

BOWDLERIZING OR MAXIMIZING? TWO STRATEGIES TO  
RENDER SHAKESPEARE'S SEXUAL PUNS  
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY SPAIN<sup>1</sup>

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In 1883, Ricardo de Miranda, Marqués de Premio Real, addressed a letter to poet and novelist Emilia Pardo Bazán in the newspaper *La Época*.<sup>2</sup> In this letter, Miranda argued Zola's "immoral naturalism" was lacking in English novelists and playwrights, whose works could be read in family, as they were appropriate for people of all ages. Miranda emphasised the great difference in naturalistic styles between Shakespeare and Zola, and subtly blamed the latter for writing "coarse and revolting" novels.<sup>3</sup> In order to prove his point, the Marqués de Premio Real invited Countess Pardo Bazán to review Shakespeare's plays, with the exception of *Titus Andronicus*, a tragedy about whose authorship Miranda was not sure. Four days after the publication of this letter, Pardo Bazán answered the Marqués with another, where she reviewed Shakespeare's texts and showed the extent to which his works were full of a realism that made Zola's pale in comparison. Among the excerpts that she quoted, there is a considerable number of sexual allusions from plays such as *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*, and references to extreme forms of cruelty, such

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as the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*. Pardo Bazán recalls the embarrassment she felt when reading those plays aloud in small meetings, and the many changes she had to improvise in a number of passages to avoid offending the ears of her friends. The Countess concludes her account of Shakespearean realism commenting anybody reading his plays will find "...salt, pepper and even Valencian chilli in them",<sup>4</sup> something Emile Zola would never dare to show in his works.

The idea that Shakespeare was a genius full of coarse and indecent phrases was not uncommon among European scholars throughout the nineteenth century. This was an opinion that had originated a century before, when French neoclassicism made decorum one of the key features of the new playwriting. The tendency towards decorum reached one of its high points in 1818, a year that saw the appearance of Thomas Bowdler's *Family Shakespeare*, an edition that stated in its secondary title that: "[N]othing is added to the original text, but those words and expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family". Bowdler's priggish omissions of Shakespearean bawdy language have made his work an uncomfortable piece of literary censorship, and his surname has been used to coin the verb *to bowdlerize*, which means, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "To expurgate (a book or writing), by omitting or modifying words or passages considered indelicate or offensive".

Spanish critics and scholars were not unaware of neoclassical opinions on Shakespeare. As a matter of fact, the Bard had been receiving regular attacks since the end of the eighteenth century on behalf of his indecent language and non-observance of theatrical decorum. Jesuit Juan Andrés, who published the influential six volumes of *Origen, progresos y estado actual de toda literatura* [*Origins, progress and actual state of all literature*], sentenced that: "Licentiousness and obscenity hardly appear on the Spanish stage, but these constantly echo in the English theatre, where they give raise to virtually no offense in the educated people, but to much pleasure and delight in the masses".<sup>5</sup> Similarly, celebrated playwright Leandro Fernández de Moratín, who deserves credit for being the first in rendering *Hamlet*

from the English original into Spanish, attacked Shakespeare in the prologue of his translation, accusing him of marring a great and intense tragedy by introducing: “[C]oarse dialogues that could only raise a laugh in the rude and drunken populace”.<sup>6</sup> Although these authors maintained their neoclassical views on Shakespeare, subsequent editions of their work saw a significant reduction of their harsher accusations. This was probably due to the circulation of the new Romantic ideas, which began to spread throughout Europe in the nineteenth century. August Wilhelm Schlegel’s opinions on Shakespeare, which appeared in *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* [Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature] (1809-1811), exerted a great influence on European nations, and Spain was no exception. Prominent Spanish figures such as Antonio Alcalá Galiano and José Joaquín de Mora, who had supported Neoclassicism in their first writings, moved to embrace Romanticism, and their new views on Shakespeare contributed to restore the Bard’s image in Spain. In his *Historia de la literatura española, francesa, inglesa e italiana en el siglo XVIII* [History of Spanish, French, English and Italian Literature in the Eighteenth Century], Alcalá Galiano stated that: “[In Elizabethan England] there flourished and excelled one of the greatest men ever known to all ages, probably the first playwright in the world, William Shakespeare, whose glory has not shone as it should until recent times...”.<sup>7</sup> Five years before, José Joaquín de Mora had sentenced: “Nobody will make me believe Shakespeare is a barbarian...”.<sup>8</sup> With influential opinions such as these, Shakespeare began to slowly but inexorably acquire his definitive position in the Spanish dramatic panorama, a position that was ultimately established by the sanction of Spain’s acclaimed scholar Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, who asserted that Shakespeare was the best playwright in the world.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the critics’ favourable views on Shakespeare, by the end of the nineteenth century, the appearance of bawdy language in his plays seems to have posed rather difficult and embarrassing situations for translators, such as Pardo Bazán pointedly remarked in her letter. If the Countess’ high opinion on Shakespeare and her very much advanced

views on social and moral freedom did not prevent her from skipping indecorous excerpts in her readings, what would have become of Shakespeare's sexual puns in previous translations? How would nineteenth-century translators have dealt with the many and often explicit bawdy allusions in the Bard's plays? My aim in this article is to offer a tentative answer to these questions by comparing two rival translations that appeared within less than a year in Spain: Guillermo Macpherson's *Hámlet, príncipe de Dinamarca* (1873) and Jaime Clark's *Hamlet* (1873-1874). The reason to choose *Hamlet* lies in that, as the greatest of Shakespeare's tragedies, it has been a favourite in Spanish translation, and has been continually rendered since its first performance in 1772.<sup>10</sup>

Although the play's main concerns are not as evidently linked to love and sexuality as is the case with *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet* or *Measure for Measure*, *Hamlet* shows a series of indecent puns and obscene play on words that seem more difficult to translate precisely because they appear in Shakespeare's masterpiece. Among these bawdy allusions, Pardo Bazán referred to one that she considered particularly crude: the notorious dialogue between Hamlet and Ophelia in act 3 scene 2. By looking into the translation of this excerpt, I will try to determine if sexual allusions posed a problem to Clark and Macpherson, and if so, what translation strategy they used to render them into Spanish.

After rejecting his mother's invitation to sit by her before *The Mousetrap* begins, Hamlet joins Ophelia and both hold the following conversation:

HAMLET. Lady, shall I lie in your lap?  
 OPHELIA. No, my lord.  
 HAMLET. I mean, my head upon your lap.  
 OPHELIA. Ay, my lord.  
 HAMLET. Do you think I meant country matters?  
 OPHELIA. I think nothing, my lord.  
 HAMLET. That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.  
 (3.2.104-110)

Ophelia's initial refusal makes sense if, instead of taking Hamlet's words literally, we assume the sexual connotations of the verb *to lie* and *lap*.<sup>11</sup> Hamlet would therefore be implying his wish to maintain a sexual relationship with her, an idea Ophelia rejects straightaway. The Prince rephrases his proposal then, and suggests his only intention is to rest his head upon her lap. However, the apparently neutral word *head* may also be read as an equivalent for penis,<sup>12</sup> especially after Hamlet's following reference to "*country matters*". These suggest engaging in sexual intercourse and carry an indecent quibble on country's first syllable (Hibbard 1987:254). Hamlet's final remark, "That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs", overtly refers to the idea of having sex, something that will appear once more in the following dialogue with Ophelia:

OPHELIA. You are keen, my lord, you are keen.

HAMLET. It would cost you a groaning to take off my edge.  
(3.2.233-34)

In this dialogue, Ophelia uses *keen* in its sense of "Intellectually acute, sharpwitted, shrewd,"<sup>13</sup> but Hamlet takes it as if it meant being "sexually sharp-set" (Hibbard 1987:262). This leads him to his next comment, where he suggests that if Ophelia were to satisfy his sharp sexual appetite, she would lose her virginity and would therefore moan in pain.<sup>14</sup>

Shakespeare's meaning is as straightforward as it is obscene, and the presence of sexual puns is likely to pose rather complicated issues for the Spanish translators.

Macpherson renders these two dialogues as follows:

HAML. ¿Me permitiréis, señora, me recline en vuestra falda?  
(*Sentándose a sus pies*)

OFEL. No, señor.

HAML. Digo, reclinar mi cabeza.

OFEL. Sí, señor.

HAML. ¿Pensasteis que quería ofendervos?  
 OFEL. Nada pienso.  
 HAML. Dulce es pensar a los pies de una dama.  
 (Macpherson 1873:66)

The most striking fact about Macpherson's translation is his conscious effort to bowdlerize the original conversation. After Hamlet's first question, where the use of the verb *reclinar* (*to lean*) has less sexual connotations than *to lie*, Macpherson introduces a side note clarifying that the Prince sits at Ophelia's feet. This note effectively removes whatever indecent purpose remained in Hamlet's first question, but leaves the reader thinking why Ophelia would reject such an apparently innocent move, especially when she agrees to it immediately after. This feeling of confusion is further heightened with Hamlet's next question, where the explicit *country matters* have become "Did you think I meant to offend you?" How could have Ophelia felt offended by having the prince sitting at her feet is something the readers may wonder at, for there has been nothing remotely obscene in his conversation. Macpherson concludes this dialogue with a shocking manipulation of the original, for "That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs appears as It is sweet to think at a damsel's feet".

A similar case of the translator's bowdlerization can be found in the rendering of the following dialogue:

OFEL. Qué agudo, qué agudo sois.  
 HAML. Con un suspiro vuestro, pierdo yo mi agudeza.  
 (Macpherson 1873:71)

At Ophelia's apparently innocent "*Qué agudo... sois*" [You are sharp], Hamlet replies "*Con un suspiro vuestro, pierdo yo mi agudeza*" [A sigh of yours, and I loose my sharpness]. In Hamlet's response, Macpherson has blatantly manipulated the original to imply that Hamlet's sharpness, here unmistakably referred to his intellect, becomes muddled when he hears his beloved sighing. Whereas in the original

text Ophelia's groans would be a consequence of Hamlet's sexual desire, in the Spanish version Hamlet would be undone just by hearing one of Ophelia's lovely sighs.

Macpherson's uneasiness towards these sexual puns is as clear as his bowdlerizing strategy. If the expurgation originated in a personal and prudish attitude or in the fear of his nineteenth-century audience rejecting a text with such explicit sexual allusions is certainly difficult to determine. However, the reason behind this manipulation may likely be found in the translator's unwillingness to show Shakespeare using a language so unbecoming the world's best playwright. It is important to notice that Macpherson not only acted as translator, but also as a keen scholar and critic of Shakespeare. In the prologues to his translations, he showed a contradictory attitude towards the English playwright, for while he praised Shakespeare's wit and inventiveness, he still considered there was much in the plays that could not be forgiven—bad language, historical mistakes, bawdy puns, rude scenes, imperfect characters and sordid settings. An opinion, in sum, not so distant from the Neoclassical ideas that previous translators such as Moratín had expressed when rendering *Hamlet*. So, while Macpherson the critic worshipped the genius of Shakespeare, Macpherson the translator saw to it that his fame and reputation remained intact. In order to achieve this purpose, the translator consciously expurgated the original text of all offensive allusions. At a time when in Spain only a few people could read English, and when Shakespeare's originals were hardly found, Macpherson's bowdlerization of Shakespeare went unnoticed, and readers remained unaware their understanding of *Hamlet* had been conditioned by the translator's vision.

Jaime Clark's rendering of the dialogue between Hamlet and Ophelia, published within less than a year from Macpherson's, is strikingly different:

HAMLET. Señora, ¿Puedo reposar en vuestra falda?  
(*Sentándose a los pies de Ofelia*)  
OFELIA. No, señor.

HAMLET. Quiero decir, mi cabeza en vuestra falda.

OFELIA. Sí, señor.

HAMLET. ¿Pensabais acaso que hablaba en sentido rústico?

OFELIA. No pienso nada, señor.

HAMLET. ¡Qué dulce, sin embargo, es el pensamiento de reposar entre las piernas de una doncella!

(Clark 1951:174)

Clark's use of the Spanish verb *reposar* to render *to lie* clearly suggests Hamlet means to sleep on Ophelia's lap. The introduction of a stage indication where Hamlet is made to sit at her feet resembles Macpherson's, but its effect is quite the contrary. Whereas in Macpherson's case the Prince was moving away from Ophelia's lap, in Clark's translation Hamlet consciously approaches the object of his desire. The movement towards Ophelia's legs reinforces the idea of sleeping with the lady, an idea Hamlet had already suggested and which will be soon appearing again. After Ophelia's rejection, Hamlet rewords his sentence so that he can gain some kind of access to her. Clark retains the connotations of "My head upon your lap" rendering it literally as "*Mi cabeza en vuestra falda*", an apparently innocent move Ophelia allows, probably believing the Prince will be satisfied. However, Hamlet is far from satisfied, and pushes the sexual issue further inquiring: "*¿Pensabais acaso que hablaba en sentido rústico?*". This translation closely resembles the original, for *rústico* means *rude* or *coarse* in Spanish, and leaves no doubt as to what is haunting Hamlet's imagination. The Prince's last comment, "*¡Qué dulce, sin embargo, es el pensamiento de reposar entre las piernas de una doncella!*", a word by word translation, openly exposes his wish to have sex with Ophelia.

Literalness as a translation strategy to render sexual puns evidences two crucial facts about Jaime Clark. First, the translator was not burdened by any of the limits, personal or literary, that constrained Macpherson. Second, the translator did not believe Shakespeare's bawdy language dishonoured his plays or his reputation, and consequently, decided to include it in his translation. Clark's admiration



for Shakespeare is therefore of a very different kind than Macpherson's. Whereas the latter could not avoid a sense of shame from pervading his translation, the former paid tribute to the Bard by presenting his plays as faithfully rendered into Spanish as he could manage.

However, being "faithful" to the Bard's language was not Clark's only guiding principle when translating, as the following excerpt highlights:

OFELIA. Sois sutil señor, sois sutil.

HAMLET. Os costaría más de un gemido el embotar mi filo.

(Clark 1951:180)

Whereas in the original text Hamlet implies Ophelia would moan once when losing her virginity ("It would cost you a groaning to take off my edge"), in the Spanish translation the implication is that she would be groaning repeatedly until the Prince's sexual desire was satisfied. Clark achieves this reading by purposely changing *a groaning* into "*más de un gemido*" (more than one groan), thus effectively maximizing the sexual content of Hamlet's words.

Clark's manipulation of the original is amazing and unexpected. To find evidence of a translator fuelling the sexual content of certain bawdy puns by introducing new elements that do not appear in the original is as rare as hard to account for.<sup>15</sup> Whether Clark's maximizing strategy was born out of a very personal and conscious decision, or motivated by a desire to clarify the text to the utmost, is something that can only be guessed at. However, I believe the most likely hypothesis is that Clark's maximization was a reaction against previous censorship of the original. In the brief introduction to his translations, Clark acknowledges he has consulted several editions and adaptations of Shakespeare. Therefore, it is highly probable he had read Macpherson's and Moratín's versions of *Hamlet*, two translations in which sexual puns are remarkably bowdlerized. In this way, Clark would be using translation as a double-edged weapon—on the one hand, he would be offering the real uncensored Shakespeare to Spanish readers, whereas

on the other, he would be reacting against previously unfaithful and mutilated translations.

Be that as it may, the conclusion to be obtained from this analysis is that the nineteenth-century translators selected had a very particular conception of their translating activity. Both Macpherson and Clark understood translation as a flexible task that granted them permission to rewrite the Shakespearean text attending to personal, literary or historical factors. Manipulating the original, an idea that would be considered anathema nowadays, was not uncommon for these two translators, and although further research into their renderings should be done, it is certainly disturbing to find so important manipulations in such a brief dialogue between Hamlet and Ophelia. If the tendency towards bowdlerization in Macpherson and towards maximization in Clark is as general and constant in the rest of their translations, we may have to ponder what kind of Shakespeare Spanish audiences have been reading for more than a century.

### Notes

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2. Ricardo de Miranda wrote a free version of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1891.
3. "... el realismo de Zola, o sea el naturalismo inmoral, no existe en las novelas inglesas... lo cual prueba que, si son realistas o materialistas, no son groseras y repugnantes, como muchas de las francesas" (Marqués de Premio Real 1883:n.p.). All translation from Spanish into English is the author's.
4. "[En las obras de Shakespeare] hay sal y pimienta y hasta guindillas valencianas, y otras mil cosas... ante las cuales... se queda Zola tamaño" (Pardo Bazán 1883:294).
5. "La disolución y obscenidad rara vez se ve en el teatro español, pero continuamente resuena en el inglés sin ofensa de las personas cultas y con deleite y aplauso del pueblo" (Andrés 1784:303).

6. "... los diálogos más groseros, capaces sólo de excitar la risa de un populacho vinoso y soez" (Fernández de Moratín 1798:n.p.).
7. "[En la Inglaterra isabelina] floreció y sobresalió uno de los hombres más grandes que se han conocido en aquella edad y en todas, quizá el primer dramático del mundo, Guillermo Shakespeare, cuya gloria no ha relucido como debía hasta estos últimos tiempos..." (Alcalá Galiano 1845:11).
8. "Nadie me hará creer que Shakespeare es un bárbaro..." (Mora 1840:xii).
9. Menéndez y Pelayo, in the Introduction to his *Dramas de Guillermo Shakespeare* (1881:3).
10. Leandro Fernández de Moratín was the first to translate *Hamlet* from the English original in 1798. Ramón de la Cruz's previous version, performed in 1772, had been done from Ducis' French adaptation.
11. For the meaning of to lie as "To lie down, to recline (especially in bed): in reference to sexual intercourse" and lap as "Lap in the ordinary sense, but with an implied localization in the pudend" see Eric Partridge's *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (1996:136 and 132).
12. Partridge (1996:119).
13. OED acute 7b.
14. For edge as "Sexual desire in a man, with especial reference to erection" and groaning as "A woman's cry or groan of pain at losing her virginity", see Partridge (1996:98 and 117).
15. A similar case of maximization of sexual elements can be found in act 3 scene 4, when the King's "damned fingers" (l.173) become "torpes/malditos dedos" (Clark 1951:194) (lecherous/damned fingers, literally).

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