INTRODUCTION
SHAKESPEARE IN TRANSLATION: A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES[1]

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The fact that many shelves could be filled with publications on the translation of the Bible and of Shakespeare (but not of, say, Homer, Cervantes, Racine, or Joyce) must have to do more with the unique cultural functions Shakespeare and the Scriptures have fulfilled through the centuries than with any concern for the intrinsic difficulties involved in translating them. Focusing on Shakespearean translation, we could try to assess its cultural importance in both quantitative and qualitative terms:

- quantitatively speaking, we would have to 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 use of Shakespeare in imperial contexts).

The worldwide cultural importance of Shakespearean rewritings is indeed confirmed by the plethora of publications devoted to the subject (see 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. The main objective of the present essay, then, is to sketch a bird's eye view of the whole field which gives as much attention to such differences at the descriptive level as to the variety which characterises the historical practices of Shakespeare translators.

1. Normative and Descriptive Attitudes

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. But many scholars have apparently felt called upon to abandon their descriptive position in order to come to the Bard's rescue and expose any 'injustice' committed against him. For this reason translations of the target-oriented type have usually found little favour. Especially (and typically) scholars with an institutional background in English Studies have had little patience with them. Thus, 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 disruptive

or 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 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. Technicalities and Beyond

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. To start with, several are specific to particular

language-pairs only. 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 Ovid or Rabelais 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 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.

3. The International Dimension

Translators usually prefer 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.

In a later stage France gradually lost its grip on the European Shakespeare reception as opposition to the neoclassical domination became stronger. With Germany emerging as the champion of anti-classicism, translators increasingly turned to German intermediate translations of a more 'faithful' kind. The translations by Christoph M.

Wieland (1762-66), Johann Joachim Eschenburg (1775-82), Friedrich Ludwig Schröder (e.g. *Hamlet*, 1776), Friedrich Schiller (e.g. *Macbeth*, 1800), and August Wilhelm Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck (1797-1833) began to influence translators elsewhere in Europe either directly, in terms of serving as a textual basis for further translations, or more indirectly as a general model for a viable approach to the task of translating Shakespeare. In this way, international filiations connecting the various so-called national Shakespearean traditions in Europe clearly reflect the shifting power relations among its cultural communities.

The ties between cultural or political entities and the dominant national language spoken there are too easily taken for granted: French is not the only language spoken in France for instance, nor has its use been restricted to it. This insight points to a different aspect of Shakespeare's cosmopolitanism by drawing attention to 'non-translation' as a means of dealing with the language barrier. The status of English, French, and German as a lingua franca in certain areas and at certain times has strongly determined the international spread of Shakespeare's works, leading to bilingualism and biculturalism in theatrical or literary life and so bringing about a complex interplay between different translational traditions. The use of a foreign lingua franca alongside, or as the substitute for, the local vernacular is very often enforced by a politically stronger and/or culturally more prestigious group rather than being the outcome of a free choice. This largely accounts for the immense worldwide success of untranslated Shakespeare, not least in England's (former) colonies and dependencies, where the relative stability of the sacrosanct originals can be used to serve Western imperialism and avert the danger of Shakespeare being appropriated by the local cultures. The very absence of translation can thus become a culturally significant fact worthy of the scholar's closest scrutiny. In a different way and for totally different reasons, the untranslated performances by English visiting troupes in eighteenth-

and nineteenth-century Europe were positively welcomed by (pre-)romantics as a catalyst which could speed up the already existing trend towards a more 'Elizabethan' and 'unadulterated' Shakespeare.

4. Conflict and Acculturation

It is a commonplace 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 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 canonised 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 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 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.

5. Post-romantic Shakespeares

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. This typically occurs in politically sensitive contexts, such as Quebec (Brisset 1990) and the many emergent postcolonial cultures.

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 those destined for the **stage**, with the latter often more innovating than the 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.

Note

1 This text is a revised version of my entry on 'Shakespeare Translation' in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, edited by Mona Baker (London & New York: Routledge, 1998). We are grateful to the publishers for permission to reprint the earlier material.

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