

Understanding Shakespeare through a Modern Verse Translation:

A contemporary playwright translates Edward III for today's audiences, to be performed as a dramatic reading March 27 in Ashland, Oregon

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By Kara Q Lewis

Afternoon light filters over the laptop of playwright Octavio Solis, who focuses on the screen, puzzling out ways to decipher a difficult verse from William Shakespeare's play *Edward III*. After getting sick two weeks earlier, Solis began working from bed. His wife teases him about not using his brand new writing studio. He works intensely and relentlessly: "I get obsessive about it," he says, "I work on it 'til 1 or 2 in the morning and then it's the first thing I do when I wake up." He continues:

"I've enjoyed every second of it. It taps into the part of my brain that likes puzzles. I'm decoding something really intricate and special. The process has revealed Shakespeare's craft as a writer. I'm getting into Shakespeare's head, like when I try to think like Will Shortz so I can solve New York Times crosswords."

Solis is part of Oregon Shakespeare Festival's project *Play on! 36 playwrights translate Shakespeare*. The playwrights have been paired with a dramaturg and commissioned to create modern verse translations of plays attributed to Shakespeare. The project aims to "bring fresh voices and perspectives to the rigorous work of translation" while making "39 unique side-by-side companion translations of Shakespeare's plays that are both performable and extremely useful reference texts for both classrooms and productions." Solis' version of *Edward III* will be presented as a staged reading by Ashland New Plays Festival on March 27.

The *Play on!* project comes with controversy. For some, Shakespeare's words should remain unaltered. The belief is that today's audiences should intuit and grasp one of Shakespeare's play's meaning from skilled actors and directors in its original language. Another issue raised is one of funding. As one New York Times op-ed contributor, James Shapiro, writes, "I'd prefer to see [the project] spend its money...enabling those 36 promising American playwrights to devote themselves to writing the next Broadway hit."

The director of the project, Dr. Lue Douthit, has worked at OSF for over 20 years and says she is frustrated as a theatergoer. She understands the meaning of Shakespeare's works, having discussed, written about, studied, annotated, and adapted the bard's plays. And yet, she gets lost in the language. In a *HowlRound* forum, she writes: "I can hear it at 16 rpms, but not often at the zippy 78 speed that the language is designed to run."

Solis responds to the controversy: "I understand why this project exists," he says. "In scholarship, [the language] feeds the scholar's soul to read and study it. But in performance there are some elements that are over our heads no matter what."

For instance, he explains that there are many references and metaphors from Shakespeare's time that have lost their impact, like those related to Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and the lives of Roman generals. In

one specific case with *Edward III*, Solis had to research the identity of “the queen of shades,” and upon discovering it, re-wrote the line to provide context that she is “Diana of the moon...”

Sidestepping the discussions and lively debate over the translations, we come face to face with the playwrights and their work. Solis is enthusiastic and passionate about this project: honoring Shakespeare’s poetry and getting to understand the preeminent playwright’s motives in order to clarify and strengthen his play’s power for today’s audiences.

“I’m trying to make myself invisible in this process,” Solis says. “But I’m a poet, too. And I think I bring some poetic clarity to the work. I’ve also been an actor, so I’m trying to make it moreactable, to make lines more personal, rather than lofty and disengaged. I’m not inventing characters or story; I’m working from what is already there. Within that, there’s immense creative freedom. It pushes me to be the poet I know I can be, and I am comforted. We know more words than Shakespeare did, and I can access them so quickly.”

One of the most challenging aspects of Solis’ line-by-line translation has been Shakespeare’s use of chiasmus - a reversal of subject and predicate, usually with two parallel statements, as in this line from Act II Scene I, by Shakespeare: “Her beauty hath no match but my affection. / Hers more than most, mine most and more than more / hers more to praise than tell the sea by drops /”

Solis continues: “It’s a device that disengages – to not use ‘my, me, or I’.” One example of Solis making a scene more personal by using more direct language is in this intense speech given by Edward III in response to his son’s challenge to uphold a promise the prince made that contradicts his father:

Thou and thy word lie both in my command
what canst thou promise that I cannot break?
which of these twain is greater infamy
to disobey thy father or thyself?
Thy word nor no man's may exceed his power
nor that same man doth never break his word
that keeps it to the utmost of his power.

Solis unpacked this verse multiple times and finally rested on this translation:

Your word and you fall under my command.
What can you promise that I cannot break?
Which of these two bring you the most disgrace,
To disobey your father or yourself?
Your word, nor any man's, should not exceed
My power to break it, nor should you ever

Infringe upon your utmost word to me.

One of Solis' most treasured discoveries during this project has been what he's learned from dissecting Shakespeare's writing process: his word choices, shortcuts, and creativity.

"I am in awe of his particular genius, to fit so much into one line, and then make it rhyme," Solis says. "With my tries, they'll be one and a half lines – or two or three lines. I'll agonize sometimes forever on iambic pentameter, and then I'll go back to the original and find out – Shakespeare cheated! Some lines have one less or a couple more syllables than scan." (*Scansion* is the process of scanning a line of verse to determine its rhythm, which is iambic pentameter in Shakespeare's case.)

Separate from the controversy of translating Shakespeare, *Edward III* has its own unique discourse and disagreement among scholars as to whether the play was actually written by Shakespeare. It was officially added to Shakespeare's canon in the late 1990s. Part of the evidence used to credit Shakespeare as the author came from computer software meant to find plagiarism in college papers.

Solis describes what convinced him *Edward III* must have been written by Shakespeare: "In two of the most powerful speeches, with messengers describing graphic sea battles and French refugees fleeing their villages – there is such a command of language and tone. They're so vivid, with the poetry subverted to describe something that is truly horrifying."

The story of *Edward III* follows the personal and political struggles of pivotal characters at the start of the Hundred Years' War between England and France in the 14th century. The five-act play features the English king's love for a married countess, brutal battles for power in France, and personal struggles of honoring oneself versus honoring a king or country.

Solis found that promises resonate in the play: "Promises, swearing oaths, these are big: when is it okay to break a promise, what is the value of your word, from both a personal level to a cosmic level to everything in between – a country to the army and towns? It's interesting to see how they play out."

Also of interest for Solis were the impactful correlations between parts of the play and present-day political events, including Brexit, Syrian refugees, as well as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Solis says, "I'm drawn to the way the war, the political situation then, echoes to the present day. Edward III – England – chose to invade France and then they wondered why the French didn't embrace them. They wanted to win hearts and minds, as they were going through burning villages and killing people."

When *Edward III* was written in the 1590s it was a propaganda play, showing the royalty and their praiseworthy wars. "But," Solis says, "It doesn't put a gloss on it. Yes, it was patriotic and enormously popular, but there are some dark things that Shakespeare is mindful of exploring, like how to be a good ruler, a good conqueror."

In a pivotal scene at the town of Calais, it is the king's wife who helps change her husband's mind not to kill French men who surrendered voluntarily to save their town. However, the king wants to raze the village and kill the men to show his power. Queen Philippa then says, "Those who fall under the sword and turn to ash by fire, offer you no homage. Only living can pay you homage."

Another strong female character is the Countess of Salisbury, whom the married Edward falls in love with and propositions, expecting her to fall under his command. He is then humbled by her response.

“She had to stand up by herself and make a solution all by herself,” Solis says. “She’s more honorable than I could imagine. She forces [the king] to come to his senses. It’s resonant on so many levels.”

As Solis labored over individual words and phrases, working line by line through the five-act, 103-page, 19,000-word play, “tweaking confusing parts to make it better for contemporary audiences,” he was also translating the characters, giving audiences a stronger connection to the lives and lessons played out in the story.

In addition, the play needs to work as poetry. Solis asked himself constantly, “If Shakespeare were alive today what would he do?” For Solis the poetry was as demanding as the story. “Shakespeare’s poetry is just gorgeous, and I’m a purist.” He quotes the *Play on!* playwrights’ first rule, “to do no harm.”

When choosing *Edward III* from the list of available plays to work on for *Play on!*, Solis was excited. “I found it at the bottom of the list,” he says, “I didn’t know the play, so I was going at it with virgin eyes, and it will be the same for the audience.” When he gave his selection to Douthit, the project’s director, Solis says she was pleased.

“Why?” he asked.

She replied, “Because, you’re a poet.”

The special, one-night-only dramatic reading of Solis’ translated version of Shakespeare’s “new” play is being produced by Ashland New Plays Festival, a nonprofit organization that assists playwrights in the development of new works through public readings and offers educational forums to the community through discussions and workshops.

Solis looks forward to the performance. “This is a fresh script, newly done, and I am working in a mode that is entirely new to me.” He also hasn’t heard the play out loud yet. “It’s imperative that I hear this with the most qualified Shakespearean actors,” he says, “in order to know whether I am going in the right direction. ANPF is giving me first shot at this. The importance of that cannot be minimized.”

The performance is Monday, March 27, at 7:30 p.m. at Southern Oregon University’s Music Recital Hall. Tickets are \$20 and \$25, reserved seating, available online or at the door, subject to availability. Visit www.ashlandnewplays.org/tickets-e3/ to learn more. It is directed by Dawn Monique Williams and features a cast of 12, including: Armando Duran, Devin White, Sam Osheroff, Tamra Mathias, Jamie Peck, Jon Cates, Jordan Barbour, Kyle Haden, Robin Goodrin Nordli, Nancy Rodriguez, Stephen Michael Spencer, and Vilma Silva.

More about Octavio Solis:

Author of over 20 plays, Octavio Solis is considered by many to be one of the most prominent Latino playwrights in America. With works that both draw on and transcend the Mexican-American experience, he is a writer and director whose style defies formula, examining the darkness, magic and humor of humanity with brutal honesty and characteristic intensity. His imaginative and ever-evolving work continues to cross cultural and aesthetic boundaries, solidifying him as one of the great playwrights of our time. Learn more at www.octaviosolis.net.