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Erin M. Ritchie

Brigham Young University - Provo, erinmatheson6394@gmail.com

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Wherefore art Thou, Bae Romeo?

An Argument for Modernizing
Shakespeare's Texts

Erin Ritchie

Shakespeare's plays have been adapted thousands of times from generation to generation, each with updated settings, plot points, and concepts to mirror the values of the current society and critique social issues, as Shakespeare's works did with Elizabethan England—setting *Romeo and Juliet* in Verona, California with mobsters; reversing the racial roles of *Othello* into an all-black cast with a white Othello. While these updated adaptations offer unique insights into the cultures that produce them, they often draw their lines solely from the original text. However, there is a growing niche of Shakespeare adaptations in a variety of mediums that toy not just with elements of staging and production, but with the text as well. Because the text is considered as some of the finest English work, changes to the text are widely discouraged. When changes to the text with the intent of modernizing it occur, they are often critiqued as simplifying timeless classics for the lazy readers of today. However, I argue that twenty-first century Shakespearean adaptations that translate the original text into modern English vocabulary provide new ways to express the same universal social commentaries on

love, sacrifice, and ambition for a wider audience, while honoring Shakespeare's innovative wordplay and word-creation with our changing, growing millennial vocabulary.

Before we examine Shakespeare's texts and the modernization targeting that text, we must understand that a Shakespearean-era view of words was a utilitarian one. During the Renaissance, the ability to communicate ideas clearly was valued over the ability to choose elegant words with which to communicate those ideas. Language was viewed as a vehicle to convey concepts with rather than something to be valued independently for its structural beauty. It "existed to communicate people's ideas to other people—so the best language was that which communicated to the largest number of people" (Hope 6). This functionalist view based on language's communicative efficiency values the enabling power of language that allows us to transfer thoughts to a large audience. In Elizabethan England, language that "did not communicate across society" or "create society was pointless" (6).

While language was valued primarily as a vehicle of ideas rather than something inherently meaningful during his lifetime, Shakespeare's wordplay demonstrated language's ability to communicate complex ideas in beautiful ways. Although language's practical value was more important than its aesthetic value, wordplay was "a game the Elizabethans played seriously" (Mahood 55). They engaged in various forms of wordplay both in conversation and writing. According to Jonathan Hope, it denoted "intelligence and social engagement in the Renaissance" period (43). William Shakespeare mastered this game, to the delight of his contemporaries. Called "the master of the English language," he crams his plays full of hybrids of existing words and sly puns designed to complicate the meaning of the lines (Cox 1). Shakespeare generated new words and compound words, changed parts of speech into other parts of speech, and added prefixes or suffixes to common words—a blend of techniques that organize words into "intricate and pleasing patterns" (Womack 4). His wordplay has generated commonplace English words that have slowly been accepted as traditional parts of speech. We rarely trace them back to their origins nor realize how untoward the caliber and frequency of his new words was, even from a time period that valued wordplay. The word *uncomfortable* was first coined in *Romeo and Juliet* as Capulet howls, "Uncomfortable time, why camest thou now?" when he discovers Juliet's body (Shakespeare n.p.). Pithy sayings such as "Violent delights have violent ends" and "Parting is such sweet sorrow" both were first created by Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare n.p.).

The phrase “wild goose chase” originated with a speech from Mercutio claiming that Romeo’s wits were “run[ning] the wild-goose chase” as he fantasized over Juliet (Shakespeare n.p.). Examining phrases that Shakespeare coined helps us understand how revolutionary his wordplay was and why his innovative imagery is valued by scholars for its ability to communicate common ideas in beautiful ways.

Because Shakespeare’s language is so popular, especially among scholars, English adaptations that alter the text of his plays are met with resistance and dismissal. Professor James Shapiro denounces making changes to Shakespeare’s texts with a metaphor about beer: “I drink 8.2 percent IPA, and by changing the language in this modernizing way, it’s basically shifting to Bud Light [which] just doesn’t pack the punch and the excitement and the intoxicating quality of that language” (Scott 4). Shapiro is not entirely wrong; adapting Shakespeare’s original texts inevitably loses some of the richness of the play. The No Fear modern translation of Juliet’s first words to Romeo does clarify the meaning of her speech: “After all, pilgrims touch the hands of statues of saints. Holding one palm against another is like a kiss” (“No Fear Shakespeare” 5). Yet it simply does not compare to the original speech’s wording: “For saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch, and palm to palm is holy palmers’ kiss” (Shakespeare n.p.). Understandably, literary purists argue against altering the Bard’s original wording. But Molly Mahood says that Shakespeare’s wordplay serves to clarify “the conflict of incompatible truths” in his plays and provides a “valuable means of access to the heart of the drama,” suggesting that while the wordplay should be treasured for its poetry and inherent beauty, it also functions as a tool through which Shakespeare expresses thoughts about and exposes tensions between the themes, such as love and sacrifice, that he tackles in many of his plays (Mahood 55–56). This functionalist view reflects the popular ideas about language of Shakespeare’s day, though it often takes a backseat to the assumption that Shakespeare’s value lies “not in his complicated characters or carefully orchestrated scenes or subtle ideas but in the singularity of his words” (Pollack-Pelzner 1).

However, Shakespeare’s language is not what appeals to his worldwide audience; the universally relatable themes of love, sacrifice, and ambition (among others) that he chronicles resonate with people with or without his original masterful wording to embellish them. His fame is often assumed to be connected to “his masterful use of the English language,” but translator AJ Hoenselaars explains that “more often than not . . . people’s familiarity

with Shakespeare around the globe comes via translations of his plays and poems into languages other than the playwright's own Early Modern English" (Hoenselaars 1). The argument that Shakespeare's original words must be preserved in English adaptations because of their brilliance loses its impact when we realize that all translations of Shakespeare forfeit his original wording in order to make his messages accessible for more audiences. To demonstrate the textual differences that inevitably occur when translating Shakespeare between languages, let us examine the Prince's final speech in the last act of *Romeo and Juliet*. In the original text, the Prince declares, "A glooming peace this morning with it brings: the sun for sorrow will not show his head . . . For never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo" (Shakespeare n.p.). A transcript of American Sign Language, or ASL, explains the signs that the translator needs to perform in order to approximate this message to their audience. The periods between each letter indicate the need to spell out the word by letter; the hyphenated words indicate combining existing signs to create that specific meaning. In sign language, the Prince might sign, "Peace have but bad, bad (head shake). We-all go-away (in off-stage direction) . . . Why? Never before story worse never. (Indicate the couple) J.U.L.I.E.T. R.O.M.E.O. Both. Sympathy" (Hoenselaars 210). Although this is a rough estimate of the play's wording, the ASL translation communicates the essential plot points and themes of the Prince's speech, albeit in a less sophisticated way. Yet when one considers the Renaissance view of language—that language is most valuable when it communicates ideas between the largest number of people possible—does the sign language not complete that task even if it loses the elegance of Shakespeare's phrasing? The phrasing is not as valuable as the comprehensibility, for we must understand something before we can appreciate the wording. If translating Shakespeare into other languages allows the non-English speaking world majority to understand his messages, which are at the heart of his wordplay, then that is worth the losses in intricate phrasing and the complexity such wordplay can add to the plot. As Hoenselaars explains, Shakespeare's plays have transcended centuries and cultural boundaries, remaining relevant today "despite the inaccessibility of the language to the modern audience" because of the "power of the plots" and the "nuances of the sub-plots, the richness of the characters, the tragedy of Lear and Cordelia, the twist of fate in *Romeo and Juliet*" (213). While Shakespeare's original words can be more elegant than their translations, the ideas in his plays still resonate with his global audience.

The value in adapting the original language of Shakespeare's plays to modern English so his commentary can engage a wider English-speaking audience justifies the changes to the text. Linguistic professor John McWhorter poses the following questions: "Do you want to listen to an English that we really can no longer take in without being scholars who are spending the kind of time that most of us . . . don't really have time for? Or we sacrifice some of that detail, some of that exquisiteness, so that we can get, say 95 percent of what the man meant?" (Shockman 1). While the basic gist of Shakespeare's plays is easy to grasp—each one has something to do with love or sacrifice or ambition, one could argue—some of the text is difficult to understand not because of the ornate language, but because of the antiquated social commentary and the changed meanings of words. Shakespeare often set his works in foreign countries and used the guise of telling foreign, fictional stories to "discuss the state of contemporary England without getting into trouble with the authorities" (Hoesenlaars 45). However, those subtle commentaries on Elizabethan England are lost on the modern audience who has little background studying literature, theatre or history. Bluntly put, those allusions are culturally irrelevant to today's pop culture and consequently, their wit and political weight is lost on modern audiences.

Furthermore, many words Shakespeare uses and puns with their meanings have changed in definition over the last five centuries. Though the changes in meaning for some words do not impact our overall understanding of the plot, they do impact our ability to understand several quick-witted jokes without "consulting stacks of footnotes" (McWhorter 1). McWhorter argues that "Shakespeare didn't intend for us" to not understand his text because "he wrote plays for performances" that were supposed to be understood by all "in real time" as the plays progress, not only by poring over the text (McWhorter 1). Recently, Oregon's Shakespeare Festival has commissioned a variety of playwrights to modernize all of Shakespeare's thirty-nine plays, with the intent of performing all of these plays over the course of a few seasons so that a wider audience could enjoy the gripping, relatable plots without getting lost in outdated illusions and antiquated language. Five of those plays' texts are already being modified and are slated for performance during the next annual festival season in 2016. This project was met with some disapproval from the general public, even though the Festival made it clear that their intent was to remain as faithful to the original text as possible while simplifying some of the most confusing parts of the text that bog down the action of the play. Aaron Scott

defended this modernization by explaining that “playwright Kenneth Cavandar says that people came up to him after the world premiere of [a modern adaptation of] ‘Timon of Athens’ at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in 2014 to say this was the first time they’d fully understood the Bard” (Scott 4). Modernizing the text allows theatergoers to better understand what occurs and what is spoken onstage without sacrificing the enduring ideas about love and other facets of humanity that Shakespeare’s original plays conveyed.

Adapting Shakespeare’s plays to modern English not only engages a wider audience, but it also emulates his innovative wordplay by reworking his texts to reflect our changing, growing millennial vocabulary. One argument that appeared in the *New York Times* against the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s project to modernize the language of Shakespeare’s plays exclaims, “Why not just rewrite Shakespeare in emoticons and text acronyms?” Much to this traditionalist’s horror, exactly that has already been done earlier this year in the book, *YOLO Juliet*. Translating some of Shakespeare’s most famous lines and wordplay into emojis while retaining not only the intent of the original speeches but also a large portion of the original text’s wording (albeit through pictures) is innovative, much in the same way that Shakespeare’s combining and altering of existing words from the Elizabethan English vocabulary was. When Paris presses Lord Capulet about marrying Juliet, he asks, “My lord, what say you to my suit?” and Capulet responds, “Let two more summers wither in their pride ere we may think her ripe to be a bride” (Shakespeare n.p.). In the *YOLO Juliet* version of this interaction, as displayed in Appendix Figures 1 and 2, the emoji-laden text messages not only simplify the exchange, but add humor to an otherwise humorless discussion. The humor in the adaptation stems from the juxtaposition of the conversation’s formal subject—a marriage suit declined by a protective father—and the medium used to conduct this conversation—a series of iMessages, perhaps the least formal means of communication available today. As Hoenselaars explains, “Language is invested with the values and norms of society” (34). The language used in these text messages reflects the speech of today, just as Shakespeare’s wordplay, with its heavy emphasis on puns, reflected the Elizabethan language trends of his day.

The creation of modern adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays allows the millennial generation to engage with the original text as they modify it to make social commentaries on the present day, as Shakespeare did with his original works about Elizabethan England. Another modern textual adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* occurred when an anonymous Internet user created

a set of social media interactions designed to sum up the play, using fake accounts named after the characters of the play to interact with each other on Facebook. As seen in Appendix Figure 3, the timeline of the play is summed up in a series of fictional Facebook posts, events, and groups that outline the major plot points of the tragedy. In the original play, Mercutio challenges Tybalt to fight by declaring he wants “one of your nine lives” and drawing his sword (Shakespeare n.p.). However, this Facebook adaptation notes the fight that leads to Mercutio’s death by posting a notification that “Tybalt and Mercutio are attending DUEL,” where “DUEL” is an event that both Tybalt and Mercutio’s profiles have been invited to (Fig. 3). The humor in this adaptation hinges on the joke that millennials’ real lives are entwined with their virtual lives. The idea that had *Romeo and Juliet* occurred today, Mercutio may have challenged Tybalt to a deadly fight using the social standard for making plans—a Facebook event—is humorous, yet it offers some social commentary on the pervasive use of social networking today. Similar fake accounts for other Shakespeare plays have been created on a variety of social media platforms, including Instagram and Twitter. They poke fun at Juliet by imagining what she might have titled her Instagram pictures with as she fell in love with Romeo. Would she post one final selfie before stabbing herself in the name of true love, captioning it, “O happy dagger! This is thy sheath!” (Shakespeare n.p.). These community-created adaptations allow the millennial generation to make Shakespeare’s words their own using a medium native to them. Creating modern English adaptations and parodies of these plays in any medium demonstrates an advanced understanding of the text necessary to adapt it into another vernacular while retaining the meaning of the original text. If these young adults driving Shakespearean adaptations, especially ones conducted using the social media slang that has developed recently, are able to manipulate their regularly changing vocabulary in order to make the same universal commentaries as the Bard did while injecting their adaptations with culturally relevant humor, they not only understand but appreciate the original text enough to make it their own. Doing so is a tribute to Shakespeare’s wordplay rather than desecration of the “best writing in the English language” (Mabillard 1). Modern adaptations allow Shakespeare’s plays to transfer thoughts to a large audience and in this way staying true to the standards of Elizabethan language.

Experimenting with and updating Shakespeare’s ideas through adaptation allows us to not only identify and connect with the universal values his plays espouse, but to rework them into social commentaries with the same punch

that his originals had because the subjects of his plays—love, sacrifice, ambition, to name a few—are still integral parts of the human experience. It allows us to experience the same masterful plots and enduring characters without getting confused by outdated word usage or allusions. In short, the language of modernized adaptations of Shakespeare allows his ideas to be communicated to an even broader audience than he has already reached, fulfilling the primary purpose of language that Shakespeare’s era so valued. The processes and results of modernizing the language of Shakespeare’s plays not only communicate across societal boundaries, but also continue to shape our understanding of humanity just as the Bard’s original work did nearly five centuries ago.

Appendix

Figure 1

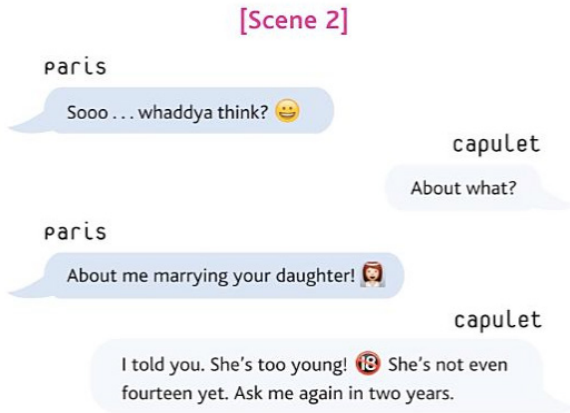


Figure 2

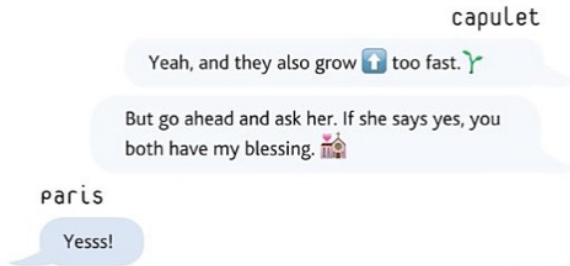


Figure 3

RECENT ACTIVITY

-  **Count Paris and Juliet Capulet** are now friends.
About 2 days ago [Comment](#) • [Like](#)
-  **Lord Capulet** likes this.
-  **Peter, Samson and Gregory and 11 others** are attending **Capulet Ball**.
About 2 days ago [Comment](#) • [Like](#) • [RSVP to this Event](#)
-  **Romeo Montague and Rosaline Capulet** are in a relationship
About 2 days ago [Comment](#) • [Like](#)
-  **Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet** are now friends.
About 1 day ago [Comment](#) • [Like](#)
-  **Romeo Montague** is single.
About 1 day ago [Comment](#) • [Like](#)
- Rosaline I effin h8 u.**
-  **Tybalt and Mercutio** are attending **DUEL**.
About 1 day ago [Comment](#) • [Like](#) • [RSVP to this Event](#)
-  **Romeo Montague and 58 others** have joined the group **RIP Mercutio**.
About 8 hours ago [Comment](#) • [Like](#)
-  **Lady Capulet and 34 others** have joined the group **RIP Tybalt**.
About 8 hours ago [Comment](#) • [Like](#) • [RSVP to this Event](#)
- Juliet Capulet** ▸ **Romeo Montague**: :)
About 4 hours ago [Comment](#) • [Like](#)
-  **Lord Paris and 135 others** have joined the group **RIP Juliet**.
20 minutes ago [Comment](#) • [Like](#) • [RSVP to this Event](#)
-  **Lord Capulet, Lady Capulet and 3 others** have joined the group **RIP Paris**.
15 minutes ago [Comment](#) • [Like](#)
-  **Benvolio and 62 others** have joined the group **RIP Romeo**.
12 minutes ago [Comment](#) • [Like](#)
-  **Lord Capulet and 6 others** have joined the group **RIP2 Juliet**.
8 minutes ago [Comment](#) • [Like](#)
-  **Lord Capulet** is attending **Poison Prevention Education**.
Moments ago [Comment](#) • [Like](#) • [RSVP to this Event](#)

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