Shakespeare and Translation: An Introduction*

Jonathan Locke Hart
School of Translation Studies
Shandong University, China

The translation of Shakespeare goes back centuries. In the year of George Bernard Shaw’s birth—1856—Albert Lacroix could write about the history of the influence of Shakespeare on the French theatre to when Lacroix was writing in *Histoire de l’influence de Shakespeare sur le théâtre français jusqu’à nos jours* (Lacroix; Delabastita “Language” 227). In the same year, Ernest Lafond translated Shakespeare’s poems and 47 sonnets with the English text at the bottom of the page, and by 1865, François-Victor Hugo, who lived in exile in Guernsey and whose translation of Shakespeare’s poems and plays was published between 1859 and 1866, had translated all of the sonnets (Lafond; F-V Hugo; Cheesman; “Shakespeare Text”). Although Shakespeare and translation has received increasing attention in fields such as comparative literature, world literature and Translation Studies, the subject deserves more attention and that is one reason for this special issue, which is focused on the translation of *Romeo and Juliet* and the Sonnets (Eoyang et al.; Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, *How to Read*; Hart and Xie; Miller; Saussy; Conley; Butterfield; Porter; Hart, “Poetry”; Bermann and Porter; Gambier and Van Doorslaer; Malmkjær and Windle).

Furthermore, the issue is part of a movement in which literary and cultural studies and Shakespeare studies meet in considering comparative and world (global) Shakespeare, the translation of Shakespeare in language, time and space, within and between cultures (see Bennett and Carson). Even if the matter of translating

---

*I-Chun Wang and I would like to thank the editors, board, and anonymous readers for their work and for improving this issue. This Introduction takes into consideration and shows the influence of the anonymous reviewers when discussing the contribution of each of the four articles. Moreover, our thanks to the editors for their encouragement and expertise. Additionally, I would like to thank and remember J. Hillis Miller for his kindness and the encouragement he gave me in this and other work. Thanks to Daniel Gallimore and all those who advised me, contributed or reviewed my project on Shakespeare and Translation. It has been a great honor and privilege to work once again with my old friend and accomplished colleague, I-Chun Wang, whose work on this special issue was exemplary.*
Shakespeare is not new, as can be seen in France, for instance, in the comments of Voltaire and of Victor Hugo, Shakespeare and translation became more and more a matter of interest after the Second World War. In the 1960s, for example, Laura Bohannan discussed Shakespeare in the bush (Bohannan). In the 1990s, for instance, the work of Dirk Delabastita and Lieven D’hulst, Dennis Kennedy and Inga-Stina Ewbank embodied the meetings of academic fields in the study of Shakespeare and translation (Delabastita and D’hui, Kennedy, Ewbank). The editorial and scholarly work of Ton Hoenselaars has also been important to Shakespeare and translation after the turn of the twenty-first century (Hoenselaars, “Shakespeare and Translation,” Shakespeare and the Language, “Shakespeare and the Cultures”). Alexander C. Y. Huang has examined creativity involved in translating Shakespeare’s plays into various media, discussed three adaptations of King Lear in monolingual, bilingual and multilingual forms, and noted, as others have, that Shakespeare transformed sources and was translated into many languages and genres (see Huang, “Shakespeare and Translation.”). In recent years, other studies of Shakespeare and translation or multilingualism have appeared (viz. Saenger; Delabastita; Hoenselaars).

Shakespeare and Translation, edited by Jonathan Locke Hart and I-Chun Wang, a special issue of Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies, contributes to Shakespeare and translation in terms of literature, theatre and culture, and brings together innovative scholars from Asia and globally to explore matters of translating Shakespeare in East-West and global contexts then and now. Shakespeare’s poetic dramas were first performed in an English capital inhabited by a considerable number of people from other countries and there was much movement not just to and from England but in Europe, Asia, and globally (see Greenblatt; Huang et al.; Wang; Hart, “Translation”). Shakespeare’s poetry and plays (scripts and performances) involved the crossing of boundaries and have come to be more conspicuous because of the translations—in multiple senses—that these texts have undergone in print, on the stage and in film and other media. The German Romantic translations by A. W. Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck, the Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa’s twentieth-century adaptations of Shakespearean tragedy (as well as Japanese translations), the Congo-Brazzaville writer-director Sony Labou Tansi’s La Résurrection rouge et blanche de Roméo et Juliette (1990) are instances of Shakespeare and cultural translation (Shakespeare, Dramatische Werke Kurosawa; Tansi; Darriet-Féréol, Kawachi; Sanchez). In many other responses and varied cultural and linguistic situations, Shakespeare has been in flux or—to use a term from one of his favourite poets, Ovid—in “metamorphosis.”
The linguistic afterlife of Shakespeare’s writing across the world and across time and cultures has been the subject of work by Gary Taylor and Jonathan Bate and the field has been enriched by the multiauthor volume of essays edited by Alexander C. Y. Huang and Charles S. Ross, *Shakespeare in Hollywood, Asia, and Cyberspace* (2009), and by Dirk Delabastita’s chapter on language and translation for *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s Language* (2019) (Taylor; Bate; Huang and Ross; Delabastita). *Shakespeare and Asia* (2019), edited by Jonathan Hart, brought together fifteen authors from Asia to explore Shakespeare in East-West and global contexts.

For this special issue of *Concentric*, we have included contributions that address various aspects of Shakespeare in translation. Diverse theoretical and practical modes of criticism appear here. The issue stresses the importance of Shakespeare’s translation and/or adaptation for an understanding of local and global culture; Shakespeare translated via performance; poetic Shakespeares; multilingual Shakespeares; and non-European Shakespeares, notably an Asian Shakespeare here.

The issue explores Shakespeare from the perspective of translation and through non-Anglophone perspectives by scholars of both Eastern and Western backgrounds and how that contribution is changing our understanding of the importance and value of Shakespeare’s plays in ways that should help readers, artists, and scholars globally to understand an aspect of changing global culture. The issue is rich, ranging and innovative and contributes to Shakespeare Studies, Shakespeare and performance (theatre, media and film), Shakespeare and translation and global Shakespeare. The question of Shakespeare and translation is not only a matter of Shakespeare studies, but also of world literature and culture. The special issue attempts to go beyond a western-centric concentration on universal Shakespeare and to appeal worldwide to the significance of Shakespeare to their local contexts and cultures. This is one of the conceptual foundations of this issue.

Moreover, the special issue includes articles that explore Shakespeare’s impact and influence in the world, particularly through being translated into different languages and how Shakespeare is also an indispensable perspective from which to illuminate Western, Eastern and other cultures. Shakespeare is recontextualized through translation and recontextualizes the cultures that translate him. This issue builds on earlier scholarship and theoretical and practical discussions of Shakespeare and translation in the theatre, text, film and other forms. The special issue differs from other work on the subject and makes the following contribution: it focuses on the relations between Shakespeare and translation and its global reach to the East, beyond the Western hemisphere; it provides an in-depth exploration of context,
themes, connections, appropriations and adaptations; it highlights the importance of
Asia and Asian scholars and offers an emphasis on diversity of background and
location. Finally, contributors explore a number of additional aspects of this topic,
such the areas related to the transnational movement of texts, which are often studied
in world and comparative literature. Another current element is the global growth of
Translation Studies. The study of Shakespeare is part of comparative literature, world
literature and Translation Studies, and this special issue has implications of these
connections.

This special issue is about Shakespeare and translation in two senses: the
articles are about Eastern and Western translations of Shakespeare and contribute to
an underdeveloped field in Shakespeare Studies and Translation Studies. The
contributors are from Taiwan, Canada, France, and Finland. The main themes and
objectives are Shakespeare not simply in his contemporary England but also in the
wider world and in subsequent times. The objectives are to show readers the
importance of Shakespeare and translation by discussing key relations of his works
in the translation and adaptation into Asian and European languages (Chinese, French
and Finnish) and to expose readers in Asia, Europe, the Americas and indeed,
worldwide, to East and West in the areas of Shakespeare and translation. The issue
discusses Chinese, French and Finnish Shakespeare, focusing on Romeo and Juliet
and the Sonnets, and examines the translation of the poems and plays while also
discussing the drama and the sonnets in connection with books and readers and
performance (theatre, television and film) and audience and showing the innovation
of Shakespeare and translation globally while balancing the Eastern and Western
translations (see Delabastita).

A dual perspective or emphasis of the special issue on Shakespeare and
Translation may be seen from the perspective of translation and through non-
Anglophone perspectives by scholars of both Eastern and Western backgrounds.
Such an approach helps to transform how we understand the importance and value
of Shakespeare’s plays and serves as a fulcrum for readers, artists, and scholars
globally to treat of contemporary questions and for reshaping the connection between
East and West in the global culture. There are two principal assumptions of this
special issue. First, Shakespeare can be interpreted through its impact and influence
in the world, particularly through being translated into diverse languages. Second,
Shakespeare is also a productive perspective from which to shed light on Eastern and
Western cultures. Translation recontextualizes Shakespeare and recontextualizes the
cultures that translate him.
The special issue examines *Romeo and Juliet* and the Sonnets in particular. In “Issues of Transcultural Mobility in Three Recent French Balcony Scenes,” Stephanie Mercier discusses recent translations and/or productions of *Romeo and Juliet* by Olivier Py (2011), Pascal and Antoine Collin and David Bobee (2012), and Éric Ruf, who staged François-Victor Hugo’s version of the play (2016-2017), and she argues that they are especially notable for their well-considered translations/adaptations into French of the Balcony Scene. Mercier chooses one of the best-known scenes in Shakespeare as an emblem of cultural mobility in the French theatre as a result of the French contextual elements that are caused to circulate by the practitioners mentioned above. In this way, Mercier’s article contributes to an understanding of Shakespearean adaptations and staging. The discussion of “tradaption” is suggestive, taking into account the vocal performance in which these French “tradaptions” (translations/adaptations) occur and well as the intertextual relations of the later works and Hugo’s nineteenth-century translation. Integration or hybridization are not mutually exclusive but can contribute together to the cultural components of tradaption, inspiring textual translation or theatrical creativity. Mercier highlights the positive elements of Shakespeare in French translation but discusses these matters in terms of the non-verbal translation like props, costume, gesture, posture, and the body. She sees the three instances of cultural mobility involving the Balcony Scene as illustrating heterogeneity and simultaneity in “the French cultural space.”

In “On Modernizing the Language of *Romeo and Juliet* for Finnish Teenagers,” Nely Keinänen analyzes a recent production of *Julia & Romeo* at the Finnish National Theater (2018) as an instance of innovative linguistic adaptation through variations in style and some rewriting. Keinänen says that whereas most of the FNT Finnish text is based on Marja-Leena Mikkola’s poetic translation, the dramaturg Anna Viitala also worked closely with the director and actors, and added some colloquial language that teenagers use. The article brings the Finnish experience to the discussion of Shakespeare and translation as well as raising issues about modernizing translations and appealing to teen audiences, issues that appeal to scholars, directors, and others in literary and theatre studies and in the theatre itself. The case study in this article tells us a good deal about the translation of Shakespeare and about the reception, adaptation, interpretation of Shakespeare, not only in Finnish but also in English. Keinänen calls attention to a more extended example of rewriting, that is Romeo’s and Juliet’s shared sonnet, which becomes a humorous love poem that Romeo is writing. Keinänen observes that the juxtapositions of colloquial language are comic and help teenage viewers to relate to the characters but can also be tragic,
for instance in the repetition of *hei*, a Finnish word for hello and goodbye that Romeo and Juliet say to each other when they first meet. The author shows the significance of the repetition of this word three more times in the play at key moments, especially at the end. Moreover, as the author says, an interview with the dramaturg presents the reasons behind the choices. According to Keinänen, these types of variations in register, involving colloquial text mixed with modern poetic text, were effective. Young people seem, as Keinänen argues, to have liked this translation and production while also enjoying Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and the beauty of his poetic language.

The articles on the translation of Shakespeare’s sonnets concentrate on France and China and the Hugo translation comes up again. In “The Hugos and the Translation of Shakespeare into French, Texts and Cultural and Historical Contexts,” Jonathan Locke Hart explores the political aspect of a translation process in the reception of a foreign author within a national literature and examines the impact of Victor Hugo and François-Victor Hugo to literary and cultural translation of Shakespeare’s work in France. Moreover, the article highlights the shift in public opinion when the Hugos suggest that translation be considered as an enrichment of national literature and not a threat and something beyond classical principles. Hart traces the reception of Shakespeare’s work in France and compares Voltaire’s translation and critical views of Shakespeare with those of the Hugos. The article examines how the rhetoric and argument of these French figures help to enact the drama of meaning and also English reluctance to embrace Shakespeare in the neoclassical era as can be seen in John Dryden and Alexander Pope. For Hart, translation is a matter of culture and politics affected by changes in genre and taste. Voltaire lived in exile in England from 1726 to 1729. Two later French political exiles—the Hugos—contributed to introduction of a foreign author to French culture, revealing the betweenness of the position of the translator, including of Hart himself who translates while also discussing the practice and theory of translation. The article considers Victor Hugo’s Introduction as a part of cultural translation, thereby widening the frame and scope of Translation Studies, while also analyzing a text within its historical context and in the “co-text,” as one of the anonymous reviewers says.

Min-Hua Wu, in “Rhyme and Reason: Rethinking Gu Zhengkun’s Practice of Translating Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” interprets the translation of .with an analysis of the form of the sonnets and of the rhyming tradition of classical Chinese poetry and concentrates on the final couplet of a sonnet and its aesthetic value. Wu notes Shakespeare’s lexica, wording, phrasing, simile, metaphor, structure, cadence, sonority, diction and the like.
Furthermore, Wu asserts that, among Chinese translators, Gu Zhengkun stands out with his experimental rhyming scheme that uses a single rhyme throughout the sonnet in the target language, thereby crafting a musical rhyming to the ears of Chinese readers versed in ancient Chinese poetry, although the single rhyme does not represent the aesthetics or the poetics of the original couplet. Wu employs a comparative poetics amongst English literature, Chinese literature, and Taiwanese folk literature to uncover the issues in Gu’s “creative domestication” of the sonnets. Wu argues that Gu’s Chinese sonnets, although masterful, lack the deviation, variation, twist, musing, and the final power of the couplets of Shakespeare’s sonnets. This article combines a detailed knowledge of Chinese and English, the mainland and Taiwan as well as their literature and English literature. Shakespeare is poised between East and West and we come to see him in a new light. Bilingual or multilingual readers experience this richness most, but Wu also shows how, through translation, Shakespeare enriches Asian and Chinese culture and literature as they enrich our understanding of Shakespeare. Asian and Chinese Shakespeare enhance Shakespeare in English as well as global or world Shakespeare. Shakespeare benefits from comparison. Translation improves our interpretation of Shakespeare, literature, and culture. We come to understand poetry, drama, theatre, and the world, not to mention ourselves.

I-Chun Wang and I hope that this special issue on Shakespeare and Translation encourages more contributors in this field to appear in subsequent issues of *Concentric* and, more generally, to pursue research in the area of translation and Shakespeare in terms of Shakespeare Studies, Translation Studies, world literature, and comparative literature. This journal of literary and cultural studies is a forum for innovative research. Shakespeare and translation is a topic that is hundreds of years old, and interest in the subject has grown since the Second World War and has intensified in recent decades. It is our hope that, building on that analysis and research, we have presented thoughtful and original work that prompts others to move the conversation forward and to make important contributions in the years to come.

**Works Cited**


Cheesman, Tom. “Reading Originals by the Light of Translations.” *Shakespeare, Origins and Originality*, edited by Peter Holland, special issue of *Shakespeare Survey*, vol. 68, 2015, pp. 87-98.


Wang, I-Chun. “Imperial Landscape of the Mughal Empire in Early Seventeenth-Century Geographical and Travel Writings.” *Landscape, Seascape, and the*

About the Author
Jonathan Locke Hart is Chair Professor, the School of Translation Studies, Shandong University. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and Member of the Academia Europaea; Fellow, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, University of Toronto; Associate, Harvard University Herbaria; Life Member, Clare Hall, University of Cambridge. A winner of many international awards, including two Fulbrights to Harvard, he has held visiting appointments at Harvard, Cambridge, Princeton, the Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Leiden, UC Irvine, Peking University, and elsewhere. His books include Theater and World, Representing the New World, Empires and Colonies, The Poetics of Otherness, and Shakespeare, the Renaissance and Empire (two volumes).