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Cher Monsieur Shakespeare

A French Approach to the World-Renowned Elizabethan Genius

For as long as can be remembered, France and Britain have been regarded as enemies. Historically, their interaction with each other has confirmed this rivalry. Their rivalry has been seen mostly through their interaction in history. A few examples include the Norman invasion of England and Henry V's seizing of Normandy. However, these encounters have also enabled these nations to exchange their languages and literatures. It was inevitable then that the British would share with the French the literary genius of William Shakespeare. Through this essay, I would like to explore the relationship between Shakespeare and France. I will examine how his works were greeted by the French and then, through a more unusual perspective, by exploring the question of translating them.

Although Shakespeare's plays and sonnets crossed the Atlantic Ocean to reach France about a century after their publication, it was not until the nineteenth century that the French began attributing it some credit. The influence of Classicism on literature and art had greatly postponed the popularity of this literature. According to Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia, Cardinal Richelieu became the King of France's chief advisor in 1624 and gained even more power four years later, so much so that he practically ruled France. He exercised enormous power over theatre and imposed Classicism's rules on playwrights who had had scarcely any limitations until then. The Classicists emphasized order and balance after their predecessors

from Ancient Greece and Rome. Rather than keep to these kinds of restrictions, Shakespeare focused his microscopic lens on the open sore that is the malfunctioning of human relationships. Knowing this, it is easy to imagine why Shakespeare's works, which were gorged with atrocities in context and unconventionality in form, violated the tenets of Classicism.

The principle of the three unities of time, action, and place became a requirement under Richelieu (Morlock 7). More specifically, plots had to be resolved within twenty-four hours, had one main plot, and had to take place in one locality. Through his writings, we can see that Shakespeare was not by any means restrained by the three unities. For instance, in *King Lear*, scenes alternate between the mountains, Gloucester's residence, or Lear's castle, thus violating the unity of place. *Troilus and Cressida* spans on at least a couple of days because at least twenty-four hours pass before the duel between Hector and Ajax takes place. Finally, in *As You Like It*, there are two main plots: the problems caused by primogeniture coupled with Rosalind and Celia's quest.

It is interesting to note how certain French writers under Classicism and the Enlightenment disliked Shakespeare, yet could not help but point out his incomparable talent. Let's take Voltaire for example. Although he judged Shakespeare harshly and mercilessly and even thought he was a tasteless clown, he still conceded that the writer "reached the sublime without striving for it." Here, Voltaire alluded to Shakespeare's natural and innate power to accomplish that (Ralli 46). LaHarpe expressed the same ambivalence in feeling: he disliked Shakespeare's anarchical writing, yet admitted, like Voltaire, that some passages in his plays were exceptional (Ralli 54-55). In my opinion, French writers were not ready to step down from the pedestal of arrogance, and the restrictions of their literary movement caused them to be unjustly critical and narrow-minded.

Fortunately, beliefs changed toward the end of the eighteenth century with the Romantics. These writers distanced themselves from the Ancients' influence and started desiring a more cosmopolitan and utopian literary world. Lyricism and "the expression of the inner life of the individual" were some of the main characteristics of the Romantic platform. It allowed much more freedom to the writers in content and form ("Shakespeare in France"). In *La Littérature Anglaise*, Taine sums up this difference in style when he writes:

The drama reproduces promiscuity, ugliness, baseness, horrors, unclean details, profligate and ferocious manners, the whole reality of life just as it is when it is unrestricted by decorum, common sense, reason, and duty. Comedy, led through a phantasmagoria of pictures . . . brings before our eyes on its fairy wings the genius which created it. (qtd. in "Shakespeare in France" J)

This same crudity enacted on stage by the English Company fascinated Alexander Dumas who was pleased to see for the first time what he calls "real passions" and "inspiring men and women" (Morlock 10).

It is reasonable to say that Shakespeare was ahead of the French because he has long mixed verse and prose in his plays. However, it was not until the Romantic era that the French could explore and enjoy this new license. Victor Hugo's preface to his book *Cromwell* (1827) is the bible of the Romantic ideas. In it, he praises Shakespeare's writing style, which is proof of his notoriety. What he appreciates in Shakespeare's plays is the combination of grotesque and sublime (Morlock 11). The Victorian Web offers a brief explanation of the grotesque: that is it "the estranged world." According to Dr. Wheeler's website of literary terms, the sublime is "the powerful depiction of subjects that were vast, obscure, and powerful" (Literary Terms).

It is Hugo's opinion that the grotesque is a necessary step in attaining beauty. Augustus Ralli summarizes Hugo's belief that the combination of the two is vital through the following

words with the analogy that “in the poetry of Christian peoples [comedy] represents the beast in man, [tragedy] the soul. If the two branches are kept apart instead of fruit there will be abstractions of vices and virtue” (Ralli 212).

Following Augustus Ralli’s *A History of Shakespearian Criticism*, writers in the first half of the nineteenth century expressed in their writings their amazement at Shakespeare’s depiction of human nature. Lemercier, Madame de Stael, Chateaubriand, Villemain, and many more recognized great depth and dimension to Shakespeare’s characters. This acknowledgement did not come without criticism because most of these writers, and ones from the second part of the century, thought he lacked art because his talent was innate and not learned through rigorous training (Ralli 229).

Although nowadays, Shakespeare is considered a master of drama in France, *The New York Times* published an article in 1914 scandalously entitled “Noted French Critic Calls Shakespeare a Very Bad Dramatist.” It explains how George Pellissier harshly criticizes Shakespeare’s literary works in his book, *Shakespeare and the Shakespearian Superstition*. What is surprising is the fact that he is a well-known critic in France, a college professor, and even Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. One would think that with all these titles he would enjoy Shakespeare like the thousands of his contemporaries and modern scholars. He dislikes the fact that Shakespeare as a dramatist emphasizes the characters instead of the action. He writes: “in his plays the action hardly ever had that continuity and coherence to which the fundamental laws of drama should subject it.”

He also states that Shakespeare never explicitly analyzes his characters in the plays. For this reason, critics get lost in a maze when they try to find out who the characters really are, rather than being able to pinpoint them after a reasonable amount of analysis and research. However, as most critics of Classicism and the Enlightenment, Pellissier partially acknowledges

the Elizabethan writer's talent ("Noted French Critic").

Perhaps the most convincing proof of the French's interest in Shakespeare is the many translations of his works into French. Some of the first translators include Letourneur at the end of the eighteenth century and Guizot in 1821. In 1870, Arthur Rimbaud's "Ophelia" was published, which was an elegiac poem praising the character of Ophelia from *Hamlet* (Morlock 115). The poem depicts the dead Ophelia as a saint and the place where she lies as a shrine. Clearly, Rimbaud was fascinated and emotionally affected by this character and maybe by the play as a whole.

Other famous French writers who tried themselves at rendering Shakespeare into French are dramatist Alexandre Dumas and George Sand. The former translated *Hamlet* and the latter the upbeat comedy *As You Like It*. In his introduction to *Shakespeare in France*, Frank Morlock comments on both of these adaptations and how these authors found it necessary to change staging. In fact, as times evolved, "it was no longer feasible to spread action through any number of scenes as the Elizabethans had." To remedy to this problem, Dumas and Sand cut certain scenes and excluded minor characters (Morlock 17).

Dumas' main innovation is the reappearance of the ghost of Hamlet in the final scene to clarify the ending of the play. According to Morlock, Dumas' undertaking disencumbers the play of its original ending. Its vagueness was not suitable to the French public, who value rationalization (Morlock 18-9). Although the most flagrant modification of *As You Like It* is the deleting of certain scenes to create "greater unity to the action," the simple fact that Sand adds her own experience and enjoyment to the play refreshes it and makes the reader see the action and the characters in a new and insightful perspective.

Yves Bonnefoy, a French critic, essayist, poet, professor, and translator, has a lot of experience with the rendering of Shakespearian literature. Indeed, he has courageously

translated about fourteen of Shakespeare's plays and several of his sonnets. In his essay "Shakespeare and the French Poet," he thoroughly explains the difficulty of the enterprise. The problem exceeds simple language matters; there is an implication about the languages' essences, functions, and abilities that complicates the translation. In addition, "opposite metaphysics" rule over English and French, a problem which cannot be overlooked. Looking at translations that have been done in the past, he concludes that "in all of these translations, all Shakespeare's characters lose their roundness" because of these issues (Naughton 216).

Bonnefoy seems disappointed by both Letourneur and Francisque Michel's translations of Cleopatra's line "I have immortal longings" in *Antony and Cleopatra*. He thinks that "Je sens en moi l'impatient désir de l'immortalité" and "Je me sens pressée de quitter la vie" are just blurry and feeble reflections of Shakespeare's powerful words. In English, they have the dual function of capturing Cleopatra's feelings right at that very moment and of referring to "the timeless and the universal" (through the word "immortal").

Bonnefoy writes that "English poetry, Shakespeare's at least, rejects archetypal realism but only in order to follow the inalienable liberty of man with greater flexibility." This, in the English language, allows for a certain level of independence in the reader's imagination. French poetry is more "cautious" and "self-contained" and anything that is not stated cannot be implied (Naughton 219). Bonnefoy's analogy of English as a mirror and French as sphere illustrates this difference between the two (Naughton 218-20).

Let's not forget that Shakespeare is the author of magnificent sonnets, which the French also tried to translate. The endeavor seems even more frightening than that of translating plays. In fact, the translator has to ask himself the question of what, between meaning and form, needs to be preserved the most. It seems that he or she will hurt either one of them to obtain a

translation as accurate as possible of just one. Neither of them has priority over the other because the one complements the other and vice versa and their combination gives the poem the complete function intended by the poet. In brief, the translator's compromise has high chances of breaking the "dialectic relationship" between meaning and form (Naughton 253).

Bonnefoy decided to preserve the general form of the sonnet, that is, to divide the verses into four parts, but he did not keep the restrictive meter. The freedom granted to him after this requirement is waived allows him to "relive what [he has] seen in the poem and, above all, to listen to it more intensely – even perhaps, to draw out of the original text certain potentialities that were stifled by the fixed form" (Naughton 254). He reflects further on this issue and comes up with the conclusion that the translator's duty is not to translate the meaning of the poem. This is impossible because he is never a hundred percent certain of the author's original meaning (Naughton 254). Therefore, we can only expect to find the translator's personal experience of the text's meaning.

Another sonnet translation is Dikdran Garabedian's "The Sonnets of Shakespeare Translated into French 'Regular' Sonnets," which was reviewed by Ian Forbes Fraser in *Shakespeare Quarterly* and Michel Grivelet in *The Modern Language Review*. According to these critics, his translation is surprisingly disappointing knowing his brilliant poetry and impressive amount of experience with both languages. What they criticized mostly is his syntax, which Ian Forbes Fraser calls "fractured French" (Fraser 182). The meaning gets lost in the sentence's ambiguous structure, between the commas, the interjections, and the exclamation points.

The fourth line of Sonnet XCV exemplifies this awkwardness. In English, it reads: "O, in what sweets dost thou thy sins enclose," whereas Garabedian writes "Toi tes péchés d'encloure, oh! dans quel douceur!" Michel Grivelet comments on Garabedian's difficulty to "match the

monosyllables of the original with French ones” so much so that “look” becomes “clin” instead of “clin d’oeil.” Grivelet continued by naming Garabedian’s work “petit nègre”, “infantile grammar,” and lacking the “sweetness, the flow of music” (Grivelet 249-50).

Although Fraser highlights the fact that no French person living in the twenty-first century can be inspired by this poetry as Garabedian presents it or appreciate its beauty, it was not the translator’s goal. In fact, he intended to be as accurate as possible as to render “Shakespeare’s vocabulary, word play, imagery, stress, and even, in so far as may be, the rhythm” (Fraser 183). The results show, once again, the impossibility of the challenge (even by a knowledgeable French tutor at Oxford as Garabedian). Therefore, Dikdran Garabedian’s work is an excellent example to illustrate the complexity of rendering Shakespeare’s literary creations into French. Meaning, syntax, and form cannot stay intact during this process and the translator has to carefully decide what to leave and take, consciously meditating on what is at risk with each of his initiatives.

Although it has been said umpteen times that the French and the English do not get along, it is impossible to examine the literature of one without looking at the other. They have influenced each other interchangeably. Even though it took some time in order for the French to enjoy William Shakespeare’s literary works, by the nineteenth century, the Romantics looked up to him with eyes full of respect. This shows how defined the characteristics of a literary movement are and how writers abide to it.

The many translation initiatives or attempts of Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets witness the French fascination for the Elizabethan genius. Nonetheless, they also reveal the quasi-impossibility of it, hence the use of the word “attempts” previously. The difficulty of translating such a complex masterpiece as Shakespeare’s reminds me of how fortunate I am to be able to understand and, most of all, appreciate the richness of the two languages.

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