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Intimate Tragedies: Body Politics and Narrative Interruptions in Contemporary Rewritings of Shakespeare's Richard III

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Abstract: When they set Shakespeare's Richard III into one night and eliminate most of the male characters, Italian actor and playwright Carmelo Bene's *Richard III or the Terrible Night of a Man of War* (1977) and Flemish dramatist Peter Verhelst's *Richard III* (2004) turn Richard's story into an intimate, private tragedy. This article argues that, influenced by ideas and concepts developed by the theorists of the historical avant-gardes, both practitioners condense, fragment, atomise the story they borrow from Shakespeare, shifting the focus from the events themselves to the characters' perception of the events, and foregrounding the image of the suffering or disabled body.

Keywords: Richard III, rewriting, body, narrative, the avant-garde, women.

Spectators expecting to enjoy the adventures of the Duke of Gloucester/ King Richard III when attending a performance of Carmelo Bene's or of Peter Verhelst's contemporary takes on Shakespeare's historical drama might be a little surprised, as nothing really happens (or nothing happens for real) in

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these rewritings. Condensed in one night, set in an intimate space, and turned into a private tragedy, Richard's story seems to unfold with difficulty, as characters frequently stop in order to reflect on the events. With both Bene's *Richard III or the Terrible Night of a Man of War* (1977) and Verhelst's *Richard III* (2004), the prince is essentially surrounded by women, not particularly interested in his warrior exploits, but very strongly attracted to/repulsed by Richard himself, an able-bodied man who now and then morphs into a monstruous figure. The story, that both Richard's stage partners and modern audiences are (supposed to be) familiar with from Shakespeare's play, is constantly interrupted, reiterated or atomized – associated to a performance that the women comment. Thus fragmented, manipulated, disorganized, the dramatic events become a means of telling other stories, at the same time casting new lights on Richard's monstrosity. These manipulations, which involve a new relation with the audience, are informed by theories and concepts developed by the historical avant-gardes, especially by Marinetti's 1913 Variety Theatre Manifesto and by Maeterlinck's static drama.

The issue of the specificity of the theatre, already present in the reflection of the avant-garde theoreticians of the 1920s and 1930s, acquired new forms and meanings in the theatre of the 1960s and 1970s. According to Italian performer, director and dramatist Carmelo Bene, once a performance starts "everything has already happened"[2], and everything we are left with are oral fragments of a scenic palimpsest. Indeed, one of the features of the Italian avant-garde, as Dorota Semenowicz argues, is "the shift in emphasis from text to that which is happening onstage"[3]. Richard's story "has already happened", it is already known in these contemporary rewritings, and seems to be taking place for a second time, as if in a theatrical representation, providing characters with the time to muse on the dramatic events.

Bene's 1977 rewriting, *Richard III or the Terrible Night of a Man of War*, is set into a strange funeral chamber reminding of a theatre dressing room, where the protagonist and the women of Shakespeare's history play (Elisabeth,

[2] Quoted in Dorota Semenowicz, *The Theatre of Romeo Castellucci and Societas Rafaello Sanzio*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 4.

[3] Dorota Semenowicz, *The Theatre of Romeo Castellucci and Societas Rafaello Sanzio*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 4.

Margaret, Lady Anne, Mrs. Shore and a chambermaid whom Richard calls Buckingham) grieve over King Henry VI, whose corpse is exposed in a coffin in the middle of the room. Bene's Richard is an able-bodied dandy figure, "an elegant in black"[4], who will try to set himself apart from the mourners, to attract their attention in order to tell his story and become the monster we know from Shakespeare. The events happening on Bene's stage are not new, they are part of a sort of ritual reiterated every evening, and his Richard becomes a reflection on the status of the actor.

It is interesting that, although repudiating any association with the avant-garde, Bene seeks inspiration for the constitution of his Richard-figure in the theories of the Futurists, and especially in Marinetti's Teatro di Varietà manifesto. In this respect, Franco Quadri observed that "whole passages of the Variety Theatre Manifesto find with Carmelo Bene their first practical application, fifty years later"[5]. Thus, for almost a quarter of an hour, the protagonist will attempt to pronounce his "sadly famous soliloquy" (p. 15) – "Now is the winter of our discontent" – but the women, hardly impressed with his attempts, constantly silence him. However, when Richard stumbles, when he accidentally loses his balance, his stage partners start considering him with much more interest, and finally allow him to deliver his speech. The protagonist will soon understand "the arousing effect male physical weakness and infirmity have on women"[6] and start faking his accidents, enjoying the effects of his acting technique.

Later on, in the famous "wooing scene", Richard will refine his seduction techniques, by putting on fake prostheses, monstrous hands and funeral bandages. Every time he becomes different, every time he falls or puts on a

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[4] Carmelo Bene, *Richard III ou l'horrible nuit d'un homme de guerre*. Traduit de l'italien par Jean-Paul Manganaro et Danielle Dubroca, in Carmelo Bene et Gilles Deleuze, *Superpositions*. (Paris: Minuit, [1979] 2004). Subsequent quotations from this text will be referenced within parentheses. Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from French are mine.

[5] Franco Quadri, "Du théâtre au théâtre. L'itinéraire de Carmelo Bene vers un langage non littéraire du spectacle", in Carmelo Bene, *Dramaturgie*. (Paris: Centre international de la dramaturgie,1977), 9.

[6] Mariangela Tempera, "Looking for Richard: Two Italian Versions of *Richard III*", in Martin Procházka and Ondřej Pilný (eds.), *Time Refigured. Myths, Foundation Texts and Imagined Communities.* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2005), 324.

deforming accessory, Anne turns into a tamed, subdued young girl in love: she helps poor Richard to his feet and unconsciously uncovers different parts of her body. Richard's non-Shakespearian falls elicit in Anne non-Shakespearian reactions, which can be interpreted as moments of oblivion of the role she has given to herself, but also as moments when the actress playing Anne, bewitched by the actor playing Richard, forgets the Shakespearian part she is supposed to perform. Richard's fake slips are not without recalling Marinetti's recommendations to "systematically prostitute all of classical art" by soaping "the floorboards of the stage to cause amusing pratfalls at the most tragic moments"[7]. These grotesque, clownish moments, when the actor playing Richard is detached from Richard the tragic hero, interrupt Shakespeare's story and enable the emergence of a second, fragile story, where the actress playing Anne is seduced by the actor playing Richard. During these brief moments the protagonists continue to recite their Shakespearian lines, so a clash emerges between the visual level of the performance and its aural component, between the speeches uttered by the protagonists and their gestures.

Marinetti enthusiastically mentioned, in his Variety Theatre Manifesto, the café concert performances, which turn the classical masterpieces into mere attractions, by parodying them, by stripping them of their solemn apparatus. Just like a malicious director, Bene either imposes to his characters, throughout the "wooing scene", gestures that clash with the tragic situation, undermining the tragic, or allows them to perform the gestures suggested by Shakespeare, but deconstructs their significance in his strange stage directions. Thus, Richard does not hesitate to "embellish" himself by borrowing funeral gaze from Henry's corpse, while a hysterical Anne almost breaks down the king's coffin in her attempt to express her rage at Richard's crimes. Richard will kindly help her put the body together again, but unfortunately, he cannot be very efficient, given the deforming accessories he has pared himself with. When offered the sword, Anne is really tempted to kill Richard, just as in Shakespeare's tragedy. However, Bene stipulates in the stage

[7] F. T. Marinetti, "The Variety Theater (1913)" in Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi and Laura Wittman (eds.), *Futurism, An Anthology*. (New Haven and London: Yales University Press, 2009), 163.

directions that Anne is not mad at Richard – it is the beauty of the sword which really attracts her, and that she would like to kill him "just like at the end of turbulent nights of love" (p. 40). She will finally ask the duke to commit suicide, but while fixing her hair.

"Put life into the works of Beethoven, Wagner, Bach, Bellini, and Chopin, by inserting Neapolitan songs into them"[8], Marinetti recommended, and Bene could not but agree with his compatriot: he interrupts Richard's story and introduces different fragments with Neapolitan songs. Thus, after the sequence corresponding to Richard's encounter with the women in Act I Scene 3, the mourning becomes even more tedious and somber, Anne falls asleep on Henry's coffin, and Bene announces that "a Neapolitan serenade off-stage swells and distracts from the interior […] It evokes restaurants and 'oyster shells' […] and the first ideas for a possible *Richard III*" (p. 27). Mariangela Tempera argues that this surprising auditive intrusion might have been triggered by the context where the Italian director conducted the rehearsals for his production: "the adaptation of Shakespeare's gruesome tragedy must have been discussed by actors mellowed by wine and food at the end of an open-air meal by the sea". She considers that apart from disrupting the solemn atmosphere of the wake, the Neapolitan serenade foregrounds "a culture which, with its emphasis on family ties and motherhood, can generate the most moving theatrical moments and the most embarrassingly maudlin songs"[9]. Richard steps out of his Shakespearian role during this musical interlude, just as an actor taking a break during an exhausting performance.

Music imposes its presence in Bene's play, it changes rhythms and introduces variations, distances the narrative frame, suggesting that the interest of the adaptation is to be found beyond the dramatic events, in the ever-changing play of speeds and intensities. "At the opera, it is musicality which matters, not meaning, Carmelo Bene argued. And the villains are

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[8] F. T. Marinetti, "The Variety Theater (1913)" in Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi and Laura Wittman (eds.), *Futurism, An Anthology*. (New Haven and London: Yales University Press, 2009), 163.

[9] Mariangela Tempera, "Looking for Richard: Two Italian Versions of *Richard III*". in Martin Procházka and Ondřej Pilný (eds.), *Time Refigured. Myths, Foundation Texts and Imagined Communities* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2005), 323.

those who have the most beautiful songs"[10]. At the end of his encounter with Lady Anne (the scene is placed at the end of the first part of the adaptation) Richard has finally learned how to make himself irresistible to his fellow mourners, how to inspire both awe and unconditional admiration. He thus finally succeeds in pronouncing his famous soliloquy, "in a musical crescendo": of course, there will be no trace of bitterness in his voice, the performer becomes "more and more euphoric" as he progresses with his speech.

The clownish or the musical interruptions, the gestures and the diction which undermine the sober atmosphere, the overcharge of the stage (loaded with coffins, white and red roses, mirrors), all these elements, partly inherited from the Futurist aesthetics, relegate the Shakespearian story into the background, drawing the spectator's attention to the making of the performance. Indeed, the Italian director conceived the dramatic text as a score, which is reinvented, every night, within the performance. When directing classical works, written by great authors (Shakespeare, Marlowe), Bene compares himself to composers or avant-garde directors (Verdi, Prokofiev, Meyerhold, Artaud) who put these works to music: "the spectator will certainly not go to the opera or to the theatre in order to ecstasy himself on the value of the libretto – that he can read at home"[11].

Flemish dramatist Peter Verhelst also sets his take on *Richard III* in an intimate, mostly feminine space. However, whereas Bene's rewriting is made of intensities and variations, with Verhelst there is very little action, as characters limit themselves to delivering long poetic speeches, seemingly addressed to the spectator, speeches where they confess their most intimate feelings and comment upon facts and events in the source text, but take no moral stand towards the protagonist's crimes. The prince's physical deformity and moral villainy are displaced in Verhelst's rewriting too, as Richard is an able-bodied man. Far from descanting upon his deformity, he becomes a strange Christ figure, whose aim is to create a new, pure world, by destroying the old, vulgar, impure one. In this context, killing those who separate him from the throne become steps in delivering the world from the evil.

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[10] Carmelo Bene, *Polémiques et inédits*. In *Œuvres complètes III*. Préfacé et traduit de l'italien par Jean-Paul Manganaro. (Paris : P.O.L., 2012), 333.

[11] Carmelo Bene, *Polémiques et inédits*. In *Œuvres complètes III*. Préfacé et traduit de l'italien par Jean-Paul Manganaro. (Paris : P.O.L., 2012), 333.

A strange mixture of strong body presence and disembodiment governs this play, where the actual events and characters in *Richard III* are heavily cut and reported to Verhelst's spectator by an offstage voice. It is as if Shakespeare's story were turned into a performance, a remote, de-dramatized one, performed on another stage, which is not accessible to Verhelst's spectators. This offstage story inhabits the secondary one, in a ghostly, hollow way, as now and then bits and pieces of the actual events in Shakespeare's tragedy intrude in the world created on stage.

Thus, the actual dramatic events in Richard's story are atomized, reduced to short factual announcements made by the disembodied voice: "Clarence, Richard's brother, is arrested and brought to the Tour", "Loyal enters Clarence's cell", "Clarence has been found dead in his cell" [12]). This voice acts like a chorus, guiding the spectators through Richard's intricate story, narrating what would otherwise remain hidden, as in a radio broadcast of Shakespeare's play (as rewritten by Verhelst). The violence of the announcements – addressed at the audience members – clashes with the pervasive lyrical atmosphere of the adaptation. However, now and then the voice does not shy away from explaining to the audience the character's real intentions, hidden behind their metaphoric language, or from commenting the action, in the manner of an omniscient narrator. For instance, when Richard tries to persuade the young prince that it would be better to head for the Tower, the voice intrudes: "For his own good, says Richard, the crown prince is taken to the Tower. Richard means by that: for my own good" (p. 19). The often lapidary or fragmented information provided by the narrative voice functions like the visible part of an iceberg, as it frustrates the spectators and asks them to reconstitute the initial stories by relying on their former acquaintance with Shakespeare's play, but also on the accounts delivered by the Shakespearean characters that the Flemish dramatist preserves in his version of the play.

Indeed, with Verhelst, the characters, whose main role seems to report what is happening "on the other stage" and to reflect on facts and actions in the source text and on their own destinies, foreground what appears as an

[12] Peter Verhelst, *Richard III*. Traduction du néérlandais par Christian Marcipont. Unpublished text, 12. Subsequent quotations from this text will be referenced within parentheses. Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from French are mine.

important feature of the adaptation: they provide time to think over the mechanisms of fiction-making. According to Christel Stalpaert, contemporary Flemish Shakespeare adaptors, of which Verhelst is an important representative, are informed by Maeterlinck's "static drama, where the narrative comes to a standstill": just as the works of the famous symbolist, Verhelst's adaptations are characterized by "a feverish state of inaction, a condition of waiting or sleeping on behalf of the characters and a language filled with holes of silence"[13]. Maeterlinck claimed that "the play has to be above all a poem"[14]. Indeed, Verhelst's characters do not seem to be involved in any type of action – Richard, the Duchess or Lady Anne occupy the stage for long periods of time and address the audience directly, in soliloquies with a postdramatic flavour, telling their own versions of the story, justifying their actions, exposing their hopes and fears in beautiful, lyrical soliloquies. What keeps returning in these "stage poems" is the striking corporeality of the characters' reactions to the events scripted by Shakespeare, as Richard's violent acts are deeply inscribed into their bodies and minds.

Thus, the play starts with a soliloquy pronounced by Richard's mother, the Duchess of York, who recalls the birth of her son, through cesarian section, and her own very mixed feelings, of love, culpability and hatred, for her monster-child. In an almost obscene display of her intimate feelings, the ageing Duchess relives, in the present, the physical and moral pain that Richard caused her as a fetus and as a new-born. This speech, distanced from the speaker[15], is interrupted twice: it continues half-way through the adaptation and ends it. As a privileged witness of this intimate confession, the spectator is placed in an uncomfortable, intermediate position, in-between reality and fiction, at the same time entering into some sort of relationship with the fictional character, detached from the dramatic situation. This device is not without recalling Bene's strategy, who also interrupts the Shakespearian story in order to

[13] Christel Stalpaert, "Something is rotten on the Stage of Flanders: Postdramatic Shakespeare in Contemporary Flemish Theatre". *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 20 (4), (2010), 438.

[14] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic theatre*. Transl. by Karen Jurs-Munby. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 58.

[15] In Ludovic Lagarde's 2007 production of the play at the Festival d'Avignon the actress wore a microphone and delivered her lines in a detached manner.

provide the grieving Duchess with the opportunity to sing a strange lullaby to her agonizing Edward – consisting of some lines from two poems by T. S. Eliot (*Gerontion* and *Ash Wednesday*), on the disillusion and regret associated with death. With the Italian adaptor the discourse is doubly detached, both from the speaker (the stage directions indicate that the actress must exaggerate the expression of pain) and from the addressee (in a way, the Duchess lends her voice to her son, as the poetic *I*, in both poems, is a tired old man). This short moment, when the "Shakespearian" character speaks with the words of Eliot in the name of her dying son, constitutes a hole, a retreat from the dramatic action, a poetic moment to be enjoyed for its own sake.

As opposed to the source text, the wooing of Lady Anne has a very physical dimension in Verhelst's adaptation. Richard delivers a speech where he evokes his encounter with an unnamed young girl, who seduced him with her pure voice, with her frail hands, reaching for the sky, and also the death of the girl in what looks like an explosion. Meanwhile, in a stage action seemingly detached from Richard's discourse, Anne undresses, takes Richard's hand and places it around her neck, which seems to frighten him. Later on, Anne will provide to the audience her own perspective on this scene: she will recall how Richard seduced her with his voice, with his dream of purity, how she undressed and forced him to touch her. What Anne remembers from her amorous encounter are Richard's eyes, the eyes of a child vainly longing for a caress, of a child treated with violence. Anne knows that by authorizing Richard to love her, she also exposed herself to his inherent violence, she let herself caressed to death. As stated by Matt Cater[16], in Shakespeare's tragedy it is Richard who gives Lady Anne power over his body by offering her his sword and instructing her to revenge Henry's death. Richard is fully conscious that the possibility that she might kill him are scarce: "If thy revengeful heart cannot forgive,/Lo, here, I lend thee this sharp-pointed sword,/Which if thou please to hide in this true bosom/And let the soul forth that adoreth thee", *Richard III*, I.2.159-162). With Verhelst it is Anne who grants Richard power over her body, although she is fully conscious that the caress will turn into a

[16] Matt Carter, "Embodiment and Disability in *3 Henry VI* and *Richard III*". *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*. Volume 61, Number 1 (2021), 38.

punch, that Richard will eventually murder her. As with the Duchess of York, Richard's and Anne's bodies seem to be made of words, but words which foreground the very intimate, corporeal perception of the events by the characters.

With both Carmelo Bene and Peter Verhelst, Shakespeare's story, that audiences and characters alike are supposed to be familiar with, turns into a sort of present-absent performance, happening elsewhere but ghosting the world of the rewriting, reduced to some key moments that characters stumble to perform (Bene) or that are reported to the spectators by a disembodied voice (Verhelst). In both rewritings, the importance given to de-dramatized, lyrical moments, combining violent and tender images (such as the Duchess reflecting on her relationship with the monster-child) suggest that the adaptors are interested in the intimate side of Richard's story, in the family sphere, as a tool for approaching the politic. *Richard III* becomes a private tragedy in Bene's or Verhest's rewritings, a tragedy that unfolds according to the model of a secondary performance, of an event happening in the here and now of the stage, which both modifies and provides time to reflect upon Shakespeare's script.

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