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## **Between Adulteration and Explanation: On the Origins of an Unusual Shakespeare Translation<sup>1</sup>**

In the following three different German translations will be dealt with. They belong to different periods and focus on different purposes (reading, performance, studying) but they also have affected each other in the debate of what translations can and should do. The account casts light on a moment in the history of German Shakespeare translation and introduces the rationale of an edition that is unique in its kind. There is one thing that makes my task awkward: as German is no longer a common medium of international exchange the discussion has to do without illustrative examples.

The focus will be on the *Englisch-deutsche Studienausgabe der Dramen Shakespeares*.<sup>2</sup> It began to appear in 1976, and by 2020 offers thirty plays in single volumes.<sup>3</sup> The edition offers a good English text with selected variants,<sup>4</sup> and a wider range of features than is common in critical editions in English. It includes a scene-by-scene commentary, specifically discusses theatrical notation and rhetorical features, and, uniquely, includes a prose translation as part of its explanatory apparatus. It was a response to what critics considered to be a crisis in Shakespeare translation in the German-speaking world.

At this point I better declare my personal interest in the topic. I was part of the project from the beginning. I wrote the style sheet to be followed by contributors under the guidance of the general editors,<sup>5</sup> and edited the first volume in

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<sup>1</sup> In *Shakespeare and the European Heritage: The Legacy of Ángel-Luis Pujante*. Eds Keith Gregor, Juan F. Cerdá, Laura Campillo and Clara Calvo. Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 2022. 175-86.

<sup>2</sup> There is an excellent introduction to what the edition has to offer in (Brönnimann 2012). He is also the editor of its *King Lear* (Brönnimann 2020).

<sup>3</sup> A full list is to be found on the website of Stauffenburg-Verlag (<http://www.stauffenburg.de/asp/reihe.asp?id=26>).

<sup>4</sup> The first volumes used the Pelican Shakespeare as a copy-text (Harbage 1969). Later editors prepared their own texts.

<sup>5</sup> The first general editors were Werner Habicht, Ernst Leisi and Rudolf Stamm.

the series, *Othello*.<sup>6</sup> And it was through the *Studienausgabe* that the first participants of the Basel *Sh:in:E* (Shakespeare in Europe) project met,<sup>7</sup> a project which then joined Ángel-Luis Pujante in his tireless (and successful) effort to institutionalise a European network in Shakespeare studies, today's European Shakespeare Research Association (ESRA).

The *Studienausgabe* began as a huge project (Engler 1974), involving seven universities in Germany and Switzerland (Basel, Berne, Bochum, Bonn, Freiburg, Munich, Zürich) and ran under the patronage of the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft West, later the re-united Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft. Regular meetings took place at which collaborators discussed shared issues and reviewed each other's work.

The project grew out of a specific situation in the German theatre, which concerned the use of texts in productions. Somewhat schematically the situation may be sketched as follows: on the one hand, there were conservative circles that insisted that the theatre should be literary. It should reveal the work of art as the dramatist had created it and avoid what were felt to be arbitrary interpretations and unjustified experiments. A document of these demands was the so-called *Düsseldorfer Manifest*, signed by Gustav Gründgens and many other directors in West Germany. This kind of theatre, insisting on *Werktreue*, also made it possible for prominent directors already active during the war to continue without problems after 1945. On the other hand, there were those who considered the theatre a forum for intellectual and political debate or a performative experience. There too, texts had an important role to play but could be revised and adapted—an attitude increasingly gaining ground in the theatre.

Translation presented a particular problem: the original is always at one remove; different translations may compete against each other and reduce the authority of the text. In the case of German Shakespeare, however, the

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<sup>6</sup> Why *Othello*? The director Claus Bremer was preparing a production of the play, and he asked Rudolf Stamm (who was my professor) for a new prose translation that he could use, an example of the collaboration between the university and the theatre: An advanced seminar set to work and, after a semester, had finished a sketch of the first act ... This formed the basis of my work.

<sup>7</sup> They included the editors Werner Brönnimann (*Troilus and Cressida*, *King Lear*), Markus Marti (*Titus Andronicus*, *Timon of Athens*), Thomas Pughe (*Julius Caesar*), Jennifer Jermann (*Henry VI*, part 1).

situation has been more complicated. In the course of the long and intense German affair with his works since the eighteenth century new versions were continually produced<sup>8</sup> but one translation, the so-called Schlegel/Tieck-translation, first published between 1796 and 1833, gained itself the authority of a classic, of a quasi-original text. Still today, German speakers quote Shakespeare's works in their version. Directors would continue to use it with revisions, out of respect (and possibly because they could then collect royalties).

There was no denying that the Schlegel/Tieck version had dated. Its language was the poetic language of Goethe's contemporaries. It respected the restrained conventions of its early nineteenth-century readers and audiences. Even the blank verse which German literature had originally adopted from Shakespeare was associated with the German classics rather than its original source. No wonder, therefore, that some directors started to disapprove of it, even to use the earlier Wieland/Eschenburg prose versions.

After the First World War new translators tried to improve on Schlegel/Tieck by incorporating newer scholarly insights and the Elizabethan exuberance and directness of the English text.<sup>9</sup> One of them proved particularly influential: Hans Rothe and his *Der Elisabethanische Shakespeare* (Rothe 1963) He started to translate Shakespeare's works in a period of radical cultural change. Its potentialities reminded him of the Elizabethan age (and made the Schlegel/Tieck version representative of a bygone world). Impressed by the disintegrative textual criticism of J. M. Robertson he felt encouraged to re-create the plays in what he saw as Shakespeare's own spirit. Being a man of the theatre himself, he created versions which proved to be very successful on the German stage.<sup>10</sup> He translated freely, cut, added and moved speeches. His language was contemporary and easy to speak. Two things irritated Rothe's critics: his claim that his Shakespeare was the authentic one, and the often mediocre

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<sup>8</sup> An impressive list can be found on Markus Marti's Sh:in:E website <https://shine.unibas.ch/home.html>, under German.

<sup>9</sup> Some of the more important translators: Richard Flatter, Rudolf Schaller, Rudolf Alexander Schröder.

<sup>10</sup> Also of neglected comedies like *The Two Gentleman of Verona* and *The Comedy of Errors* (Hortmann, 104).

quality of his translations.<sup>11</sup> In the spirit of the times, the Nazi cultural establishment, having consulted the Shakespeare-Gesellschaft, banned Rothe's versions in 1936, giving preference to Schlegel/Tieck (Ledebur 2006, 264).

After the second world war Rothe experienced a revival in West Germany, and in 1959 four professors of English associated with the *Shakespeare-Gesellschaft* and its president attacked his versions in a somewhat intemperate full-page article in the prestigious weekly *Die Zeit* (Schröder et al. 1959a), and they had it reprinted in *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch* under a title that suggested a court case ("In the case of Shakespeare versus Rothe" (Schröder et al. 1959b)).<sup>12</sup> In a detailed indictment, giving many examples, they came to the conclusion:

Here and there details may also be debatable with other translators. With Rothe, however, it is no longer a matter of *individual* points, but rather an intermeshing of numerous translation errors, changes distorting the meaning, additions and arbitrary interventions, which in their interaction mean nothing less than *adulterating Shakespeare*. (Schröder et al. 1959b, 260 trans. BE)

By the 1960s a veritable crisis in Shakespeare translation was diagnosed (Suerbaum 1969, 80) and new, sometimes strange proposals were made ("Shakespeare-Übersetzungen" 1971).<sup>13</sup>

The Rothe indictment may have hardened positions more than it helped to clarify things. The *Gesellschaft* (and especially the *Gesellschaft West* after the split in 1963) could be cast as representing an old-fashioned if not reactionary conception of Shakespeare, with little understanding for the contemporary theatre. One way of correcting this impression, and of escaping fruitless argument was for the *Gesellschaft* to provide the German Shakespeare community with the best up-to-date information international scholarship could offer and let people judge for themselves.

This is how the project of the *Studienausgabe* began to take shape—an edition that significantly, considering issues

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<sup>11</sup> Having studied Rothe's versions in some detail when working on my dissertation on Shakespeare translation I do not hesitate to say so. Having been banned by the Nazis does not make Rothe's translations any better.

<sup>12</sup> All translations from the German are by the author.

<sup>13</sup> New translations respecting both the texts of the originals and the needs of the theatres began soon to appear. To mention just a few translators: Erich Fried, Maik Hamburger, Frank Günther. See (Schabert 2000, 849–54)

like the *Düsseldorfer Manifest* and the Rothe indictment, only deals with the plays. The style sheet of 1973 describes the purpose of the edition as follows:

The English-German study edition of Shakespeare's dramas is meant to be a working tool that offers German-speaking users - be they directors, actors or spectators, be they researchers, teachers, students or pupils, be they private readers or translators creating a new German version - the help modern Shakespeare scholarship can provide on the way to understanding the original texts. (Richtlinien, 2)

Among the scholars who contributed most to what made the edition special were Rudolf Stamm, who had signed the Rothe indictment, and Ernst Leisi. In his research Rudolf Stamm had shown how Shakespeare's texts often subtly guide the way they should be performed, what he called the theatrical physiognomy of the plays (Stamm 1966). Ernst Leisi was interested in historical semantics and had published *Measure for Measure: An old-spelling and old-meaning edition* (1964). There he had formulated some editorial principles that were to be binding also for the *Studienausgabe*:

It should have no gaps.

It should not translate a passage "en bloc" before having dealt with its individual words.

All statements about meanings should be corroborated by reliable evidence.

It should try to give Shakespeare's meanings rather than vague period meanings gathered from other authors.

It should not take dictionary information for granted.

It should give full meanings, not merely situational equivalents. (16)

Adopting Leisi's principles offered a serious challenge to the editors of the individual volumes. The usage of all words in the play had to be checked in the context of the Shakespeare corpus to determine their full meaning. Before the advent of electronic concordances this meant ploughing through Bartlett's Victorian volume and other resources listing the occurrence of words. With frequent words this would take hours and hours but could eventually yield surprising results.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> My favourite example comes, of course, from *Othello*, where my research showed that Cassio's last words on Othello "for he was great of heart" (not exactly rare words) do not refer to his magnanimity but to his

Another of Leisi's principles was: "no gaps." In other words, editors must resist the temptation of remaining silent on passages they had not understood. The most efficient way to make gaps impossible was obviously translation, and this was to be a special feature of the edition.

The edition was therefore to be bilingual, with the English text on one side, the translation and the notes on the other. Subverting the traditional hierarchy of texts in bilingual editions, the English text was to be on the right, which has a higher status than the one on the left, being the reader's side.<sup>15</sup> The German version, as suggested by its place on the left, definitely had a supporting function:

The German prose version serves to explain the original. It is not an end in itself. It refuses to juxtapose a fully formed, actable equivalent to the original. It does without calling up substitute ideas and using the compensation technique belonging to the art of old and modern Shakespeare translators. It does not compete with any of the existing translations. (Richtlinien, 12-13)

Basic stylistic features like verse, rhyme, alliteration and other sound effects familiar to an educated German-speaking audience were meant to be read off the English text, and where necessary could be explained in the notes.

The special status of the German text called for detailed instructions in the style sheet:

The prose version follows the syntax of the original as faithfully as possible, as long as this can be done in clearly understandable, unforced German. (Richtlinien, 14)

The words and phrases in the German text could be complemented by footnotes, which had equal status where meanings were concerned,—another subversion of textual hierarchy:

Where [...] translation reaches its limits, for example in puns, ambiguous expressions, unusual idioms and strange metaphor

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being upset, forcing a rather different reading of the ending (Engler 1987) Some of these findings made it into standard English language editions—if they were published separately in English. Leisi continued his semantic work as one of the general editors and eventually published a book on Shakespeare's problem words, unfortunately only in German (LEISI 1997)

<sup>15</sup> The title pages of books are always, and the beginnings of chapters are usually on the right. It was the legendary German publisher Siegfried Unseld of Suhrkamp who told us this. The relationship between the two sides in bilingual editions seems to be under-researched. See Engler 2006.

sequences, the text renders the primary meaning, and otherwise makes room for explanation, i. e. .:

Where the German wording deviates so far from the original that it questions the correct understanding of an entire section of a speech or of the dramatic situation, an explanatory note must be added.<sup>16</sup> [...]

The following semantic "basic components" must be retained wherever possible, e.g., the following categories: nomen actionis, abstract and concrete notions, references to persons, *pars pro toto*, imagery and its absence.

[...] Clichés (like "to kill two birds with one stone") should be reproduced with similar German clichés. However, if a part of the cliché is taken up again in the following, so that the group of words regains metaphorical power, it is translated literally and the cliché is characterized as such in the notes or is represented by a German equivalent. (Richtlinien, 13)

Where, in the words of the style sheet "translation reaches its limits" a footnote would be added listing all the German words that, together, covered the semantic field of the English expression--including the one selected for the translated text. This procedure made great semantic precision possible.

At the same time, it gave the editors more freedom in shaping the German text. They could choose the words they wanted to use in the text and which they wanted to place in the note. Within limits this allowed them to develop their own consistent style of translation, without which their text would easily lose its trustworthiness as explanation. Given the purpose of the translation they would be wise as far as possible to use the neutral and incisive style of an explanatory text, in "clearly understandable, unforced German" (Richtlinien 14).

The different forms of passing on knowledge in the *Studienausgabe*—introduction, translation, footnotes, scene-by-scene commentary, etc.—meant that that editors constantly had to make choices and to find a balance between these. The German prose translation offered a bare prosaic prose text, doing without the stylistic means of the original. It was not meant to stand on its own.

But what if it still had done so? I can only offer anecdotal evidence: I remember sitting beside the editor of

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<sup>16</sup> Simple puns could also be rendered without a footnote, by putting the two meanings into the text, divided by a slash.

one of the plays in the edition, watching its performance in a German theatre, where the director had proudly declared that he had produced his own German version. My colleague became increasingly irritated because he kept recognizing phrases that he had used in his translation—without being acknowledged anywhere. Of course, he experienced the fate of all scholars who remain invisible in fields where intellectual property is not respected as much as in their own.

But one could also look at things differently. As the work of the author, defined by the text in the *Düsseldorfer Manifest*, and defended by the Rothe indictment had increasingly lost its authoritative status, the director had returned, at least partly, to the meanings of the original. He may even have been attracted by the prosy dryness of a German text that clearly marked its difference from the Schlegel/Tieck version.

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