

## Political Villainy on the Modern Stage: Arabic Translations and Adaptations of William Shakespeare's *Richard III*

### LA POLITIQUE DE VILLAINY SUR LA SCENE MODERNE: LES TRADUCTIONS EN ARABE ET DE L'ADAPTATIONS DU *RICHARD III* DE WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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#### Abstract

The following paper explores the rhetorical use of anaphora in William Shakespeare's *Richard III* and its impact on the translation of western conceptions of political villains to an Arabic audience. The analysis examines the use of anaphora in Richard's soliloquies and public speeches that show Richard's skills in rhetoric aimed primarily at political deception. The Arabic translations and adaptations of the play for contemporary audiences, on the other hand, were received poorly because the Arab world perceives political villains differently. The study proposes that a new translation or an adaptation should be based on an awareness of the historical background and the linguistic differences particular to the Shakespearean play so as to approximate the English model of political villainy for modern Arabic audiences.

**Key words:** *Richard III*; Shakespearean play; William Shakespeare; Arabic; English play

#### Résumé

Le document qui suit explore l'utilisation rhétorique de l'anaphore dans William Shakespeare, Le Richard III et son impact sur la traduction de conceptions occidentales de méchants politiques à un public arabe. L'analyse porte sur l'utilisation de l'anaphore dans soliloques de Richard et de discours publics qui montrent les compétences de Richard dans la rhétorique vise principalement à la tromperie politique. Les traductions en arabe et des adaptations de la pièce pour un public contemporain, d'autre part, ont été reçues mal parce que le monde arabe perçoit méchants politiques différemment. L'étude propose que une nouvelle traduction ou une adaptation

devrait être basée sur une prise de conscience du contexte historique et les différences linguistiques notamment pour la pièce de Shakespeare de façon à approcher le modèle anglais de la vilénie politique moderne publics arabes.

**Mots clés:** *Richard III*; Pièce de Shakespeare; William Shakespeare; Arabe; Pièce en anglais

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John Marston in *Scourges of Villainy* (1598) makes a reference to Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1594) in the seventh satire where he parodies Richard's "A horse, a horse, a kingdom for a horse" (5.4.7): "A man, a man, a kingdom for a man" (p.394). The anaphoric statement in the Shakespearean play is a demonstration of Richard's abilities to use language to manipulate others on the battle field and ultimately shows a political villain's skill failing as he is unhorsed. The rhetorical statement creates a melodious discourse that attempts to stir the audience to Richard's predicament. At the same time, the assertion uttered at the height of battle emphasizes the energy of Richard's political motivations and shows that people will eventually acquire immunity from being affected by speeches. Thereby, Richard sketches a model of villainous leader driven by his own rhetoric to postulate a positive response from his followers and construes an ending which shows his ultimate alienation. In a literal translation of the play as manifested in Al-Qid's (1993) version the repetition of "horse" (p.244) would stimulate an Arabic spectator to link the word to the cultural importance of the animal in Arabic literature and history. Therefore, for a translator, the gap between the two cultures is immense and rendering *Richard III* to an Arabic audience is from the onset a complicated endeavour. The most difficult

task, however, is mainly portraying western perceptions of political villains to the Arab world who have come to see dictators as lacking in rhetorical abilities.

A reader of modern politics in the Arab world realizes that politics are intensely territorial and the translation or adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard III* reveals the difficulty of approximating western political themes to an Arabic audience. The intricacy is demonstrated in a review of Al-Bassam's adaptation of *Richard III* on the English stage for an Arabic audience. Margaret Litvin (2007) considered the half-empty room and the reaction of the audience along with "the theme of mutual Arab-West ignorance and misappropriation [which] continued to resonate throughout" would hardly account for a successful play (p.5). The contemporary adaptation of the play performed in England by a Kuwaiti national under the title, *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* was not reviewed favorably because the original Shakespearean play is simply foreign to Arabic audiences who have a different conceptualization of political villains. The adaptation, a costly one, was presented by The Cultural Project and Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon Avon in 2007. It was directed by Sulayman Al-Bassam and translated by Mehdi Al-Sayigh. There was a great effort to make the play a sensation and was originally sold under the title, "Baghdad Richard." Later, the title was changed to broaden the play's thematic concerns with political leaders and not just Saddam Hussein. The focus on the Gulf Arab context provided scenes that emphasized its concern with the present political situations in the Gulf. The Arabic background is evident in the play as examples include, Gloucester's wooing Lady Anne at a funeral wearing a woman's abaya and the princes murdered reading the Quran among other Arabic cultural transformations of the play (p.86). Litvin finally evaluated the play as a "work in progress" (p.91). Graham Holderness (2007) also expressed an unfavorable attitude towards al-Bassam's version (124-144). Both reviewers have considered the adaptation a failure and Litvin mentioned that the play was redone multiple times as members of the audience could not understand the intended political meaning in the Arabic version. Unlike the first adaptation by Al-Bassam of *Hamlet*, entitled *Al-Hamlet Summit*, which was considered a public sensation, *Richard III* could be painstakingly termed as a play lost in adaptation and translation.

Modern Arabic adaptations of Shakespeare's *Richard III* are a testimony to its thematic and rhetorical complexity. The first attempt was performed on the Tunisian stage and was later followed by Al Bassam's version in England in 2007 for an Arabic audience. In the earlier adaptation, the linguistic, rhetorical and cultural differences are especially noticeable in the Tunisian experience. Rafik Darragi (2007) in "The Tunisian Stage: Shakespeare's Part in Question" discusses the adaptations

of some of Shakespeare's plays on the modern Tunisian stage. According to Darragi, the bard's position in Tunis is secure in spite of the different cultural and linguistic background; due to the fact that Tunisians speak French and are not familiar with English literature (p.95). Darragi examines three modern Arabic adaptations of Shakespearean plays on the Tunisian stage, *Richard III*, *Othello*, and *Romeo and Juliet* by three well-established directors, Mohamed Kouka, Tawfiq Al Jibali and Mohamed Driss. The choices by different professionals were not to follow the Shakespearean plays literally and yet *Richard III* was unsuccessful due to the lack of knowledge of English history and culture. Earlier adaptations of Shakespearean plays also suffered a similar fate such as *Macbeth* which was produced in 1972 and directed by Mohamed Souissi (p.96). Among the many reasons for the failure of *Richard III*, Darragi considers the unfavorable timing of introducing the English play to the Tunisian stage which was interested in and geared towards popularizing new playwrights including the translator of Kouka's version of *Richard III*, Ezzeddine Madani. The director, who also played the role of Richard on stage, was expecting an critical response but was driven by enthusiasm to perform "his project" (p.97). Darragi locates other reasons for the play's lack of success which include themes on the dangers of mixing politics and religion and the confusing props used such as the tower (p.98). The adaptations show the difficulty of portraying political villainy and the original text's reliance on the rhetorical devices as the major obstacles for a convincing rendering of *Richard III* to an Arabic audience. The paper focuses on the use of rhetoric, especially anaphora, in *Richard III* as a major challenge to a more convincing depiction of political villainy when translating or adapting the play for a contemporary Arabic audience.

The play classified by literary historians as a history and a tragedy similar to other Shakespearean plays was adapted and translated into many different languages. *Richard III*, however, is unique because of the particular linguistic and thematic challenges the play presents to readers and spectators in English and in Arabic. The appeal to translate *Richard III* stems from the spectacle of the charismatic Richard who emerged as a forerunner of a political villain modeled in later plays and adaptations by Western and Eastern writers. The linguistic difficulty and the cultural import present in the original Shakespearean text are perceptible in other renditions of the play. Rui Carvalho Homem (2004) in "*Richard III* in Space and Time: On Translating Shakespeare into Portuguese" discusses four existing translations of the play which began with "William Shakespeare: Ricardo III" by D. Luís de Bragança (1880) and then was later followed by Henrique Braga (1955), Didia Marques Reckert (1968), and a collaborative version by Eduarda Dionísio, Maria Adélie Silva Melo and Luís Miguel Cintra (1986).

According to Homem, the original English text is remote for Portuguese audiences in terms of its themes (p.80-93). The play's obscure meanings are difficult to follow even for an educated contemporary audience who are presented with an option to read *Richard III* (written approximately about 1591) independently or as the last in play in the tetralogy containing *Henry VI part 1, part 2, and part 3*. Translating the text into Arabic is more difficult because the historical plays are not popular in the Arab world and an understanding of *Richard III* relies on the knowledge of past events incorporated in the preceding Henriads on the dynastic strife of the English monarchy. The play's themes are complex and critical opinion varies on the location of meaning (Ortego, 2007). Therefore, other critics have located meaning in the historical content. Dan Breen (2010) discusses the allusiveness of the interpretation of the play within context of More's history which was the source of Shakespeare's play. Moreover, the generic classification also adds another dimension to the complexity of the play as discussed by Jean Howard (1997) in "Shakespeare and Genre" who declares that there was an intention of the instability of the genre to create a "horizon of expectations" (p.298-299). Therefore, the written text of *Richard III* demands a series of footnotes to import its themes.

The play's lengthy detail of events in English history further alienates the Arabic audience because only a handful of Shakespeare's plays get to be performed on stage and directors usually choose the well known ones to present such as *Hamlet*. Moreover, most of the plays are performed as adaptations because Arab audiences are familiar with the original plot and appreciate its relevance to their cultural context. *Richard III* usually remains within academic borders because of the various obstacles of rendering it to Arabic audiences. Instructors often notice students' complaints on the difficulty of the English text and also on the available translations which reveal a need for a clarification of the historical background of the play, unlike the western spectator who is familiar with the use of rhetoric in the play. The reviews of the adaptations therefore, indicate that a researcher would not have to investigate further the additional obstacle of the extensive use of rhetorical devices and its effect on English audience and the Arabic reader as well who could not be blamed for not grasping the intended effects of the political play.

*Richard III* is famous for its opening lines, which are often quoted by Western politicians:

Now is the winter of our discontent  
Made glorious summer by this sun of York;  
And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house  
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried

Richard describes the succession of the York house to the English throne by his brother, King Edward IV, in a metaphor. The lines reveal his psychological nature in

front of the audience which shows an embedded jealousy and a hatred for the two elder brothers. The metaphor in the opening lines shows Richard's utilization of language to conceal feelings because his exaltation in praising the new era of York accession masks a plan for becoming a future king. The lines also show his skillful use of metaphor, irony, anaphora and many other rhetorical devices employed throughout the play.

*Richard III* demonstrates western conceptions of language as an effective tool in gaining political power. According to Richard, his physical deformity is the social obstacle to advancement in the royal family. He is envious, especially of his brothers, because they do not suffer any physical defects, and therefore, his determination to become a villain manifested in linguistic prowess is a way of consolation in gaining accession to the crown. E. Pearlman (2004) in "The Invention of Richard of Gloucester in '3 Henry VI' and 'Richard III'" cites Richard as a turning point in Shakespeare's development as a dramatist. Richard according to Pearlman shows remarkable oratory skills as opposed to other characters in the Henry VI plays. Richard in the second part of the trilogy, according to Pearlman, was advancing linguistically and his talents culminated in the famously quoted lines in the last play of the trilogy, *Richard III* (p.15). As the action of the play progresses, Richard is able to control King Edward IV and spreads rumors about his second brother. Through a carefully construed plan, Richard weaves into the mind of the king that Clarence is a suspect in plotting against the monarch because his first name begins with a "G" and the king falls into the scheme and sends the innocent brother to the notorious Tower. Moreover, Richard's villainy becomes chilling as he sends assassins to get rid of Clarence. Furthermore, Richard wins Anne, the late widow of the Prince of Wales, by using clichés related to repentance and love and is overcome by his skills in manipulating others. Dolores Burton (1981) states that the first Act of the play is crammed with rhetorical devices to demonstrate the power Gloucester has over people (p.55). From the onset of the play, Richard captures the attention of the audience with his remarkable linguistic dexterity.

In consequent acts Richard, assisted by his cousin Buckingham, shows a skillful manipulation of language by pretending to be a devout and a modest man who has no claims to the throne. Later, Richard spreads a rumor that his nephews are illegitimate to secure a position as a rightful claimer to the throne. Richard's decision to get rid of the princes stems from his observance of their ability to use language effectively which Buckingham states is inherited from the princes' mother. Richard's audacity continues in trying to secure a marriage to his niece through language, but he is unable to achieve his goal because of a skilful tactic by her mother. The rhetorical advantage remains except towards the very end

until Richard isolates himself. The downfall is spiraled by the curses of the ghosts that appear before the battle of Bosworth who tell him to "Despair and die." The final death of Richard in battle demonstrates a poetical justice by the bard himself on the justified ending of those characters who manipulate language to selfish aims.

The play juxtaposes Richard's rhetorical cleverness with the apparent lack of dexterity of the other characters. George T. Wright (2000) in "Hearing Shakespeare's Dramatic Speech" gives an example of how eloquent Richard's speech is because the voice rises in a pitch "then immediately descending to give the next syllable its full stress" (p.263). Richard is aware of the power of language in political advancement and at moments spectators realize that Richard gets rid of those characters who are awed by his manipulation of language or those who try to match his skills.

Richard's use of rhetoric can be compared to the way women use language in the play. David Bevington (2000) in "Shakespeare the man" says the history plays especially the "Henriad" plays are about fathers and sons and domineering women like Queen Margaret in the Henry VI plays and in *Richard III* or about women as victims of war (p.17). Therefore, language becomes important as a political tool because the play is a testimony to its power as an alternative to manly physical prowess. Juliet Dusinberre (1996) in *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* says Richard blames his deformity on Mistress Shore (III, iv, 70) and states that "the women of the political world are smaller and more domestic" (p.92) and consequently are not involved in the rhetorical speeches. According to Dusinberre, "Women are aware their only weapons are words. Duchess of York moans on the nature of calamity that is "full of words" (II, ii, 39) (p.278-279). In *Richard III* women lacerate with their tongues and their frustrations in the political world is many sided (p.280). Dusinberre states that Margaret in the previous plays of Henry VI who had physical prowess is reduced to words in *Richard III* (p.300). Nevertheless, Richard despises women and his contempt shows in the manner he wooed Anne because he believes that women are susceptible to language manipulation. The relationship of Richard and the women in the play was tackled in numerous critical essays and books, such as Phyllis Rackin (2005), Kristin Smith (2007), and Marilyn Williamson (1987) Therefore, Richard flaunts with language throughout the play because at moments the daunting linguistic skill is related to the relationship he has with women.

The extensive use of rhetorical devices especially anaphora seem to make *Richard III* appear as a linguistic jingle and they obstruct the play's political significance. There is also a particular problem in Arabic because there are many definitions of anaphora. In Arabic, anaphora translated as "jenas" is often confused with alliteration which is also defined as "jenas." Moreover,

Arab linguists refer to anaphora as "alawad asbaqi." The different translations point to the absence of the rhetorical definition of anaphora in Arabic. The denotative meaning of anaphora in English as mentioned in *The Merriam Webster Dictionary* states that the word comes from Greek origins and it is the repetition of words and phrases at the beginning of successive clauses for rhetorical or poetic effect. Therefore, the rhetorical aspect of anaphora is absent in a literal translation or even in an adaptation in Arabic because of the term's foreign etymology.

In addition to anaphora, there are other devices heavily employed in *Richard III*. There is also the extensive use of stichomythia in the play which is defined in *Shakespeare's Theatre: A Dictionary of His Stage Context* as a device used by Greek dramatists, especially Seneca, where single lines are being repeated by characters as if echoing each other and the following example is an illustration (p.441):

Queen Elizabeth: Shall I be tempted of the devil thus?  
King Richard: Ay if the devil tempt you to do good.  
Queen Elizabeth: Shall I forget myself to be myself?  
King Richard: Ay if yourself's remembrance wrong yourself.  
(4.4. 418-21)

Rhetorical devices appear frequently particularly when other characters exchange dialogue with Richard and they indicate his skillful manipulation of language. However, for an Arabic audience, Richard's dexterity in rhetoric does not produce any effect on the average Arab spectator.

The difficulty in the interpretation of the play's rhetorical meaning can also be illustrated in the film dramatization. Christopher Andrews (2000) in "*Richard III* on Film: The Subversion of the Viewer" comments on the relationship between Richard and his audience in three movie versions of the play: Laurence Olivier (1955), Ron Cook (1983) and Ian McKellen (1995) and concludes that Richard does seem to compel the audience to get into a closer relationship in a variety of ways. Moreover, Richard in the film version displays a relationship of intimacy and also a great deal of exploitation similar to the attitude Richard in the play exerts over his audience. The play does need physical closeness to import its political themes and the reliance on language alone is not sufficient to the average spectator.

The rhetorical devices which are employed in the text show the complexity and the obstacles writers face when they try to approximate the thematic concerns of the Shakespearean play. Language in *Richard III* acts as a signifier of English identity and could only be interpreted in the context of a play narrating English history. Moreover, the play celebrates national unity and solidarity with the catechistic renewal of faith in a new dynasty that is expected to map a new homeland built on a linguistic cleansing of rhetorical impurities and founded on a homogenized nationality. Richard served a purpose in the play- a reproachful reminder to the use of language in the

political field. The play appeals to people from different cultural backgrounds because it provides a political villain emulated by many writers. After all, the insight into human psychology that was inspiring and controversial in the audience's judgment of Richard, the Duke of Gloucester who exploited the possibilities of language adds another dimension to the play. The ambivalence surrounding his character, alienation, identity, and tortured body and soul resonated with many readers and spectators. Therefore, many writers in other languages chose to adapt *Richard III* than to literally translate the play's rhetorical jungle. Unfortunately, even the adaptations in Arabic of the play were not affluent and were condemned by critics. The Arab spectators are met with a persistent image that is poorly fitting the Arabic antagonism of scoundrels and Richard merely offers a simplified version of a political villain.

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