

Rewriting  
Shakespeare's Plays  
For and By the  
Contemporary Stage



# Rewriting Shakespeare's Plays For and By the Contemporary Stage

Edited by

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and Estelle Rivier-Arnaud

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# INTRODUCTION

Despite its quasi-systematic use, *rewriting* is still treated as a pejorative term, as if it merely meant the act of copying another text imperfectly. Indeed, what is *rewriting* if not choosing a model which is recomposed as a new text, i.e. building a plot from what was already shaped as a former work? For example the characters' names and the set of the action might remain alike while some other considerations are adapted. Likewise, the language, the chronology, the intended message might change together with the title. Those alterations are however not insignificant insofar as they induce substantial, if not major, transformations in the new work which will eventually turn out a distorted because partial view of the so-called "model".

The term *rewriting* is associated with or replaced by others that are more or less derogatory: *repetition*, *reproduction*, *replay*, *plagiarism*, *pastiche* or *parody*, *summary* or *gloze*. Translating a work is also considered as being part of the rewriting process. Playwrights like Heiner Müller did not conceal the fact that, through their translations of Shakespeare's drama, they were voicing the political and social concerns of their own country and times. In Müller's translation of *Macbeth* and its portrayal of peasants revolting against their tyrant, the playwright's opponents in the politically-divided 1970s Germany, perceived encouragement for the East German's resistance against oppression, Marxism and the violence of despots. Thus despite being a rewritten work, Müller's translation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was definitely meant to embody its (second) author's personal opinion about more contemporary times. Translation does not prevent the final composition from being an inventive adaptation and the result of a revisited reading of the Shakespearean source.

Sometimes, the notion of rewriting is used to describe only part of the process when, for instance, the contemporary work has retained mere details of the source such as the theme, one or two scenes, a description, the names of characters or the overall structure. The reproduction is then only partial. In his *Littérature dépliée*, Jean-Christophe Bailly pointed that in essence the act of *writing* is always a new beginning, a reconstruction,

whereas the *rewritten* work may be seen as a “remake” or a “variation”, a “new phenomenon embedded in an apparent [...] shift<sup>1</sup>.” Indeed, rewriting is conditioned by meaning: if playing with words was not an infinite literary stake, if meaning was not constantly a source of reformulation, analysis and investigation, writing would not be an endless cycle.

More significantly, in drama, the notion of rewriting is clearly linked to the rehearsal process. Rehearsing means repeating: actors learn their parts by heart before stepping foot on stage and being confronted with the other parts. Yet, even then, repeating the same words and actions paradoxically implies that things will never be exactly similar. Random circumstances always disrupt intentions and their tangibility. This is also one of the reasons why performances, either set in a permanent venue, or on tour, never sound nor look exactly the same and arouse contrasting critiques each time. On this aspect, Caryl Churchill’s *A Number* (which is not a play based on Shakespeare) is a good semantic illustration<sup>2</sup>. In this play, Salter, a man in his sixties, who abandoned his son to the welfare services when he was young and had an identical one genetically engineered later, discovers that he has eventually had three sons: the natural one and two clones. As the play unfolds, he meets them in turn, and is led to realize that despite their similar genes, they are all very different. The same could be said regarding a play, its various productions and its offspring: although they are based on the same material, they never look nor sound the same.

Likewise, Jean-Christophe Bailly relevantly takes the metaphor of a ball of wool to speak of literature and of its main tool, language: “each word is a thread we draw but to put it back again immediately<sup>3</sup>.” Just like in sewing where tears need to be sown up, writing or rehearsing needs revisions. Still, in drama, rehearsing, i.e. re-telling the script again and again, is an unending task because rehearsing —just like “repeating” (*répéter*) in French— implies giving the text an infallible power. At the same time, it asserts the oblique nature of the dramatic composition. Indeed as it is rooted in a text meant to be performed, the dramatic voice

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<sup>1</sup> « [N]ouveauté enchâssée dans un glissement, fût-il léger, d'apparence. » Jean-Christophe Bailly in « Reprise, répétition, réécriture, *La littérature dépliée*, Jean-Paul Engélibert, Yen-Mai Tran-Gervat (ed.), Rennes : PUR, 2008, p. 14. (My translation.)

<sup>2</sup> The play’s title is significantly translated as ‘copies’ in French.

<sup>3</sup> (« Chaque mot comme un fil qu’on tire mais pour qu’aussitôt [on] y retourne »). *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

becomes the constant object of actors' investigation. No ending nor limitation obstruct its progress in time and places. Paradoxically enough, as Bailly remarks, rehearsing and rewriting aim at reaching a kind of perfection and formal ending but conversely the text never ends. Indeed, repeating, imitating and rewriting it open the field of possible interpretations, unclose and disclose it infinitely<sup>4</sup>. Rewriting thus characterizes the endless work of telling (whether on paper or on stage) and of unwinding meaning. It is one of the reasons why when we read a text, we often think of another, the echo of which resonates through the pages. In drama, we could compare such a vocal reverberation to a chorus whose song can be heard in the wings while other characters are speaking on stage. Some scholars often use the word "spectre" to describe the entanglement of voices and the reminiscence of the former author's stylistic identity in a new literary work<sup>5</sup>.

Still, the notion of *rewriting* embraces other literary concepts that need to be further developed. Gérard Genette has thoroughly explained the intertextual relationship that most literary texts have engaged in. In his book *Palimpsests*<sup>6</sup>, he focuses on the textual transcendence (also called *transtextuality*) which is "everything that links the text, either manifestly or secretly, to other texts<sup>7</sup>." He also mentions five categories of transtextual relationships that we can recall here as they will help the reader to understand the connections that Shakespeare's plays and their rewritings nurture. Genette nominates the five categories as such: 1/ *Intertextuality* which can be explicit (e.g. a quotation) or less canonical (e.g. plagiarism and allusion); 2/ *Paratextuality* which encompasses the title, the subtitle, the inter-titles, the preface, the foreword, the post-face, among other elements; 3/ *Metatextuality* is a text commenting on another which may be neither quoted nor named; 4/ *Hypertextuality* implies a union between two texts: the first (A) is the *hypotext*, the second (B) is the

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<sup>4</sup> Bailly uses here the barbarism « infir » : « la répétition infir le texte, ouvre le texte à l'infir du sens [...] », *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance the works of Pierre Kapitaniak in France and of Vanasay Khamphommala who wrote his PHD on Shakespeare's spectre in Barker's works: *Spectres de Shakespeare dans l'oeuvre de Howard Barker*, sous la direction d'Élisabeth Angel-Perez, 26 novembre 2010, Université Paris IV-Sorbonne. Recently published with a preface by Howard Barker. Paris : Presses Universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne. Mondes anglophones (coll.), 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Gérard, Genette. *Palimpsestes, La littérature au second degré*, Paris : Éditions du Seuil, coll. Points, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> « tout ce qui met [le texte] en relation, manifeste ou secrète, avec d'autres textes. » Gérard, Genette, *op. cit.*, p.7.

*hypertext*. 'B' results from 'A' although the latter may not be mentioned. 'B' is a kind of metamorphosed 'A' and could not exist without it; last but not least, 5/ *Architextuality* indicates a silent relationship between the text and its taxonomic origin (e.g. *Poetry*; *Essay*; *Novel*, etc.). Genette later mainly focuses on the hypertextual category (n°4) which defines the very act of writing 'on top of' another text or just because the 'A' text is a source of inspiration for the 'B' one. Originally, the 'palimpsest' was a manuscript on which two or more successive texts were written, each one being erased to make space for a new one. This technique now describes the rewriting process, which implies using a model to be *recomposed* in a different way, with numerous alterations.

In the large field of drama, Shakespeare has inspired many palimpsests that express themselves under various forms: Arnold Wesker's *Shylock* for instance, reformulates Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. Set in a Venetian ghetto in 1563 (the eve of Shakespeare's birth), Wesker's 1976 play however manages to highlight the post-Holocaust impact of *The Merchant of Venice*. As Chantal Meyer-Plantureux shows in her book *Les Enfants de Shylock*<sup>8</sup> (*Shylock's Children*), Shakespeare's *Merchant* has inspired many other works among which are Charles Marowitz's adaptation published in *The Marowitz Shakespeare*, and even some operatic variations (Gabriel Fauré's *Shylock* (1889); Reynaldo Hahn's *Merchant* (1935) for example.) The list of Shakespearian-inspired works is long and whilst far from aiming to offer an exhaustive account below, we may at least try to mention some of the major works that have been published on the world scene.

It is worth noting that some Shakespeare plays are rewritten for the modern stage more often than others, especially the tragedies. *King Lear* for instance, quite apart from its Enlightenment variation by Nahum Tate, is the source for Edward Bond's *Lear* (1971), Howard Barker's *Seven Lears* (1989), Michel Deutsch's *John Lear* (1997), Rodrigo Garcia's *Rey Lear* (2001), and Olivier Cadiot and Ludovic Lagarde's *Lear is in town* (2013). *Romeo and Juliet* led Jean Anouilh to write a *Roméo et Jeannette* in 1946; likewise Eugène Ionesco adapted the play in a contemporary context in *La Petite histoire* (1998). Carmelo Bene also determined to adapt the play in his own *Romeo and Juliette based on Shakespeare* (1976). As already mentioned, Bene also rewrote two *Macbeths*: *Macbeth* (1983) and *Macbeth, horror suite* (1996). Such plays inspired many other

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<sup>8</sup> Chantal Meyer-Plantureux, *Les Enfants de Shylock ou l'antisémitisme sur scène*, Paris : Editions complexes, coll. Le théâtre en question, 2005.

playwrights, among whom, Eugène Ionesco for his *Macbett* (1972) and Heiner Müller, *Macbeth based on Shakespeare* (1971). *The Tragedy of Richard III* inspired Bene's *Richard III* (1977) which was later extended by Deleuze's *Superpositions*. It also gave birth to Normand Chaurette's *Les Reines* (1991), and Dan Jemmett's stage-adaptation, *Trois Richard* (*Three Richards*, 2012). And yet the play that has engendered the most new interpretations is undeniably *Hamlet*. Whether on paper or on stage, and whether in dramatic or novelistic forms, the meaning and the structure of these plays are constantly being revisited to express new ideas, as we shall see in Chapter 4.

This brief and largely Francophone-centred account willingly omits other 'palimpsests' based on Shakespeare's canon<sup>9</sup>. Because of their manifold natures and forms (operas, stage and cinema productions, essays, novels and songs for instance), it would be an anthology in itself to try to encompass them all. In the ensuing chapters, the authors focus on the multiple ways by which Shakespeare's works are revised. Thus in Part One, "**The Rewriting Process under Scrutiny and its Stakes**", Anne-Kathrin Marquardt first proposes to explore the distance separating *King Lear* (1606), Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Thousand Acres* (1991) and the eponymous film adaptation of that novel by director Jocelyn Moorhouse (1997). Her paper examines how Smiley's reading of the play "positions itself in the interpretive tradition", explores the relationship between two texts and the way in which the latter can translate into film.

In the second paper, Allene Nichols challenges academic conventions as she revisits the stakes of *Macbeth* in the light of her own literary composition called *Second Witch*. She explains how myth-based plays can be identified as either 'reflectionist' or "interventionist" (Babbage: 53), the first providing an accurate representation of the contemporary world, the second seeking to interrogate our modes of perception. For her case study she chose the interventionist mode, i.e. "keeping the setting in early Scotland, but interweaving an imaginary history of women warriors with mystical powers who are defeated by the Scots into the fabric of the story". The play is aimed at a high-school audience. In a to-and-fro conversation between texts and centuries, she interrogates notions of gender and their ideological implications.

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<sup>9</sup> For example Botho Stauss's *Rape*, Aimé Césaire's *Tempest* or Bond's *Bingo* without mentioning rewritings dating back from previous centuries: George Sand's *As You like It* or Le Lorrain's *Love's Labour's Lost*.

In the third chapter, Dana Monah focuses on four non-Anglophone rewritings of *Richard III* to underscore how rewriters attempt to deepen the mysteries in the source text rather than providing answers to them. The aim of their ‘supplements’ is to alter the meaning of the preceding text to shed a new light on it. “To use Umberto Eco’s metaphor of reading as a pleasure walk in the woods, we could say that the secondary writer stops to admire a beautiful image [(...). His/her] aim is [then] to tell it in a different manner,” she writes.

In the second part, **“Global Shakespeares: Adaptation and Performance”**, Preti Taneja uses *We That Are Young*, which forms the creative production in her practise-based Creative Writing PhD, to investigate the implications of the rewriting process in a postcolonial context in reaction to *King Lear*’s topical question : ‘Who is it that can tell me who I am?’ (1.4.211). *We That Are Young* charts the fortunes of five young people as they navigate the terrors of an ancient and postmodern Indian society undergoing seismic change. Preti Taneja argues that the appropriation of Shakespeare by postcolonial fiction serves as a way of criticizing its own hybrid identity while providing a vision of a new, if precarious infrastructure. This in turn can ‘figure forth an equality that takes disgrace in its stride’ (Gayatri Spivak).

As a possible continuation or answer to the issue raised in this chapter, Giselle Rampaul explores what is made of Shakespeare on the Caribbean carnival stage. Every year, in Carriacou (a Caribbean island off the coast of Grenada), a group of men wearing costumes and reciting passages from *Julius Caesar* demonstrate their strength and mental poise in a carnival. While detailing the implications of such a ritual, the paper addresses various questions: What does it mean to *perform* Shakespeare? How does the Carnival cultural stage of Shakespeare Mas complicate ideas about the *contemporary* stage? To what extent does recontextualisation transform Shakespeare?

To conclude this part, Estelle Rivier’s account of Bernard Kops’ *Hamlet of Stepney Green* leads us back into British territory but to tell the story of a Jewish family in the manner of kitchen sink drama. The play stages a confrontation and comparison between bathetically modern Hamlets senior and junior. East Enders Sam Levy and his son David are undeniably, odd revisions of Shakespeare’s ghost and eponymous hero. What does it mean to write *Hamlet* in a post-Holocaust context? Why is Kops’ version curiously not a tragedy? How is the notion of performance involved in his writing? Why should this often forgotten play be regarded as a masterpiece?

Finally, in part three, **“European Shakespeares: Challenging Contemporaneity”**, Mariacristina Cavecchi focuses on the work of the theatrical laboratory of the prison of Volterra (formerly a Medici fortress), launched in August 1988 and managed by Armando Punzo. She analyses the way Shakespeare (more particularly his *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*) has been appropriated by the convicts (in performances involving choreography, music, physicality) and shows how the experiment has become the seed of a cultural revolution which has burst both geographical and metaphorical bars.

Still in Italy, Margaret Rose centres her chapter on *Caliban's Castle*, a play published by *The London Review* in 2010 and turned into a short-story illustrated by Emily Chappell in 2011, which brings Prospero, Miranda and Caliban to Milan's Forzesco castle in 2009, exactly four hundred years after Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Margaret Rose relates the backstory and explains why Shakespeare's play is, according to her, so deeply relevant to the environmental issues in our contemporary world.

Finally in chapter six, Anne Etienne and Estelle Rivier offer a direct comparison between Arnold Wesker's *Shylock* and Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. They discuss the distance between the two plays, thereby questioning the notion of (re-)writing from common or personal experience. The discrepancies between these *Merchants* signal a contemporary urgency which may be apprehended both as ideological corrective and as humanistic cure. The authors of this paper study how Wesker negotiated the modern identity of his play by moulding a modern language while settling his characters, in a characteristically tongue-in-cheek gesture, in the 1563 Ghetto, and implicitly positing a virtual dichotomy between the corrupt Venice and the hopeful Belmont.





## **PART ONE**

### **THE REWRITING PROCESS AND ITS STAKES**



## CHAPTER ONE

### UNLEARNING TRADITION: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR*, JANE SMILEY'S AND JOCELYN MOORHOUSE'S *A THOUSAND ACRES*

ANNE-KATHRIN MARQUARDT

Gérard Genette famously described rewritings as palimpsests<sup>1</sup>, new texts that can let older ones shine through in-between the lines. But this is only potentially true, since readers will not automatically be aware of both texts simultaneously. The relationship between the texts can be, as Philippe Lejeune<sup>2</sup> once put it, palimpsestuous or, to push the pun even further, incestuous – where the second text can ultimately cover up the first, masking the difference between them. Linda Hutcheon has also explored this tension between fusion and distinction. But, according to her, the notion of difference is crucial to understand rewritings:

Seen from the perspective of its *process of reception*, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation.<sup>3</sup>

It is, therefore, the tension between 'repetition' and 'variation' that this paper is interested in, trying to measure the relative distance – if any – that separates William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606), Jane Smiley's Pulitzer

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<sup>1</sup> Gérard Genette. *Palimpsestes*. Paris: Seuil, 1992. It was translated into English under the same title.

<sup>2</sup> Lejeune uses the word in passing and without further explanations; Hutcheon uses it in English several times. Philippe Lejeune. *Moi Aussi*. Paris: Seuil, 1986: 115.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Hutcheon. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2006: 8. Hutcheon's emphasis.

Prize-winning novel *A Thousand Acres* (1991) and the eponymous film adaptation of that novel by director Jocelyn Moorhouse (1997).<sup>4</sup> If a rewriting positions itself vis-à-vis the first text by opening a gap between the two works, then it is in this gap that the possibility of *critical* distance is located – but is this possibility always realised?

Smiley's rewriting is centred on incest in a very literal sense, as Lear's equivalent in the novel abuses his daughters, one of whom becomes the first-person narrator of the tale. In *A Thousand Acres*, Shakespeare's play thus becomes associated with a much wider patriarchal tradition. Telling her story is a struggle for the narrator, not least because it entails calling into question other narratives she had heard about her father – in the process, she has to distance herself from *King Lear* as well. As this paper hopes to show, Smiley represents rewriting as a contest between two narratives, where the newer attempts to wrestle free of its palimpsestuous relationship with the older. We shall examine how Smiley's reading of the play positions itself in the interpretive tradition, and what her choice of a rather hesitant narrator means for the rewriting process. We shall also explore whether a relationship between two texts can translate into film.

When one compares the plot and characters of *King Lear* to those of Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, it becomes obvious that, in many respects, Smiley has remained quite close to the first text. Although set in 1970s Iowa, the plot of her novel remains recognisably that of the play: a family conflict between an authoritative father (Lear / Larry Cook) and his three daughters, to whom he wishes to bequeath his farm. The two older sisters (Goneril / Ginny, who is also the narrator, and Regan / Rose) accept but will be accused of taking advantage of their father's generosity. The youngest (Cordelia / Caroline) is first rejected by Larry for refusing the gift, but will later fight alongside her father to take back the farm. A lawsuit follows, tearing the family apart. The subplot of the play is also represented, since Gloucester / Harold Clark, a neighbour of the family, has a falling out with his two sons, Jess and Loren / Edmund and Edgar. Other parallels exist at the level of imagery: as status symbols of the patriarch's power, the thousand acres of the novel correspond to the hundred knights of *King Lear*.

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<sup>4</sup> Line numbers, page numbers and DVD time indexes in this paper refer to the following works: William Shakespeare. *King Lear*. Ed. R. A. Foakes. London: Arden Shakespeare Third Series, 1997. Jane Smiley. *A Thousand Acres*. London: Harper Perennial, 2008. *A Thousand Acres*. Dir. Jocelyn Moorhouse. Perf. Jessica Lange and Michelle Pfeiffer. Touchstone, 1997.

But the diegesis of the play is also reworked in important ways, as the subplot is contracted and the Lear / Larry storyline is given pride of place. At the heart of the novel lies a terrible secret, that of the incest between Larry and his two elder daughters, Ginny and Rose. As memories of the trauma are slowly brought back to the surface by the narrator, Ginny, the two sisters are undoubtedly portrayed as victims. Moreover, the sisters are no longer implicated in what was the most terrible crime of Shakespeare's play: the blinding of Gloucester at Regan's hands (3.7) is transformed into the half-accident of Harold's blinding, instigated solely by Rose's husband (p. 231 ff.; p. 301). If, in the first scene of *King Lear*, Goneril and Regan could be accused of flattery and deceitful rhetoric (1.1.55-82), their short replies to Larry's love test in the novel seem much more innocent (p. 19). Conversely, Larry's guilt is emphasised. Kent becomes the very inconspicuous character Ken LaSalle, while the Fool disappears, leaving the patriarch without a moral compass. Choleric and inflexible, he treats all things and persons as his possessions, including his young daughters' bodies.

Smiley's rewriting is thus based, in great part, on an inversion where guilt is assigned to a different set of characters. But inversion with respect to what, precisely? At least since the 1970s, feminist criticism of the play has emphasised Lear's own responsibility in the tragedy. To quote only one example, Cristina León Alfar<sup>5</sup> argues that Goneril and Regan merely imitate the patriarchal and violent power structures they grew up in to gain a measure of freedom and control for themselves. Interpretations that are more sympathetic to the sisters can also be found in the theatre, for instance when Judi Dench played Regan with a stutter, making her seem less articulate and powerful.<sup>6</sup> When we speak of inversion, therefore, it is inversion with respect to a certain traditional interpretation of the play, in which Lear is portrayed as the innocent victim of scheming daughters. Their ingratitude for his gift of the kingdom and the blinding of Gloucester justify the following assessment by A. C. Bradley at the beginning of the twentieth century: Goneril is 'the most hideous human being (if she is one) that Shakespeare ever drew' and 'what we desire for [Lear] during the

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<sup>5</sup> Cristina León Alfar. 'King Lear's "Immoral" Daughters and the Politics of Kingship.' *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 8.2 (1996): 375-400.

<sup>6</sup> Philippa Kelly. 'See What Breeds about Her Heart: *King Lear*, Feminism, and Performance.' *Renaissance Drama* 33 (2004): 137-157. This Royal Shakespeare Company performance of 1976 was directed by Trevor Nunn; Donald Sinden played Lear.

brief remainder of his days is [...] peace and happiness by Cordelia's fireside'.<sup>7</sup> More recently in 2009 Sophie Alatorre wrote that 'the cruelty of the play is exemplified by the behaviour of Goneril and Regan who ruthlessly take advantage of the credulousness of others'.<sup>8</sup> It is this traditional interpretation of the play which Smiley sought to call into question in her rewriting, producing what Alan Sinfield might call a 'dissident reading'<sup>9</sup> of the play. As Smiley puts it: 'I'd always felt the way Lear was presented to me was wrong. Without being able to articulate why, I thought Goneril and Regan got the short end of the stick'.<sup>10</sup>

The question of the relative distance from novel to film, or even from play to film, is more complex, however.<sup>11</sup> Jocelyn Moorhouse's adaptation remains close to Smiley's novel, as it depicts the choleric father, the incest, the trauma relived and overcome by the elder sisters. But, as is perhaps normal when transforming a 350-page-novel into a film, the story is compressed even further, leaving little room for the Gloucester / Harold subplot. The film concentrates on Ginny and Rose, which is explained by the fact that Jessica Lange (Ginny) and Michelle Pfeiffer (Rose) had bought the adaptation rights and initiated the project, ensuring that they could pick their roles and focus the film on them.<sup>12</sup> The marketing strategy, including the slogan 'Best friends. Bitter rivals. Sisters', and the

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in: David Brauner. "'Speak Again': The Politics of Rewriting in *A Thousand Acres*.' *The Modern Language Review* 96.3 (2001): 654.

<sup>8</sup> Sophie Alatorre. "'O Ruined Piece of Nature': *King Lear*, Tragedy of Subversion?' *'And That's True Too': New Essays on King Lear*. Ed. Sophie Alatorre, Pierre Iselin and François Laroque. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009: 78. To quote only one other recent example of this point of view: Naomi Conn Liebler. 'Pelican Daughters: The Violence of Filial Ingratitude in *King Lear*.' *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 143 (2007): 36-51.

<sup>9</sup> The expression comes from the title of his book: Alan Sinfield. *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> James A. Schiff. 'Contemporary Retellings: *A Thousand Acres* as the Latest *Lear*.' *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 39.4 (1998): 367-381.

<sup>11</sup> To many critics, the *Lear* reference is obvious even in the film. To give only a few examples: Gioia Diliberto. 'King Lear's World, Reborn on a Farm in the Heartland.' *The New York Times*, 8 December 1996: 22. Yvonne Griggs. "'All our lives we'd looked out for each other the way that motherless children tend to do": *King Lear* as Melodrama.' *Literature Film Quarterly* 35.2 (2007): 101-107. Janet Maslin. 'King Lear (Just Call Him Larry) in Iowa.' *The New York Times*, 19 September 1997.

<sup>12</sup> On the history of the film project, see: Gioia Diliberto. 'King Lear's World, Reborn on a Farm in the Heartland.' *The New York Times*, 8 December 1996: 22.

poster showing the two Hollywood stars close up, further emphasised the central role of the two women. If anything, the opposition between guilty father and innocent daughters is even stronger than in the novel. Larry is often filmed in low-angle shots making him an authoritative and threatening presence. This is the case when he tells the story of the farm to Ginny (00:04:10-30), when he watches his family play baseball (00:19:25-50), when he insults his daughters during the storm (00:41:30-00:43:30), when Ginny remembers the incest (01:03:40). Conversely, the daughters appear more innocent, as Ginny's attempt at poisoning Rose, which the novel depicts at length, is left out in the film. The blinding of Gloucester / Harold disappears entirely.

According to Yvonne Griggs, these choices clearly place the film in the genre of the melodrama, as it concentrates on female characters and domestic life, and uses soothing music. Most strikingly, the conclusion of the film is far more optimistic than that of the novel. The novel ends on Ginny's remark that 'I can't say that I forgive my father, but now I can imagine what he probably never chose to remember – the goad of an unthinkable urge', an urge symbolised by 'the gleaming obsidian shard I safeguard above all the others' (p. 370-1). This is of course a reference to the memory of incest slowly rediscovered by the narrator as the novel moves forward, and which she chooses to hold on to. In the film, by contrast, the last frames show Ginny leaving the farm behind as her voice-over focuses on Rose's children: 'As each year goes by I see them grow and in them I see something new, something my sister and I never had. I see hope' (01:36:20-40). The opposition between safeguarded dark memories of the past on the one hand, and optimism about the future on the other, could hardly be clearer. According to Griggs, the film thus repeats the typical story of the melodrama: a woman in conflict with patriarchal values ultimately succeeds in escaping from that world.

Beyond the question of genre, this Hollywood production is clearly a mainstream film. Smiley's text is set against the backdrop of an economic and social crisis in 1970s rural America.<sup>13</sup> The political tensions of the period are also present, since, in the novel, Jess escapes from conscription for the Vietnam War by fleeing to Canada. Even if it is not a prominent

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<sup>13</sup> For a very interesting discussion of the historical background of the novel, especially of rural America in the 1970s, see: John Mack Faragher. 'The Historical Imagination of *A Thousand Acres*.' *Novel History. Historians and Novelists Confront America's Past (and each other)*. Ed. Mark C. Carnes. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001: 146-159.

theme, the societal conflicts of the time are depicted in the text. In the film, however, the reference to the war disappears, perhaps to avoid controversy; the world the characters inhabit could not be described as being in crisis. Caution is also exercised when the incest itself is revealed. In the novel, two separate scenes serve to corroborate each other: Ginny remembers as she makes her bed (p. 228 ff.) and when she hears her father address Caroline in an inappropriate tone (p. 271 ff.). The film shows both moments, but the memory comes back only on the second occasion – making the bed is perfectly unproblematic. One possible explanation for this choice is that showing the memory of the incest in the place where it had happened would have been too shocking.<sup>14</sup>

The film thus appears as both more and less extreme than the novel, less extreme because the actual violence is attenuated, more so because the moral divide is much clearer. In this last sense at least, the film can be said to participate in the inversion of values vis-à-vis the traditional interpretation of *King Lear* that could be seen in the novel. For some critics such as Philippa Kelly, however, its credibility is called into question by these exaggerated moral oppositions:

By participating in contemporary dialogues about recovered memory, it may be that the film *A Thousand Acres* skews its perspective so far toward its women that it has no room for sympathy toward masculinity at all (not only is Daddy irredeemable, but he remains largely unsupported by the thinly fleshed husbands).<sup>15</sup>

One way rewritings build distance with respect to their first texts is thus by concentrating the diegesis on a few salient aspects, displacing emphasis, and, ultimately, shifting the moral fulcrum of the work. One implication is that rewriting does not necessarily consist in inventing something new, it can also entail (re)discovering possibilities of meaning that may be contained in the first text, but are undervalued by criticism or in performance. Smiley thus justifies her ‘adding’ the incest motif in her novel by pointing out that it is already contained within the play:

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<sup>14</sup> This strategy seems not to have been successful in the USA. The film was rated ‘R’ (forbidden for under-seventeen-year-olds without adult supervision) by the Motion Picture Association of America because of ‘some strong sexual language’. The French authorities were less cautious, since the *Commission de Classification des Œuvres Cinématographiques* allowed general audiences to see the film (‘tous publics’), released in France in 1998 under the title *Secrets*.

<sup>15</sup> Philippa Kelly. ‘See What Breeds about Her Heart: *King Lear*, Feminism, and Performance.’ *Renaissance Drama* 33 (2004): 149.



But given [Lear's] passionate reaction to everything they do, there's some sense that his feelings about his daughters are inappropriately vindictive. And why should a father's feelings be inappropriately vindictive? Because they were inappropriately passionate to start with. [...] Now you have to ask yourself, why would a man of normal sexual feeling view a woman's sexual area as a source of sin, if he didn't feel terrible guilt about what he'd been doing?<sup>16</sup>

Smiley bases her analysis on concrete elements of the play, such as the numerous insults Lear directs at his daughters, reading them as signs of exaggerated passion. For instance, Ginny's sterility in the novel might have been inspired by the threat that Shakespeare wrote for his *Lear*, 'dry up in her the organs of increase' (1.4.271), while Rose's breast cancer might come from the play's 'see what breeds about her heart' (3.6.73-4). It should be noted that Smiley is not the only one to have seen incestuous tendencies at work in *Lear*. Lynda E. Boose reads the first scene of the play about Cordelia's betrothal to France as a failed wedding ceremony which reveals that the father does not, in fact, want to give away the bride to another man. Boose concludes that 'the implied relationship is unnatural because it allows the father to deflect his original incestuous passions into Oedipal ones, thus effecting a newly incestuous proximity to the daughter'.<sup>17</sup> Thus, as Linda Hutcheon remarks:

What is involved in adapting can be a process of appropriation, of taking possession of another's story and filtering it, in a sense, through one's own sensibility, interests and talents. Therefore, adapters are first interpreters and then creators.<sup>18</sup>

Smiley herself underlines her role as an interpreter of Shakespeare's text: 'In one sense, *A Thousand Acres* is my academic paper on *King Lear*, while in another sense, it is my production of the play'.<sup>19</sup> Of course,

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<sup>16</sup> Eithne Farry. 'Smiley's *Lear*.' *A Thousand Acres*. London: Harper Perennial, 2008: 10.

<sup>17</sup> Lynda E. Boose. 'The Father and the Bride in Shakespeare.' *PMLA* 97.3 (1982): 334. The problem of desire for maternal affection as sublimation of an incestuous desire was later developed in: Coppélia Kahn. 'The Absent Mother in *King Lear*.' *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986: 33-49.

<sup>18</sup> Linda Hutcheon. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2006: 18.

<sup>19</sup> Jane Smiley. 'Shakespeare in Iceland.' *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women's Re-Visions in Literature and Performance*. Ed. Marianne Novy. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999: 159.

adapters as interpreters are free to read the first text in a new light, laying stress on aspects hitherto ignored or undervalued.

Perhaps paradoxically, in Smiley's novel, this is done thanks to a hesitant narrator who has difficulty finding her voice. Ginny is literally silenced by her father – not even by explicitly imposed rules, but by habit and internalised obligation. There is no dialogue when Larry speaks:

I said, 'Daddy, did you go all the way to Des Moines?'

'What if I did?'

Now the glare was for me. It shone into me like a hot beam of sunlight.

I couldn't think of anything to say. What if he did? What if he did? (p. 103)

The parallelism between the direct speech of the father ('What if I did?') and the free indirect speech of the daughter ('What if he did?') shows that, even at the most elemental linguistic level, Ginny is trapped by her father's words, unable to find her own, condemned to repeating his. This happens time and again in the novel, for instance when she tries to confront her father about Rose's memories of incest. She cannot say anything but 'Daddy' and concludes that 'My voice vanished' (p. 216). Only Larry masters language:

It was easy, sitting there and looking at him, to see it his way. [...] When he talked, he had this effect on me. Of course it was silly to talk about 'my point of view'. When my father asserted his point of view, mine vanished. Not even I could remember it. (p. 176)

Various 'points of view' are presented, with the narrator remaining incapable of deciding which is valid. But, little by little, she imagines a confrontation between the perspectives of others – stand-ins for an audience used to the traditional interpretation of the play – and her own ideas – representing the departure from that traditional reading which the rewriting seeks to create. The metaphor used to stage this confrontation is that of the trial, but even here, Ginny is not sure she can convince the jury in this imaginary scene with her youngest sister, Caroline, who is a lawyer in the novel. It is 'as if her criticisms were simultaneously unjust and just, and the sequence of events that I remembered perfectly was only a theory, a case made in my own defense that a jury might or might not believe' (p. 118).

This relativism stems from a profound mistrust in the power of story-telling. Ginny justly remarks: 'The fact is that the same sequence of days can arrange themselves into a number of different stories' (p. 155). She keeps imagining alternative versions, both of other stories and of her own,

envisioning a different past or future. The diversity of these alternatives creates a fragmented timeline, which relativises all stories. Picking up Larry from the hospital after he had an accident, Ginny imagines a serene future where she would be in charge: 'It created a whole orderly future within me, a vista of manageable days clicking past, myself in the foreground, large and purposeful' (p. 148). Her dead mother's past is also a source of inspiration: 'The clothes in the closet [...] intoxicated us with a sense of possibility, not for us, but for our mother, lost possibilities to be sure, but somehow still present' (p. 224). After Ginny learns something new about her mother from a neighbour, she imagines a future where she would investigate her mother's past (p. 93-4). Ginny's numerous miscarriages and the children she will never have also function as symbols of a different future. About trying to become pregnant once more she says: 'I felt larger and more various than I had in years, full of unknowns, and also of untapped possibilities' (p. 26). This is symbolised by the family's Monopoly games: 'I wonder if there is anyone who isn't perked up by the sight of a Monopoly board, all the colors, all the bits and pieces, all the possibilities' (p. 76).

There are so many alternatives that the linearity of time is almost called into question, and with it the possibility of writing a 'chronological' story that can reliably be called the truth. A case in point is a newspaper article about a young girl who was killed by her boyfriend, despite her family's best efforts to prevent the tragedy. Ginny the narrator concludes: 'I keep rewriting it in my head' (p. 75). This sentence is perhaps key to understanding the narratorial strategy: this is a novel that keeps rewriting itself. But since this novel incorporates an earlier text, in the process it also rewrites that text. The narrator's difficulties in writing her own story may thus be read as one version of the struggle opposing an earlier and a later text.

The novel's temporal and narrative relativism may at first seem to undermine any attempt at constructing any story. But the other side of that coin is that all teleology is rejected, so that outcomes are never presented as inevitable. Implicitly, it is perhaps also the tragic mechanism of *King Lear*, which had led unswervingly to the destruction of all protagonists including the daughters, that is broken by Ginny. Little by little, the novel seems to discover the freedom that lies in alternatives and possibilities, finally wrestling free from the first text it successfully rewrites in the end. At a later stage, the narrator thus succeeds in questioning the point of view of those characters who embody the traditional interpretation of *King*

*Lear*. The truths of her childhood that had seemed set in stone are – tellingly – compared to a play:

The harvest drama commenced then, with the usual crises and heroics. [...] Of course we had the ritual recall of earlier harvests that made me wonder what we would say years hence if this harvest were punctuated by Rose dropping dead at the supper table one night. [...] The harvest was a drama that caught me up, no doubt about it, something that moved me below the level of knowledge [...]. I saw that I could give in to the theatrical surge and be delivered in a matter of weeks to a reconciliation with my life. It was tempting. It was tempting. (p. 317)

Theatre functions as a double-edged metaphor here, referring both to a certain vision of the pastoral American dream, but also, of course, to the first text the novel is rewriting. It appears as a script that is already written: one simply has to play one's part to fit in, once more, with the ensemble cast. Theatre becomes an allegory of the temptation of adjusting to a predetermined societal role, imposed by subtle and insidious pressures and obligations. The metaphor also taps into the common association of theatre with illusion and appearance, suggesting that this role is at odds with the narrator's real identity. This disconnection is of course a sign that the narrator has already developed a sense of her identity which is distinct from the social role she had once played. As a whole, it can be seen as a critique of the tragedy the novel is based on, condemning its traditional interpretation as restrictive and illusory role play.

In the end, the narrator's ability to disentangle herself from narratives once believed to be authoritative, to envision new possibilities, and hence to rewrite her own story, is an essential tool for the rewriting of *Lear*. Caroline Cakebread underlines the parallelism between Ginny, who builds her story against her father's, and Smiley, who builds her story against Shakespeare's:

Look at *A Thousand Acres* as the product of Smiley's struggle to map out her relationship to Shakespeare. In working to gain a foothold in her own past – to recover memory from silence – Smiley's protagonist Ginny reflects Smiley's own confrontation with an author whose presence at the hub of the Western literary canon represents a powerful and often overwhelming legacy.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Caroline Cakebread. 'Remembering *King Lear* in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*.' *Shakespeare and Appropriation*. Ed. Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer. London: Routledge, 1999: 87.

Smiley is in fact fully aware of the overlap between her project as an author and Ginny's project as a narrator, so that these traditionally separate notions converge:

As the lawyer for Goneril and Regan, I proposed a different narrative of their motives and actions that cast doubts on the case Mr. Shakespeare was making for his client, King Lear. I made Goneril my star witness, and she told her story with care.<sup>21</sup>

One remembers, of course, that the trial metaphor is used by Ginny herself within the diegesis. Smiley's novel thus appears as a Bildungsroman, which not only follows the progress of Ginny the character towards self-knowledge, but also the progress of Ginny the narrator towards the ability to tell her own story against her father's, and against Shakespeare's.

Several elements in the novel help to explain why rewriting, i.e. imposing one's own version of a story as the truth, can be conceived of as a struggle. The narrator is hesitant at first because a number of obstacles prevent the shaping of a new story. The first of these is Ginny's fragmented perception of her own body, caused by memories of abuse which never amount to more than 'fragments of sound and smell and presence' (p. 280). Ginny's perception of her own body is equally distorted, as she explains to Jess:

Shame is a distinct feeling. I couldn't look at my hands around the coffee cup or hear my own laments without feeling appalled, wanting desperately to fall silent, grow smaller. More than that, I was uncomfortably conscious of my whole body, from the awkward way that the shafts of my hair were thrusting out of my scalp to my feet, which felt dirty as well as cold. Everywhere, I seemed to feel my skin from the inside, as if it now stood away from my flesh, separated by a millimetre of mortified space. (p. 195)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Jane Smiley. 'Shakespeare in Iceland.' *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women's Re-Visions in Literature and Performance*. Ed. Marianne Novy. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999: 172.

<sup>22</sup> Numerous other passages allude to this lost sense of dignity, for instance when Ginny fetches eggs for her father's breakfast: 'The whole way I was conscious of my body – graceless and hurrying, unfit, panting, ridiculous in its very femininity. It seemed like my father could just look out of his big front window and see me naked, chest heaving, breasts, thighs, and buttocks jiggling, dignity irretrievable.'

Just like her memories of incest, Ginny's perception of her body is fragmented (hair, feet, skin), and that in turn is linked to the narrator's desire to 'fall silent'. Finding one's voice thus becomes linked with the act of redeveloping a sense of one's own body. When Ginny finally remembers the incest, her reaction is instinctive:

I screamed in a way that I had never screamed before, full out, throat-wrenching,     unafraid-of-making-a-fuss-and-drawing-attention-to-myself sorts of screams that I made myself concentrate on, becoming all mouth, all tongue, all vibration. (p. 229)

Inarticulate though it may be, the scream enables the narrator to reconnect with bodily sensations, and it becomes a first step towards reaffirming her voice. At the end of the novel, this evolution is complete:

My inheritance is with me, sitting in my chair. Lodged in my every cell, along with the DNA, are molecules of topsoil and atrazine and paraquat and anhydrous ammonia and diesel fuel and plant dust, and also molecules of memory: the bracing summer chill of floating on my back in Mel's pond, staring at the sky; the exotic redolence of the dresses in my mother's closet; the sharp odor of wet tomato vines; the stripes of pain my father's belt laid across my skin; the deep chill of waiting for the school bus in the blue of a winter's dawn. All of it is present now, here; each particle weighs some fraction of the hundred and thirty-six pounds that attaches me to the earth, perhaps as much as the print weighs in other sorts of histories. (p. 369)

At the end, some memories of bodily sensations can thus be recovered. That the weight of Ginny's body is compared to print in histories again points to the connection between redeveloping a sense of her body, finding her voice, and her ability to tell a story that is different from what she had inherited.

The exact nature of that inherited story is also explored in the novel, and represents one more obstacle in the narrator's struggle to write her own narrative. The traditional interpretation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* is incorporated into the novel, so that its validity can be questioned by an increasingly self-assured narrator. It is present as the opinions of Larry, Caroline and various neighbours, who take sides for the father against his daughters. Caroline accuses her elder sisters of being selfish, acquisitive,

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(p. 114-115) She compares herself to a woman with three legs (p. 262); she realises her father has deprived her of the memory of her own body (chapter 35).