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## **Between Adulteration and Explanation: On the Origins of an Unusual German Shakespeare Translation**

The *Englisch-deutsche Studienausgabe der Dramen Shakespeares*,<sup>1</sup> offering its own German version, was a response to the festering crisis in German Shakespeare translation that was diagnosed by the 1960s (Suerbaum 1969, 80), a crisis that expressed itself in the texts performed, in manifestoes, public attacks and sometimes strange proposals of new versions ("Shakespeare-Übersetzungen" 1971).<sup>2</sup>

The crisis and the responses to it may best be discussed by dealing with three German translations, which belong to different periods and focus on different purposes (roughly reading, performance, studying), translations that also affected each other in the debate on what translations can and should do. The following account may thus cast light on a moment in the history of German Shakespeare translations, but it will focus on introducing the rationale of one of them, the version of the *Studienausgabe*. 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 project of the *Studienausgabe* began to take shape in 1971, its first volume appeared in 1976, and by 2022 the edition offered 31 plays in single volumes.<sup>3</sup> They offer a good English text with selected variants,<sup>4</sup> and a wider range of features than is common in critical English-language editions. They include a scene-by-scene commentary,<sup>5</sup> specifically discuss theatrical notation and rhetorical features, and, uniquely, include a prose translation as part of their explanatory apparatus.

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1 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).

2 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).

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

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

5 Later volumes also figure a history of Shakespeare productions on the German-speaking stage.

At this point, I'd 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>6</sup> and edited the first volume in the series, *Othello*.<sup>7</sup> And it was through the *Studienausgabe* that the first participants of the Basel *Sh:in:E* (Shakespeare in Europe) project met,<sup>8</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 reunited 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 on the theatre being an institution of literature. 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" of 1952 (*Die Zeit*, 16 October, 1952), signed by Gustav Gründgens and many other directors and critics in West Germany.<sup>9</sup> 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 that had also been common in the theatre before it became literary and was increasingly gaining ground again.

Translations present a particular problem: they remain open to revision and improvement, may therefore compete against each other and can only claim a reduced degree of authority. In the case of German Shakespeare, however, the situation has been more complicated. In the

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6 The first general editors were Werner Habicht, Ernst Leisi and Rudolf Stamm.

7 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.

8 They included the editors Werner Brönnimann (*Troilus and Cressida*, *King Lear*), Balz Engler (*Othello*), Markus Marti (*Titus Andronicus*, *Timon of Athens*), Thomas Pughe (*Julius Caesar*), Jennifer Jermann (*1 Henry VI*).

9 This kind of theatre, insisting on *Werktreue*, also made it possible for prominent directors already active during the Nazi period to continue without problems after 1945.

course of the long and intense German affair with his works since the eighteenth century, new versions were continually produced.<sup>10</sup> But in the process, one of them, 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, speakers of German quote Shakespeare's works in that version. Directors would continue to use it out of respect (and possibly because they could be used for free).

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.

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>11</sup> One of them proved particularly influential: Hans Rothe and his *Der Elisabethanische Shakespeare* (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>12</sup> He translated freely, cut, added and moved speeches. His language was contemporary and easy to speak. His critics were irritated by two things: his claim that he had access to the spirit of Shakespeare's age, and the often mediocre quality of his translations.<sup>13</sup> In the spirit of their own time, 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

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

11 Some of the more important translators: Richard Flatter, Rudolf Schaller, Rudolf Alexander Schröder.

12 Also of neglected comedies like *The Two Gentleman of Verona* and *The Comedy of Errors* (Hortmann 2001, 104).

13 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 versions any better. Tobias Döring (2020), in a strange defence of Rothe, refuses to address the question of quality (181) and of Rothe's justification of his project (179), to present him as an early forerunner of contemporary attitudes to Shakespeare's text in the theatre.

its president, himself a Shakespeare translator, 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 Sachen Shakespeare contra Rothe" ("In the case of Shakespeare versus Rothe").<sup>14</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.)

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 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 the two Swiss scholars 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).

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<sup>14</sup> All translations from the German are by the author.

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 dedicated software this meant ploughing through heavy Shakespeare concordances and dictionaries listing the occurrence of words. With frequent words this would take hours and hours but could eventually yield surprising results.<sup>15</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 being upset, forcing a rather different reading of the ending (Engler 1987).

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 the unique feature of the edition. It would be a special kind of translation, which had its specific task among the other forms of passing on knowledge in the *Studienausgabe*, introduction, translation, footnotes, scene-by-scene commentary, etc.

The edition was to be bilingual, with the English original 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>16</sup> The German version, as suggested by its place on the left, definitely had a supporting function:

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15 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).

16 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-Verlag who suggested this to us. The relationship between the two sides in bilingual editions seems to be under-researched. See Engler (2006).

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)

The rigorous insistence on the task of the translation is significant here. Whereas the translation of single words and phrases in an explanatory note would be unproblematic, the translation of the whole text, even one of a special kind, would suggest that it can replace the original.

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). 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 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 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>17</sup> [...]

The following semantic "basic components" have to 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 using 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)

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<sup>17</sup> Simple puns could also be rendered without a footnote, by putting the two meanings into the text, divided by a slash.

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 some freedom in shaping the German text, which would strike a creative spark dormant in any scholar. They could choose the word they wanted to include in the text, and which words they wanted to place only in the note. Within limits this allowed them proudly to present the particularly apt solutions they had found, and to develop their own consistent style of translation. 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). Otherwise, their text would easily lose its trustworthiness as explanation.

The German prose translation then offered a bare prosaic prose text, doing without the stylistic means of the original, and it was insistently 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 one of the plays in the edition, watching its performance in a provincial 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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