

William Shakespeare's The Tragedy of Richard III: Political aspects of the source and its translations into Hebrew, and its performance on Israeli theatre stage in the last 50 years

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Abstract

This thesis examined the political aspects in William Shakespeare's *Richard III* – in the source, its translations into Hebrew, stage adaptations, and performances during five consecutive decades in Israel. The study investigates how the work of translators, adaptors, and directors address issues of power and lust for power in the original play and considers the implications on the play's relevance.

Richard III, one of Shakespeare's most frequently performed works, chronicles the struggle over the rule of England in the late sixteenth century, presenting Richard as a conniving character who aspires to seize the throne, and for whom all means to this end are justifiable. While its characters and events are rooted in English history, the play addresses issues that are not exclusive to English dynasties or the Shakespearean era – ethics and politics – raising social, ethical, and human dilemmas. The political issues are readily of relevance to Israeli reality, which may explain Israeli directors' interest in it and its recurring performance on theater stages in Israel. This study examined seven productions of *Richard III* – in 1966, 1967, 1973, 1992, 2007, 2008, and 2012 in the *Haifa*, *HaOhel*, *Habima*, *HaSifriya*, *Tmuna*, and *Cameri* theatres, respectively, based on the translations to Hebrew by Raphael Eliaz and Meir Wieseltier.

The theoretical framework for this study includes research on the concept of 'politics' and its application in the theater and in translation in general – and in translation for the theater in particular. Aristotle argued that human beings are by nature political animals who live in a polis, and that any human society can be defined by interactions and associations, including power relationships. Researchers have explained the term 'politics', management of state affairs, in relation to 'power' (Schäffner and Bassnett 2010: 2). Political theater focuses on politics, whether in the form of cooperation – or as a bitter struggle for power, shedding light on those driven by lust for power to eliminate unwaveringly, at times brutally, anyone standing in their paths, as in *Richard III*. Schäffner connects politics, in both combative and cooperative forms, with language, contending that the former cannot exist without the latter. She identifies a connection between the process of the translation and the political action, reflected in the fact that any decision to encourage, enable, or prevent translation is of a political nature (Schäffner 2007: 136). Oz, on the other hand, links a political message to current affairs (Oz 1999: 21), claiming that by its very nature, political theater maintains a continuous and mutual dependency on the political reality but disregards the aspects of power within that reality.

The theoretical framework in the area of translation research includes the approaches presented by Bassnett (1984, 1988, 1991), Snell-Hornby (2007), and Vermeer (2000). Bassnett refers to the translation of a play as a literary translation (Bassnett 1984: 87), while Snell-Hornby asserts that translators of plays are responsible not only for the verbal presentation, due to the reliance of an enacted play's verbal language on non-verbal acts (Snell-Hornby 2007: 109). Vermeer introduces another significant aspect – the different target audience, saying that the source text addresses a need or a goal of the source culture, whereas the translated text is directed to the target culture. In

translating for the theater, the translator must consider the needs of the audience, and, in so doing, is required to make decisions regarding the time and place appropriate for the new audience. The text is transferred between different periods, languages, religions, and cultures, and must find its place in a different historical, governmental, and political context (Fernandes 2010: 126).

The study's stages comprised, first, an examination of two full Hebrew translations of the play, focusing on three scenes with aspects of power relations and control.

Subsequently, the translation was compared to the stage adaptations in the various productions, using production files deposited in the Israeli Center for the

Documentation of the Performing Arts, one production file delivered to me by the director (Oded Litman for the Tmuna theater), and press reviews. The comparison refers to additions and omissions, language, and explications. The three earlier productions relied on the translation by Raphael Eliaz, and the four later ones – on Meir Wieseltier's translation. I next reviewed interviews and programs and watched filmed productions, in order to determine the nature of the relationship between the director and translator and to identify the mutual influences, or lack thereof, and even independent measures made by the director after receiving the translation. Finally, I surveyed the press reviews with special emphasis on additions and omissions of characters, use of set, lighting, and props, musical accompaniment if existent, and their implications for the political message.

The findings show, first, that the political aspects of the source were preserved in both the full translation to Hebrew and the stage adaptation, but the latter tended to be more linguistically updated. From production to production, the stage versions gradually lost the distinct literary linguistic characteristics, implementing some spoken Hebrew. This change facilitated actors' accurate pronunciation in the target

language, thereby also conveying a political message more readily understood by the audience. Although the text of the stage adaptation shortened and rearranged the play, it did not change the verbal contents with regard to its political aspects and did not introduce present-day elements to tie it with current Israeli reality.

Based on interviews with the directors and on the programs, I determined that not only was the staging of the play a careful and deliberate choice of the director, but also that the lead actor's perception of Richard's unique character was in agreement to that of the director. Directors and other production team members employed a variety of dramaturgical means to convey political messages, but not all acted comprehensively to relate message with present-day relevance. Productions ranged from communicating a universal political message to the audience (as compared to the original play with its relevant-to-the-day message), to distinctly linking to current Israeli political reality using various theatrical means.

The two productions directed by Arthur Kogan in *HaSifriya* (2007) and the *Cameri* (2012) theaters combined, in their own specific way and to different extents, musical compositions, some of which were identifiable with the political stance of composers who were musically active in tyrannical rules. These compositions served as an additional, heard but unspoken voice carrying a political message, or implying one. Another finding relates to the lack of difference between the institutional and non-institutional theaters. Contrary to my assumption, I found that it was in fact an institutional theater (the *Cameri* in 2012) that initiated a bold and unique project, in comparison with the previous productions and the original play by closely staging two of Shakespeare's history plays: *Richard II* and *Richard III*, which present two extreme characters of political leaders; one who is dominated and finally overthrown, and the other who is manipulative and aggressive, with no qualms about abusing

people and violence to seize power. The non-institutional theater created a multimodal production, but its theatrical wealth masked the political aspect of the source.

Finally, I found that critics' focus was on the actual staging of a Shakespearean play on Israeli stage. They wrote about the original play's historical and cultural background and referred to the artistic and performative aspects of the production, commenting on the work of the director and the actors, as well as on the costumes, set, and text they listened to. In addition, from production to production, critics progressively tried to identify a connection made by the director to current Israeli affairs, and, upon failing to do so, concluded that the production did not fully realize its political potential.

The unique contribution of this thesis is in juxtaposing the play's translations, stage adaptations, and theatrical performance along the course of five consecutive decades and from a political perspective. In addition, the discussion takes into consideration the translator from the source language, the adaptor of the staged version, the director-adaptor (together or separately), enabling to shed light on a process that necessitates the integration of two fields, theater and translation, which represent language, art, and culture, with emphasis on politics.