

Petőfi as a Translator of Shakespeare
(A Translation Criticism and Literary History Approach to Sándor Petőfi's Translation
of Coriolanus)

Júlia Paraizs

PhD Dissertation Abstract

Doctoral School of Literary Studies
English Renaissance and Baroque Program

Supervisor: Dr. István Géher

2008.

1. The scope of the dissertation

The study of Sándor Petőfi's translation of *Coriolanus* (1848) is an important chapter in the history of Hungarian literary translations. Petőfi's translation, together with Mihály Vörösmarty's translation of *Julius Caesar* (1839), created a paradigm for the first *Complete Works* of Shakespeare in Hungarian (1864-78) and for later editions to come. The translation which is included in the latest editions of the *Plays* (1988) and the *Complete Works* (1992, 2005) has served as a model for translating Shakespeare according to the norm of fidelity dominant in the late 19th and in the 20th century. Is there a different story to tell about Petőfi's *Coriolanus* from what the existing literature reveals? Gábor Szigethy showed in his monograph (*Shakespeare-t olvasó Petőfi*, 1979) the impact of Shakespeare on Petőfi's own works, Zoltán Ferenczi compared the translation with the English original (Paris, 1838) in his apparatus to his edition of the translation in 1916 and Kálmán Ruttkay's article (1965) on the 19th century canonical translations showed the importance of popular language in the translation. A detailed study from a translation theory approach, however, has not yet been attempted. The aim of the dissertation is to define the literary characteristics of the translation from the choice of *Coriolanus* to the explication of textual choices, to place the translation in the discourse of translation theory in the middle of the 19th century, to determine the status of the original text in the long and distinguished tradition of Shakespeare editions, to offer a narrative on Petőfi's translation by relying on an intertextual reading of *Coriolanus*. The dissertation is designed to contribute to the literature on Shakespeare in the 19th century, to translation criticism as well as to the studies on Petőfi.

2. Theoretical and methodological foundations

The dissertation is a case study and looks at the translation as part of the translator's *oeuvre* and as a literary text. Therefore, it diverts from the quantitative tradition of comparative approaches to the translations of Shakespeare as represented by the works of Katalin É. Kiss (1975) and Ágnes Vargha (1991). Comparative approaches tend to focus on the correspondence of the translation to the original by searching for equivalence. This approach has been questioned by post-structuralist schools as their theoretical premises undermined the hierarchy between original and translation, and also by the so-called cultural turn in translation studies which directed the orientation from the previous dominance of the source

text to the target text. This turn, however, resulted in the neglect of questions related to the original text. The dissertation restores the original text to the interpretation of the translation in the framework of intertextuality. The focus on the original edition also calls for a positioning of the text in the history of Shakespeare editions which I attempt for the first time.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, when the question of the original text was last studied in relation to Petőfi's translation, philologists like Gyula Haraszti, Adolf Havas, Zoltán Ferenczi approached the translation from the source text and examined it whether it fulfilled (or failed to live up to) the norms of fidelity. Ruttkay's article (1965) was the first to direct attention to target text-orientation which examined how the translation integrated into the poetry of the translator and into the traditions of the target literature. In the dissertation I follow the translation poetics framework of Henri Meschonnic who suggests to view translations as literary texts which erases the hierarchical distinction between translation and original, and invites the examination of poetic features instead of measuring the translation against notions of fidelity. This approach, as I argue, allows for recognizing the importance of inventive and romantic irony as the governing poetic characteristics in Petőfi's translation. It also enables us to see the poetics behind Petőfi's concept of Shakespeare's Complete Plays (*Shakspeare összes színművei*) explaining the choice of *Coriolanus* as the first play in the enterprise.

In order to ascertain the Shakespearian features in Petőfi's poetics I rely on an intertextual reading of Petőfi's works, his translation of *Coriolanus* and Shakespeare's original play. As Ildikó Józán (2007) writes the dominant interpretative mode of Hungarian translation criticism in the 20th century read translations exclusively in relation to the original which was itself reduced to a single meaning. As an alternative, Józán (1998) suggests to introduce intertextuality in interpreting translations which considers the original as the translation's intertext and therefore looks for evidence of textual interplay in the place of equivalence. On the one hand, this approach is able to relate the original text to the translation without making claims to the hierarchical superiority of the original and the traditional subservience of the translation. Translation criticism building on intertextuality, on the other hand, is also liberated from the exclusivity of the original in the discourse on translation as it makes references to a wealth of texts in interpreting the translation.

3. Conclusions

The literature on Petőfi's *Coriolanus* has traditionally built on political or psychological

interpretations to explain his choice in translating this particular play by Shakespeare. I argue that if we approach the translation from Petőfi's concept of the *Complete Plays* (1848) then the poetics of the translation will be more discernible. I suggest that while the critical discourse in the 1830s thought of translating Shakespeare's plays in a selective way in the formation of the Shakespeare canon in Hungarian, the 1840s brought about the emancipatory gesture to translate all the canonical plays as an identification with the totality of Shakespearian poetics in the frame of the complete plays. Therefore, I propose to see Petőfi's concept of the *Complete Plays* (involving fellow-poets Mihály Vörösmarty and János Arany) as the Hungarian version of the German "Schlegel-Tieck" translation. First, the concept of the complete plays is governed by the poetics of Petőfi who chose to translate nine plays (as A. W. Schlegel's translation of seventeen plays form the base of the Schlegel-Tieck) and not by an order established in the English editorial tradition (as attempted in the concept of the first complete plays in Hungarian by Emília Lemouton in 1845). Secondly, the model of the German translation inspired Petőfi to publish a text entirely free from paratexts: the title page of his 1848 edition of *Coriolanus* offers itself primarily as a play ("Coriolanus. Shakspeare után angolból Petőfi Sándor. Pest, 1848." –"Coriolanus. Sándor Petőfi after Shakespeare from English, Pest, 1848.") which does not make it explicit whether the product is a result of translation, writing or rewriting.

Coriolanus, the flagship play of Petőfi's Shakespeare canon was not included in the list of the Hungarian Academy of Science which singled out twenty-two plays by Shakespeare for translation in 1831. On the basis of the key text to the understanding of Petőfi's canon, which is his review on a production of *Richard III* (1847), I argue that the key features governing Petőfi's Shakespearian poetics are: humour and romantic irony. Humour is also mentioned in Petőfi's review as a characteristic of Gábor Egressy's performance of Richard III, however, I draw attention to its decisive role in the formation of Petőfi's canon by reading it in the context of contemporary theatre criticism. I offer Petőfi's review on *Richard III* as a text pointing out the role of romantic irony as a reflection on his own cultic attitude as shown by Péter Dávidházi (1989). Romantic irony is present partly in disrupting the unequivocal continuity of the cultic attitude in the digressive rhetoric of the review and partly in the poetical-rhetorical reflection on Shakespeare's "boundless, omnipotent power" ("korrlátalan, mindenható erő"). This reference is made with regard to the coffin-scene (1.2.) of *Richard III* and its description in Petőfi's narrative (which is reduced to the contrast of action and utterances) leaves the interpretation of "boundless" and "omnipotent" to the reader. I interpret this textual strategy as a recognition of the boundaries posed to the Shakespearian ideal of

“boundless” speech.

I argue that *Coriolanus* is a play on poetic utterance in Petőfi’s translation. This argument builds on the interplay of the word “boundless” which links various texts in a discourse on speech. Petőfi translates Volumnia’s words to Coriolanus “You are too absolute” as “Nagyon korlátatlan vagy” in scene 3.2., which is spoken by Volumnia after the patricians fail to convince him to speak a different language to the plebeians. The word “korlátatlan”, on the one hand, offers an interplay with the review on *Richard III* in referring to Shakespearian poetics and, on the other hand, it alludes to the refrain of Petőfi’s poem, *A természet vadvirága* (“A korlátlan természet / Vadvirága vagyok én”) which is generally interpreted as his *ars poetica*. I suggest that the poem defines its position against normative criticism in a type of utterance which is parallel to the invectives found in *Coriolanus*. In my reading of Petőfi’s translation of the play, I find invective (which is characterized by Kenneth Burke as the primary freedom of speech and by Mikhail Bahtyin as a type of speech based on honesty) as a defining feature in the discourse on poetic utterance.

In the Shakespearian poetics of Petőfi I identify the idea of “boundless” speech with invective which finds its legitimacy in honesty. The possibility of honest speech, related to self-sufficiency and independence from normativity, appears in Petőfi’s *oeuvre* by echoing the Senecan Stoic vocabulary of *Coriolanus* as shown by Geoffrey Miles (1996). However, as István Margócsy (1999) argues, the separation of the subject from the community is problematic in Petőfi’s poetry. I propose that romantic irony is extended to the polemical poems promoting the idea of “boundless” speech (by the heavy use of invectives) which, at the same time, cannot but revert to rhetorical strategies of negation and commonplace and thereby defeat the idea of “boundless” poetic utterance. I also propose to read Petőfi’s poem, *Ha férffi vagy, légy férffi...* as a piece embodying the poetical-rhetorical reading of the play. The reader of the poem is confronted with the Stoic vocabulary of *Coriolanus* only to find that through various rhetorical strategies (which find their parallels in Shakespeare’s play) the Stoic ideal of man becomes a matter of faith. Focusing on invective and romantic irony I provide an allegorical reading of *Coriolanus* as a story of the aspiration for “boundless” poetic utterance, the limitations imposed by the community on poetic self-sufficiency, the recognition of boundaries which find verbal echoes in Petőfi’s poetry as well as in contemporary criticism. I also submit that translation as a literary form silenced those critics who censured Petőfi’s own poetry as sub-literary (often for his heavy use of invective) since translation by default is literary.

The translation theory of the 1840s is a neglected period in the literature. I argue that

there are two paradigms at work at the time of Petőfi's translation. The dominant discourse is articulated in the theoretical piece written by Ferenc Toldy (1843) who distinguishes three types of translations. However, in my reading (as opposed to Mónika Burján, 2001) these three types are all part of the same paradigm and are defined by the concept of fidelity. The other paradigm is represented by Petőfi who identifies his translation in a letter to Arany in the concept of freedom. By applying the translation poetics framework of Henri Meschonnic I identify Toldy's theory a paradigm which locates meaning in the signified in the concept of fidelity. Separating the signifier and the signified, and giving priority to the latter, means that in interpreting Toldy's theory in relation to translating Shakespeare fidelity ultimately resides in the prose translation of the plays. Petőfi, however, translating from English and in verse draws attention to the role of the signifier in the translation which is later on articulated by János Arany and Károly Szász in their theoretical writings on translating Shakespeare. Petőfi (and Vörösmarty), working outside the norms of contemporary translation theory and practice, were later on singled out as normative translations for generations.

I argue that the reception history of *Coriolanus* is determined by textual revisionism. The translation criticism of the late 19th and early 20th century constructed the image of Petőfi's translation as faulty in their bulky apparatus. The most radical revision took place in the complete edition of the plays in 1955 which was published in the rewriting conducted by the poet Gyula Illyés. Since the 1955 edition the revised text replaced Petőfi's first edition and the Petőfi-Illyés version acquired a canonical status. It became the standard text standing for Petőfi's *Coriolanus* which, however, is always published without the apparatus of 1955 (indicating the changes introduced into the main body of the text) and at times editions silently omit the name of Illyés as a rewriter. I show how the rewritings disrupt and erase the textual interplay in the translation and also in the intertextual frame of Petőfi's poetry which have an impact on the interpretative potential of the text. Revisionist attempts, whether they reside in the apparatus or over-write the body of the text, measure the translation against an idealized original with a fixed meaning and as Henri Meschonnic notes the criticism is mostly targeted at the level of lexemes and therefore loses sight of the poetics of the translation. While the Petőfi-Illyés version offers itself as a play to read it is certainly a different one from Petőfi's 1848 edition.

In revisionist criticism the Shakespearian original is idealized to the extent that critics like Gyula Haraszti and Adolf Havas attributed faults to Petőfi's translation by making use of other editions than the Paris edition of 1838. Zoltán Ferenczi was the first critic to rely on the 1838 edition in his 1916 apparatus yet his contribution is omitted from the latest critical

edition of Petőfi which contains *Coriolanus* (1952). While translation criticism traditionally positions the idealized original as the only reference for the translation, and target-oriented approaches often ignore the question of the original, an intertextual approach to the 1838 edition reveals that digressions from this text provide telling examples of the unique interpretative choices offered by *Coriolanus* in Petőfi's translation pointing to the polysemy of the original drama. The attention directed to the original text raises the question on the quality of the original text, on the status the 1838 edition occupies in the textual history of Shakespeare. My research, which addresses the issue for the first time in the literature, shows that Petőfi's 1838 edition was an eclectic edition, the plays being based on Alexander Chalmers's 1823 edition. The Chalmers edition itself belonged to the line of so-called derivative 19th century-editions (Andrew Murphy, 2003) which was based on the Johnson-Steevens-Reed editorial tradition. Petőfi, through the 1838 edition, received a textual tradition which (along with Edmond Malone's editions) dominated the first half of the 19th century (Murphy 2003). Chalmers as a Romantic editor, however, created editions for a Romantic readership by breaking with the tradition of the received 18th century-apparatus and introducing his own selective approach to the reduced paratextual material, by introducing his "Life of Shakespeare" and adding illustrations as appeals to the imagination, concepts which also influenced the 1838 edition. Petőfi working on the basis of the tradition of George Steevens is not accidental as, judging by the editions in the possession of Hungarian libraries, I suggest that the textual tradition of Steevens's editions was the dominant one for Petőfi and his contemporaries.

Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* is not a popular play either in the history of the stage or in criticism. The most influential Hungarian reading of the play by István Géher (1991) also finds *Coriolanus* a discomfiting character. Petőfi, however, singled out this play as the first to be published in his concept of Shakespeare's complete plays. I set out to show the literary considerations in translating Shakespeare, and *Coriolanus* in particular, while the dominant interpretative tradition offers political or psychological motivations. The dissertation presents a reading of *Coriolanus* in Petőfi's translation as a play on poetic utterance focusing on the role of invective associated with the "boundless" capacity of speech and on romantic irony as a recognition of the limitations on the concept of boundlessness. The intertextual reading of the translation and the original text also advances humour as a more decisive feature of the translation than István Géher's end-of-century reading of the play as a tragedy of impersonality and estrangement. Furthermore, the dissertation also provides a critical approach to textual revisionism which characterizes the reception of Petőfi's translation,

offers a poetics-oriented discourse on translation and a theoretical contextualization of the translation in the 19th century. It also attempts to restore the original text to the discourse on translation in the framework of intertextuality as well as to position the text in the English editorial tradition. Although there is no comprehensive monograph on the Hungarian translations of Shakespeare comparable to Péter Dávidházi's book on the reception history (1989), the dissertation hopes to contribute to the growing field of research on translating Shakespeare.