



SHAKESPEARE



IN SUCCESSION

*Translation  
and Time*



Edited by  
Michael Saenger  
and Sergio Costola

# Translingual Shakespeare: An Afterword

*Alexa Alice Joubin*

Literary translations work with, rather than out of, the space between languages. Translation as a cultural practice brings together different temporalities and localities, bridging – and drawing attention to – the cracks between cultural texts from diverse time periods and cultures. Translations evolve not only across linguistic and cultural borders but also across time. Umberto Eco notes how literary translation tends to “modernize the source to some extent” by building in new relevance of the work to contemporary readers.<sup>1</sup> Plays such as *Hamlet*, as I have examined elsewhere, have the potential – through translation and adaptation – to become a more politically charged work or to be used as a platform to discuss sensitive topics.<sup>2</sup>

In the twenty-first century, Shakespeare’s verse is becoming ever more foreign, even to native English speakers, except for many common expressions – for example, “playing fast and loose,” being “tongue-tied,” recognizing it is “high time” – that circulate out of context (and often not remembered as Shakespearean). As Michael Saenger theorizes, there is a fundamental instability of languages as systems of communication because meanings of words change with contexts and, as this volume reveals, over time.<sup>3</sup> Translations, even from Shakespeare’s text to modern English, can, on the one hand, erase difference, and, on the other hand, *recognize* difference, with an eye toward equality.

It is notable that Shakespeare’s own play texts feature translational properties that can be amplified in translation. Take, for example, Macbeth’s confession of guilt in the porter scene.

No; this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,  
Making the green one red. (2.2.58–60)

The use of “incarnadine” and “red” is serendipitous, but the deliberate alternation between words of Latinate and Germanic roots creates two pathways to Macbeth’s guilt in murdering King Duncan. The built-in redundancy is informed by two perspectives on the world in which he lives.

Translation draws attention to literary meanings that may have been previously glossed over. In *The Tempest*, what exactly do Prospero and Miranda teach Caliban that the latter should yell, “You taught me language” (1.2.365)? It is often taken to mean his master’s language, a tool of oppression. But it can also mean rhetoric and political speechwriting, a new tool for him to change the world order. Caliban’s word, “language,” was translated into German as “reden” (speech) by Christoph Martin Wieland (1766). In Japanese, it is rendered as “human language,” as opposed to the language of the animals or computer language. Take, for example, another word in act 4, scene 1, where Prospero announces that “our revels now are ended” (148). The word “revels” in the Elizabethan context refers to royal festivities and stage entertainments, but it carries different diagnostic significance in translation. Christoph Martin Wieland used “Spiele” (plays) and “Schauspieler” (performer) to refer to Prospero’s masque and actors (unsre Spiele sind nun zu Ende). Sometimes translators working in the same language have different interpretations. Liang Shiqiu translated it as “games” in Mandarin Chinese in 1964, alluding to Prospero’s manipulative “games” on the island, but Zhu Shenghao preferred “carnivals” (1954), highlighting the festive nature of the wedding celebration.

This translingual property makes Shakespeare’s text inherently translational in the dramaturgical and gestural senses. Translingual echoes occur when semantically linked phrases mean similar but not identical things in more than one language. The term *translingualism* refers to semantic connections across languages.<sup>4</sup> Translating and interpreting Shakespeare in multilingual contexts enriches our understanding of words that have escaped attention. Translation is a process that simultaneously defamiliarizes and familiarizes literary works. Intuitively aware of the benefit of defamiliarization and skeptical of assuming ownership of one’s native language, director Peter Brook worked closely with the poet Ted Hughes as he conceptualized his film version of *King Lear* (1971). Hughes rewrote part of the play in his distinctive poetic voice; Brook, having worked with Hughes’s “translation,” was then able to engage with *Lear* (in Shakespeare’s language) from a renewed perspective. Hughes’s contribution recast the tragedy in language “that could

neither roll automatically off the tongue through years of intimate acquaintance nor provoke too much learned reverence,” thereby jostling itself “out of its usual linguistic cadences.”<sup>5</sup> In the words of the film’s producer, Michael Birkett, this exercise reinvigorates the play’s “essential themes.”<sup>6</sup> The benefits of the exercise remained stable even when Brook did not film *Lear* using Hughes’s lines. Brook’s method of finding directions out by indirection is similar to how non-Anglophone directors adapt Shakespeare. Judith Buchanan compares Brook to Kurosawa, observing that both directors enjoy the “luxury ... of coming fresh ... to the specific language of a play” in translation.<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Rothwell similarly regards filming Shakespeare in a foreign language as the freedom to reinvent the plays in “purely cinematic terms.”<sup>8</sup>

Literary translations rely on, and amplify, the translanguing property of languages. Translanguing echoes occur when phrases are relevant but may not necessarily mean the same things in more than one language. British theatre director Tim Supple elucidates Shakespearean narratives rather than simply reenacting the supposedly untranslatable language of poetic drama. One of Supple’s most well-known works is *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with a pan-Asian cast in seven languages (RSC, 2006–08). When audiences of different backgrounds encounter such performances, their horizons of expectation enrich the event, even though not all layers of allusion and wordplay are activated at all times. Unlike pigments that make up a painting or individual notes that constitute a musical work (both of which are often transparent to the audience), non-Anglophone performances of Western classics frequently draw attention to their formal features and thereby enable new paths to the cultures being represented.

A frequently stated myth is that Shakespearean drama is all about its poetic language, and adaptations in another language would violate the “original.” The history of performance and reception in and beyond the Anglophone world suggests otherwise. As J.L. Austin theorizes in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), words do not mean in and by themselves, and this is especially true for drama. Words – in any language – acquire meaning when spoken in context and embodied by actors.

Even English-language performances engage in translational behaviours, because audiences would find many scenes confusing without seeing the actors performing them. Some scenes would lose their dramaturgical impact if only read and not performed. Examples include the mock trial in *King Lear* (13.16–52 [Quarto]) where, without modern stage directions, it would not be immediately clear that Lear is speaking

to a piece of furniture (joint-stool); the appearance of Banquo's ghost at the banquet in *Macbeth* (3.4); and the fifteen characters (eight of whom are in disguise) in *Love's Labour's Lost* (5.2).

Another instance of creative exploitations of the translingual property of the plays is Baz Luhrmann's film *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*. The choir sings the prologue in Latin, interspersed with the announcer's purposeful, methodic, and measured delivery of the prologue in English. The opening sequence features a composed, dispassionate, deliberately old-fashioned script reading by a female TV news anchor framed by an antiquated TV set. The arrangement uses TV news as a framing device to translate the relevance and valence of the prologue for the modern audiences, but it also simultaneously insists on the ideological distance between film audiences and Shakespeare's text. The heteroglossic multi-media delivery of the prologue is as remarkable as the film's multilingual, non-diegetic sound environment.

Due to Luhrmann's use of Shakespeare's language for indexical value, the film has not usually been taught from the perspective of translation studies or been categorized under "global" adaptations. In fact, the film pitches Latin American Catholicism against North American Protestantism in its costumes, sets, and accents adopted by the Montagues and Capulets. Early modern English Protestant anxieties about Catholic Italy, as reflected in Shakespeare's play, are presented as sources of modern misunderstanding and gangland conflict in the film. Mexico City and Boca del Rio in Veracruz, the film's primary shooting locations, are dressed up as a fictional American city called Verona Beach. The fictional and filming locations, attitudes toward Latinity in the film, and Elizabethan English fantasies about Spain and Italy are meshed together to create a new "site" where youthful exuberance, religious sentiments, and early modern and postmodern notions of feud and hatred play out.

The performative aspect of translational work is most evident in the subtitles of films. Subtitles are simultaneously a heuristic and filtering device, revealing as much as they repackage some motifs for consumption by a target audience not proficient in the oral language. Spoken language is an important aspect of, for instance, Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*. In the samurai-film adaptation of *Macbeth*, salutations and word choices are intimately related to moral and political agency or the lack thereof. What stands out in the film – but is obscured by the English subtitles – is how and when some characters choose informal language.

Translating or transforming gendered pronouns is a key issue here. When conversing with each other, Washizu and Miki (*Macbeth* and

Banquo) refer to each other through first names, deepen their voice, and use informal language, especially the informal masculine “I” (*ore*). They often laugh things off, as in the scene when they are lost in the forest, as part of their bravura. Singular first-person pronouns in Japanese serve important discursive functions, according to discourse and cognitive linguistics. In addition to *ore*, other first-person pronouns include the informal *boku*, typically used by young men, and the more formal but more feminine *watashi*, commonly used by women.

In a world strictly governed by rigid hierarchy and titles, the men’s move to undermine formality has profound implications. It could be interpreted as a gesture toward building a masculine bond and camaraderie, but also as a move to reassert their masculine identity in a world full of uncertainties. The bravura around the pronoun *ore* buttresses their denial that they are lost. Yet even if they are, they remain brothers, lost together in the woods.

Washizu (Macbeth) attempts to create a similarly intimate bond with Lady Asaji (Lady Macbeth) in private, but she rejects his attempt and maintains verbal and physical distance. It is notable that when Washizu addresses Asaji, he does not use any honorific; he does not address her as *tsuma* (wife) or *okusan* (lady of the house). Meanwhile, Asaji uses the most formal, singular first-person pronoun *watakushi*, rather than the informal, feminine *atashi* (or *atakushi*), which would be what a private conversation between a husband and a wife normally entails. Moreover, she addresses Washizu with the general second-person pronoun *anata*. This word, though often used in TV commercials to refer to a general audience – that is, in the absence of information about the addressee’s age, gender, or class – is also used by women to address their husbands. Asaji’s combination of the formal *watakushi* and the usually more casual *anata* – the latter here spoken in a register that conveys condescension and rejects intimacy – creates another layer of the uncanny beyond the atonal music. The use of these pronouns creates tension and conflicts between desired intimacy and rejected informality; it confuses Washizu, who is unsure how to respond.

What is lost in translated subtitles is as significant as what is gained in translation. Shakespeare in translation acquires the capacity to appear as the contemporary of the German Romantics, a spokesperson for the proletarian heroes, required reading for the Communists, and even a transhistorical icon of modernity in East Asia. Even new titles given to Shakespeare’s plays are suggestive of the preoccupation of the society that produced them, such as the 1710 German adaptation of *Hamlet* as *Der besträfte Brudermord* (The Condemned Fratricide) and Sulayman

Al-Bassam's *The Al-Hamlet Summit* (English version in 2002; Arabic version in 2004). While Western interpretations of *The Merchant of Venice* tend to focus on the ethics of conversion and religious tensions with Shylock at centre stage, the play has a completely different face in East Asia with Portia as its central character and the women's emancipation movement in the nascent capitalist societies as its main concern, as evidenced by its common Chinese title *A Pound of Flesh*, a 1885 Japanese adaptation titled *The Season of Cherry Blossoms, the World of Money*, and a 1927 Chinese silent film *The Woman Lawyer*.

The significance and weight of singular first-person pronouns is given a spin in the animated 2016 box-office hit *Your Name* (*Kimi no na wa*, dir. Makoto Shinkai, CoMix Wave Films). From time to time, Mitsuha, a high-school girl living in a small mountain town, inexplicably swaps bodies with Taki, a high-school boy in Tokyo. When inhabiting each other's body, they strive to act normally (that is, Mitsuha has to act and talk like the boy she now embodies, and Taki has to adopt feminine speech patterns when in Mitsuha's body). Comical scenes ensue when they fail, such as when Mitsuha – waking up and going to school in Taki's body – slips and uses the feminine singular first-person pronoun.

Gendered pronouns in translation open a fascinating new vista. When Viola, dressed up as a page boy, Cesario, and finding himself pursued by the lovelorn Olivia, declares that "I am the man ... she were better love a dream" in *Twelfth Night* (2.2.25–6), he speaks with double irony as a doubly cross-dressed boy actor on the early modern English stage (such as Nathan Field, 1587–1619). But as an *otokoyaku* (actress specializing in male roles) in the all-female Takarazuka musical production (dir. Kimura Shinji, 1999), Yamato Yuga's Viola embodies enticing gender fluidity.

Japanese, a language that often elides the subject, features a long list of personal pronouns. In addition to making the right choice of employing the familiar or the polite register, based on the relation between the speaker and the addressee, male and female speakers of Japanese are restricted by the gender-specific first-person pronouns available to them. The gender dynamics in *Twelfth Night* worked well for Takarazuka, which is known for its romantic, extravagant musicals. Similarly, gendered code-switching creates semantic ambiguity in Kei Otzuki's double performance of twins Viola and Sebastian. Having played exclusively male roles in the Takarazuka Revue until her retirement in 2012,<sup>9</sup> Kei brings a unique perspective to her roles in the second Shakespeare production in Japanese, with a Japanese cast, directed by John Caird,

honorary associate director of the Royal Shakespeare Company (Nissay Theatre, Tokyo, March 2015).<sup>10</sup> It was a rare opportunity to see an actress specializing in male roles play Viola, Cesario, and Sebastian.

Just as gendered pronouns carry and undermine agency, the messages of the texts to be translated are often moralized as well. Widely known in the Sinophone world as the only poet to have single-handedly translated all Shakespeare's works into vernacular Chinese, Taiwanese translator Liang Shiqiu (1903–1987) used translations of the Western canon to promote the value of the written vernacular when classical Chinese was still regarded as the preferred vehicle for literary expressions. Based on W.J. Craig's Oxford edition (a 1943 reprint), Liang's translations brush aside the question of a male speaker asking a young man to procreate in sonnets 1–17. Gender identities are deliberately obscured or rendered ambiguous in his translation, possibly out of an effort to avoid assigning male or female identities to a speaker. As recently shown by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells's revisionist approach, the addressees in many sonnets cannot be gendered because the context is fluid and ambiguous.

In his translation of sonnet 1, for instance, Liang uses the neutral term “*zuimei de ren*” (the most beauteous person) for “fairest creatures.” It is notable that Liang translates “fair” elsewhere with different vernacular phrases suggesting non-physical beauty. Likewise, the word “blood” in the final line of sonnet 2 is translated by Liang simply as “blood,” with subtle hinting at the significance of a “blood line” (sonnet 2: “see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold”).<sup>11</sup> When translating sonnet 127 (“In the old age black was not counted fair, / Or if it were it bore not beauty's name”), Liang renders “fair” as “*biaozhi*” (comely) and “beauty” as “*mei*” (transcendentally beautiful). In classical texts, the word *biaozhi* often refers to the attractiveness of female facial features. As such, it is more clearly gendered than *mei* (beauty in the metaphysical sense). The word *mei* circulates more widely in the vernacular – both written and spoken, but the somewhat more literary *biaozhi* was introduced into the vernacular by Liang. Liang's sonnets, while they still thematize love, are a vehicle for the promotion of the vernacular.

Liang's translation of sonnet 90 is another example of his penchant for dramatization and preference for the more immediate impact of vernacular expressions. Along with sonnet 89, it addresses the emotions of parting with a friend of unspecified gender. The keywords in the first quatrain are “wilt” and “spite of fortune.”

Then hate me when thou wilt, if ever, now,  
Now while the world is bent my deeds to crosse,  
Join with the spite of fortune, make me bow,  
And do not drop in for an after-loss.

The opening line is glossed by Edmondson and Wells as “hate me whenever you will,” with a more open timeframe (“whenever”).<sup>12</sup> Liang, in contrast, emphasizes the imperative form in the present (“now”) in the first line: “If you want to hate me, go ahead. If you wish, hate me now.” He continues with a liberal sprinkling of more loaded vocabulary than sonnet 90’s: Liang’s evocation of volition (“to want to hate me”) provides an interesting contrast to the even more emphatic “must” (muß) in the German version by Romanian-born poet Paul Celan (1920–1970). The first quatrain is rendered by Celan thus:

Mußt du mich hassen, haß mich ungesäumt,  
gesell der Welt dich zu, die mir den Weg vertritt,  
groll mit dem Schicksal, beug ihn, der sich bäumt,  
und sei nicht du das Letzte, das entglitt.<sup>13</sup>

Celan highlights the narrator’s inevitable fate of being ostracized by the world through his repetition of the verb to hate, *hassen/haß*. Sonnet 90 was the first sonnet to be translated by Celan (January 1960; in *Einundzwanzig Sonette [Twenty-One Sonnets]*, 1967). Celan’s use of “must,” writes Michael Eskin, “outweighs the conditional gist in the first line.”<sup>14</sup> One final contrast between Liang and Celan is Celan’s introduction of the idea of rising up against fate in the third line (“der sich bäumt”). He complements the Shakespearean narrator’s plea to “make me bow” with “a clear articulation to worldly obstructions.”<sup>15</sup>

Just as translation enriches all languages and texts, comparative analyses of translations of the same poems, as we have just done, sheds new light on words that would have escaped attention. For instance, act 1, scene 3, of *Othello* is ripe for multilingual interpretations. Examining multiple translations of the problematic word “fair,” similar to its presence in sonnet 127, analyzed above, enhances our understanding of the cultural construct. In fact, an entire digital project has been dedicated to just two key lines in act 1, scene 3:

If virtue no delighted beauty lack,  
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.

These are the last words spoken by the Duke of Venice to Brabantio in the court scene after Othello eloquently defends his love of Desdemona. Directed by Tom Cheesman, the website *Version Variation Visualisation: Multilingual Crowd-Sourcing of Shakespeare's Othello* (<https://sites.google.com/site/delightedbeautyws/>) has collated two hundred translations in thirty languages along with English translations of them. Translations of these lines into different languages deal with the meanings of fair and black rather differently. Mikhail Lozinskij's Russian translation says, "Since honour is a source of light of virtue, / Then your son-in-law is light, and by no means black." Christopher Martin Wieland and Ángel Luis Pujante used words for "white" in German and Spanish (respectively) to translate "fair," while Victor Hugo chose the French for "shining." The translators' choices of word reflect how social markers – gender, class, immigration status – create and amplify one's desires and needs. Translational differences draw attention to the instability of Shakespeare's texts as well as their variegated terrains that are open for interpretation.

In our times, most audiences encounter Shakespeare in truncated, often translational, forms, such as short video clips, memes, or quotes. The chapters in this book argue convincingly that cross-fertilization and mobility are the norms, not the exceptions. Translation studies, as the present volume demonstrates, contribute site-specific epistemologies to our understanding of what Shakespeare means in different locations and in different times. Energized by internal divisions and pathways, translingual Shakespeare is the prodigal child that ultimately expands the riches of human civilizations.

NOTES

- 1 Umberto Eco, *Experiences in Translation*, trans. Alastair McEwen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 22.
- 2 Pauline Holdsworth, "How Translating Shakespeare's Plays Reveals New Ideas – From China to Afghanistan" (with Alexa Alice Joubin, Alberto Manguel, and Irena Makaryk), CBC Radio Canada, 3 Nov. 3 2021, [www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/how-translating-shakespeare-s-plays-reveals-new-ideas-from-china-to-afghanistan-1.6234629](http://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/how-translating-shakespeare-s-plays-reveals-new-ideas-from-china-to-afghanistan-1.6234629).
- 3 See Michael Saenger's definition of interlinguicity, in his introduction to *Interlinguicity, Internationality, and Shakespeare*, ed. Michael Saenger (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 3–5.

## Translingual Shakespeare: An Afterword

- 4 The term *translingualism* appears to have been coined by Steven G. Kellman, "J. M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett: The Translingual Link," *Comparative Literature Studies* 33, no. 2 (1996): 161–72; see also Steven G. Kellman, ed., *Switching Languages: Translingual Writers Reflect on Their Craft* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003). Using the concept of translingual practice, Lydia H. Liu analyzes cultural exchange between China, Japan, and the West, in *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity – China, 1900–1937* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).
- 5 Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film* (Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2005), 71.
- 6 Roger Manvell, *Shakespeare and the Film* (London: Dent, 1971), 136–43; Birkett, quoted on 137.
- 7 Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film*, 71.
- 8 Kenneth S. Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 160.
- 9 Jennifer Robertson's *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) remains one of the most thorough studies of the cultural phenomenon of all-female Takarazuka and its female fan base. See also Leonie Stickland's *Gender Gymnastics: Performing and Consuming Japan's Takarazuka Revue* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2008).
- 10 Nobuko Tanaka, "John Caird Delivers Home Truths with *Twelfth Night*: Stage Giant Bestrides a World of Ideas," *Japan Times*, 4 Mar. 4, 2005, [www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2015/03/04/stage/john-caird-delivers-home-truths-twelfth-night/#.XoOnGtNKgQE](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2015/03/04/stage/john-caird-delivers-home-truths-twelfth-night/#.XoOnGtNKgQE).
- 11 Quotes from the *Sonnets* are drawn from Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells, eds, *All the Sonnets of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
- 12 Edmondson and Wells, eds, *All the Sonnets of Shakespeare*, 253.
- 13 Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke [Complete Works]*, 5 vols, ed. Beda Allemann et al. (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 5: 343.
- 14 Michael Eskin, "'To Truths Translated': Celan's Affair with Shakespeare," *New German Critique* 91 (Winter 2004): 83–4.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 84.

funded by Humanities and Social Science Research Youth Funds of the Education Ministry of China (2017); and “An Ethical-Literary Interpretation of Shakespeare’s Plays, Adapted as Children’s Literature in the United Kingdom in the Victorian Period,” funded by the Education Department of Jilin Province (2017). His recent publications are “An Ethical-Literary Analysis of “The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines” (2018), “The Adaptation of Shakespeare’s Plays in British Children’s Literature (1807–1901)” (in Chinese, 2017), and “Penelope’s Web and Mary Cowden Clarke’s Shakespearean Young Adolescent Heroines” (2016).

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# Contents

Figures | vii

Acknowledgments | ix

Introduction | 3

## PART 1: TRANSLATION AND ADAPTATION | 27

1 In the Beginning Was the Verse: A Personal Testimony on the Adventurous Task of Translating Shakespeare's Metre into Brazilian Portuguese

*José Francisco Botelho* | 36

2 Stage or Page? A Momentous Choice

*Niels Brunse* | 62

3 "My Restless Discord Loves No Stops Nor Rests": Translating "The Rape of Lucrece" for the Stage

*Marcus Kyd* | 72

4 A Riverplate Translation of the Sonnets

*Miguel Ángel Montezanti* | 90

5 Taming and Timing: Translating *The Taming of the Shrew* into Italian

*Iolanda Plescia* | 102

6 Entangled and Embodied Knowledge(s) in the "many strange dishes" of *Much Ado about Nothing* in Performance

*Sarah Roberts* | 123

## Contents

7 Lyric Reflection: Translating the Script of a *kunqu Romeo and Juliet* into English

*Zhiyan Zhang and Carl A. Robertson* | 155

PART 2: THEORIZING TRANSLATION | 195

8 Celebrating Life: Translation as an Act of Survival

*Zoltán Márkus* | 202

9 Shakespeare's Fathers and the Undead Renaissance

*Michael Saenger* | 219

10 Commedia dell'Arte Translations: Three Pantalones in

*The Merchant of Venice*

*Sergio Costola* | 239

11 A Mirror up to *Hamlet*: Translations of Shakespeare in Japan

*Hiromi Fuyuki* | 258

12 Shu Lin and the Earliest Image of Shakespeare in China

*Rangping Ji and Wei Feng* | 284

Translingual Shakespeare: An Afterword

*Alexa Alice Joubin* | 298

Contributors | 309

Index | 315