

Edgeways Miscellany no. 12  
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## “How sacred is Allan Massie?”

. . . Shakespeare might ask, if he read the *Spectator* for October 10, 2007

“Has it ever occurred to you, Mr Massie, to re-write Shakespeare to bring him up-to-date?”

I was asked this fascinating little question while giving the first Magnus Magnusson Memorial Lecture at the Wigtown Book festival. Magnus had been a great supporter of this little festival from its smallest beginnings, in its earliest days. (And no wonder, for it is charming, quite charming!) All Morningsaide exclaimed, of course, when little Wigtown—that small Galloway town on the fringe of the out-of-the-way Solway Firth—was selected as the official book town for all Scotland. (Did you know, baye-the-baye, that the best way to get to Wigtown from Morningsaide Draive by public transport is via the Belfast ferry?) But we none of us let that stop us turning up to promote ourselves and our latest books at its charming little festival, which, to its credit, still managed to attract not just me and Matthew and Mark but Maggie and Luke and the *Speccie*’s very own John himself.

But you’ll be wanting to know how I answered that remarkable and fascinating question, in which sat Shakespeare’s name and my own saide-baye-saide. One’s *immediate* reaction was, of course, “Oh, goodness me, *no*. How could you possibly *think*? I shouldn’t dream.” Yet, and yet, some *have* thought. And some have done too. A. L. Rowse did. And made Shakespeare sound very much like me (not as much, of course, as he made him sound like *himself* . . . but still . . .). And it must be, oh, half a century and more since (much to the gratitude of generations of ‘A’ level students) Neville Coghill did the same for Chaucer and the *Canterbury Tales*. Likewise the C of E for the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. All now sound much more like me than they used to.

But what is the balance of loss and gain? That is the question.

Shakespeare’s chief glory is his language, of course. It is his use of words in which we take our keenest delight, his poetry to which our fibres most deeply thrill. But who avers that, because his plays are poetry, they are not plays? (No one, I am sure, except that unspeakable—and now unspeaking—puritan, Dr Leavis.) Do they not make employment for set-designers, scene-shifters and make-up artists? Do not foreigners, the whole world over, perform them, in I know not how many tongues? Indeed, although, with me, translations into the French have always fallen rather flat, the most gripping production I ever saw was by a company of travelling Glaswegians in a language I wot not a word of.

Happily, as I was able *most sincerely* to say to my questioner, the day has not yet arrived when Shakespeare fails so completely to make himself understood that he needs re-writing by Allan Massie. But who knows? If one *were* to bring Shakespeare up-to-date, would it not permit future generations to understand him as well as one understands oneself? Time moves on, after all, and language with it, ever changing, ever more swiftly—1597, 1697, 1797 and so forth, all the way up to 2007 and beyond—covering, levelling, obliterating, but also, like the glaciation of the haighlands, opening the way at last to Morningsaide and the lowlands. Nevertheless, fine as *that* prospect may be, Modesty (paraphrasing Dryden) reminds us that what Shakespeare is Massie may become.

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