

“The pattern of all patience” – Adaptations of Shakespeare’s King Lear from Nahum Tate to Howard Barker

Literary theory has a relatively new, quite productive research area, namely *adaptation studies*, which seem to offer intriguing new possibilities to Shakespeare scholars as well. Adaptation studies cover a wide range of different fields, including film versions, stage adaptations, visual arts in general, musical recompositions, and also literary works (rewritings in prose, poetry or drama). However productive and interesting this area may be, there is virtually no theoretical work written in Hungarian dedicated to the theory of adaptation, or indeed, to any dramatic adaptations of Shakespeare’s major works. This dissertation was partly triggered by this “gap” in Hungarian literary criticism and theory, and I therefore chose to write my dissertation in Hungarian.

The dissertation is focussing exclusively on English adaptations of British authors, and includes exclusively dramatic works, and *not* any films, novels or poems written on/about *King Lear*. All the dramatic works have been published, and I based my analyses on these printed drama texts and *not* on any of their stage realizations and performances. However, I do rely on some aspects of stage history and criticism, as I found these necessary to illustrate the basic adaptation techniques and the motivations behind them.

In the first chapter I attempted to give an overview of adaptation theories, paying special attention on the problematic relationship between the origin-text¹ and the drama-adaptation, and on the special position of both the adapted and the adapting authors. After providing a complex and flexible definition, my primary aim was to present the two basic types of dramatic adaptation with the interpretation of five *King Lear*-adaptations written in the past 330 years. I did not attempt to give a chronological, exhaustive list of interpretations on all the English language *King Lear* adaptations, instead I tried to select those texts which seemed to illustrate the basic adaptation types (and the mechanisms of adaptations in general) most effectively, and provided a vivid, fruitful “conversation” with Shakespeare’s text. I distinguished the basic types of dramatic adaptations by their relations to the plotline of the adapted text, and I found that basically there are two exceedingly

¹ A term I introduced to refer back but at the same time provide a substitute for the rather overused and unclear “original text;” by this, I wished to keep the word “origo, origins” in the discussion, which I thought was crucial in the consequent modelling and understanding of how adaptations work.

different approaches to the origin-texts: one presents a plotline that runs *parallel* with the plotline of Shakespeare's drama (I called these *parallel-plot adaptations*), while the other basic type attempts to provide motivations or consequences, events *before* or events *after* the origin-plot, they precede or continue the plot of Shakespeare (I called these *prequel/sequel adaptations*).

Parallel-plot adaptations may follow the origin-text's events rather closely, as it happens in the case of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* or Csaba Kiss's *Homecoming to Denmark* (Hazatérés Dániába) with adaptations of *Hamlet*; in this dissertation this close-adapting is presented by Nahum Tate's *The History of King Lear*. Other adaptations may use only hints and motives, characters and emblematic scenes to operate as parallel-plot adaptations, and with these the origin-plot is hardly recognizable, but still possible to follow precisely by the observation of these rare and characteristic bits of Shakespeare's texts embedded into the adaptations. These adaptations might be illustrated by Müller's *Hamletmachine*, or, in the dissertation by Edward Bond's *Lear*. Tate's and Bond's adaptations are strikingly different, yet both can be interpreted as parallel-plot adaptations: Tate's is a restoration-replacement for Shakespeare's *King Lear*, an "amending" or "improving" attempt on the origin-play; whereas Bond's play is a modern tragedy with new characters and setting, criticising the Shakespearean world-view, an adaptation that relates back to the Shakespearean origins by its marked (Derridaic) difference.

Prequel/sequel adaptations form the second category, and as *King Lear* – I daresay uniquely in the history of drama – has three different major prequel adaptations, I included all of them in my examination. I added a short theoretical section introducing the nature of prequel adaptations in general, because they have a debated role in adaptation studies. Therefore I wished to emphasize the reasons why and how I think prequel adaptations can smoothly be integrated into the theory of adaptation before I turn to the actual texts. In the second section of the prequel-chapter I present a parallel/comparative interpretation of two prequel-adaptations focussing on the female characters (not) presented in *King Lear*: *King Lear's Wife* by the Georgian poet Gordon Bottomley and *Lear's Daughters* by Elaine Feinstein and the Women's Theatre Group. The third section provides an interpretation to a different prequel-approach to *King Lear*, focussing on the development and character of Lear himself, Howard Barker's *Seven Lears*.

In all the interpretations I presented in the dissertation I had another, secondary aim, namely to prove that for the most fruitful and fertile interpretation of any adaptation, we have to reconsider the postmodernist claim of “the death of the author” and have to deal with the author function reclaiming authority in certain aspects. With adaptations, the intentions and motivations of the adapting author are almost always traceable in the form of prefaces, dedications, mottos, interviews, letters, essays etc., and the exclusion of these from the interpretation not only seems implausible, but also seems less productive: as several adaptation-theorists claim (including Linda Hutcheon² and Julie Sanders), to include the traceable authorial intentions and motivations may in fact enrich the readers’/ audience’s understanding of a given play. The other reason why it is almost impossible to exclude the author function is the fact that adaptations of Shakespeare by definition cannot get rid of the overwhelming, still massive, iconic figure of the “national poet,” and most adaptations are born as a (deconstructing and/or reassuring, nostalgic) reaction to Shakespeare’s presence. I also found that including the authorial intention is an intriguing option when approaching adaptations, and therefore I tried to illustrate this “rebirth” of the author with the integration of their written comments concerning their attitudes toward Shakespeare and his work into my own interpretations of their plays.

My final (and less direct) aim was to consciously communicate with Lynne Bradley’s 2010 book, *Adapting King Lear for the Stage*, and most of all to question her basic idea concerning the nature of “double gesture,”³ which she claims to be true for twentieth-century adaptations only. Double gesture would mean to collaborate with and undermine, deconstruct Shakespeare and his work *at the same time*, and, according to Lynne Bradley, this can only be traced in twentieth century, post-modern adaptations of Shakespeare. However, as I tried to prove this in the introductory, theoretical chapter and then in all of my interpretations, this double gesture of collaborating and undermining is not only recognisable in *all* of the adaptations, but it is a basic characteristic of adaptations of any time and any author.

The dissertation discusses all the texts along the lines of a thorough and detailed re-definition of *adaptation* as such, which definition is based partly on the fundamental

² Linda Hutcheon: *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge, London; New York, 2006: 109.

„...the need to rethink the function of adapter intention *for the audience* when it comes to understanding both the interpretive and creative dimensions of an adaptation. [...] it can affect [their] interpretation.”

³ Lynne Bradley: *Adapting King Lear for the Stage*. Ashgate, Farnham, 2010: 7.

adaptation theories, and partly on my own reader/interpreter experiences that I attempted to integrate into and harmonise with the numerous already existing attempts to define the protean term *adaptation*. The main points of this new and rather complex definition are the following:

- Adaptations embody intentional, extensive and conscious intertextual relations between two (or more) texts.
- Adaptations always use familiar elements combined with new and creative content and/or form.
- Adaptations are in a constant, on-going, and reciprocal relationship with their origin-text.
- Adaptations usually apply a well known text of a canonical figure to be most effective.
- As adaptations involve a conscious and intentional *changing* of one work into another, we might have to count with the rebirth of the author as an entity, and with the involvement of an authorial intention.
- To define a work as adaptation is possible either by the acknowledged intention of an author or by the results of an audience's interpretive strategies, or (and in most cases) by both.
- Adaptations are autonomous works, with their own specific space and role in the canon, but they are not independent of their origin-text.

In case of Tate's *History of King Lear* I wanted to emphasize the special situation and role of the typical restoration adaptation in the general framework of adaptation studies, as the authorial motivations and creative drives of the age were radically different from later periods' adaptations. This was mainly due to the fact that restoration writers did not have to restrict themselves from changes in Shakespeare's language, style, character, and plot, as Shakespeare's cult was not as overwhelming and detaining as it gradually became after the period. Their bold and essentially corrective changes in Shakespeare's texts nevertheless provide the basics for later adaptor's works, and restoration adaptations can smoothly be integrated into the modern adaptation definitions as well.

Edward Bond's approach, though still a parallel-plot adaptation, is radically different from Tate's. Bond attempts to distance his work from any reference to Shakespeare, but,

paradoxically, this distancing and avoidance will define his adaptation *as* an adaptation of Shakespeare. Bond creates a modern tragedy which does not simply alienates itself from Shakespeare, and not only differs from his Lear-text in almost every possible mode, but employs active, direct points of differentiation, or, to use Derrida's term, of "differance." To trace these points of "differance" has proved the most fertile way of interpreting the complex relational network between adaptation and origin-play in this particular case.

The prequel-adaptations for *King Lear* raise the intriguing question how the creation of a hypothetical precedence can alter an already existing play: its characters, its plot, and its outcome. The three different prequels offer three different pasts for King Lear and his family, and provide three different and quite radical re-interpretations for *King Lear*. The female-centred prequel-adaptations, *Lear's Daughters* and *King Lear's Wife* deconstruct Shakespeare's heroic king figure and by focussing on the missing, one-sided, or silenced female characters and their motivations, they present a provoking feminist overtone on *King Lear*. Howard Barker's *Seven Lears* employs different strategies, as it keeps Lear in the focus throughout the play and presents his childhood, his youth, his manhood and his old age; Lear is seen as a son, a brother, a lover, a husband, a father, a statesman and a friend, and consequently Shakespeare's Lear is also re(de)composed in all his possible roles. The interpretations in the dissertation shed light on the most important feature of prequel-adaptations, namely that in these cases both the adaptation and the origin-text are causes and effects, reasons and results in one, and as such, they are able to question and reinterpret each other in an endless and constantly renewing way.

The adaptations – whether parallel-plot or prequel-adaptations – will always offer practically endless routes of analysis, the origin(s) and the adaptation(s) use and reuse each other to gain multiple interpretations, they question and reinforce each other's presence in the literary canon. Adaptations exist in a paradoxical dependent independence with/from their origins, and the origin-text remains open to all of the various adaptive attempts, as – to quote King Lear's words – "the patterns of all patience."