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Untranslatable Poetry? Shakespeare and a Few Others¹

This article will explore some examples that test a tenuous and debatable notion: the idea of “untranslatability.” Since we’re dealing with judgment, reader reaction and evaluation (translations that seem to work, those that don’t, and why), there will necessarily be a large element of subjectivity and reaction to the effect of texts in the discussion, elements which the present writer believes are at the heart of literature. Those who prefer a more theoretical, structural or abstract framework are advised to turn elsewhere.

Most readers have occasionally felt “This is untranslatable!” when encountering a particularly beautiful line of poetry in their own language. An informal survey of participants in a recent conference on Shakespeare in translation confirmed that impression. I think most practicing literary translators—if they’re honest—will admit they react that way, too. It’s the feeling that lies behind Robert Frost’s over-quoted dictum that poetry is what gets lost in translation. Translators who work with poetry constantly strive to prove it wrong, and I am one of them. Yet I confess to having felt just that, often, when reading Shakespeare, Keats, and others in English, and Baudelaire or Verlaine or Mallarmé in French… to name but a few.

Nonetheless, that recent conference of scholars at the University of Massachusetts featured papers about Shakespeare in Japanese, Serbian, Spanish, Chinese and many other languages. And of course Shakespeare was both a dramatist and a poet, probably the most widely translated poet in the world. In any given theater season, more Shakespeare is likely to be performed in Paris (in French, of course) than in New York—to say nothing of performances in the other cities in France. Every French director wants to show how brilliantly and innovatively he or she can stage Shakespeare. But that’s just it: it’s a question of staging, of acting, of timing, of drama. The question I wish to explore here is whether the poetry really gets translated.

One of the most memorable evenings in a theater I’ve ever had was watching the Théâtre du Soleil’s Richard II. The director, Ariane Mnouchkine, used the enormously wide stage of her theater in the Cartoucherie, an old cartridge factory just outside Paris, as a huge, bare setting for this historical tragedy in a performance where every word was belted out clearly (in French translation of course)—so that the dramatic
impact of the debate came through with great force. In fact the struggle
over the nature of kingship and of “language and power” \(^2\) came through
so strongly that the audience was moved in a way I’ve never seen at the
performance of a Shakespeare history play. It was also visually stunning.
There were no props, but when Richard is imprisoned, for example, we
see him almost naked inside a small bamboo cage. The Vietnam War was
a recent memory at the time and the image stayed in our minds.

There was just one part of \textit{Richard II} that did not come through at
all—a passage I’ve always found moving, beautiful and memorable. I was
waiting to hear how it would sound in French. It’s Richard’s speech in
Act 3, Scene 2 after he hears “tidings of calamity,” a report of widespread
revolt against the Crown, and realizes he is losing his power and the
future looks grim. I don’t think the speech was cut in the French per-
formance; it just made no particular impression on me or on my French
companions. Why? Because here what counts is translating \textit{poetry} more
than drama. The other elements which worked so well all depend on
staging, theatrical direction, and, of course, the work of actors. Mnouch-
kine was using her own translation. She’s a great director but not really
known as a literary translator, so one might wonder if other translations
do it better.

Here are the five lines and two dramatic words from Richard’s
speech in \textit{Richard II}, Act 3, Scene 2:

\begin{verbatim}
For God’s sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings;
How some have been deposed; some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed
Some poison’d by their wives: some sleeping kill’d;
All murder’d:
\end{verbatim}

Note the simplicity of the language. Aside from one inversion,
it sounds like Richard talking naturally, not making a speech. After his
humbling invitation to his companions, which seems wrenched from
the depths of his despair (“For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground”),
he simply pours out his intimate, dark thoughts about the tragedy of
kingship. It is this naturalness which accounts for much of the passage’s
strength.

The \textit{19th century} translation by François-Victor Hugo (Victor
Hugo’s nephew) published in 1865, was standard in France for many
years. It is in prose—a bad idea. Moreover, while Shakespeare may be
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ageless, translations age badly and it would be unfair to draw any conclusions about “translatability” from a text produced over a century and a half ago. So let’s look at the translation by Jean-Michel Déprats, who recently translated Shakespeare’s complete theatrical works for the new bilingual edition in the Pléiade, an expensive series of authoritative editions of literary classics put out by Gallimard, the main quality publishing house in France. Like many literary translators, Déprats is an academic. Even in Europe, where translators are paid far better than they are in the United States, it’s hard to earn a living from literary translation alone. He has theatrical experience himself and he has spent a few years in the United States, so in addition to his theatrical and scholarly knowledge, there’s a good chance he really knows the source language—a qualification we often, quite improperly, take for granted. When he was student in the elite École Normale Supérieure, he spent a number of years teaching at Amherst and Mt. Holyoke Colleges. He has written, interestingly, about his own Shakespeare translations. Surely if anyone can render these lines in French, he can! And indeed his work has been highly praised in France. Let’s examine this sample passage:

Pour l’amour de Dieu, asseyons-nous sur la terre,
Et racontons la triste histoire de la mort des rois ;
Certains déposés, d’autres tués à la guerre,
D’autres hantés par les spectres de ceux qu’ils avaient déposés,
D’autres empoisonnés par leurs femmes, d’autres tués dans leur sommeil,
Tous assassinés;

This conveys something of the force of these lines to a French reader or audience, especially the last two words, tous assassinés, with their repeated sibilants. It gets the sense of the passage. But it doesn’t do nearly what the original does in English. For one thing, Asseyons-nous sur la terre is closer to the English “Let us sit on the earth” (or even “on the soil”) than to “Let us sit upon the ground.” Above all, the strength of the first two lines has been lost. “For God’s sake” is ordinary English, a commonplace phrase. Here it’s a simple expression of deep sadness, perhaps an attempt at closer contact with his allies—and of dawning despair. Pour l’amour de Dieu sounds as if the speaker were actually invoking God; “sad stories of the death of kings” has become, retranslating back to English, “the sad story,” for some reason. Further on, “Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed” has become “Some haunted by the ghosts of those they have deposed”—which is certainly more logical (the kings didn’t depose...
ghosts) but much weaker. This latter change is not the translator’s fault: you can’t do it any other way in French. The many preceding translations are certainly no better and often worse.\textsuperscript{5}

It seems to me that the French language, for all its many expressive capabilities, lacks a certain simplicity that our language possesses. And in fact Déprats, who really is a skillful translator, does much better with the more elaborate and rhetorical continuation of that speech, bitterly magnificent as it is.

\begin{quote}
All murdered: for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear’d and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life,
Were brass impregnable, and humour’d thus
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!
\end{quote}

Déprat’s translation:

\begin{quote}
Tous assassinés ; car dans la couronne creuse
Qui ceint les tempes mortelles d’un roi
La Mort tient sa cour, là trône la bouffonne,
Raillant sa dignité, ricanant de sa pompe,
Lui accordant un souffle, une petite scène,
Pour faire le monarque, être craint, et tuer d’un regard,
Lui insufflant une vaine opinion de lui-même,
Comme si cette chair, rempart de notre vie,
Etait une citadelle de bronze ; puis s’étant joué de lui,
Pour finir elle vient et avec une petite épingle
Perce le rempart du château, et adieu roi !
\end{quote}

To the degree that anything can be confirmed in this sort of necessarily subjective judgment, this fine work on a highly constructed, allegorical discourse can be taken as confirmation: unlike the sad simplicity of the beginning of Richard’s speech, this part does not seem “untranslatable” at all. The full rhetorical effect comes through perfectly. On stage it would no doubt be clearer and thus stronger than the original to a mod-
ern audience, since, unlike Shakespeare’s English, it is in modern French.

Shakespeare’s famous lyrical passages fare no better. And in those, it’s not the simplicity of the English that’s at stake nor its rhetorical complexity, but rather the complexity of poetic effect. Take these lines from Lorenzo’s speech in *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 5, Scene 1:

> How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
> Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
> Creep in our ears: soft stillness and the night
> Become the touches of sweet harmony.

Most of the translations of this passage—and there are many—are, not to put too fine a point on it, awful.⁶ Here’s one of the better ones, published in 2000:⁷

> Comme le clair de lune dort doucement sur ce talus!
> Asseyons-nous ici et laissons la musique
> Couler dans nos oreilles. Le doux calme nocturne
> Convient bien aux accents de l’harmonie suave.

This is written in verse, but unlike Shakespeare, it’s in free verse—at best. It almost sounds like prose. It is interesting to note that when the prose translation by François-Victor Hugo was republished in the 1959 Pléiade, the editor, Henri Fluchère, an Elizabethan scholar famous at the time, felt obliged to add a note to the first line—a line identical to the one in the translation quoted above except for the last word. Fluchère’s note informs the reader that the passage is famous in English for its mellifluous musical quality; he then felt obliged to quote that last line, *in English*, in this otherwise monolingual French edition.

A few words about French prosody are necessary here in order to describe what’s going on in Spriet’s translation, quoted above. French doesn’t have a strong tonic accent, as English does, so a “foot” in French meter is not defined by a beat, but a syllable, and certainly not an accented plus one or more unaccented syllables, as in English. And since there are naturally more rhymes in the French language than in English, all French poetry was in rhyme until the late 19th century and much French poetry still is. The cultural equivalent in French of Shakespeare’s unrhymed iambic pentameter—the English “standard meter”—would be rhymed couplets of 12-syllable lines. The rhymed *alexandrin* is the meter
not only of 17th-century French classical theatre, of Racine and Corneille, but also of many modern poets. (This does not necessarily mean that Shakespeare should be translated into rhymed alexandrines in French to match their cultural equivalent. In French-to-English translation, for example, when Racine is translated into blank verse we miss the inexorable click of those couplets, which seems to reinforce the inexorableness of the tragedy unfolding on stage. On the other hand, translating him into rhymed alexandrines—as Richard Wilbur has done quite skillfully—makes him sound dangerously close to Alexander Pope.)

The lack of rhyme in the verses I just quoted is striking. The syllabic count is irregular, especially if we follow the French tradition of pronouncing the mute “e” in poetry, and we’ve lost the rhythmic effect of the lines. The translator has tried to compensate for the loss of that lovely assonance in the first line (“sweet” – “sleeps”) through alliteration, dorg – doucement, but doucement is more like “gently” than “sweet;” and in this translation music will “flow” into our ears, while in Shakespeare it will “creep.”

All in all, we’ve lost the complex effect of the combination of rhythm, sound pattern and meaning in the passage that makes the source text great lyric poetry.

Jean-Michel Déprats’ more recent translation is easy to say on stage and his se glisser (below) is more accurate than Spriets’ couler. Déprats certainly captures the poetic idea of the passage. His French is not devoid of lyricism: the rhyme of the last two lines and the repetition of vowel sound “i” (the French i of course, which sounds something like the English “ee”) work well. But it has the other defects of the Spriet translation described above. Interested readers can try to scan his verses, for example, to see just how irregular they are—and bearing in mind what we said about about “standard meter” in French:

Comme le clair de lune dort doucement sur ce talus !
Asseyons-nous ici, et que les sons de la musique
Se glissent jusqu’à nos oreilles ; ce tranquille silence et la nuit
Conviennent aux accents d’une douce harmonie;8

Good as this translation may be, it is simply not great lyric poetry. One could pick many other examples of Shakespeare’s poetry that are apparently not quite translatable—into French, at least—but the demonstration would quickly grow tiresome. We are tempted to state a provisional conclusion: Shakespeare at his most poetic is untranslatable.
Despite this little demonstration, however, I no longer quite believe that, although I used to. Now I simply think some passages are harder to translate than others, and the others may be waiting for the ideal translator, who may yet appear. (Or may not: nothing is certain in literature and still less in the art of translation.) The account of what might be called a translational conversion experience with a great poem will explain why I was forced to re-examine the instinctive conviction that some poetry is untranslatable. The poem in question was not written by Shakespeare, but by an author English-speaking people quote almost as much as Shakespeare. I used to be convinced that the following poem was obviously among the absolutely untranslatable English lyrics. Here’s the first stanza:

“Will you walk a little faster?” said a whiting to a snail,
“There’s a porpoise close behind us, and he’s treading on my tail.
See how eagerly the lobsters and the turtles all advance!
They are waiting on the shingle—will you come and join the dance?
Will you, won’t you, will you, won’t you, will you join the dance?
Will you, won’t you, will you, won’t you, won’t you join the dance?

The reader will have recognized “The Lobster Quadrille” from Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland.

Obviously untranslatable, or so I thought—until one day, when I was reading a collection of poems interspersed with prose by Louis Aragon (1897-1982) called Le roman inachevé (“The Unfinished Novel”), published in 1956. Aragon wrote some great lyric poems, some of them love poems, some based on the historical situation of France at the time of writing. (There is an interesting coincidence here. One of Aragon’s finest poems is called Richard II Quarante “Richard II, ‘40.” In that poem, the figure of the king dispossessed of his kingdom becomes the poet—and the French, dispossessed of France in June 1940, when the Wehrmacht occupied the country and Pétain abolished the Republic. There is little doubt that Aragon was thinking of Shakespeare’s play, not English history, when he put the figure of Richard II in his poem.) Le Roman inachevé is unusual in that through the poems, one can see an autobiographical account of the poet’s love affair with an Englishwoman
in London. At one point, after writing *Tu me parles de ton enfance ta tête est sur mes genoux*—“You tell me about your childhood, your head is in my lap,” he unexpectedly inserts this bit of poetry. It’s printed in italics, unlike the poems in the rest of the book. Here’s the first stanza:

**Quadrille Des Homards**

Allez un peu plus vite A l’escargot dit le merlan
Un marsouin piétine ma queue Il proteste qu’on est trop lent
Voyez les tortues les homards vivement comme tous avancent
Ils attendent sur le plongeoir Vouslez-vous entrer dans la danse
Voulez-vous ne voulez-vous pas voulez-vous entrer dans la danse

This is, of course, a literal translation of “The Lobster Quadrille.” The metered verses rhyme a-a-b-b-b and they sound perfectly natural in French. There is no forcing of the rhyme, no changing of meaning to fit the rhyme or meter to imitate the English poem, which is also in metered verses rhymed a-a-b-b-b—and then another b. This is almost impossible for a translator to do. Almost: since Aragon did it. The French has the same nice lilting feel to it and the absurd charm of Lewis Carroll comes across perfectly. The rest of the poem is just as good if not better. So the absolutely untranslatable “Lobster Quadrille” was beautifully, perfectly translated into French by a poet who was never known as a literary translator.

One may conclude that when we say “This is untranslatable!” we don’t mean it literally. We really have no idea if it can be translated or not. The exclamation is an impulsive, unexamined expression of pleasure and praise for the work, the artist, and the language and culture that produced the poem.

Perhaps someday the most “untranslatable” lines Shakespeare ever wrote will be perfectly translated—not only for actors on a stage and audiences in a theater, but for readers whose native language is not English, and who love poetry.
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(Endnotes)
1 A different version of this paper was delivered at the Second International Shakespeare Conference, University of Massachusetts/Amherst, September 8, 2015.


3 “Jean-Michel Déprats ou l’art de traduire Shakespeare en comédien,” *Le Monde des Livres*, December 18, 2008. The title says it all: “Jean-Michel Déprats or the Art of Translating Shakespeare as an Actor.” This is a perfectly reasonable approach, but puts the poetic aspect of the text far down in the translator’s priorities.


5 Just one example, in prose again: “Au nom de Dieu, asseyons-nous à terre, et racontons de tristes histoires de morts royales ; disons comment les uns ont été déposés, les autres tués dans la guerre, certains hantés par les fantômes de ceux qu’ils ont déposés, ceux-ci empoisonnés par leurs femmes, ceux-là tués dans leur sommeil, tous assassinés.” (Émile Montegut, Shakespeare, *Oeuvres complètes*, 1869)

6 For example: «Avec quelle douceur le clair de lune dort / Sur ce parterre ! Viens, seyons-nous là tous deux / et que les sons de la musique en nos oreilles / S’insinuent. Le silence et le calme nocturne / Conviennent aux accents d’une douce harmonie» -- Mme Lebrun-Sudry (Les Belles Lettres, 1931). Or, more recently:


9 *Almost* literal: there’s one mistake in the first stanza. Either Aragon didn’t know what “shingle” meant, or he liked the sound of *plongeoir* (which means “diving-board”) to describe where the lobsters and turtles were waiting, so he put it in. After all, he never says it’s a translation.