

VEGETAL SYMBOLISM IN THE ROMANIAN TRANSLATIONS OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET* AND *OTHELLO*

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Abstract: Since imagery and vegetal imagery (flowers, the effect of herbs, weeding, gardening, etc.) in particular play an important role in Shakespeare's work, the paper examines two Romanian translations of the Bard's *Othello* and *Hamlet*, paying special attention to the use of vegetal symbolism and how vegetal metaphors are rendered by the two Romanian translators. The two variants are compared in terms of effect on target reader, the manner in which cultural and historical elements are conveyed, and accuracy.

Key words: Shakespeare's translations, vegetal symbolism, imagery, metaphor.

1. Introduction

Early translations of Shakespeare's plays – especially of the four great tragedies – occurred around the 1850s, in a period when the Romanian Principalities were attempting an opening towards the cultural and linguistic integration of Romania among the well developed western civilizations, as well as a crystallization of the modern Romanian language (Matei-Chesnoiu 2006). The earliest translations of the great tragedies, in the 1850s and 1860s, share several important features: a linguistic feature – the combination between archaic linguistic structures and modern elements, a more or less fortunate use of neologisms, testifying for the long and sometimes painful process of the reformation of the Romanian basic vocabulary and syntax, the so-called standardization of the Romanian language; a political feature – after having embraced the ideals of the 1848 Revolutions during a transition period, more radical changes occur, under the pressure of the Junimea movement, which are reflected in the cultural-ideological discourse of the time; a translation feature – the translator's intention to adapt the text to the requirements of stage performance is obvious and, secondly, a professional translation is attempted, using original English texts as sources, rather than French ones, as it was customary beforehand (if such variants are still used, this happens only in the translator's attempt to consult translations in Romance languages in order to establish the most fortunate syntactic or lexical choice that would fit the new requirements of the Romanian linguistic structures). A second important stage in the odyssey of translating Shakespeare into Romanian took place during the communist period. After the "proletcult" of the 1950s, relative liberalization and the strategic easing of state oversight occurred during the early years of Ceaușescu's rule. Some freedom of expression fostered the rehabilitation of major literary voices, while literary criticism flourished (Chetrinescu Percec 2008:206). Important publishers translated and published classical literature so it was during this

period that Shakespeare's complete works appeared, in a reputed collection, *William Shakespeare. Opere complete*, at Univers, completing the series of Shakespearean translations which had appeared at ESPLA in the late 1950s.

2. General issues related to translating Shakespeare

In translating Shakespeare, specialists have identified two major areas of difficulty (Volceanov 2005:185-9) – a linguistic area and a reception area. Firstly, there are the difficulties of translating Shakespeare's verse. English is basically a monosyllabic language, which is not the case of Romanian. The board of Romanian translators who were entrusted with the task of translating Shakespeare's plays in the 1950s set up a norm according to which 100 English lines must be translated into no more than 107 Romanian lines. A line per line translation would incur heavy losses at the level of particular details, atmosphere, and overall meaning, but an exaggerated increase in the number of translated lines would also entail dilution, verbosity, and even the risk of literal translation. The translators of that period belonged to a school that aimed at translating Shakespeare in a concise, abbreviated language, devoid of many ornaments but all the more impressive in its choice of words. The translation of rhyming couplets is a painful process, which confronts the translator with the same dilemma: either try to concentrate the meaning or increase the number of lines (2005:185). Secondly, in terms of issues pertaining to theories of reception and reader response, any translator should be aware that the Shakespeare text they translate is not 'by' Shakespeare, but by 'Shakespeare', an abstract authorial agent constructed by printers, editors, scholars, critics, etc. Having to choose from among several interpreting solutions, the translator is forced to identify himself not with Shakespeare's authorial intention, but with an editor's footnote. This situation may again incur heavy losses of virtual meaning attachable to certain passages, but these losses are somewhat compensated through the translator's choice, which is still supposed to bear some meaning that suits the overall design of the original text. Therefore, the translator is doomed to rephrase not so much the author's original text (a utopian entity), but the editors' footnotes (2005:186). In George Volceanov's opinion (2005:189), the *traduttore traditore* paradigm can thus, in Shakespeare's case, be replaced by *autore traditore*, in terms of the uncomfortable position in which the translator of the Shakespearean text finds himself. The 'Shakespeare' text is the canonical work par excellence and its value is, hence, undisputed. The text, obscure as it may be, is issued in scholarly editions which try to surpass all inconveniencies. The translator is thus left in an unenviable position, drifting away on a sea of signifiers; Shakespeare may be allowed to be incoherent or obscure, but the translator is at fault if 'his' Shakespeare does not live up to the readers' (and literary critics' or theorists') expectations.

The aim of this paper is to compare and discuss two Romanian translations of *Hamlet* and *Othello*, with special emphasis on the range and choice of vegetal imagery available both in the English texts and in the two Romanian editions. If some ado has

been made about the dilemmas of the translator faced with the difficulties and ambiguities of the language in the comedies, with puns, colloquialisms and idiolects (Volceanov 2004), less has been said about how Shakespeare's rich imagery is rendered in a translation. "In drama, especially Elizabethan drama, images tumble out of the mouths of the characters in the heat of the writer's feeling or passion, as they naturally surge up into his mind" observed Caroline Spurgeon (1961:5) as early as the 1930s. With Shakespeare, this wealth of imagery belongs especially to the realm of nature (plants and gardening), animals and birds.

When translating imagery – thus, metaphor, simile and other figures of speech – an instrumental distinction to be made is that between propositional meaning, the truth value of an utterance, of little or no importance, and the expressive meaning, where individual producers or receivers of discourse may relate to it differently, assigning various values and intensities to lexemes or whole sentences both within the same language and – more importantly – in other languages (Baker 2003:13). This brings forward the issue of the universality of metaphor, as it is conceived by Zoltán Kövecses (2007:4), an aspect which is forever a source of trouble for translators, especially translators of fictional texts that have a high degree of emotional charge, as it happens with the lyrical genre or, in general, with texts in which imagery is very dense and stylistically foregrounded by the author.

3. *Hamlet* and *Othello*. A case study

Spurgeon (1961:88-89, 164) writes on Shakespeare's admiration of the vitality and strength of plants and seeds, as well as his parallels between the disease in plants and the evil passions which can destroy humankind. Evil is frequently described as a "weed" (68 times, *Shakespeare Concordance*) particularly in the historical plays, with the imagery deriving from the world/ kingdom as an untended, weedy, garden. Shakespeare's use of vegetal metaphors, with mentions of 61 different plants and trees, cleverly transposes feelings from the moral to the physical plane.

In order to illustrate the Bard's use of plant symbolism, we have selected two fragments from *Hamlet* and *Othello*. We will discuss the meanings attached to the plants mentioned, as well as two translation variants – an older and a more recent one for each source text – with a view to observing the differences between the two translators' choices of language and imagery.

Throughout *Hamlet*, there are many references to plants, weeds and smell, frequently associated with sin, corruption, rottenness and foul smell, but also with madness – as Ophelia loses her mind, she carries wild flowers and herbs, offering them to people around. There are six references to weeds/ weedy, five mentions of roses, three of violets, two of pansies and daisies, one for each of the following: columbine, rosemary, fennel, crowflower, and nettles, all of which translate the Bard's fondness of plants.

The scene we have selected for analysis is suffused with references to the vegetal domain. The imagery links the more physical domain of plants and flowers to

the more abstract domain of the character's thoughts and feelings, giving rise to conceptual metaphors (Kövecses 2007:3). For example, for the English, rosemary relates to memory, while pansies connote a pensive mood. Jenkins (1987:359) notes in an explanatory footnote that the plants Ophelia gives away have meanings appropriate to their recipients: Laertes receives rosemary and pansies to remember his sister; the Queen gets fennel and columbine, symbols of marital infidelity, while Claudius is offered rue for repentance. Violets are a symbol of faithfulness, while daisies suggest (unhappy) love.

In Romania, however, rosemary has completely different meanings, being mostly used during the wedding ritual, as a symbol of eternal love, or during funerals, as it also connotes immortality (Fildan 2009). Both translators have rendered the propositional meaning of the original text, instead of adapting the metaphor to the Romanian context, where "forget-me-not" is the flower for remembrance.

Pansies, in the Romanian context, stand for love and memories (Rusu 2007). The metaphor has been conveyed slightly differently in the target language according to the translator's interpretation of the source text. Whereas Dumitriu focuses on thought in general and employs a direct reference to the person whom the receiver (Laertes) should think of, "să te gîndești la mine", Levițchi and Duțescu appeal to a more specific love imagery, adding new meaning to the original text by hinting at a deeper relationship between the two persons: "pentru gînduri de dragoste". The reader of the translation may infer that there is something more than sibling love between Ophelia and Laertes (Appendix 1).

The 1959 translation seems to focus on the implied meanings of the source text, adapting the flower symbolism to the Romanian context. Although Dumitriu apparently mistranslated the English "fennel" as "pintenaș" (a wild flower, with purple-blue petals, *DEX online*), "daisy" as "romaniță" (chamomile, *DEX online*), and "violets" as "micșunele" (a yellow species of violets, *DEX online*), he managed to convey meanings similar to those of the source text, using plants which the Romanian readers would be more familiar with. "Pintenaș" stands for frivolity and fickleness, "căldărușe" for madness, "romaniță" for powerful hatred (*Limbajul florilor* 2008), and "micșunea" suggests love and fertility (though a folk Romanian saying also links it to something that would never happen: "Când o face plopul pere și răchita micșunele"). With the exception of "căldărușe", the Romanian equivalent of "columbine" with different symbolism, and "romaniță", which, though in aspect is similar to the English "daisy", has a symbolism different from that of dissembling, Dumitriu's translation renders the original meanings quite accurately.

Levițchi and Duțescu, by comparison, concentrate on the propositional meanings of the source text, using "mărar", "margaretă", and "toporași" respectively, which makes the 1974 version seem more accurate. Thus, "toporași" – violet in colour as the English plant – stand for love and fertility, "margaretă" suggests innocence, faithful love and simplicity (*Limbajul florilor* 2008), "mărar" is associated with femininity

and seduction, being a component of the elixir of youth (“Mărarul, un elixir al tinereții, feminității și frumuseții” 2008).

Due to its association with grace and heaven, rue is a proper flower for young and chaste Ophelia, but rather improper for the older, adulterous Queen Gertrude, who must wear it differently. The English “rue” may also suggest sadness or regret, which, in the play’s context, refers to the loss of old King Hamlet, whose death Gertrude did not mourn enough. This original pun is unfortunately lost in both Romanian versions.

It is also interesting to observe the two translations of “rue” and “herb of grace”. Dumitriu adds meaning to the original text “să le zicem florile harului sfintei duminici”, and later calls it “floarea raiului”. Levițchi and Duțescu also modify the original meaning by implying that the plant is called “floarea iertării” on Sundays only, otherwise bearing a different name. The Romanian equivalents for “herb of grace” employ different target domains in the metaphor construction, with Dumitriu focusing on place, and Levițchi and Duțescu on process

On the whole, even if the register of the two translations is similar, the 1974 version appears more accurate in rendering the imagery of the original text, at the same time offering the reader an insight into English culture. Levițchi and Duțescu (1974:121) also provide explanatory notes (taken from J.D. Wilson’s *The Essential Shakespeare*) about the contextual meaning of the flowers given away by Ophelia.

Vegetal symbolism, related to weeds in particular, also pervades *Othello*, with Iago making use of various herbs when referring to his devious plan. But Othello, too, uses vegetal imagery, though to a far less extent than his ensign. For example in act IV, scene 2, Othello compares his wife to a “black weed” (Ridley 1974:154), or “weed”, thus highlighting the contrast between his wife’s fair looks and her assumed illicit deeds. Translator Dan Grigorescu resorts to a more pleasant image/ metaphor “floare de pădure” (Grigorescu 1958:151), laying emphasis on the woman’s naturalness, while the more recent translator uses an image closer to the original (editor’s) text: “Buruiană rea” (Lăzărescu 2006:233), with the adjective “rea” highlighting the negative connotation of “buruiană”/ “weed”, thus highlighting the woman’s wrong wifely behaviour.

The scene selected for discussion centres on Iago and his strange preference for plants. For instance, when Roderigo complains that he is not virtuous enough to win Desdemona, Iago comments that virtue (i.e. strength), is something useless), “a fig”. The editor reminds the reader in a footnote (Ridley 1974:40) that “to give a fig” is an extremely offensive and vulgar gesture (thrusting the thumb between the index and middle fingers). Although the insult contained by Iago’s comment is lost in both Romanian versions, both translators convey the image of uselessness: while Grigorescu focuses on the expressive meaning of the original word rendering it by a more abstract noun – “fleacuri”, Lăzărescu resorts to propositional and evoked (geographical) meanings, using a hyperonym, modified by an adjective meant to point out that the fruit is of no use – “poamă putredă”. Lăzărescu’s “poamă” adds meaning to the source text with its evoked meaning – in Romanian slang, it also hints at a wanton woman who sleeps around.

Iago's garden imagery is meant to suggest that the other characters are fertile ground for his plots. This is true especially of Othello in whose mind Iago will plant the seeds of jealousy, metaphorically becoming the gardener of the general's thoughts. Here, too, the plants are heavily symbolic. The stinging nettles are normally associated with betrayal and slander (*Limbajul florilor* 2008), and point to Iago's malicious design; lettuce, hyssop and thyme are common savoury herbs, meant to deceive the taste buds and cloud the mind, persuading Othello of his wife's unfaithfulness. Being all green, these plants also connote jealousy, a passion that will eventually bring about the death of both protagonists (Appendix 2).

In an explanatory footnote, Ridley (1974:40) draws attention to Iago's choice of plants, pointing out that thyme and hyssop, as well as nettles and lettuce, are usually sown together, since they have complementary natures: hot and dry vs. cold and moist. Both Romanian translations have kept the names of plants, but seem to have focused more on the verbs related to gardening. Grigorescu faithfully renders the propositional and implied meanings of the English text, while Lăzărescu alters some such meanings as "plant" by using "să asemănăm", which expresses a comparison between two or several objects/ people, or "weed up"/ "să culegem", which refers to picking up, gathering, instead of pulling out the overgrowing weeds around. Lăzărescu also tries to retain the English structure, which makes the target text more difficult to read and comprehend.

Grigorescu translates the implied meaning of the sterile garden metaphor by "s-o lași în părăginire", implying that weeds overgrow and suffocate the other plants. By comparison, Lăzărescu, who remains perhaps too faithful to the source text, concentrates on propositional meanings, creating a new figure of style (personification) in the target text by bringing together the garden and the female body, and suggesting that nothing grows on the garden territory.

On the whole, Grigorescu's version is more direct in address, using verbs in the second person singular, with a focus on the perlocutionary force of advising the listener/ reader, advice that Iago will later put to practice himself. In this respect, Lăzărescu's translation is comparatively more faithful to the original text, as it employs first person plural, with a stress on the illocutionary force. All in all, Grigorescu's translation seems to render more successfully the flavour of Shakespeare's language, culture and time, while Lăzărescu remains perhaps too faithful to the original text in terms of structure and propositional meaning, occasionally changing the intended message. The former version uses more archaic and simple vocabulary, sounding more natural and closer to the Bard's language, while conveying more emotion-laden imagery.

4. Conclusion

In their attempt to render as much of the original text as possible, translators often focus on the propositional meanings to the detriment of implied or evoked ones.

As the two Romanian translations of *Hamlet* are close in time, there are no salient differences between them. On the other hand, the two versions of *Othello* are somewhat more strikingly different, with the more recent translator less successful in rendering Shakespeare's style and language, striving perhaps too much to retain structures, which makes the target text appear as unnatural. On the whole, older translations, although not always accurate on the level of propositional meaning, seem much closer in style and register, as well as in their overall message, to Shakespeare's text, rendering the 'flavour' of his time and language.

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Appendix 1

Ofelia:

Uite rozmarin: e floarea amintirii, te rog, iubitele, să-ți amintești. Și aici sînt panseluțe, ca să te gîndești la mine. [...]

Ofelia:

Uite pintenași, pentru tine, și căldărușe, uite și virnanț, floarea raiului, pentru tine. Și am și cîteva pentru mine; să le zicem florile harului sfintei duminici. Și tu trebuie să porți floarea raiului, dar altfel decît mine. Iată și o romaniță. Aș fi vrut să-ți dau și cîteva micșunele, dar toate s-au ofilit cînd a murit tata.

(Translated by Petru Dumitriu, 1959, p. 669-670)

Ofelia (cătrelaert):

Iată rozmarin – pentru aducere-aminte. Nu uita, iubitele, te rog. Acestea sînt pansete – pentru gînduri de dragoste. [...]

Ofelia (cătrelaere):

Pentru dumneata, mărar și căldărușe. (Cătrelaeregina) Virnanț pentru dumneata – cîteva fire și pentru mine. Duminica i se mai spune și floarea-iertării. Nu, nu, virnanțul trebuie să-l porți altfel decît mine. Poftim o margaretă. Aș fi vrut să vă dau niște toporași, dar s-au ofilit toți cînd a murit tata.

(Translated by Leon Levițchi and Dan Duțescu, 1974, p. 120-121)

Appendix 2

Iago:

N-ai putere? Fleacuri! Ba e în puterea ta să fii într-un fel sau altul. Trupul nostru e o grădină iar grădinarul ei e voința. Fie că vrei să sădești urzici sau să semeni lăptuci, să pui isop și să plivești cimbru, s-o acoperi cu un singur soi de iarbă sau s-o împodobești cu mai multe, s-o lași în părăginire din trîndăvie, sau să trudești ca să rodească, în voința ta stă puterea și autoritatea.

(Translated by Dan Grigorescu, 1958, p. 36)

Iago:

Virtutea! O poamă putredă! De noi și numai de noi atărnă să fim așa sau altfel. Trupurile noastre nu sunt altceva decît niște grădini, ai căror grădinari sunt voințele noastre. Dacă ne trece prin cap să asemănăm urzici sau să răsădim lăptuci, să punem isop și să culegem cimbru. Dacă vrem să semănăm în toată grădina numai un singur fel de iarbă, sau să răsădim mai multe feluri; dacă să lăsăm grădina să rămână stearpă, din lenevie; sau s-o facem să fie rodnică, prin muncă încordată, îți dai bine seama că de voința noastră atărnă puterea și deprinderea să facem ce voim din ea.

(Translated by Dan Amedeu Lăzărescu, 2006, p. 77)