

At the Damsel's feet: Translation and Decorum in a nineteenth-century *Hamlet*

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Any assessment of a translation of a text culturally so central as *Hamlet* will almost inevitably rest on an awareness of the expectations generated by one of the broadest, weightiest and more diversified critical receptions ever. And, if the critical consequence of *Hamlet* is overwhelming, its more strictly literary consequence is no less so, as proved by the many texts from different genres, traditions and periods which display intertextual links with *Hamlet*. Such intertexts, in their number and variety, fully confirm *Hamlet's* status as 'a classic', in the sense in which Gianfranco Contini proposed it years ago - as a text whose authority and vitality derive from its eminent 'citability' and 'memorability'¹.

Hamlet thus comes to us inevitably refracted² through a multiplicity of other texts, of other readings - to an important extent, of other translations, if we endorse the notion of a basic coextension of the acts of reading and translating. As is well known, this is a point on which several authors have insisted - that, since all acts of communication are instances of translation, 'reading is already translation', whilst translation proper is 'translation for the second time'³. Such a notion is, of course, akin to an understanding of reading as producing rather than uncovering meaning, and of translation as the form of reading which manifests that understanding at its most characteristic⁴

This also reminds us that the plethora of other readings which will intertextually inform my 'production of meaning' for a late 19th-century version of *Hamlet* will include, in the foreground, other Portuguese translations of the play - almost all of them more recent than the one in question. The refraction effected by those other translations may entail for the present-day reader of the 19th-century version a sense of strangeness or foreignness, deceived as he will be in his expectations of 'sameness'. What is meant by this is that, *Hamlet* being the Shakespearean tragedy which was more often translated into Portuguese, its 'citability' and 'memorability' will strongly depend on the tradition instituted by such translations. In other words, the reader will expect to find, for some passages at least, versions which will have become emblematic of this play in his/her cultural memory, and consequently be led to judge other versions (other readings) as deviant or inadequate - a scrutiny of the translator's options which, as André Lefevere pointed out some years ago, is particularly strict for culturally central texts⁵.

¹ Contini, Gianfranco 1979: Dante e a Memória Poética. *Intertextualidades - Poétique* 27, trad. Clara Crabbé Rocha. Coimbra, Almedina: (77-107) 80.

² On the notion of 'refraction' in translation studies, see Lefevere, André 1985: Why Waste Our Time on Rewrites? The Trouble with Interpretation, and the Role of Rewriting in an Alternative Paradigm. Hermans, Theo ed. 1985: *The Manipulation of Literature*. London, Croom Helm.

³ Gadamer, Hans Georg: To What Extent Does Language Prescribe Thinking?, cited by Biguenet, John and Schulte, Rainer eds. 1989: *The Craft of Translation*. Chicago, The Univ. of Chicago Press: ix. See also Barnstone, Willis 1993: *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice*. New Haven and London, Yale U.P.: 7, 19, 22.

⁴ See Biguenet and Schulte eds. 1989: x; also Barnstone 1993: 7, *passim*.

⁵ Lefevere, André ed. 1992: *Translation / History / Culture: A Sourcebook*. London, Routledge: 70.

We should thus be on the alert lest the late-20th century reader's PRIVILEGE of retrospection when considering a century-old translation, intertextually mediated by a dozen other translations and by a weighty literary-critical consequence, turn into the ABUSE of an a-historical and anachronistic view. It will not be a purpose of this paper to exploit, as humourous 'curiosities', the consequences of historical distance as seen in the use of the lexicon or in the socio-linguistic register of many passages. My aim will be rather to reinforce an awareness of how ineluctably historical any reading is, of how elusive an attempt to produce the 'definitive' or 'neutral' translation would be.

The version of *Hamlet* in question has the peculiarity of having been written by a monarch - King Luiz I of Portugal, who first published this translation in 1877 (I will, however, be referring to the 1880 second edition). It should be added that this was not an isolated venture, since Dom Luiz was also a translator of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello* and *Richard III*. These translations have been regularly reprinted, with modernised spelling, and not always in such a way as to make the non-specialised reader aware, from the outset, of their rather remote dates of first publication. However, many features of the text should gradually make that obvious, in particular semantic shifts which have had a catachretic effect - involving words which in nineteenth-century usage had a markedly different meaning from that which they came to have. An instance of this occurs in Act I, Scene III, which might surprise the present-day reader with a seemingly not-so-innocent Ophelia rather aptly comparing Laertes's departing advice, and its effect on her, to a contraceptive -

LAERTES

Be wary then; best safety lies in fear;
Youth to itself rebels, though none else
near.

OPHELIA

I shall th' effect of this good lesson keep
As watchman to my heart.

LAERTES

Sê, pois, circumspecta, a melhor
protecção é o receio do perigo; a
juventude é para is mesma um perigo,
se não trava luta com outros maiores.

OPHELIA

Em meu coração encerrarei, como um
preservativo, a tua salutar lição.

(*HAMLET I-3: 43-6*)⁶

- the translator's choice, for the original 'watchman', of the word 'preservativo' (literally, 'that which preserves') having been rendered unacceptable by the fact that it has become, in twentieth-century usage, the Portuguese word for the commonest of contraceptives.

This is, however, no more than an instance of several incidental occurrences which highlight the historical distance of King Luiz's version, but do not, in their proper context, detract from the translator's competence: time, not the translator, has made them catachretic, or in any other way inadequate. It should be added that, in general terms, the translation comes across as a careful and scrupulous one, guided by coherently followed strategies. Patterns of discourse, in particular those which represent specific social relationships, are usually transposed to the target language in ways which we could broadly describe under Eugene Nida's famous notion of 'dynamic equivalence' (i.e., the production in the target language of a relationship between utterance and reader which will be identical to a similar relationship in the source language)⁷. This strategy does, of course, strongly date this translation when (for instance) amounts of money, or other historically changeable quantitative references are at stake.

More significant, however, are the ways in which the same strategy will put in evidence the inevitable role played by the translator's values in determining the meanings in Shakespeare's text - or, in even more precise terms, the ways in which (intentionally or otherwise) the translator's ethical

⁶ Hibbard, G. R. ed. 1994: *William Shakespeare: Hamlet*. Oxford, O.U.P.; Bragança, D.Luiz trad. 1880: *William Shakespeare, Hamlet - drama em cinco actos*. Segunda edição. Lisboa, Imprensa Nacional. Henceforth cited only by Act, Scene and line/page numbers.

⁷ See Bassnett, Susan 1991: *Translation Studies*. revised edition. London, Routledge: 26.

and political standpoint elides (or eludes) meanings it cannot accommodate. This is in the least surprising when a king translates a tragedy which (amongst many other things) rather prominently concerns power and revenge - and, as a consequence of their intersection, enacts circumstances such as regicide, usurpation, treason, political murder, and a set of decisions and attitudes rather uncertainly placed between political prudence and timidity, diplomacy and intrigue.

To do justice to King Luiz, such circumstances often survive in his version in most of their crudeness. But this acknowledgment will only render even more conspicuous and surprising the cases when they do not. An instance of a rather blatant, and hardly accidental, evasion occurs when Hamlet, soon after killing Polonius, is visited by his 'friends' Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, sent on an errand to try and find out where he has hidden the corpse. At the height of his 'antic disposition', Hamlet answers their questions with some cryptic statements which include the words: 'The king is a thing' - to which, faced with their bafflement, he will add: 'Of nothing' (IV-2: 26-8). As any annotated edition of the play promptly explains, this passage contains an allusion to Psalm 144: 4, 'Man is like a thing of nought, his time passeth away like a shadow' - an allusion justified by Polonius's unforeseen death (which could have been the king's, had he been the eavesdropper in Gertrude's closet), as an instance of 'uncreation' and of the triumph of the inert over the living. Prior to summoning this biblical intertext, however, Hamlet's words cast an obvious slur on the king's status and dignity. Dom Luiz translates 'The king is a thing' as 'O rei é uma creatura' (IV-2, p.100; literally, 'the king is a creature') - a choice which neutralises the passage's pejorative import, as well as the ensuing verbal and conceptual play. It is true that the demeaning intention will be preserved immediately below, when the passage 'Of nothing' is rendered as 'Uma creatura que nada vale' ('a creature worth nothing'). However, it cannot but be suspected that the substitution of the 'creature' for the 'thing' may have corresponded to a perception that the limits of a political decorum would have been crossed with a description of a royal figure as 'a thing' - no matter how little there is to be admired in such a king as Claudius.

Another instance of this potentially difficult relationship of the royal translator to the political implications of *Hamlet* comes in one of the most quoted passages in the play - precisely when, towards the end of Act I, Scene IV, and faced with the ghost of old Hamlet, Marcellus remarks that 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark' (I-4: 65). King Luiz chooses to translate this as 'Algum vício ha na constituição da Dinamarca' (I-4, p.30; literally, 'Something is wrong in the constitution of Denmark'), a rendering which most Portuguese readers today would probably find far-fetched. The reasons for that lie, first of all, in the fact that this famous passage comes to the reader refracted by better-known, and more recent versions of *Hamlet* which almost invariably maintain the image of rottenness and - even more important in determining the reader's probable surprise - render 'the state' as 'o reino' (literally, the kingdom, or the realm). Since there is nothing culture-specific about the metaphor of organic decay when applied to the ills of the body politic one has to infer that it was the translator's sense of decorum - political or merely socio-linguistic - that led him to evade a more literal rendering of the first three words. We cannot, in this case, suspect the translator of wanting to censor an association of rottenness with kingship, since (as pointed out above) the Portuguese reader's assumption of that association originates in other translations, rather than in Shakespeare's text. But we can and must remark that Dom Luiz's choice of the 'constituição' as the site for whatever is wrong is evidence of a perspective on power which prefers to lay the blame for the faults of power on an abstract and diffuse entity, and that even his choice of the word 'vício' (for fault or flaw) can give the sentence legalistic overtones. It is true that this constitutional monarch is not using the word 'constituição' in the sense of the fundamental law, a written statute embodying the basic political principles of the state - the sense in which it would more often be taken in Portuguese - but it is no less true that he means by it the structuring aspects of power, those that are constitutive rather than conjunctural or incidental. On the contrary, 'state' is employed in this passage of Shakespeare's text to name a use or a consequence of power in a specific time and set of circumstances - those which follow the death of the protagonist's father. The appearance of his ghost, which prompts Marcellus's remark, signifies an incapacity to enjoy 'eternal rest' which, in itself, is a symptom of dis-order, of un-rule, and fosters the doubts felt by Hamlet and his friends as to the legitimacy of the new ruler.

As to the translator King, it is not only within the scope of a political decorum that he is haunted by circumstances which are potentially transgressive of his values. Although it does not seem to be a systematic practice, instances of bowdlerisation may occur in Luiz de Bragança's translation of scatological imagery (III-4: 114), of laughter-inducing language directed at matters of great ethical gravity - such as the clowns' discussion of the moral implications of suicide, at the beginning of Act V - or, maybe even more characteristically, of sexual imagery and innuendo.

In this respect, the verbal representation of Hamlet's disgust with the marriage of his recently-widowed mother to his uncle will be subject to some decorous rephrasing, as when Hamlet urges his mother: 'go not to my uncle's bed' (III-4: 155) - a passage which King Luiz abridges to 'evite meu tio' (III-4, p.93; literally, 'avoid my uncle'). Hamlet's dialogues with Ophelia also seem to involve difficulties, both social and sexual. To begin with, the translator hesitates as to the adequate forms of address to be employed between the prince and the damsel, daughter to one of the king's advisers - such forms being always couched in the Portuguese third person singular (as a courteous form of address), but varying in register from the more formal 'Vossa Alteza' ('Your Highness') to slightly more familiar alternatives. Occasionally, such variations prove instrumental in characterising changes in emotional register between the two characters, as in their longest presence on stage together as spectators to the play-within-the-play.

It is precisely in this scene that we find the passage which best reveals King Luiz's unease as a translator of the Hamlet/Ophelia exchanges:

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| HAMLET Lady, shall I lie in your lap? | HAMLET Ser-me-ha permitido estar a vossos pés, senhora? |
| OPHELIA No, my lord. | OPHELIA Não, meu senhor. |
| HAMLET I mean, my head upon your lap. | HAMLET Quero dizer, recostar a cabeça sobre vossos joelhos. |
| OPHELIA Ay, my lord. | OPHELIA Sim, meu senhor. |
| HAMLET Do you think I meant country matters? | HAMLET Pensaveis talvez que tivesse outra idéa? |
| OPHELIA I think nothing, my lord. | OPHELIA Nada pensava. |
| HAMLET That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs. | HAMLET É um pensamento este digno de um coração de donzella. |
| OPHELIA What is, my lord? | OPHELIA O que, senhor? |
| HAMLET No-thing. | HAMLET Nada. |
| OPHELIA You are merry, my lord. | OPHELIA Vejo-o hoje alegre, senhor. |

(HAMLET III-2: 104-13 / P.73)

Hamlet is making himself comfortable to watch the performance when he asks the question which opens this exchange. The innuendo is obvious, Ophelia's 'lap' being a synecdoche for her body as an object of desire. King Luiz renders that question as (literally) 'Shall I be allowed to lie at your feet, madam?': from this point onwards the dialogue will hardly make sense in this Portuguese version. In the original, after Ophelia's curt (presumably offended) negative Hamlet will counter: 'I mean, my head upon your lap' - a clarification which, by removing or (at least) making the sexual innuendo less obvious, will obtain Ophelia's consent. As to King Luiz's version, it will go on avoiding the maid's 'lap' - but will get closer to it by a few inches: 'Quero dizer, recostar a cabeça sobre vossos joelhos' (literally, 'I mean, to lay my head upon your knees'). Which means that what in Shakespeare's text was a movement of retreat after the initial lewd suggestion, in this translation actually becomes an advance But how can the reader understand that the damsel who prudishly said 'no' to her prince's wish to lie at her feet should now say 'yes' to his offer to lay his head on her knees? Hamlet's ensuing question will make even less sense: 'Pensaveis talvez que tivesse outra idéa?' (literally, 'Maybe you thought I had something else in mind?'): what indecent proposal could Ophelia

suspect to be lurking behind the initial question? But the major instance of decorous rephrasing is yet to come. In the original, on hearing Ophelia declare that she ‘thinks nothing’, Hamlet remarks: ‘That’s a fair thought to lie between a maid’s legs’ - a once more deliberately ambiguous utterance, set halfway between the notion that the beauty of the thought would lie in taking the position so graphically described, and the suggestion that ‘no-thing’ is what one would expect to find there. And how does our royal translator deal with this?: ‘É um pensamento este digno de um coração de donzella (literally, ‘That’s a thought worthy of a damsel’s heart’). In brief, by wanting to evade the dangerous synecdoche of the ‘lap’, Luiz de Bragança generates (albeit inadvertently) an insinuating movement from Ophelia’s feet to her knees - but promptly circumvents the implications of that anatomically rising motion and proceeds straight to the heart, a chaste translation as the site of feeling of what was very explicitly, in Shakespeare’s text, the site of sexuality.

In such a passage King Luiz would seem to agree with Antoine Houdar de la Motte, the French translator of the *Iliad* who, by the early 18th century, was claiming in the preface to his translation to have ‘taken the liberty of changing whatever [he] thought disagreeable’ in Homer’s text; or even with Nicolas Perrot d’Ablancourt when, also in the preface to his translation of a classic, he proudly admitted to having ‘left out what was too filthy and softened what was too free’⁸. He proceeded with remarks on how he meant to adapt the author’s words to the taste of his time - much in the same way as (again in d’Ablancourt’s words) ‘ambassadors usually dress in the fashion of the country they are sent to, for fear of appearing ridiculous in the eyes of the people they try to please’⁹. As the ‘embassy’ simile makes clear, these remarks, to the extent that they are rooted in a sense of decorum, are evidently akin to some of the most transparent concerns in King Luiz’s version. At the same time they correspond to a clear option for one of the strategies which Friedrich Schleiermacher would propose in an 1813 essay which would prove extremely influential, and has in recent years been much re-valued within translation studies¹⁰. According to Schleiermacher, the translator, in his effort to bring reader and author together, could opt for one of two methods: either he took the reader over to the author, by producing a translation which preserved the ‘foreign’ marks of the text, as a way of not depriving the reader of an awareness of its unfamiliarity; or he brought the author to the reader, by delivering a text which might originally have been written in the target language.

It is clearly the latter - and much commoner - method that King Luiz I adopts for his *Hamlet*, but he does it in such a way as to bring to mind what Lawrence Venuti called, a few years ago, ‘the violence of translation’:

The aim of translation is to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar; and this aim always risks a wholesale domestication of the foreign text, often in highly self-conscious projects, where translation serves an appropriation of foreign cultures for domestic agendas, cultural, economic, political.

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Explicitly citing Schleiermacher’s distinction, Venuti emphasises that a domesticating strategy results in a concealment of precisely those social and cultural features which it would be a prime function of translation to make evident - thus producing sameness where there should be difference.

In the utterly disinterested spirit in which he decided to translate some of Shakespeare’s best-known plays, one can hardly suspect Dom Luiz de Bragança of consciously producing a normalised and thus impoverished version of Shakespeare’s text. But, in some passages of his *Hamlet*, he allowed himself as a translator to annul or inflect utterances which deviated from his own ethical, political and social norms - deviations which, as his ‘corrections’ also suggest, he felt would detract from the dignity of characters to be preserved as admirable. By thus imposing his identity on the text of *Hamlet*, he manages to give his version a fair degree of coherence - as it becomes, undisguisably,

⁸ Lefevere 1992: 28-9, 36.

⁹ Lefevere 1992: 36-7.

¹⁰ Schleiermacher, Friedrich 1813: Ueber die verschiedenen Methoden des Uebersetzens. Störig, Hans Joachim herausg. 1973: *Das Problem des Übersetzens*. Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: 38-70.

¹¹ Venuti, Lawrence 1995: *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London, Routledge: 18.

the work of a royal figure in late nineteenth-century Portugal; but, in this very datedness, it also becomes a case in point for the relevance of an ever-renewable commitment to deliver new readings (new translations).

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