

Translating Richard

A Conversation about Shakespeare, Otherness and Mexico with Alfredo Michel Modenessi

Anne Sophie Refskou with Alfredo Michel Modenessi

Abstract:

Shakespearean scholar and translator, Alfredo Michel Modenessi, talks to Anne Sophie Refskou about translating Shakespeare into Spanish in a Mexican context, about the translator as ‘Other’, fighting against invisibility and celebrating the otherness of the translation. He also refers to his translations of *Richard III* and of Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II* and subsequent Mexican productions of both plays.

Keywords:

Shakespeare; translation; performance; Mexico; otherness; *Richard III*; Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II*.

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Anne Sophie Refskou (ASR) I would like to begin this conversation with a big and broad question about otherness and translation. Critics have long questioned the validity of the ‘original’ versus ‘derivative’ binary, in conversations about translations or adaptations – I’m thinking not least of Linda Hutcheon’s path-breaking work in adaptation theory – and thankfully there is a certain consensus about viewing translations as creative works in and of themselves. But, as a someone who is both a critic and a practicing translator, do you ever find your translations – and yourself as translator – being ‘othered’ still? And is there a Shakespeare-specific version of that? I mean, Shakespeare’s global status is in large part thanks to his global translators, but, at the same time, the many translations can be taken as confirmation of his unique status in the first place.

Alfredo Michel Modenessi (AMM) Translators, including myself, are certainly continuously overlooked, which works as a kind of ‘othering’, yes. To give an example: I had done a translation for a Shakespeare festival, and after the show the organizer gave a speech to thank everyone involved. My daughter was there and I told her “No one is going to mention your dad’s work; just wait and see.” She didn’t believe me, but I’m afraid I was right. The translator wasn’t

mentioned. The director, the actors, the musicians, all got their well-deserved praise, everyone, in fact, except the translator.

ASR So it was a “who’s that? Oh, nobody, it’s the translator”-moment? To risk a *Shakespeare in Love* misquote.

AMM Precisely. And there have been many such moments. I’m sure it’s because in those people’s minds, the words are Shakespeare’s, not mine. But of course that’s wrong for a very simple reason: Shakespeare didn’t write in Spanish. I do. So, yes, translators are struggling against invisibility. That is the term we’re permanently fighting: invisibility, which is of course also a keyword for any kind of marginalised community. The problem is that translators have historically been expected to work towards being invisible; to present the translated text to the target audience without imposing their own presence on it, as if the original had not been written in a different language. We’ve had to combat this notion, which, among other things, has led to long-standing debates about concepts such as foreignization versus domestication, popularized by Lawrence Venuti.¹ In that case, the response to the demand for invisibility was to theorize translations that somehow highlighted the ‘foreignness’ of the original in the translation, in opposition to ‘domesticating’ the original, that is, in opposition to translations made to sound as if they had been written in the target language in the first place. But I don’t think these concepts are very useful either. To be honest, the reasoning behind them sounds – to me, anyway, a translator from the global South – as if it’s coming from what is effectively a white, ‘first-world’ perspective: so, if we mustn’t appropriate the foreign language (and its culture), then the alternative is highlighting what is ‘foreign’ – very often English? That comes straight from the redeeming heights of white wisdom; it’s as condescending as some Shakespeare productions that presume to pay tribute to ‘exotic’ cultures.² Rather, by ‘foreignizing’, we’d likely end up reinforcing the

¹ See Venuti (1995).

² See Modenessi (2019).

stranglehold of the power language over our own. Sure, in my own practice, I sometimes do drop in something that may not sound entirely familiar to readers and listeners in the target language; something that signals a kind of disconnection to our usual way of expressing ourselves, because of course what I'm writing is fiction, it's not what you might call 'natural' language. But fundamentally I subscribe to the understanding of language as a conglomerate of sounds that, emitted within a certain context, performs a certain act of speech. So, when I translate I must create a new speech act to render the 'original' one, and the only tool I have available to me is my own language. This makes me an 'other', necessarily, yes, but with regard to the 'original language', not regarding my own. I remain joyfully bound to my own language and my culture, and I work according to their character and ways. Then again, as a Latin-American, 'my own' language is an 'other' with respect to its European 'original', which adds an interesting layer to the discussion, doesn't it?

ASR It does. So, in talking about translation in a Latin-American context, we can't simply talk about English and Spanish as source and target languages without also paying attention to the histories of colonialism and their legacies. But as you have also suggested elsewhere, certain Latin-American cultural traditions excel in resisting the continuous (post)colonial processes of othering they may be subjected to.³ This partly involves staging a self-conscious and self-assertive recognition and celebration of otherness, doesn't it? One that pre-empts patronizing exoticisms. Is this perhaps helpful to sketch out how translation might resist being 'othered' in a wider sense too?

AMM Yes, absolutely! Because the moment we recognize own our otherness is when we become visible as translators. Translation is always about otherness; otherness is at the core of what we do, and, crucially, we should celebrate that otherness. What does a translation do? It liberates things confined within the

³ Ibid.

original text. Where do you place the translator? In the position of the player. What I mean is that, as a translator, you ‘play’ the original, you ‘perform’ it. You’re not the composer, but the player. And in that process, you liberate meaning. You also free the text from its own constraints, problems and mistakes. The things I’ve had to tweak or touch up in Shakespeare and others... You’re doing the writer a favour, when you ‘help out’ the original...

ASR Yes, I imagine you must find a way to convey the meaning to the audience, and if Shakespeare’s meaning is a bit inaccessible to begin with...

AMM Yes, and of course if the translation is bad, the translator gets the blame, not the author! I must make it work. And make it work in the text. I can’t explain the jokes in footnotes. At the same time, I can’t stand the idea of translation as a pedagogical enterprise! Translating is a creative practice that seeks to obtain, in another language, the experience that the source induces in its own. The translator’s job is not to explain the original. If we think that, we’re still stuck with the misconception that venerates the original and imbues it with authority, we remain mired in stale notions of fidelity, betrayal, subordination, and whatnot – notions that reduce translations to the category of embarrassing, though indispensable, acts.

ASR If we extend your description of the translator as ‘playing’ or ‘performing’ the text, I imagine the performance would be very dull if it’s main purpose was explanation...

AMM Which also relates to a key advantage of the translator: the fact that, like the player, I can repeat my performance. I can keep improving my text. If I’m unhappy with a sonnet or a piece of dialogue, I can change it (which Shakespeare cannot), so we should also see translation as constant flux.

ASR I would like to talk a bit about your translation of *Richard III* and how you experienced the process of translating this play as well as the subsequent stage production of it in Mexico.

AMM I did the translation in 2014, while I was actually staying in Stratford-upon-Avon, so by a strange coincidence I was surrounded by all the trappings of Shakespeare's Englishness. The translation was then staged in Mexico City in 2015 and again in 2016. The Richard who emerged from my translation and in the stage production was audibly Mexican. By that I mean that he had our speech rhythms, but not necessarily our colloquialisms. You don't need colloquialisms in the text or on the stage; you don't need to 'domesticate' Shakespeare in a way that talks down to the local audience, because they will understand anyway. I mean, *Richard III* is a play about power struggles and the violence around and behind them – you don't think that will resonate with people in Mexico? Of course it will. You don't need to spell it out with explicit local references, because when the Mexican audience hears Richard speak with our own rhythms and accents, the language is more than enough; the language performs the connection by itself.

ASR Could you give an example of how the speech rhythms worked to perform that connection, which clearly localised the play, but without, as you say, patronizing the audience?

AMM Our Richard was played by the splendid Mexican actor Carlos Aragón and I remember that instead of representing Richard as sort of regally cynical, he infused his speech rhythms with what the audience would have recognised as the ingrained spite and derision that upper classes have for others lower down the social scale in Mexico. He performed his role with that sense of superior disgust that is a post-colonial legacy in Latin America, when the ruler demonstrates their disgust at being merely the ruler of such a measly little place as Mexico, or El Salvador, or other such places. I say that the actor performed Richard in this way, and I think it was ingrained in the director, Mauricio Garcia Lozano's interpretation too, but it was also reflected in my text. I think my translation steered that way, because the voices of power that I hear when I translate Shakespeare are not European voices, but those of privileged Mexicans, living in sub-urban

mansions or high-rise buildings who treat the lower classes with such contempt. Mexico is a country where such people have domestic staff – almost always women – of indigenous descent whom they treat inhumanely, literally. So, when Richard spoke with the attitude of those people, the audience would connect and understand, without the translator or the director or the actor having to explain anything!

ASR That's a hugely interesting example of how much the translation potentially offers the production, if the production listens. Literally. And there's clearly nothing conceptually wilful or overthought about that kind of 'localizing' of the play.

AMM If the language fits the character who is despotic and has total disregard for life around him, it works. There were only two aspects of the production which made local references quite explicit – or in the second case quite broad and parodic – and I think they were appropriate and effective. At several points, and increasingly, the dead bodies of Richard's many victims were seen hanging suspended from the ceiling wrapped in plastic in the way that bodies sometimes hang from bridges in crime-ridden areas in Mexico.⁴ I remember those moments very distinctly, and of course the connection was immediate for the audience too. Secondly, the scene in act three when Buckingham and the Mayor of London enlist the citizens of London as 'extras' in their staged entreating of Richard to take the crown, was played as a parody on how local elections take place in certain towns in Mexico, where the locals are taken out to political rallies and given a lunch (which always includes a banana). So suddenly here on stage, were a bunch of people screaming for Richard to be king while clenching their bananas. The farcical potential was brought out superbly by the Mexican comedian Haydeé Boetto, who played the Mayor. It was a very broad representation, like I said, but

⁴ Images from the production are available on the Performance Shakespeare 2016 blog: <http://performanceshakespeare2016.org/blog//richard-iii-ricardo-iii-inba-mexico>

apart from these two examples, there was nothing in the production to explicitly or specifically signal that Shakespeare and England had been transported to Mexico, even if that was so blatantly the case.

ASR This special issue is interested in representations of *Richard III* and *Richard II* and in how stage productions might challenge processes of ‘othering’ instead of perpetuating prejudice. The representation of Richard III’s disability has a long and troubling history of being stereotyped on stage and screen and, as Sonya Freemann Loftis has recently explained, the stereotyping of Richard’s disability in performance works as a kind of cultural disability denial (different from the one which simply denies that Richard is disabled) because it fetishizes - or we might say ‘others’ - disability (Loftis, 2021, 19). Did these questions affect the production in any way?

AMM The simple and regrettably short answer is that Mexico is a long way from addressing those questions. Mexican society is extremely diverse, but segregation is rife and marginalised groups are still struggling with visibility and representation. The production of my translation of *Richard III* did not overstate Richard’s disability, in fact it downplayed it.

ASR Performances of Shakespeare’s ‘other Richard’, *Richard II*, have also sometimes participated in cultural prejudice, by representing Richard as gay and implicitly linking his sexuality to his incompetence as king. You have not (yet) translated *Richard II*, but you have translated/adapted Marlowe’s *Edward II*, a play which is often read alongside *Richard II* and which is arguably much more explicit about sexuality than Shakespeare’s play. I’m really interested in hearing why you decided to translate *Edward II* and in what you think contemporary performance can do with this play? Do you think performances of *Edward II* might work to challenge homophobic prejudice in ways that performances of *Richard II* have not been able to?

AMM I translated *Edward II* in 2002 for a project that fell through, but in 2008 it was used for a Mexican production which wanted to do exactly that: challenge homophobic prejudice and address questions about violent masculinity.⁵ I remember that the director, Martín Acosta, wanted to break away from a fixation on the idea of ‘coming out’ in the gay movement, nor did he want to represent Edward or Gaveston in ways that would look deliberately camp. Instead it became a question of telling the story of their relationship against the background of the violent, toxic masculinity of the locker room, with its adjacent showers and urinals, all of which were used in the set designs. So, rugby was used as a conceptual device in the production; the English nobles were all playing rugby at the opening of the show. At the same time, the production exposed the hypocrisy of that masculine culture. I remember that whenever the queen crossed the stage, the nobles would cover their genitals and bow respectfully! Another subtle and striking moment, was when the director had Edward and Gaveston dancing a beautiful tango. The noblemen were first watching them and then started to dance themselves, but so as to mock and parody Edward and Gaveston. The point, however, was that we got to see this whole group of male couples dancing together. However, the most memorable and also most horrific moment in the production was the end of act one, when the noblemen capture Gaveston, because the capture was staged as a gang rape of him, of Gaveston. It was extremely powerful, because the production didn’t try to de-politicize Edward and Gaveston and victimise them, but it showed the noblemen as inhuman, emphasising what violent masculinity does. I did the translation strictly in verse, line by line, because Marlowe doesn’t lend himself to the kind of rhythmical prose I have sometimes used for Shakespeare, but this also made the passionate exchanges between Edward and Gaveston stand out very

⁵ See production trailer on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xosHkPyKVmM>. See also Magun (2008) for an analysis of the production.

strongly. That was, however you look at it, one of the best productions that I have been part of: a powerful demonstration of what the creativity of our verbal, stage, and body languages can accomplish in unison – and in collaboration, as equals, with a magnificent text from a time rife with similar turmoil and artistic energy. That's what translation is about: conveying the other to your otherness for a fertile encounter, albeit ephemeral.

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