

ALEKSANDRA KAMIŃSKA
Akademia Ignatianum w Krakowie
e-mail: aleksandra.kaminska@ignatianum.edu.pl

“Cast Forth in the Common Air”? Piotr Kamiński’s Translation of Mowbray’s Speech in *Richard II*

Abstract

The article discusses the metadramatic aspect of William Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and the way it is rendered in the contemporary Polish translation by Piotr Kamiński, based on a theoretical reflection offered by Patrice Pavis¹. As *Richard II* is famous as a “play about language”, one of its themes is being exiled from one’s native language. It seems that this metaphor perfectly lends itself to the discussion of drama translation. In fact, owing to Kamiński’s careful handling of this theme, his text might be read as both metadrama and metatranslation. Furthermore, the article looks into the possibility of translations’ influences on the source culture and assesses potential cultural benefits of drama translation.

Keywords: *Richard II*, drama translation, metadrama, back translation

Richard II is often referred to as a metadrama or a play about language – “its power and its weaknesses”.² The critics note that among all Shakespeare’s plays, this one contains the highest proportion of key words concerning language,³ such as “speech” (5 times), “tongue” (32 times), or “say” (59 times). It cannot be denied that Shakespeare’s plays frequently investigate this theme. As John Russell Brown points out,

in almost every scene of every play his characters speak about the use of words. Words, they say, are to be weighted, exchanged, transformed, repeated, played with, used with conscious intent, dismissed as meaningless or false. Words are said to multiply and breed,

¹ P. Pavis, *Problems of Translation for the Stage: Interculturalism and Post-Modern Theatre*, L. Kruger (transl.), in: H. Scolnicov, P. Holland (eds.), *The Play Out of Context: Transferring Plays from Culture to Culture*, Cambridge–New York 1989, p. 25–44.

² R. Bolam, *Richard II: Shakespeare and the Languages of the Stage*, in: M. Hattaway (ed.), *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, Cambridge–New York 2002, p. 142.

³ Jane Donawerth qtd. in: R. Bolam, op. cit., p. 142.

disguise themselves, become wild, weak, gentle, bold, hateful, desired. They are wrestled with and wooed; they are used aptly, and misused. Worlds make up an unruly world [...].⁴

The play certainly looks closely at language from many different viewpoints: the “process of questioning and interpretation of meaning [...] runs throughout the play”.⁵ Once the king abdicates, “with his own tongue denying his sacred state”,⁶ and becomes “unkinged”,⁷ names and their referents are disconnected, opening a potential of questioning the nature of the links between them. According to James L. Calderwood, the metadramatic plot of the play “centres in «the fall of speech»”,⁸ for “when words are divorced from things, meaning comes into question”.⁹

Language is presented as a frail and questionable thing in the play, and yet it is infinitely precious. The capacity for speech is likened to life, especially in a powerful speech in Act I:

Thomas Mowbray

A heavy sentence, my most sovereign liege,
And all unlooked for from your highness' mouth:
A dearer merit, not so deep a maim
As to be cast forth in the common air,
Have I deserved at your highness' hands.
The language I have learn'd these forty years,
My native English, now I must forgo:
And now my tongue's use is to me no more
Than an unstringèd viol or a harp,
Or like a cunning instrument cased up,
Or being open, put into his hands
That knows no touch to tune the harmony:
Within my mouth you have engaoled my tongue,
Doubly portcullised with my teeth and lips;
And dull unfeeling barren ignorance
Is made my gaoler to attend on me.
I am too old to fawn upon a nurse,
Too far in years to be a pupil now:
What is thy sentence then but speechless death,
Which robs my tongue from breathing native breath?¹⁰

The Duke of Norfolk is exiled and this is undoubtedly a tragedy for him. Interestingly though, he laments not so much his lost lands or the necessity to abandon his loved ones, as the loss of his native language, which condemns him to “dull unfeeling barren ignorance”. The loss of language is tantamount to “speechless

⁴ J.R. Brown, *William Shakespeare: Writing for Performance*, London 1996, pp. 18–19.

⁵ A. Gurr, *Language*, in: W. Shakespeare, *Richard II*, Cambridge–New York 1990, p. 34.

⁶ W. Shakespeare, *Richard II*, Cambridge–New York 1990, IV.1.208.

⁷ *Ibid.*, IV.1.219.

⁸ J.L. Calderwood, *Richard II: Metadrama and the Fall of Speech*, in: G. Holderness (ed.), *Shakespeare's History Plays: Richard II to Henry V*, London 1992, p. 121.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁰ W. Shakespeare, *Richard II*, op. cit., I.3.154–173.

death" and the imagery used in the speech is that of imprisonment and execution: "engaoled tongue", "portcullised with teeth and lips". Mowbray deems himself too old to learn foreign tongues and therefore doomed to painful, deadly, incapacitating silence. I believe this haunting metaphor offers a fascinating outlook on translation, especially in the context of Poland. After all, in a metaphorical sense, translated texts are also "exiled from their native tongues" and forced to speak the languages of others.

*

Drama translation has become a subject addressed by many scholars and translation for the stage has firmly established itself as a separate phenomenon. Issues such as "speakability", "performability" and "theatrical potential" encoded in dramatic texts have been extensively studied and discussed.¹¹ As a result, it may seem, however, that cultural aspects of translating for the stage have received less attention. Hence this is the primary concern of the present article.

In his manifesto on translating Shakespeare, Stanisław Barańczak¹² lists four key aspects that need to be addressed in a successful Shakespearean translation, namely: clarity, poetic value, equivalence and performability. Symptomatically, the poet-translator does not mention issues arising from relocating the text from one culture to another (in this particular case, English to Polish). Barańczak seems to follow Jan Kott's proposition¹³ in which Shakespeare is "our contemporary" – where the pronoun "our" extends to all readership, regardless of the country of origin, since problems shown by Shakespeare in his plays, such as the Great Mechanism of power and history, are in his view universal.

This aspect of cultural relocation is not overlooked, however, by Patrice Pavis. In his article entitled *Problems of Translation for the Stage: Interculturalism and Post-Modern Theatre*, the critic outlines two main problems characterising translation for the stage:

- 1) In the theatre, the translation reaches the audience by way of the actors' bodies.
- 2) We cannot simply translate a text linguistically, rather **we confront and communicate heterogeneous cultures and situations of enunciation that are separated in space and time** (emphasis – A.K.).¹⁴

¹¹ See e.g. S. Bassnett, *Ways through the Labyrinth: Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts*, in: T. Hermans (ed.), *The Manipulation of Literature*, New York 1985, pp. 87–102; eadem, *Still Trapped in the Labyrinth: Further Reflections on Translation and Theatre*, in: S. Bassnett, A. Lefevere (eds.), *Constructing Cultures*, Clevedon 1998, pp. 90–108; E. Espasa, *Performability in Translation: Speakability? Playability? Or Just Saleability?*, in: C.-A. Upton (ed.), *Moving Target: Theatre Translation and Cultural Relocation*, Manchester 2000, pp. 49–62; S. Totzeva, *Realizing the Theatrical Potential: The Dramatic Text in Performance and Translation*, in: *The Practice of Literary Translation Constraints and Creativity*, Manchester 1998, pp. 81–90; A. Ubersfeld, *Lire le théâtre*, Paris 1978.

¹² St. Barańczak, *Od Shakespeare'a do Szekspira*, in: idem, *Ocalone w tłumaczeniu*, Poznań 2005, pp. 191–195.

¹³ J. Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, B. Taborski (transl.), London 1991.

¹⁴ P. Pavis, op. cit., p. 25.

According to Pavis, once the translated text “is staged for the target audience and culture, it is itself surrounded by a situation of enunciation belonging to the target culture. The result is the real or virtual intersection of these situations of enunciation in differing degrees in the text”.¹⁵ This “intersection” is by no means an equivocal or balanced transaction. As the critic vividly describes it, the translated text, especially in performance, “may glance at the source, but [...] has its eye chiefly on the target”.¹⁶

This problem is clearly visible in the Polish translations of Thomas Mowbray’s speech in Act I. How to satisfy the need for equivalence and resolve the question of performability at the same time? Some translators may choose to minimise “glancing at the source” and keep their eyes firmly fixed “on the target”. This is certainly the case in the late 19th-century translation of *Richard II* by Leon Ulrich (1895), in which all references to England are removed from Mowbray’s speech. In Ulrich’s rendition, the line “My native English now I must forgo”¹⁷ becomes “Muszę ojczystej zapomnieć dziś mowy!”¹⁸ [‘My native tongue now I must forgo’]. This, seemingly small, yet significant choice delegates the source culture to the background, and shifts the speech towards universal experience – or rather, specifically towards the context of the receiving culture: it is worth remembering that at the time when Ulrich completed his translation, the Polish state was non-existent and the exile from one’s “native tongue” was the everyday reality of millions of Poles so Norfolk’s speech would have most likely been read and interpreted in the context of that experience.¹⁹

Piotr Kamiński’s 2009 translation is rooted in a very different historical context: Poland is an independent state with Polish as its official language. He thus renders the same line as “Mam się dziś wyrzec mej angielskiej mowy”²⁰ [‘I must forgo my English tongue’]. He remains faithful to the letter of the source text, but still his translation is not quite equivalent, adding a new, rather thick layer of meaning to the entire passage. In Kamiński’s translation, Norfolk’s speech becomes a brilliant paradox: the duke mourns the loss of his “native English”, dooming him to “barren ignorance” – very eloquently, one might say – in another language. On the one hand, he declares that being cut off from the English tongue, he must become like a mute, encased instrument and face “speechless death”, while, on the other, he communicates all these thoughts through poetry **in another language**.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ W. Shakespeare, *Richard II*, op. cit., I.3.160.

¹⁸ Idem, *Ryszard II*, in: idem, *Dzieła dramatyczne Williama Shakespeare (Szekspira) w dwunastu tomach, T. 1: Król Jan, Król Ryszard II, Król Henryk IV część I, Król Henryk IV część II*, Kraków 1895, I.480.

¹⁹ During the partitions (1795–1918) Polish was forcefully replaced by languages of the occupants (German and Russian). The Polish language was removed from schools and administration and exiled from public spaces. The repression was especially severe in the Prussian partition, where children who spoke Polish at school were subjected to corporal punishment.

²⁰ W. Shakespeare, *Ryszard II*, P. Kamiński (transl.), Warszawa 2009, I.3.159.

If *Richard II* is a metadrama focused on language, then Kamiński's *Ryszard II* invites us to extend this metacommentary to the realm of translation. Reflected in Mowbray's speech as rendered by Kamiński, the translated text is no mute instrument – rather, it plays a different tune that opens new questions and offers new possibilities.

Mowbray's speech seems to epitomise the fear of the foreign, a world unwilling to open up to translation. Transgressing the realm of one's native language is represented through a figure of suffocation: Norfolk's tongue is "robbed from breathing native breath" and the duke becomes "cast forth in the common air". The world defined by fearing otherness is thus a small, constricted space. On the contrary, the translation is able to subvert this state of affairs, constantly pushing the borders and letting in some "common air".

In her discussion of literature viewed from the perspective of translation, Małgorzata Łukasiewicz quotes Goethe, for whom reading Shakespeare meant that his existence became "expanded by infinity". Łukasiewicz²¹ explains how that illumination experienced by individual writers can be transposed into expansion of entire literatures. (It seems then that translation has the potential of changing maps and moving borders, proving that "common air" may in fact be the healthiest to breathe.)

Two layers of meaning identifiable in Kamiński's rendering of Mowbray's speech suggest that it is possible to treat this translated fragment as a token of this process. On the one hand, Kamiński's text still conveys all the emotions present in the English version, opening up a potential for its riveting performance on stage. On the other hand, however, the Polish text exiles Norfolk and saves him at the same time, being a tangible proof of the richness and creativeness of that common space.

But there is more to it than that. Looking back at Pavis's definition referring to the spatial and temporal dimensions (source text and translated text are separated in space and time), it is clear that Kamiński attempts to resolve the temporal aspect and keep his vocabulary and register as neutral as possible, avoiding words and expressions immediately identifiable as archaic. There is a visible difference in terms of language even between Kamiński's 21st-century translation and Ulrich's 19th-century one: while Ulrich refers to concepts such as "mamka" ['wet nurse'] (where Kamiński opts for a neutral expression "aby mnie niańczono" ['to be looked after']) and uses archaic syntax, Kamiński's language stands the test of natural, contemporary Polish. The language of Kamiński's *Ryszard II* is therefore much easier to understand for contemporary Polish audiences than Shakespeare's English for contemporary Brits. This paradox of translation has also been noticed by Pavis,²² who confirms that "Shakespeare is easier to understand in French or in German translation than in the original, because the work of adapting the text to the current situation of enunciation will necessarily be accomplished in translation".

²¹ M. Łukasiewicz, *Pięć razy o przekładzie*, Kraków–Gdańsk 2017, p. 116 et seq.

²² P. Pavis, op. cit., p. 28.

In the case of translating for the stage, that bridging of the temporal gap is extremely important, for it has direct influence on theatrical practice. There can be no doubt that the Polish tradition of staging Shakespeare's plays is very different (definitely much less conservative) than the British one – a partial explanation for this may possibly be found in the language of Polish translations of Shakespeare, which more easily lend themselves to theatrical experimentation. Obviously, translations cannot be held solely accountable for the Polish tradition of staging Shakespeare, as there is a whole range of influences behind the modern experimental context. Another important issue at play here would be, among others, the aforementioned historical component – during the partitions, political and cultural repression often made writers and theatre directors resort to hints and allegory, and Shakespeare's plays were often used as an opportunity to speak out (in disguise) on current political topics.²³ As a result, as Andrzej Żurowski explains, “the Polish people talk through Shakespeare about their own politics, history, power structures, jobs, orders, and disorders. [...] His plays have been the mirror of our times; and through them we have seen the artistic, but not simply artistic, transformations of our history”²⁴

The issue is interestingly presented in Thomas Anessi's article on his own translation for Grzegorz Jarzyna's production of *Macbeth* (2008) into English. As it turned out, Jarzyna's contemporary settings and theatrical means of expression clashed at times with Shakespeare's archaic text, prompting Anessi to resort to the direct back translation of the Polish translation (by Stanisław Barańczak) rather than use the original lines from the play.²⁵ Anessi's experience suggests that had the performance been based on the English source text rather than on the modern Polish translation, it would not have looked the same. Now, however, Jarzyna's translation-based performance (in Anessi's back translation) was presented in Britain, enriching and inspiring British theatrical culture – thus, in a way, feeding back into the original system.

It is my contention that these two examples – Kamiński's rendition of Norfolk's speech, offering a new layer of metadrama (absent in the source text) and bridging the time gap that opens up a potential for different staging techniques – invite us to reflect on the cultural value of theatre translation. In today's world of clashing cultures and forced migrations, it is especially important to ask ourselves how to talk about translation and how to perform translations in such a way as to avoid conceptualising translation in terms of exile, picturing a translated text as a refugee. Let us keep asking ourselves, how to “play this instrument”, drawing new melodies. How to receive, share and host texts rather than keep them “engaoled”.

²³ This issue is discussed in detail by Jerzy S. Sito (1970), himself a Polish translator of Shakespeare, in the article *Shakespeare, Poland's National Poet*, “Delos” 1970, no. 3, pp. 147–158.

²⁴ Andrzej Żurowski qtd. in: J. Elsom, *Is Shakespeare Still Our Contemporary?*, London 1989, pp. 169–170.

²⁵ T. Anessi, *Adaptacja jako krwawe bagno. Tłumacząc spektakl 2008: Macbeth na angielski*, “Przekładaniec” 2015, no. 31, pp. 201–221.

Perhaps Kamiński’s translation may indicate the right direction. Rather than suppressing the cultural aspect, Kamiński’s *Richard II* embraces it and makes it accessible to the target readers/audience. As Pavis²⁶ points out, “culture intervenes [...] in all the nooks and crannies of the text”, and instead of perceiving this fact as a problem that needs to be swept under the carpet or grudgingly resolved, we should treat it as an opportunity. As Antoine Berman²⁷ reminds us in his *Translation as the Trial of the Foreign*, while the translated text is “uprooted from its own language ground”, “this trial, often an exile [sic!] can also exhibit the most singular power of the translating act: to reveal the foreign work’s most original kernel”.

References

- Anessi T., *Adaptacja jako krwawe bagno. Tłumacząc spektakl 2008: Macbeth na angielski*, “Przekładaniec” 2015, no. 31, pp. 201–221.
- Barańczak St., *Od Shakespeare’a do Szekspira*, in: idem, *Ocalone w tłumaczeniu*, Poznań 2005, pp. 191–215.
- Bassnett S., *Still Trapped in the Labyrinth: Further Reflections on Translation and Theatre*, in: S. Bassnett, A. Lefevere (eds.), *Constructing Cultures*, Clevedon 1998, pp. 90–108.
- Bassnett S., *Ways through the Labyrinth: Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts*, in: T. Hermans (ed.), *The Manipulation of Literature*, New York 1985, pp. 87–102.
- Berman A., *Translation and the Trials of the Foreign*, in: L. Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*, London 2000, pp. 284–297.
- Bolam R., *Richard II: Shakespeare and the Languages of the Stage*, in: M. Hattaway (ed.), *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, Cambridge–New York 2002.
- Brown J.R., *William Shakespeare: Writing for Performance*, London 1996.
- Calderwood J.L., *Richard II: Metadrama and the Fall of Speech*, in: G. Holderness (ed.), *Shakespeare’s History Plays: Richard II to Henry V*, London 1992.
- Elsom J., *Is Shakespeare Still Our Contemporary?*, London 1989.
- Espasa E., *Performability in Translation: Speakability? Playability? Or Just Saleability?*, in: C.-A. Upton (ed.), *Moving Target: Theatre Translation and Cultural Relocation*, Manchester 2000, pp. 49–62.
- Gurr A., *Language*, in: W. Shakespeare, *Richard II*, Cambridge–New York 1990, pp. 31–34.
- Kott J., *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, B. Taborski (transl.), London 1991.
- Łukasiewicz M., *Pięć razy o przekładzie*, Kraków–Gdańsk 2017.
- Pavis P., *Problems of Translation for the Stage: Interculturalism and Post-Modern Theatre*, L. Kruger (transl.), in: H. Scolnicov, P. Holland (eds.), *The Play Out of Context: Transferring Plays from Culture to Culture*, Cambridge–New York 1989, pp. 25–44.

²⁶ P. Pavis, op. cit., p. 42.

²⁷ A. Berman, *Translation and the Trials of the Foreign*, in: L. Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*, London 2000, p. 284.

Shakespeare W., *Dziela dramatyczne Williama Shakespeare (Szekspira) w dwunastu tomach, T. 1: Król Jan, Król Ryszard II, Król Henryk IV część I, Król Henryk IV część II*, Kraków 1895.

Shakespeare W., *Richard II*, Cambridge–New York 1990.

Shakespeare W., *Ryszard II*, P. Kamiński (transl.), Warszawa 2009.

Sito J.S., *Shakespeare, Poland's National Poet*, "Delos" 1970, no. 3, pp. 147–158.

Totzeva S., *Realizing the Theatrical Potential: The Dramatic Text in Performance and Translation*, in: *The Practice of Literary Translation Constraints and Creativity*, Manchester 1998, pp. 81–90.

Ubersfeld A., *Lire le théâtre*, Paris 1978.