

A Study of Lin Zhaohua's Adaptation of Zhu Shenghao's Translation of Hamlet—An Analysis Based on Basnett's View on the Performability of Theatre

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Abstract: As to the performability of theatre translation, Basnett was inconsistent. But it can never be denied that performability is of paramount importance to a playscript. Lin Zhaohua, the director of a Chinese play *Hamlet*, adapted Zhu Shenghao's written version of *Hamlet* and produced his script. Compared with Zhu's complete literary version, Lin's presents a stronger performability. This paper will focus on the ways in which Lin adapted Zhu's translation in order to promote the performability of the text and make it more suitable for stage performance from both linguistic and thematic perspectives. For the linguistic perspective, Lin changed some language details to fit his purpose. For the thematic perspective, he reconstructed its original theme, presenting his understanding of this play by two means: the role swapping and the rearrangement of the plot.

1. Introduction

When it comes to the translation of theatre, Susan Basnett has to be mentioned. As the pioneer in this area, she put forward a lot of ideas, among which the most debated topic is her inconsistent attitudes towards the performability of the translated theatre text. Since the 1970s, Basnett has conducted a lot of practical and theoretical studies on the translation of theatre. In the beginning, she believed that the translation of theatrical texts is inseparable from their performability. Borrowing the words of Bogatyrev, Basnett illustrated that the language expression in theatre is not only a linguistic symbol, but also the social symbol related to characters, which is accomplished by the actors' gestures, costumes, stage sets, etc. She believed that it is reasonable to regard the fidelity of the language as the primary criterion for translation, since the theatrical texts are first intended for popular readers, but a theatrical text should also have distinct features for performance, and the translator must translate them into a text that is acceptable to the target language readers and audience, even if significant linguistic and stylistic changes need making. That is to say, the translation of theatre should abide by the overriding principle of "performability". In a word, "A central consideration of the theatre translator must therefore be the performance aspect of the text and its relationship with an audience suggest that the translator must take into account the function of the text as an element for and of performance." [1]

However, in 1985, Basnett suddenly changed her position radically in her article “Ways through the Labyrinth: Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts”. She opposed seeing “performability” as the evaluation criterion of theatrical translation, and advocated that theatrical translation should return to its literary nature, focusing on the analysis and translation of the text’s linguistic and paralinguistic components. She also argued that “an abstract notion of performance” cannot “be put before textual considerations”, emphasizing the “complete entity” of the theatrical text itself [2]. “The task of the translator is to work with the inconsistencies of the text and leave the resolution of those inconsistencies to someone else. Searching for deep structures and trying to render the text ‘performable’ is not the responsibility of the translator.”[3]

Peter Newmark believes that “Whilst a great play may be translated for the reading public’s enjoyment and for scholarly study as well as for performance on stage.”[4] Here, Peter mentioned an important topic -- the purpose of translation, that is, what it is for. No matter what opinion he holds, we can never forget that theatrical translation serves the purpose of translation -- the initiator of the translation task determines the translation purpose, and then also determines the nature of the translated theatrical text, whether it is a literary text or a playscript, whether it is more literary or more performable, or both literary and performable. As for theatrical translation aimed at the literary system, the initiator is usually the publisher, through which the translated text is released to the public. In this case, the target object of the theatrical translation is the readers. As to translation aimed at the theatrical system, the initiator can be a director, an actor or anyone who is willing to bring the play to the stage and provide funds, and the translation is finally presented to the public through the initiators. In this case, the target object of the theatrical translation is the audience. In these two cases, theatrical translation involves two completely different processes, and different degrees of performability. Translation in the service of a literary system turns the text from the written to the written form, while it in the service of performance turns the text from the written to the oral form. The written text gives the reader enough time to savor its content and ponder the lines. Long sentences would not interfere with readers’ comprehension, and the cultural differences can be annotated by the translators. Its performability is not the most important factor, while its literary feature matters. As what Basnett said about the return of translation to the literary realm, only a few readers will read it and imagine the performance scene in their minds. However, for the playscript used at the stage, performability is a prerequisite for translation. The script of a play is delivered to the audience through the mouth of the actors, so this kind of translation is bound to take into account the colloquiality of the language, the degree of simplicity, the action, the handling of cultural differences, etc., otherwise the expressiveness of the play will be affected.

However, no text has only one single function. All may have several functions at the same time, with different levels of importance. The primary function of the theatrical translation targeting readers is its information function -- to present the content of the original play to the readers, so that they can have a general understanding of the plot, the content of the dialogue, the artistic methods and the cultural background in which the play is set. And as to the theatrical translation whose purpose is the stage performance, the primary is its appealing function -- to immerse the audience in the play and to make them resonate with the heroes. However, as the translation of a theatre, the former cannot completely abandon the essential feature of theatre, even if it is biased toward literature. Likewise, the latter, even if it is aimed at performance, cannot be completely devoid of the efficacy of conveying a message. Thus, it can be seen that the principle of performability is not absolute, and there is no absolutely clear distinction between readability and performability, the extent of which depends on the initiators of the translation task and the purpose of translation. As the importance of performability varies under different translation purposes, the content of the text and the strategies adopted in actual translation will also vary.

The playscript of Lin Zhaohua’s Hamlet is adapted from Zhu Shenghao’s written version.

Obviously, as a direct script of a play, the performability of Lin Zhaohua's script must be stronger than that of Zhu Shenghao's translation, which is a complete literary work. This paper will analyze how Lin Zhaohua adapted Zhu Shenghao's translation, enhancing the performability of the text and making it more suitable for stage performance from both linguistic and thematic perspectives.

2. Linguistic Perspectives

It is easy for us to find some differences in language details between the two versions, serving their different purposes respectively. For example:

*Remember thee?
Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat,
In this distracted globe. Remember thee? [5]*

Compared with Zhu Shenghao's version, which translated Shakespeare's original script strictly, Hamlet raved "Remember thee" again and again in Lin Zhaohua's playscript. It seems not necessary to repeat it so many times in the written form, which may be a little weird and obtrusive, while in the oral version, the repetition and emphasis of the words reflecting the heroes' attitude can better bring the audience into the story and help them understand the heroes' sensation, making the play more infectious. When the audience saw Hamlet shouting "remember thee" in desperation on the stage repeatedly, their ears would be heavily struck. They would be shocked and impressed by Hamlet's emotion, and have great empathy with his desperation, identifying personally with Hamlet's misery, despair and hatred and believing that he would never forget his father, and would never give up revenging his father's death.

The performing of a play has the limitation that the line of the actors is transitory. This means that once the audience misses some point, they will have no chance to figure it out again. So the script should be as simple and colloquial as possible. For example:

*Laertes: For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor,
Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood,
A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,
The perfume and suppliance of a minute,
No more.*

In this section, Zhu uses free translation, choosing "fu yu" to describe the violet, which is literary and a little obscure. In the script, Lin uses literal translation, changing it into "tian mi", making it easier for the audience to understand. Besides, Zhu uses literal translation, translating "the perfume and suppliance of a minute" into "yi fen zhong de fen fang he xi yue", which kind of expression is not common in China. Hence, Lin uses free translation, translating it into "yi shi jian de fen fang he xi yue". Although it may deviate a little from the original meaning, this can help the audience get the point in the shortest time.

3. Thematic Perspectives

As a translation task commissioned by the publisher without the need to consider the stage effects, Zhu Shenghao's translation version of Hamlet strictly followed Shakespeare's original language details without much intervention of his personal thinking. However, based on the contemporary social background, Lin Zhaohua not only adapted some language details, but also reconstructed the theme of it, improving the play's social importance.

"The Hamlet we are facing today is not with a prince who takes revenge for justice, not a humanist hero, but each of us ourselves." [6] The presentation of a play on the stage is the result of the director's reworking of the script based on his own understanding. So the themes that the

original playwright wanted to express may be inherited, processed or even subverted. Lin often finds novel ideas in classic plays, which he calls “the second theme” with the original idea of the play being the first theme. Therefore, the theme reflected in his *Hamlet* is very different from the traditional way of interpretation. He can keep up with the times and use his own understanding and way to connect the main character in the classic tragedy with everyone of his contemporaries, conveying a new kind of interpretation that is more in line with social reality, more suitable for Chinese culture, more performable, and closer to the audience. It forms interaction and resonance with the audience, reflecting the second theme that Lin Zhaohua wants to show through the play -- “Everyone is Hamlet”. In order to explain his understanding of Shakespeare’s original theme, what he calls “the second theme”, Lin Zhaohua mainly adapted this classic play from two aspects -- the role swapping and the rearrangement of the plot.

3.1. The Role Swapping

Role swapping is one of the most common staging techniques of theatre of the absurd. In Lin Zhaohua’s version of *Hamlet*, he adapted the dialogue of the characters in the original version translated by Zhu Shenghao, accomplishing the second theme of “everyone is Hamlet” by switching and exchanging the roles of the actors.

The first character exchange took place between Hamlet and Claudius. Faced with the pain of losing his father, Hamlet was persuaded by the king and queen to stay in Denmark. When Hamlet said he was willing to obey his mother’s will, Claudius looked happy: “Why, ’tis a loving and a fair reply.” Suddenly, he lowered his head, whose face was overcast with gloom. At this moment, Hamlet took the Queen’s arm: “Madam, Come”, and exited the stage. Claudius was left alone on the stage, becoming a depressed Denmark prince, shouting “frailty, thy name is woman!”. The identity exchange of Hamlet and Claudius interprets Lin’s new understanding of Shakespeare, that is, the scandalous behaviors of Claudius may also be conducted by Hamlet -- everyone’s situation is constantly changing, so the roles of different characters are also interchangeable. The identities of Hamlet and Polonius were switched after Hamlet made up his mind to investigate the king with the play. Polonius spoke in Hamlet’s voice about his determination to expose the conspiracy. The honest, upright and noble Hamlet became the foolish and treacherous Polonius.

These two role swaps paved the way for the next one. Standing in a triangle on the stage, Hamlet, Claudius and Polonius questioned “to be or not to be” collectively. At this moment, Hamlet was no longer alone in his predicament between suffering the tyranny of fate and rising up against the suffering of the world. The sinful Claudius and wicked Polonius also faced the same choice. Whether you are a king, a prince, or a vassal, whether you are ethical or unethical, whether you are righteous, disloyal, or treacherous, everyone raised the same question: “to be or not to be”. It went beyond the personal question of Hamlet with everyone being tormented by the confusion of choice. The role mismatching and overlapping of Hamlet, Claudius and Polonius on stage led the audience to think about how to position Hamlet’s characterization -- Is he someone else? Is he myself? Am I Hamlet? Thus, the audience’s potential interaction with the plot was strengthened and the appeal of the work was much improved.

Besides, as the three actors asked themselves on stage in the same voice at the same time, the resonance between the actors and the audience reached a climax, and it was hard for everyone not to be struck and impressed. The audience couldn’t help examining themselves and reflecting on their lives, and may actively face up to the practical problems instead of avoiding the difficulties in daily life. At this point, Lin’s re-creation of the theme of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, that “everyone is Hamlet”, had made a qualitative leap, which realized his original intention of adapting and directing the play.

3.2. The Rearrangement of the Plot

Apart from the role exchange, Lin Zhaohua's rearrangement of the plot also improves the performability of the playscript. Although Shakespeare himself did not divide his plays into acts, since 1676, Shakespearean scholars have regarded all of his plays as five-act. In this regard, Lin Zhaohua did not make any change in the division of acts. However, in the original script, the dialogue of the gravedigger appears only once, at the beginning of Act V. This detail was broken down and reconstructed by Lin, which was deliberately divided into four parts and placed at the beginning of Act I, Act II, Act III and Act V, running through the play. In the first act, two gravediggers discussed "Who is the most gentle man?" and "Who builds stronger than a mason, a shipwright, or a carpenter?", and the answer is "We gravediggers". All of us had to go through the experience of birth and death, so "We gravediggers." will never be unemployed. Whether you are a prince or an ordinary person, the grave is the final end for everyone. The elaborate arrangement of the gravedigger's appearance laid a solid foundation for the advance of the plot and the presentation of the theme, making the development of the story more rhythmic and clearer, and helping the audience better understand the director's intention.

In the arrangement of the storyline, Lin also made a small change, putting the scene of Claudius' praying directly after the king's sending Hamlet to England, leaving Claudius alone on the stage saying: "Till I know 'tis done, Howe'er my haps, my joys will ne'er begin." After bowing his head for a moment in contemplation, he continued his monologue: "It hath the primal eldest curse upon't, A brother's murder. Pray can I not....." Up to that moment, Hamlet had no chance to hear his uncle's inner confession, and no chance to hesitate whether to kill the king to avenge his father's death. That is to say, he did not avenge his father on the king due to the lack of chance rather than his indecision. The whole process of his revenge was resolute and smooth without any hesitation. Lin overturned the traditional interpretation of *Hamlet* as a revenge play: on his stage, Hamlet was no longer the indecisive Danish prince, no longer confused by the mission and responsibility of revenge and justice, but a determined and resolute revenger. Through the adaptation of the original plot, Lin diluted Hamlet's noble identity, turning the prince into a common person.

4. Conclusion

As a translator of the published written version aimed at readers, Zhu Shenghao tried his best to tell us everything about what Shakespeare wanted to show in *Hamlet*, having no need to consider too much about how it will be shown on the stage. His primary task is the information function -- to show the major plot and convey the main idea of the original script. As the director of a theatre aimed at the audience, Lin Zhaohua takes more about the stage effects and the audience's feelings into consideration. The appeal function of the heroes' dialogue overrides its information function. To increase the performability of his play, which can further improve the audience's empathy with Hamlet, strengthen the play's attraction and deepen its modern social meaning, Lin Zhaohua adapted Zhu Shenghao's translation a lot, making modifications not only in some details of language but also in the play's main theme. By exchanging the role of different characters and rearranging the storyline, he highlighted "the second theme", that is "everyone is Hamlet". In other words, Lin Zhaohua's slight but elaborate change in the language makes the theatre more infectious and his innovative theme inspires every modern people, making the audience identify with Hamlet and think about their own life. These add to the performability of his theatre, helping it stand out from various adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* all around the world.

References

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