TRANSLATING SHAKESPEARE FOR THE BRAZILIAN STAGE[1]

MARCIA A. P. MARTINS
PUC-Rio

ABSTRACT: As is widely known, translating Shakespeare for the stage requires different strategies from translating for the page, and must meet the needs and expectations – both overt and covert – of different producers, directors, target audiences and critics. This paper aims to discuss some of these needs and expectations as expressed by some leading directors and critics as well as theatergoers in Brazil. The purpose of such discussion is twofold: (i) to shed some light into the black box of what "works" or does not "work" on the stage, and (ii) to add to translators' resources by gathering data which could help them make the informed choices required.

KEYWORDS: Shakespearean Studies – Translation Studies – Drama translation

As is widely known, translating Shakespeare for the stage requires different strategies from translating for the page, and must meet the needs and expectations – both overt and covert – of different producers, directors, target audiences and critics. Due in part to the fact that Shakespeare has been one of the most staged playwrights around the world since the 18th century, such expectations can vary extremely, both diachronically (according to different acting styles and theatrical conventions) and synchronically (from culture to culture or even within individual cultural systems). Throughout the last four centuries, Shakespeare has

---

[1] In: Tomitch, Lêda M. B., Abrahão, M. Helena V., Daghlian, Carlos, Ristoff, Dilvo. *Literaturas de Língua Inglesa: Visões e Revisões*.1 ed. Florianópolis: Insular, 2005, v.1, p. 475-484.

become a highly prestigious author – a fact which, in a way, has had the effect of investing his work with an elitist aura; however, quite naturally, his language sounds increasingly archaic, as the conventions regarding patterns of speech and syntax have changed and the English lexicon has evolved. Authors who have been awarded a place in supposedly universal canons tend to inspire such respect, even awe, that they end up being considered “too difficult”, even daunting, by average audiences, who may feel somewhat excluded from the author’s universe.

In the Brazilian theatrical scene, directors and critics always mention “fluency”, “naturalness of expression”, “colloquial narrative”, and “performability” as objectives to be accomplished by the translation, as numerous articles and statements produced along the years can attest to. Some of such statements explicitly argue for a break with the tradition of treating Shakespeare’s plays as if they were “museum pieces”. The actor and producer Paulo Autran has said about his 1996 production of Lear (Oliveira, 1996:21) that he specifically wanted to do something new, that would catch the audiences’ attention, rather than something that would strike them as belonging in a museum. Another production, this time of *Measure for Measure* by Arlequins do Teatro, a company from São Paulo, aimed to “retrieve the popular and the poetical aspects of Shakespeare, stressing his comic side without risking vulgarity, but also without the excessive respect of the prim museologist”[1] (as cited in the article “Mosaico de emoções”, published in *O Estado de S. Paulo*, Caderno 2, Oct 3, 1986).

Also aiming at “fluency” and “naturalness of expression”, although leaving aside the analogy with museums and antiquities, director Ron Daniels, when translating *Lear*, sought to “adapt the powerful Shakespearean meter to the musicality of Brazilian Portuguese speech” (Brasil 2000). Translators and directors who strive to bring Shakespearean language closer to ordinary language are praised by some leading Brazilian critics, who tend to disapprove the excesses of some adaptations. According to Paulo Vizioli (1995), critic and translator, there are some adaptations that pretentiously attempt to “carnivalize” and “deconstruct” the text, but end up by disfiguring and often degrading the text.

In general, the theater milieu expresses a wish to “repopularize” Shakespeare, to rescue him from the ivory tower to which he has been committed for the last two hundred years, and

apparently many critics and audiences share this feeling. But what does that imply? How can this goal be accomplished? These questions led quite naturally to the survey reported here, which involved interviewing a number of leading, trend-setting directors and critics, as well as theatergoers, in an attempt to find out what they mean by "naturalness" and other notions. The lack of precision and clarity of such comments is somewhat disturbing, even though most people now tend to agree that there isn't a "right" way to translate or a foolproof recipe for the success of a translation for the stage.[2] But I hope that the data collected and commented on in this paper may eventually add to translators' resources and help them make the informed choices required.

I must also note that I don't intend to discuss in length the complex activity of translating theater texts, but rather to focus solely on the translation for the Brazilian stage of Shakespearean drama. Translating for the theater is an endeavor that involves an awareness of multiple codes, both in and around the written text (Bassnett-McGuire 1985:101). As Susan Bassnett notes, "a theater text exists in a dialectical relationship with the performance of that text" (ibidem, p. 87). There seems to be a consensus among the directors and critics I have interviewed that "certain texts, such as the plays of Shakespeare, for example, are perceived as absolutes and performance is expected to adhere to a notion of 'fidelity' to that written text" (ibid., p. 88). Once it is written, a play tends to acquire solidity and to be treated as a literary text (ibid.). However, as the same informants have stressed very firmly, Shakespeare was primarily a man of the theatre, and the fact that the written text – or different versions of it – may have been set down following a performance or series of performances must never be forgotten. We now know that Shakespeare adapted his text to the actors of his company and did not bother to establish a printed version of his plays. Therefore, to sacralize his texts and treat them as if they had been carved in stone seems to be a totally un-Shakespearean attitude.

After these prolegomena, I will proceed to report the results of my survey. As I have said, I interviewed a few directors, critics, translators and theatergoers, and read over one hundred articles (from newspapers, magazines and programs of plays). The research focused on the choice of both general (macro) and specific (micro) strategies for translating Shakespeare's works.

Regarding macrolevel strategies, it is widely believed that a translation for the theater must not sound literary – in other words, it must be spoken with pleasure by the actor and understood with ease by the audience. Says Ron Daniels: "The most important strategy, to my mind, is simply to ask – how does the language sound in the actor's mouth, in the audience's ear?" (2003). As we all know, many times a translation works beautifully on the page but is too cumbersome to spring to life on the stage. As Daniels points out,

> if in the illusory search for Shakespearean "poetry" the translation becomes daunting, unnatural, convoluted, and joyless, rooted steadfastly to the page, then it will compound the actors' terror and invite the audience's aloofness. If it is easy to speak, if it fits the actor's mouth and conveys meaning with clarity, if it is embedded in action and full of energy, then it will also be fun to listen to and rewarding to become involved with. And some of the terror will disappear. (ibidem)

Barbara Heliodora thinks likewise, warning that "the translated text must not break the actor's jaw" (2003).

On the microlevel, the research focused on three main aspects of the translation of Shakespearean texts for the stage: dramatic verse, diction and style.

As far as dramatic verse is concerned, it is essential for the translator to understand the mechanisms of language, "not out of slavish respect for rhythm and meter" but, as Ron Daniels notes, "because secrets as to meaning lie embedded in the way the text is organized" (2003). Elizabethan drama was typically in verse, mostly blank verse, which is comprised of unrhymed lines all in the same meter. But what we find in Shakespeare is a combination of blank verse, rhymed verse and prose, with rhyme increasingly disappearing in his late plays whilst prose was more intensely used.

According to media articles, Brazilian productions of Shakespearean plays tend to favor all-prose texts. The alleged reasons are basically three: (i) everyday speech is in prose; (ii) for "content" champions, translating in verse limits the translators' options and prioritizes form over meaning; and (iii) the awareness that Portuguese verse, which is syllabic, does not correspond to English verse, with its accentual pattern.

However, the case for verse has been built by prestigious translators such as Barbara Heliodora and José Roberto O'Shea, and endorsed by some critics. According to Barbara Heliodora (2003), verse helps the actors to find the proper rhythm for the lines. She points out that in some lines that seem incomplete, with a few syllables missing, the missing syllables actually correspond to longer pauses to be made by the actor. She also considers important to translate rhyming couplets as such, due to their encoded meaning of closing scenes. To those who criticize the limitations imposed by rhyme, the poet and translator Paulo Henriques Britto (2003) suggests the use of half rhyme (in which only the vowels of the stressed syllables rhyme) and consonantal rhyme as alternative rhyming resources. In his opinion, it is possible to use a more flexible meter and rhyme scheme to escape from the shackles of rigid, exact rhyme.

As to meter, as we all know, Shakespeare wrote in iambic pentameters, five-feet lines stressed on every second syllable. This is the natural rhythm of the English language; the English sentence is at its most comfortable and natural in this form, as the cadence is very familiar. However, the iamb is only an underlying rhythmic pattern, since actual lines often deviate from it. The poet's skillful use of meter involves endowing with meaning these departures from the pattern. Ron Daniels (2003) speculates, "What happens to the meaning if the stress is changed, if an unimportant word falls suddenly on a stressed syllable? How is the meaning changed? What are implications of that for the character? For the play?"

And we wonder: How can the iambic pentameter be treated by translators? Apparently, they should, likewise, try to find the living pulse of the Portuguese language as it spoken in Brazil. The most obvious counterpart of the iambic pentameter is the decasyllable, which usually follows either of two basic stress patterns: so-called "heroic" decasyllables are stressed on the second, sixth and tenth syllables, while "Sapphic" lines have stresses on the fourth, eight and tenth syllables. Some page-oriented translations allegedly use twelve-syllable verse lines in order to retain "all the ideas" from the original ten-verse lines, but there is a consensus that this meter does not work on the stage. Twelve-syllable Portuguese verse tends to scan so that it is divided in parts of equal length (4-4-4 or 6-6), with a dreary singsong effect; and attempts to break with both patterns often results in lines hardly distinguishable from prose. Britto (2003) believes that translators might search for inspiration in the rhymed drama written in

Portuguese, such as the plays by the Portuguese dramatist Gil Vicente (1465-1537). He also suggests that a decasyllable different from both the heroic and the Sapphic could be used; it is called "martelo agalopado", and in it the stress falls on the third, sixth and tenth syllables. Since it is a metric scheme typical of the "repentistas" – folk poets – from the Northeast of Brazil, it may help translators accomplish Ron Daniels' goal of adapting the Shakespearean meter to the musicality of the Portuguese language as it is spoken by Brazilians.

Regarding vocabulary, another focus of this survey, Shakespeare's lexicon is said to be the richest and largest of Western literature: the word count of his plays amounts to over 800,000 lexical items. Using 21,000 different words, Shakespeare compares favorably with Racine, who used approximately 2,000 different words. In *Hamlet* alone the poet used nearly 30,000 words, of which 4,700 (four thousand and seven hundred) were used only once throughout the play (Silos 1984[3]). He also coined 600 neologisms, 400 of which were never repeated. His penchant for neologisms is understandable, since modern English was coming into shape and coining new words was common practice. However, the novel terms used by Shakespeare were easily understood by the audience, because they could be inferred from the context. According to Barbara Heliodora (2003), the Bard never used arcane words; the variety and innovation found in the lexical universe of Shakespeare's plays did not pose any hurdles to their comprehension.

This raises the question: How should Shakespeare's rich vocabulary be treated? Although some directors choose to simplify it, many translators and critics interviewed for this survey think otherwise. There is a consensus that a translation for the theater has to be assimilated at once (Décio Almeida Prado, quoted in Luiz, 1980), that the text must have immediate intelligibility; as Millôr Fernandes (1989) points out, "there can be no footnotes on the stage". To the critic Alberto Guzik (1991), a suitable translation for a Shakespearean text should avoid scholarly, wordy versions that end up by scaring off the audience – and, why not say it, even the actors.

But even though such professionals believe that grandiloquence must be avoided, apparently they do not find it easy to define how colloquial the translation should be; how to find a middle course in translation, arriving at a language that is direct and completely understandable, but that does not fizzle out into prosiness. Sometimes this problem can be

solved only during rehearsals, with director and actors working with and on the translation. Many translators have now given up the use of the second person plural pronoun "vós", using "senhores" instead, and are now resorting to the combination of "tu" and "você" pioneered by Millôr Fernandes to make the translation sound more colloquial. For European Portuguese speakers "vós" is quite natural, as the plural of "tu", but not for Brazilians. Barbara Heliodora (2003) revealed that she has finally decided to use "tu" and "você" combined in her translations; it was, she says, her most difficult decision so far, but she now admits that it sounds more familiar to Brazilian ears. So, this is clearly a strategy that aims at "naturalness of expression".

One of the most serious dilemmas faced by translators seems to be how to keep Shakespearean lines short in Portuguese, a language that is expansive, full of vowels, and often seems to require too many words and syllables. Ron Daniels' advice is to "find the sentence that has as few words as possible. Trim it down to its shortest, yet still most comprehensible form" (2003).

Then there remains the issue of difficult, scholarly words. The English text has many words and expressions that are unfamiliar nowadays, and as Daniels reports, actors in England and the US constantly have to refer to a glossary and to footnotes in order to make sense of what is being said. It must be noted, however, that if the language in the original is often difficult to understand; to some extent it could even be said that Shakespeare in translation is curiously liberated. The actor can bypass the glossary and the footnotes, since the translation is already a paraphrase, more often than not facilitated (Daniels, 2003).

As to style, some critics and translators bemoan the disfigurement of Shakespeare's poetic language, which involves eliminating the imagery found in the source text and ignoring the text's metaphors. According to the late translator Péricles Eugênio da Silva Ramos (1954), such a strategy stems from a misguided concern to clarify completely, to render absolutely univocal what Shakespeare expressed by means of tropes. Some contemporary translators and critics agree, advocating a translation strategy of finding the closest equivalent in Portuguese for Shakespeare's rhetorical devices. This strategy can be called "re-creation", as opposed to "elimination" – when a pun disappears in the translation and is not compensated for elsewhere. The strategy of "re-creation" is frequently used by the translator Barbara

Heliodora, as the analysis of three different Brazilian translations of *The Merchant of Venice* showed (Martins forthcoming). Heliodora's translation had the highest percentage of re-created puns: 26%, as against 16% and 4%. Here is an example of the recreation of a pun by Barbara Heliodora:

II.ii Launcelot	"... as I have set up my rest to run away, so I will not rest till I have run some ground."(l. 91-92) PUN (*rest* is being used as a noun in the first occurrence and as a verb in the second)	"Vou dar o fora e só vou parar quando estiver muito fora daqui, mesmo;..." Re-creation of pun (The word *rest* was replaced by *fora*, used first as a noun and then as an adverb, creating a different pun in Portuguese at the same point in the text)

Director Susana Kruger is an enthusiast of Shakespeare's imagery, and believes in "keeping text's fire burning" (2003). She does not appreciate translations and productions that are too ascetic, too "Apollonian", championing a "Dionysian" approach instead.

As a closing remark, I would say that a great number of translators mentioned that they would like to work closely with the director and the actors, making adjustments in the text as the rehearsals proceed. Their experience, however, suggests that directors resist this practice, to avoid too much interference. Sometimes directors decide to drop their first choice of translation altogether and produce their own rendering.

It seems just fitting to conclude the ideas presented here with a comment by Ron Daniels that may give some encouragement to Brazilian translators and directors involved with Shakespearean drama and who may feel a sense of inadequacy and loss – not to mention self-consciousness – when working with a translated text:

> Portuguese is a beautiful language. Ask anyone who speaks the language of Shakespeare what he or she thinks of Portuguese and you will inevitably be told how beautiful

Portuguese sounds to their ear. It has its own wonderful rhythms, astonishing turns of phrase, a gorgeous sensuality and an incredible generosity of spirit. But the translation must ring true and be unafraid. It cannot be mock English. Mock verse. Mock Shakespeare. (2003)

REFERENCES:

BASSNETT-MCGUIRE, Susan (1985) "Ways Through the Labyrinth: Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts". In Theo Hermans (ed.) *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation.* London/Sydney: Croom Helm, p. 87-102.

BASSNET, Susan (1991) "Translating for the Theatre: The Case Against Performability". TTR Volume IV, Number 1, 1st Semester. Montreal: Association canadienne de traductologie/Canadian Association for Translation Studies, Concordia University, pp. 99-108.

BRASIL, Ubiratan (2000) "Musicalidade brasileira na tragédia de *Rei Lear*. *O Estado de S. Paulo,* Caderno 2, August 24.

BRITTO, Paulo Henriques (2003) Personal communication. Rio de Janeiro, March 26.

DANIELS, Ron (2003) Personal communication by e-mail, March 28.

FERNANDES, Millôr (1989) "*Hamlet* - a tradução". *34 Letras*, nº. 3. Editora 34: Rio de Janeiro, p. 76-80.

GUZIK, Alberto (1991) "Um grande castigo para os Crimes de Shakespeare". *Jornal da Tarde* (Teatro/Crítica), July 26.

HELIODORA, Bárbara (2003) Personal communication. Rio de Janeiro, March 27.

KRUGER, Susana (2003) Personal communication. Rio de Janeiro, March 23.

LUIZ, Macksen (1980) "Shakespeare já fala português com sotaque brasileiro". *Jornal do Brasil*, March 1.

_____ (1997) Personal communication. Rio de Janeiro, July 8.

MARTINS, Marcia A. P. (forthcoming). “Traduzindo o trocadilho: o humor de *O mercador de Veneza* em português”. To be published in: Marcia A. P. Martins (ed.) *Visões e identidades de Shakespeare no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: PUC-Rio.

OLIVEIRA, Roberta (1996) “Um encontro de mestres”. *Jornal do Brasil*, Revista Programa, May 24-30, p.19-21.

RAMOS, Péricles Eugênio da Silva (1954) “Sentido e forma nas traduções de *Hamlet*”. *Correio Paulistano*, July 11.

SILOS, Geraldo (1984) “Hamlet em nova tradução mais perto do original”. *Jornal do Brasil*, Caderno B, p. 2, Nov 26.

VIZIOLI, Paulo (1995) "Um Shakespeare traduzido que soa natural". *O Estado de São Paulo,* July 1.

NOTES

[1] My translation, as in every other English language quotations in this paper.

[2] At times, the strategy adopted is close adherence to the source text, while at other times there may be, as Susan Bassnett (1985) notes, a process of intersemiotic translation, “wherein a function of the source-language text or a system working within it is substituted in the target-language text – as in the case of jokes, puns, obscenities, topical satire, etc.” (p. 101). There is also the target-language oriented approach, which includes modernizations and radical adaptations.

[3] According to Geraldo Silos, this count applies to the text edited by G. B. Evans.