

Tomáš Kačer

## Pavel Drábek's *Czech Attempts at Shakespeare*

Drábek, Pavel. *České pokusy o Shakespeara* [Czech Attempts at Shakespeare]. Brno: Větrné mlýny, 2012. 1,136 pp.

Pavel Drábek's impressive book began, as he himself admits, as an originally narrow, clearly focused and relatively "marginal" (3) idea which was to collect all Czech translations of Shakespeare's plays. After years of "feverish agony" (3), this endeavour has turned into a publication consisting of over 1100 printed pages, which present a variety of research outputs. These are: the first attempt at a comprehensive theory of translation of drama in the Czech context; a vast, total, and systematic study of all currently available translations of Shakespeare; an anthology of previously unknown, considered to having been lost, and unpublished translations; a bibliography of Czech translations.

The first part of the book (305 pp.) is the study itself, which consists of ten chapters. It had been published previously as a personal print for the purpose of Drábek's habilitation as an Associate Professor at Masaryk University in 2010 and then reworked, re-edited and expanded into the current shape. The first chapter called "Before the Beginning" is Drábek's theory of translation of drama. This is important for two reasons. One, it serves as a methodological background for Drábek's later assessment of Shakespeare's translators into Czech and their works in chapters 2–10; two, it shows that dramatic translation is a cultural activity, which is relative to, yet separate from other types of translation (including "liter-

ary" or "academic" translations of dramatic texts seen as a literary genre, as opposed to a "theatrical" translation of a dramatic texts seen as a component of a performance).

Drábek acknowledges that there is no absolute quality of what is "literary" and what is "theatrical" in a translation (or, for that matter, any dramatic text) and that these criteria change over time. The translator "Sládek was still too factual and little poetic in 1905" (22) and ten years later "he was too poetic" (22). Yet there are criteria of theatricality of a translation that can be studied relatively to one of the three historical axes that Drábek finds crucial for the context of each translation: a translator's personal context (early or late translations), the artistic context (the state of literary, theatrical and translational culture) and the historical context (political and historical) (15). Besides these extrinsic features of each translation, there are numerous intrinsic features that Drábek lists and explains, such as the acoustic criteria, the ones relative to actors, and the ones relative to the stage, including its changing dynamics during the performance (these are further developed on pp. 54–69).

When defining dramatic translation in general, Drábek sees the original (which is different from the individual piece of work in the source language, which may vary from other manifestations of the same original due to edition, errors, etc.) as a myth that the translator attempts at getting as close to

as possible by means of parody, in the sense to sing (an ode) around, i.e. an approximation, with a mask, in the sense to wear the original's clothes, i.e. an adoption of concepts and forms of the original.

As for the translator himself or herself, Drábek defines him or her as “the author or the team that transfers a work into another language and remains true to the content of the original in good faith” (41). This broad and inclusive definition goes against some international trends (e.g. Noel Clark), but it is grounded on Drábek's felt necessity to include all existing translations of Shakespeare, including plays published as books, performance texts, re-workings of these and re-translations, edited and slightly changed versions, products of collaborations of linguists and theatre practitioners, re-told plots as seen in a (typically German-speaking) theatre production and subsequently translated into Czech, and so on.

All criteria and methodological grounds for an assessment of translations in the following chapters are illustrated by examples mostly from translations of Shakespeare, although there are a few general points which are illustrated by common-life examples, such as a multi-lingual edition of a TESCO “Blue Royal” cheese packaging, which illustrates the difference between translation as interpretation, commentary to the original, and cultural transfer (33). Drábek shows how it can be identified what type of translation an individual text represents, which then helps him to come up with a division of translators into nine generations so far (with the ninth just emerging, or sooner or later about to come). Basically, there are always two types of translators – the ‘ancients’ and the ‘moderns’ (the reference to Classical

Latin authors and the subsequent struggle in the European literary tradition ever since is intentional). Over the course of the history of the Czech Shakespeare translation, the dominance of the two approaches has been alternating as well as overlapping, and various features were once considered poetically progressive or conservative depending on the context. In chapters 2–10, Drábek's book deals with individual generations.

Before Drábek, nobody had ever collected and studied a body of translations that would be so complete in the Czech context. Besides published works (it is worth noting that the year 2012 was special for Shakespeare in Czech: besides the publication of Drábek's *Czech Attempts at Shakespeare*, a collection of Shakespeare's complete works in Martin Hilský's translation was published), the analyses deal with at least 200 newly discovered translations. Drábek admits that there are still dozens of translations that remain undiscovered (“the archival iceberg sunk under the surface of 750 thousand of unprocessed items lying in the Theatre department of the National Museum in Prague”, 22), or that are known to be lost forever (“Jaroslav Kraus's impressive translation work, which consisted of at least fifteen Shakespeare translations, that found its place in a recycling facility”, 23).

On the basis of the vast textual evidence and based on the methodological approach outlined in the first chapter, Drábek finds nine generations of translators (or, rather translations), which are the following: the Vlastenecké [Patriotic] Theatre generation; Jungmann's generation; the Museum Shakespeare; the Academic Shakespeare; Fischer's generation; E. A. Saudek's times generation; Shakespeare, our contemporary; Shake-

spere at the turn of the Millenium; and the new (coming?) generation. This historical study presents the history of Czech translations of Shakespeare from 1782 to the present (and the near future). It includes analyses of the historical and artistic context of each of these generations and as such, the study is also a history of the Czech theatre, as well as of the Czech culture as such, against the background of Shakespeare.

The second part of the book is an extensive anthology of (a selection of) previously unpublished translations. Each translation is introduced by a paragraph dealing with its history that describes whether the text was a result of a translation of an English original, or a German adaptation or a retold story merely inspired by a performance seen in a German-speaking theatre. For example, the oldest work of the anthology is “a prosaic adaptation of Shakespeare’s comedy *The Merchant of Venice* by an anonymous author, published in Jindřichův Hradec in 1782” (309). The anthology also includes Antonín Marek’s *Omylové*, a translation of *The Comedy of Errors*, “the first Czech attempt at a literary translation and an introduction of Shakespeare’s work [...] as a classic of literature and culture” (433). The most recent translation is *The Midsummer’s Night*

*Dream* by Bohdan Kaminský from 1922, which was a surprising discovery, because Kaminský had been known “for his translations of Molière and other translation from French and German” (1045), this particular translation proved to be more than a mere edition of J. V. Sládek’s earlier translation, and it had been considered lost.

The last part of the book consists of a list of existing translations attributed to their translators. It includes both published versions and premiered plays. There are more than 60 translators in the list, including the anonymous author from Jindřichův Hradec.

New generations of Czech translators will make their own attempts at Shakespeare. This endeavour is an inherent part of non-English speaking culture, which is developing and as such is trying to find and define itself against this central figure of the Western canon, or rather the myth which “was invented in the 18<sup>th</sup> century” (11) and has remained the acid test of a national culture ever since, writing its own history. In this context, Drábek’s book is a fundamental contribution to the debate about the theory of translation of drama and theatre in general, cultural and theatre histories in Europe, and Shakespeare studies.