European Shakespeares

Translating Shakespeare in the Romantic Age

Edited by

Dirk Delabastita and Lieven D'hulst

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Editorial Note

References to Shakespeare's texts throughout are to the Penguin one-volume edition: Harbage, Alfred, general editor. 1969. *William Shakespeare. The Complete Works*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. (Various reprints.) Quotations in languages other than English, French and German (the languages used during the conference) have been systematically translated into English by the author of each article. References are listed in a double bibliography at the end of each paper: Shakespeare editions and translations have been arranged chronologically (first list); other items are presented in alphabetical order (second list).

Introduction

1. Once again "Shakespeare in Europe"?

In the last century or so scholars have shown a most lively interest in the reception of Shakespeare 'abroad', a fact largely accounted for by the pre-eminent position of Shakespeare in world literature. The subject has been dealt with so extensively, that there may actually seem to be little point in taking it up for the umpteenth time. Consider, for instance, the case of the *translations* of Shakespeare's dramatic works. These, so the bibliographies tell us, have been abundantly studied from the textual, contextual, dramatic, cultural, and every other conceivable angle. In fact, a closer look at this variegated critical discourse reveals that several, to some extent even rival disciplines such as literary history, the history of ideas, comparative literature, text linguistics, etc. have tried to lay claim to the Bard, his works and their translations have been used to support a wide spectrum of theories and have accordingly been submitted to the most diverse analytical methods. This has especially been the case since the boom enjoyed by literary studies, drama studies and translation studies from the 1960s onwards.

It is of course hardly astonishing that all these competing disciplines and paradigms have been so keen to put forward the translation of Shakespeare as a yardstick for their relevance. Shakespeare's remarkable capacity for serving the most diverse functions is implied in the positions of critics as wide apart as Ben Jonson ("not of an age, but for all time") and Jan Kott (Shakespeare as "our contemporary"), even though, significantly enough, more often than not the full epistemological and ideological implications of this have escaped being spelled out or weren't even perceived:

> the protean values which subsequent generations of critics have discovered in the texts themselves can be demonstrated to be in large part the projection of their own externally applied values. (Drakakis 1985: 24)

Be that as it may, the observation that Shakespeare's works and their translations have been widely used to lend greater authority and legitimacy to a whole host of theories ultimately reveals that these theories were in need of such support in the first place. In addition, it prompts us into a greater awareness that the very *object* of these theories, in both its formal and material sense, may actually be rather indefinite: are they really about the 'same' Shakespeare? do critics always have the same thing in mind when they use words such as 'translation' or 'stage version'?

For one thing, as philosophers of science have stressed time and again, every decision made by researchers as to which aspect of their object (here: Shakespeare's work and its reception) they want to look into and how to go about it, will necessarily reflect their particular view on the case in hand. For another, there is

now an increasingly wide consensus that even the *objectum materiale* of Shakespeare studies is fundamentally unstable. The word *Shakespeare* proves to be a very elusive metonymy indeed:

i. Shakespeare's works originated within, for, and with the help of his company, while the production process was also strongly influenced by audience feedback. Their authorship is basically collective.

ii. For the same reason the extant textual evidence fails to be complete or even representative in two respects. First, the written script is but a component of the total performance text:

> Scholars who work on these Renaissance texts are like archaeologists confronted with the foundations of a great building. The words may be there, but the notation of spectacle and gesture, the great fabric of the production, is missing. (Hattaway 1987: 17)

Secondly, every written version represents but one step in the ongoing and collaborative process of the successive dramatic productions. Being an actor himself, Shakespeare must have known perfectly well that his scripts would inevitably undergo transformations day after day in this process. In this way, the different extant versions of the plays often embody different stages in the development of the text; text editors have accordingly come to realize the futility of attempting to 'rescue', say, the single 'authentic' *Hamlet* from the different surviving texts.

For these and other reasons we have to conclude that there is no such thing as an 'essential' Shakespeare who can then be 'approached' in different ways that do, or fail to do, 'justice' to the Genius. Every later generation of editors, translators, critics, etc. rewrites or reinvents their own Shakespeare, by making selections from the potentially relevant facts and texts, by filling in what is felt to be missing, and combining everything into an intellectually and morally satisfying story (image, interpretation, evaluation). Along similar lines John Drakakis has argued that

> To assert a monolithic development of Shakespeare criticism after Bradley [...] would be to falsify its history. Indeed, it could well be argued that different priorities and considerations have demanded attention at different times in response to particular, though not always overtly connected, questions. [The different areas of the study of Shakespeare] have encountered each other synchronically at particular historical conjunctures, have individually reverted to positions held at earlier stages of their own history, and have often revealed in oblique ways the effects of external historical pressures. (1985: 9)

This explains why the history of Shakespeare's texts (editions) and of their readings has come to be accepted as belonging to the province of the Shakespearean scholar within English studies: more and more *books about books* about Shakespeare are now indeed appearing on the market. As a corollary of the growing awareness of such problematic issues there has been a tendency in recent years to look back and reflect on research done previously in the field of Shakespeare

translation and reception. Thus, the history of Shakespeare's reception on the Continent is now coupled with a historiographic interest in the different available historical methods (e.g. Klein 1986, Larson 1989), which are compared and, if necessary, subjected to criticism. This new concern can in its turn be perceived as an attempt to meet the need for self-justification referred to above. By the same token, it often appears as a manifestation of the will to overcome the barriers set up by the New Criticism and related traditions, for which the Text was sacrosanct to the extent that it was considered the main object of literary research, and actually seen as existing in a historical vacuum. To take one example: the frequently heard call for a more interdisciplinary kind of approach is largely the outcome of historical projects which explicitly or implicitly foster the ambition of a *comprehensive* coverage of Shakespeare's reception, which should encompass criticism, stage productions, adaptations, etc. next to the translated texts, and which should perhaps even overstep the boundaries of individual national literatures. Thus, Müller-Schwefe's attempt to chart the semiotic transformations of *Hamlet* across various media and cultures - which pays surprisingly little attention to translation (cf. below) - prompts the following reflection:

> Das hier vorgelegte Ergebnis mehrjähriger Studien macht ein umfassendes CORPUS HAMLETICUM sichtbar, das seine unverminderte Vitalität immer wieder neu aus dem Shakespeareschen Grundtext gewinnt. Das zwingt m.E. zu der Folgerung, daß Wissenschaft vom Text ("Philologie"), Theaterwissenschaft, Musikwissenschaft und Medienwissenschaft zusammenarbeiten müssen in dem gemeinsamen Bemühen, dem Verständnis und der Vermittlung des bedeutendsten Dramas der Weltliteratur durch Theater und die anderen Medien zu dienen. (Müller-Schwefe 1987: viii)

Such ambitious attempts to account for Shakespeare's reception in the widest possible sense cannot hope to meet with unqualified approval. In fact, one can at the same time observe an increasing measure of scepticism about the possibility of any such *Gesamtdarstellung* or exhaustive account. This resistance to the idea of a full understanding of all phenomena has clearly thrived in the prevailing post-structuralist climate, which has not failed to have a strong, if somewhat belated, impact on modern Shakespeare studies. The infinite variety of responses to Shakespeare's work throughout the centuries have left a considerable number of researchers doubting the feasibility of a full reconstruction of how the continental Shakespeare was read, performed, translated, etc. (e.g. Steiger 1987).

The need for self-legitimation often causes researchers to occupy fairly extreme positions; in this case, the doubts just referred to have sent the pendulum swinging to the other side, with scholars now tending to focus their attention on rather limited areas of research and seeking to pursue more modest objectives. One aspect of Shakespeare's reception to have fallen victim to this reversal is the complex set of relationships between its textual or literary dimension ('the page') and

its strictly theatrical dimension ('the stage'). A related consequence of this compartmentalization of research interests is that the study of Shakespearean translations has regrettably benefited very little from developments taking place in relevant disciplines such as theatre studies or modern descriptive translation studies. Last but not least, the grey area between disciplines has remained unexplored; think of the relations between translation and other forms of intercultural transfer and interference. Thus, insufficient thought has been given to the particular status and position of *translations* within the global field of the continental Shakespeare; more often than not, the translated texts have remained the Cinderella of the reception process, worth studying only insofar as they document, in a supposedly direct manner, the target culture's beliefs and obsessions, rather than for any intrinsic interest they may have.

The scepticism about any renewed attempt to investigate Shakespeare's translations in a comprehensive European framework remains more than ever justified. What, then, is the ground on which the present enterprise is based? Our starting point is the conviction that, given a particular historical frame (here: the European reception of Shakespeare in the romantic age), we should be able to interrelate more closely than we have been up until now the apparently disconnected hypotheses advanced by the various disciplines concerned with drama translation. This seems feasible with the help of certain relatively new insights into the ways different literatures and cultures interrelate and the role that translations can play in such contacts, conflicts and interactions between cultural systems[1]. This conviction also prompted us to go beyond the cases of the French and German reception of Shakespeare, which usually receive a privileged (and isolated) treatment[2], and to aim to contribute to the study of Shakespeare translations on a truly European scale.

2. The Translational Dimension

It is not by chance that our attention is focused on translation. Translation studies has been a major - if not the most important - catalyst in the recent process of renewal within comparative literature and even within the history of literature as such. Indeed, a growing number of scholars now accept the concept of translation as a process of verbal communication governed by different sets of norms generated by both the source culture (including language and literature) and the target culture, whereby the latter has to be considered the initiator of the process itself. Thus, the research into the interference processes between Shakespeare's theatre and the receiving cultures via translations provides us with a unique opportunity to observe the interplay of the multiple linguistic, literary, ideological, and theatrical factors involved in intersystemic transfer. From this perspective, the central issue

is no longer to what extent translators have been successful in reproducing certain, or all, features of the source text, but rather the significance of the translator's poetics for and within the natural frame in which it emerged, i.e. the target culture. It is therefore imperative not to get stuck in the discussion of certain technical translation difficulties - Shakespeare's wordplay, imagery, blank verse, style levels, etc. - and the ways to overcome these, which have for perhaps the majority of translation critics been the sole topic worth commenting on. These difficulties may in many cases be real enough, but their importance is after all relative. The time has come to regard translated texts as the result of complex decision processes, as selections made from a whole range of possibilities, which derive their historical significance from underlying poetic and cultural systems.

It seems obvious, especially when studying the rediscovery of Shakespeare at the beginning of the romantic era, that one should pay particular attention to the systemic constraints affecting the translators' work, the more so since their importance is often explicitly evidenced in numerous accounts by the translators themselves and contemporary critics[3]. The analysis of such comments can undoubtedly help us in the reconstruction of the norms implemented in the actual translational activity. Yet the attitudes and convictions expressed by translators (e.g. in their prefaces), reviewers, etc. cannot be taken at face value. People are often unaware of the cultural constraints acting on them, or have reasons for being reluctant to acknowledge them. In addition, metatexts on translation often possess certain, perhaps more deliberate, metaphorical and argumentative qualities, which make them all the more interesting as objects for study in their own right, but also less reliable as interpretations of the translational reality they deal with. The study of these various critical statements is therefore to be seen as complementary to a close analysis of the translations themselves, but not as a substitute for it.

We insist on the need to study the complex set of norms that underlie the translations. This must not be mistaken for sheer relativism, nor is it necessarily incompatible with the concern of present-day translators for full (or optimal) translatability. The difference is one of position and perspective, with translators being actively *involved* in the field of competing norms we are merely trying to *describe*; it can certainly not be defined in chronological terms, as if there was in matters of Shakespeare translation somewhere a clear dividing line between an uninformed past and an enlightened present age. In point of fact, the diachronic dimension entails the danger that one might uncritically take for granted that translation conceptions and techniques underwent an all-embracing and chronologically linear evolution during the period under study, i.e. from the neoclassical *belles infidèles* towards more source-oriented versions in the nineteenth century. (This assumption might even deceive us into the dubious conviction that the standard of Shakespeare translation has in fact *improved* over the years, so that, some day in the foreseeable

future, the ultimate translation will appear - even if our understanding of history told us that such a perfect translation can only be the outcome of the felicitous but most unlikely conjunction of a verbal formulation and an intuitive understanding.)

What complicates matters is that the claims of description must not be limited to the question of *verbal* formulation *only*, i.e. to texts, their translations, and various kinds of metatextual statements. In point of fact, some of the most stimulating arguments put forward in this collection bear on the theatrical side of Shakespeare's reception, i.e. on the theatre *as such*. What do we know about the performances, their characteristic features, and their relationship to their 'source texts' (i.e. the scripts), be these originals or translations? As we said earlier, the question how the translation scholar is to deal with this kind of material is still open, as most available descriptive models are designed uniquely for the text and let the researcher down as performance aspects come into play. This state of affairs is hardly surprising: since translation studies made its debut on the academic scene in the 1960s, it has evolved within the limited framework of textual communication in an attempt to solve the problems of linguistic and cultural translatability. Its primary concern has therefore been to establish criteria for the comparative analysis of verbal material in the source and target languages and literatures, and to find possible explanations for the translational behaviour observed, mainly the shifts occurring between source text and target text - a concern which, incidentally, has found support in one of the most common functions of translation, i.e. to act as a kind of replacement for source text communication. As is well-known, the poetics of the theatre performance developed on a totally different basis, which happens to be very inspiring in the present context. It is, indeed, not to be sought first and foremost in some illusory source-systemic context, but within the target culture itself (although knowledge of the 'original' style of production has been known to influence the performance of the translated text). Text-oriented and play-oriented translation studies may reasonably hope to find a valid common methodological basis in a similar target-oriented attitude.

3. Normative and Descriptive Attitudes

As has been suggested, the high hopes of multi-disciplinary research turn out to be thwarted in the reality of contemporary research especially by its fragmentation into different disciplines and subdisciplines - a problem made more acute if not actually caused by the various institutional forces at work in them (e.g. Culler 1988: 24ff). In addition, there seems to be a second major obstacle to a satisfactory description of Shakespeare's reception: the history of the discourse on the translation of Shakespeare makes it painfully clear that the canonized status of Shakespeare in our Western cultures has all too often precluded a detached and purely

descriptive attitude. This problem manifests itself in two opposite tendencies.

On the one hand, a great number of researchers have felt themselves called upon to defend the (imaginary) 'rights' of the Bard against the 'irreverent' translators who dare go beyond a mere linguistic transcoding and opt for cultural, rhetorical, and theatrical transpositions as well. This normative reflex often causes such unwanted rewritings of Shakespeare to be simply ignored in the critical discourse. This fact goes a long way towards explaining why the neoclassical tradition of Shakespeare translations, which (it should be remembered) dominated the European import of Shakespeare in the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries, is in many cases still awaiting a thorough examination. In more extreme cases the translations are discussed only to be openly disparaged. This fate, too, has befallen the neoclassical tradition, with Voltaire and Jean-François Ducis as the main victims. In such forms of discourse the eventful history of the Shakespeare rewritings is actually continued, or re-enacted, rather than explained or even described. This first tendency, which reduces the complex issue of the translation of Shakespeare to the single topic of the maximal reconstruction of the 'Elizabethan Shakespeare', has understandably been predominant among those specialists who have institutional affiliations with the discipline of English studies; typically, it has emerged in initiatives connected with the diverse Shakespeare Associations[4].

On the other hand we must also mention the second, opposite tendency, even though all in all it has had less impact: in certain critical reflections every form of 'slavish' source-oriented copying tends to be rejected in favour of a more 'creative' treatment of the source text which is geared to the taste and conventions of the target audiences. This attitude, too, is to some extent institutionally determined; it often prevails among those critics who are actively involved in the modern theatre and in whose view formal types of correspondence merely result in museum theatre - a stilted production style that will kill off Shakespeare instead of resurrecting him. It is symptomatic in this respect that Hans Rothe presented his target-oriented translations as *der elisabethanische Shakespeare* and that many theatres willingly accepted and defended them, in spite of many protests from the scholars. The search for the allegedly universal 'essence' or 'real intentions' of Shakespeare here presupposes the willingness to sacrifice historically determined aspects of outer form. This second attitude also surfaces when the discourse centres on Shakespeare rewriters who, in their own right, occupy a canonized position in the target culture as an author or director, which somehow entitles them to the privilege of a more 'personal' response to Shakespeare[5].

In this manner, the high status of Shakespeare has led many 'historians' to commit themselves to one or the other position vis-à-vis the different possible ways of translating Shakespeare and to leave behind the maximally detached stance of the neutral observer. One is reminded here of Ulrich Suerbaum's apt observation

on the discourse about German Shakespeare translations:

> Allgemein zeigt die Diskussion eine starke Beimischung an Polemik und Apologie. (1972: 47)

The resulting lack of harmony within the critical discourse, with one critic praising what enrages another, reflects the variety of the Shakespeare translations themselves, whereby (sometimes radically) different kinds of versions tend to exist alongside one another: versions for the closet and versions for the playhouse, or perhaps for both, and in either case prestigious ones next to marginal ones, newly made ones next to surviving older ones, traditional ones next to more innovative ones, and so forth. These versions are usually different because they fulfil different functions within different segments of the target culture; as such they may enter into competition, but also co-exist peacefully in a situation of relative non-contact. It stands to reason that there are systematic correlations between the translations of Shakespeare on the one hand, and broader conflicts and tendencies within the target culture as a whole, on the other; or, put differently, between the series of 'Shakespearean' and the series of 'non-Shakespearean' phenomena within each particular situation. If that is so, it follows that an understanding of this complex interplay depends on the maximally detached position of the historian. By either discouraging or propagating certain methods for translating Shakespeare, or even by tacitly ignoring them or taking them for granted, one participates in the activity of rewriting Shakespeare and becomes part of the object to be investigated; while there is, of course, in itself nothing wrong with such an active involvement, it can hardly be conducive to the researcher's ideal of a maximally neutral and complete understanding.

4. Looking Back and Looking Forward

The thirteen contributions in this volume, tackling as they do several aspects of this search for new comprehensive hypotheses, are structured around three themes[6]:

1. Translations and national literatures;
2. Literary,-cultural, and theatrical traditions taking shape;
3. Shifting poetics of translation.

We should like to present all the following papers as steps towards a new dialogue between the different disciplines that can make a relevant contribution. The basic principles of the research programme outlined in this introductory chapter existed before the Antwerp conference of which this volume is the outcome; they had, in fact, been communicated beforehand to the participants. Yet the various papers, and the subsequent discussions and reports, as well as the continued dialogue with