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0521810299 - Rescripting Shakespeare: The Text, the Director, and Modern Productions

Alan C. Dessen

Excerpt

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## I

*“Let it be hid”: price tags, trade-offs, and economies*

“a short tale to make”

Polonius, 2.2.146

In the final speech of *Othello* Lodovico issues the command: “The object poisons sight, / Let it be hid” (5.2.364–65).<sup>1</sup> According to scholars who gloss the line, “the object” and “it” refer to the bodies of Othello and Desdemona (“the tragic loading of this bed” – 363). Jacobean beds had curtains whereas our beds do not, so that in those first performances at the Globe the poisoned sight could be hidden after Lodovico’s line by closing a bed curtain, an option usually not available today. Recent directors, moreover, resist such closing off of the two or three dead figures on the bed because they prefer to have that tragic loading the final image as the lights go down (such diminution of onstage illumination was not possible at the Globe), often accompanied by an onlooking Iago. The preferred choice today is therefore to treat Iago rather than the figures on the bed as the object that poisons sight and direct him to be “hid” or taken offstage. Furthermore, directors such as Brian Bedford (SFC 1991) and Michael Attenborough (RSC 1999)<sup>2</sup> have chosen to keep Iago as an onstage observer of an Othello and Desdemona still visible on the bed. Their solution is worthy of Alexander the Great with the Gordian knot: cut “Let it be hid.”

In singling out such a problematic moment (and a large cluster of such moments are found in final scenes), my goal is to explore the theatrical rationale behind a director’s choice and point to both the gains and losses – in this instance the possible diminution of a major motif or image, the refusal of those Venetians onstage to face fully the horrors or poisoned sight generated by tragic error. The asset of offering the playgoer a powerful final image crafted by the director should be played off against the blurring or loss of another potentially powerful climactic image, here a refusal to “see.”

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[More information](#)

As evident in this example, my focus is on choices made by today's theatrical professionals, more specifically the choices made about the playtexts to be used – the actual words to be spoken, the scenes or segments to be omitted or transposed, the many other adjustments that must be made – for example, the treatment of references to *swords* in a production that features handguns and grenades. From many conversations over the last twenty-five years I have gained a healthy respect for the commitment and expertise of actors and directors, so I will not mount an attack against the director-as-vandal or sing hymns to uncut playscripts. Indeed, as my years increase and my staying power in a theatre seat diminishes, I am less sanguine about four-hour renditions of *Hamlet* and *King Lear* (that is no country for old people). Rather, I will spell out (I hope accurately and sympathetically) the exigencies faced by actors and directors in placing before today's audiences words and effects targeted at players, playgoers, and playhouses that no longer exist.

In taking on such a task I am building on my previous work in two related but discrete areas. Since 1977 as a theatre historian I have published four books in an attempt to recover features of the first performances of the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. During that same period as a performance historian I have written a book on the onstage history of *Titus Andronicus* and close to thirty theatre essays devoted to recent productions of Shakespeare's plays, usually with a focus on the shows I managed to see in a given year. In these twin pursuits I have wrestled repeatedly with the evidence about the first performances of English Renaissance plays and since the mid 1970s have also seen an enormous number of Shakespeare productions in North America and England (often fifteen or more per year).

My goal in this book is to fuse these two bodies of material so as to draw upon my expertise in the dramaturgy and staging practices of the 1590s and early 1600s in order to shed some light on problems and choices found in the 1990s and early 2000s. Readers familiar with the wealth of studies linked to what has become known as "Shakespeare in Performance" may rightly wonder about the need for yet another such investigation.<sup>3</sup> My own approach to such issues has changed considerably since the mid 1970s when I began a series of annual reviews of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival season. In particular, evaluative comments about the work of actors, directors, and designers (what I now think of as the hits-runs-and-errors method) have been superseded by a focus upon choices, especially those that strike me as "new" or provocative or worthy of putting "on the record" (I rarely write with prospective ticket-buyers

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*“Let it be hid”: price tags, trade-offs, and economies*

3

in mind). In collecting such material while simultaneously puzzling over the limited evidence about the first performances of the same plays, I have made various connections that I hope will be illuminating to others and not merely a rehashing of the plentiful scholarship of the last decade and more. Again, my goal is not to attack directors or editors for failing to understand the original playscripts but to play off then versus now in a fashion that I hope will be useful to the theatre historian, the theatrical professional, the student of these plays, and the playgoer.

The starting point for today’s director is the received text, almost always a modern edition of the play in question. Subsequent choices and adjustments then range from the tiny (a single word) to the massive (as when a two or three-part play is compressed into one). To describe this process of turning an English Renaissance printed text into a playscript for today’s actors and playgoers I use two terms. For me, *rescripting* denotes the changes made by a director in the received text in response to a perceived problem or to achieve some agenda. For more extensive changes I use the term *rewriting* to characterize situations where a director or adapter moves closer to the role of the playwright so as to fashion a script with substantial differences from the original.

The forms of rescripting vary widely. To cite a few categories, directors make adjustments in order to (1) streamline the playscript and save running time by cutting speeches or entire scenes, (2) eliminate obscurity (in mythological allusions, difficult syntax, and archaic words), (3) conserve on personnel by eliminating figures completely (Lovell in *Richard III*) or telescoping together various lesser characters (Antenor-Margarelon in Trevor Nunn’s 1999 RNT *Troilus and Cressida*), (4) sidestep stage practices appropriate to the Globe that might mystify today’s playgoer or actor, and occasionally (5) cancel out a passage that might not fit comfortably with a particular agenda or “concept.” Examples of rewriting include presenting the three parts of *Henry VI* as two plays (or more radically one) or the two parts of *Tamburlaine*, *The Honest Whore*, or *The Fair Maid of the West* as one (see chapter 7) and factoring in material from the 1594 *The Taming of a Shrew* to “complete” the Christopher Sly story apparently left incomplete in the First Folio’s *The Taming of the Shrew* (see chapter 8).

To discuss these choices is to enter a murky area, one where the vested interests of the scholar or theatre historian can easily be at odds with the “real world” reflexes of the theatrical professional. Rescripting decisions can yield practical, narrative, and conceptual gains but can also involve some losses or diminutions. Throughout my presentation the emphasis will therefore be upon what I term *price tags* and *trade-offs*, both the pluses

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

and minuses of a director's rescripting or rewriting. Any movement of a Shakespeare play from page to stage involves hundreds of interpretative decisions. In many instances (as with Lodovico's "Let it be hid") to opt for X means to diminish or even eliminate Y – a trade-off situation true of all interpretative choices but particularly those that take place in the theatre. For example, to seek broad, farcical effects in a scene from a Shakespeare comedy is often to achieve a short-term gain at the expense of some long-term effect or "build" that is diminished or denied. To play Morocco and Arragon in *The Merchant of Venice* as buffoons is to entertain the audience during those three scenes at the risk of changing, even subverting the way an audience eventually sees and evaluates Bassanio's choice of the leaden casket in 3.2. The implications found by various critics in the golden and silver choices can evanesce if the speeches that enunciate the rationale behind those choices are eclipsed by laughter at a scimitar-waving Morocco and a lisping, affected Arragon.

Such interpretative decisions are further complicated when the production in question is geared to a "concept," a new historical period, or an elaborate set (hence the term "Designer's Theatre"). For many theatrical professionals and playgoers, such design choices or transpositions into other eras introduce new excitement and liberate the imagination. For less sanguine observers, such choices diminish Shakespeare by prizing ingenuity over substance. The spectrum of opinion can be summed up by two remarks overheard in Stratford-upon-Avon in the summer of 1985. First, a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company noted that only the bold director dared to do a "traditional" production of Shakespeare. In contrast was a remark heard in the foyer of the theatre: "I've saved for five years and come 5,000 miles to see three shows in Stratford, and not one of them was in Elizabethan dress" (the three were set in 1850, 1959, and 1985).

This debate over "pure" Shakespeare versus transposed or "Designer's Theatre" Shakespeare will not be soon resolved. The purist's stock response (play the Quarto or Folio version with as few trappings as possible) will not necessarily lead to a show that will play in Peoria (although it might do well in Urbana). Remember, some of the most memorable productions this century have realized significant meanings and effects (sometimes in long-neglected scripts) through such transpositions (as in Tyrone Guthrie's 1956 *Troilus and Cressida*). In tackling elaborate designs, transpositions into new periods, and other "strong" directorial decisions, I will therefore forgo any absolute "purist" stance, for such choices would not be made were there not effects or meanings to be gained.

Rather, my recurring questions will be: what is the cost or price exacted for these gains? What do such choices exclude or preclude? Wherein lie the trade-offs? If some massaging of elements in the received scripts is to be expected, how much rescripting is “legitimate” to gain a more sympathetic Shylock or an anti-colonialist Ariel? Where is the line between interpretation and translation? In posing such questions, I admit, my own purist gene is never fully recessive, but my goal is to present as judiciously as possible the rationale of both the director and the theatre historian.

In some instances that rationale includes a sense of financial and theatrical exigency. Many of the productions I will be discussing are linked to large theatrical companies with significant resources in terms of budget and personnel: the Royal Shakespeare Company; Stratford Festival Canada; the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. But what if you are a director of a regional repertory company in Virginia with less than four weeks to set up *The Tempest*, your first Shakespeare production ever, and, moreover, you are working with actors with little experience in doing such plays (so that both your Prospero and Ariel have never before done a professional Shakespeare production)? Wherein lies the incentive to dig deeply into the script and wrestle with apparent oddities or difficulties? Rather, if Prospero’s masque in 4.1 (notoriously difficult to bring off) is giving you trouble, why not cut it and reshape the end of 3.1 (Prospero’s observation of Miranda and Ferdinand) to take the omission into account? Similarly, in a 1974 interview Michael Kahn observed that he was “cutting less and less,” with such editing “very often to do with our inadequacies rather than Shakespeare’s.” For example, his first choice would be, despite the obscure jokes, to include the musicians in *Romeo and Juliet* (4.5.96–146), but to cut this sequence means “a great deal of money less on salaries, three fewer costumes, and also four minutes that the audience isn’t going to understand anyway because they don’t have any clues about Simon Catling and ‘heart’s ease’ and all that.”<sup>4</sup> To do such rescripting or rewrighting is therefore to “solve” the problem within your time limit and resources. In such situations wherein lies the inducement to dig deeply for solutions (and maybe come up with nothing) when you can simply cut the Gordian knot and save precious rehearsal time by using the blue pencil? Why privilege Shakespeare and his “intentions” anyway?

Nonetheless, the alternative approach – to play a full text and wrestle with the subsequent problems – is not a stance limited solely to professors far removed from the practicalities of the theatre but is found in the work of such directors as Deborah Warner and Sir Peter Hall and has led to

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

some remarkable productions. In this context Hall's diary entries on his 1975 RNT *Hamlet* are revealing. Given enormous pressure to cut this very long script owing to mounting costs, he laments "So what am I to do?" Although initially reluctant to direct this show, Hall notes: "But I now have a line, an excitement, something to get the adrenalin going" and then adds tellingly: "I don't want to *interpret* the play by cutting it." In the next day's entry he observes: "It seems to me that we have come some distance in the last twenty-five years in understanding the rhythm of a Shakespeare play, how it operates, how one segment reacts on another. We have also come some way in understanding how to speak the verse. But we still cut the text like barbarians. Do we know *what* we cut? And don't we normally cut either to fit some preconceived theory for the production, or because we simply can't make the passage work? I think my future direction in Shakespeare must be to reveal the total object as well as possible. I feel in my blood now that I know how. The cost implications of full length will have to be got over somehow."<sup>5</sup>

## WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

Directors such as Hall and Deborah Warner (in her uncut or nearly uncut productions of *Titus Andronicus*, *King John*, *King Lear*, and *Richard II*) represent one end of a broad spectrum of approaches to rescripting. In the chapters that follow I provide a road map of such choices by means of a wide array of examples placed in a series of sometimes overlapping categories. The most provocative situations arise from a director's decision to update or improve the received text, but in this introductory chapter I will focus primarily on choices linked to practical considerations, most often the desire to cut down on running time and to eliminate elements perceived as obscure, excrescent, awkward, or beyond the resources of a given company.

The logic behind such pragmatic cuts is spelled out by Tom Markus in his description of how he prepared *2 Henry IV* for the Colorado Shakespeare Festival. In his view, "play doctoring is necessary as a result of the differences in the knowledge and beliefs of a contemporary audience from those of one in Shakespeare's era." Included therefore among his guide-lines for such "play doctoring" or rescripting are: "shorten each scene as much as possible . . . eliminate everything that might confuse an audience . . . cut all characters who are unnecessary to the scene . . . cut all scenes which do not advance the story . . . cut or change all words that are archaic or obscure."<sup>6</sup> Here in extreme form is the rationale for

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*“Let it be hid”*: price tags, trade-offs, and economies

7

directorial intervention to bring Shakespeare’s plays more in line with today’s idiom and expectations.

To start at the most fundamental level (in keeping with Markus’s injunction to “cut or change all words that are archaic or obscure”), students of Shakespeare regularly encounter situations wherein a specific word may vary from text to text. Most famous are the many variations in Second Quarto/Folio *Hamlet* such as *solid* versus *sallied/sullied* flesh (1.2.129), *despised* versus *disprized* love (3.1.71), and *scullion* versus *stallion* versus *scallion* (Q1’s delectable version – 2.2.587), but also well known in editorial circles are items such as Othello’s base *Indian/Judean* (5.2.347) and Juliet’s *name/word* (2.2.44). Here is where editors make choices in behalf of their readers. Directors, who may or may not be aware of these interventions, face comparable problems when presenting speeches and interactions to their auditors. An editor may present to the reader a difficult passage and then gloss it by means of an explanatory note, but directors, fearful of losing their auditors and not getting them back, regularly cut or simplify syntactically complex passages or otherwise streamline long speeches, with mythological allusions particularly vulnerable. In the eyes (or ears) of a director, the need for a steady flow of communication without jolts (in the spirit of Markus’s “eliminate everything that might confuse an audience”) takes precedence over textual purism – assuming there is anything “pure” in these muddy waters.

Many of these directorial alterations are tiny and go unnoticed even by veteran playgoers – as when at the outset of *The Taming of the Shrew* (OSF 1991) the hostess’s reference to the *thirdborough* (Induction.1.12 – *headborough* in the Folio) was changed to *third-constable*. In two rival 1999 productions of *Antony and Cleopatra* the Globe director retained Enobarbus’s comment that Antony at Philippi “was troubled with a rheum” (3.2.57), but the RSC director changed *rheum* to *cold*. In the 1994 RSC *Twelfth Night*, Sir Toby described Cesario to Sir Andrew not as “fencer to the *Sophy*” (3.4.279) but rather to “the *Shah of Persia*.” Beatrice grieves that a woman must “make an account of her life to a clod of wayward marl” (2.1.62–63), but the director of the 1989 OSF production changed *marl* to *sod*. In Steven Pimlott’s *Hamlet* (RSC 2001) the poisoned sword wielded by Laertes in the fencing match was not *unbated* but *unblunted* (see 4.7.138, 5.2.317). In Brian Bedford’s 1991 SFC *Othello* Iago called Roderigo a *pimple*, not a *quat* (5.1.11); Desdemona was described as a *treasure craft*, not a *land carract* (1.2.50); and Othello referred to a *reed*, not a *rush* and *judgment day*, not *compt* (5.2.270, 273). Nicholas Hytner’s *Twelfth Night* (Lincoln Center 1998), widely seen on television in the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

United States, provided an unusually large number of such changes: for example, *sink-a-pace* became *hornpipe* (1.3.130–31), *con* became *learn* (1.5.174), *revolve* became *consider* (2.5.143), *chev'nil* became *kid* (3.1.12), *pilchers* became *sardines* (3.1.34), and *barricadoes* became *stone walls* (4.2.37).<sup>7</sup> In the same director's *The Winter's Tale* (RNT 2001), to avoid an unwanted laugh during the final moments at what initially might seem an incongruous image Paulina said not "I, an old *turtle*, / Will wing me to some wither'd bough" (5.3.132–33) but *turtledove*.

Often changes are occasioned by a combination of difficult phrasing and tangled syntax. In his *Coriolanus* (RSC Swan 1994) David Thacker sidestepped a notable puzzle (to which the Arden 2 editor devotes a long note) by cutting "make you a sword of me?" (1.6.76). A pet passage of mine in piecing out an interpretation of *King Lear* (Kent's disquisition on the "holy cords" [2.2.73–80]) is regularly omitted or pared back on-stage (as in Adrian Noble's 1993 RSC production) owing to syntactical difficulty and the presence of phrases such as "halcyon beaks." I should note, however, that when in a lecture at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival I lamented the absence of these lines from the 1976 production, director Pat Patton shrewdly noted that in discussing it for my auditors I instinctively paraphrased the passage, rearranging the word order and explaining the hard words, an option not available to the actor playing Kent. Comparable passages also disappear, as when Brian Bedford (SFC 1991) eliminated Othello's "Exchange me for a goat" phrasing (3.3.180–83), presumably because of "exsufficate and blown surmises," and several other hard passages (e.g., Brabantio's lines on "the bruise'd heart" being "pierced through the ear" – 1.3.219). Perhaps most subject to such changes is *Love's Labor's Lost* with its many puns and learned quibbles. Even a lightly cut production such as OSF 1980 omitted both the fox-ape-humblebee passage involving Armado, Moth, and Costard (3.1.83–103) and the final forty lines of 4.1, a witty and bawdy exchange among Boyet, Rosaline, Maria, and Costard. Also often pared back are a variety of obscure or syntactically difficult passages in *All's Well That Ends Well* (OSF 1975, DC 1988, PRC 2001), especially the speeches of Lavatch – and Jon Jory (OSF 1975) omitted this figure entirely and substituted three *commedia* jesters who provided acrobatics, mimicry, and dumb shows and, after his exposure in 4.3, received Parolles as one of their own.

Sometimes in-the-theatre changes occur when words or phrases are deemed offensive or politically incorrect. Prominent among the casualties are Portia's comment on the departed Morocco "Let all of his

complexion choose me so” (*The Merchant of Venice*, 2.7.79), the third witch’s “Liver of blaspheming Jew” (*Macbeth*, 4.1.26), and Benedick’s “if I do not love her, I am a Jew” (*Much Ado About Nothing*, 2.3.263). The first two items are often omitted, whereas Benedick’s *Jew* has been changed to *knave* (OSF 1989), *fool* (RSC 1990) or, as reported to me from another recent production, *jerk*. Moreover, some directorial ears are more sensitive than others. The director of the 1995 DC *Macbeth* changed Macduff’s “Be not a *niggard* of your speech” (4.3.180) to *miser*, and the director of the 1995 PRC *Othello* omitted such lines as “Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (1.3.290) and “Haply, for I am black” (3.3.263).<sup>8</sup> The latter cut may also have been influenced by Othello’s subsequent comment that “I am declin’d / Into the vale of years” (3.3.265–66), for in this production a youngish actor was cast in the role (“the vale of years” also disappeared in RSC 1999 where a thirty-year-old Ray Fearon played Othello). In a virtually uncut *Othello* (SFC 1979) Othello’s famous speech building to his suicide was not interrupted by the brief lines from Lodovico and Gratiano, a standard adjustment. In this instance, however, the two interjections were not omitted to enhance the dramatic rhythm but because, in a production that was to end its run with a series of matinees for high school students, the director and her actors were fearful of losing this climactic moment when Lodovico, in front of 2,000 teenagers, exclaimed: “O bloody period!” (5.2.357).

Changes or elisions are not linked solely to obscurity or political correctness. Iago tells Othello that Cassio used the handkerchief to “wipe his *beard*” (3.3.439), but if the actor is clean-shaven, *beard* becomes *mouth* or *face*. Similarly, Malcolm’s “ne’er pull your hat upon your brows” (4.3.208) will often disappear (as in OSF 1987) if directed at a Macduff not wearing a hat. In *The Tempest* Antonio mockingly describes Adrian as a *cockerel* (2.1.31), but, given a small cast for a touring show, David Thacker (RSC Swan 1995) opted for an Adriana played by an actress and therefore changed the term to *hen*; similarly, if Alonzo is played by an actress as Alonza (PRC 1998), Ariel’s “three men of sin” (3.3.53) directed at Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio becomes inappropriate, so *men* became *creatures*. In a production of *Hamlet* (RSC 2001) in which the same older actor doubled as the ghost and Osric, the director cut references to “young Osric” (5.2.196, 259). Productions of *Much Ado* often omit Borachio’s line to Conrade “Stand thee close then under this penthouse, for it drizzles rain” (3.3.103–4) as in RSC 1990 where the garden set had no such overhang. Also often adjusted is Tybalt’s angry comment on Romeo’s presence, “This, by his voice, should be a Montague”

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

(1.5.54), as when Jim Edmondson (OSF 1975) inserted a dance between Romeo's speech (44–53) and Tybalt's reaction and therefore changed *voice* to *face*.

As evident in such examples the rationale behind pragmatic cuts can vary widely. Whether for practical or conceptual reasons, directors of *The Winter's Tale* (e.g. RSC 1981, RSC 1992) omit Leontes's first reaction to Hermione's "statue" ("Hermione was not so much wrinkled, nothing/ So aged as this seems") and Paulina's response ("So much the more our carver's excellence, / Which lets go by some sixteen years" – 5.3.28–31). An award-winning Falstaff (John Woodvine) explained to me that Sir John's camomile passage at the outset of his rendition of Henry IV (that starts "for though the camomile, the more it is trodden on, the faster it grows" – 2.4.399–401) disappears because if it is included the beat is too long for an actor to sustain. Adrian Noble cut the opening lines of 1.2 from his *Henry V* (RSC 1984) because in his production the dialogue between the two clergymen that constitutes 1.1 was presented with Henry V and various lords in view elsewhere onstage; since the Archbishop never exited, Henry's call for his presence ("Where is my gracious Lord of Canterbury?" – 1.2.1) became superfluous. A small pragmatic adjustment was made by director Mark Rucker in his production of *Titus Andronicus* (SSC 1988). In the script, Marcus's first line after the four murders in 5.3 is: "You sad-fac'd men, people and sons of Rome," but at some performances the rapidity of these murders elicited titters from the Santa Cruz audience. Since in this rendition Marcus was addressing his lines to the playgoers rather than to actors playing onstage Romans, the actor had the option to omit the first three words so as not to label a gaggle of giggling onlookers as "you sad-fac'd men."

Adjustments also occur when shows are updated to later periods. The 1998 Cheek by Jowl *Much Ado About Nothing* was set in turn-of-the-century England, so that Dogberry and Verges became bobbies, the watch carried *truncheons* rather than *bills* (3.3.41), swords were eliminated (the various challenges in 5.1 were realized by means of gloves), and various lines inappropriate to 1900 were gone (e.g., "What a pretty thing man is when he goes in his doublet and hose and leaves off his wit!" – 5.1.199–200). In her *The Taming of the Shrew* (RSC 1995) Gale Edwards omitted Biondello's elaborate description of the approaching Petruchio and Grumio (3.2.43–71) which was out of phase with the actual costuming or mode of transportation: this Petruchio arrived in a red Fiat and sported multi-colored, parrot-like feathers, a toucan-beaked hat, a boxing glove on his left hand, green boots, and a huge codpiece; Grumio