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## **Shakespeare's Histories and Polish History: Television Productions of *Henry IV* (1975), *Richard III* (1989) and *Othello* (1981/84)**

The aim of this paper is to discuss the reception and signification of select televisual productions of Shakespeare's history plays on Polish television. My choice of teleplays has been determined by two factors: on the one hand, history plays aired on Polish television were rare and their accessibility limited; on the other hand, I want to illustrate the fate of Shakespeare productions in the context of Polish post-war history by comparing them with yet another play which seems to be resistant to political interpretation: *Othello*, produced in 1981 and aired in 1984. My argument is that although officially the teleplays discussed by me did not allude to the political situation in Poland at the time of their production and/or airing, *political* readings, nevertheless, become visible in retrospect. Due to censorship, which was conducted by a special office in Poland, official reviews of the productions avoided political references to the current affairs in Poland. Shakespeare's plays on television have yet to be extensively discussed,<sup>1</sup> and this paper is one of the first attempts to suggest a politically-oriented interpretation of selected teleplays aired before 1990.

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<sup>1</sup> Apart from my own study *Polish Televised Shakespeares*, which does not focus on the political context but approaches teleplays from the perspective of the poetics of so-called television theatre (as it is presented in Jerzy Limon's study), Professor Andrzej Żurowski is at present working on a book on Shakespeare on Polish television which will include the historical milieu.

### *Henry IV (1975)*

To suggest that the 1975 Polish television production of *Henry IV* was a political comment on the approaching crisis in what a generation of Poles considers to have been the most prosperous period in communist Poland is certainly risky. Yet, Maciej Zenon Bordowicz, the director, clearly focuses on the fate of a king/monarch/ruler/General Secretary who is facing a rebellion in his own country and is surrounded by others who challenge his power. Significantly, the director decided to heavily prune the second part of the play, leaving only two truncated scenes: the scene in which Prince Hal puts on the crown while his father is dying of fever (4.5) and a fragment of the coronation scene in which the young King rejects Falstaff (5.5). One could argue here that the tensions between the rebellious barons and the king are more central to the plot in the first part, which culminates in a battle, but in the context of Polish history, one could point at two kinds of conflicts which would allow for the kind of political reading of the production postulated in this paper. On the one hand, there were those communist party members who did not follow, and even opposed, the policies of Edward Gierk (then General Secretary). Thus, the production possibly alluded to a conflict between the hard-liners and the younger generation of communists. On the other hand, it may have alluded to the emerging political opposition: those who thought socialism/communism might not to be the best way to make everybody happy. Furthermore, one finds in the production as well as in the Shakespearean text vices which characterize, and some might still consider to be, a feature of politics in general and Polish politics in particular: nepotism and arrogance.

The 1975 *Henry IV* is a teleplay which stresses problems of the state. Bordowicz makes sure that the viewer focuses on the issues of power; more specifically on the problems of a worried ruler whose main concern is that of the state but is surrounded by mighty opponents. Bordowicz provides the viewer with tokens of power: the crown, the map, chess pieces (the production opens with characters playing chess). King Henry (August Kowalczyk) is shown as mainly preoccupied with maintaining power against the rebels whereas Prince Hal (Andrzej Seweryn) is presented as consciously preparing for the role of the king after his father's death, which, of course, the King does not realize until the moment of his death. The production can also be read as posing questions about a ruler with a dubious legitimacy. Bordowicz's focus on Shakespeare's history plays (he had previously directed a version of *Henry V* in 1970) is unique in the tradition of staging Shakespeare in Poland and testifies to the director's interest in the matters of the state.

Bordowicz's production was aired in 1975, five years after the events in Gdańsk in 1970, one year before the events in Radom in 1976<sup>2</sup> and five years before the events at the Lenin Wharf in Gdańsk which led to the founding of Solidarność in September 1980. In retrospect it marks yet another critical moment in Polish history: the halfway mark of Edward Gierek's rule, which lasted 10 years and was eventually terminated by the Solidarność movement. It was a time of lethargy when Polish society was lulled, as it were, by a kind of prosperity, an idea still cherished by some people in Poland today (Gierek himself remained popular in the Silesia region, where he had been a secretary of a *voivodship* before he was named General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1970). Significantly, the production is characterized by the lavish use of telegenic means.<sup>3</sup> The director even attempted to stage a battle in the television studio. On the other hand, the political import of a production in which a ruler is worried about the legitimacy of his power might remind one of what the then General Secretary was exposed to: the pressure at home as well as from the Soviet hard-liners who opposed the opening of Poland to the West. The issue is how to interpret the character of Prince Hal. The character of Falstaff, however, is quite typical of how things were done in Poland in the 1970s and the 1980s. One's skills or abilities did not count; what mattered were personal connections. In the Polish language these were referred to as "znajomości" [the people I know] and "załatwić" [to take care of, to fix]. Janusz Kłosiński as Falstaff suggested just such a stance, a stance which is rejected by Prince Hal, who not only refuses to comply with Falstaff's terms, but also defies his father's opponents by standing up to Hotspur's claims. One may ask at this point whether the director intended a critique of the customs prevalent in Poland or was suggesting *that* a new policy be introduced, which would lead to a more effective rule and/or change in the social and economic relations between people. Furthermore, the highly pragmatic Hal, as opposed to the idealistic, yet equally power-hungry Hotspur, might have represented a cynical approach to power, something that even his father, himself a political "upstart crow", did not assume. That certainly *can* be read as a criticism of the communist system, especially in view of Gierek's term in office as General Secretary as a social and political disappointment. After the strikes in Gdańsk in 1970, Gierek was welcomed by many a Pole as a most desirous change following

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<sup>2</sup> In 1970 increased food prices led to strikes in Gdańsk that were brutally suppressed by the police and army with at least forty-four people killed. In June 1977 another attempt to raise prices resulted in strikes in factories in Radom, Ursus (in Warsaw) and Płock. The strikes were suppressed and many workers arrested. A corollary of the Radom events was the spontaneous constitution of the so-called KOR (Komitet Obrony Robotników), Committee for the Defense of the Workers, which provided the arrested workers with defense lawyers and helped the workers' families. The organization later functioned as an illegal opposition.

<sup>3</sup> Jerzy Koenig, a director of the Television Theatre unit within Polish Television, recalled the 1977 version of *Twelfth Night* 10 years after its premiere and remarked that in 1977, Polish television had had the resources and money to produce rich televisual shows, which also testifies to the way how Gierek's midterm was considered in those times.

the crude rule of Władysław Gomułka. Quite symptomatic in this respect is the reaction of Dzidek (Bogusław Linda), the hopeful young man who experienced the 1970 massacre in Andrzej Wajda's *The Man of Iron* (*Człowiek z żelaza*) (1981), yet writes a congratulatory telegram to the newly elected General Secretary.

### *Richard III* (1989)

Macej Bordowicz's *Henry IV* came halfway through Gierek's term whereas Feliks Falk's *Richard III* was produced in 1989, the most significant year in Polish post-war history, the year in which the first semi-democratic elections after World War II took place. Although Feliks Falk, the director, and Andrzej Seweryn, who (again) played Richard, may deny it,<sup>4</sup> the production can be read as a political and historical comment on the transfer of power and the dangers to which the intoxication with power may lead. Timing is significant in the case of this production. It was shot in June 1989 (the month of the elections) and aired in December 1989 ca. 100 days after the first non-communist government since 1945 took power. Although the director may not have had any influence on the time when the production was aired, yet the time of shooting was by no means accidental and had to have an effect on the political signification of the teleplay. Its political and historical significance is also marked in another way: Andrzej Seweryn, in exile since the introduction of martial law in 1981, was again present on the Polish small screen.

The date on which *Richard III* was aired is crucial since the nature of the new power was a pressing question in December 1989. No matter how much Falk and Seweryn may deny bringing current politics into their production, it was certainly *read* by many viewers as a comment on two aspects of the political situation in that critical year in Poland. On the one hand, Richard, the totalitarian ruler, is replaced by someone who has a different vision of how the state should be run. Since the teleplay also shows characters who represent different types of evil out-Heroding each other, the production can also be read in the context of the conflicts between the winners of the June election in 1989. These were people who had previously belonged to the same Solidarność movement, but whose ideas on how to run a state were, in fact, different.<sup>5</sup> The growing split in December 1989 between the government of

<sup>4</sup> In interviews conducted by Magdalena Fiałkowska, both Falk and Seweryn, when asked a question about the political import of the production, distance themselves from bringing contemporaneous politics into the teleplay.

<sup>5</sup> Wałęsa and Mazowiecki came from two different opposition groups. Wałęsa came from the workers at the Gdańsk shipyard whereas Mazowiecki was associated with the intellectuals of the Koło Inteligencji Katolickiej (Catholic Intelligentsia Circle) and the mainly Catholic newspapers he worked for as a journalist. He was also a member of the Polish communist parliament in the

Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Lech Wałęsa, legendary leader of the freedom movements in Poland and Europe and Polish president to be, must have been in the minds of the viewers at that time. In the case of Lech Wałęsa, the conflict is depicted not via the characters of Richard and Richmond, but via Stanley and Richmond. The former even offers the crown to the latter. When he passes the crown, Stanley pulls it from the hand of the dead Richard, which still grips it tightly, and presents it, bloodied and muddied, to the victorious Richmond. That Stanley was Richard's man for a long time implies that he was steeped in the previous system, something that both Stanley and Richmond were, to a degree, stained by.

### *Othello* (1981/84)

The political import of these Shakespeare productions should be complemented, however, by the way in which politics invaded, as it were, even the 1981/84 production of *Othello*, arguably the least politically oriented of Shakespeare's great tragedies. The reason why two dates are given for this production illustrates my point: the teleplay was produced in the memorable year of 1981, memorable in that it was dominated by an almost official anti-governmental opposition, and ended literally with the introduction of martial law on 13 December. The production was not aired, however, until 1984. One could ask the simple question: why so late? What was wrong with this teleplay which presented a drama of jealousy and can be considered to be a "domestic tragedy"?<sup>6</sup> Andrzej Chrzanowski as *Othello* was an example of the so-called "półkownik", a pun on the Polish words "colonel" (pułkownik) and a neologism indicating something that sits on a shelf (półka).<sup>7</sup> The difference between the two lies in

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1960s. After the constitution of the first non-communist government with Mazowiecki as its Prime Minister in September 1989, the different visions of Polish politics represented by Wałęsa and Mazowiecki led to the break-up of the so-called Obywatelski Klub Parlamentarny (OKP), the Citizens' Parliamentary Club, which included all of the anti-communist opposition. In 1990 they split into the Porozumienie Centrum (the Centrum Agreement) headed up by the present Polish Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński, who, at first, supported Wałęsa and the ROAD (Ruch Obywatelski Akcja Demokratyczna), the Citizens' Movement: Democratic Action, which in 1991 transformed into Unia Demokratyczna, the Democratic Union, headed up by Mazowiecki. One should also remember that Wałęsa, among others, stood against Mazowiecki in the first fully democratic Polish presidential elections in 1990.

<sup>6</sup> This is the perspective of a Shakespeare scholar, which did not coincide with that of a director or a recipient or a censor. As I attempt to show below, the censors did not see the production as a "mere" domestic tragedy.

<sup>7</sup> Poles were inventive when it came to neologisms ridiculing communist rule. Thus, the militia officers were referred to as "pałkownicy", the root of the expression being the word "pałka", which means a "truncheon". The expression is also a pun on the word "pułkownik" – a "colonel".

the spelling. “Pólkownik” (pronounced: /poowkovnik/) was a film or television production which had fallen victim to the censors and consequently the premiere showing had been delayed. Some of these productions were not shown until after 1989, the year of political transition. In this context, the delay in airing the teleplay appears bizarre. One of the reviewers accounted for it quite enigmatically, “history, great and small, postponed the premiere presentation of the production” (Brzostowiecka; my translation). This remark was, nevertheless, fairly characteristic of the time when it was made: only an intelligent understatement could make it through the censorship due to the well-trained censors who were expecting understatement and capable of reading between the lines. The “great” historic narrative in this production was the Solidarność movement and its outcome; the “lesser” narrative was Daniel Olbrychski, who played the part of Othello in defiance of Polish television, film and stage after the introduction of martial law.<sup>8</sup> Olbrychski refused to act on Polish stages after 13 December 1981; after that, one of his occupations was that of a taxi driver. The presentation of the character of Iago by Piotr Fronczewski, I would argue, resembled the conduct of the communist political police officers and provocateurs, who not only desired to destroy and defile that which is pure and innocent, but also enjoyed the scheming. Iago was always there in the background, watching and silently conspiring, yet overtly arousing trust and confidence. With Fronczewski’s sober apparel, his plain looks and his “economic” acting, the play could easily have been read as a comment on the work of the secret police, their methods and influence on even the most noble and pure-hearted people.

On the other hand, the 1981 *Othello* is also an example of a production prepared at a time of economic crisis. The setting was crude, yet televisual. The lack of an elaborate and flamboyant setting can be attributed to the economic situation, which also affected Polish television. At the same time, the bare set also emphasizes the nature of television theatre with its characteristic use of space as a non-distinct locality which can be shaped by the camera and the spatial relations between actors. Another significant element which helps mould the space are the lines uttered by actors; this function is particularly important in the case of televised Shakespeare plays, which contain so many spatial (and temporal) references. Yet another effect of the bare set and reliance on truly Elizabethan synecdoche and metonymy in *Othello* is that the production is specific in neither place nor time. Consequently, the action becomes timeless, which naturally enhances a political reading as suggested above.

The 1981 *Othello* stands, in terms of the treatment of the set, in stark contrast to the 1975 *Henry IV* with its rich setting. Falk’s 1989 *Richard III* seems to be a combination of these two approaches: the studio sets are reminiscent

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<sup>8</sup> Something that also influenced Andrzej Wajda’s *Hamlet IV*, especially the way in which the players are shown in the production (Howard 61).

of Zaniewska's setting in *Othello* while the shots on location are more elaborate and filmic. The point I am trying to make is that in Poland the aesthetic dimension of televisual Shakespeare, but not only Shakespeare, coincided with the economic and ideological context, and – indeed – all these three factors affected each other.

In this brief and sketchy review of selected televisual productions of Shakespeare's plays in Poland in their historical and political (and, to a degree, aesthetic) context, I have tried to illustrate their position in the post-war Polish history and some of the major issues they addressed. The stress on the political import results from the fact that so far hardly any critical attention has been paid to Shakespeare productions aired on Polish television under the communist regime in terms of their commentary on the contemporaneous politics; a commentary, which out of necessity had to be subtle and implied rather than spelled out, not only because of official state censorship, but also because of the fact that television was under strict control by the state, even more than other media. The notorious pre-release screening of shows and productions in the presence of an official censor decided about the fate of the production: whether it would be shown uncensored or would need to be altered or would become yet another "półkownik".

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