The Translation of Shakespeare

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Résumé: L'écriture dramatique de William Shakespeare a reçu diachroniquement des fonctions culturelle uniques, vue la multitude d'études et de traductions de son œuvre. Notre recherche se propose une évaluation de son importance culturelle, de même que les effets multiples que son œuvre a eus sur le plan international dans le processus de formation des identités culturelles, littéraires et des idéologies partout dans le monde. Notre premier objectif est de donner une image globale sur tout le domaine qui traite ces aspects et les pratiques historiques de la traduction de Shakespeare.

Mots-clés : traduction, œuvre dramatique, histoire, linguistique, néoclassicisme, culture, traditions littéraires.

There are many more publications on the translation of Shakespeare than of any other author in the world and we believe the main reason to be related more to the unique cultural functions that Shakespeare's writings have had through the centuries, than to the intrinsic difficulties involved in translating them.

The cultural importance of the Shakespearean translation can be assessed in both quantitative and qualitative terms; quantitatively speaking, we consider the sheer number of translations, adaptations, etc. (Shakespeare being unquestionably among the most widely translated writers and most frequently performed playwrights in world literature); qualitatively speaking, we would have to refer to the multiple effects Shakespeare's work has had internationally in the process of shaping cultural identities, ideologies, linguistic and literary traditions, both in the West and beyond.

The worldwide cultural importance of Shakespearean rewritings is indeed confirmed by the plethora of publications devoted to the subject (see

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recent bibliographies such as Paul/Schultze 1991 or Blinn 1993). It is further attested by the fact that many translation scholars have elected to test their views against the case of Shakespeare translation, using it as a touchstone for the relevance and validity of their theoretical constructions. It is, however, useful to be aware of the intrinsic differences between all these critical writings, each having been researched and produced with a certain public and purpose in mind, and consciously or unconsciously incorporating certain theoretical presuppositions or even value judgements and ideological positions.

1. Attitudes in Shakespearean translations

Many studies of Shakespearean translation have been normative in that their perception of the translations is determined by a predefined concept of what translation is or should be. This normative stance shows most clearly in explicitly prescriptive statements of the kind 'how to translate Shakespeare for the stage'. But it often manifests itself much more subtly, for instance in discussions of the so-called untranslatability of Shakespeare's work or in attempts to draw the borderline between adaptation and translation (with both types of discussion logically presupposing a definition of what 'real' translation or 'good' translation is), or in the many historical accounts describing the development of Shakespearean translation in terms of a 'progress' or 'growth' from the crudely disrespectful first attempts to the scholarly accuracy of contemporary translations (usually such accounts frown upon, or even pass over those versions which supposedly caused a 'stagnation' or a 'relapse' in the process).

While it is quite natural and legitimate for people to have strong views about Shakespeare or about translation, the historically oriented scholar will gain from the insight that people in different circumstances may have, or may have had compelling reasons for holding different views. Until recently the neoclassical tradition in Shakespeare translation was generally either ignored or treated with disdain.

In the opposite direction, one sometimes hears pleas for more 'creative' translations of Shakespeare, showing a less submissive attitude and a greater concern for contemporary relevance and performability. Such pleas often come from people with an institutional background in the theatre; their commitment to revitalising Shakespeare for the modern stage implies a rejection of the 'museum theatre' they feel is the outcome of philological orthodoxy in translation. This attitude typically surfaces when the translators in question hold a canonised position in the target literature or theatre, which is taken to entitle them to the privilege of a more 'personal' response to Shakespeare. Calls for free and adaptive—even disruptiveor subversive—forms of Shakespeare translation are now increasingly forthcoming from theorists and practitioners with a postcolonial agenda; motives for this kind of approach derive from a highly politicised poetics, which promotes linguistic and textual hybridity and plurality as a form of resistance to English cultural hegemony. For whatever aesthetically or politically motivated reasons, scholars of Shakespearean

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translation may decide to take a specific position in such debates, perhaps drawing strength from the widespread post-modern conviction that neutral or value-free historical description is beyond our epistemological reach anyway. Descriptively oriented scholars, on the other hand, will argue that any such engagement ends up muddling the discussion of what should remain the basic issues to the academic study of translation: what kinds of translations and rewritings were made, by whom, for whom, why, and with what effect?

2. Problems in translating Shakespeare

The range of technical problems that the translator of Shakespeare may be faced with is quite formidable, including as they do the many textual cruxes, the obscure cultural allusions, Shakespeare's archaisms and daring neologisms, his contrastive use of words of Anglo-Saxon and Romance origin, his use of homely images, of mixed metaphors and of iterative imagery, the repetitions of thematic key words, the personifications (which in some languages may lead to contradictions between natural sex and grammatical gender), Shakespeare's puns, ambiguities and malapropisms, his play with y- and th- forms of address, his elliptical grammar and general compactness of expression, his flexible iambic patterns (not easily reproducible in certain other prosodic systems), the musicality of his verse, the presence of performance-oriented theatrical signs inscribed in the text, and so forth. Real enough though the above-mentioned technical problems may be in many cases, they are not the be-all and end-all of the question of Shakespeare's translation. Moreover, the problems experienced by translators have a relative status insofar as they are always subject to certain prior and hierarchically higher decisions. To take an obvious example, the difficulty of finding an optimal prosodic equivalent for Shakespeare's iambic verse depends on the preliminary choice of a verse translation over a prose translation.

Furthermore, translators of other authors are likely to confirm that none of the potential problems listed above is limited to the case of Shakespeare. Also, it is worth noting that many of the same features have at times disturbed his English-speaking readers and rewriters as well, appearing no less perplexing or unacceptable to them than to the translators.

This last remark is worth developing a little further. Regardless of the question whether Elizabethan English and contemporary English should be regarded as different languages (necessitating modern language 'translations' of the Shakespeare Made Easy kind, which indeed exist and seem to fulfil a real function), it is obvious that any understanding and evaluation of Shakespeare rests on textual, cultural, and ideological codes which are largely independent from the linguistic barrier as such. The operation of these codes therefore tends to confront editors, critics, directors, adapters, and other English-speaking rewriters of Shakespeare with much the same difficulties and dilemmas as those facing the translators abroad. Any comparison of English stage versions or critical editions with translations made abroad will reveal the extent to which the

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factor of linguistic conversion as such needs to be put into perspective. And, by the same token, it will highlight the necessity to stop viewing translation as a purely linguistic process and to regard it instead as a culturally determined intertextual operation showing many intrinsic similarities to other forms of (intralingual, interlingual, intersemiotic) rewriting.

It is a well-established fact that, ever since the beginning of the Shakespearian translations, it was usually preferred to start from the current critical editions of Shakespeare's texts rather than from the original quartos and folios. This means that many translations somewhat belatedly reflect trends in English text editing. For example, twentieth-century editions such as the Arden Shakespeare or John Dover Wilson's New Cambridge Shakespeare have certainly been instrumental in the translators' growing awareness of certain subtleties of Shakespeare's verbal textures (wordplay, ambiguity, imagery, and the like). In fact, the dependence of translations on critical editions prompts certain fundamental questions about the identity and stability of the source texts insofar as the changing editorial and critical traditions continue to interpose themselves between the elusive Elizabethan Shakespeare and his translator. Very often it turns out that translators have not (only) used English editions of the original, but (also) intermediate translations in their own or even another language. This phenomenon is usually called indirect translation or second-hand translation. Several translators of Shakespeare have actually been known to possess little or no English. Far from being a mere curiosity, in certain situations, including eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, indirect translation of Shakespeare was the rule rather than the exception. In the days of the neoclassical hegemony Shakespeare was imported into Europe and beyond largely via France. For example, the late eighteenth-century neoclassical versions by Jean-François Ducis were further translated into Dutch, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish; the incomplete prose translations by Pierre-Antoine de La Place (1746- 49) and the more source-oriented prose versions of all the plays by Pierre Le Tourneur (1776-83), too, found readers and rewriters all over Europe.

3. The cultural and political paradigm

It is a common place of dramatic history that Shakespeare's work presents a blend of Greco-Roman and popular vernacular elements. This underlies Shakespeare's ambivalent relationship to later neoclassical poetics, many of whose principles he flouted to the point of exasperating its supporters: witness Shakespeare's juxtaposition of high tragedy with broad farce and of prose with verse, his ignorance of social decorum, his disrespect for the unities of place, time and action, the bloodshed and spectacular effects on stage, the indecencies, the wordplay, the undisciplined imagery and verbal obscurity, and so on. This incompatibility with neoclassical poetics hardly mattered in the first stage of Shakespeare's reception in Europe. During Shakespeare's lifetime and the next few decades, the English 'strolling players' brought simplified stage

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versions of Shakespeare to the Continent, first in English with strong dependence on body language and spectacular stage action and later followed by translations. These players largely operated outside the official theatrical and literary circuits. Shakespeare's name gradually began to emerge in canonized European culture, not least via mentions in translated English spectatorial magazines and novels (for example by Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding) and through Voltaire's widely influential criticism (for instance in his *Lettres philosophiques*, 1734). This incipient interest in Shakespeare's work led to the earliest published translations, including those by Pierre-Antoine de La Place in France and C.W. von Borck's German version of Julius Caesar (1741), and was further encouraged by them.

However, growing familiarity with Shakespeare's work also brought home the extent of its unacceptability by neoclassical standards, barring the way to the prestigious theatres except in strongly adapted versions, and leading to fierce controversy between detractors and defenders of Shakespeare, who posthumously became the standard-bearer of the anticlassical campaign. Many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics and translators used his works as a testing ground for literary and theatrical experimentation, often aligning them with other innovating trends or genres of English provenance, including non-dramatic ones such as the gothic novel, Ossianic poetry, or the historical novel.

Similarly, many European writers in non-dramatic genres appealed to the authority of the Shakespearean model and adapted it for their own purposes; this phenomenon can even be observed in the non-verbal arts. Clearly, what was being challenged in Shakespeare's name was not just a particular concept of the tragedy, but the entire genre-system, indeed the whole cultural and political paradigm of neoclassicism which the tragedy epitomised as its most respectable genre.

In any case, the so-called 'real' Shakespeare that the (pre-)romantics tried or pretended to resurrect remained above all a writer of anthology pieces and closet dramas: the free neoclassical rewritings of the eighteenth-century continued to dominate the stage until well into the next century. The opposition between Shakespearean and French neoclassical poetics was clearly a very effective force. Among other things, it helps us understand why the reception of Shakespeare remained largely restricted to some of his tragedies for a long time, entailing the partial exclusion of the comedies, the histories and even more the non-dramatic works. Translations of the Sonnets, for instance, systematically appeared much later and often have to be ascribed to an interest in their presumed autobiographical content.

Even so, one should resist the temptation to reduce the opposition between Shakespeare and neoclassicism to a radical or static polarity and so overlook the particulars of each concrete situation. First, those who used Shakespeare to liberate their culture from French rule by trying to create a truly national theatre, literature, or even language, were acting in their own interest and not in Shakespeare's. Almost inevitably this meant that the critics' and

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translators' versions of Shakespeare were selective and biased in accordance with prevailing tastes and aspirations. For example, in the German context Shakespeare really became a pawn in the strategies of the promoters of the domestic tragedy, the Sturm und Drang movement, the closet drama, the notion of popular poetry, the Weimar production style, and so forth. Even the celebrated Schlegel-Tieck translations, which pioneered the view of Shakespeare's poetry being organic and therefore requiring full translation of forms as well as meanings, are no exception to this rule insofar as they prove strongly tributary to the ruling stylistic conventions of the Goethe era.

Second, neoclassical rewriters such as Voltaire or Ducis were not the arch-conservatives they are usually made out to be: the truth is that they were using Shakespeare to renew the classical tragedy from within by borrowing Shakespearean elements such as from within movement and spectacle and by adding elements of the bourgeois drame.

Third, in many nations Shakespeare also catered for expanding middle-class audiences in popular theatres which could more safely ignore the conventions of high neoclassical tragedy and welcome a variety of adaptations (such as comedies, prose versions, operatic versions, parodies, melodrama and vaudeville), whose success paradoxically favoured the anticlassical striving for the 'authentic' Shakespeare by undercutting the status of neoclassical poetics.

4. Post-romantic translation

It is not possible to dwell on post-romantic Shakespeare translations except in the most general terms. Very broadly speaking, in comparison with the preceding two centuries, post-romantic translation of Shakespeare in Western Europe seems to have been determined somewhat less by trends affecting entire period-codes or genre-codes, and more by the private poetics of individual translators. In different parts of the world, however, Shakespeare still plays an important role in the formation of new cultural identities. Statistics show that after the romantic debates petered out and merged into new aesthetic developments in most cultures, the now secure standing of Shakespeare as a genius has boosted even further the production of new translations. Source-text-oriented translators can now profit from the resources offered by modern scholarship, while successful creative versions also continue to be made. The translation of Shakespeare for film and TV (dubbing, subtitling) has become a major new application, while the presence of Shakespeare on the Internet and in other digital media is undoubtedly in the process of opening up new perspectives for the future. Translations often prove to be longer-lived (on the stage in some cases, in reprints or revised editions in other cases) than the newcomers which allegedly superseded them. Importantly, this often results in the simultaneous coexistence of different forms of Shakespeare translation alongside each other. The co-presence of distinct traditions usually shows clearly in the differentiation between versions for the page and page those destined for the stage, with the latter often more innovating than stage the

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former. Not surprisingly, the heterogeneity of any culture (e.g. in terms of phenomena being artistic or non-artistic, conservative or innovative, highbrow or lowbrow, collective or individual, etc.) will be reflected in the heterogeneity of its critical and translational responses to Shakespeare. This invalidates any simplistic attempt at periodization or at establishing a one-dimensional chronology of Shakespearean translations. A full and systematic account of this extremely complex state of affairs will require much more empirical research, but in return offer invaluable insights into the workings of our post-Renaissance cultures. Post-modernity and the spread of hypertext-related textual practices have recently made it fashionable to dethrone the sacred original and to decentre the notion of translational equivalence. Translation throws overboard its subservience to the original along with its claims of being the original's authentic representation.

Translation thereby asserts its transformative nature and its inherent affinity with other textual modes of intervention in intertextual space (rewriting, reading, adaptation, parody, pastiche, criticism, citation, and so on). If this intellectual climate persists, we may reasonably expect that traditionally orthodox concepts of translating Shakespeare will come under more and more pressure and risk dissolving at least partly in a plurality of rewriting processes.

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