

'AS THOU ARE PILED, FOR A FRENCH VELVET': ON THE (UN)TRANSLATABILITY OF SHAKESPEARE'S REFERENCES TO SYPHILIS

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Abstract: William Shakespeare's rise to fame coincided with a turning point in the history of the Elizabethan theatre. Although the arts enjoyed support among the English Renaissance nobility, the same could not be said of the clerics. Hence it is that the Puritan oppression pushed the playhouses to the outskirts of London, the home of bear-baiting rings and brothels, on the grounds that they promoted an idle and licentious lifestyle. Little did they realize that it was quite the other way around: the plays from that era drew their inspiration from real life rather than vice versa, primary among their themes being precisely that of promiscuity, namely its most likely consequence in the Bard's day—syphilis. Given that London witnessed at that time an unprecedented influx of immigrants, it is no wonder that they brought along a variety of euphemisms for this sexually transmitted disease which dramatists such as the Bard used extensively in their plays. While there is no doubt that Romania too has fought its own battles with this unforgiving venereal infection, neither the archaic nor the modern autochthonous slang accommodates an equally vast array of argotic synonyms for syphilis. As a result, more often than not, Romanian translators find themselves in the situation where they use a limited number of words and phrases to recreate Shakespeare's numerous euphemisms for this sexually transmitted disease. What the present paper seeks to accomplish is to offer new creative translation alternatives for the Bard's most problematic argotic terms for this venereal infection.

Keywords: Romanian, Shakespeare, slang, syphilis, translatability.

1. THE BARD AND THE BAWDS

Some Shakespearean characters hold the French accountable for the syphilis epidemic (*H5* 5.1.87), while others put the blame on the Neapolitans (*T&C* 2.3.18). What results from this buck passing is that the origin of this sexually transmitted disease is, to say the least, controversial. Researchers have yet to discover where syphilis first emerged in Europe. This task, however, is not a simple one, for nations have long put the responsibility for the scourge of Venus on enemy states (Winters 17). Hence it is that the French accused the Italians of waging “an early form of biological warfare” against them during Charles VIII's campaign by facilitating their contact with women known to carry the pox (Ross 399). The Neapolitans, on the other hand, argued the opposite, “describing this new illness as the *mal francese*” (Hewlett 239). Its origin may be forever lost in the fog of history, but one thing is certain: by the time the Bard arrived in London, syphilis had already established itself as one of the most virulent afflictions of that era.

What distinguishes Shakespeare from his fellow playwrights is the fact that none of his contemporaries took a livelier interest than him in this sexually transmitted infection. According to

John Ross, there are “only six lines referring to venereal disease in all seven plays of Christopher Marlowe.” The Bard, however, hints at it sixty-seven times in *Timon of Athens*, sixty-one times in *Troilus and Cressida* and fifty-five times in *Measure for Measure* (Ross 399). It is no wonder, then, why Anthony Burgess describes Shakespeare as having “a gratuitous venereal obsession” (221). Whether he did have first-hand experience with syphilis is difficult, if not impossible, to tell, but we would not be too wrong if we imagined that the Elizabethan London's theatre scene was ravaged by this sexually transmitted disease just as much as AIDS wreaked havoc on the New York art scene of the 1980s (Ross 400). Yet again, nor is it assuming that the playhouses' proximity to brothels in Bard's day also contributed to his fascination with the scourge of Venus. As a result, it would not be far-fetched to think that the groundlings too, the majority of them being men and women of questionable morals, served as constant reminder of the damaging effects of syphilis.

However, it is not the sheer number of references Shakespeare makes to this venereal infection that is truly impressive, but the wide variety of words he uses to allude to it. It was not the absence of a single word describing the disease that prompted the Bard to employ such a vast array of terms to hint at it. As a matter of fact, the word 'syphilis' has existed since 1530 when the Italian poet Girolamo Fracastoro coined it in his pastoral poem *Syphilis sive morbus gallicus* (Snyder 193). Whether the playwright's numerous euphemisms for this venereal infection is yet another display of his literary genius or the result of being exposed to different social classes, dialects and languages, we may never know, but there is no doubt that they pose many a problem for modern translators. It is only by analyzing the linguistic intricacies of these allusions that they can be faithfully recreated for today's international audience and it is to this that I now turn.

2. WORDPLAYS: LOST AND FOUND IN TRANSLATION

Language-wise, the effect of puns, be it humorous or deprecating, relies on the existence of a “communicatively significant, (near)-simultaneous confrontation of at least two linguistic structures with more or less dissimilar meanings . . . and more or less similar forms” (Delabastita 57). When submitted for translation, however, translators are faced with the challenge of retaining as much as possible of both signifieds and signifiers. But even if they do manage to fully preserve them, the wordplay may fail to be recognized as such by the target-text audience, mainly because wordplays are, to a greater or lesser extent, culture-bound. Put differently, a translated pun works solely when it succeeds in crossing the temporal, linguistic and cultural barriers of the source-text, thus enabling the foreign reader and original author to find common ground (Chiaro 11). Yet, more often than not, finding an identical target-language counterpart for a source-text wordplay is an exercise in futility.

What derives from this realization is that successful pun translation implies knowing what to sacrifice and where to add new material. In other words, for the sake of recreating wordplays in the target text, translators can and should abandon one or more of their features while attaching others to them. As Tatu and Sinu put it, they “must be skilled enough to be able to divorce textual means from textual function” (42). Lying at the intersection of the “ambiguous semantic, phonetic, and/or graphemic forms of language” and “the interlinguistic correspondence in sounds, structure and the two or more semantic meanings of the pun” (Ehlfeldt 4), the translation of wordplays requires a combination of what Nida defines as *formal* and *functional equivalence*. However, the proportions in which these two strategies should be combined so as to produce the best possible counterpart for a source-text pun is anything but fixed. They usually vary considerably, depending on whether they are more language- than culture-specific or viceversa. Therefore, adaptability is one of the prerequisites for high-quality wordplay translation. Yet unfortunately, as is evident from the translations featured in the next section of the present paper, not many translators realize the importance of flexibility.

As for the translation procedures used to analyze their (mis)treatment of Shakespeare's puns, I have opted for Delabastita's model which includes: PUN > PUN (replacing the ST wordplay with

a TT one), PUN > NON-PUN (substituting the ST pun with an explanation of it), PUN > PUNOID (using some other stylistic phenomenon to render the ST wordplay into the target-language), PUN > ZERO (eliminating the ST pun altogether), direct copy: PUN ST = PUN TT (copying the ST wordplay without actually translating it), transference: PUN ST = PUN TT (retaining the meaning of the ST pun at the expense of its form), addition: NON-PUN > PUN (transforming a non-punning ST word or syntagm into wordplay as a means of compensating for a lost ST pun), ZERO > PUN (inserting new punning material in order to make up for the translator's inability to recreate a ST wordplay) and EDITORIAL TECHNIQUES (using endnotes, footnotes etc. to explain the ST pun). With the exception of the wordplays that successfully replace their source-text counterparts, all the other ones are accompanied by our own translation suggestions.

3. CASE STUDIES

Example (1) introduces an exchange of lines between Bottom and Quince, two of the characters of the Bard's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a comedy Partridge labels as “a pretty 'safe' play” (56). But it nonetheless contains a fairly large number of bawdy puns and allusions to syphilis. The next few paragraphs feature a parallel between such an indirect reference to this venereal infection and three of its Romanian versions:

(1) *A Midsummer Night's Dream* George Topîrceanu

G. P. Sterian

Dan Grigorescu

Bottom: I will discharge it in [...] your **French-crown** colour beard, your perfect yellow.

Quince: Some of your **French crowns** have no hair at all, and then you will play bare-faced. (1.2.96-101)

Bottom: - Aş putea să-l iau cu o **barbă** [...] galbenă de tot, acesta: [...] cu o **barbă fără păr**.

Quince: Ai să joci **barbă!** (30)

Jurubiţă: O să-mi iau o **barbă** [...] d-aia galbenă, galbenă de tot.

Gutuie: Barbă franţuzească? Unele **tidve de franţuji** sunt spâne ca-n palmă. Vrei să joci fără barbă? (25-26)

As is evident from the dialogical exchange mentioned above, the punning syntagm *French crown* is used twice within the same portion of text, exploiting its denotative meaning, namely the reference to “the French coin called the *écu*” and the connotative one indicating “a visible sign of the pox on the head” (Williams 134). Although this pun does not seem to rank up there with the Bard's most problematic wordplays, the aforementioned autochthonous translations stand as proof that one should not jump to such conclusions, underestimating the amount of effort needed to render Shakespeare's puns into a foreign language. Most likely, this is the reason why the three translators did not succeed in recreating this particular wordplay. However, it is still well-worth looking further into their versions.

What Topîrceanu and Grigorescu's have in common is that none of them rendered *French crown* in its entirety into Romanian, neither in Bottom's line, nor in Quince's reply. More specifically, both the first and the last translator abandoned the reference to French currency altogether. Yet there are also significant differences between their adaptations: Topîrceanu used the word *franţuji*, the target-language counterpart of the English ethnic slur *Froggies*, to substitute the second occurrence of the punning syntagm, while Grigorescu substituted Bottom's *French crowns* with *tidve de franţuji*, the Romanian equivalent of the source-language *Froggies' noggins*. Although the latter notified his readers that this particular textual fragment contains a pun on syphilis, it does not mean that he succeeded in recreating the Bard's wordplay on this venereal disease. But despite this omission, their level of interference with the Shakespearean text is nowhere near that of Sterian.

Hence it is that the Bard's punning phrase completely disappears in the second translator's

version of this dialogical exchange. More precisely, what he did was to replace Bottom's *French crown* with *barbă fără păr*, the target-language counterpart of the English *hairless beard* and the second occurrence of this punning syntagm with *fără barbă*, the Romanian equivalent of the target-language *without a beard*, which qualifies his approach to Shakespeare's *French crown* for the PUN > ZERO translation technique. As for the procedures used by the other two translators, Topîrceanu resorted to a hyperbole to render the Bard's *French crown* into his native tongue, substituting *some* with *tofi*, the autochthonous counterpart of the English *all*, while Grigorescu explained the pun in a footnote. Yet even if their talent and skills are undisputable, there is nonetheless room for improvement in their versions.

To that end, I suggest translating Bottom's line as 'O să-mi iau o barbă [...] de culoarea coroanei franțuze, galbenă de tot' and Quince's reply as 'Coroana sfranțuză-i spână; joacă-l și tu fără barbă.' Back-translated into English, the weaver's utterance overlaps the original one to a great extent; however, some alternations had to be made to the carpenter's response in order to successfully recreate Shakespeare's wordplay in terms of both punning and ribaldry. Hence it is that I substituted the term *French* in Quince's *French crown* with *sfranțuză*, the slang variant of Argintescu-Amza's *sfranțuzească*, a portmanteau word combining *sfrenție*, an archaic Romanian term for syphilis and *franțuzească*, the target-language equivalent of the English *French*. Although the top of the head is not called *crown* in Romanian, the new reference to a generic crowned head, *coroană*, inserted in the carpenter's line manages to preserve the cohesion between the two meanings of the Bard's punning phrase. This is not in any way the only means of reproducing it in Romanian, but it does prove that pun translation requires copious amounts of research as well as fine-tuning.

Example (2) features a dialogical exchange between several characters of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, a play Partridge considers to be the Bard's second "most sexual, most bawdy" literary work (57). The following paragraphs introduce an analysis of Shakespeare's ribald wordplay on *dolour* and the extent to which three Romanian translators managed to recreate it:

(2) Measure for Measure	N. Argintescu-Amza	Ioana Ieronim	George Volceanov
<i>Lucio.</i> [...] I have purchased as many diseases under her roof as come to –	<i>Lucio.</i> [...] Sub acoperișul ei m-am ales cu boli destule; prețul lor s-a ridicat la...	<i>Lucio.</i> [...] Sub acoperișul ei, mi-am cumpărat eu bolile toate până la...	<i>Lucio.</i> [...] Sub acoperișul ei m-am umplut de puzderie de boli, care m-au costat cam la vreo...
<i>Second Gent.</i> To what, I pray?	<i>Al doilea gentilom.</i> La cât mă rog?	<i>Al doilea domn.</i> Până la...? Spune.	<i>Al doilea gentilom.</i> Hai, spune, cât.
<i>Lucio:</i> Judge.	<i>Lucio.</i> Cît crezi?!	<i>Lucio:</i> Ghici.	<i>Lucio.</i> Fă și tu o socoteală.
<i>Second Gent.</i> To three thousand dolours a year.	<i>Al doilea gentilom.</i> Pe an, trei mii de ducați s-au dus. Ducă-se! Ducă-se!...	<i>Al doilea domn.</i> Pân' la vo trei mii de lire pe an.	<i>Al doilea gentilom.</i> Mamă, trei mii de ducați pe an – ustură rău.
<i>First Gent.</i> Ay, and more.	<i>Primul Gentilom.</i> Ei da, ba poate chiar mai mult.	<i>Primul domn.</i> Ba și mai mult.	<i>Primul gentilom.</i> Ba chiar și mai mult.
<i>Lucio.</i> A French crown more. (1.2.48-55)	<i>Lucio.</i> Mai pune-alături o coroană „sfranțuzească”, una măcar!... (17-18)	<i>Lucio.</i> Mai mult, da, o coroană de Franția. (14)	<i>Lucio.</i> Mai adaugă și o coroană sfranțuzească. (223)

Both in Elizabethan and contemporary English, *dolour* and *dollar* are pronounced /'dɒlə/ (Crystal 2016: 213). Although in the Bard's time the American dollar was not yet introduced, as is evident from Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, the term was nevertheless used to designate the Dutch or German coin ("Dollar"). According to Williams, "dollar and crown were the basis of the new system called into being by radical changes in the C16 European economy" (134). The other word, *dolour*, refers to an ache of some sort ("Dolour"). The question then arises: why did Shakespeare write *dolours* instead of *dollars* when it is obvious that the context calls for the latter? Is this an editorial mistake or did Shakespeare try to tell us something more?

This homophonous pair makes one more appearance in *The Tempest*, 2.1.18-19. As opposed to its counterpart in *Measure for Measure*, the bawdy pun on *dollar/dolour* featured in this play is a horizontal one, the same portion of text containing both *dollar* and *dolour*. In the First Folio version of *The Tempest*, *dollar* is spelt *dollor*, while *dolour* is written as *dolour* (24). These spellings did not change when the Second (24) and Third Folios (27) were published. The same goes with *Measure for Measure* where today's *dolour* is written as *dollour* (80), a spelling that is preserved in the two subsequent collections of the Bard's literary works (80, 85). Therefore, if the Bard spelt *dollar* as *dollor* and *dolour* as *dolour*, it can rightfully be assumed that *dollour* found in *Measure for Measure* is a classic Shakespearean portmanteau word, a combination of today's *dollar* and *dolour*. It is true that spelling was anything but consistent in the Bard's time (Crystal 2008: 58), but it is just as true that Shakespeare invented about three thousand new words (Kiernan 32) and maybe this is just another example of how far his linguistic genius actually went.

As for the editors' choice of *dolour* over *dollar* in *Measure for Measure*, it may be due to the fact that the manner in which we spell these terms today makes it difficult for them to find an equivalent for the Bard's portmanteau word. But why did Shakespeare feel the need to invent a new term? In order to answer this question, one needs not look further than the Bible, a religious text the Bard must have been familiar with, regardless of whether he believed in God or practiced his religion. In 1 Timothy 6:10 it lies written "for the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil" (*The New Jerusalem Bible: Standard Edition*). *Measure for Measure* deals with just that—money, prostitution and syphilis. Therefore, one can just very well say that Shakespeare merged the two homophones denoting money and suffering in order to come up with a word that sums up this belief. The reason why editors decided to go with *dolours* instead of *dollars* is the fact that, in this context, the term refers to the financial equivalent of the treatment for the pain experienced after coming down with a sexually transmitted disease from a woman working in such an establishment. This interpretation is backed by *French crown* a few lines later, a ribald wordplay on syphilis, a venereal infection thought to have come from France (Partridge 186).

As for the Romanian translations, none of them features the best possible recreation of the Bard's bawdy pun on *dolour*. Both Argintescu-Amza and Volceanov opted for *ducați*, the target-language counterpart of the English *ducats*, which is historically and geographically consistent with *Measure for Measure*, given that the play is set in Vienna under the fictional reign of Duke Vincentio. Ieronim, on the other hand, replaced it with *lire*, the Romanian equivalent of the source-language *pounds*, which is not accurate as far as those two previously mentioned aspects are concerned.

On closer inspection, however, it turns out that Volceanov came up with a new pun in order to compensate for the loss of the original wordplay. The source-text line containing the pun reads '[t]o three thousand dolours a year,' while Volceanov's can be translated into English as 'Oh dear, three thousand ducats a year – it burns badly.' What he did was to substitute the Shakespearean *dolour* with a money-related expression, *a ustura pe cineva la buzunare*, the target-language counterpart of the English *to burn a hole in one's pocket*. The question then arises: did he come up

with this wordplay in order to make up for the loss of the original pun or to introduce the bawdy wordplay on syphilis? I am inclined to think this is not the case for two reasons. The first is that he managed to find a functional equivalent for the Bard's *French crown* by using Argintescu-Amza's portmanteau word *sfranțuzească*. The second is that, according to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, syphilitic chancres and rashes are usually painless (“Syphilis – CDC Fact Sheet 2”).

Particularly striking is, however, the fact that Volceanov could have come up with a faithful and ingenious translation for the ribald wordplay on *dolour*. Partially, he did for his version of *The Tempest* where he replaced *dollar/dolour* with a pair of paronyms *galben/gălbînare* (301), the Romanian counterparts of the source-language *coin/jaundice*, but for some reason, he did not use a variant of the latter in his translation of *Measure for Measure*. It is true that jaundice can be a symptom for a variety of underlying conditions, but it is just as true that it is usually triggered by hepatitis. Moreover, according to Hepatitis B Foundation, hepatitis B, C and D can all be transmitted through sexual intercourse (“*ABC's of Viral Hepatitis*”), not to mention that the most common symptoms of hepatitis C are muscle and joint aches. (“Symptoms of Hepatitis C”). For example, he could have translated *dolours* as *gălbînari*, a portmanteau term that combines *dinari* and *gălbînare*. Although *dinars*, the English counterpart of the target-language *dinari*, is just as geographically inaccurate as Ieronim's *lire*, in my opinion, this anatopism pales in comparison with the fact that this blend of words would have perfectly captured the idea that *dolours*, in this context, symbolizes the financial equivalent of the treatment for the pain caused by a sexually transmitted disease.

By analyzing the three Romanian adaptations against Delabastita's pun translation strategies, it becomes evident that both Argintescu-Amza and Ieronim resorted to a selective non-pun, translating one of the meanings of the wordplay, while leaving the other one out. Volceanov, if my assumption is correct, inserted a new ribald pun in order to compensate for the loss of the Shakespearean one by means of the ZERO > PUN procedure.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions can be drawn from the parallels featured in the previous section of the present paper. Chief among them is the one according to which recreating the Bard's references to syphilis in a foreign language is indeed possible, but nonetheless requires much more time and effort than is normally considered necessary, especially when the donor and recipient cultures share little to no similarities. However, this is not too heavy a burden to bear when a flexible approach to translation is taken.

Adaptability, in this context, implies knowing what to compromise on when faced with such instances of languages. Yet there is no ready-made recipe for success in this area. Figuring out what to lose and what to keep is no simple task, but in order to live up to Shakespeare's level of ribaldry and punning, translators should be able to bend their first language to suit their ultimate purpose—that of producing on the target-text audience an effect similar to that experienced by native readers and spectators while keeping as close as possible to the source text. But in order to accomplish this goal, some familiarity with the original spelling editions of Shakespeare's plays must be established.

As is evident from the vertical homophonic wordplay on *dolour* analyzed in the previous section of the article herein, a fairly large number of the Bard's allusions to this venereal infection have been lost as a consequence of further changes brought to the English orthography and sound system, but there are nonetheless cases in which some of them can be recreated in another language. Reviving them through the process of translation is nearly impossible if the three Folios are not in any way consulted prior to one's attempt to recreate Shakespeare's puns on the scourge of Venus.

However, probably the most important idea that emerges from the present paper is that this aspect of the Elizabethan culture deserves more attention from Romanian translators. We have a lot of catching up to do as far as this topic is concerned and a whole lot more to lose if we continue to

accord little importance to it. What the article herein seeks to achieve is to raise awareness among the autochthonous Anglicists of the importance of bridging the gap between source- and target-culture via linguistic flexibility.

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