

"WHOSE PLAY IS IT?" TRANSLATING SHAKESPEARE INTO ENGLISH

Gary Harrington

Abstract:

The paper will look at contemporary published versions of the Shakespearean plays which purport to provide "simplified" or "modernized" readings. Gone are Shakespeare's polysemy and heteroglossia, to be replaced by a single "meaning" of a given line which in effect goes beyond interpretation to constitute what is in effect a translation of sorts (and underscores considerations which I think have a direct bearing on translating Shakespeare into other languages as well). This principle may best be illustrated at a close examination of two of Shakespeare's most consistently twin-tongued characters, Prince Hal and Hamlet. My paper concludes with a short foray into 21st century "alternative" Shakespeares in English, with a particular focus upon recently emerging "rap" versions of some of the more famous passages.

Keywords: *translation, adaptation, drama, stylistic analysis*

In a crucial, if underrated, episode in *Macbeth*, Malcolm and Macduff meet in England to plan their campaign against Macbeth. Ross arrives midway through the scene and after some prompting relates that Macbeth has had Macduff's family slaughtered, whereupon Macduff immediately pulls his hat over his brows. This has typically been taken as Macduff's method of hiding his tears.¹ However, it's equally possible and arguably more likely that Macduff is in fact disguising the fact that he is *not* crying, and that Malcolm suspects this and so orders Macduff to raise his hat. The latter's comment shortly thereafter, "Oh I *could* play the woman with mine eyes" (4.3.230, my emphasis) - that is to say, shed tears - suggests that he has not been doing so previously. And elsewhere in Shakespeare, pulling a hat over one's eyes registers chicanery, hypocrisy, and/or subterfuge. For instance, in *Julius Caesar*, both Brutus and Portia complain

¹ Wilbur Sanders, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 272; Michael Long, *Macbeth* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), 102-103; Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Macbeth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 553.

about the conspirators' arriving at the house with their caps drawn down (2.1.76-85; 276-79), and in *The Merchant of Venice* the incessantly-irritating Gratiano says that he will conceal his true obnoxious nature by "Wear[ing] prayer books in my pocket, look[ing] demurely,/ Nay more, while grace is saying, hood[ing] mine eyes/ Thus with my hat" (2.2.183-185). Consequently Macduff, whom many consider to be the hero of *Macbeth*, at least possibly couldn't care less about the slaughter of his wife and children, just as in the following act Macbeth is notably nonchalant regarding his wife's death - "She should have died hereafter" (5.5.17) - and Siward seems entirely unaffected by the death of his son, just so long as he was wounded in the front: "Then God's soldier be he" (5.8.47).¹

It is therefore of crucial importance both for understanding *Macbeth* itself and noting in it a recurring motif in Shakespeare's works that Malcolm's directive to Macduff, "What, man, never pull your hat upon your brows" (4. 3. 208), be delivered substantially - and preferably exactly - in that form. However, the *No Fear Shakespeare*, which presents the original text of a Shakespeare play on the left page and a "line-by-line translation that puts Shakespeare into everyday language" (according to the cover blurb) on the right, rephrases the line as follows: "Come on, man, don't keep your grief hidden".² Not only does the "Come on, man" make Shakespeare sound as if he wrote the play on acid at Woodstock, but the "don't keep your grief hidden" dismisses the whole context of the hat and loses along with it Shakespeare's possible indictment of Macduff. Moreover, the *No Fear*'s translation of Macduff's comment that he *could* cry is rendered as "I could *go on* weeping like a woman",³ which in its supposition that Macduff had indeed been crying earlier robs the scene of its ambivalence.

Underlying the *No Fear*'s blurb that the editors intend to provide "translation[s] anyone can understand" is the mistaken idea that most who are fluent in English cannot expect to become fluent in Shakespeare, that his works are "caviary to the general" as Hamlet puts it (2. 2. 437), or "like caviar for a slob who couldn't appreciate it",⁴ as the *No Fear Hamlet* has it. Certainly, Shakespeare on the stage is accessible at many levels of understanding - it's one of his greatest strengths as a dramatist - and while Shakespeare on the page and in the study does require a more sophisticated understanding than that of a Polonius who is interested only in "a jig or a tale of bawdry" (*Hamlet* 2.2.500), it's been my experience that students who devote the necessary hard work to understanding Shakespeare ultimately do so at some satisfactory level.

¹ See Gary Harrington, "The New World Order in 4.3 of *Macbeth*". *The Journal of the Wooden O Symposium*, 1.1 (2001), passim.

² *No Fear Shakespeare. Macbeth* (New York: Spark, 2003), 173.

³ *Ibid.*, 175, my emphasis.

⁴ *No Fear Shakespeare. Hamlet* (New York: Spark, 2003), 121.

Perhaps the most challenging of Shakespeare's texts for students and professionals alike is *Hamlet*, largely because Hamlet's remarks typically contain multiple meanings, each of which is equally applicable to the situation at hand. So, for instance, Hamlet's famous first line - "A little more than kin and less than kind" (1.2.65) - which may or may not be an aside, offers several puns. *No Fear* renders the line as "Too many family ties there for me",¹ which effectively enough captures the "more than kin" reference but completely erases that involving "less than kind," which I'm surprised the *No Fear* doesn't translate as "not very nice, to boot." "Less than kind" does indeed mean not nice, but it also means "of a different and inferior species," and so underscores Hamlet's sense of the enormous gulf separating him from Claudius in terms of moral character.

This gulf, though, may not be as vast as Hamlet would like to believe. When Hamlet sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their doom in England, he does so by imitating Claudius's florid writing style, signing Claudius's name to the execution order, and using the royal seal of Denmark to keep the order secure, all of which underscore the extent to which Hamlet and his uncle/father resemble one another - more than kin indeed.² And like Claudius, Hamlet ultimately ends up poisoning the King of Denmark who is married to Gertrude. This conflation of Hamlet and Claudius is forecast by Claudius's remark to Hamlet, "Be as ourself in Denmark" (1.2.122), an anticipatory meaning missing from the *No Fear*'s "Stay in Denmark like us".³

Claudius is not the "Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain" (2.2.581) Hamlet would have him be, or at least he isn't entirely so, for Claudius is plagued by his conscience, as appears in his first remark in the play: "Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death/ The memory be green" (1.2.1-2). *No Fear* rightly enough translates "green" as "fresh", but "green" also carries the connotation of jealousy, which Iago refers to as "the green-ey'd monster" (*Othello*, 3.3.166), a correlation also available in Portia's reference to "green-eyed jealousy" (*MV*, 3.2.110). So, well before the confession scene, Claudius unwittingly provides verbal indicators of his own turpitude, in this instance to his jealousy over his brother's position as king and as Gertrude's bedmate. Another indicator occurs in that same speech when Claudius, talking of Young Fortinbras, refers to "those lands/ Lost by his father, with all bands of law/ To our most valiant brother. So much for him./ Now for ourself, and for this time of meeting" (1.2.23-26). *No Fear*, trying to be helpful, makes explicit the

¹ *No Fear Shakespeare. Hamlet*, 23.

² Catherine Brown Tkacz, "The Wheel of Fortune, the Wheel of State, and Moral Choice in *Hamlet*", *South Atlantic Review* 57.4 (Nov., 1992), passim.

³ *Ibid.*, 27.

antecedent of “him”, saying “So much for Fortinbras”.¹ “Fortinbras” is indeed the conversational antecedent, and the person to whom Claudius means to refer; the grammatical antecedent, however, is not “Fortinbras” but “brother”, and so Claudius is also inadvertently saying “So much for my dead brother, now for myself.”

However, King Hamlet is not so easily dismissed from Claudius’s subconscious, as is indicated elsewhere in the play, including later in the same scene. When Claudius chastises Hamlet for wearing mourning for too long, Claudius not only hits unerringly upon Hamlet’s anxiety about his virility by stating “‘Tis unmanly grief” (1.2.94), he also emphasizes that all fathers perish, “From the first corse till he that died today” (1.2.105). In the Biblical tradition “the first cor[p]se” was that of Abel, not coincidentally a good man who was murdered by his own brother, and so Claudius’s indirectly referring to Abel’s murder constitutes a further unwitting self-indictment, and one entirely absent from the *No Fear* which ignores the “first corpse” line altogether.

In the graveyard, Hamlet alludes to the same Biblical incident, referring by name to Cain and identifying him as he “that did the first murder” (5.1.77). In this episode, Hamlet seems almost reconciled to his father’s death, at least in that he doesn’t mention his father at all in 5.1 and only in passing in 5.2. Certainly, in act 5 Hamlet seems a more callous, and to my mind a less intriguing, figure than previously. He has no qualms now about killing Claudius - “the readiness is all” (5.2.222) he states - and though he’s referring to being prepared for death, the phrase accurately captures his newfound ease with regard to dispatching Claudius. Hamlet is certainly complacent about having arranged for the executions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, telling Horatio that “They are not near my conscience. Their defeat/ Does by their own insinuation grow./ ‘Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes/ Between the pass and fell incensed points/ Of mighty opposites” (5.2.58-62). Horatio’s response, “Why, what a king is this!” (62), apparently reflects his judgment upon Claudius after having heard the entirety of Hamlet’s tale; certainly the *No Fear* version subscribes to this notion, having the line read “What a king Claudius is”.² This, however, precludes the possibility of reading an additional commentary by Shakespeare upon Hamlet’s own negative potential as a king. Certainly, a future ruler who would shrug off the deaths of two of his subjects because they got in the way of quarreling nobles is a less than edifying prospect - especially when the potential ruler is himself responsible for the deaths of his two subjects: “Why, what a king is this!”

Shakespeare further implies that Hamlet is becoming inured to killing in his comment on the gravedigger’s singing merrily while performing his duties.

¹ Ibid., 19.

² Ibid., 305.

Hamlet explains to Horatio, “the hand of little employment hath the daintier sense” (5.1.70). Hamlet has been responsible for the deaths of three people by this point, and he’s looking forward to number four, so his hand has of late seen much employment in the vocation of murder. Thus, his comment unintentionally reflects upon his growing ability to murder others without reservation. The *No Fear Hamlet* completely botches this line by rendering it as “Only people who don’t have to work can afford to be sensitive”,¹ thereby transmuted a statement implying murderous callousness to one which posits some vague connection between being upper-class and having feelings.

No Fear itself, however, seems unnecessarily sensitive in its mode of expression. Apparently assuming that references to sex don’t fall into the category of the so-called “Plain English” the series advertises, *No Fear* decides to improve upon Shakespeare by bowdlerizing or altering some of the racier comments in *Hamlet*. Hence, the gravedigger’s references to “whoreson”, one of the great Anglo-Saxon cuss words and one which has a very specific reference to Hamlet’s situation given his attitude towards his mother, is replaced by “goddamn” and shortly thereafter “crazy bastard” substitutes for the more expressively colorful “whoreson mad fellow”.² Likewise, the gravedigger’s joke about “many pocky corses” (5.1.166), those falling apart from the ravages of tertiary syphilis, becomes the tepid “a lot of people now who are . . . rotten”.³

Such disease imagery runs virulently throughout *Hamlet*, as does the related motif of poison, the latter of which culminates in the duel scene at the end of the play. Most of the deaths onstage in Act 5, including those of the play’s major figures, are attributable at least in part to poison. For example, Laertes is stabbed by the poisoned sword which he had prepared for Hamlet. While Laertes’s comment in *No Fear* upon thus falling victim to his own devices “like a mouse caught in my own trap”⁴ provides the distinctly weird impression of a mouse having constructed a trap, the simile by accident or design fits in with a minor motif in the play. Mice scamper through *Hamlet* at various points, such as in Francisco’s comment that not a mouse has been stirring on his watch (1.1.10), in Hamlet’s remarking that Claudius will call Gertrude his “mouse” (3.4.183), and most prominently in Hamlet’s changing the name of *The Murder of Gonzago* to *The Mousetrap*. So the *No Fear* Laertes’s referring to the mouse and trap isn’t bad, but it also isn’t Shakespeare, in which Laertes describes himself as having been caught “as a woodcock to mine own springe” (5.2.306). This phrasing is important because it echoes Polonius’s telling Ophelia that Hamlet’s gifts are “Springs to catch woodcocks” (1.3.115). Laertes’s use of the

¹ Ibid., 281.

² Ibid., 289.

³ Idem.

⁴ Ibid., 329.

phrase thereby not only recalls the murdered old man and his ill-fated daughter, but also emphasizes the completion of the circle of family devastation; moreover, via the reminder of Polonius's and his son's own "springes," the phrase expands the arena of blame beyond Hamlet and his dysfunctional family.

Keeping the original language in Shakespeare is also necessary to recognizing allusions embedded in works by other authors. Someone familiar only with the *No Fear Macbeth* would be unlikely, for example, to recognize in the phrase "noise and emotional disturbance"¹ the source in the "Tomorrow" speech for Faulkner's splendidly resonant title, *The Sound and the Fury*. To return to the woodcock example from *Hamlet*, in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, a text which alludes frequently to Shakespeare, when Frederic and Catherine are in the hotel room in Milan, Frederic orders woodcock for dinner. In this erotically-charged scene, his choice has a sexual component, as the term perhaps does in Polonius's diatribe to Ophelia - *No Fear* translates "woodcocks" in this instance as "stupid birds"² - and Hemingway's use of "woodcock" further relates to *Hamlet* in that Frederic states in this episode that he feels "trapped" after Catherine announces the pregnancy, essentially as a woodcock to his own springe.

Hemingway was a great admirer of Shakespeare, referring to him in letters, for example, as "The Champion" of writers.³ In "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," Hemingway has Robert Wilson misquote one of Hemingway's favorite passages, Feeble's speech in *2 Henry IV* in which he extols the virtues of living up to his martial obligations. The *No Fear 2 Henry* provides a fairly close translation of this speech, with one important exception. Whereas Shakespeare has "No man's too good to serve 's prince" (3.2.236-237), *No Fear* opts for the more democratic "No man's too good to serve his country" (409). This apparently slight modification is nonetheless crucial because throughout the Lancastrian tetralogy Shakespeare questions whether the reigning royals deserve service, as when the Chief Justice says to Falstaff "God send the prince a better companion" (1.2.199-200) and Falstaff responds "God send the companion a better prince."

Hal, that prince to whom the Chief Justice and Falstaff refer, is a student of language in *1* and *2 Henry*: for instance, after tipling with the lower classes he tells Poins, "I am so good a proficient in one quarter of an hour, that I can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life" (*1 Henry*, 2.4.17-20). One of Hal's tutors in his informal course in lower-class dialects is his putative comrade Falstaff, who claims to possess "a whole school of tongues in this belly

¹ *No Fear Shakespeare. Macbeth*, 203.

² *No Fear Shakespeare. Hamlet*, 49.

³ Ernest Hemingway, *Selected Letters: 1917-1961*, ed. Carlos Baker (London: Granada, 1981), 673.

of mine” (2 *Henry*, 4.3.18-19), a point confirmed by the Chief Justice’s avowing to be familiar with Falstaff’s capability of “wrenching the true cause the false way” (2 *Henry*, 2.1.110-111).

In Hal and Falstaff’s first meeting onstage, Falstaff provides a verbal cover to defend his “vocation”, as Falstaff himself terms it (1 *Henry*, 1.2.104), saying that highwaymen like him should be called “Diana’s foresters” (1 *Henry*, 1.2.25-26). As is well-known, Queen Elizabeth I was often associated with Diana, and so Shakespeare is indirectly stating that at least some of the Queen’s members of government are essentially bandits - as then, so today. Now, while one might be inclined to quote Horatio with regard to many politicians’ being crooks and say “There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave/ To tell us this” (1.5.125-126), the Diana reference crucially associates Shakespeare’s play about medieval kings with the corruption in Elizabethan politics. To its credit, the *No Fear* version keeps the name “Diana”, thus also nominally retaining the Elizabeth association, but unfortunately its garbled version of the rest of Falstaff’s speech omits the supporting evidence. Diana was the moon goddess, and so Falstaff’s remark, “let men say we be men of good government, being governed, as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon, under whose countenance we steal” (1 *Henry*, 1.2.27-29) indirectly places the blame for Renaissance England’s politically-sanctioned thievery rather firmly in Elizabeth’s own noble and - at least according to her propaganda machine - chaste lap. *No Fear* dilutes this association by rendering “Let people admire us for being well-behaved. After all, we’re governed by the same force that governs the tides - the pale and cool moon, who lights our way as we sneak around”.¹

An even more directly subversive remark occurs in 2 *Henry* when Falstaff says of Hostess Quickly, “Throw the quean in the channel” (2.1.47). “Quean” means “whore”, as “channel” means “gutter”, and so the *No Fear*’s version, “throw this whore in the gutter”² seems on the surface to be unobjectionable. However, and momentarily for a listening audience, the pronunciations of “quean” and “queen” are essentially identical, and so Falstaff’s comment implies that Elizabeth should be thrown in the gutter or perhaps into the English Channel. Consequently, one of the most potently radical comments in the Shakespeare canon loses its political referent when “quean” is altered to “whore”. To be fair, though, if one were determined to change the original Shakespeare, what would be a preferable alternative to *No Fear*’s “whore”? Certainly “queen” would be misleading given the circumstances of the scene, and no other word in English that I know of quite captures the combination of queen and whore. “Madam” might be all right, since it implies

¹ *No Fear Shakespeare. Henry IV, Parts One and Two* (New York: Spark, 2005), 11-13.

² *Ibid.*, 317.

an upper-class status and at the same time designates the female manager of a brothel, but “madam” lacks the political implications of “quean”.

The addled Hostess Quickly, it is implied, is just such a “madam,” although whether or not she is aware of it is impossible to determine. In any case, her alehouse is often compared to a whorehouse, which in turn relates to the royal houses, or family lines, in the main plot. So Falstaff’s remark about Quickly’s inn that “This house is turned to bawdy house; they pick pockets” (*1 Henry*, 3.3.98-99) bears a distinct relation to, say, the houses of York and Lancaster, and the ways in which each tries in various ways to pick the political pocket of the other.

In many ways, Falstaff bridges the two worlds of inn and court, and indeed there is a pun of sorts available in the English phrase “inns of court” used by Shallow (*2 Henry*, 3.2.13, 22), since when Hal is present the inn is a type of court. After Hal becomes king, however, he draws a sharp distinction between the two, deeming Falstaff to be unworthy of the court, and perhaps rightly so. For instance, in the rejection scene in *2 Henry*, Falstaff refers to the newly-crowned King Henry V using the familiar “thy” and “thee”, and following Falstaff’s lead so does the linguistically-challenged Pistol. But what is arguably an appropriate term in the tavern, or perhaps I should say in Quickly’s “house”, is inappropriate while addressing a newly-crowned king, as the Chief Justice indicates in condemning Falstaff’s usage: “Have you your wits? Know you what ‘tis to speak?” (5.5.44-45). Given that the familiar “thou” forms have disappeared from contemporary English, it’s understandable that *No Fear* uses the modern and class-neutral “you” form. However, retaining the distinction in this scene is important. By employing the familiar rather than the formal mode of address and in his choice of pronouns, Falstaff attempts verbally to assert possession of the King - “my royal Hal... God save thee, my sweet boy!” (5.5.41-44) Hal, however, is no boy and will not be owned by anyone, and most certainly not by the plebes in his kingdom, as anyone should know who has read his soliloquy in 1.2 wherein he pledges to dump all his lower-class friends.

Hal does precisely that to Falstaff in the final scene of *2 Henry*: he banishes Falstaff from his kingdom and effectually from the play which bears Hal’s regal title, the upcoming *Henry V*, where he will no longer have to compete with Fat Jack for center stage. In fact, Hal puts a double-whammy on Falstaff, not only banishing him but sending him to prison, as if Hal’s extreme anxiety over Falstaff’s disruptive potential necessitates not only that the door be closed upon him, but that it also be locked with a dead-bolt. However, although Hal’s triumph seems complete, Falstaff’s subversive presence is not so easily

dismissed; as I’ve noted elsewhere,¹ Falstaff is evoked throughout the epilogue, both visually and verbally. Predictably, the *No Fear* epilogue loses most of these echoes. For example, the epilogue actor says to the audience “If my tongue cannot entreat you to acquit me, will you command me to use my legs?”² The word “tongue” here not only recalls Falstaff’s remark about his belly housing a “school of tongues” but it also relates to *2 Henry*’s other bookend, the Induction spoken by Rumour, whose costume is “painted full of tongues”.³ *No Fear* replaces Falstaff’s “my tongue” with “my talking”,⁴ and concludes the statement with “then would you like me to dance?” The original’s “will you command me to use my legs?” is far preferable because it provides another association with the Falstaff of 5.5 in that he was commanded in that scene by Henry V to use his legs in another sense by removing himself to a distance of at least ten miles from the king.

In the scene which precedes the epilogue, Falstaff kneels to the new king, and in the epilogue, the actor kneels to the audience. The *No Fear* version leaves out this second genuflection entirely, and its attendant explanation. When Shakespeare’s Epilogue kneels, he says he’s doing so “to pray for the Queen”,⁵ spelled with the double e’s this time, although the word may recall the earlier scurrilous reference to “quean”. In any case, the contemporary reference to the Queen at the end of *2 Henry*’s being spoken by a figure who bears marked verbal similarities to Falstaff underscores the palimpsestic parallels between Henry’s reign and Elizabeth’s.

So the *No Fear* versions of Shakespeare’s plays commit sins of both commission and omission, while supplying a service of dubious value. Students might profitably use the *No Fear* texts as a prelude to reading the Shakespeare plays, but my guess is that most who resort to such aids skip the second step, reading only the *No Fear* “translation” and ignoring the original texts, which means of course that they aren’t really reading Shakespeare at all. And while the *No Fear* does preserve the general storyline, the plot, while of course requisite, is the least interesting feature of any sophisticated literary text, especially in the case of Shakespeare whose plots so often derive from other sources.

¹ Gary Harrington, “The Epilogue in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part Two*”, *The Explicator* 53.3 (1995), 131-33s.

² *No Fear Shakespeare. Henry IV, Parts One and Two*, Epilogue, 19.

³ *Ibid.*, Induction s.d.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 535.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

Even should readers move from the *No Fear* to the original, their general disposition towards the text will have been predetermined by their reading of the *No Fear* version first. As in a more legitimate translation, the choice of alternative terms in *No Fear* relies heavily upon the translator's reading of the text, and so reduces the reader's possibility of seeing beyond that interpretation. The choices in the *No Fear* are consistently traditional and conservative, so the translators essentially prescribe that same avenue of approach and thereby hamstringing their clientele from experiencing a full and fruitful collision with Shakespearean complexity.

In the last act of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, as Tyrone and Edmund play cards the former asks twice "Whose play is it?"¹ with regard to whose turn it is to lay down a card. There is, however, a double-meaning in the question, O'Neill thereby emphasizing that the focus of the play is distributed equally among "all the four haunted Tyrones", as O'Neill puts it in the dedication.² One might well apply the same question - "Whose play is it?" - to the *No Fear Shakespeare* series. Of course, most would maintain that *Hamlet*, for example, is Shakespeare's, giving authority to the verso text in the *No Fear*, but at least some would opt for the recto, capable of being "understood by anyone" and written in "plain English". Part of the problem with the series lies therein: the English is simply too plain. One of the pleasures of reading Shakespeare involves luxuriating in the beauty of the language and admiring his superb facility in making iambic pentameter sound so natural. All of this is lost in the *No Fear* translations, which are entirely in prose, and so my objections to such texts are aesthetic as well as academic. Most galling to my kibe, though, is that the *No Fear* versions are primarily directed to native speakers of English who, whether they initially believe it or not, can make good sense of Shakespeare and actually come to enjoy the process of doing so, if only they engage in that process.

This discussion of *No Fear Shakespeare* also points to general questions about the more serious and more necessary process of translating Shakespeare from one language to another. Certainly, a translated version of Shakespeare is better than no Shakespeare at all, but he is the most difficult of all English-speaking authors to translate. Indeed, the *No Fear* series resembles some other translations of Shakespeare in its bowdlerization and in its rendering of the

¹ Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989), 145, 149.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

works entirely into prose. So, in moving from English to another language, does the translator try to recreate Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter or use another meter which the host language finds more congenial (such as the alexandrine in French)? Which is to be privileged, sound or sense? Is contemporary vernacular to be used or an equivalently historic mode of expression from the host language? And how does one capture Shakespeare’s many double-meanings? Yves Bonnefoy, in his five translations of *Hamlet* into French, has encountered just such issues. Bonnefoy feels that French “excludes all it does not designate, and [Christian] Pons in turn suggests that one needs to develop explicitly all that which is implicit in Shakespeare in order to capture his use of image faithfully”.¹ Yet Bonnefoy “rejects Pons’s solution to the problem as being nothing short of treasonable, since his overelaboration leads to a rupture of the poetic tension of the original”.² Bonnefoy consequently has settled, at least for the time, on free verse with regular verse forms available for sporadic use. But the very fact of his having produced five different translations points to both the opportunities and the difficulties in translating Shakespeare.

More germane to the general considerations in this paper is the extent to which adaptations of Shakespeare in other languages constitute “translations” and what is the “re-translator’s” responsibility in such a circumstance? At this point, we indeed begin to ask ourselves “Whose play is it?” What, for example, does a translator into English do with something like Daniel Mesguich’s direction of Michel Vittoz’s translation of *Shakespeare’s Hamlet*, whose title is in part misleading in that it is as much their *Hamlet* as it is Shakespeare’s. Mesguich’s version “takes into account the history of *Hamlet* and, primarily, well-known French translations of the play - for example, that of Gide”.³ Additionally, Vittoz’s translation for *Shakespeare’s Hamlet* “reflects the back-and-forth movement between past and present of the *mise en scene*; the result is a combination of medieval and modern syntaxes, archaic expressions and modern slang, quotes from Joyce, Mallarmé and Gide, and Lacanian plays on words - an imaginary French version of Shakespearean language”.⁴ This reworking contains “ghost doubles” of Hamlet and Ophelia appearing on stage, has the ghost of Yorick deliver the “To be or not to be” soliloquy as meaningful

¹ Romy Heylen, “*La Tragédie d’Hamlet*: Bonnefoy’s (In)verse Translation Theory”, *The French Review* 66.2 (Dec., 1992), 279.

² Idem.

³ Judith Gershman, “Daniel Mesguich’s *Shakespeare’s Hamlet*”, *The Drama Review* 25.2 (Summer, 1981), 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

gibberish, and contains commentary on Brecht and Cixous - all while following the general outline of Shakespeare's play and often quoting from it.

It's entirely appropriate that Mesguich's *Shakespeare's Hamlet* was done by the *Theatre du Miroir*. Mirrors figure prominently in Shakespeare, as when Richard II experiences a crisis of identity after being deposed and smashes the mirror into which he has been gazing, or maybe more memorably when Hamlet holds a mirror up to his mother's face in Act 3. All translation to some extent constitutes a house of mirrors, reflecting not only the period in which the original text was written and the personality of its author but also reflecting the period in which it is being translated and the personality of its translator, as well as translations and productions from intervening periods. Just as the many critical readings of Shakespeare's plays themselves tell us as much about the critics as about the plays, so does a translator hold a mirror up not only to the nature of the text but to his or her own inner profile. Critical essays also resemble translations in that neither, to paraphrase Lincoln, can please all of the people any of the time.