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Get thee ready, Ophelia, thy Bard's labour may be lost in a new translation

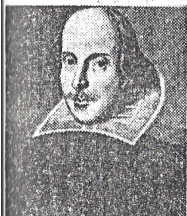
By Hilary DeVries
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

The word is well cull'd, chose, sweet, and apt, I do assure you, sir, I do assure.
— Holofernes in "Love's Labour's Lost"

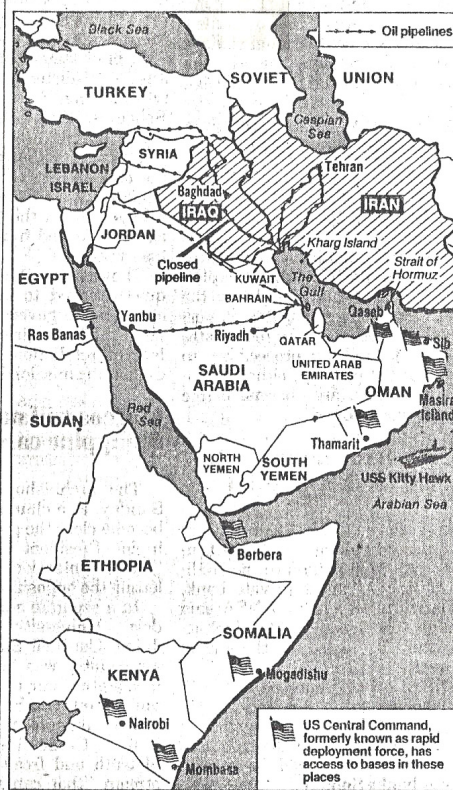
THE Bard's words may never have been more prophetic. For Shakespeare, one of the world's foremost culcers of *le mot juste*, has just had his language recurred by one of the world's foremost Shakespearean scholars. Oxford historian A. L. Rowse, the renowned if controversial Elizabethan authority, has become the first to transform the traditional language of Shakespeare's 37 plays into modern English.

The transformations — published as "The Contemporary Shakespeare Series" by the University Press of America to coincide with the 420th anniversary of the Bard's birth — extend to double negatives, double comparatives, his use of second- and third-person singular, and other vestigial grammatical forms. So the Bard's "thous" and "thees" and "shouldsts" and "wouldsts" have hit the cutting room floor — along with "fardels," "quietus," "hoodwink'd," and a host of other 16th-century archaisms. In their

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Shakespeare portrait from 1623 book



Jittery Arab oil states may be opening door to American-Soviet jostling

By Ned Temko
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

A quiet yet important superpower political contest may be shaping up in the Gulf as jittery Arab oil states seek to head off further strikes on their tankers.

In the shorter term, any implications for the United States and the Soviet Union are being overshadowed by nuts-and-bolts moves among Arab oil states to hike their military preparedness for any further air attacks.

Most Arab political analysts here say more attacks are likely to occur anyway. This is as much because of Iraq, which wants continued world pressure for a palatable end to the war it started 44 months ago, as because of Iran.

Only months ago, Iraq was in effect suing for peace at any price. But by hitting tankers near Iran's key oil terminals at Kharg Island, Baghdad has finally managed to do what Iran did early in the war — sharply reduce its foe's essential oil-export revenue. Thus, Iran's counterstrikes on Saudi and Kuwaiti tankers in recent days.

Published remarks by various Gulf officials suggest they feel the need of concerted, if discreet, outside support in their attempt to curb escalation of the war.

"Obviously, the US is seen as key in this respect even though the Saudis would like to keep any American role as low profile as is workable," remarked a veteran Arab political analyst here Monday.

[US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy held talks on the Gulf with Saudi leaders in Riyadh Monday, Reuters reports.] The US Central Command, a rapid-response force for the region, has access to several military bases in the area.

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place, Rowse has substituted familiar linguistic forms — and, frequently, his own or other scholars' words.

The result? It setteth scholars on their ears. The alterations are eliciting both bursts of applause and howls of protest from Shakespearean scholars and dramatists here and abroad.

Some, such as actor Richard Burton, New York Shakespeare Festival producer Joe Papp, and historian Barbara Tuchman, have applauded the historian's attempts to free Shakespeare from the often obscure original language and its accompanying ballast of footnotes.

But most critics charge that the textual tampering violates not only the meter but also the meaning of Shakespeare's verse. Some observers have labeled it a "popularization"; others find it simply "irresponsible." Actress Helen Hayes says it introduces "jive talk" into Shakespeare. And John Andrews, editor of *The Shakespeare Quarterly* and academic program director of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., says that "Rowse's editing obliterates nuances, reduces tonality, and brings the poetry down to the prosaic." He notes that "it's akin to replacing the statuary of a medieval cathedral with [department store] mannequins."

But Rowse, author of dozens of tomes on Shakespeare and the Elizabethan age, is no stranger to scholarly disputes. He first raised the hackles of the academic community when he identified Shakespeare's *Dark Lady* of the Sonnets as Emilia Bassano Lanier, the daughter of one of the Queen's Italian musicians — a controversial theory that literary circles have debated and many critics have debunked. So Rowse brushes off barbs aimed at his latest work like so many errant gnats.

"Their attitude towards Shakespeare is that of the museum," said the professor emeritus in an interview here recently. "I want to keep William Shakespeare alive and not have him laid up the fridge."

Rowse maintains that his approach has been one of "absolute common sense. I'm simply removing unneces-

sary difficulties."

In some cases, the effect of the removal is nominal. At other times, it is dramatic. The awkward use of the subjunctive "Where be thy brothers?" for example, Rowse changes to the more easily read "Where are your brothers?"

But in such well-known passages as Hamlet's injunction to Ophelia — "Get thee to a nunnery" — even his minor change sounds odd: "Get you to a nunnery." Elsewhere the historian has trod lightly: In Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy, Rowse has changed only two words for clarity.

As a practicing poet, Rowse insists that he is sensitive to Shakespeare's original metrical scansion and that where possible he has substituted modern words of syllabic similarity. His alterations of the sonnets, he says, will be minimal. "One needs to be an Elizabethan authority and a practicing poet — and how many people are that?" he asks.

Rowse says his target audience is students. "My first thought was that [this] was valuable for high schools," he says. "I myself don't need a modern Shakespeare; I live in the Elizabethan age. But I've been told that in some classes they are studying Shakespeare in synopsis and footnotes. I think that's awful, don't you?"

But critics such as Dr. Darwin Turner, a University of Iowa English professor and director of the Commission on Literature of the National Council of Teachers of English, say there's little proof of such classroom problems. "We have no evidence of a turning away from Shakespeare in high schools," Dr. Turner says. "And at the college level, Shakespeare remains extremely popular."

Indeed, others insist that Rowse's alterations do more to constrict than to augment the students' comprehension of original texts. Andrews points out, for instance, that the simple insertion of an additional comma into the well-known "O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?" — Rowse's version reads, "O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore are you, Romeo?" — substantially alters the line's original meaning.

While this might strike some observers as a literary

tempest in a teapot, Andrews says it is indicative of what he calls Rowse's tampering. "The responsible way to have done this," says Andrews, "would be to make a real translation" — a word that Rowse eschews. "A page of the original facing a page of translation," Andrews adds. "That way you are not taking people away from Shakespeare."

But Rowse is undeterred. "Shakespeare used 8,000 [different] words. We use roughly 4,000. Every decade his language gets further and further away."

"We've got to think of the future, and of the third world," Rowse says. "Nobody's got a writer as universal as we have. That's why it's so important to get him read. Besides, the proper approach to Shakespeare is in the theater." In staged productions of the new version, Rowse insists that "you won't even know the difference."

Yet opinion in dramatic circles differs. Terry Hands, artistic director of Britain's Royal Shakespeare Company, has said that comprehending Shakespeare is no more difficult than understanding the language of the 23rd Psalm in the King James Version.

Barry Kraft, an actor with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, agrees. "Granted, some words have changed and it takes a little elbow work to make it clear [to the audience]. But some of the most exciting work occurs when as an actor you ask yourself, 'How can I interpret this?' Besides, Shakespeare wrote 75 percent of his work in verse, and you're not going to get rid of the perplexities without reducing that resonance."

Despite assertions by Rowse and his publisher that the largest market for the Contemporary Shakespeare lies in US schools, many predict that the academic community will simply ignore the "popular phenomenon." "There will be virtually no impact on college level [Shakespearean studies] and minimal impact at the high school level," says Andrews, adding that the teachers he has encountered "think [the revision] is appalling."

"It's pointless to have students read it in translation," says Dr. Turner. "The plot isn't why one reads Shakespeare anyway."