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Translating Shakespeare: The Bottom Line

The “bottom line” in the title of this paper is of course the end result, the summing up of the pros and cons of translating Shakespeare, and specifically Shakespearean comedy. But it is also my starting point in another sense, namely as the famous line spoken by Quince in Act III of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: “Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated.” The line is often used as a joke in conversation, and often at the cost of translators, inasmuch as it is anything but flattering for their profession. What Quince and his fellow mechanicals see after the translation of Bottom is not their dear, familiar friend, but a hideous, disfigured monster showing unmistakable signs of asininity. No wonder they flee in horror.

Well, it doesn’t always have to be that bad. It *is* possible to translate even Shakespeare successfully. I have been doing so, into Danish, for almost thirty years now, and they haven’t hanged me yet. So what’s the secret?

First of all, one has to bear in mind that a translation is not, and never can be, an exact replica of an original. A translation is a representation of an original; you might even say a kind of portrayal of an original. What we usually hope for in a portrait is truth – it must be true to life, and a Shakespeare translation must be true to the life that is inherent in the text, the life which is best realized on stage. If we talk of Shakespeare’s comedies, a comedy is supposed to be funny, at least part of the time, and there is no better way of killing a joke than having to explain it in a footnote. So, obviously, the translator must find ways of making the text function in the target language more or less as it functions in the source language, something which certainly does not depend on meaning alone.

I will try to explain this through a few examples. Time does not allow very many of them, and I’ll concentrate on certain technicalities which present stumbling blocks for any translator of Shakespearean comedy or indeed Shakespeare’s plays in general.

Part of the message is in fact hidden in the form. The iambic pentameter is a very important vehicle for acting Shakespeare, and I always translate verse as verse and prose as prose, because the form definitely adds something to the characters, it is not mere convention or outdated fashion. If we go back to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, most of it is in pentameter, and a lot of those lines are in fact rhyming couplets.

I won’t go into detail about the well-known problem of the many monosyllabic English words, which means that you need more syllables in Danish, for instance, to convey the same semantic content, and the metre puts no more than eleven syllables per line, at most, at your disposition. Neither will I lament the even more well-known problem that rhyming lines seldom rhyme when directly translated. The very first rhyme in the *Dream* occurs when Hermia professes her love for Lysander:

*By the simplicity of Venus’ doves,*

*By that which knitteth souls and prospers loves*

and the Danish words for “doves” is “duer”, and for “love” “kærlighed”, which can’t even be plural. So I had to change the lines into

“ved kærlighedsgudindens blide due,

ved det, der sætter sjæl og sind i lue,”

which in literal back-translation means “by the gentle dove of the goddess of love, by that which sets soul and mind on fire”, because “lue” means “flame” and rhymes with “due” – and lo and behold, it even produced an unintentional rhyme with Cupid’s “bow” (“bue”) two lines above, a kind of sneaky introduction of the emotional rhyming style.

Why do I sacrifice the more exact equivalents of “that which knitteth souls and prospers loves” for the sake of rhyme? Because the meaning is easy to grasp anyway, and the shift to rhyme marks an increased intensity between the two young lovers. That, in fact, is a more important message than all the specific knitting and prospering.

*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was my very first translation of a Shakespeare play. And with the beginner’s carefree recklessness I did something to it that I have never done again. The *Dream* is rich in metrical devices; the fairies speak sometimes in pentameter, sometimes in doggerel-like lines of four beats, and the “hard-handed men” of Athens play parts of their “most lamentable comedy” of Pyramus and Thisbe in a very artful stanza form with internal rhyme. This apparent freedom of variation led me to give to Puck, and to the pentameter parts of the Pyramus and Thisbe play, a six-foot iambic metre with a caesura in the middle. How clever of me, I thought, because it would give me more space to solve the problem with the monosyllables!

You will probably have recognized this metre already – the Alexandrine, the classical metre of French tragedy. Now what on earth is *that* doing in the middle of a Shakespearean comedy? I didn’t choose it at random, though. This metre has some very special connotations for Danish readers and theatregoers. The story behind it is as follows: The Danish-Norwegian poet and playwright Johan Herman Wessel wrote, in 1772, a generic parody of the French tragedy, which was then very fashionable in Denmark. His play with the title *Love without Stockings* became a huge success, so much that lots of people in his own time and well into the 19th century learnt it virtually by heart and loved to quote from it – Søren Kierkegaard being one of those people – since it was extremely witty and surpassed the translated French tragedies and the Danish imitations of them in terms of literary quality. For a Danish audience, it became impossible to hear this distinctive metre spoken on stage without chuckling; French tragedy was forever deflated in Denmark, and the effect lingered on even into my lifetime. I did read *Love without Stockings* at grammar school, although I’m not quite sure the generations after me are familiar with it, sadly enough.

So, the effect of the Alexandrine in Danish ears is comic rather than tragic, which is what I aimed at. My translation of the *Dream* has been staged several times, and each time I have noted that my metrical trick works well, even though the connection to Wessel may remain subconscious in most of the audience’s minds or blankly non-existing. The fact is that the metre, which may soon became tedious at the slow and solemn speed of tragedy, acquires a kind of vivacity and briskness at the faster pace of comedy. But later in my career I have not given in to this kind of translatorial licence; I feel that, after all, the form in Shakespeare should be respected and not arbitrarily changed, precisely because it carries so much meaning in itself.

The *Dream*, as well as other comedies, presents other problems which definitely call for changes – puns and punning names, for instance. In all of the comedies we find characters with names alluding to something rather than just designating the individuals, and such names must be translated. So how should one translate Nick Bottom’s name?

All of the “rude mechanicals” have names that somehow point to their trades, as many editors have observed. “Quince” has been linked to “quoins” or carpenters’ wedges, and “Snug” may mean close-fitting like the work of a joiner. That’s all very well, but a quince is also a fruit, and snug means comfortable, and these are the meanings that spring to mind first. And a “bottom” is a bottom of thread, appropriate to a weaver, but the word certainly means other things as well.

As chance would have it, this very first Shakespeare translation of mine was commissioned by a Danish theatre which had also hired the British director Richard Digby Day to stage it. I was summoned to a meeting with Digby Day and listened eagerly to his comments and suggestions – this was back in 1985, and I was a Shakespeare lover already, but not as well informed as I hope to be today. When the question of the names came up, and Bottom was mentioned, Digby Day rose from his chair, turned round, said, “Bottom means THIS!” and slapped his own behind very loudly. I will never forget it. So I decided to skip the decent and, to be honest, rather prudish solutions of earlier translators and call Bottom “Rumpe” in Danish, meaning precisely that – backside, behind, or rump. Gone was the allusion to the weavers’ trade, but the gains were greater. The name even allowed me to make a nice little malapropism for him in Act IV, when he wakes up and is bewildered by the dream he has had:

*I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream; it shall be called ‘Bottom’s Dream’, because it hath no bottom …*

In Danish he says, again in literal back-translation: “it shall be called ‘Bottom’s Dream’, because there is no end to how over-bottoming it is …” The word in Danish is “overrumpende”, which is a corruption of “overrumplende”, “surprising”. And the word “end”, Danish “ende” is, by the way, another Danish synonym for backside, behind, or rump.

Likewise, I kept the literal translation of “Quince”, Danish “kvæde” – which also has the benefit of pointing to Quince’s function as the company’s playwright and poet, because as a verb, the word “kvæde” means “to chant” like the bards used to do in times of yore. And Snout, the tinker, was made into “Tryne”, the Danish word for a pig snout; I couldn’t resist giving ham a middle initial in the roll call scene in Act I, so instead of “Tom Snout” he became “Thomas B. Tryne” – which to a Danish audience recalls Thomas B. Thrige, a well-known Danish industrialist who made a fortune from manufacturing heavy machinery. Not bad for a tinker, however false it may be.

In short, I feel convinced that Shakespeare meant these names to be funny rather than subtle hints at professions, and the fact is that the names in my translation often do get a smile when they are pronounced on stage. The combination of acting, physical character and name must be right, of course, but the basis is there. I could add many more names from other comedies and tell you what I have felt obliged to transmogrify them into, but let’s press on to other challenges.

Puns are an essential part of the fun in the comedies – and they occur in most of the tragedies and histories as well. Shakespeare loved the English language and was constantly experimenting with it, testing it, renewing it, and punning is a most transparent way of doing this. Samuel Johnson’s reproachful remark, that a quibble was to Shakespeare “the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it” is unfair, because Shakespeare was no Mark Antony, he didn’t want to rule the world of language, but to discover it.

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* is about a lot of things – Falstaff in love, as demanded by Queen Elizabeth, jealousy, deception, young infatuation and so on – but it is also very much about language. It opens with a punning scene, in which the Welsh parson, Sir Hugh Evans misunderstands the dialogue between Justice Shallow and his “cousin” Slender. The scene comes across as somewhat garbled, perhaps due to scribal errors or typesetters’ mishaps, but clearly enough the punning revolves around the words luces (heraldic word for pikes)/lice, coat (of arms)/coat (to wear) and even cod(fish). Puns are basically made from similarities between words, but alas, all of these words are absolutely un-similar in Danish. What to do?

The trick is to find another axis, another similarity, as close in meaning to the original as possible, but necessarily different. I chose to exploit the similarities between the Danish words “kappe” (coat to wear) and “karpe” (carp, that’s where the fish comes in) and the fact that the Danish word “[et] skjold” (shield, and hence “coat of arms”) is homonymous with “[en] skjold” (stain). Same sound, different gender.

So, when Slender in the original talks about “the dozen white luces in their coat”, and Shallow adds, “It is an old coat”, and Evans answers, “The dozen white louses do become an old coat well,” the Danish version – in back-translation – has Slender talk about “twelve white carps in their shield” and Shallow add, “It is an old shield”, and Evans answer, “You will often see an old stain on a coat.” This is nonsense in English, of course, but it works in Danish and provides the platform for the punning to go on during the next lines.

Now, what is lost and what is found in this translation? The luces, or pikes, are out, in favour of the carps, and the louses, or lice, have been replaced by an admittedly more tolerable stain. And with the luces we lose the connection to the dubious anecdote about Shakespeare’s conflict with Sir Thomas Lucy, who purportedly had him punished for poaching. No great loss, in my opinion. What is retained is the exchange of misunderstandings between the three characters, in a clearer form than the slightly garbled original – this is one of the advantages of translation – and the establishment of their personalities. The pride of Shallow and Slender in their ancestry and their coat of arms is made ridiculous by Evans, who seems to believe that they are just talking about a smelly old cloak. And the quick establishing of characters is far more important than linguistic niceties.

Moreover, Evans’ character is established as a foreigner, a Welshman, because he fails to distinguish between the vowel qualities of “karpe” (with a long a) and “kappe” (with a short one). This is a typical mistake made by non-native speakers of Danish. There are two foreigners in *The Merry Wives*, Evans and the French doctor Caius, and their accents and misunderstandings contribute greatly to the fun. I had no problems whatsoever with the French accent of the doctor; in fact, my greatest concern was that he might come too close to our Prince Consort, who is French, and whose accent is very well known by all Danes.

But Evans posed a problem. Practically nobody in Denmark knows what a Welshman sounds like, and Danish with a Welsh accent is so rare that no one would recognize it. So in the first version of my translation, which was commissioned by The Royal Theatre, I decided – and here’s another confession I have to make – I decided to make him Norwegian instead. A Norwegian accent would certainly ring a bell, and the Danes’ popular notions about Norwegians are not far from those of the English about the Welsh. Pistol’s outburst against Evans in this same first scene: “Ha, thou mountain-foreigner!” would fit a Norwegian perfectly.

However, it did not work. Doctor Caius got all the laughs, and Evans got none. The actor who played him did his best, but somehow it simply wasn’t funny. And when I revised my translation last year, to have it published in the next volume of my Complete Plays of Shakespeare, I decided to change Evans back into a Welshman and make up a kind of artificial Danish-with-a-Welsh-accent, following Shakespeare’s lead in substituting p’s for b’s and t’s for d’s and so on. I don’t know yet whether it will work better on stage, but at least I feel better about it.

Such attempts at localization as my Norwegian Evans will often suggest themselves, and they are often prompted by another aspect of punning – the allusion to commonly known facts. There is a nice example in *Twelfth Night*, Act I, fifth scene, where Malvolio talks very condescendingly of Feste, the fool: “I marvel your ladyship takes delight in such a barren rascal; I saw him put down the other day with an ordinary fool, that has no more brain than a stone.”

At first glance, there is nothing remarkable about that last sentence. Malvolio claims to have seen Feste “put down”, that is, defeated in a contest of wit, by a common and rather unintelligent fool. But if you happen to know that “ordinary” in Early Modern English might also mean “a tavern” (where cheap, ordinary meals were served), and that there was a well-known Elizabethan jester by the name of Stone – then the sentence hints at a second and more specific meaning: Feste has been defeated by a competitor, a stand-up comedian so bad that he has to perform for his supper at a cheap restaurant.

It is very unlikely, of course, that a modern English reader or theatre-goer will catch this sophisticated insult without the help of an annotated edition; the jester Stone is long dead and forgotten, and “ordinary” has lost its culinary meaning. But the allusion will probably not have been lost on an audience in Shakespeare’s own time. And one of the tempting possibilities for a translator is to recreate this kind of subtleties in a way which makes sense to a modern audience – something which not even the best staging of the original text can achieve. I tried. In Danish:

“Jeg så ham blive sat til vægs forleden af en værtshustumpe, dum som en dør og uden en dirk der passer.”

And in back-translation: ”I saw him defeated the other day by a tavern nitwit, stupid as a door and without a picklock that fits.”

Now this really craves an explanation, so I’ll kill the joke and make the footnote. The idiomatic English expression “no more wit than a stone” matches the idiomatic Danish expression “stupid as a door” (“dum som en dør” – maybe some of you will remember the phrase “dead as a doornail” from Dickens). And “picklock” is “dirk” in Danish, while “fits” is “passer”, and together these two words form the name of Dirch Passer, the best-loved Danish comic actor of the twentieth century. What one hears in passing is “uden – Dirch – Passer”, matching “no more – than – Stone”, and giving a fleeting suggestion of Feste being inferior to someone who is inferior to a renowned comedian. It usually takes the audience a second or so to react to this, but they do react!

I have dwelt in such detail on these examples because they so clearly demonstrate the obstacles produced by the relative incompatibility of languages, and the strategies for surmounting them. But of course there is much more to comedy than laughing and much more to translation than cultural nut-cracking.

A translator of Shakespeare must be able to visualize what’s happening on stage, to understand the subtext, and to feel the timing. A translator of Shakespeare must decide for himself or herself what makes the characters tick, even if it may clash later on with the opinions of a stage director (what follows then, is a matter of negotiation!) A translator of Shakespeare must, in brief, respect Shakespeare as a practical man of the theatre *and* a poetic genius, for he is both, at all times. His fools are sad because they understand the other characters so well; his melancholy lovers are funny because they understand so little of themselves; there is never a caricature without compassion, there is never an ideal without a flaw, and all of this must be accommodated in the target language.

Let me give you just two more examples to explain what I mean by this. The first one is short. In the final scene of *Twelfth Night*, as everyone is preparing for the festivities and the weddings which are traditionally part of a happy ending in Shakespeare’s comedies, the only character on stage who is really hurt and humiliated, stripped of his hopes, his illusions and his dignity and left with nothing but resentment, is pompous Malvolio. Yet his exit line is remarkably short and un-pompous: “I’ll be reveng’d on the whole pack of you!” It is a pentameter, but almost a failed one, it is bursting with his anger – and a translation of it should be as short and colloquial. Earlier Danish translations had – again in back translation – “I’ll revenge myself on your whole pack.” I chose a more vernacular variation, which incidentally coincides with the English syntax: “I’ll revenge myself on the whole gang of you!” An actor may of course choose to cover it in pomposity even at his exit, but the translation must make room for the desperate edge to it and make it possible for the actor to exit fuming, or on the verge of tears, or despondent, because the final meaning of this short line depends on how it is spoken on stage.

The second example will be a bit longer, because it is from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a play which is less frequently performed and perhaps not as familiar. Just to refresh your memory: The two young gentlemen, Proteus and Valentine, are each other’s best friends. Proteus loves Julia, Valentine loves no one. Valentine goes to Milan, falls in love with Silvia. Proteus comes to Milan and covets Silvia, too. After many twists and turns they all end up in the same forest at the same time, but Valentine appears only at the moment when Proteus attempts to rape Silvia. After three astoundingly short speeches of outrage (by Valentine), contrition (by Proteus), and magnanimity (by Valentine), Valentine offers Silvia to Proteus as a gift. Julia faints – but comes to again and fights back. And the play goes on for another ninety lines or so, bringing more protagonists on stage and tying the last loose ends of the plot – but reading it, one can’t help feel baffled by the clumsiness of it all. What’s the matter here?

Reading it, one tends to forget that from the moment Valentine enters and interrupts the attempted rape, Silvia does not speak one word. Did Shakespeare simply forget her? Not likely. Or maybe the young male actor playing Silvia was not up to the noble, indignant and faithful speech one would expect from her at this point, so Shakespeare simply cut those lines? Possible, but not very likely either.

The translator, bearing in mind that Silvia is still on stage, faces a most peculiar task here – to translate Silvia’s silence. Of course there must be reactions from her, reactions to Valentine who seems to treat her like a chattel, reactions to Julia who reveals herself as Proteus’ lover disguised as a page, reactions to Thurio, the rival suitor who enters to claim her, reactions to her own father who suddenly accepts her choice of husband. It is as if most of the speeches here are, on another level, directed towards Silvia, hoping for her approval, renouncing her, offering her forgiveness for her filial disobedience; all the other speakers know her and admire her, and the key to solving their Gordian knot of conflicts is what she thinks of them.

It is the only way to make sense of Silvia’s silent presence, and I’ll bet my best quill that Shakespeare knew it. It does not have to change very much, if anything, in the wording of the translation, but all the speeches must take into account this double address, speaking to someone and glancing at Silvia. The translator must not concentrate on the words alone, but think like a dramatist.

Let’s get to the real bottom line, the end result of these and many more deliberations. Is it possible to translate Shakespearean comedy? I say yes. With the right mix of audacity and reverence, you *can* find means to play the wordplay in another field, you *can* link the idiosyncrasies of one culture to the idiosyncrasies of another, and you can even restore or refresh features of the original which for various reasons have become unintelligible. I’d like to quote something that Stanley Wells, of whom I am a great admirer, once wrote:

“A too often repeated cliché about Shakespeare says that his greatness lies “all in the poetry”, and it is true that some of his verbal effects, such as those relying on rhythm, rhyme and wordplay, may be variously untranslatable into other languages. But this is not to say that in the hands of skilful translators, such effects may not be replaceable by a poetry which, inspired by the original and attempting to recreate its linguistic theatricality, is nevertheless native to the language into which the translation is being made. […] It is even possible to argue that translation can improve on Shakespeare; in any case, it does Shakespeare a disservice to suggest that there is no more to his language than a meaningless shimmer of word music.”

Be that as it may, it goes without saying that no translation can ever supplant Shakespeare’s own works as the inexhaustible source which we all return to. But in an age where Shakespeare is becoming the spiritual property of all nations and not just of the English, I think it safe to say that translations can create a rainbow of diversity around the shining light of the Shakespearean canon.