

TRANSLATING SHAKESPEARE FOR THE THEATRE

**Jean-Michel Déprats**  
University of Nanterre  
France

Translate Shakespeare for the theatre? The question is not purely rhetorical. In his *Memoires*, Jean Vilar, speaking of his work as an actor, raises the question of whether it is even possible to translate dramatic texts:

Macbeth. Whilst learning my part alone at home in the morning, I keep on saying to myself , 'Never again will I perform translated plays, not even those of Shakespeare.' Translations either emasculate the original so that the actors may 'utter' a French which is straightforward, or at least authentic, or force us to chew up and spit out a stodgy French, weighed down by the burden of the English. My friend Curtis, the translator, can't help it. Remaining faithful to the original text makes the French prose heavy, but to stray from the original is a crime. So what can we do? (131)

This dilemma, so accurately put into words by Vilar, brings us to the question: when translating a Shakespeare play for performance,

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must we incorporate into our work aims which curtail the usual demands of translation? What is specific about translating for the theatre? Or rather, what demands must a French translation of a dramatic text meet if it is to make performance possible?

Shakespeare's text is dramatic in the sense, firstly, that it demands to be **spoken**, that it is animated by breath, scansion and rhythm. To translate Shakespeare for the theatre is therefore, first and foremost, to be able to hear voices speaking. As the rules imposed upon his work are numerous and often contradictory, the translator of plays has just one guide to lead him through the maze of constraints: the sound of a voice, whose inflexions he seeks to bring out. A voice, a diction, a breath, which draw him towards a particular word or melody, or a particular word order. The rhythmic impetus, whether expansive or concise, smooth-flowing or uneven, constitutes the music of each translation, its internal poetry. Without this music, the translation is nothing but a string of lifeless words, accurate perhaps, but devoid of necessity and ineffective in performance. And it is precisely this music, Vilar tells us, which is missing in most translations of Shakespeare: "Good dramatic texts are marked by a rhythm. Translators are, in general, incapable of finding that rhythm and bringing it out in their translations. I like to be carried along by the **breath** of a play. Translators' texts do not breathe" (44). Similarly, André Gide, whilst preparing a translation of *Hamlet*, reproached the French translations he had consulted for being "uninterpretable, unbreathable, cacophonous, without rhythm, vigour or life, and at times incomprehensible without sustained attention, which the spectator does not have time for" (8). Numerous comments by directors, playwrights or theatre critics could be added to the above,<sup>1</sup> but all agree on one point: that the translator's main concern should be the language **as it is spoken**. Maurice Gravier comments:

Indeed, theatre translation is about transferring from one language into another a text which was created to be spoken (as opposed to read). The translator must therefore write an

'oral', not a bookish language, and formulate lines that the actor can articulate with ease, even pleasure, which can resonate and come across. (41)

A Shakespeare play is, above all, a text written for mouths, lungs and human breath. Translating it for the stage invites us then to write a language which is both oral and gestic, full of power and life, and which will give the actor strong, precise material to perform. The translator must take into account the physical demands of the actor, and ensure that the verbal fabric is supported by the actions of the body and the modulations of the voice.

Since the question of fidelity has been raised, can we not consider that to respond to the specific nature of a dramatic text, and to its particular purpose, is the highest form of fidelity? A translation which cannot be acted out misunderstands the nature and purpose of Shakespeare's text. It may be precise, inventive and beautifully written, but if it isn't conducive to performance, it remains essentially unfaithful to the original. The reason Shakespeare's plays constitute such precious dramatic material is that they possess that specific quality which defines them as texts for the theatre, are fraught with suggestions concerning the actor's bearing on stage. Shakespeare's texts are entirely geared towards performance. Written by an actor for actors, they are texts where the word order, rhythms and images are above all bearers of action, and where the properties of the verb become acting material. When undertaking the translation of such texts, the task therefore is not to add one more constraint to those already imposed upon translators, but rather to preserve the theatricality and the rhythm embedded in the original text.

Let us take an example. In the first lines of *Love's Labour's Lost*, the King of Navarre describes to his companions his plan for an ideal retreat where they will dedicate themselves solely to the quest for knowledge. Reading the English text aloud, it is clear that the verbal dynamics and the authority of the royal proclamation are upheld by a

powerful rhythm and the strong framework of consonants. In François-Victor Hugo's translation (1:1081), the impetus of the original text, its vigour and clarity are absent, or at least subdued. His wish to allow a detailed understanding of the English text leads to a regrettable lengthening of the sentences which breaks up the play's momentum. Preserving the oral and sonorous impact of the text requires a translation which is more concerned with movement and rhythm than with intellectual understanding. One might object that the notion of rhythm, not easy to define, is a subjective one. However, not only are both audience and actor able to perceive, intuitively and fairly accurately, the presence or absence of rhythm in a play, but if we scan the word groups of a line in French which corresponds to a line in English, the perception of the rhythms therein is given analytical precision. If we look at the translation of the extract from *Love's Labour's Lost* just mentioned:

x x — x — — x x x —

*Que la gloire / que tous / traquent / dans leur vie scans*

(anapaest/ iamb/ trochee/ anapaest), and consequently holds its rhythm more easily than:

— x x — (x) x — x — x x x —

*Puisse la gloire que tous poursuivent dans leur vie*

If we are to avoid drawn out explanations which weaken the taut dramatic structure, the translation must be clear, resolute, kinetic and concise, and must have considerable verbal economy.

As a second example, let us take the first line of Hamlet's outburst against semblance: "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'" (*Hamlet*, Arden edition, 1.2.76). André Gide's version: "Apparence?"

*Eh! non, Madame. Réalité. Qu'ai-je affaire avec le 'paraître'?*" (27), is obviously more 'oral', and conveys greater energy than does Yves Bonnefoy's translation: "*Qui me semble, madame? Oh non: qui est! Je ne sais pas ce que semble signifie!*" (39).

The literal translation I myself propose (30) also contains a more vigorous rhythm, and we can see here that there is a close link between the force of the rhythm and the conciseness of the translation (9 words in English, 10 in my translation, 12 in Gide's, 13 in that of F-V Hugo and 16 in that of Yves Bonnefoy). To quote Maurice Gravier again: "It would be a useful exercise for the translator of plays to count the syllables of a line and force himself to be as brief and lively as the author he is translating" (43). As Michel Grivelet points out: "The purpose of a translation of poetry is not only to communicate a meaning, (...) but also to reproduce an object, a rhythm, a form and a volume" (75). Sticking closely to the construction of the original text, trying to keep the same word order and (as far as we can) the same number of words as there are in English, does not mean attempting to create an impossible imitation. It simply means trying to preserve the dramatic impetus and vocal energy of the original play. Shakespeare wrote for the stage, and the spectator, borne along by the swiftness of both word and action, is more sensitive to form than to content. The perception of rhythms and sounds takes precedence over intellectual comprehension. Or rather, the latter can only come about by way of the former. If we emphasize tenor over vehicle, and favour the denotative use of a language to the detriment of its music and its movement, we only contribute to making a translation difficult to perform. On the other hand, we can see that the demand for theatricality and attention to the poetics of the text are requirements which, far from being contradictory, in fact intersect, or even go hand in hand. So the first aim of any translation written for performance is to preserve the play's theatricality—here meant in the sense of vocal energy.

Now, theatricality does not imply orality alone. Shakespeare's plays are also dramatic in the sense that they call for **stage action**. By

means of precise indications of gesture and movement, or through implicit suggestions of physical bearing, they have the capacity to set the body in motion. For language has a body, and not only in the metaphorical sense. There is, indeed, a gestic quality of the poetic word. In a dramatic text, the actors' movements are present within the verbal fabric itself in the form of hints to guide the actions of the body. Without giving stage directions—which are virtually non-existent in Shakespeare's plays—the spoken text sets up, describes or suggests actions. Every dramatic text demands to be brought to life by the player's body, voice and action. The word pronounced on stage must be deciphered or decoded by the actor's body if it is to be understood by the spectator. That it should be uttered is not enough; the entire body must participate in the act of speaking. And the language of Shakespeare possesses this 'physicality' to the highest degree.

Brecht tells us that:

A language is gestic when it indicates the exact standpoint adopted by the speaker towards others. The phrase 'Pluck out thy right eye if it offend thee' is, from a gestic point of view, less rich than the phrase 'if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out'. In the latter, the eye is shown first, then comes the first part of the phrase, which dearly contains the *gestus* of the conjecture, and finally the second part, like an ambush, a liberating piece of advice. (462)<sup>2</sup>

At the end of his speech about the death of kings, Richard II stresses the fact that a king is as mortal as his subjects, and concludes:

...subjected thus,  
How can you say to me I am a king?  
(*Richard II*, Arden edition, 3. 2. 176-7)

The literal translation:

...ainsi assujetti  
Comment pouvez-vous me dire que je suis roi?

is certainly more gestic, and contains a more precise indication of how the actor should deliver it, than does that of Pierre Leyris:

*Qu'avez-vous à me dire, esclave comme je suis, que je suis  
roi? (121).*

Although this translation is borne by the rhythm of oratory, it is governed by the logic and poetics of written language. Leyris makes no difference between two *gestus* which are clearly separate in the original text. In the former version, on the other hand, the presence of the word *assujetti*<sup>3</sup> suspended at the end of the line, the upholding of the anacoluthon and the syntactical twist, together with the rapid projection of this paradoxical royalty, give the player more analytical and more precise acting material.

These physical potentialities, these kernels of theatricality, are what Brecht calls *gestus*. This *gestus* includes the physical bearing of the actor, his stance in relation to his fellow actors, but also his mental attitude vis-à-vis his lines and the theatrical situation he is in<sup>4</sup>. In a dramatic text meant for performance, as Shakespeare's are, all the properties perceptible in the verse, above and beyond its denotative value, are part of the *gestus*, and hold great significance for the actor. All the formal elements of the text: its stylistics, rhythm, phrasing (cf. my attempt at a mimetic translation of "O that this too, too solid flesh would melt!": "*O si cette trop trop solide chair pouvait fondre*")<sup>5</sup>, its syntactical breaks (as in the example already quoted from *Richard II*), its redundancies and repetitions ("lives" and "live" at the end of line 1 and beginning of line 2 in *Love's Labour's Lost*, 1.1) its metric structures and prosodic patterns, are part of the *gestus*. No dramatic text is as rich in suggestions as to the vocal and corporal approach the actor must adopt. Through rhythms, images and prosody, Shakespeare suggests physical movement and directs the actor's voice and body. Antony,

expressing his rage following the rout of his fleet, employs what J. L. Styan terms “gestic poetry” (53), that is to say poetry which sets the body in motion:

The shirt of Nessus is upon me: teach me,  
Alcides, thou mine ancestor, thy rage;  
Let me lodge Lichas on the horns o’ the moon  
And with those hands that grasp’ d the heaviest club,  
Subdue my worthiest self.  
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, Arden edition, 4.12.43-47)

All the properties perceptible in this verse: alliterations (hushing sounds and sibilants in the first two lines), the melodic curve (rising in the third line, falling in the last two), the auditory texture (heavy sounds in the last two lines), translate physical movement. Antony writhes in pain under the effect of an imaginary burning sensation (lines 1 and 2). He raises his arms to the heavens as though to free himself of his mental and physical torture (line 3), and his arms fall again (lines 4 and 5) as if under the weight of Hercules’ club. There is therefore a virtual inscription of movement in the body of the language that the translator must, of course, take into account.

We must not, however, fall into the trap of interpreting these notions of orality and gestuality in a purely mechanical or restrictive way. Orality is not synonymous with fluidity. The multiplicity and richness of metaphors are the major characteristics of Shakespeare’s plays. “In his work, the images overlap and run into one another” (Gide Foreword ix). Faced with the plethora of images, and in order to allow words to be uttered easily and even to **sound** spoken, many translators of plays (whose work is closer in this respect to adaptation than to translation) have tended to reduce and simplify the imaginary material therein. In their concern for ease they turn Shakespeare’s flourishing landscapes into a neatly-ordered French-style garden. In order to facilitate diction, these translators chop up the rhetorical periods, smooth

over the bumps and pare down the metaphors. In doing so, they alter not only the luxuriance of the poetry, they also change the actor's material, for Shakespeare's dramatic rhetoric is designed more to seize than to be seized. In the dramatic economy of his texts, the abundance of metaphors serves in the first place to tighten the elocutionary spring and increase the energy of the diction. The plays' vigour and dramatic force originate in a virtually ceaseless flow of powerful words, thoughts and images which form constellations and radiate outwards in all directions. Peter Brook speaks of "radiant words", and Jean-Claude Carrière comments:

Shakespeare's long sentences are punctuated as they run their course by radiant words, which suddenly burst open, rich with different meanings, images and perfumes. Each of these words appears like a crossroads in a whirlwind. The word explodes into bright fragments, Shakespeare seizes one of them and pursues it along its path to another radiant word, which in turn vibrates and shines forth light, and so it goes on. (9-10)

Pointing out this construction is acknowledging from the outset the difference between the logic of the French sentence, which is based on linear development, and the prismatic nature of the Shakespearean one. The French sentence can only be fully understood when we reach its end. The Shakespearean sentence opposes this logic in every way. Shakespeare constructed his text so that actor and spectator may be bound together by a constant flow of words. If this dramatic force is to be retained in translation, one is obliged to do at least some violence to the "genius" of the French language and its common usage. In its "classical" definition and practice, French has to meet criteria such as clarity, logic and ease of expression. It is no doubt appropriate to modify these principles when translating Shakespeare. If the text's dynamic force is to be preserved, one cannot take a metaphor contained within

one word and develop it into an entire phrase. One should not conventionalise the violent strangeness of an image out of concern for intellectual understanding. Thus, “the fruitful river in the eye” (*Hamlet*, 1.2.80) seems more accurately translated by “*la prodigue rivière dans l’œil*”, which remains at the core of the metaphor, than by the drawn out explanations we are given in Bonnefoy’s “*fleuves intarissables nés des yeux seuls*”, François-Victor Hugo’s “*ruisseau intarissable qui inonde les yeux*” and Gide’s “*ruissellement des pleurs*”. In all three of these translations, clichés take the place of a much more imagination-sparking metaphor. When one seeks to untangle these webs of images, logic is satisfied but at the cost of the poetic and dramatic flow. A mixed metaphor is better than a prolonged explanation of the original. André Gide said that he preferred to sacrifice the meaning of a phrase to its cipher. Perhaps we should add that when translating Shakespeare into French, one should be trying less to manipulate the existing forms and usual turns of phrase than attempting to create new ones. And this to serve the demands of the original language rather than those of the language we are translating into. The long history of Shakespearean translation can perhaps be summed up by this series of blows dealt out to Cartesian logic and its avatars. Since the classical era, the French language has evolved in such a way as to allow the establishing of forms which were not originally organic but are becoming so. Translation doubtless has an important role to play in this evolution. Nowadays we no longer risk barbarism or an attack on the “genius” of the French language if we translate:

(When), spite of cormorant devouring Time  
 Th’endeavour of this present breath may buy  
 That honour which shall bate his scythe’s keen edge.  
 (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, 1.1.3-6)

by:

*Contre le Temps vorace cormoran  
Puisse aujourd'hui l'effort de notre souffle acheter  
Cet honneur qui mordra le tranchant acéré de sa faux.*

whereas François-Victor Hugo felt obliged to explain:

*En dépit du temps, ce cormoran **qui dévore tout, nous pouvons**, par un effort de **cette éphémère existence, conquérir** un honneur qui emoussera le tranchant acéré de sa faux.*

For my part, I believe we can speak out in favour of a certain use of literalness, despite the widespread idea that it is the opposite of precision. In condemning literalness, one usually calls into question the illusion of capturing a perfect replica of the original text, whereas it in fact flattens it, and causes its meaning and mystery to disappear into thin air. In translations of Shakespeare, however, it seems to me that literalness is better able to preserve the original text's form, which acts like a lightning conductor for the flow of dramatic energy.

Thus, taking theatricality into account does not impose limits upon the usual criteria of translation. There is no contradiction between remaining faithful to the original and writing a translation for the stage. Instead of leading to a distortion or reduction of the text for extra-textual ends, keeping in mind the dramatic dimension of the play in translation means bringing the text back to its palpable materialness. And in doing this our purpose in no way eclipses the necessity for precision and fidelity. On the contrary, it embraces and refines these imperatives, supports and reinforces them. To bear in mind the actor's concrete demands is to see, in our mind's eye, bodies in action, to hear, in our heads, voices which speak to 'the eye that listens' (as opposed to that which reads). It is not to seek to facilitate the actor's physical and vocal undertaking by simplifying the images. The translation of a play for performance must be as oral and gestic as possible, but without reducing

the Shakespearean text, or normalising it through use of more common modes of expression. We can go further, and say that Shakespeare's text suggests an action, but does not dictate one particular action. Neither does it unequivocally determine the actor's bodily movement or vocal inflexions. The text neither tells us everything nor resolves everything. It would therefore be better to under-translate than over-translate, as the relationship between word and action, action and word, is a dialectical and open one. The actor is thus free to bring to life certain potential actions and to leave others lying dormant, and equally free (indeed, often compelled) to bring into play his own physical inventions or to suggest a score of gestic notes through rupture or irony rather than through symbiosis. To say that a text contains kernels of theatricality obviously does not mean that it must be mimed: any attempt to do this would result in the poorest possible kind of gestic rhetoric.

The translation of a dramatic text must therefore remain open- it must allow for performance, but not impose a particular way of acting. It must be invigorated by a rhythm, but again, not impose only one. To translate for the stage is not to distort the text according to what we hope to show or how it'll be acted or who will act it. It is not to anticipate, plan or suggest a particular staging, it is simply to make performance possible. In short, we are less concerned with translating **for** the theatre, an expression which suggests adapting the play to an external end, than with translating **theatre**. It will be clear, then, that the most propitious way to preserve theatricality is, in my eyes, through a well-tempered form of literalness which is concerned with the number and order of the words, and the density of the images. One must preserve the rhetorical and imaginary economy of the play, its system, and stick closely to the original language in all its physical reality. The aim is to provide the actor with material which is all the more refined precisely because it adheres closely to the original text. Seen in this way, it seems clear that in translating Shakespeare, one is not so much seeking an autonomy and singularity of writing in French, as attempting to recapture the initial creative impetus which directs the dramatic word.

## Notes

- 1 René Pruvost quotes remarks by Marcel Pagnol and Jean Anouilh in *Etudes Anglaises*, 12, (2, 1960), 137. For good measure, we could add René and Christine Lalou's declarations of intention (*Ibid.*, 133), and Georgs Brandes' converging opinion on the subject of translations of Ibsen: "What is lost more than anything in a translation of a play is the natural sound of the diction, the colloquial turn of its phrases". G. Brandes, "Henrik Ibsen en France", *Cosmopolis*, (January, 1982). Quoted by Maurice Gravier *op. cit.*, 45.
- 2 The biblical phrase quoted here is from Matthew 5: 29.
- 3 In *assujetti* there is a *sujet*. Leyris' translation destroys the subject/king opposition.
- 4 He makes it clear in the same passage that "the gestus (...) is not a gesticulation. It is a question of general physical bearing, not of using the hands to emphasise or explain what is said".
- 5 As is well known, most editors favour the second Quarto reading, *sallied=sullied*, over the Folio reading, *solid*. I must admit to being convinced by the arguments of Henri Suhamy in his lectures on *Hamlet* (Centre National de Télé-Enseignement, Agrégation et Capes d'Anglais, 1982, p. 18, note 1), who prefers *solid* to *sallied=sullied*.

I personally prefer **solid to sullied** for several reasons: 1) This reading can be taken from the text without any emendation, contrary to **sullied**, which must be guessed out of **sallied**. 2) The poetic antithesis between **solid and melt, thaw and resolve ... into a dew** sounds quite Shakespearian. 3) To assert that flesh is sullied at the very beginning of this speech would amount to jumping to conclusions. 4) Until recently the phrase could not be grammatically correct. The adverbs **too** and **heavy** could not refer directly to past participles. The normal form would be **too much sullied**. As a matter of fact the pirated Quarto of 1601 had **too much griev'd and sallied**. That was perhaps the first version of the text, which Shakespeare changed into the more poetic, less explanatory **too, too, solid**.

Another reason favoured my choice of *solid*. This reading alone allowed for a literal translation where I could follow the phrasing which would best communicate, through a rising intonation pattern, the dejection and desire expressed here by Hamlet to disappear into nothingness. On this point, Philippe Sollers' criticism of

the tendency towards the 'embellishment' characteristic of many 'literary' translations seems particularly relevant:

Gide translates 'too, too solid flesh' by '*chair massive*'... '*Chair massive?* Hamlet? We can both hear and see in the very repetition of **too**, the action of Hamlet literally banging up against the physical wall of his own body.(...)

*Oh, si cette trop, trop solide chair  
pouvait se dissoudre en rosée!*

Another translator, another example: "*The Tempest*... Here things are even more serious... Shakespeare's poetics, his testament ...If Shakespeare wrote 'noises, sounds, sweet airs' (and we are immediately in the world of Dowland, Byrd or Purcell, and the fluid enchantment of the *Fairy Queen*), one should not translate this by '*résonances, accents, suaves mélodies*' instead of, quite simply, by '*bruits, sons, doux airs*'—which indicates a gradation in the musical scale... How can you hope to have a hold over the dream like figures that we are if you don't take the words in their number, in their very nerve and vein, I was going to say in their fragrance?"

Philippe Sollers in *Femmes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1983): 466-7.

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