

The Domestication of Otherness and the Politics of Language in Jo Clifford's and Rona Munro's Versions of Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*

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It is almost impossible to discuss any aspect of *The House of Bernarda Alba*¹ by Federico García Lorca without mentioning the special status of the work in the playwright's oeuvre, namely that it is the last play he finished some weeks before right-wing military officers murdered him in his native Andalusia at the age of thirty-eight. At the time of writing (August 2016), Spain is commemorating the eightieth anniversary of Lorca's death so this background is vividly present, but independently of the publication date, most editions of the play tend to highlight that the work is the tragic farewell of one of theatre history's most seductive icons. As a result, this dramatic biographical context can be regarded as an integral part of the text, and the specific circumstances of the murder might encourage a more political, more Andalusian or simply more tragic reading of the work. Since its belated première in Spain (Teatro Goya, Madrid, 1964, dir. Juan Antonio Bardem), *The House of Bernarda Alba* has been widely staged in radically different interpretative directions for Spanish audiences, with varying emphasis on the politics of oppression, the colours of Andalusian culture and the sources of personal tragedy (gender, sexuality, age, class). There is an evident danger that any production may be turned into a melodrama or a dull ethnographical study of rural Andalusia but more than the text itself, it is the biographical context that might work as a distorting factor.

For international productions, especially those in languages other than Spanish, there is an additional challenge: to find a functional balance between the striking cultural otherness of Lorca's world and the timeless, universal conflict it contains. No strategy, however successful the output, can be repeatedly employed due to the ever-changing nature of major adaption factors such as language, the socio-political context and the host community's theatrical expectations. In this article, two attempts at adapting *The House of Bernarda Alba* for Scottish audiences are compared, Jo Clifford's 1989 version for the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh and Rona Munro's 2009 version for the National Theatre of Scotland. Radically different even at first glance, these adaptations of Lorca's classic by two of Scotland's long-established, leading playwrights reveal how their diverging choices in language, style and basic concept can be traced back to the political context of the time when these versions were conceived. The way Clifford and

Munro treat politics and language (and the politics of language) in their adaptations, however, is different, complex and highly problematic. Hidden under Clifford's resourcefully woven, philologically precise surface, there is quiet reference to late Thatcherite Scotland's turmoil, whereas Munro's contemporary Glasgow setting finds no meaningful equivalent to the multi-layered, systematic oppression in the original, so she explores a different, more arts-related institutional dimension of politics instead. This article first discusses issues related to the general practice and political agenda of contemporary drama translations in Scotland, then turns to the Scottish versions of *The House of Bernarda Alba* in question to study three aspects that are relevant for this analysis: their treatment of the elements of otherness in the original play, their divergences from Lorca and the possible political subtext of the translations.

The everyday sense of the word 'translation', which implies the production of a target-language representation of a source-language text by a person proficient in both languages, is generally problematic in the domain of drama and theatre. On the one hand, the target-language representation is often created by a playwright who does not speak the source-language and thus has to base his/her version on earlier ones by others or an intermediary ('literal') translation, which is unfit for theatrical representation. Whereas Clifford translated *The House of Bernarda Alba* directly from the Spanish original, Munro admittedly relied on several English-language translations of the play, so in the everyday sense, hers would not qualify as translation. On the other hand, the target-language text of a play can remain invisible for audiences since usually they have no access to it as authentic reading material, only as part of a performance, and this predominantly oral nature may affect the whole process of translation. (Munro's version, as most NTS production texts, was published in the same year it premièred, whereas Nick Hern Books published Clifford's translation twenty-three years after the Royal Lyceum production closed.) In addition, the Scottish context for drama translation provides further complication because, as Bill Findlay explains, 'Scottish translators are at an unusual advantage in the English-speaking world in having at their disposal such a rich and flexible linguistic resource', referring to the availability of several long-established stage languages including all varieties of Scots, English and Gaelic. (1996: 192) This coexistence results in a highly complex reality due to the lack of a clear hierarchy of language varieties or markedly differentiated situations for their use, as John Corbett argues, 'Scots and English have histories that are too nuanced, polyphonous and contrary to yield easily to binary categorisations. The tension between domestication and foreignising and the way in which drama translators deal with this tension inform all Scottish drama translations.' (2011: 105)

The two dominant modes of translation highlighted by Corbett, both with a long, well-documented trajectory in Scotland, differ in dealing with elements of otherness found in the original text, as foreignising translations retain them whereas domesticated translations substitute them with equivalents from the target culture. In terms of power, Lawrence Venuti describes British and American domestication practices as the 'appropriation of foreign cultures for domestic agendas, cultural economic, political,' while he sees foreignising as 'a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism.' (1995: 18, 20) For Venuti, then, whether the output of drama translation is an acculturated, familiar-sounding version or a self-consciously foreign, distancing one is a political matter rooted in postcolonial power structures. Most tendencies in Scottish culture, however, consistently challenge and at times invalidate the postcolonial framework and indeed, drama translators have developed their own ethic and agenda in which the choice and function of the translation mode work in a radically different way from Venuti's model. Most importantly, the intolerance of the foreign and the struggle for a monolingual-monocultural output as major factors for opting for domestication would not be possible in the Scottish theatrical context. Besides the abovementioned language diversity, Corbett underlines that Scottish drama has always drawn 'its plots and characters from the wider repertoire of European and, later, world drama' (2011: 96), and Ian Brown explains that the 'role of translations as an impetus for the internationalising of Scottish drama and theatre should not be underestimated.' (2013: 221) As a result of this organic coexistence of international perspectives and local complexity, domestication in Scotland cannot be regarded as an aggressive, reductive practice to erase otherness and to impose local cultural values on the outcome. Quite to the contrary, it is often employed to resist such anglicising translations from the British tradition and to empower cosmopolitanism and cultural diversity, both being essential characteristics of Scottish theatre culture. Consequently, Scottish audiences perceive the multi-layered language of foreignising translations as less awkward, given that they often encounter similar combinations of languages in home-grown drama, too.

Having set this general framework of translated drama in Scotland, let us turn to Clifford's 1989 translation of *The House of Bernarda Alba* to examine how the prolific dramatist deals with the elements of otherness in Lorca's play, where she diverges from the original text and whether her choices can be related to late-Thatcherite Scotland's political situation.

Before translating Lorca's play, English-born but Scotland-based Clifford had already achieved critical acclaim with her now canonical *Losing Venice* (Traverse Theatre 1985) and *Ines de Castro* (Traverse Theatre 1989), and she had translated some of the great classics of Spanish theatre (works by Pedro Calderón de la Barca, Tirso de Molina, Miguel de Cervantes and Fernando de Rojas). Besides this solid first-hand knowledge of both Spanish culture and Scottish audience expectations, the other antecedent for the Royal Lyceum Theatre's commission of Clifford's translation was the critical and commercial success of the Lyric Hammersmith's 1986 version of Lorca's play. There, Maria M. Delgado notes that *The House of Bernarda Alba* was selected to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Lorca's death and to accommodate actress Glenda Jackson, while the political motivation behind the production, if any, was not domestic but external, as Spain's transition to democracy resulted in 'a renewed [British] interest in all things Spanish.' (2003: 127) On the performance level, Delgado explains that the director, renowned Catalanian actress Núria Espert, 'steer[ed] clear of exoticism in crafting a production in which Andalusian referents were largely absent' (2003: 127), something that as an audience member, Clifford found 'terribly English' (1998: 5). In accordance with the director's vision, the production used a translation by Robert David MacDonald,² whose signature blend of domestication and foreignising generally incorporates some source culture-specific elements into a florid Standard English rewriting. While many critics found MacDonald's translation to be a proper British register for Lorca, in his review for the *Daily Telegraph*, Eric Shorter remarked that 'the voices remain[ed] those of an English theatrical drawing-room — well-bred, beautifully enunciated, highly intelligent but stuck, so to say, in Professor Higgins' territory rather than Lorca's'. (1987: 9)

As cited above, Clifford had serious concerns about the Lyric Hammersmith production, which would transfer to the West End and to television, and indeed, she adopted a markedly different emphasis and approach to translating Lorca for the Royal Lyceum. Most importantly, Clifford read *The House of Bernarda Alba* as a highly political play with a conflict and dynamics that can be effortlessly understood in the Scotland of the late 1980s. This is evident in her discussion of the character of Bernarda Alba when she writes:

Banal as it may seem, Mrs Thatcher irresistibly springs to mind. In both instances, we can see a woman who in order to survive the destructive pressures of a man's world, has had to become twice as hard and determined and ruthless as any man. (1998: 20)

For Clifford, then, the connection between Lorca's world and the Scottish audiences living in the turmoil of the 1980s was clear and strong. However, instead of opting for a more radical form of domestication to emphasise possible parallelisms, she employed a politically quieter approach that resulted in a text that was philologically precise but not too distracting from the politics of the original.

The mechanics of Clifford's translating strategy can be best exemplified with instances from the early scenes of the play taking place on the day of Bernarda's husband's funeral. This part contains some of the culturally most alien elements in the original text for Scottish audiences, for whom the deeply rooted, rural Catholic rituals and the unbearable heat of the Andalusian landscape can seem strikingly exotic. As a result, their distancing potential is likely to work against a political agenda like Clifford's. The playwright opted for accuracy in some cases and let the exotic remain, but whenever possible, she strove for cultural compromise, by which is meant the substitution of an unfamiliar or unknown cultural element in the source text with an equivalent that is less distracting for Scottish audiences but is not alien to Spanish culture either. In Lorca's original, chickpeas [*garbanzos*], the most widely used legumes in Spanish cuisine, are mentioned twice, first as the actual vegetable and then as a synecdoche of food (contemporary Spanish still widely uses it in this sense). In Clifford's translation, chickpeas are turned into a more familiar-sounding type of legume, beans: 'Take a few beans. No one'll notice.' and

FIRST WOMAN: The poor also feel pain.

BERNARDA: They forget it when they see a plate of beans. (Lorca 2012: 4, 8)

This substitution illustrates that when Clifford chooses cultural compromise over accuracy, her aim is not domestication but rather the naturalisation of the theatrical effect of a potentially distancing element. Other examples for this strategy include 'lemon juice' for *limonada*, a sangria-like sweet alcoholic beverage, 'yard' for various spaces found in rural Spanish architecture such as *patio* and *corral*, and 'brandy' for *aguardiente*, another alcoholic beverage. (Lorca 2012: 9, 12)

However, there are two related instances at the beginning of the text where Clifford decides to make significant alterations that cannot be explained in the terms discussed thus far, as they politicise the outcome in a way that it refers to the

contemporary situation of Scotland (and the UK) more directly. In the original work, the Albas' old, long-time housekeeper named Poncia describes Bernarda to a younger servant as a 'tyrant of all those around her' [*Tirana de todos los que la rodean.*], and later in the same conversation, explains that Bernarda 'does not want to be seen in her dominion' [*Ella no quiere que la vean en su dominio*]. (Lorca 2005: 6) The expressions 'tyrant' and 'dominion' would certainly not sound odd or particularly Spanish for a Scottish audience, still, Clifford changes them, so in her version, these lines become 'She's like an empress. She who must be obeyed,' and 'It's her little empire, and she doesn't want anyone else to see it.' (Lorca 2012: 4, 5) The repeated use of the word-root 'empire' is striking as it is missing from the original, but it definitely suits the Thatcherite context of neo-colonialism, which Clifford had successfully examined in her 1985 play *Losing Venice*, too. Contrary to tyrant, 'empress' is gendered with reference to both current politics and Victorian imperialism, whereas one can read 'little empire' as a sarcastic reference to the UK. Unlike the nearest cultural equivalents discussed earlier, this alteration is highly political and introduces external elements from a different semantic web into Lorca's world, establishing direct connection to the dynamics of the present. The place of this intrusion in an otherwise precise and only quietly political translation is also significant, as it happens in a conversation meant to anticipate immediately Bernarda's entrance, so it contributes to directing the audience's attention towards specific characteristics of the protagonist, among them her potential resemblance to British empresses, past and present.

Even though the Royal Lyceum production that Clifford's translation was commissioned for had a very short run and little success, her text has received belated recognition as in 2012, Nick Hern Books published it in their Drama Classics series. (In 2016, they republished it in a collected volume with her other Lorca-translations, *Yerma* and *Blood Wedding*.) The other, radically different version of *The House of Bernarda Alba* to be analysed here, Rona Munro's 2009 Glasgow-set rewriting for the National Theatre of Scotland, had an equally short run and scholars have found her approach problematic: Corbett describes it as 'an awkward amalgam of Mafia drama, Spanish lyricism and home-knit soap opera' (2011: 106) and for Brown it 'failed as a concept to work.' (2013: 237) Independently of the overall theatrical effect of the outcome, however, Munro's choices inform us about the politics of language in Scottish drama translations in the late 2000s. Let us examine how Munro's domestication strategies follow the Scottish patterns discussed earlier, how she treats otherness in her version of Lorca, and then analyse to what extent Scottish politics penetrate her text.

Clifford's fertile engagement with Spanish drama may well be unequalled among Scotland's playwrights, but Aberdeen-born Munro, whose decades-spanning career includes major canonical plays such as *Bold Girls* (1990), *Iron* (2002) and *The James Plays* (2014), has produced two different versions of *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Her very first attempt at translating a foreign play (based on literal translations) was in fact Lorca's classic in 1999, for Salisbury-based Shared Experience Theatre Company. Michael Billington characterises the production as 'much more overtly political than Nuria Espert's famous 80s revival' (1999 online), and mentions the controversial subtext of 'thwarted incestuous passion' also supported by Munro's version, which Paul McDermid consequently describes as 'riddled with contradictions, falling wide of the original mark of the poet's text' (2007: 177). Ten years later and based on this experience, Munro was commissioned to update *The House of Bernarda Alba* to the twenty-first century by the National Theatre of Scotland, at that time a very young but already game-changing institution with *HOME* (2006) and *Black Watch* (2006) as their signature productions. From its first year on, the NTS has encouraged translation and international cooperation, and when Munro was commissioned, some other long-established playwrights had already produced versions of European drama classics for the institution. (Between 2006 and 2009, the NTS staged Stindberg's *Miss Julie* by Zinnie Harris, Schiller's *Mary Stuart* and Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by David Harrower, Euripides's *The Bacchae* by David Greig and Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* by Colin Teevan.) There is of course diversity in these playwrights' approaches to translation but, in general, Corbett suggests that they 'found the tension between foreign and domestic difficult to negotiate.' (2011: 105)

Munro's case is further complicated as her commission directly included updating Lorca, that is, domesticating the play, so the range of her possible strategies was limited. As a result of her previous work with the text, Munro knew the dynamics of *The House of Bernarda Alba* and how audiences may react to it, and she believed that bringing it to contemporary Scotland would increase engagement. As she writes in her introduction,

I felt a lot of the play's original shocking power had been diluted by time. We could observe the repressed world of Bernarda and her daughters, but it wasn't our world, we were just voyeurs on the past. We could appreciate the absolute taboo of an unmarried woman letting a man put his fingers on her skin through the bars of a window...but there were no bars on our windows, and plenty of naked skin on view anywhere you cared to look. We understood, but we couldn't feel it as Lorca's intended

audience would have done. [...] I wanted it to be about us and about now.
(2009: 4)

As a consequence, Munro erases all references to Spain and rural Spanish culture (the country is mentioned only once, as a holiday destination) and sets out to find 'a realistic equivalent for all the events and the emotion in the play without diluting their power.' (2009: 4) As she reimagines Bernarda Alba as Bernie, the widow of an executed gangster from Glasgow's East End, it is evident that much of the physical, cultural and linguistic framework has to be modified substantially to suit Munro's radically different concept. Some of these changes, such as the endless pouring rain, can be perceived as comic if one reads them with the source text in mind, but since they give the impression that the Scottish version is a parody, they work against Munro's aspirations to rewrite the play as a contemporary tragedy.

The East End mafia setting offers some equivalents that Munro uses resourcefully. She substitutes the rural soundscape of church bells, animals and loud villagers with other noises (police car and ambulance sirens, Rottweilers, night club) that are organic to the city context and fulfil an important function in the development of the tragedy. The aggressive, intruding omnipresence of the press isolates the Alba family from the outside world, although television and the girls' mobile phones dissolve the claustrophobic anxieties of historic Andalusia. As mentioned above, a key question to resolve was the treatment of taboos regarding sexuality and, at the end of Scene Three, the hooligans' bashing of a gay wedding reception can be regarded as a functional equivalent of the hate crime in the original (there, it is against an unmarried girl giving birth). However, the overall concept of representing love instead of sexuality as the object of Bernie's hate and oppression is less convincing and, on the level of language, this implies the substitution of the tension of Lorca's cryptic lines about sexuality with teenage talk about love, which moves the text towards the terrain of melodrama rather than canonical tragedy. Perhaps the most striking divergence is the construction of Bernie's character, who acquires some motherly features that are absent from the original title character:

BERNIE: What is it? (*Taking it.*) Turkish delight?

ADIE: Princess sweeties.

MARTY: What?

BERNIE: That's what me and Adie used to call it, when she was wee. [...]
Oh Adie... (*She is completely thrown, disarmed.*) Well, we've been all
forgetting the old times, haven't we? (2009: 67)

In accordance with this, the end scene stages a broken, regretful mother's lament to the press rather than a satanic oppressor retaking the house and silencing her remaining daughters so that, once again, the 2009 play ventures far beyond the realm of Lorca's tragedy.

The politics of Munro's version rely on the language alone, as she omits direct or indirect references to the immediate context of the play such as the global recession or on the domestic level, the first-ever Scottish National Party-government led by Alex Salmond, with an independence referendum on their agenda. As a result, the political subtext is connected to language within the broader picture of the National Theatre of Scotland's dramaturgical practices and to Munro's domestication strategies. The institution was still in the initial exploratory phase of its trajectory and, due to its innovative, wall-less concept, the productions of this era were expected to examine or defy the three concepts in its name: nation, Scotland and theatre. (Hence the abundance of site-specific performances, the revival of recent Scottish plays, the commission of new versions of classics and new work in novel themes, tone or style.) Thus, the question of what a national theatre could be in the new millennium was central to the agenda of the NTS. Munro's *The House of Bernarda Alba* can be analysed within this project of exploration and transgression of limits. Naturally, she was expected to adopt a different approach to previous translators of the play in the UK (herself included) and, in the Scottish context, her take on domestication, as it has been pointed out in the introduction, can be understood as resistance to anglicising and the empowerment of cosmopolitanism and diversity. Corbett describes the language Munro uses as 'colloquial English laced with occasional Scots terms'; as a consequence, her output resembles the original as the Spanish text of *The House of Bernarda Alba* is mainly written in a standard variety of Spanish with generically rural expressions, and the specifically Andalusian details are rare. (2011: 105) Of course, it would be far-fetched to relate Munro's de-anglicising version with the SNP's aspirations for independence, but it definitely finds resonance with the NTS's explorations of what a new national venture could be and what it could mean to Scottish audiences, thus the politics of institutionalised arts are strongly present as Munro's subtext.

In conclusion, Clifford's 1989 and Munro's 2009 versions of *The House of Bernarda Alba* are both defined by their treatment of the striking otherness of Lorca's world, and their strategies to adapt it for Scottish audiences are embedded into a broader framework of politics. For Clifford, oppression becomes an evident link between the rural Andalusia of the 1930s and the audiences in late-Thatcherite Scotland, so she opts for a politically quiet translation where distancing elements are replaced only when there is another not culturally alien equivalence for them. Her aim is to let the politics of the original play speak to audiences and, except for one strategic inclusion of a reference to contemporary British neo-colonial aspirations, her translation remains philologically precise. On the other hand, Munro operates within the NTS's framework of innovation and her version, which reimagines the plot of *The House of Bernarda Alba* as a Glaswegian mafia drama, excludes references to domestic or world politics. Instead, she explores the politics of institutionalised arts, together with the possibilities and limits of domestication, and it is a conclusion of her endeavour that the elimination of otherness may simultaneously erase other elements belonging to the essence of a play. If one juxtaposes these two versions of Lorca's classic, it is evident that translation is a field as diverse as playwriting in the Scottish context, and in particular that differing domestication practices reveal the complicated nature of the politics of language in theatre.

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Notes.

¹ Plot summary of *The House of Bernarda Alba*: After her husband's funeral, Bernarda Alba is about to impose an eight-year-long utter seclusion on her five daughters as a form of mourning. When the eldest daughter and only heir to Bernarda's husband gets engaged to Pepe el Romano, the most eligible bachelor in the village, it is revealed that Adela the youngest sister sees him regularly. Enraged, Bernarda tries to shoot Pepe, and Adela, who thinks him dead, hangs herself. The play ends with Bernarda imposing silence on her household she now has under control again.

² Scotland's most prolific post-war drama translator who produced more than seventy translations from ten different languages throughout his decades-long career as the dramaturg of Glasgow's Citizens Theatre. (Reid 2013:54)