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A Marvellous Proper Man: *Richard III* in 20th Century Brazil

Speaking of Shakespeare in translation entails various levels of meaning, as both his work and the idea of translation have now lost the aura of uniqueness and essentialism that were common in past years. The “Bard of Avon” is at present still greatly respected but also subject to scrutiny that may lead to possibilities of different readings/productions pregnant with new temporal and national meanings. Similar openness is found in contemporary translation studies, which see the translator as someone who seeks not for the literal meaning but for contextualized ways of expressing ideas and, in the case of plays, of transforming words into utterances and especially *gestus*, as Brecht has defined it. When Shakespeare, an actor writing for performance, creates a metaphor or forms some meaning, he endeavours to make ideas clear by expressing them in ways that will be decoded by the spectator through what he/she hears and sees.

When it comes to the history plays, with translation used for performance, the latter requires both temporal and local adaptation. How can an ordinary Brazilian, Japanese, or Dutchman nowadays clearly understand the crowd of historical characters, sometimes transposed in time, as is the case with Queen Margaret, in *Richard III*? How will the swift flow of events take form in the spectators’ minds as they pass before their eyes and have to be quickly interpreted, if, once so close to Shakespeare’s

contemporary audience, such events now become unintelligible by temporal/spatial dislocation? These and other questions arose as Odeon Group, directed by Yara de Novaes, decided to put on *Richard III* in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, in 1999. As I worked with them during the preparation of the performance, I feel it is worthwhile to discuss the problems of translation, adaptation, and appropriation offered us at that time.

The first difficulty arose when, after the group had studied the theatre of Shakespeare's time, seen his works as a whole and then discussed *Richard III* in detail, the historical facts related to the first tetralogy included, we had to decide which translated text should be used. There was in fact not much choice, as the history plays are not easily found in Brazilian translations, for obvious reasons. The constraints imposed on the performance of plays that tend to be topical creates in actors, directors and, of course, translators a certain lack of interest in these texts. So we chose one of the very few Brazilian translations available, made by Ana Amélia Carneiro de Mendonça in 1968 but published only in 1993. Our first task was to compare the semantic and melodic nuances in the translated text and the "original" (we used the 1974 *Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans, the 1997 *Arden Shakespeare*, edited by Antony Hammon, and the *Oxford Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor in 1986). Such comparison was necessary since we had the Brazilian 1999 audience in mind and felt the need to communicate through *gestus* and *accoustic marks*. And we did know how well Shakespeare could transform word into action and sound into bodily expression!

The comparison soon brought to light some distortions because of the translator's search for poetical transposition and, I believe, the Shakespeare myth still predominant at the time the translation was made, which sometimes forced highly rhetorical language into the translated text, as such language was then supposed to be the only acceptable means of giving the translated text the grandeur expected of the "Bard" in our culture. A good example of this sort of distortion can be found in a very short – and consequently very strong – line, in the dialogue between Richard and Lady Anne. In the English text,¹ it goes:

LADY ANNE: Didst thou not kill this King?

RICHARD: I grant ye, yea.

LADY ANNE: Dost grant me, hedgehog? Then God grant me too
Thou mayst be damned for that wicked deed.

(1, 2, 103–106)

¹ The text used in the quotations is the 1974 *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans.

The verb *grant* was translated by *concedo*, a word not used in this context in everyday speech and thus having no meaning to the average audience, though one would find it in the dictionary. We opted for the clearer *concordo*, which, in the sentence *Concordo que sim*, offers exactly the same sound and semantic pattern as found in *I grant ye, yea*, thus making the expression more meaningful through both semantic and accoustic markers.

Another major problem was the question of the historical characters. There were too many quite unknown to Brazilian audiences. As might be expected, Brazilians know very little about the War of the Roses; maintaining all these characters would certainly interfere with the assimilation of the main plot. We had to be careful to avoid obscurity through either excessive information or insufficient clarification. Omitting characters might make the meaning clear but it could also be responsible for lack of important information about the plot in its derivation from historical facts or legend. Thus, after careful consideration, we cut out the Duchess of York, Richard, Duke of York, and Clarence's children; we conflated Lord Grey and the Marquess of Dorset, omitting lines that would not disturb the general meaning or giving to one character lines that were spoken by either. Other minor characters were also cut. There remained Richard, Clarence, King Edward IV, Lady Anne, Queen Elizabeth, Queen Margaret, the Duke of Buckingham, Lord Hastings, Catesby, Lord Rivers, Richmond, Edward, Prince of Wales, Clarence's and the princes' murderers. Cardinal Bouchier and the Bishop of Ely were conflated. This was an extremely difficult task as we had made a point of not losing the core of the play's political theme. This theme, being one of the crucial points concerning universality and multiculturalism, as it is recurrent at all times in all cultures, could by no means be overlooked.

Considering translation, adaptation and appropriation as three different aspects of the acculturation of a text, I see the 1999 performance of *Richard III* by Odeon Group in Brazil as illustrative of this difference in its evolution from text to stage.

Translation comprises the other two aspects, in that it "translates" the text (canonical, in our case), that is, it transports this text from one culture and one time to another culture and another time. In so doing, it may comprehend both adaptation and appropriation. I see adaptation as the arrangement of structures, themes, symbology and language of a source text within another new text so as to bring to the fore aspects and motifs known to and experienced by a culture different from that of its origin, even to the point of highlighting but not changing passages and/or characters that more closely resemble those embodied in the target culture. Adaptation, then, is a text midway between literal translation and appropriation. It seeks to safeguard the characteristics of the source text, keeping close to

its original formal structure, but introducing elements that do not distort its “essentialism.” Adaptation transports the original into the other culture, dressed in new clothes, as it were, striving to maintain its canonical position, this time within a different context. It uses the target language, creates links between the first and target contexts, asserting the status and primitive meanings of the text it translates. André Lefevere (1998: 49) shows the importance of the translator’s task in this process of *moving* a text between different cultures and times:

...they [the translators] must define themselves in terms of the poetics dominant in the target literature at the time the translation is made, and also in terms of the tension between the poetics of the source literature and that of the target literature – a tension that needs to be resolved by the translator. Most of the problems in this area are likely to be encountered in the domain of so-called ‘form,’ rather than that of so-called ‘content.’

Lefevere discusses translation as written forms. I would stress here the fact that, in the case of plays, when there are other, non-verbal forms of communication that have to be taken into consideration, translation often involves adaptation. The entire process of preparing a play for performance entails the same tensions peculiar, as he says, to the written translation. But it also demands careful resolution of other sorts of tension, related to voice, posture, movement, etc., so as to convey to the audience the meanings the translator and the director have found in the original, simultaneously displaying experiences, behaviours and beliefs peculiar to the target culture. It is this conflation of contextual experiences that brings to light adapted constructs.

Appropriation entails somewhat different procedures and effects. It goes beyond adaptation, as it anthropophagically *swallows and digests* the original and in so doing, brings the new text closer to the target than to the source culture. Talking of language appropriation, Ashcroft/Griffiths/Tiffin (1994: 38–39), thus define it:

Appropriation is the process by which the language is taken and made to ‘bear the burden’ of one’s own cultural experience, or, as Raja Rao puts it, to ‘convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own.’ (Rao, 1938: vii). Language is adopted as a tool and utilized in various ways to express widely differing cultural experiences.”

Substituting *text* for *language* one may say that the appropriated text, conveying a *spirit that is one’s own*, serves as the tool Rao discusses. One must not forget that this *spirit that is one’s own* has much to do with the openness of a text, its universality, as only rich multifaced works yield themselves to the *digestion* and later formation of a new expression that is not entirely new. Just as the anthropophagi killed and ate only the

vanquished warriors who were known to have qualities, like honour and courage, expecting these qualities to be digested, improved, and made part of their own character, so the appropriated text is expected to have intrinsic values that will be inserted into the target cultural construct, thus offering the possibility of rich and creative readings. The strongest aspect of appropriation is the use of another's language (language here taken in its widest sense, of communicative devices of whatsoever kind) aiming at expressing cultural experiences involved in an atmosphere of different national identity. The text "looks like" the original, but it sounds like something else. The Other becomes the I. The text is dressed in garments that make it appear as a familiar figure, able to move around free from what it used to mean, since it now has strength enough to express new feelings common to the reader/spectator.

This is what has happened to Odeon Group's *Richard III*. Shakespeare's text is there all the time, as are the final events of the War of the Roses. But any Brazilian spectator is able to realize that what takes place on the stage is the representation of events that he/she knows. Shakespeare's universality is given life in the lust for power that may take hold of anyone. And so is evil, as it is portrayed, or the fantastic characterization of the man/actor embodied in Richard. The multifarious tints of malevolent intention concretized in the protagonist's unscrupulous actions as they are **performed**, the irony, the rhetoric, the need for revenge, the somewhat religious awareness of retributive punishment, they are all there and they are all *one's own*. One does not have to be English or to live in Shakespeare's time to be able to realize the depth of his construction. Shakespeare is and is not there. He speaks his speech and as he does, one hears the voices, one encounters in them the untrustworthy theatricality of twentieth century Brazilian politicians. The lust for power that devours all before it is what one detects in different hegemonic layers in our time.

Mere written translation will not do for the enterprise of recreating Richard. Only adaptation, I believe, can simultaneously highlight the protagonist's dubious and hilarious, evil and attractive performance, restoring to the 16th century play all the brilliance it offered at the time of its birth, despite the lapses of a text written by a young author and blurred by misreadings, misprints and confluences of the many Quartos and the 1623 Folio. Performance has a hand here, aiding in the communicative construction expected of adaptation, in *translating* Shakespeare's text for contemporary Brazil. And the recreation, in the actor's *gestus*, is of utmost importance for this adaptation. Communication between actor and audience must take place and it is now, as Peter Brook (1968: 57) puts it, that *...an actor making a gesture is creating both for himself, out of his deepest need, and for the other person*. This creation entails experience of his own and the

other's culture and everyday life. No message will be carried over if there is no mutual understanding; and this must be the kind of understanding that comes out of shared cultural expectations and realizations. When Jorge Emil, playing Richard, speaks his *mirror* monologue after having won Lady Anne, he manages to convey meanings, such as the values contained in appearance, cunning, and rhetorical ability, that will count for a Brazilian audience. When he derisively laughs after his coronation, he does so as a contemporary dishonest politician would do among his closest friends and away from the *mob* that has elected him/her. When Queen Elizabeth cries after her children's murder, it is not a Lady of Shakespeare's time who laments her loss, but a Brazilian mother who expresses her sorrow. Here the suffering of so many mothers at the disappearance of her sons and daughters during the dictatorship may still resonate in the audience's minds. Or how close are we to watching those forlorn women from our slums who, day after day, see their children killed in the drug wars? This scene with Queen Elizabeth, played by Cristina Villaça, has worked beautifully with the audience. Behind the iron bars that make the scenery, where a great part of the performance takes place, the distressed Queen wails, hopelessly calls for her children, desperately looks for them. There is no royal dignity in the scene, no other expression than the pain experienced by a mother at this moment of utter loss.

From these examples, it can be seen that in the case of performance, the director has a part as important as that of the translator. He/she, too, has his/her say, which reaches ampler spaces than a sheet of paper allows for as his/her voice is tinged with various nuances of meaning. The director *translates* by means of word, gesture, music, light, posture, movement, choice of scenery and wardrobe... In the case of Odeon's *Richard III*, the scenery and costumes are very telling. The scenery, by Daniela Thomas, is simply made of an iron upper stage, the lower front part of which is formed by bars so that actors can walk behind it or go up the stairs at its rear side. When necessary, its central front part is moved forward, becoming a throne, where, for instance, Richard sits after his coronation. During the first part of the dispute among Richard, Queen Elizabeth, her kinsmen and the Lords, who are gathered on the upper part of this iron structure, Queen Margaret walks frantically below and is seen and heard behind the bars as she speaks her asides. Later on, she climbs the stairs and joins the group, flinging her curses at all of them. This throws a new light on her participation, as she appears, from the very beginning, as the embodiment of hatred, enjoying her enemies' mutual dislike and furiously longing for revenge. The fact that historically she was dead at the time of the events makes no difference to the Brazilian audience, who is unaware of the data of the War of the Roses, perhaps as it made no difference to

Shakespeare's spectators, who, though aware of the historical facts and because of their theatrical formation (I mean theatrical again in the broader sense, including all the political performances such as pageants and festivals that made up a considerable part of the average Englishman's life then), were prepared to accept such distortions for the sake of dramatic effect. Wardrobe, too, was effectively changed. There are no 15th century clothes. Very plain black and white garments (except for Queen Margaret's dress, of a vivid red, highlighting her presence), black boots and one or two hair twists is all one has to see. As on Shakespeare's stage, in Yara de Novaes's production, there are conventions to make it clear that one is watching royal characters. Only a robe and a crown that pass from one King to another make their status clear. Or a quick change of robes turns Lady Anne, for instance, into Queen Margaret (the actress Ana Prado plays both roles). Once again, a boy actor is used to play a woman's part. That is when Yara de Novaes felt that the young Princess, daughter to Edward IV and Elizabeth should be seen, during the dispute already cited and, in the end, parading at her future husband Richmond's coronation. The young actor who had played Prince Edward appears as the Princess, silent, dressed in a white gown and wearing a white head-dress. This introduction of the boy actor, nostalgic on the part of the director, some hidden wish to return to Elizabethan origins, gives a flavour of *estrangement* to the performance that increases its quality of play-acting. As the director's aim is to highlight this idea, that is, to centre the performance on the actor/actress and his/her role, on the making of dramatic expression and not on political, historical, moral or ethical content, the boy actor, with the connotation of representation that the type carries, gives extra life to the display of dramatic art, marvellously created in *Richard III* and innovated in the production here discussed.

The opening of the performance already gives a clear suggestion of theatricality as the essence of the production. *Richard III* was very likely chosen exactly because of its centrality in play-acting. As Richard is probably the most perfect *actor* in Shakespeare, Yara molded her performance on this characteristic of the protagonist's. There is no curtain. As the play begins to the sound of mechanical music, a light shines on each side of the dark stage. Two actors enter, mimicking a fight. Then one of them stops and just says: *Imagine...* They leave the stage, the music continues, the darkness returns. After a few moments, the light shines on the front right side of the stage, where the two actors/chorus, stamping their feet to imitate the sound of galloping horses, speak some lines from the opening chorus of *Henry V*:

Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them,
 For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
 Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,
 Turning the accomplishment of many years
 Into an hour-glass.

(1. Pro., 26–31)

Then, the one who spoke at the first entrance repeats his *Imagine!!!* and each says some lines still related to play acting, now from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

FIRST ACTOR: The best in this kind are but shadows.

SECOND ACTOR: And the worst are no worse if imagination amend them

(MND 5.1, 210–211)

These lines will be repeated near the end of the play, so as to reinforce the idea of the unreality of play-acting and the power of the imagination to turn it into intensely felt concreteness when experienced as dramatic art. As in Shakespeare's time, actors and audience arrive at a compromise; a pact is formed from the very beginning and the play, this *airy nothing*, is given life.

This borrowing from other texts by the Bard, straightforward as it is on the question of role-playing, unequivocally focuses on both representation and the audience's participation in the development of the performance. In the production by the Odeon Group, two dumb shows follow the words by the chorus. In the first, the audience sees, from 3 *Henry VI*, the combat between Richard and King Henry VI, and the latter being killed by the former; in the second, there is a parade with the coronation of Edward IV. When Richard first appears, his opening monologue not only serves, as in the original, to characterize him, to outline the historical situation, and to inform the spectators about his future intentions and behaviour, but also reinforces the focus on play-acting.

Borrowings stressing performance will be spoken again and again by the two actors/chorus, whenever they may help to highlight play-acting and simultaneously clarify the plot. In Act V, scene II, for instance, the audience is made to imagine the preparation for the battle at Bosworth through pieces from the chorus in *Henry V*, Act IV:

FIRST ACTOR: Now entertain conjecture of a time
 When creeping murmur and the poring dark
 Fills the wide vessel of the universe.
 From camp to camp, through the foul womb of night,
 The hum of either army stilly sounds,
 That the fix'd sentinels almost receive
 The secret whispers of each other's watch.

SECOND ACTOR: Fire answers fire, and through their paly flames
 Each battle sees the other's umber'd face.
 (4, Ch., 1–9)

Here, some of the lines are cut, and instead of *The confident and overlustly French/ Do the low-rated English play at dice*, one has the same actor continuing: *Confident Richmond... plays at dice/ Richard's low-rated Englishmen*. His lines are completed by the first actor, who then goes back to the borrowing from the *Dream*:

*And so our scene must to the battle fly;
 Yet sit and see,
 The best in this kind are but shadows.*

which the second actor finalizes:

And the worst are no worse if imagination mend them.

The borrowings come mainly from Henry V, but there are also the lines from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; and, after Richard is killed at Bosworth, one of the actors/chorus comes near the lonely corpse lying on the front right side of the stage and says, from *Macbeth*, the last words in this performance:

...Out, out, brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.

(V., v., 23–28)

The convention common on the Shakespearean stage is then forgotten for the sake of focus on play-acting – here the hierarchically highest character (Richmond in our case) is denied voice at the end. As the chorus speaks Macbeth's words, so direct about man's flickering role in this world, thus conflating dream and reality, a dumb show takes place behind the two actors playing dead Richard and the chorus. Once more, there is the enactment of coronation. Another parade, the same actors are seen on stage again, this time to represent Richmond's, now Henry VII's ascent to the throne, as the actor/chorus, by Richard's corpse, says the lines on death and the fugacity of man's life and values, and on play-acting as the only real stuff living is made of.

It is clear, I hope, from the above discussion, that the performance of *Richard III* by Odeon Group is an adaptation, not an appropriation of

Shakespeare's text. The intention of keeping the literal poetic translation attests to the undeniable respect for a canonical text. But to make that same text clear to a contemporary Brazilian audience, as already stated, it was necessary to cut parts and choose one main aspect among those developed in the original, highlighting it and adding, when necessary, lines that would make it more telling. As the choice was the theatrical aspect, the added lines had to deal with role-playing and the commitment by actors and audience to fuse dream and reality. Of course, this was entirely a choice of the director's, a risk that had to be taken if she wished not only to perpetuate Shakespeare's work, but also – and I would say, desirably – to give it new light and new meanings. If the text could speak, it would not say with Viola or Iago: *I am not what I am*. It would rather resound with Richard's own words in act V, scene iii: *Richard loves Richard, that is, I am I*.

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