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Walter P. Bowman

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THE TITLES OF DRAMATIC WORKS:

PROBLEMS FOR TRANSLATORS

Walter P. Bowman

An old punning tale, too good to be true, has informed generations of American university students that Colley Cibber's Eighteenth-Century English play Love's Last Shift (meaning "the last stratagem of love," more freely "the final ruse of a lover") was once translated into French under the title La Dernière chemise de l'amour (meaning "the last feminine undergarment of love"). That particular play, however, unlike two others by the same author, has never been published or produced in French.

The titles of dramatic works - their "names," to emphasize literary onomastics - have inherent importance. They point to the thematic intentions of the author, often with symbolic or other nuances. They catch or repel the interest of the theatre-going or play-reading public.

Therefore the translator will try not only for fidelity to meaning and flavor, word by word, in a language which functions differently from another in sense and sound - diction, grammar, rhythm, tonic stress, number of words and

syllables needed for adequate equivalence - but he will also try for striking phrasing for the cover of a book or for a theatre marquee, with a sensitivity furthermore to the foreign characteristics of the original title, at worst mystifying or unappealing, at best attractively exotic. On this level translation may truly become an Art, rising daringly from mechanical exactitude to a free search for warm imaginative expression. The artistic achievement can be admirable, adequate, or weak, measured with regard to the challenge the task offers, its "degree of difficulty."

Of course the problems encountered in transferring titles from one language to another will be much the same whatever the tongues involved.

An interesting example of a Spanish title is La Malquerida (Benavente), rather badly Englished as The Passion Flower. Professor Grace Alvarez-Altman (Brockport) informs me that "malquerer" means "to have an aversion towards someone or something," that the gerund "malquerida" is the descriptive name of the acacia bush or tree, and that "acacia" carries the connotations of "false" and "thorny," appropriate adjectives for the nature of the protagonist. My colleague suggests "Repulsion." I prefer "The Unwanted." But perhaps

the translator knowingly discarded such accuracy in favor of a more striking effect.

The same colleague provides me with another example, which may well have had serious commercial consequences. When Bodas de sangre (Lorca) was staged in New York in the 1930s as Bitter Oleander, it was a flop. Botany got that play nowhere! Imagine those two words as a come-on for your night out, on a theatre marquee or in a newspaper advertisement! Nowadays the title used is Blood Wedding, and as "bodas" means "wedding" and "sangre" means "blood," the translation is both accurate and effective - though the grammatical and rhythmic turn of phrase in Spanish cannot be rendered exactly in English.

Still another example, this time from American English into German, has been given me by Professor Lawrence F. McNamee (East Texas State University): A Streetcar Named Desire (T. Williams) became End Station: Sehnsucht (meaning "Last station on the line: Yearning"). Interesting, poetic, but none too close.

And now we come to my main business, a survey and analysis of the efforts of Frenchmen to render faithfully and yet imaginatively the titles of plays originally written in

English. All in all, in 250 years, there have been about 3,000 translations or adaptations. Half of these have been drawn from Shakespeare, an author slower than others (such as Addison) to catch on in France, because of the condition of critical and public taste in the Eighteenth Century. Interesting generalizations may be made: thanks to increased educational opportunity, the effects of academic programs in schools and universities, more publication of paper-bound books, more cross-Channel travel, and much else, the French public now knows the latest English suspense play and the latest American whodunit, as well as the entire works of Yeats, O'Neill, and many another major dramatist. But the translator who makes this international phenomenon possible gets all too little recognition.

There seem to me - proceeding taxonomically and drawing on more than forty years of familiarity with American and British plays in French translation and acquaintance with several French playwrights, translators, critics, and scholars - to be three "degrees of difficulty."

The first is that of TRANSLATION, a literal carrying over (Latin: translatio, "I bear across"), posing no problem. Example: Hamlet, Prince du Danemark.

The second is that of ADAPTATION. On this I shall dwell for some time, for here are the problems and solutions worth attention. Two Shakespearean titles present special challenges.

Even in English, Twelfth Night, Or What You Will, is a throw-away title, its meaning lost I fear on today's audiences. Some years ago Professor Leslie Hotson (Harvard) discovered that the title signifies only that the play was going to be performed before Queen Elizabeth on Twelfth Night, 6th January, the traditional time for revelry closing "the twelve days of Christmas." Though the author himself may have cared little what name he gave his piece, the translator must struggle seriously. Over the years, only three forms of wording have come into existence.

A too-literal rendering is La Douzième nuit, supplied by Duval and others, for it carries no meaning whatever in French. My colleague Professor Gilles Six (Brockport) tells me that Le Soir des rois, used by F.-V. Hugo and others, is "adequate but too restrictive." He prefers La Nuit des rois, used by Anouilh and others. Obviously only such an adaptation can keep the true sense of the wording (little understood even in English today) for a French reader or playgoer: the legendary date of the arrival of three kings from the Orient

bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh for the Christ-child in the stable at Bethlehem. The French celebrate this religious event as "la Fête des Rois." Hence the felicitous translation.

More of a challenge is posed by a subtlety in the title The Taming of the Shrew, as Professor Six has pointed out to me. Le Diable à la maison, a comic opera, is merely an honest acknowledgment of debt. La Leçon conjugale is too free. La Sauvage apprivoisée is dreadful, even though invented by the best Shakespearean translator of them all, by and large - Victor Hugo's son François-Victor. Passable is La Méchante femme (mise à la raison) (corrigée). But better surely is "mégère" in the more frequently used La Mégère apprivoisée or La Mégère domptée. Unfortunately, however, "taming" is not "tamed."

On the whole, Shakespeare comes off very well. Nothing need be said of the many titles suited to simple literal translation, except to point out that once a good equivalent is achieved, a tradition may commence and possible variations may be unattempted; but also a good tradition may die out, as with The Comedy of Errors, early known as Les Méprises, later as La Comédie des erreurs, which seems

to me to be equally literal but less colorful; and I prefer what Montégut created, La Comédie des méprises. But the first translation of A Midsummer Night's Dream began as Le Rêve and I find that wording inferior to Le Songe which has been traditional ever since. Love's Labour's Lost is always pluralized in French, as "peines," no doubt owing to idiom. There is even a title which has been invented in France for a play concocted of three with different titles in English, Falstaff. Comment could be extended to other tricky Shakespearean titles.

After the greatest English playwright, let us turn for contrast in time and nationality to the greatest American, O'Neill. I note more than forty French renderings, most of them literal (e.g. Anna Christie). We might split hairs about others. Is Ah, solitude! for Ah Wilderness! exact enough? Is Enchaînées as good as Welded? Is Endroit marqué d'une croix equal to Where the Cross Is Made?

The plays of Pinter, perhaps the greatest living English dramatist, offer two titles which I think are not well handled. L'Anniversaire for The Birthday Party is accurate, but loses the subtlety of "day of birth;" in this instance Pinter is thematically stressing the concept

of rebirth of an adult's birth into a new life excitingly different from a horrible old life; doesn't the French title convey merely the annual recognition of a common event, a true but once-only event, whereas Pinter's play is "absurd" even in its title? And does Le Retour for The Homecoming, though it is correctly literal, convey what "home" signifies to an Englishman?

The titles of three tragedies of Arthur Miller, perhaps the greatest living American dramatist, likewise fail to arouse my enthusiasm in their French forms. Mort d'un commis-voyageur carries the idea but not quite the flavor of Death of a Salesman, for the directness of "sale" is muted in the other language; and the author intends, one may suppose, an ironical turn of phrase relating to the protagonist's selling of himself. Les Sorcières de Salem is by no means The Crucible with its overtones of soul-testing. Ils étaient tous mes fils becomes a bit too decorous in its grammatical completeness, deliberately avoided by the author in All My Sons.

Obviously, then, some French titles go wide of the mark, others strike in the outer or inner rings, some target hit the bull's-eye - but if merely literal translations, the

"degree of difficulty" is so low that the translator deserves no praise, merely the rating "adequate." So much for TRANSLATION and ADAPTATION as challenges. But there is a third category: THE IMPOSSIBLE-TO-ADAPT, a title in dialect. Examples from O'Neill and Synge will suffice.

A French equivalent for O'Neill's Ile simply does not exist. Even an English-speaking person would be puzzled, thinking of "isle" rather than of a dialectal pronunciation of "oil;" hence De l'huile is the best that can be done. All God's Chillun Got Wings is a similar case. What about The Iceman Cometh, with the archaic present-tense ending "-eth" to convey a sense of solemnity? Something is lost in the past tense of Le Marchand de glace est passé.

In Juno and the Paycock, Synge uses a phonetic spelling of "peacock" to give Irishness to a word as no French expression can do; one returns reluctantly to the tastelessly accurate "peacock" in Junon et le paon.

A very odd instance of title-translation in the reverse direction, from French into American English is The Late Christopher Bean (Sidney Howard) of the 1920s, first a successful play, then a movie. Here is true translational transmogrification. The setting becomes New England instead

of the Midi; the charactonyms have become Anglo-Saxon; and the title has lost completely any resemblance to Prenez garde à la peinture (Fauchois), with the intent to pun on "wet paint" and artistic painting proved by the text.

In France the translator has a great financial advantage not enjoyed in other countries. Box office receipts are legally controlled under fixed formulas by the Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques, so that if a play can be profitably staged, the translator - who is responsible for much supervision of the production - may do very well indeed. That is a happy note on which to close.

Walter P. Bowman

State University of New York

College at Brockport