Shakespeare Retold by and with Women

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Abstract: Recent seasons on the British stage have shown the increase of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays that are not merely aesthetic revisions nor textual reductions but full and innovative rewritings by contemporary playwrights, though what is striking in the post-noughties is that most of them enhance the female roles in a radical way. This has been the case of *Emilia* by Morgan Lloyd Malcolm, a play starring the Sonnets' Dark Lady. When it was produced at the Globe in 2019, three black actresses shared the main part while another one performed Shakespeare. The play was also directed by a woman, Nicole Charles. As for *The Cordelia Dream* written by Marina Carr, it was produced by the RSC in 2008 and, more recently, at the Irish Repertory Theatre in July 2021 (dir. Joe O'Byrne), illustrating the conflictual relationship between a father and his favourite but too neglected daughter. If the attraction for Shakespeare's background as well as for the reinvention of his plays are not new, the motivations underlying the recent rewritings and the impact they generate on Shakespearean scholars, readers and audiences should be questioned. This article proposes to investigate on the way four authors have recently reworked two of the playwright's direst plays—*King Lear* and *Othello*—from a feminine (and feminist?) point of view. While studying Marina Carr's *The Cordelia Dream*, Toni Morrison's *Desdemona*, Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters* and Paula Vogel's *Desdemona, a Play with a Handkerchief*, we shall interrogate the notion of adaptation that makes repetition and renewal cohabit, so that we better remember and forget Shakespeare all at one time.

Résumé : Récemment les théâtres britanniques ont programmé un grand nombre d'adaptations de pièces de Shakespeare qui ne sont pas simplement des révisions esthétiques ou des réductions textuelles, mais des réécritures complètes et novatrices par des dramaturges contemporains, mais ce qui frappe depuis les années 2000, c'est que la plupart d'entre elles mettent sur le devant de la scène les rôles féminins de

manière radicale. C'est le cas *d'Emilia* de Morgan Lloyd Malcolm, une pièce qui met en scène la Dame noire des Sonnets. Lors de sa création au Globe en 2019, sous la direction d'une femme, Nicole Charles, trois actrices noires se sont partagé le rôle principal tandis qu'une autre interprétait Shakespeare. *The Cordelia Dream*, écrite par Marina Carr, a quant à elle été créée par la RSC en 2008 et, plus récemment, a été montée à l'Irish Repertory Theatre en juillet 2021 sous la direction de Joe O'Byrne, illustrant la relation conflictuelle entre un père et sa fille préférée mais trop négligée. Si l'attrait pour la vie de Shakespeare et pour la réinvention de ses pièces n'a rien de nouveau, il convient de s'interroger sur les motivations qui sous-tendent les récentes réécritures et sur l'impact qu'elles produisent sur les spécialistes de Shakespeare, les lecteurs et le public. Cet article se propose d'étudier la manière dont quatre auteurs ont récemment retravaillé deux des pièces les plus funestes du dramaturge - *Le Roi Lear* et *Othello* - d'un point de vue féminin (et féministe ?). En étudiant *The Cordelia Dream* de Marina Carr, *Desdemona* de Toni Morrison, *Lear's Daughters* d'Elaine Feinstein et *Desdemona, a Play with a Handkerchief* de Paula Vogel, nous interrogerons la notion d'adaptation qui fait cohabiter répétition et renouvellement, pour mieux nous souvenir et oublier Shakespeare tout à la fois.

Keywords: feminist adaptation; women on stage; Shakespeare; *King Lear*; *Othello*

Mots-clés : adaptation féministe ; femmes au théâtre ; Shakespeare ; *King lear* ; *Othello*

Theoretical approaches to Shakespeare's drama have exponentially tackled reflexions on adaptation over the past decades, taking into account not only scenographic and cinematic adaptations – two categories we could range in the field of 'visual' adaptations – but also 'textual' adaptations involving rewritings such as screenplays, novels,

scripts for VR and immersive experiences. We should however here recall that adaptation is essential to theatre as Margherita Laera states in her introduction:

> Theatre returns, it always does. […] It refashions beliefs, **recycles** old and used objects and reassembles them into new embodied experiences. Above all, theatre **repeats** […] and the act of returning and rewriting, as though it were struck by a compulsive compulsion to **re-iterate** and **re-enact**, again and again, the vestiges of its past. […] Theatre never stops adapting its features to the world and the world to its features. (Laera 1, emphasis mine)

Thus, as Margherita Laera points out, theatre is a fertile material for *re*-invention, *re*-newal, *re*-production, the 're' being included in the word 'rehearsal' that is central in the dramatic process. Theatre is intrinsically based on a repetitive *modus operandi*. Furthermore, the etymology of the word 'rehearsal' is particularly relevant in Shakespearean studies because its meaning of "practice (a play, part, etc.) in private for a public performance" (Etymonline) dates from the 1570s in England, which is a period contemporary to Shakespeare's early career. In Shakespeare's time, regular performances came with professional practice as well as with the development of editing initiatives. Theatre progressively ceased to be an ephemeral process whereby a play vanished in oblivion just after having been produced once or twice. Thereafter it became a commercial industry that could evolve and be amended over time.[1]

Hence, the history of Shakespeare's canon is a story of adaptation. As some scholars have highlighted in book collections and essays,[2] from the Renaissance to the Restoration and then from Romantic to Modern settings, plays have gone through multiple transformations. Even the Royal Shakespeare Company's recent policy has been encouraging directors to produce new plays based on Shakespeare's life and work.[3] This may seem quite paradoxical because it is a way of maintaining a form of tradition whereby a former play is kept alive thanks to its performance but not its original script. In other words, institutional companies such as the RSC encourage their authors to remember the past of the Shakespearean text the better to offer it a

new language, a new aesthetics and a new meaning. In the section "New Plays and Writers" on their website, Erica Whyman, the RSC deputy artistic director writes:

> Our job is to connect contemporary writers and audiences to the spirit of Shakespeare. […] He and his contemporaries had a strong sense of the world in which they were living and how it was changing. That's something we inherit directly from them. By including writers and new plays we keep our work new and daring, just as Shakespeare's work was in his own time. ("New Plays and Writers.")

It is therefore a challenging experience for a scholar to investigate this new theatrical material that takes Shakespeare's canon as a reference while transforming and reinventing it. It fits one of Linda Hutcheon's defining principles of the adaptation, that is "repetition with variation" (4) or "without replication" (7). In the present study, we shall use the word 'adaptation' in its broader sense, which is "the action or process of adapting one thing to fit with another, or suit specified conditions […]"' (*OED*, 1610). Each time another equivalent term will be mentioned, we shall justify why. Finally, adaptation also interrogates the method used by contemporary playwrights who rewrite iconic texts, and their purpose in doing so.

To reflect on those questions, this article focuses on four plays that have offered new approaches to Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Othello* over the past decades. In their chronological order, these are Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters* (1987), Paula Vogel's *Desdemona, a Play About a Handkerchief* (1994), Marina Carr's *The Cordelia Dream* (2008) and Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* (2012). If one of their common features is to retell famous tragedies (and not comedies or romances), the reasons for their being part of this corpus that excludes other adaptations of the same plays[4] are first to focus on one adaptation per decade, and second to offer a representative set of samples highlighting the evolution of Shakespearean adaptation on stage. Another argument will be to consider these rewritings from a feminine/feminist perspective since they have all been written *by* women, *about* women, and predominantly *with* women on stage. Finally, it is interesting to wonder why women from different countries and backgrounds come

back to William Shakespeare and to these two works – *King Lear* and *Othello* – specifically.

We shall reflect on the key features and the structure of these compositions that have triggered either controversy or laudatory criticism. Can we consider them as "appropriations" and mere "revisionings" alongside with Sujata Iyengar (59)? Or is the purpose of adaptation to "writ[e] the present [in order to] exorcise the past" as Margaret Jane Kidnie states (70)? This is what we endeavour to discover in the following study.

Context of composition and structure of the plays

More than a single female artist's rewriting, *Lear's Daughters* is presented as a "co-creation" of Elaine Feinstein and the Women's Theatre Group (the WTG now called the Sphynx), a feminist theatre company[5] born in England in the 1970s. Apart from triggering problems of authorship due to its collective authorial penname, *Lear's Daughters* also questions the way an adaptation comes into being and what has stimulated its main features. Some of the strategies of the WTG have been to pay particular attention to feminist content (excluding male-dominant implications), and extensively use improvisation as well as multi-racial casting. In the play, the father, Lear, is absent as well as all the other male characters except the Fool, who is however named "she". *Lear's Daughters* is a prequel to Shakespeare's play: composed in fourteen scenes and casting five women – Cordelia, Regan, Goneril, the Fool and the nurse – it recounts the past of King Lear, his wife and their daughters' childhood. The prose is elliptic; cues are brief, often monosyllabic, and the tone is humorous despite darker undertones. It recounts the frustrations of Regan and Goneril whose sister Cordelia has always been their father's favourite. The story is interspersed with anecdotes and tales that shed light on more psychological traits in order to prepare Lear's downfall and the elder daughters' rebellion later, in Shakespeare's play.

Paula Vogel's *Desdemona, a Play with a Handkerchief* also focuses on the story of the women of Shakespeare's play: Emilia, Bianca and of

course, Desdemona. As a note for the directors states in the incipit of the script: "Desdemona was written in thirty cinematic 'takes'. [Therefore] the director is encouraged to create different pictures to stimulate the process of filming […]" (Vogel *in* Fischlin and Fortier 236). The plot is expected to unfold in a backroom of the palace of Cyprus, in an indeterminate time ("ages ago"), one day before Desdemona's death. Contrary to Shakespeare's heroine, Vogel's Desdemona is unfaithful to her husband with the entire garrison, and when she learns that Othello is informed about it, desperately looks for her handkerchief. The plot revolves around the place of women in a male society: Bianca, the prostitute, and Desdemona have become friends and delight in recounting their sexual infidelities while Emilia abhors such behaviour. As in Shakespeare's play, Iago (Emilia's husband) plots against Othello, and the handkerchief is the agent for both his and Desdemona's destruction. Beyond this parallel motif, however, Vogel addresses the Shakespearean play's gaps and silences: "*Desdemona* provides us with everything that Shakespeare denies us: full portraits of three women… high spirits which do not willingly suffer their men's foolishness, no easy acquiescence to being victimized, even a lusty frank sexuality" (Dace 253).

A similar treatment can be observed in Toni Morrison's adaptation. Her *Desdemona* is also the product of a collaboration: it is a literary and musical play composed with Rokia Traoré, a Malian singer and musician. Both of them have imagined what happened before *Othello* and more specifically what inhabited the past of the female characters. For example, what the "Willow song" refers to or who Barbary (mentioned in Shakespeare's play) was, become central subjects of the adaptation. Alternating dialogues with songs, this short play explores the secrets of the source-text, its misinformation and innuendoes, while questioning its gender and racial issues. It leads us to consider whether Shakespeare cared about African people's concerns when he composed *Othello* and, in fact, why he wrote on a black man confronted to the Western civilization while having scarce historical knowledge about the subject-matter. Other mysteries pervade the play: why are Othello and Iago mutually dependent? Why does Emilia – who is present in almost all the scenes and knows the importance of the handkerchief – remain

silent? Morrison and Traoré "[offer] some missing pieces and wider perspectives," Peter Sellars writes. "Women now have the scope to speak their minds and their hearts, and Africa is real, not just imagined" (11).

I purposefully break the chronology to conclude on Marina Carr's *Cordelia Dream* though it was published and performed before Morrison's *Desdemona.* Being the product of a woman-writer, the point of view is here undoubtedly gender-focused. Two unnamed characters – "Man" and "Woman" – are alone on stage. A grand piano is the essential prop for music, which is fundamental to give the play its frame. At the beginning of Act One, stage directions announce: "*The Old Man sits at the grand piano playing a beautiful melody*" (Carr 7) and at the end "*Music. Light down*" (27); the same occurs in Act Two: "*We hear it. Piano and strings*" (28); "*Man plays a beautiful, haunting sonata. Lights fade. End*" (52). Man is a pianist and Woman's father. As the characters converse within the two-act-long plot, we learn that their tense relationship has led the woman to commit suicide. She used to be a musician too, yet was considered as a rival in her art by her father whose authority eventually silenced her (we also learn that he locked the piano for his wife not to play either). The link with Shakespeare's *King Lear* is explicit through a few cues and allusions, and obviously because of the title. Early in the play, the woman justifies her presence saying she had a dream in which she heard "the four howls in *King Lear*" (Carr 17). If Marina Carr later implies that the woman reflects Shakespeare's Cordelia – "In the dream Lear comes on with the dead Cordelia and it's you and I" (19) – her play is not a rewriting of *King Lear*'s plot. It is anchored in a contemporary context and, apart from the allusions to Shakespearean names, the considerations lead the audience/reader to ponder about filial bonds threatened by ambition and pride whatever the context and age. Carr's play does not shed a light on Shakespeare's possible implicit issues. It is the opposite: *King Lear* stirs contemporary debates. When for instance Man claims that "[Cordelia's] death was necessary for her father's salvation" (Carr 18), it foreshadows the reconciliation in death that occurs at the end of the play between him and Woman, thus alluding to a topical human reality: we acknowledge our flaws (such as defective communication and missed love) too late.

As in the other adaptations, Carr's play also highlights women's debased condition and, as a female playwright, she tries to give them a new voice. In her two previous retakes of Shakespeare, *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *Ariel* (2002) respectively inspired by *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest*, "[h]er focus [was] on female figures who are silent, sidelined or stifled" (Maley and Van der Ziel 8), but there too she drastically departed from the original narrative and structure. Such considerations may lead us to moderate the way we have used the word 'adaptation' so far and to question whether we can indifferently categorize a play adapted from another as such. Walking in Ruby Cohn's steps, shouldn't we, instead, name them "offshoots", or like Julie Sanders "appropriations"?[6]

"Appropriation as revisioning" (Iyengar 59)

Despite their distinct features, the four plays maintain an obvious link with their hypotexts, whether *Lear* or *Othello,* and trigger key questions about the process of adaptation: how can we explore the meaning of such canonical works further (by a prequel, a sequel or a retelling)? How can the author be inspired from them without being restricted in her choices? In other words, is it possible for contemporary playwrights to reinvent and appropriate world-famous tales successfully? As Julie Sanders defines them, adaptations that tend to be radical, adopting "a posture of critique, even assault" should instead be called "appropriations" (4). In her definition of the term, she highlights the necessity that writers find of taking "a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (Sanders 26). Additionally, in the third chapter of her analysis, she concentrates on Shakespeare's oeuvre as the privileged material that is, as Ben Jonson put it "not of an age but of all time", and that can be "adapt[ed]" and "adopt[ed]" by all generations (48).

One of the motivations that led Paula Vogel to write a new version of *Othello* is that in a post-colonial, post-slavery historical context, she found it impossible to represent Othello and Desdemona together (Savran in Fischlin and Fortier 233-234). Complicating the three

women's characterizations – Bianca, Desdemona and Emilia – and involving multiple and antinomic emotions like bitterness, sexual voracity, hope for independence, class-consciousness and religious concerns, Vogel both departed from and enhanced her source. As Sujata Iyengar sums it up:

> Othello still suspects Desdemona with Cassio, Cassio still gives the handkerchief to Bianca, and Desdemona still dies strangled in her bed. Even without the men on stage, and even with their individuality on full display, Vogel's heroines cannot escape the ritualized marital violence of Shakespeare's play (59).

Therefore, Iyengar considers such an appropriation as a "revisioning" (59) because, as in Morrison's adaptation of the same play, Vogel uses the structure of the adaptation (what Linda Hutcheon names "repetition with a difference", 20 and 36) to 'revise' *Othello* with a deeper conscience of Black people, their traditions, alienation and painful history.

Likewise, in Morrison's *Desdemona,* the eponymous character, an "incandescent" Desdemona, "[…] minimizes the lost handkerchief," Iyengar remarks. "She acknowledges that her obliviousness to her race and rank blinded her to the truth about her own life" (61). Henceforth, she fails to understand Emilia adequately. She is accused of treating her black maid as an inferior, and is also required to name Barbary, her nurse, "Sa'ran" which is her true name and status as a slave:

> Desdemona. Listen to me.
>
> Saran. No, you listen. **I have no rank in your world**. I do what I am told. I brought you what you wanted before you knew you wanted it. I kissed your every cut and bruise. I held you when fever made you tremble, and when your parents made you weep. You never had to wash your hands or feet or face. I did that for you.
>
> Desdemona. You blame?
>
> Saran. **I clarify**! (Morrison 48, *my emphasis.*)

We should probably consider this last word as being metafictional because the way Morrison appropriates *Othello* enables her to "clarify"

some hidden facets embedded in Shakespeare's play. In other words, she makes them clearer in both senses of the term. Similarly, Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters* "takes its shape from the 'gaps' in Shakespeare's *King Lear*" (Griffin and Aston *in* Fischlin and Fortier 216). It is a means of challenging Shakespeare's authority and of commenting on the way the latter is traditionally understood. For instance, in their analysis of the play, Gabriele Griffin and Elaine Aston suggest that the Fool "details the fictions, myths, and structures which are deployed by men to imprison women in patriarchal ideology, to separate them from themselves, their bodies and their desires so that they are only ever daughters, wives and mothers" (11-12). Feinstein and the WTG also question race concerns in their revision of the play. The first production used a white actress to perform Cordelia and two black women in the roles of her sisters (215);[7] the second had all three performed by black women while the nanny and the Fool were white (216). Ethnicity and class-consciousness were therefore emphasized through skin colour. According to Fischlin and Fortier, such choices tend to complicate the story of the daughters just as they pinpoint some absent motifs that might have fuelled Shakespeare's own tale. Indeed, class and race involve conflictual relationship, jealousy and resentment. Shakespeare does not densify his characters' portrayals, especially when it deals with women. For instance, we do not really know why Goneril and Regan are so cruel towards their father and younger sister in *King Lear*, except for their extreme ambition and probable affective frustration. But like Morrison, Feinstein does not intend to judge Shakespeare's source as "a flawed, inferior, or politically incorrect" text, Fischlin and Fortier note before adding that her play rather leads us to value "narrative alternatives that disrupt the sedimentation of convention gathered round [its] source" (216).

Marina Carr's intention in adapting *King Lear* responds to the same principles: to write *after* Shakespeare and not *against* him. Carr's relationship with Shakespeare is a long and documented story: it illustrates the influence of the one on the other in a tormented, paradoxical love-hate relationship, as possibly reflected in the complex communication between Man and Woman in *The Cordelia Dream*. *King Lear* as well as *The Tempest* have attracted by far the most attention from Carr "because

of the centrality […] of the father-daughter relationship which 'make[s] it possible to criticize patriarchal heritage as well as colonial heritage'" (Novy quoted *in* Maley and Van der Ziel 6). Carr gives an Irish angle on Shakespeare's tragedy when approaching the tough confrontation opposing a father's authority and a daughter who longs for her independence both as an artist and as a woman. As Brian Singleton acknowledges, "Carr's commission from the Royal Shakespeare Company, homes in on […] an approach that […] steers clear of the cult of Cordelia as voiceless victim in Shakespeare criticism [...]" (Maley and Van der Ziel 9). Such a remark reassesses that one of the key motors leading contemporary playwrights to adapt a Shakespeare play is to question – and often overturn – convictions, prejudices and preconceived beliefs. In some interviews, like the one conducted by Paddock, Marina Carr has reflected on 'the ghost' of Shakespeare whom she often refers to as her own father figure. Her role has been to challenge him. To re-invent Shakespeare and even subvert him is like answering Lear's question: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most,/That we our largest bounty may extend/Where nature doth with merit challenge" (1.1.51-53 *in* Shakespeare 161). From Carr's point of view, Lear's asking his daughters who loves him most is comparable to Shakespeare. In that sense, to write her own *Lear* is to continue her mentor's tale while taking, in so doing, ample liberties to fill in the 'nothing' left by Cordelia.[8] Therefore, her adaptation of Shakespeare's play could be seen as a literal exemplum of a gap-filler.

"Writing the present, exorcising the past" (Kidnie 70)

Despite an overt attempt at detaching their plots from Shakespeare's, the authors of the four plays we are considering have all claimed their filiation and reverence to Shakespeare.[9] As Linda Hutcheon develops thoroughly in her theoretical analysis, adaptation is "inherently palimpsestous" (6); the ghost of a prior text is omnipresent, which most authors do not deny. If adaptation is "repetition with variation", it is because it provides for "the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (Hutcheon 4): the adaptation is no inferior literary work as some critics listed by Hutcheon have professed.[10]

The palimpsest predominates in *Desdemona, a Play About a Handkerchief* composed both "[…] as a 'tribute' (i.e., 'rip-off') to the infamous play, *Shakespeare the Sadist* by Wolfgang Bauer" (Fischlin and Fortier 236) and as a response to Shakespeare's play. If Bauer's radical adaptation is neither the rewriting of *Othello* nor of any other play by Shakespeare, it links the name of the playwright with a Swedish pornographic film that is embedded in the plot and where violence against women is enacted. As in Vogel's play, Bauer's script is divided into 'takes' that, when dealing with Shakespeare's part, convey the narcissistic nature of the poet as well as his extreme brutality towards the female protagonists. Obviously, Vogel does not use a similar aggressiveness in tone, but she retains the demeaning view towards women that Shakespeare may have conveyed in his tragedy, and overturns it. In her play, women challenge male omnipotence: men are silenced, negated, excluded from the stage, and are depicted as mere objects in the service of female sexual satisfaction and possible escape from a degrading life. Hence, from Desdemona's point of view, Bianca represents women's emancipation and personal fulfilment as expressed in her reaction to Emilia's rebuff:

> Desdemona. […] She and I share something common in our blood – the desire to know the world. I lie in the blackness of the room at her establishment… on sheets that are stained and torn by countless nights. And the men come into that pitch-dark room – men of different sizes and smells and shapes, with smooth skin, with rouge skin, with scarred skin. And they spill their seed into me, Emilia – seed from a thousand lands, passed down through generations of ancestors, with genealogies that cover the surface of the globe. And I simply lie still there in the darkness, taking them all into me. **I close my eyes and in the dark of my mind – oh, how I travel!** (scene 12, *emphasis mine*)

The stress on sombre colours through words like "blackness", "pitch-dark" and "dark" hints at one of the most present motifs in Shakespeare's *Othello*: the peculiarity and fear that the Moor's black skin conveys is attractive to Desdemona. In Vogel's adaptation, it also stimulates the bride's desire to go beyond the boundaries of her secluded and restricted space. Darkness is not an element of exclusion

or rejection, but the expression of female thirst for empowerment as the last line underlined above highlights. Here, the palimpsest superimposing 16th-century women's social expectations and their modern counterparts sustains the dialogue between the ages. When Vogel's play was being written, feminist movements were extremely active in both the United States and England where the play had a great impact. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations against Women was signed in 1981 and then ratified in 1986 in England, not in the United States. Hence, a step forward was partly taken, and things still needed to be done: liberating Shakespeare's female voices was a way for artists like Vogel to maintain the protest alive, audible and topical.

Anchoring Shakespearean themes in topicality is nothing new, however. As Hutcheon recalls, thematic persistence is an essential part of the adapting process: "The form changes with adaptation […], the content persists. […] Themes are perhaps the easiest story elements to see adaptable across media and even genres or framing contexts" (10). According to Iyengar, some adaptations like Morrison's *Desdemona* reconcile the past and the present because such plays "foregroun[d] international, intercultural, and intergenerational connections among women" (60). Indeed, women in Morrison's script and Traoré's songs "meet, converse and reconcile" (*ibid.*); whether Barbary (Saran) or Emilia, Othello's mother or Desdemona, and even Brabantio's mother (named Soun), they all express their resentment, love, sorrow and regret in death so that they eventually sing and speak in unison. But of course, the message of Morrison and Traoré goes beyond the thematic level: the adaptation not only conveys gender and race issues but also encapsulates the history of humanity, its recurring tragedy and the hope for its salvation:

> Desdemona. The world is alive and even if we kill it, it returns fresh, full-throated and hungry for time and space in which it thrives. And if we haven't secured the passionate peace we yearn for, it is because we haven't imagined it. Is it still available, this human peace? In our privileged position in timelessness, our answer is a roar. (Morrison 56)

As exemplified by Morrison's play, "timelessness" is precisely what adaptation feeds on and breeds. It is the memory of past (feminist) fights and the present (feminist) voice that continues them. In *Lear's Daughters*, the intention is alike although it is expressed differently as explained in Annamária Fábián's article "The 'Unfinished Business': The Avoidance of King Lear by the Prequel *Lear's Daughters*" in which she describes how the adaptation, in its "attempts […] to *avoid* the origins", results in "a complete redefinition [of them and provokes] new and quite drastic interpretations to [the source-text]" (§3). In writing a prequel, Feinstein and the WTG do not superimpose the hypotext and the hypertext but propose to anticipate Shakespeare's play though writing *after* it. Thus, it justifies the women's cause in *King Lear* where the three daughters rebel each in her own way. As Fischlin and Fortier explain, it is not because of his elder daughters' failing to express their true love and protection that Lear is driven to a tragic end, but because they have suffered from his own unfair treatment and imperfect affection in their childhood (216). The past justifies the present of the text, but the new play is also an attempt to overshadow the source-text and be put in the forestage together with the women's voices. As Stanley Cavell notes, "[w]e are not in Shakespeare's confidence. Now tragedy grows from the fortunes we choose to interpret, to accept, as inevitable [...]" (89 quoted *in* Fábián). The "fortunes" chosen by Feinstein and the WTG, Annamária Fábián explains, are aspects of *King Lear* "out of which" they have produced "a feminist play" that problematizes "the effects of the oppression" of the patriarchal society and the "dominating" fatherly position within the family (§ 4). The movement backward (i.e., *before* Shakespeare's play) enables the movement forward (i.e., Feinstein and the WTG's contemporary play). Ages confront each other, which enables the adaptation to fight even further against women's ill-treatment, a customary doom in 16th-century England that has remained latent until the present days. For example, the extract below, taken from scene 14, highlights an aspect that is absent from *Lear*'s play: the nurse's redundancy as well as Lear's wife's repudiation. These features also explain Goneril and Regan's feelings of ostracism voiced earlier in scene 12 (229):

> NURSE. (*opening letter, finds money inside*) My services are no longer required. Who does he think he is? Who is he to throw me aside when he no longer wants me to do the job he chose for me in the first place! […] Just like the Queen when she didn't make the right sort of boy-child for him – finished. […] (231)

Finally, we can venture to say that Marina Carr's *Cordelia Dream* is a way of "exorcising the past". As we have seen, the play does not retell Shakespeare's *King Lear:* the plot has nothing in common, structurally at least. Through the troubled relationship between father and daughter, it mainly illustrates the impossible reconciliation with the past as though Shakespeare's play had cast a spell on filial love forever. "Like her other tangential takes, on Shakespeare […]," Willy Maley and Stanley Van der Ziel write, "*The Cordelia Dream* offers no neat solutions to intractable problems, just a profound meditation on influence and independence that doubles as an allegory of art and patriarchy" (7-8). In *The Cordelia Dream,* woman feels a need to emancipate and free herself from her father's egocentric omnipotence. As the reflection of Cordelia but also of Lear's elder daughters, Woman encapsulates the feminine condition as a whole: "It's not a good time to be a woman right now. It hasn't been a good time to be a woman since the Bronze Age," Woman says (20) and through her words we feel we hear Carr's own convictions. As a female writer, can she get rid of the shadowy presence of a national poet, the Stratfordian 'ghost' who haunts every writer? Therefore, many cues can be read as meta-comments on the art of writing, and the impossibility for it to be pure invention. Every composition results from a previous one, consciously or not, willingly or not. For example, Woman claims that art is mere plagiarism: "[…] Plagiarism and cunning disguise, a snapping up of unconsidered trifles" (24). Exorcising the past seems a vain quest in Carr's perception of creation. Such a painful observation (the artist's irremediable interwoven link with bygone oeuvres) does not however contribute to Carr's believing in Shakespeare as a sacred reference not to be contradicted, even despite her admiration for his work. Her behaviour as a writer is challenging. As pointed out by Siobhán O'Gorman: "Carr achieves this by deliberately revealing within [her]

works the inevitable links and borrowings between diverse texts, as well as by rereading (or wilfully misreading) Shakespeare's Cordelia […] as confrontational rather than passive" (501).

Conclusion: #AdaptationWhatFor?

> "Stoytelling is always the art of repeating stories"
> (Walter Benjamin 90)

Coming back to Ruby Cohn's terminology about adaptation, we read at the beginning of her first chapter:

> Rewriting of Shakespeare is known by an array of names—abridgments, adaptations, additions, alterations, ameliorations, amplifications, augmentations, conversions, distortions, emendations, interpolations, metamorphoses, modifications, mutilations, revisions, transformations, versions. In contrast, I use a loose and more neutral word, 'offshoot,' […] (3).

In her list of words, some are far more positively connoted than others, and when in turn we try to qualify the plays of our corpus, we definitely hesitate. Referring to Cohn, Margaret Jane Kidnie asserts that "an adaptation involves the 'addition' of new material 'alongside substantial cutting' and 'rearrangements with a transformation' […]" (3); hence, it is never a 'reduction' or an 'emendation' (*ibid.*). This is I think what Feinstein's work as well as Morrison's, Carr's and Vogel's have highlighted: even if a text stems from a preceding one, it is not a pale copy of the original nor the result of a lack of inspiration. They have all written in response to one of the most famous writers of all times, and in so doing have committed a daring act just like the characters of their stories who have all, as erstwhile voiceless women, risen from the ashes and claimed their worth. Not surprisingly then, in some of the heroines' cues, do we think to hear their authors' own beliefs and complaints. But concomitantly, we also hear them claim their precious heritage and the assumption that a text always echoes another. For instance, one of Traoré's final songs in *Desdemona* reads:

> When two beings meet,
> Each brings to the other a bit of themselves.
> So we learn, we construct our selves, we evolve. […] (55)

And we sense we are hearing: "when Shakespeare and *I writer*, meet, we construct our selves, we evolve." Likewise, in *Lear's Daughters,* Cordelia eventually acknowledges: "I love words. I like their roughness and their smoothness, and when I'm silent I'm trying to get them right. I shall be silent now, weighing these words, and when I choose to speak, I shall choose the right one" (232). Taken out of their context, these lines can be analysed as a comment on the act of adapting a text and choosing the right way and time to do so. Authors weigh their words and may decide either to keep them for themselves or to let the cry get out when they are convinced it will fairly bespeak the(ir) truth.

All in all, as Kidnie later writes, referring to D.C. Greetham's *Theories*:[11] "[…] the conventions of drama permit performance to take exception, perhaps even unwarranted freedoms with the work of art defined specifically by its text" (19-20). We might go further in saying that the entire dramatic text allows creative authors to take "unwarranted" or rather unexpected yet blissful "freedoms." Such considerations strikingly resonate with the very recent preamble to the Comédie-Française programme announcing the 2024 theatrical season when its director, Éric Ruf, very poetically compared theatre to a pebble repeatedly bouncing on water, just as a rehearsal is the constant though imperfect reproduction of the same:[12]

> Répéter, refaire, réactiver, représenter. Le « re » est un mystère qu'aucune connaissance ne peut circonscrire. Le « re » lui-même a vocation à se réinventer. Le théâtre a maille à partager avec ces paris joyeusement perdus car il en va ainsi du sens, qui court et rebondit involontairement de spectacle en spectacle au cours d'une saison théâtrale (3).[13]

And so, appropriating Éric Ruf's words, I believe that adaptation is an inexhaustible means to better remember and challenge Shakespeare all at one time.

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1 See on this aspect: Smith, Emma. *The Making of Shakespeare's First Folio*, Bodleian Library, 2015. And also: Gurr, Andrew. *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642,* Cambridge University Press, 2009 (4th edition), in particular Chapter 2.1"The companies / The Laws of playing, p. 38-45 and by the same author: *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, Cambridge University Press, 1987 (more on the evolution of playgoers' tastes and practices.)

[2] See for instance Wells, Stanley and Sarah Stanton. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage,* Cambridge University Press, 2002; Schoch, Richard. *A Short History of Shakespeare in Performance,* Cambridge University Press, 2021; Ritchie, Fiona and Peter Sabor. *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

[3] See the very recent adaptation of *Hamnet* by Lolita Chakrabarti for the 2023 Summer Season in Stratford-Upon-Avon, and in London from September to February at least.

[4] For example, Edward Bond's *Lear* (1971) and Howard Barker's *Seven Lears* (1990). Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1997) and The Q brothers, O*thello: The Remix* (2016), both based on *Othello,* removed Desdemona from their adaptations.

[5] Their website is under the name The Sphinx Theatre Company: https://sphinxtheatre.co.uk/

[6] See the titles of their respective monographies in the bibliography.

[7] Feinstein worked with the Women's Theatre Group "in devising some ideas, and then went away to write the script independently." The company used a revised script and toured in 1987.

[8] Cordelia's answer to Lear's question in I.1.87/89 *in* Shakespeare, William. *King Lear,* edited by R.A. Foakes, The Arden Shakespeare, 1997, p. 164.

[9] See for instance W. Maley and S. Van der Ziel. "Filial ingratitude: Marina Carr's bond with Shakespeare", *in* Collins, N. and Van der Ziel, S. (eds.). *Shakespeare and Contemporary Irish Literature*. Palgrave: London, 2018.

[10] "Nevertheless, in both academic criticism and journalistic reviewing, contemporary popular adaptations are most often put down as secondary, derivative, « belated, middlebrow, or culturally inferior" (as noted by Naremore 202b:6" *in* Hutcheon 2).

[11] Greetham, D.C. *Theories of the Text,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 35 quoted in M. J. Kidnie, *op. cit.* p. 20.

[12] These remarks come full circle with those in our introduction.

[13] "To repeat, to redo, to reactivate, to represent. The 're' is a mystery that no science can delimit. The 're' has full authority on its own reinvention. Drama can hardly share the challenges that it has joyfully lost because here is how meaning goes: it runs away and bounces back, unwillingly, from one performance to another within a theatrical season." (Ruf, *my translation*.)