre-goers insisting that it’s wrong to cut lines from his plays, or to impose new interpretations on his works.

Yet artists have been adapting and altering Shakespeare for more than 400 years. His great rival Ben Jonson mocked the idea that Shakespeare had never felt the need to “blot out” any mistakes, wishing that he had instead “blotted a thousand” of his lines – some of which Jonson found undisciplined and even ridiculous.

And Shakespeare himself often set out to revise, improve and challenge his own ideas. When he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, he apparently felt the need to laugh at its intensity – and so he re-told his story of star-crossed lovers not as tragedy but as farce, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. His other plays show similar lines of development. For instance, *Much Ado About Nothing* gives us a treatment of jealousy which is unapologetically superficial, but which paved the way for *Othello*. And the treatment of jealousy in *Othello* in turn made possible the psychological realism of his late tragicomedy *The Winter’s Tale*.

Even in Shakespeare’s lifetime it was considered permissible to alter or even improve his plays. Sometime shortly before the end of his life, his own company the King’s Men hired Thomas Middleton to revise *Macbeth* and (perhaps) *Measure for Measure* – and there is plenty of evidence that his other plays were changed and developed during performance as well.

Such revisions increased in frequency after Shakespeare’s death. From the late seventeenth century, his plays were often rewritten, sometimes becoming unrecognisable in the process. Most notoriously, in 1681, the Irish dramatist Nahum Tate presented a new version of *King Lear*, cutting the role of the Fool and giving the play a happy ending. Those decisions might seem barbaric nowadays, but Tate’s version was defended by Samuel Johnson, and continued to be staged in London until 1840: audiences much preferred Tate’s version to Shakespeare’s.

In the nineteenth century, we begin to see more evidence of “Bardolatry”, the belief that Shakespeare was a genius whose words need to be treated with a reverence normally accorded to sacred texts. Yet even during that period, many theatre-makers played gleefully with Shakespeare’s works, producing dozens of burlesques and travesties based loosely on his plays. The general tone of these productions is obvious from their titles: they included works such as *A Thin Slice of Ham-let!*, *The Rise and Fall of Richard II – or A New Front to an Old Dicky* and, perhaps most absurdly, *Antony and Cleopatra; or His-Story and Her-Story in a Modern Nilo-Metre*.

For an Irish audience, one of the most interesting of those burlesques was written by the young Charles Dickens. It was called *O'Thello or The Irish Moor of Venice*, and Dickens performed it with his family in 1832. In that play, the protagonist doesn't steal Desdemona from her father; being Irish, he instead gets her drunk...

In our own times, we've seen many innovative (but perhaps more respectful) approaches to Shakespeare. These include such plays as Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, a Beckettian re-invention of two of the least interesting characters in *Hamlet*. And of course there's also *West Side Story*, which was inspired by *Romeo and Juliet*. We've also seen Shakespeare moving between media – with the plays being made into films, and his poetry occasionally finding its way onstage (something we saw recently in Ireland with Camille O'Sullivan's widely praised version of *The Rape of Lucrece*).

Ben Power's *A Tender Thing* is very different from versions like Nahum Tate's or Dickens' – or even Stoppard's or O'Sullivan's. It's also more respectful of Shakespeare than Ben Jonson was: while the play is truly original, it also takes almost every line directly from Shakespeare (though not necessarily from *Romeo and Juliet*).

What this tradition of adaptation suggests, then, is that every generation of theatre-makers and audiences feels the need to re-invent Shakespeare, to understand him anew. Sometimes this new understanding is achieved by laughing affectionately at him, and sometimes by making his plays more “relevant” to a particular time and place. And sometimes, most rewardingly, those adaptations can change our understanding of plays that we think we know very well.

But adaptations also lead us back to the qualities that make Shakespeare great, especially in plays like *Romeo and Juliet*: a joyous love of language, a newly-minted language of love, and an inspiring understanding of how human intimacy can give us courage – even when we're faced with death itself.

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NOTE to Marie –

If you think it might work better you could cut the last paragraph.
Another option would be to cut the last clause of the last par. so that it reads:

But those adaptations also lead us back to the things that make Shakespeare great, especially in plays like *Romeo and Juliet*: a joyous love of language, a newly-minted language of love, and an inspiring understanding of how human intimacy can give us courage.