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From Palimpsest to Prompt: Rewriting Shakespeare, Creative Authorship, and the Generative Logics of Large Language Models in Contemporary Theatre

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Article History: Received: 29/06/2025; Accepted: 14/07/2025; Published: 17/07/2025

Abstract: This article examines the convergence of creative authorship, adaptation, and generative artificial intelligence within contemporary theatre, taking Michael Harding's *Awake, Young King* as a central case study. Through the rewriting of Shakespearean drama, Harding's creative process demonstrates how theatrical meaning emerges through ongoing negotiation among playwright, performer, and audience, with scripts historically subject to revision, improvisation, and reinterpretation. Concerns regarding copyright, intellectual property, and the role of AI in the performing arts are reframed as extensions of enduring debates over originality and authorship, rather than novel threats. Tracing the evolution from *The Rise of James VI* to *Awake, Young King*, the article reveals that both human playwrights and large language models employ adaptive recombination of existing material, challenging strict divisions between human and computational creativity. Within the wider context of technological mediation already prevalent in theatre—from digital tools for rehearsal and feedback to automation in set and sound design—the presence of generative AI reflects an intensification of established creative methodologies, rather than a disruptive break. In light of the widespread closure of regional theatres and shifting audience expectations, the discussion advances the view that collaborative engagement with generative AI provides practical strategies for sustaining theatrical practice while also opening critical perspectives on adaptation, authorship, and relevance for emerging generations in the field.

Keywords: *Adaptation, Authorship, Artificial Intelligence, Shakespeare, Contemporary theatre.*

Cite this article: Harding, M., Hutson, J., (2025). From Palimpsest to Prompt: Rewriting Shakespeare, Creative Authorship, and the Generative Logics of Large Language Models in Contemporary Theatre. *MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature*, 2 (7)102-110.

Introduction

Tradition, Transformation, and the Digital Turn

In the third decade of the twenty-first century, the performing arts have been roiled by a persistent undercurrent of anxiety surrounding the integration of generative technologies into the processes of artistic creation. A central concern within these debates is the widely held belief that the increasing prevalence of large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT and image generators like Midjourney poses a fundamental challenge to established notions of creative authorship and artistic legitimacy. Many artists and arts institutions express trepidation that generative systems facilitate copyright infringement, erode the distinctiveness of individual voice, and undermine established systems of intellectual property and credit (Thongmeensuk, 2024; Liu, 2024). These anxieties have been particularly pronounced in the fields of theatre and performance, where the “aura” of liveness and the embodied act of creation are frequently held as sacrosanct and untranslatable into machine logic (Fernandez-Fresard et al., 2024). Recent research indicates that artists’ resistance to generative

technologies is as much a response to fears of cultural and economic displacement as it is to ethical or legal uncertainty, with questions of authorship and originality operating as proxies for deeper concerns regarding creative agency and professional sustainability (Thongmeensuk, 2024). The specter of “machine plagiarism”—the notion that a generative tool could not only mimic but also subsume an artist’s creative output—has become a touchstone in legal debates and public discourse (Liu, 2024). Yet, a careful examination of the history of the discipline reveals that such anxieties are not unprecedented but rather recapitulate older patterns of contestation over attribution and artistic value.

The tendency to interpret generative technologies as existential threats to creative integrity often elides the fundamentally recombinant nature of artistic practice, especially within the domain of theatre. From the Renaissance to the present, the dramaturgical process has depended upon the persistent reshaping, recontextualization, and citation of prior works—a practice that, far from undermining artistic value, has served as the crucible for theatrical innovation (Carlson, 2003; Sullivan, 2022). The modern obsession with intellectual property and originality is,



as theatre historians have long argued, a relatively recent development; for centuries, playwrights, including Shakespeare, regularly appropriated plots, phrases, and characters from a shared repertoire of stories, legal records, and earlier scripts (Stern, 2009). As Worthen (2023) has shown, the mutable text is not merely a product of adaptation or revision but is itself a living organism, constantly evolving in performance and through the interventions of actors, directors, and audiences. The intertextual “palimpsest” of theatre reveals that what is often condemned as plagiarism in the digital age was, historically, regarded as homage, adaptation, or even necessary craft (Carlson, 2003).

Shakespeare, whose legacy looms over the Western dramatic canon, epitomizes the complexities of creative adaptation and textual instability. His histories and tragedies are replete with moments of overt borrowing, whether from Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, earlier plays, or the popular ballads of his time (Fischlin & Fortier, 2000; Sanders, 2015). The scripts that survive under his name are, moreover, palimpsests: accretions of authorial revision, actor improvisation, and the corrective or corruptive interventions of early modern printers (Stern, 2009). These mutable texts were subject to transformation not only in rehearsal and performance but also as a consequence of their afterlives in print and adaptation, underscoring the instability of any “original” authorial intent (Worthen, 2023). As such, Shakespearean drama exemplifies the performative negotiation of meaning—a process wherein authorship is never singular but always distributed among creative collaborators and responsive to audience interpretation.

It is in this context that the contemporary controversy surrounding generative authorship, intellectual property, and the threat of “machine plagiarism” must be critically situated. The recombinatory logic at the heart of generative systems is not a radical departure from theatrical tradition but rather a mechanization and amplification of practices long familiar to dramatists and performers. As digital dramaturgs and theatre scholars have recently argued, what distinguishes generative systems is not the act of adaptation or recombination itself, but the unprecedented scale, speed, and accessibility with which these processes unfold (Liu, 2024; Fernandez-Fresard et al., 2024). Instead of reinforcing a binary between human and computational creativity, the evolving discourse invites scholars and practitioners to reconsider the genealogy of adaptation, the politics of authorship, and the ethics of credit in an era of heightened technological mediation. By foregrounding the historical embeddedness of adaptation and the mutable nature of dramatic texts, the current moment can be seen as a continuation—and intensification—of the very processes that have always defined the artistic vitality of theatre.

Within this context, *Awake, Young King* (2006) emerges as a potent cipher for understanding the dynamic evolution of authorship and adaptation in contemporary theatre. Developed by Michael Harding, the play originated as *The Rise of James VI*—a direct engagement with the structures, devices, and dramatic logics of Shakespearean history plays. The creative process taken by the playwright, marked by deliberate mimicry and divergence from Shakespearean precedent, exemplifies the ongoing dialogue between past and present, tradition and innovation. The text itself underwent multiple transformations, including substantial structural revisions, the reworking of dialogue and pacing, and the adoption of Shakespearean forms such as the prologue and alternating indoor-outdoor scene progression. These choices not

only reflect an intimate knowledge of Elizabethan dramaturgy but also foreground the mutable, recombinatory nature of theatrical authorship—affirming the extent to which new dramatic meaning continually arises from the creative reshuffling of inherited forms (Sullivan, 2022; Worthen, 2023).

Significantly, the approach illustrates how adaptation and authorship in theatre are always entangled with the material realities of performance, publication, and audience reception. The evolution of the title of the play—from the academically inflected *The Rise of James VI* to the more evocative *Awake, Young King*—was motivated not by authorial whim, but by feedback from theatres and concerns about marketability and accessibility to contemporary audiences. This responsiveness is emblematic of the historical conditions under which Shakespeare’s own works circulated: scripts were subject to modification by actors, directors, printers, and even censors, resulting in a dramatic text that was inherently unstable, collaborative, and responsive to its immediate social and economic milieu (Stern, 2009; Sanders, 2015). The explicit acknowledgment of these realities ensures that the project foregrounds the essential recombinatory logic that has long animated theatrical creation, while at the same time inviting critical reflection on the implications of such logic in the context of generative computational systems.

In its Shakespearean lineage and contemporary reinvention, *Awake, Young King* thus stands as both artifact and argument. On the one hand, the play is a product of painstaking research and creative practice—a palimpsest of Shakespearean influence, dramaturgical experimentation, and responsive adaptation to the realities of the twenty-first-century theatre marketplace. On the other, it offers a living laboratory for interrogating the implications of authorship in an era increasingly defined by computational intervention and collaborative creative processes. The case study thus bridges the traditional and the emergent, serving as a heuristic device for understanding not only how playwrights have always worked, but also how they might continue to work within a landscape now co-populated by generative algorithms and machine partners (Garcia, 2024; Fernandez-Fresard et al., 2024).

This article, then, is guided by a core research question: What does it mean to author anew in an era when both human agents and computational systems engage in the recombinatory processes foundational to artistic creation? In addressing this question, the discussion will argue that the generative capacities of contemporary models, rather than threatening the integrity of theatrical authorship, render explicit—and intensify—practices of adaptation and collaborative meaning-making that have long structured the field. Through situating the creative trajectory of *Awake, Young King* within the deep history of adaptation and textual transformation in theatre, and juxtaposing it with current debates on generative systems, the article aims to elucidate the historical continuity and ethical complexity of authorship in the performing arts. The analysis contends that an awareness of these continuities not only destabilizes reactionary fears about computational creativity, but also equips practitioners and scholars to negotiate questions of originality, legitimacy, and credit with greater nuance and historical consciousness.

Adaptation as Authorship: The Theatrical Palimpsest

Theatre history is, at its core, a continuous act of adaptation—a tradition in which playwrights, performers, and

audiences have always participated in the creative reworking and restructuring of existing material. As Fischlin and Fortier (2000) observe, adaptation is not a modern phenomenon but rather a defining attribute of dramatic authorship: classical playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides routinely reinterpreted mythic stories known to their audiences, setting the precedent for what would later become the foundational logic of Western drama. In early modern England, this practice achieved new visibility with the emergence of print, but the logic remained unchanged: playwrights routinely borrowed plots, characters, and motifs, recasting them for contemporary needs and tastes (Bratton, 2003). The result is a theatrical archive in which the boundaries between originality and derivation are blurred, and in which artistic value resides as much in the art of transformation as in acts of invention (Tillis, 2007).

Shakespeare occupies a unique position within this genealogy, not only as the most adapted playwright in Western tradition but also as a figure whose own works are themselves marked by adaptation. As Sanders (2015) notes, the plays of Shakespeare are a palimpsest: traces of earlier chronicles, morality plays, classical texts, and oral tradition are layered within his histories and tragedies, and these scripts in turn have generated centuries of reinterpretation and rewriting. From the Restoration-era *King Lear* by Nahum Tate—complete with a happy ending—to the avant-garde deconstructions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Shakespearean scripts have become the site of constant negotiation between the familiar and the new (Álvarez-Recio, 2009). Each adaptation not only pays homage to its source but also asserts a claim to creative authorship, perpetuating the dialogic relationship between past and present that is intrinsic to theatrical practice.

The living, mutable quality of dramatic texts becomes particularly evident in the context of rehearsal and performance. Recent research underscores that scripts are seldom “fixed” at the moment of composition; instead, they evolve through the practical demands of staging, the interpretive interventions of actors, and the contingencies of audience response. Stern (2009) demonstrates that in the early modern period, scripts were annotated, revised, and sometimes wholly rewritten by actors or scribes to accommodate casting, censorship, or shifting theatrical conventions. Only later, often through the process of print publication, were these living documents retrospectively stabilized as canonical “texts”—a process that inevitably obscured the collaborative and adaptive labor that shaped them in practice (Peters, 2003).

Contemporary scholarship corroborates that the concept of authorship in theatre is less about singular invention and more about the iterative, collective act of adaptation. Recent studies in adaptation theory argue that the value of a dramatic work often lies in its capacity for transformation—its readiness to be rewritten, restaged, and reimagined in new contexts (Barnette, 2018; Hutcheon, 2006). Moreover, with the emergence of digital dramaturgy and computational tools, the processes of adaptation and recombination have become ever more visible, challenging persistent myths about originality and creative ownership in the arts (Junius, 2024). Thus, the history of theatre is not merely a lineage of fixed masterpieces but rather a palimpsest—a living archive shaped by the ongoing negotiation between stability and change, source and adaptation.

The compositional process underlying *Awake, Young King* provides a vivid case study of adaptation as creative authorship—a

process that both aligns with and reimagines the Shakespearean canon. From the outset, Harding’s stated aim was not “an assigned requirement for the degree, rather a nerdy endeavor of my own to understand Shakespeare’s plays better, specifically his histories: structure, dramaturgical vs. accurate presentation of events, creation of characters, inclusion of true historical figures, conflation of time and characters, etc.”. The very first line, “Lennox, that gentle lion’s heart, is dead,” was crafted to consciously echo the meter and rhetorical weight of *Henry VI, Part I*: “Hung be the Heavens with black; yield day to night,” thus beginning the work with a gesture of both homage and transformation. Early compositional decisions emerged from an academic analysis of Shakespearean form, leading to a deliberate use of rhythmic devices such as the trochee to launch the play with energy and intention. While this initial choice demonstrated careful attention to the power of Shakespearean metrics, the creative process quickly moved beyond imitation and evolved in new directions. Throughout the play, the overall structure—including the alternation between indoor and outdoor scenes and the balance of large and small sequences—was consciously modeled on Shakespearean histories. However, these elements were adapted to better suit contemporary narrative clarity, dramatic pacing, and the expectations of a modern audience

The approach to language and character both draws from and intentionally diverges from Elizabethan precedent. The dialogue transitions fluidly between iambic cadence and modern syntax, reflecting an initial commitment to historical linguistic accuracy. As the project developed, however, the focus shifted toward making the language accessible and resonant for contemporary audiences. Rather than adhering strictly to an academic or antiquarian style, Harding adapted the script to support a more natural and current mode of speaking, prioritizing dramatic clarity and audience engagement over rigid period fidelity. At the same time, archetypal figures are retained—the fool who “speaks wisdom while frivolity and shallow reasoning is the actual mode of most ‘respectable, knowledgeable’ characters,” and the regent “as would-be usurper” are clear Shakespearean echoes—but these are refracted through modern values, such as the recommendation that “young ladies be offered the opportunity to play these roles” of James VI and Archie, a direct intervention to address the gender imbalance of classical casting. This is further underlined in a production note: “Ingenues will provide the necessary age differentiation while providing maturity of performance” and “this also gives young actresses an opportunity to take on ‘meatier’ roles” (Harding, 2006, *Personae Dramatis*).

This is evident, for example, in Act I, Scene I, where political tension, conflicting loyalties, and courtly intrigue are established through rapid exchanges and layered exposition among multiple characters. The scene not only introduces the central conflict but also evokes the chaotic, polyphonic world-building characteristic of Shakespeare’s histories, while employing original language and pacing crafted for a modern audience. Elsewhere, as in Act II, Scene I, the play uses invented figures such as Lady Elspeth and Ilsa to offer a female perspective and introduce new narrative dimensions, illustrating how the adaptation process involves both honoring and diverging from historical precedent. These moments reveal the ongoing balance between chronicling historical events and constructing a dynamic theatrical narrative that resonates with contemporary sensibilities.

These compositional and institutional dynamics are further complicated by ongoing debates over originality, citation, and artistic “ownership.” In both traditional and contemporary settings, the boundaries between adaptation and plagiarism remain unstable—what is celebrated as homage in one context may be condemned as theft in another (Carlson, 2003). The case of *Awake, Young King* underscores that “ownership” in the theatre is best conceived as provisional and negotiated, rather than absolute: scripts are shaped in rehearsal, transformed in performance, and marked by countless anonymous or collective contributions, only a fraction of which are captured by the formal apparatus of copyright. As recent scholarship on digital and generative creation emphasizes, the anxiety about “machine plagiarism” is continuous with longstanding anxieties about human adaptation, revealing the extent to which all authorship in theatre is a collaborative act of reassembly and invention (Lightwala, 2025).

Generative Logics and Creative Authorship

The concept of “generative logics” provides a critical bridge between centuries-old practices of artistic adaptation and the new modalities of creation enabled by LLMs. At its core, generative logic describes the process through which creators—whether human or computational—engage in the recombination, transformation, and contextual reimagining of existing materials to produce novel works (Jendreiko, 2024). Recent studies in digital creativity and computational aesthetics emphasize that the methods employed by LLMs, such as OpenAI’s ChatGPT, Anthropic’s Claude, and Google’s Gemini, fundamentally rely on ingesting vast textual corpora, identifying patterns, and generating new content by remixing and reframing elements drawn from those corpora (Grainger, Turnbull, & Irwin, 2025). Contrary to popular anxieties regarding plagiarism or loss of originality, this process closely mirrors the longstanding practices of playwrights and artists who have historically mined cultural archives to craft works that are simultaneously familiar and new (Fischlin, 2000).

A review of theatre history, especially in the context of Shakespeare and his successors, reveals that the recombinatory principle is not an incidental feature but a defining logic of dramatic authorship. Shakespeare’s histories and tragedies are famously layered with references, motifs, and direct borrowings from prior chronicles, legends, and literary sources. Liapis (2021) notes that adaptation in theatre operates as a form of creative citation: scripts act as palimpsests, with each iteration layering new meaning atop the old, and each performance offering further transformation. In this light, the work of the modern playwright and the generative capacities of LLMs can be seen as parallel, rather than antagonistic, modes of cultural production—both are engaged in “making something new from the familiar.” Moreover, this analogy is powerfully illustrated through the process of developing *Awake, Young King*. The project began with careful attention to the prosodic and rhetorical architecture of Shakespearean histories, but as the work evolved, it incorporated original narrative threads, new characters, and language adapted for modern sensibilities. This method exemplifies what Franceschelli and Musolesi (2024) call computational creativity by recombination—the synthesis of such examples as historical sources, dramaturgical techniques, and contemporary themes into a coherent, original whole. Just as LLMs generate plausible new sentences by assembling and transforming patterns from their training data, so too do playwrights craft original dramatic meaning

by selectively drawing from, rearranging, and reinterpreting received material (Hutcheon, 2006).

Central to this generative logic is the negotiation of authorship and meaning across a web of collaborators—writers, performers, audiences, and now, computational agents. Simpson (2021) observes that the “liveness” of theatre does not reside solely in human presence but in the dynamic, adaptive processes that continually re-author and re-contextualize dramatic texts. LLMs participate in this tradition by externalizing and accelerating the processes of transformation, recombination, and negotiation that have always shaped theatrical meaning. While their outputs may lack the situated intentionality of the human playwright, their operations embody the same fundamental mechanisms—an observation that unsettles simplistic distinctions between “original” and “derivative” creation. Again, the reflective account of *Awake, Young King* reveals that adaptation is not merely a matter of borrowing but an active, iterative process of sense-making and authorship. For example, the transformation of the opening line to echo *Henry VI, Part 1* while generating a new narrative context demonstrates conscious recombination at the micro-level (Act I, Scene I). The introduction of original characters, such as Lady Elspeth, and the restructuring of act sequences for modern performance further illustrate how playwrights, like LLMs, are engaged in purposeful, generative invention—not passive replication. This continuity is echoed in the practice of doubling roles for practical and artistic reasons, itself a form of recombinatory staging.

Recent research on remix culture, authorship, and computational creativity affirms the ethical and aesthetic complexity of this landscape. Scholars such as Ching and Mothi (2025) argue that generative technologies do not replace human creators but invite a reconsideration of how agency, originality, and credit are distributed in the creative process. Remix theorists contend that value arises from the curation, transformation, and ethical negotiation of materials, rather than from *ex nihilo* invention. In both the historical and computational paradigms, the line between homage, adaptation, and authorship is blurred—rendering questions of plagiarism and legitimacy far more nuanced than is often acknowledged in public debate (Noti-Viktor, 2025). Nonetheless, important discontinuities remain. While playwrights like Harding exercise intentional, critical, and often ethically reflexive agency in their adaptations, LLMs lack intrinsic awareness or cultural context; their outputs require human interpretation and validation. Yet, as Israel-Fishelson et al. (2021) notes, the real innovation lies in the interplay between human and computational forms of creativity, where each extends the reach and capacity of the other.

Negotiating Ownership, Authorship, and Reception

Recent research in theatre studies and digital humanities reveals that questions of ownership, authorship, and reception have become central to the ethical debates surrounding generative technologies in the performing arts. In the wake of highly publicized controversies about generative models producing content “in the style of” living or deceased artists, theatre practitioners have raised concerns that the authenticity and legitimacy of creative expression are at risk (Cejudo, 2024). At the heart of this anxiety is the belief that artistic work must originate in an individual’s “gut expression”—an unmediated, affective, and

often ineffable impulse that is presumed to confer legitimacy on the resulting art (Dewey, 2024; Sawyer & Henriksen, 2024). As recent research demonstrates, many artists perceive the emergence of machine-generated scripts, designs, and performances as fundamentally at odds with this valorization of interiority, fearing that the “soul” of the artwork is lost when creative agency is distributed across algorithmic systems (Cake, 2025; Pal, Mitra, & Lakshmi, 2025; Rahman & Ali, 2024). The theatre world, long a bastion of collaborative practice, now finds itself paradoxically defensive, defending both a rhetoric of radical inclusivity and a reality of entrenched artistic and economic hierarchies. Thus, debates about computational creativity frequently mask deeper ethical questions about credit, attribution, and professional recognition—issues that predate digital technologies but are now newly urgent in the age of generative models.

Scholarly work on the ethics of creative ownership underscores that credit and acknowledgment, rather than singular authorship, have always been at stake in the performing arts. As Colin (2015) and Mermikides (2006) both emphasize, the collaborative, process-oriented nature of theatre complicates simple narratives of individual authorship or creative “genius.” The assignment of credit has historically relied on conventions—such as program listings, copyright claims, and professional reputations—that are themselves the product of ongoing negotiation and, at times, contestation. The introduction of machine-generated scripts or performances challenges these systems, not necessarily by undermining their practical function, but by exposing their inherent instability (Ambayec et al., 2025). As Blackwell (2024) argues, ethical discomfort with computational creativity is less about the replacement of human labor than about the disruption of established norms for distributing recognition and value within creative communities. Thus, calls for more robust acknowledgment protocols for algorithmically-assisted work reflect a continuity with longstanding debates over collective authorship, ghostwriting, and the boundaries of artistic credit.

The legitimacy of computationally-generated art remains deeply contested within both scholarly and institutional frameworks. Recent studies suggest that audiences and critics continue to privilege works perceived as arising from individual vision or lived experience, despite growing familiarity with remix, collaboration, and adaptive authorship as central features of artistic production (Barnette, 2018; Fischlin, 2000). The reception of generative work in theatre often depends on contextual framing—whether machine-generated content is foregrounded as an innovative tool, hidden as a “ghost collaborator,” or critiqued as a threat to authenticity (Przegalinska & Triantoro, 2024). Institutional responses vary widely, with some companies and funders embracing digital experimentation while others reiterate traditional standards of originality and authorship (Mazzi, 2024). As a result, the legitimacy of computational art is negotiated on a case-by-case basis, shaped as much by institutional politics and cultural attitudes as by the intrinsic qualities of the work itself.

These tensions echo earlier anxieties in theatre history about collaboration, anonymity, and the dilution of authority. Scholars have long noted that the Shakespearean canon, for instance, was the product of collective writing, revision, and performance, yet only relatively recently has the discipline moved to recognize these collaborative origins (Sanders, 2015). Anxieties about “machine authorship” in the present thus replay older worries about the loss of artistic integrity in collaborative,

anonymous, or “inauthentic” forms of production. What has changed is the scale and speed at which computational tools can participate in these processes—raising new questions about the ethical limits of adaptation, the redistribution of credit, and the legitimacy of “algorithmic creativity” (Leong, 2025). Nevertheless, as Liapis (2021) points out, the boundaries between authentic and derivative art have always been fluid, and the history of theatre is replete with moments of controversy over adaptation, collaboration, and innovation.

Institutional and market responses to generative creativity further reveal the contradictions within “progressive” artistic communities. While many theatres and funding bodies publicly celebrate experimentation and technological innovation, they frequently fall back on exclusionary programming, restrictive eligibility criteria, and “safe” canonical choices when economic or reputational stakes are high (Boso, 2025). Likewise, innovative works that challenge the boundaries of authorship or incorporate generative elements are often programmed only in marginal, “experimental” venues, rarely making the leap to mainstream stages (Ren, 2024). This phenomenon underscores the persistent tension between the rhetoric of inclusivity and the reality of artistic and economic conservatism—a tension that shapes not only the production and reception of generative work, but also the broader ecology of theatre and performance. Yet, despite these anxieties, emerging scholarship suggests that the ethical challenges posed by generative technologies are best addressed through transparent crediting, robust collaborative protocols, and a reimagining of authorship as a distributed, negotiated practice (Cohen, Price, & Bernardini, 2025; McDonagh, 2021). Rather than treating computational systems as external threats or inferior co-authors, theatre communities can build on their own histories of adaptation, collaboration, and negotiated credit to develop new conventions for acknowledgment and authorship. This might include program notes, digital credits, or the explicit framing of generative contributions as one strand in a networked process of meaning-making (Worthen, 2023). Such approaches not only address ethical concerns but also offer audiences a richer, more nuanced understanding of how creative work is produced and experienced in the twenty-first century.

Technological Mediation in Performance Practice

The technological augmentation of theatre practice has become so deeply embedded in contemporary performance that its novelty is often overstated. Today’s actors, directors, and designers routinely deploy a range of digital tools that automate, enhance, or radically transform conventional modes of rehearsal, design, and production (Bird, 2023; Boiko et al., 2023). Rehearsal apps on smartphones enable actors to memorize lines, run cues, and even simulate scene partners using speech recognition and AI-driven feedback, while collaborative software facilitates geographically distributed creative teams (Ma & Yuping, 2025). Scenic and costume designers have used computer-aided design (CAD) and 3D modeling since the 1980s to experiment with spatial arrangements, while directors preview complex effects using virtual and augmented reality platforms (Baugh, 2014). These tools not only extend creative possibilities but also embed technological mediation into the dramaturgical fabric of modern theatre. The very notion of “liveness” is now negotiated across digital and physical spaces, challenging purist anxieties about authenticity and presence (Worthen, 2023). Thus, computational tools are no longer

(and have not been for some time) exotic additions but have become essential elements in the day-to-day making of performance.

In *Awake, Young King*, the interplay of tradition and innovation is manifest not only in narrative structure but also in the engagement of the script with metatheatrical technique—a strategy that echoes the logic of technological mediation. In Act I, Scene I, Archie wryly observes, “My lord, thy brazen snorts and rude guffaws will give our trick away! In silence, my lord, we must stealthily follow these three pathetic knaves.” This line directly references the mechanics of stage business and audience complicity, foreshadowing the sophisticated interplay of actor, text, and audience that underlies digitally mediated performance. Similarly, the asides and interjections—“If folly is what they want, then folly will I give” (Hardin, 2006; *Act I, Scene I*)—not only reveal character psychology but act as internal prompts, structurally akin to digital cues or director’s notes embedded in performance software. These self-reflexive strategies mirror how current technologies embed reminders, annotations, and meta-data into the creative workflow, blurring the boundaries between script, performance, and digital augmentation.

As a continuation, the landscape of scenographic practice offers a striking illustration of this ongoing technological evolution. Computer-assisted design and 3D modeling have become standard in scenic and lighting design, giving designers unprecedented control over visual composition and the ability to simulate and iterate stage environments prior to production (Soares et al., 2019). These platforms facilitate detailed collaboration between designers, directors, and choreographers, who can visualize lighting, color palettes, and dynamic movement in real time. Increasingly, generative algorithms are used to suggest design motifs, automate complex transitions, or even propose novel solutions to logistical challenges—extending the creative agency of the design team without supplanting it (Gherghescu, 2024). Such practices exemplify the productive entanglement of human intuition and machine logic in theatrical creation.

Choreography and dance have also been radically reshaped by digital technologies, especially motion capture and data-driven movement analysis (Li, 2024). Choreographers employ these systems to record, visualize, and manipulate movement, enabling the refinement of synchrony, the exploration of virtual bodies, and the preservation of performances in digital archives. This capacity for iterative revision and experimentation—once limited to live rehearsal—is now amplified by software that tracks anatomical nuance, supports real-time collaboration, and facilitates remote direction (Tsuchida, 2024). Such innovations reinforce the argument that computational mediation is an extension, not a displacement, of embodied creativity. Moreover, another area of technological mediation is the integration of pre-recorded tracks and digital sound in live theatre. Many productions, especially those with budgetary or logistical constraints, utilize pre-recorded orchestration, sound effects, and even dialogue, synchronized with live performance (Saulwick, 2015; Stinton, 2020). While this practice can provoke anxieties about the dilution of liveness, it is, in fact, a continuation of historic strategies—such as gas lighting or the use of recorded sound in radio plays—by which theatre has adapted to changing technological and economic contexts (Worthen, 2023). Contemporary productions now layer live and mediated elements to create new hybrid forms of storytelling and affective engagement.

Digital tools have also expanded the dramaturg’s toolkit. Playwrights increasingly collaborate with generative text systems to draft dialogue, develop plot structures, and remix classical works (Yaseen, 2023). These algorithms are not authors in the traditional sense, but serve as partners in brainstorming, adaptation, and revision, echoing the recombinatory spirit that has defined dramatic writing for centuries. As a result, the dramaturgical process is both democratized and complicated, with credit and creative agency distributed across human and machine collaborators. The creative remixing evident in *Awake, Young King*—with its quotations, adaptations, and interventions—thus finds its analogue in the workflows of contemporary script development. Likewise, audience engagement and marketing, too, are being transformed by digital mediation. Theatres now use data analytics to understand audience preferences, target outreach, and tailor programming, while virtual and hybrid events extend the reach and accessibility of performance (Alnasser & Yi, 2023). Recommendation algorithms, interactive platforms, and online previews shape not only how theatre is experienced but which works are programmed and how risk is managed. In this environment, the debate about generative authorship is entwined with broader shifts in the economics and sociology of theatre, where visibility, relevance, and innovation are as much products of digital infrastructure as of artistic vision.

Therefore, the “infiltration” of computational methods into theatre is best understood as a mechanization and intensification of creative practices that have always relied on the interplay of human ingenuity, technological mediation, and social context. The history of performance is marked by continual negotiation with new tools, whether in stage engineering, electrical amplification, or now, generative computation (Bird, 2023; Worthen, 2023). *Awake, Young King* embodies this tradition of adaptation, transformation, and negotiation—demonstrating that what is most vital in theatre is not the origin of its tools but the capacity to repurpose, critique, and reimagine them for new creative futures.

Future Directions: Relevance, Adaptation, and Creative Sustainability

The performative realities of contemporary theatre continue to be defined by a profound tension between the embodied, improvisational core of live performance and the relentless advance of digital mediation. While LLMs and algorithmic tools have revolutionized elements of scriptwriting, dramaturgy, and design, they have not—nor are likely to—supplant the “liveness” and unique presence that constitute the ontological heart of theatre (Worthen, 2023). Instead, what is most apparent is a hybridization, in which human actors, directors, and designers collaborate with generative technologies to extend the expressive range and adaptive logic of performance. This symbiosis compels theatre-makers to reconsider not only their relationship with technology, but also the foundational concepts of creativity, authorship, and originality. The field must now move beyond simplistic binaries—human versus machine, original versus derivative—and acknowledge that all performance is, and has always been, a recombinant practice shaped by historical, social, and technological pressures (Barnette, 2018; Sanders, 2015).

The current climate—sometimes described as the “capitalism of the heart”—forces a reexamination of value in the performing arts, as success is increasingly measured in terms of both economic viability and affective resonance (Solnit, 2008). As

traditional funding sources shrink and regional playhouses close at unprecedented rates, theatre institutions are pressed to balance artistic risk with economic sustainability (Brätt, 2024; Godya, 2024). This shift places a premium on adaptability, relevance, and audience engagement, with digital platforms and generative tools offering both new opportunities and new challenges. For younger generations, who have grown up in an environment saturated by digital culture and algorithmic content, the continued vitality of theatre depends on its willingness to adopt, interrogate, and transform these emerging modalities (Lightwala, 2025). The future sustainability and relevance of theatre thus hinges on its ability to engage and retain younger, more diverse audiences. Research indicates that digital engagement strategies—streaming performances, interactive online content, and algorithmic audience targeting—are not only viable means of survival, but also pathways to new forms of community and creative citizenship (Szostak, 2023). The integration of generative tools into script development, design, and outreach can lower barriers to entry and foster cross-disciplinary innovation, thereby broadening both participation and impact. In this sense, embracing technology is not capitulation to market forces but a means of restoring the theatre's traditional role as a civic forum and site of social transformation.

Rather than resisting technological mediation, playwrights and theatre-makers are increasingly called to embrace a generative, recombinant ethos. Such an approach is not merely about novelty or “keeping up” with technological trends; it represents a return to the foundational logic of theatre as a space of transformation, negotiation, and communal invention (Ng, 2024). By integrating computational tools as co-creators and collaborators, artists can explore new dramaturgical structures, narrative forms, and aesthetic experiences that speak directly to the conditions of contemporary life. The generative model, as demonstrated in *Awake, Young King* and across the sector, offers a template for ethical, experimental, and sustainable practice—one in which adaptation, remix, and recombination are valued as essential creative strategies. Therefore, one critical implication of these trends is the necessity to reframe the discourse on authorship, credit, and adaptation in light of networked, technologically mediated collaboration. Playwrights and producers must move toward more transparent and inclusive frameworks for acknowledgment—whether through digital program notes, collaborative crediting, or public dialogue about the origins and processes of new works (Mazzi, 2024). Such practices will help mitigate anxieties about “machine plagiarism” or the erasure of human agency, while also affirming the collective nature of artistic labor. As authorship becomes increasingly distributed, ethical negotiation and reflexive practice must become cornerstones of institutional policy and professional training.

As the field navigates institutional recalcitrance and conservative programming, it must also confront questions of equity and access. Generative and digital tools hold the potential to democratize production, amplify underrepresented voices, and facilitate global collaboration, but only if deployed with intentionality and care (Jacques, 2024). Equity must become a central consideration in the design and implementation of new technologies, with resources directed toward capacity-building, professional development, and community engagement. Frameworks for negotiating authorship, credit, and adaptation must be both flexible and robust, capable of accommodating a spectrum of collaborative arrangements and creative interventions. One promising model is the “networked dramaturgy” approach, which

explicitly acknowledges the multiplicity of contributors—human and algorithmic, local and remote—in the creation of new theatrical work (Worthen, 2023). Such frameworks encourage ongoing dialogue among artists, audiences, technologists, and institutions, fostering a culture of reflection, critique, and mutual support. They also facilitate the archiving and sharing of creative processes, supporting future innovation and ethical stewardship of artistic legacies.

The adaptive logic that has always underpinned the performing arts is not only compatible with, but in many ways reinforced by, the rise of generative technologies and computational mediation. The sustainability and relevance of theatre depend on its willingness to embrace this recombinant ethos, experiment with new forms, and rethink the boundaries of authorship and creativity. The next generation of theatre-makers will not be defined by their ability to resist or repel technology, but by their capacity to engage, critique, and repurpose it for new forms of artistic and social expression. The enduring challenge—and opportunity—for the field is to ensure that the ethics of collaboration, credit, and creativity remain as dynamic and generative as the art itself.

Conclusion

The evolving landscape of theatre, shaped by centuries of adaptation and innovation, finds itself at a pivotal juncture as generative technologies become central actors in the creative process. This article has argued that the incorporation of large language models and computational tools is not a rupture but a continuation—indeed, an intensification—of the adaptive, recombinant logic that has always defined the performing arts. Playwrights, designers, and directors, from Shakespeare to Harding, have long engaged in acts of borrowing, transformation, and collective negotiation. The arrival of generative collaboration thus offers an unprecedented opportunity to reimagine authorship, expand the boundaries of creative agency, and respond more dynamically to the complex demands of contemporary audiences.

By foregrounding the historical and ongoing role of mediation—whether by hand, voice, machine, or code—theatre can move beyond defensive anxieties about authenticity and originality. Embracing generative technologies as partners in the creative process not only secures the relevance of the art form in an era of rapid technological change, but also democratizes participation, enabling new voices and forms to emerge. Such collaboration challenges inherited hierarchies of credit, inviting the field to develop more nuanced, transparent, and equitable frameworks for acknowledgment and authorship.

In the end, the generative, recombinant ethos at the heart of theatre ensures that the field remains open to continual renewal and reinvention. This openness is vital not only for artistic vitality, but also for the ethical negotiation of credit and ownership in a rapidly changing landscape. The future of theatre will be shaped by those willing to embrace new tools, interrogate their implications, and integrate them into a living tradition of performance and transformation. In so doing, theatre-makers and scholars can foster a richer, more inclusive, and critically aware conversation about creativity—one that speaks directly to the needs, aspirations, and ethical challenges of the next generation.

Data Availability

Data available upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Funding Statement

NA

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization, M. Harding; Methodology, M. Harding; Validation, J. Hutson; Investigation, J. Hutson – Original Draft Preparation, J. Hutson; Writing – Review & Editing, J. Hutson.; Visualization, J. Hutson.

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