Re-focusing Shakespeare and Translation

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This paper takes as its starting point *Shakespeare and the Language of Translation* – the Arden Shakespeare collection which sought to effect the emancipation of translation as a sub-discipline within Shakespeare Studies[1]. It also reflects on where we as Shakespeareans have moved since, even though it has only been a few years since the collection was first published and the responses have started to appear in the form of reviews and articles. The object of this paper is to take stock, see where we stand today and perhaps, also, describe with some degree of accuracy where we may be heading. Over the past decade, translation as a discipline for Shakespeareans has successfully shed its Cinderella status (to borrow a metaphor introduced by Dirk Delabastita). But what are the maid's prospects in the world of academe? Has Cinderella now really met her match, having entered the realm of *Alternative Shakespeares*?[2]. Or is the situation, perhaps, more complex than that?

By way of an introduction, I look at a number of movies in which the notion of translation is more or less relevant, from the so-called object or story level to the meta-level that transcends it. If anything, these mainly Hollywood movies suggest how central to our current cultural experience and above all to our awareness translation really is, and suggests the ways in which the phenomenon is perceived. These movies are: *Lost in Translation* (dir. Sofia Coppola, 2003), *Kill Bill* (dir. Quentin Tarantino, 2003), *The Interpreter* (dir. Sydney Pollack, 2005), and *Elephant* (dir. Gus Van Sant, 2003).

Of these movies, *Lost in Translation* has the notion of translation most prominently in its title. It is also a movie which, for this very reason, has invited a fair degree of valuable reflection, both from reviewers and from Translation Studies specialists. This is not the place to go into these responses, but it is worth looking at the movie briefly for a more or less contemporary view of translation.

For the sake of the discussion, let us agree that Coppola's *Lost in Translation* operates on (at least) two levels: on the level of 'language' and that of 'culture'. On the first level, we deal with an implied definition of translation that is of a linguistic, interlingual kind, furthering communication between two world languages in the traditional sense of the term: American English and Japanese.

[1] *Shakespeare and the Language of Translation*, ed. by Ton Hoenselaars, London, Thomson Learning, 2004.

[2] See Rui Carvalho Homem, «Memory, Ideology, Translation: *King Lear* behind Bars and before History», in *Alternative Shakespeares 3*, ed. by Diana E. Henderson, New York/London, Routledge, 2008, pp. 204-20. For a plea to establish translation as one of the 'Alternative Shakespeares', see Dirk Delabastita, «More Alternative Shakespeares», in *Four Hundred Years of Shakespeare in Europe*, ed. by Ángel-Luis Pujante and Ton Hoenselaars, Newark (NJ), Delaware University Press, 2003, pp. 113-33.

No doubt, on the level of traditional languages, the movie offers a popular definition or misinterpretation of the term 'translation'. After all, the movie's famous scene constructed around the Japanese making of a whiskey commercial really concentrates not on translation, but on what we would need to call 'interpretation'. Like Shakespeare in the army scenes with Parolles in *All's Well that Ends Well*, the Coppola movie seeks the extreme edge of interpretation, and effectively mobilizes the confusion for the sake of farce. The main difference between *Lost in Translation* and *All's Well that Ends Well*, however, is that unlike Coppola, Shakespeare gets the term for the activity he represents right. This is what Lord Dumain says at the beginning of Act IV, scene 1, where the tasks of the soldiers are distributed:

> When you sally upon him [= Parolles] speak what terrible language you will; though you understand it not yourselves, no matter; for we must not seem to understand him, unless some one among us, whom we must produce for an interpreter. (IV.1.2-6)

On the traditional, verbal level, then, *Lost in Translation* is not as interested in translation as it claims, but really in interpretation. It is in line with this popular consumption of the profession's terminology, that the movie's title rehearses and perpetuates a rather unfortunate commonplace in the field of translation. In a reactionary manner, the film continues to prefer – despite the work done by translators and translation scholars in recent years to defuse the magic phrase – a continued focus on translation as loss. It fails to consider, as many of us have gradually come to do, that a translation may be recognized as a potentially enhancing achievement, that it may be seen as a creative act to be appreciated in its own right. But this is not the most important thing to note about the movie, or about the popular media's interest in and awareness of translation.

But the Coppola movie is not really interested in interlingual translation; it really focuses on 'cultural translation'. In the course of the movie, we are not meant to consider the difference between English and Japanese, but are, instead, invited to consider the question how 'American*ness*' translates into 'Japanese*ness*'. We are meant to arrive at the conclusion – certainly on the basis of the movie itself – that American culture does not translate well into Japanese culture: Johnny Carson, rendered as Japanese, becomes a parody of himself. In the Coppola film, that is, we constantly see that the result of the absorption of American culture by the Japanese mystifies the American visitors. And since the movie presents events from an American perspective throughout, the Japanese are really in a no-win situation.

Basically, what this curious phenomenon illustrates is that Sofia Coppola's approach – not just to verbal translation (meaning here: 'interpretation'), but also to cultural translation – is a limited one. As it engages in representing 'cultural' transfer, the movie maintains what I would call a 'unilateral dynamic', concentrating solely on the way the Japanese absorb and transform American culture. There is no sense in which cultural translation might be anything more than just 'transfer' – like, for instance, 'exchange'. In a sense, *Lost in Translation* illustrates that the failure of cultural transfer is an extension of the US's perception of the world through the English language: beyond English lies

the madness of the Japanese mimicking Johnny Carson. Beyond English lies the alternative, broken English and, on another level, the presumably kinky sex offered to foreigners by their Japanese hosts.

This unilateral dynamic in *Lost in Translation*, or this insular attitude towards a foreign culture (which is to be read in cultural as well as linguistic terms), may be said to go back as far as Shakespeare, and to *Henry V* in particular. Here, the expansion of the English king's political influence coincides with the silencing of Katherine's tongue by means of a kiss that will let the King's English prevail. Also the erotically-tinged language lesson (as perceived by the English audience) is an early precursor to the prostitute scene in *Lost in Translation*; although it may be difficult to imagine Katherine asking Henry to «lip» her stocking. Against this background, the problematization of the American adoption of the samurai code in the two parts of Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* is altogether more serious in kind. Perhaps we should tell our students to watch *Lost in Translation* only if they are prepared to consider Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* as its counterpart.

Clearly, translation is a favourite topic in today's world. In fact, it is so popular, one might say, that an almost inevitable erosion of meaning has been taking place. Studying the use of the term as employed in *Lost in Translation* we become aware that for 'translation' we should really read 'interpretation', and that if we are prepared to extend our definition to include 'cultural translation' (of which I am in favour, up to a point), we should note that representing it as a unilateral process from American to Japanese culture by-passes the issue of translation and/as exchange.

But let us move on to two other movies where the interest in translation and/or interpretation actually combines more explicitly with our own Shakespearean interests. The first of these is *The Interpreter*, directed by Sydney Pollack (2005). *The Interpreter* is an international thriller around a murder committed in Africa, and it is set at the Head Office of the United Nations in New York. Here, Nicole Kidman is an interpreter who (because of her knowledge of languages, presumably learnt during her African youth) overhears a conversation at the Head Office that she is not supposed to follow. This sparks off a thriller plot, which, fortunately for Kidman, has a happy ending. The job of interpreter alluded to in the title of the movie explicitly refers to the responsible and honourable function of those who take it upon themselves to combat the Babylonian curse prevailing in international organizations. The movie's director, Sydney Pollack, openly takes sides with the interpreter.

Pollack's attitude becomes apparent in the course of a scene set on a New York coach. Here, an old acquaintance asks the female protagonist what she is doing in the city. When she says she is working as an interpreter at the United Nations, the friend gives her a sneering reply, saying, with reference to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (V.1.25-6), that «The UN is a tale of sound and fury…». As Kidman gets off the coach, the director makes sure to suggest that one always underestimates the virtue of the interpreter at one's own peril: before the coach reaches the next stop, it is blown to pieces with the *Macbeth*-quoting passenger on board.

No less violent is my final example of Shakespearean translation in the cinema: Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003). Those who have seen the movie will remember that it is about a high-school massacre, possibly inspired by the

events at Columbine High. As in the case of Columbine, the juvenile assassins were explicitly associated with Shakespeare: as Eric C. Brown reminds us, «in a video made by the Columbine murderers before the shootings, one [of them] quotes from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: 'Good wombs have borne bad sons'»[3]. In the movie, however, it is not *The Tempest* I.2.120 that is referred to, but *Macbeth* I.1.10 as towards the end one of the killers, after shooting also his own pal and accomplice, comments: «So fair and foul a day I have not seen».

For our present purposes, it is not really relevant that the *Macbeth* quotation brings into focus the problem that the speaker, the cultivated young man – who also plays Beethoven's *Für Elise* as the main movie soundtrack feature – might at the same time be a serial killer[4]. For our present purposes, it is not so relevant either that the *Macbeth* quotation focuses the movie's central problem that 'fair' and 'civilized' may also be 'foul' and 'barbaric'. Of greater interest is the fact that Gus van Sant (who, as the director also of *My Own Private Idaho*, obviously knows his Shakespeare), is really 'translating' Shakespeare into Shakespeare.

These examples illustrate how the modern media reflect an unmistakable interest in translation as well as Shakespearean translation. In the majority of cases, though, the definition or implied definition is hardly a traditional one. In *Lost in Translation*, we witness the confusing equation of translation with interpretation. When, as in the Pollack movie, interpretation is indeed central, we are not witnessing the actual act, but are confronted with a (fatal) reflection on the practice. In both *Lost in Translation* and in my own interpretation of the Shakespearean element in *Elephant*, the term 'translation' can only be made to apply by stretching its limits to include, beyond matters linguistic, also matters cultural.

These examples, taken from a range of more or less popular movies, illustrate some of the shifts that have taken place also in academe, as it occupies itself with Shakespeare and translation. They explain why we are no longer primarily interested in translation as such but at least as much in the conditions of the act of translation and in the continual intertraffic between cultural contexts in the widest sense of the term. They may be understood more clearly when we also realize that we have continually been expanding the definition of the term 'translation' so that it can now also refer to (a) trading between cultures, between different ways of imagining the world in colonial and/or postcolonial terms; (b) travel and/as translation; and (c), if one wishes to follow Jonathan Bate in this, all 'art' may be seen as «a translation of life into special languages with codes of their own» and cultural history as a complex sequence of such acts of translation.

[3] Eric C. Brown, «Cinema in the Round: Self-Reflexivity in Tim Blake Nelson's *O*», in *Almost Shakespeare: Reinventing His Works for Cinema and Television*, ed. by James R. Keller and Leslie Stratyner, Jefferson (NC), McFarland & Co., 2004, p. 74. Brown's source is Michael Janofsky, «Student Killers' Tapes Filled with Rage», *New York Times*, 14 December 1999, A10.

[4] In its link with the Beethoven music, the combination of crime and art is a cliché. It recalls the curious representation of Nazi generals with a love of music. This also occurs in the movie *Conspiracy* (2001), where Kenneth Branagh plays the chief of the Germany security service Reinhard Heydrich taking the decision for the Final Solution at the Wannsee Conference. After the guests have left, we see Adolf Eichmann (who will dutifully execute his plans) enjoying the Schubert Quintet in C (D 956).

Bate speaks of «processes» that take their life from a hermaphroditic mingling of multiple agencies. These processes involve «not only translators in the strict sense of bilingual talents, but also all writers, actors and directors, readers and interpreters, who are bold enough to 'in' the very imagination and the true conceit of the authors they admire»[5].

This broadening view of translation is increasingly conspicuous. Speaking of the way in which Shakespeare incorporates or quotes from his personal experience in the early modern theatre, Douglas Bruster may claim «that Caliban derived from Shakespeare's experiences with Will Kemp […]. In this reading, Kemp's tendency to ignore the lines that playwrights had written *translated* into Caliban's animosity towards Prospero's powerful books»[6]. On an altogether grander scale, in a brilliant article entitled «The World Beyond: Shakespeare and the Tropes of Translation», Michael Neill exploits the full metaphorical potential that the term allows. Thus, he speaks of Shakespeare and «the role of his own theatre as a place of miraculous translations», and argues that «'Translation' seems a particularly convenient term for such crossings because of its broad range of meanings»[7]. Such no doubt attractive expansionism does make one wonder if there are any limits. One wonders if the limit is not reached with H.R. Coursen's *Shakespeare Translated*, which is really about Shakespeare *adaptations*, and fails to address the issue of terminology and definition altogether[8].

On the one hand, we as Shakespeareans could argue that as a result of continually broadening our definition of 'translation', a point has been reached where the meaning of the term has been reduced to near meaninglessness. This, as Terry Eagleton has argued, is something that tends to happen also to other buzz words, like the word 'culture' itself[9]. And since we are in a branch that pursues discrimination rather than generalization, some of us might be rather critical of this development.

On the other hand, one could argue that the ever broader definition of translation has also been beneficial for the Shakespeareans professionally engaged in the practice and/or the study of translation. As the definition of our central term has gradually complemented the concern with transfer of Shakespeare from Early Modern English to numerous other foreign languages with questions of a more broadly cultural or intercultural nature, we have stood to profit immensely. But at a certain point, one may pose the question whether, with so many new colleagues having entered the 'translation' arena, we can still say, to use a metaphor, that we are all speaking the same language, the same 'language of translation'?

[5] Jonathan Bate, «Elizabethan Translation», in *Translating Life: Studies in Transpositional Aesthetics*, ed. by Shirley Chew and Alistair Stead, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1999, pp. 50-1.

[6] See Douglas Bruster, *Quoting Shakespeare: Form and Culture in Early Modern Drama*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2000, p. 118.

[7] Michael Neill, *Putting History to the Question: Power, Politics, and Society in English Renaissance Drama*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 401.

[8] Herbert R. Coursen, *Shakespeare Translated: Derivatives on Film and TV*, New York, Peter Lang, 2005.

[9] Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, p. 131.

In the introduction to *Shakespeare and the Language of Translation* I noted that

> [s]ince, in recent years, cultural exchange has been more or less metaphorically defined as a process of translation, and translation itself has come to be recognized as a profession at the cutting edge of cultural exchange, any attention devoted to ubiquitous Shakespeare from this dual perspective should profit both the field of Shakespearean translation and the larger industry in which it is so deeply embedded[10].

When we assembled the Arden collection, we may have been just a little too confident about the magic powers of cultural contextualization. Recognizing this, I agree with Péter Dávidházy that Translation Studies may have reached a stage where it ought critically to re-assess, among other things, the now so snugly positioned Shakespearean sub-discipline along these lines. In the 1980s, we applauded the cultural turn in Translation Studies, and witnessed a change that «involved a considerable widening of the horizon, since any and all phenomena relating to translation, in the broadest sense [became] objects of study». But «the widened scope has now resulted in a loss of focus»[11]. It raises the question whether, perhaps, we should not therefore re-focus. Translation Studies, Dávidházy argues, seems to have reached a stage where it should «learn […] to include, though always on its own terms», because its «newly gained tolerance […] has not wiped out the long-cherished dream of a hard discipline»[12]. And if we are going to re-focus, argues Dávidházy (and here I am in full agreement), it might as well be an attempt to re-focus on the linguistic experience of translation, though expressly without losing sight ever again of the broader processes of cultural exchange. It seems to me that as soon as Translation Studies begins to adopt a narrower academic identity which could also be described as a disguised form of hegemony, and moves towards re-focusing along linguistic lines, the number of colleagues who now graze in the field of Shakespeare and translation might well be depleted.

It is not likely that this re-focusing process, this return from an analysis of broader cultural issues to a more text-oriented discussion, is going to make the study of Shakespeare and translation what it once was – «an interesting and harmless occupation for researchers abroad», as Inga-Stina Ewbank has described it[13]. But is it possible to elaborate on Dirk Delabastita's definition of the translation branch as «the Cinderella of Shakespeare Studies»[14] and imagine that, as Cinderella lies asleep alongside her newly acquired Prince, her dreams may occasionally recall the childhood trauma of the disenchanting chimes at midnight? On waking up she would need to consider if the monolingually-oriented scholar would maintain an interest in what is likely to become an expressly multilingual multinational organization once again. Cinderella will have to consider whether the new linguistic focus will create a new linguistic divide.

[10] T. Hoenselaars, *Shakespeare and the Language of Translation*, cit., pp. 22-3.

[11] Péter Dávidházy, review of recent work on Shakespeare and translation, in *Translation and Literature* 15 (2006), p. 128.

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 128, 129.

[13] Inga-Stina Ewbank, «Shakespeare Translation as Cultural Exchange», *Shakespeare Survey* 48 (1995), p. 1.

[14] D. Delabastita, «More Alternative Shakespeares», cit., p. 126.

But perhaps we should not only focus on matters gloomy. After all, there are also optimistic signs from quarters where we might least have expected them. The first of these I find in a recent collection of essays, entitled *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, edited by Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood. In the introduction to this wide-ranging but also fascinating collection of essays by distinguished authors including Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Lawrence Venuti, and David Damrosch, Sandra Bermann stresses the importance – and this is a US perspective – of including in education the notion, if *not* of 'translation', at least of 'translationality'. As she puts it:

> An educational focus on our 'translationality' would allow for a heightened attention to some of the most challenging issues facing us – as literary scholars and as world citizens. We might read literary texts as well as the daily news in a more informed and critical light. We might consider in different ways the intricate circulation of texts and its bearing upon nation and post-nation[15].

In Bermann's perception,

> [m]ore and better translations of non-English texts could, for instance, clearly help the Anglo-American reader to engage literary worlds and historical cultures that are not her own. Similar effects could be gathered by more translations in other parts of the globe. A focus on translationality might even urge rethinking of globalization itself in more carefully defined, more humanistic terms[16].

Certainly, there is no reason for despondency or a sense of doom as long as Bermann urges policy makers to take their cue from the claim to the effect that «without more refined and sensitive cultural/linguistic translations and, above all, without an education that draws attention to the very *act* of translation and to the interwoven, problematic otherness that it confronts, our global world will be less hospitable; in fact, it could founder»[17].

This is only one of the positive signs. The other sign I find in Domna Stanton's Presidential Address at the Modern Language Association conference of 2005. Here, Stanton offers an alternative beyond a mere heightened awareness of 'translationality', proposing «cosmopolitanism as an educational ideal and a rich literary and cultural mine for our work» in the humanities. Here, «[l]earning and teaching languages other than our own», she argues, «are… fundamental cultural exercises». The other language is not merely an 'object' to be mastered, but is part of «a way of being in the world», an «encounter with linguistic and cultural difference that transforms the self and the other(s)», engaging the subject in «a double-voiced, dialogic process»[18].

Against the background of the American government's lesson that training speakers in foreign languages «is crucial to [the] national security after 9/11»,

[15] *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, ed. by Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 7.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Domna C. Stanton, «On Rooted Cosmopolitanism», *PMLA* 121:3 (May 2006), p. 629.

Stanton continues to stress that what she proposes is a less militaristically or defensively informed mode of foreign language learning: she, instead, thinks that we should «uphold a more capacious, humanistic vision of the importance of learning the languages and understanding the cultures of others, one that predicates a cosmopolitan view of the world»[19].

It seems to me that as Translation Studies re-focuses on its new catholicity, i.e. on its linguistic origins, we as translation scholars need not fear a great falling off. To begin with, there are clear signs that within the global English language area – where languages other than English may seem irrelevant or oddities – a new awareness is developing of 'translationality'. It is an awareness that (certainly from a US perspective) should eventually silence the laughter that Bill Murray in *Lost in Translation* still evokes, and perhaps lead to a confiscation of all the Oscars, Bafta awards and Golden Globes that this Sofia Coppola movie has scored.

It is not unlikely that this new post-9/11 attitude will have a serious impact on Translation Studies and its sub-disciplines, since it has already begun to do so, notably with books like Mona Baker's *Translation and Conflict*[20]. But perhaps even more promising is Domna Stanton's call (in the wake of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Ethics of Identity* [2005], and almost simultaneous with his more recent *Cosmopolitanism* [2006]), for a multilingually schooled rather than translationally aware world citizen. One could argue that such a clarion call must perhaps be sounded for the Americans, and that it is not so very original from a European perspective, but it is the change that we must applaud, also as Shakespeareans. For, as Dávidházy notes in connection with Translation Studies's renewed emphasis on language, «With the rise of the sub-discipline focusing on European Shakespeares, the study of translations has more tasks than ever before, and by now its methodology has become sophisticated enough to do them»[21]. The direction in which we are heading is clear, and we know that the number of tasks is growing. To achieve any success, we need all the help we can get. Shakespeareans of the world unite.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 630.
[20] Mona Baker, *Translation and Conflict*, New York and London, Routledge, 2006.
[21] Péter Dávidházy, review, cit., p. 129.

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