

SHAKESPEARE IN TURKISH¹

The whole civilised world is paying this year a special homage to the immortal genius of Shakespeare on the quatercentenary of his birth.

He is certainly the most widely read poet and the most frequently staged dramatist not only in England and in all English speaking countries, but in most others too.

No literary work can exemplify better than his the universality of art and thought. It is no exaggeration (and I hope no great sin) to say that his appeal to the minds and hearts of men of all races and of all creeds during the last four centuries has been second only to that of holy books, the Bible and the Koran.

In his life time the popularity of his plays was confined to England. Even there it went through a forced waning during the austere years of Cromwell's rule. But after the Restoration it started to grow again by leaps and bounds, soon to burst out the boundaries of his native land, making him the common heritage of the civilised world.

From the second half of the 17th century on Shakespeare was translated, staged and loved in almost all parts of Europe, from France to Poland, from the Scandinavian countries to the Mediterranean ones. I said *almost* but not quite *all*. There was to it a rather conspicuous exception: The Ottoman Empire, with one foot in the centre of Europe, the other in Asia, embracing many and diverse peoples, was part and parcel of an altogether different civilisation.

The gulf between the two worlds, the Eastern and the Western, prohibiting all intellectual intercourse, retarded the entry of Shakespeare into Turkish, the language of the predominant national element in the Ottoman Empire, until a much belated

¹ This paper was read at Leicester University on May the 4th, 1964.

Renaissance began to be enjoyed there just over a hundred years ago. This late Turkish Renaissance was based on Western culture, at first mainly (I should say exclusively) through the medium of the French language.

Before I enter into my subject proper, that is, before I start relating to you the joys and despairs one feels and experiences in attempting to translate Shakespeare into another language, as into Turkish in my case, I shall beg your indulgence for dwelling a little on this rather fascinating question of the meeting of the twain, the East and West, which, if one believed too literally Rudyard Kipling's often quoted lines, were doomed to remain apart for ever.

Well, they actually did stay apart for centuries, each flourishing in its own way, culturally quite independent from and quite unknown to, in fact quite ignored by, each other. The Ottoman Turks, immersed in Eastern culture, were geographically and politically the nearest to the West. But despite continuous contacts through wars and trade, the neighbours somehow managed to remain reciprocally impregnable to all literary and linguistic influences. It is curious to note, for instance, that an untiring 17th century Turkish traveller, a certain Evliya Çelebi who wrote his experiences in the West in ten large volumes, shows an avid interest in everything there except their language and literature. And if one goes through that full bibliography of early English writings on Turks ably prepared by a colleague of mine (Berna Moran) in a recent book, one sees that all aspects of the Turkish life, except our language and literature had been a subject of interest for them.

And all this was happening at a time when the different nations of the West, the English and the French, the Italians and the Spaniards and others were bitterly fighting each other for religious or political supremacy, but they were all enjoying the same basic culture, reading each other's books, commenting on them, and translating them almost overnight for the benefit of the general reading public.

It is only in the 18th Century that the West's curiosity began

to be aroused in anything Eastern. Montesquieu, Voltaire, Dr. Johnson, O. Goldsmith, to name just a few, first used the East as an exotic background in some of their works, but it is only at the turn of the following century that this Western curiosity for the East bore a fruit of any consequence.

As for the other side of the picture, that is for the Eastern and more particularly for the Turkish interest in Western culture, we do not have to go too far back; only to the middle of the 19th century.

In its early phase, classical Islamic Civilisation had been open to many influences, including influences from the Hellenistic Orient. But soon it came to be convinced of its superiority and self-sufficiency. And when the Ottoman Turks became champion heirs of this civilisation their crushing victories on all sides did but reinforce this attitude.

During the period of their expansion up to the very end of the 16th century militarily and otherwise superior Turks believed they had nothing to learn from what they used to call the Frankish Europe, and in fact very little to fear. But when first the period of halting and then that of slow decline started, they had already missed that wonderful caravan of the Renaissance which had slowly but surely passed from one country into another in the West, opening up new vistas of thought, of art and of science.

From the middle of the 18th century onwards the Turks began to realise the importance if not of the culture as a whole but at least of the technique of the West. The last decades of that century and the early ones of the following witnessed great efforts towards Westernisation. But reactionary forces, always active in times of difficulties, were too powerful to overcome, and the desire felt by the few enlightened for trying to catch up with the ever progressing West had to be refrained until that momentous declaration of the New Order (Tanzimat) in 1839.

Outwardly Tanzimat was only a domestic political event, the Sovereign granting some rights to his subjects, a kind of Magna Carta, or better still some thing very much like the Bill of Rights, but it turned out to be the beginning of the Turkish Renaissance, as the Empire was now openly declaring its entrance into a new mode of thinking, into a new mode of living, in fact into a new

civilisation, a civilisation with which it had been at strife for centuries.

Apart from the few memorandums of intermittent Ottoman Embassies in some of the capital cities of Europe and of accounts of solitary travellers, as that of Evliya Çelebi I have mentioned, all knowledge of what was going on in the West had been obtained from Western Representatives in Istanbul, and that through the medium and interpreting of native Greek and Armenian dragomans. But now a young generation of Turks were being sent to Europe, especially to France which was considered to be the centre of the Western civilisation, to study language, literature and science. New schools of Medicine, of Engineering and of Music were opened on Western models with teachers again mainly imported from France. But the most important of all was the creation of an «Office of Translators» at Bab-ı Âli (The Sublime Porte) which came to be in a short time a centre, a kind of academy of the new culture for the aspiring politicians and men of letters.

French books began to be translated; first Fénelon's *Télémaque*, followed by others. And from 1860 on this interest shown in Western art and thought gained an impetus, on one hand with more direct contacts with people from the West during the Crimean war, and on the other with adaptations and original books written in new literary genres until then unknown in the country.

An account of these early achievements would of course be outside the scope of this talk. As an illustrative example I shall just mention a certain Ahmet Vefik Pasha's translations and adaptations from Molière which played an important part in the development of the modern Turkish theatre and of the dramatic genre.

Incidentally, while preparing this talk I had a look into the 1959 impression of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* where under the signed article on Turkish literature I noticed, to my surprise, that translations and adaptations from Shakespeare were ascribed to this Vefik Pasha. If true, it would have altered some of my foregoing assertions. Well, it took me some time to find out the utter fallacy of that statement.

One of the first results of the new liberal spirit brought in by the Tanzimat was the opening of modern theatres in Istanbul

where foreign travelling companies, mainly French and Italian, came to perform plays and operas. These were attended not only by resident Europeans and by Levantines who were versed in European languages and in European music, but also by quite a few genuine Turks who now were crossing The Golden Horn to come to the European quarters to dress (except for the headgear) in the European fashion, to mix with the Europeans, to read their papers and their books, and to enjoy with them the same entertainments.

This is how and when Shakespeare's plays came to be staged in Istanbul. The first performances were in 1842 by one of the visiting French companies, and of course in French. Next, native Greeks started to produce them in their own dialect, and shortly after that the Armenians who were, for a long period of time, the sole performers in Turkish as well as in their own language.

According to the records of the time, the very first play put up in Turkish was in fact *Othello* translated and produced by one of the Armenian companies in 1860. Unfortunately the text of it, as those of quite a few after that, is extinct. Some early foreign and Turkish literary historians claimed that the first Shakespearean play printed in Turkish was *Othello*; but the text ascribed to a certain Hasan Bedreddin is, as I have ascertained, in truth only a rendering of the libretto of Verdi's Opera. So the first play fully translated for print is really the *Merchant of Venice* published in 1885. There is a good deal of conjecture about the name of the translator: Only two initials appear on the book, H. and I. now claimed to be the first letter of the first name and the last letter of the last name of a Hasan Sirri.

In any case it is a good translation, on the whole correct to the sense, in a strikingly simple Turkish, free of the time's too ornate figures of speech, and remarkable for the right style of the dialogues with almost no precedence in literary Turkish to rely on. There are however no records of this version, or the version of the same translator's *Comedy of Errors* having ever been staged.

During the last quarter of the 19th century, under the autocratic rule of Abdülhamit II, better known here as the Red Sultan, the history of the new born Turkish theatre as well as that

of the newly introduced Shakespeare had a most variable course. Censoring authorities were then allowing or debarring the performing of plays either in Turkish or in any language on purely whimsical grounds. Shakespeare appears to have had his full share in those indiscriminate evaluations.

The account of the time's theatrical ventures is the subject-matter of a study in English : *A History of Theatre and Popular Entertainment in Turkish* by Metin And, now through press. I have seen some parts of it in proofs, and I am sure it will make most interesting reading when it comes out.

Well, despite risks and difficulties the love of theatre got its grip on writers as well as on the public. Though most of the plays in the vernacular were modelled on French originals, in at least two of the more important Turkish playwrights, Nâmık Kemal and Abdülhak Hâmit, the influence of the English theatre and specially of Shakespeare, is quite apparent. Nâmık Kemal, the leading figure in the fight for political liberty was also the leader of what one might call Modern Turkish Literature. He had come to know Shakespeare through Victor Hugo's famous book on him, and the plays through his son's (that is Hugo's son's) French translations. As a matter of fact Hugo's book seems to have been the most influential one in spreading the love of Shakespeare in Turkey. Until about thirty years ago or so all those who wrote about Shakespeare either in the prefaces to their translations, or in any general way, made a point of referring to Hugo's book, and that, always with great reverence.

As later for the Irish playwrights, for Nâmık Kemal the theatre was the best medium for awakening the nationalistic spirit in the country, not of course for political independence as in the case of the Irish, or as in the case of some Balkan and Eastern European communities of the Empire, but for political liberty of the subjects and for freedom of thought, the lack which he had considered as the sole cause of the decline and the backwardness of the country. So his plays were meant to be staged with an appeal to large audiences. And for this he seems, in fact he owns, to have made full use of Shakespearean devices. This brave Turk ended his life in exile.

As for Abdülhak Hâmit, he was essentially a poet; a great poet of transition from the old school into the new one. He, too,

had been brought up on the French tradition. But as a member of the diplomatic service he had lived in London for long years, and thus had gained a first hand knowledge of Shakespeare. His early plays, fully in verse and in the classical French tradition, were meant to be read rather than staged. But even in these the Shakespearean freeplay with the unity of time and with that of place is discernible. In the later ones, Shakespeare's influence is still more tangible, especially in his last and best known *Finten*, which is the most suitable one for the stage, the action, rather melodramatic in essence, takes place in England with English characters, the leading lady *Finten*, reminiscent of Lady Macbeth, and the Indian Villain, *Davalaciro*, very much so of Othello.

Now *Othello* seems to have been the most popular, if not the most successful one of the plays in Turkey, both on the stage and in print. For instance the earliest reference to Shakespeare in Turkish is a short newspaper item on Othello.

As most Western things, journalism had come in rather late, again only after the *Tanzimat*. The first non-official paper, *Ceride-i Havadis*, was owned and run curiously enough by an Englishman called William Churchill. In the issue number 926 of the Hegira year 1285 (That corresponds to 1869) there appeared this piece of foreign news which I am giving now in full literal translation.

"American papers are relating that a play on an Arab called Othello being staged at a theatre in Haiti where the whole population is black, a white man was sought to perform the part in order to differentiate him from the rest. But all in vain. So the face of one the players was whitened with chalk and the play thus produced has a huge ovation from the spectators."

As I said, *Othello* has been the most popular play; and this despite the fact that some of the allusions to the Turks in it are not in a particularly flattering tone, and purely historical events referred to are, to believe some experts on Turkish history, so twisted as to put our forefathers, the Ottomans, under somewhat unfavourable light. That this twisting of history was the work of Shakespeare's sources rather than his own is an obvious matter and into which I need not enter here at all.

But the play heads the list of translations by eight different

editions; and apart from that, many highly colourful adaptations of it have been made by itinerant companies which were produced in smaller towns under such picturesque and spectator-alluring titles as *The Arab's Love*, or more often as *The Arab's Revenge*.

By the turn of this century, the traditional Turkish performers whose acting was based not on texts but on improvisation began to use Shakespeare's plays; and when after the constitutional Revolution of 1908 (a further step towards Westernisation) they came to form a popular theatre in the new fashion, that is one with texts, staging and costumes, they had a certain Kâmil as the leading actor and *Othello* as the leading text. And from then on not only Istanbul but the smaller towns of Anatolia too began to hear Shakespeare's name. Kâmil was so popular in the part of *Othello* that he was soon identified with it and nicknamed «*Othello Kâmil*» the rest of his life, though it seems he would have preferred to be called «*Hamlet Kâmil*» as he had played it almost as often and he thought the part much nobler.

The first serious attempt to translate Shakespeare's plays into literary Turkish began after the Constitutional Revolution I have just referred to, when a more congenial atmosphere was created for all literary and artistic activities.

A certain Abdullah Cevdet, a doctor of medicine, a polemist, a printer, was also known as a Shakespeare idolater as he always found a way of mentioning Shakespeare in all his talks and in all his writings. Abdullah Cevdet translated and published in his own printing house first in Cairo and then in Istanbul five of Shakespeare's plays, beginning with *Hamlet* in 1908 and ending the series with *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1921.

Mainly in prose, but liberally sprinkled with rhymed verses, these translations are now much less enjoyable and much more difficult to understand than his predecessor's. His Turkish was very Ottoman, that is full to the brim with Arabic and Persian words and phrases, and his style too heavy for a dramatic rendering. So heavy indeed that a rival polemist had tersely remarked that Shakespeare had not been translated but assassinated by the Doctor.

The joke has been used since with many of the succeeding translations of Shakespeare in Turkey, and, as I found to my

delighted surprise in France, too. In a recent issue of the «Etudes Anglaises» a writer, referring to the zeal of correctness in some translators, talks of

«Anglicistes consciencieux qui assassinent les textes de Shakespeare par excès de science»

Nevertheless it was this Abdullah Cevdet's Hamlet that was first played by Muhsin Ertuğrul in 1912.

Muhsin Ertuğrul, still young and very active in his profession, despite his seventy odd years, has been the real father of the modern Turkish theatre and the main propagator of Shakespeare in Turkey.

As an actor, as a producer, as a manager, as a supervisor, and sometimes even as a translator he strove, and he is still striving with energy, knowledge and taste to make of the Turkish theatre an institution of art worthy of its name. Many of our leading theatres in Istanbul, in Ankara and in other towns owe to him their very existence and their present gratifying high standards.

I certainly would hate to tire you with statistical data, but I cannot help mentioning that out of twenty one different plays of Shakespeare staged in Turkey during the past half a century, twenty were produced by him, and many of them several times. He has to his credit ten different productions of *Hamlet*, he himself having acted in three of them; using each time a new or a fully revised text.

«But why so?» you would say! Well, I have to tell you that Turkish has gone, in these last 30 years, through a tremendous change, with no parallel to it in the history of any language. I could not possibly give you here even a most cursory account of it. It is enough to say that the script (the alphabet) was changed overnight from right to left, that is from Arabic to Latin; thousands and thousands of words and phrases of Arabic and Persian origin have been dropped out of use to be replaced by new ones, dug out from long forgotten lores, borrowed from other Turkic dialects, or the technical ones from Latin or from living Western languages, and finally thousands of them just coined within the genius of the language. And on top of all that there have been some tendencies towards structural innovations.

Stepping into a new civilisation, into a new culture we were

faced with two alternatives : a) to adopt one of the Western languages as a medium for this new culture and become, as some Asian and African nations are now, bilingual and bi-cultural, or b) to reshape the old language to suit the new requirements. We have chosen the harder way as it is the only one to link the glorious past with the future.

I am telling you all this not only for the intrinsic interest of the story of it, but also because I want you to see the difficulties writers and translators in general and translators of Shakespeare in particular are experiencing in Turkey to-day.

It is one thing to grasp the general idea in Shakespeare (and let me be bold enough to say that it is by no means a hard one, otherwise how could he have been so universal? How could all those literate as well as illiterate people through the ages and in all countries have enjoyed him?) but it is another thing to sail through the fine and divine verses, full of ideas, full of images, but also full of baffling senses, baffling even with the help of Schmidst and Onions, of Variorum and of Ardens. Surmounting that and blessed with a sensitive ear for catching the elusive quantity and the exceptional quality of his poetry the translator of Shakespeare has yet to find in his own language the exact equivalents of all those words, images, figures of speech, and a rhythm at least faintly echoing that of Shakespeare in the original.

Now, the Turkish translator, apart from that, has to make sure that the words and expressions he is using in his rendering are those still in favour, or if new, familiar enough to be intelligible to his readers and hearers.

We have some bad translations, some fair ones, and some could be considered as just good; but we have no really good translations of Shakespeare in Turkish yet. Nothing of course to compare even at a distance with Schlegel and Tieck in the past or the still more beautiful German translations of to-day of which I am no judge but as everybody else I have read the universal praise. But even the French translations, the old ones admitted to be rather poor and the more recent ones still leaving if not a good deal at least a little to be desired, would be a most enviable objective for us.

There has been no lack of incentive for translating Shakes-

peare into Turkish. On the contrary, I should say too much of it. The Ministry of Education has a series of Western classics in which Shakespeare appears in full, the more important plays such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet* and a few others have had several revised versions in prose and in verse. Since the middle of the thirties the Municipal Theatres in Istanbul have been opening their curtains each season with a new play from Shakespeare, always trying to be up-to-date with the text.²

My department of English in Istanbul has, since its creation in 1940, initiated the tradition of a Shakespeare Seminar exclusively devoted to the translation of the plays. Four of them have come out, been printed and staged. Seven more are being revised or are waiting to be printed. But while waiting they may have yet to go through another revision, as the language is still in the process of being purified.

Translation, always the most exacting and the least rewarding of tasks, is still harder when poetry is involved. Having no verse patterns in Turkish to give that natural flow of the blank verse, the rendreings of the Department have so far been in prose, except for the songs and for certain passages, like the scene of the witches in *Macbeth*, which are in rhymed lines. Free verse might be considered as a good solution; in fact it has been used in one recent version of *Macbeth* by an exceptionally gifted translator. But a poetic prose is almost as efficient with the advantage of affording a closer adherence to the sense in the original.

So keeping always in mind the advices of the old masters of translation, of Dryden, of Pope; of Coleridge, to name a few of the best known, and of the new ones, of Ezra Pound, for instance, who ingeniously expounds his idea on it in his literary essays, we strudge slowly along the path, happy if 60-80 lines in one sitting of the Seminar are rendered into Turkish to the approval of all participants.

We were most lucky to have been initiated to this work by

² By the way, those Municipal Theatres in Istanbul, now five in number, are participating in the celebrations this year with six plays, four of which starting on April 23d. The State Theatres in Ankara are joining in with two, one of which, *Twelfth Night*, will be our contribution to the festivities of the Theatre des Nations in Paris this summer.

late Professor Halide Edib, whose lamented death occurred early this year. Halide Edib was one of the first Turks, definitely the first Turkish woman to have a regular and well grounded Anglo-American education which she had coupled from her youth on with a sound traditional Turkish culture. A born writer of artistic temperament, a prolific bilingual novelist, she had come to the academic teaching at a comparatively advanced age with years of rich experience in creative writing but with an unbiased and an unsophisticated approach to historical and critical study of literature. During her tenure of the first chair of English at the University of Istanbul from 1940 till her age limit retirement in 1950, her general courses on Shakespeare, as on other authors or periods, which incidentally were attended not only by the students of her department but by all enthusiasts of arts and letters, had a driving and inspiring force behind them. Her contribution to the appreciation and to the popularity of English literature in Turkey is indeed invaluable. But she was at her best in those Shakespeare Seminars reserved to assistants and advanced students.

Sitting at her desk, with a pencil in one hand and the never absent cigarette in the other, and cups of tea going round at short intervals for all present, she worked and made everybody work and sweat under the labour. *Hamlet* was the first play tackled; certainly the hardest.

She did not agree with the famous Italian critic-philosopher Croce who had said that no work of literary art could be translated. She had the conviction that once the original is correctly understood and fully appreciated, there would surely be a way to transpose it with most of its beauty into one's own language.

Hamlet was ready for publication at the end of the second year. It went through two editions, and the staging of it by Muhsin Ertuğrul with fifty successive performances breaking all previous record, established one which in its turn was crushed some fifteen years later by 170 successive performances again of *Hamlet*, and again produced by M. Ertuğrul. These figures have a much bigger import in Turkey than in this part of the world.

I see that the time is running and that I have been reminiscing. Happy will I feel indeed if I have been able to evoke even briefly the memory of those days when we were fortunate to have with us there Professor Humphreys.

To end my talk, I must say that this late but wide interest shown to Shakespeare in Turkey has all the signs of making our theatre-goers Shakespeare addicts, and our readers Shakespeare admirers. With the more and more increasing ability and zeal of our translators we may cherish the hope of being one day, in the near future, as proud of our Shakespeare in Turkish as some nations are rightly so of theirs in their own language.

Vahit Turhan