

Political and social subtext in Nahum Tate's Shakespeare adaptations

Polityczne i społeczne podteksty w adaptacjach Szekspirowskich autorstwa Nahuma Tate'a

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse two of Nahum Tate's Shakespeare adaptations namely: *The Sicilian Usurper* (1680), the adaptation of *Richard II* and *The History of King Lear* (1681). This is done with the aim to show that Tate's adaptations were in a twofold way shaped by the political and social matters. Firstly, as it was the requirement of the Restoration theatre, he had to subject his works to the rules of French classicism, a literary theory, which was devised to strengthen the royal power as the authority of the rules in the theatre was supposed to reflect the authority of the royal power. Secondly, Tate had to be cautious that his works were critically, socially and politically acceptable in the turbulent times of 1680s.

Therefore, the characters of Shakespearean drama became over-simplified reflections of the original heroes. Numerous scenes, language puns or literary figures were just cut out. However, everything that was removed from the plays, everything that was "unsaid" on the Restoration stage provided a rich, open to interpretation subtext of political and social anxiety in England during the reign of Charles II.

Abstrakt

W niniejszej pracy podjęto próbę analizy dwóch adaptacji szekspirowskich autorstwa Nahuma Tate'a, a mianowicie: *Sycylijskiego Uzurpatora* (1680), adaptacji *Ryszarda II* oraz *Historii Króla Lear* (1681). Celem przeprowadzonej analizy jest wykazanie, że adaptacje Tate'a były w dwójnasób ukształtowane przez kwestie polityczne i społeczne. Po pierwsze, Nahum Tate, jako że wymagał tego teatr okresu restauracji, musiał podporządkować swoje dzieła regułom francuskiego klasycyzmu, teorii literackiej, która została opracowana w celu wzmocnienia władzy królewskiej. Autorytet reguł w teatrze miał bowiem odzwierciedlać autorytet władzy królewskiej. Po drugie, Tate musiał zachować wyjątkową ostrożność, aby jego prace były krytycznie, społecznie i politycznie akceptowalne w niespokojnych latach osiemdziesiątych XVII wieku. Dlatego też, pod jego piórem, postacie dramatu Szekspirowskiego stały się nadmiernie uproszczonymi odbiciami oryginalnych bohaterów. Dodatkowo, Tate zrezygnował z wielu scen czy żartów językowych tak mocno obecnych w tekście Szekspira. Jednak wszystko, co zostało usunięte z dramatów, wszystko, co zostało „niewypowiedziane” na scenie angielskiego teatru restauracji, stanowiło bogate, otwarte na interpretację odniesienie do politycznego i społecznego fermentu jaki panował w Anglii za rządów Karola II.

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Christopher Spencer, in so far the only biography of Nahum Tate, claims that “political consideration” had “a minimum of direct effect” on Tate’s rewriting of Shakespeare¹. However, for some time critics have pointed to the political significance of Tate’s adaptations and called for placing them squarely in the political context of the period. This article makes yet another attempt to show that Tate, the reviser of Shakespeare, while introducing cuts and alternations to the bard’s plays in accordance with the standards of French classicism was equally well motivated by political reasons as aesthetic ones. In other words everything that was cut out of the plays and that was introduced into the plays (everything that was later said or unsaid on the stage) was to great extent dictated by political reasons.

When George Monck, 1st Duke of Albemarle (1608-1670) employed all his diplomatic talent and irrepressible energy to restore Charles II to the English throne, he cannot have realized that doing so he was also indirectly responsible for the revival of the English theatre. The Civil War and the Interregnum had brought an abrupt end to the rich theatrical life of England. The Puritans viewed theatre and other secular entertainments as impudent and so during the eighteenth years between 1642 and 1660, theatres had been abolished, performances suspended and all actors ordered to be treated as rogues². Londoners were hungry for regular, theatrical productions so one of the first gestures of Charles II upon his return to England in 1660 was to encourage the kind of entertainment and theatrical activity that he had seen in exile in France. He not only had had a chance to admire the best plays of the seventeenth century French theatre but also realized that taking part in a stage performance could be a valuable experience for anyone participating in court life and ceremonies as it taught “the art of spectacle, the value of entrances and exits, the importance of comporting oneself with dignity and grace”³. Thus, rulers across Europe were actively engaged in the creation and patronage of theatres. That tradition was also kept by the Tudors and early

¹ Ch. Spencer, *Nahum Tate*, New York 1972, p. 68.

² O. Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, Needham Heights 1999, pp. 235-236.

³ J. van Horn Melton, *From courts to consumers: theatre publics*, [in:] *European Theatre Performance and Practice, 1750-1900*, ed. J. Davis, New York 2016, p. 179.

Stuarts who served as patrons of the London stage. Charles II resumed it, following “the Puritan chill” of the 1640s and 1650s⁴.

On the sixteenth of May, 1661, he granted the right to build a theatre and run an actors company to William D’Avenant, one of the most successful and well-known pre-Commonwealth theatre managers. This incident marked the beginning of Restoration theatre which was characterized by “dramatic variety, innovation and vitality”⁵. Its further development was heavily influenced by “big social contradictions as well as political power”⁶. On one hand, England under the rein of Charles II witnesses burgeoning libertinism, on the other, there was widespread moral disapproval of these developments. Therefore, the document D’Avenant procured not only specified his rights and duties as a manager but also ordered that all the plays to be staged had to be purged of profanity and obscenity. Thereby, the reformed dramas would become “useful and instructive representations of human life”⁷.

From that point on theatre had to present elegant, didactic and moral plays, tragedies in particular. To achieve the aim, new plays had to be written and in case of old plays revised, adapted to the concepts of the literary theory know as French classicism. That theory, based on Aristotle’s *Poetics* emerged in the early seventeenth century France under the watchful eye of Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642), Louis XIII’s minister of state. Richelieu’s main goal was to consolidate royal power and create a strong national culture, through the centralization of standards in literature and language⁸.

Largely forgotten today, Jean Chapelain (1595-1674) was the author of an epic poem about Joan of Arc and a key intellectual figure in seventeenth century France. Most importantly, he played an instrumental role in establishing Académie Française and promoted literary ambitions of its patron Cardinal Richelieu. It was Chapelain who drew Cardinal’s attention to Aristotle’s principles and thus made him realise that if Greek classical, hence reasonable, rules could be incorporated into the French theatrical tradition it would pave the way for the introduction of other sets of authoritative rules. Consequently, it would elevate the monarchy to the role of the guardian of law, order and reason. The *Poetics* of Aristotle seemed to be the perfect tool to execute his plan. To impose an Aristotelian model of drama the Cardinal, firstly, employed a coterie of dramatists to write plays on the themes of his choice under his supervision and secondly, requested literary critics to

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ S. Owen, *Perspectives on Restoration Drama*. Manchester 2002, p. 1.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ B. Murray, *Restoration Shakespeare Viewing the Voice*. Madison Taeneck 2001, p. 9.

⁸ T. Murray, *The Académie Française*, [in:] *A New History of French Literature*, ed. D. Hollier. Cambridge 1989, pp. 267-268.

produce an updated presentation of the rules of drama. Thus, political aims for long shaped the aesthetics of the arts⁹.

The fathers of French classicism were convinced that all drama rules should stem from taste and reason, which were regarded as timeless factors. Therefore each regular drama should observe the highly developed concepts of unities, decorum, poetic justice and credibility which resulted from the application of reason into theatrical praxis. To French classicists the authority of reason was inextricably connected with the authority of the State and the rules in the theatre were tantamount to the laws of the State. Unities required a play to have a single action represented as occurring in a single place and within the course of a day. Theatrical unities were strongly linked with the concepts of decorum (literature should respect moral codes and good taste; nothing should be presented that flouts these codes); credibility (actions should be believable) and poetic justice (virtue should be rewarded and vice punished accordingly). In that view, rules in theatre were not only the guardians of order, reason and credibility but also of morality. Additionally, it was agreed that literature, first and foremost, should be useful and should have didactic character. That didactic aspect was best achieved through regularity guaranteed by the unities and appropriate presentation of characters. Consequently, regular tragedy, composed in accordance with the rules was the only acceptable form of entertainment and the only thing standing between civilized society and anarchy. It was a means of bringing order into the State, of getting people to abide by the rules, it had become the third pillar of the State, along with the throne and the altar¹⁰.

At this point the political connotations of French classicism, a literary theory, which was devised during turbulent times in French history (religious conflicts, Thirty Years War 1618-1648) to strengthen the royal power should be strongly emphasized. The authority of the rules in the theatre was supposed to reflect the authority of the royal power. The same literary theory, so highly saturated with political context, was used over the Channel to revise plays for the theatres newly open by Charles II.

One of the most skillful adapters of Elizabethan playwrights was Nahum Tate (1652-1715), poet laureate of England from 1692 until his death. Tate, the son and grandson of Puritan ministers, received education at Trinity College in Dublin and throughout his life felt compelled to proselytize even using his official position as poet laureate for didactic purposes. Having

⁹ J. Heinstein, *Historia literatury francuskiej*. Wrocław 1997, pp. 113-114.

¹⁰ D. Jory, *The Role of Greek Tragedy in the search for Legitimate Authority under the Ancien Régime*, [in:] *Eighteenth - century French Theatre: Aspects and Contexts: Studies Presented to E.J.H. Greene*, eds. M. Badir and Langdon D., Edmonton 1986, pp. 9-10.

completed his degree in 1672, he moved to London four years later where he established connections to prestigious artistic circles and befriended John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Nicolas Brady or Henry Purcell. Nahum Tate was soon involved in huge collaborative projects ranging from writing an opera libretto to translating the Psalms. He also wrote some plays of his own. In 1678, following a trend for classically themed works, Tate produced *Brutus of Alba*, his rendition of Aeneas and Dido story. In *The Loyal General*, performed a year later, he explored the theme of royal irresponsibility in the time of succession crisis. In spite of those achievements, Nahum Tate, quite undeservingly, fell into obscurity and his reputation today rests mainly on Shakespearean adaptations¹¹.

Tate wrote three of nine Shakespearean adaptations staged in the period 1678-1682. He could simply have been responding to the Shakespeare vogue but the reasons for undertaking such a task become clearer after the reading of a dedicatory epistle attached to *The Loyal General* printed edition. It makes an excellent piece of seventeenth century literary criticism. There, Tate claimed, backing his argument with the authority of Aristotle, that poetry is the best way of providing effective instruction for mankind and in this function by far surpasses even philosophy. However, for a poet to create magnificent, elegant verses it is not enough to rely on “a Wind-mill in the Head, a Stream of Tattle, and convenient Confidence” , a poet has to be blessed by nature with “the Faculties of Soul in Perfection, a Copious Invention, a Comprehensive Memory (...) a Strict Discerning Judgment”¹² . Even that is still not enough, nature alone will not constitute a poet without the help of “Arts and Learning” which should embrace the knowledge of foreign languages, customs and laws of other nations, science and history, court intrigues and state policies¹³. Tate’s high expectations as to the education of a poet remain in stark contrast to his veneration of Shakespeare whom he found as “a Man that of all Men had the largest and most comprehensive Soul” although the Elizabethan had little formal training¹⁴. Nahum Tate elevated Shakespeare to the status of model dramatist on account of “his absolute Command of the Passions, and Mastery in distinguishing of Characters”¹⁵. Tate’s veneration of the Elizabethan dramatist did not make him blind to the latter’s “careless style” and justifies his attempt to improve and purify the original text¹⁶.

¹¹ A. Hager, *The Age of Milton: An Encyclopedia of Major 17th-Century British and American Authors*. Westport-London 2004, p. 320.

¹² N. Tate, *The Loyal General a Tragedy Acted at the Duke’s Theatre*, London 1680, np.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

All Tate's adaptations appeared between 1680-1682, therefore to understand his choices as a reviser of Shakespeare it is essential to understand the political situation in England of that period. In fact the appearance of those adaptations overlapped with the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Bill Crisis which ran from 1678 through 1681 in the reign of Charles II. The Popish Plot was a fictitious conspiracy fabricated by Titus Oates, who alleged that there existed an extensive Catholic conspiracy to assassinate Charles II. Oates was soon found an imposter but the anti-Catholic hysteria ran wild in England between 1678 and 1681. It led to the execution of at least 15 men and precipitated the Exclusion Bill Crisis. The Exclusion Bill sought to exclude the king's brother from the throne of England because he was Roman Catholic. The Tories (the supporters of the king) were opposed to this exclusion, while the "Country Party", who were soon to become known as the Whigs, were in favour.

Although initially Oates did not name the Duke of York complicit in the plot, it soon became obvious to the Anglican English establishment that should Charles II die, he would be succeeded by his Catholic brother. It was feared that York would not only strive to promote Roman Catholicism but also attempt to enhance royal power and rule in an absolutist way. A movement gathered strength to avoid such a form of monarchy from developing in England and to secure the country against popery and arbitrary government. Every November the supporters of the Exclusion Bill organized huge processions in London in which the Pope was burnt in effigy¹⁷. A fringe group even began to support the claim to the throne of Charles's illegitimate – but Protestant – son, the Duke of Monmouth. There was a possibility of rebellion and Monmouth was obliged to go into exile in the Dutch United Provinces (1679/1683). On his father's death in 1685, Monmouth led a popular revolt to claim the crown, which failed and the Duke ended his life as a traitor on the scaffold¹⁸.

The political situation was so turbulent and tense that there was a real fear of another civil war, which was, for example, directly expressed in Bishop Burnet's *History of His Own Time*

I foresaw a great breach was like to follow. And that was plainly the game of popery, to keep us in such an unsettled state. This was like either to end in a rebellion, or in an abject submission of the nation to the humors of the Court. I confess, that which I apprehended most was rebellion, tho' it turned

¹⁷ T. Harris, *Restoration. Charles II and his Kingdoms 1660-1685*, London 2006, pp. 136-140.

¹⁸ O. Johnson, *Empty Houses: The Suppression of Tate's Richard II*, [in:] *Theatre Journal*, vol. 47, Baltimore 1995, pp.503.

afterwards quite the other way. But men of more experience, and who had better advantages to make a true judgement of the temper of the Nation, were mistaken as my self¹⁹.

Gilbert Burnet (1643–1715) started his *History*, which was not published during his lifetime, with an outline of the Civil Wars and the Commonwealth period and then traced political events in England and Scotland from the Restoration of Charles II to the reign of Queen Anne. That highly respected, learned and fluent in several languages cleric was exceptionally well-equipped to write such an account. His fifty-year-long engagement in politics, personal relations with five English sovereigns, a wide circle of acquaintances which involved most prominent men of Church or State, both in England and in Scotland, gave him every opportunity to collect precious information and facts which were not recorded in state papers but provided deep insight into the concerns and anxieties of the time. As a narrative of the period coming from the person who was right in the centre of political turmoil the *History* has indisputable value and Burnet's bleak vision of the forthcoming rebellion even more terrifying effect. William Lloyd, preaching in front of the House of Lords on the 5 of November 1680, gave the same warning explicitly referring to the "danger of another civil war"²⁰.

Tate was ready with his first Shakespearean experiment, the adaptation of *Richard II* in December 1680. Observing the rules of French classicism, in particular the concept of decorum which demanded that royal characters should be presented in a noble kinglike fashion, he showed much concern to make Richard a good king and even gave him a loving wife as a proof of his goodness. Tate obviously thought that to paint Richard in a more attractive colours would enhance his image as a king and moral being and cast an even darker shadow of unforgivable treachery over the usurpation of Henry Bolingbroke. Although Nahum Tate took great precautions to make his adaptation appealing to the Majesty and the court, its performance was suppressed just after a few stagings on account of possible political interpretation. At that time Charles II was facing the House of Commons potentially the most dangerous since 1640, and no play depicting the feasibility of deposing an English monarch could possibly be tolerated. Clearly the deep anxiety among those loyal to the rightful Stuart succession was the problem that Tate ran into with his version of the deposition and murder of Richard.

Tate could not afford to make the same mistake twice, and his next offering, produced just when Whig demands for the legitimization of

¹⁹ G. Burnet, Gilbert. 1823. *History of His Own Time*, vol. II., Oxford 1823, p. 208 .

²⁰ W. Lloyd, *A Sermon Preached before the House of Lords on November 5 1680*, London 1680, p. 37

Monmouth were reaching their climax, more than makes amend. In this far more timely alteration of a Shakespeare play about English history, a bastard's rebellion is crushed and the legitimate monarch triumphantly restored. The play is *The History of King Lear*. Firstly, as Sonia Massai proved, Tate basing his adaptation rather on Quarto than Folio text managed to recast the old king into a stronger and more willful character²¹. Furthermore, he skillfully underlined a number of similarities between Duke of Monmouth, who was certainly considered by many contemporaries to live libertine life, and Edmund. However, Tate's Edmund is far more treacherous and despicable character than Shakespeare's original. First of all, he is eager to embrace "the revelling, self-indulgent life of feasting and masking" at the courts of Lear's eldest daughters²². Next, as Hardman convincingly shows, Edmund already in his opening speech in Act III scene 2 reveals enormous social aspiration and sexual desire. Not more than a hundred lines later, he plans to rape Cordelia. In the fourth act we firstly see him offering his earnest affection to Regan then to Goneryl. To finally hear him boasting just before the battle that he has already enjoyed Regan and looks forward to what Goneryl's beauty can offer him. Edmund motivated by his self-interest has his eyes firmly set on a throne. Thus, both Duke of Monmouth and Edmund plan to displace their legitimate brothers and are totally unrestrained by sexual morality²³.

Shakespeare's Edmund never casts any doubt as to his paternity. Tate's Edmund does so shortly before his defeat at the hands of Edgar, in the most potentially controversial remark of the play:

Thy mother being chaste

Thou art assured thou art but Gloster's son.
But mine, disdainning constancy, leaves me
To hope that I am sprung from nobler blood,
And possibly a King might be my sire. (V.5.46)²⁴.

Amidst exclusion crisis where Monmouth's paternity was questioned, Edmund suggests that it is a king who might be his father. Edmund's confession and his wretched end shown on the stage were a direct warning

²¹ S. Massai *Nahum Tate's revision of Shakespeare's "King Lears"*, [in:] *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 40 Rice university 2000, p. 447.

²² C.B. Hardman, 'Our Drooping Country Now Erects Her Head': *Nahum Tate's History of King Lear*, [in:] *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 95, p. 914.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ N. Tate, *The history of King Lear*, 1680.

to those in favour of offering the throne of England to Charles's illegitimate son²⁵.

Nahum Tate introduced other changes to Shakespeare's *King Lear* in order to transform the original play into an emblem of social and political security. The able adaptor decided to get rid of one of characters: the Fool. Bearing in mind the fact that in Shakespeare's play the Fool accompanies Lear almost all the time throughout the first three acts and many of Lear's lines develop as direct or indirect responses to the Fool's dialogue and actions, it indeed seems a risky if not damaging to the play move²⁶. Lawrence Green provides one explanation to this drastic decision:

The Fool's language itself is highly figurative and simultaneously points to several different levels of meaning. The manner in which he jumps around from one line to the next perhaps baffled Tate's impulse towards regularity and probability [...] ²⁷.

It seems clear, thus, that Tate was guided in his choice by the principles of French classicism and decided to eradicate from the play the lines that the Restoration audience could find impudent and offensive.

Furthermore, in the Act I sc. iv of the original version we find the conversation between King Lear and the Fool which takes place right after the king disinherited Cordelia and divided his kingdom between evil Regana and Goneril. Describing the difference between the bitter and the sweet fool, the royal fool provides the following explanation:

Fool

That lord that counsell'd thee
To give away thy land,
Come place him here by me,
Do thou for him stand:
The sweet and bitter fool
Will presently appear;
The one in motley here,
The other found out there.

LEAR

Dost thou call me fool, boy?

²⁵ C.B. Hardman, op. cit., p. 915.

²⁶ L. Green, "Where's My Fool?". *Some Consequences of the Omission of the Fool in Tate's Lear*, [in:] *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 12 Rice university 2000, pp. 259, 264.

²⁷ Op. cit., p. 261.

FOOL

All thy other titles thou hast given away. That thou wast born with (I.4.135-145)²⁸.

The fool's remarks are nothing but an open and severe criticism of Lear's succession policy what made them unsuitable to be presented on stage amidst the anxieties surrounding Charles's succession.

The notorious ending of Tate's *King Lear* presents a vivid example of poetic justice at work. In startling contrast to Shakespeare's play, Tate's Lear ends happily with the restoration of Lear to the throne (which he abdicates in favour of Cordelia) as well as the marriage of Edgar and Cordelia. The chance which governs the end of Shakespeare's tragedy and makes its ending so horrifying vanishes. In the world of Tate's play, the Gods protect the virtuous and punish the wicked, leaving nothing to accident or impersonal fate. Poetic justice here becomes more than a simple depiction of virtue and vice punished – it constitutes political strength by bringing peace and prosperity as well as moral certainty. The ending optimistically promises the continuance of such values as stability, tradition, inheritance and legitimacy.

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²⁸ W. Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, eds. S. Wells and Taylor G., Oxford 1994.

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