



**HAL**  
open science

## ”A Poor Ear for a Pun. Retranslating Hamlet and Paronomastic Fetishism.”

Samuel Trainor

► **To cite this version:**

Samuel Trainor. ”A Poor Ear for a Pun. Retranslating Hamlet and Paronomastic Fetishism.”. Frédérique Brisset; Audrey Coussy; Ronald Jenn; Julie Loison-Charles. Du jeu dans la langue. Traduire le jeu de mots., Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, pp.87-101, 2019, *Traductologie*, 978-2-7574-2461-2. hal-02148403

**HAL Id: hal-02148403**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02148403v1>**

Submitted on 14 Apr 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

## **A Poor Ear for a Pun. Retranslating *Hamlet* and Paronomastic Fetishism**

Samuel Trainor, Université de Lille

[This is a pre-print version of the article published in Frédérique Brisset, Audrey Coussy, Ronald Jenn, Julie Loison-Charles (eds.), *Du jeu dans la langue. Traduire le jeu de mots.*, Villeneuve d'Ascq, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2019, ISBN: 978-2-7574-2461-2, p. 87-101. The only real difference is that the numbering system in this file is correct, whereas the numbering system in the published text was, unfortunately, misconstrued, rendering the text quite difficult to follow. An earlier (2017) and longer version of the article, with more extensive appendices and a more comprehensive bibliography, is available on HAL under the heading of the original conference paper: <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01558384> ]

### **Abstract**

This article defines paronomastic fetishism, tracing the influence of *Hamlet* on its psycho-analytical development (Freud 1927, Lacan 2013). It then applies the concept to a critical analysis, firstly, of 'paradigmatic' approaches to translating Shakespearean wordplay (Offord 1990, Delabastita) and, secondly, of the 'performative' approach propounded by Antoine Vitez and Henri Meschonnic. It argues that the 'satisfaction' derived from a quibbling translation often results from a sense of conquering *aporia*. However, *aporia* is fundamental to *Hamlet*. It can be vitiated by premature resolution. Close reading of the play's French (re)translations reveals a conflict between metalingual success and tonal fidelity. Instead the paper proposes a contrapuntal, aporetic approach.

[KING.] But now, my cousin Hamlet and my son –  
HAMLET. A little more than kin and less than kind.  
KING. How is it that the clouds still hang on you?  
HAMLET. Not so much, my lord, I am too much in the ‘son’<sup>1</sup>.

(*Hamlet* [Q2]: 1.2.64-67)

## Proem

This paper is a study in aporia. It celebrates and exemplifies irresolution. What follows is therefore intentionally inconclusive. In keeping with the ‘contrapuntal’ poesis it propounds – as a means to overcome the metalingual fetish it describes – the article’s polythematic structure is left aporetically unresolved. It thus offers only a glimpse of the extensive research involved in cataloguing and analysing the treatment of wordplay in its primary corpus: the sixty-plus published French translations of *Hamlet*. Unfortunately, word-length constraints permit only the meagrest and most elliptical of citations to adduce the arguments put forward in its three stages, which are: 1. a definition of paronomastic fetishism, 2. critical synopses of two influential fetishistic tendencies (‘paradigmatic’ and ‘performative’) emergent in the analysis of puns in Shakespearean translation studies, and 3. a brief account of how my own ‘contrapuntal’ translation theory might overcome the problem.

## 1. Paronomastic Fetishism

### 1. a) Hamlet’s incessant reflexive punning

Morbid wordplay and a sense of interminable repetition are the warp and weft of *Hamlet*’s textual fabric. When Shakespeare’s Danish prince first moped on stage at the Globe, around 1600, it was already a *do-over*. Depressingly, he seems to know it. His struggle with the notion of heredity feeds his initial reluctance to do over the King. He fears that he is a mere shadow of his forebears, not just his eponymous father, but implicitly of his textual sources: the *Ur-Hamlet*, Belleforest’s version of Saxo Grammaticus, and so on. From the outset he complains of lassitude and overexposure. The play’s relentless restaging has only amplified an abiding sense of *mise en abîme* that was always a wellspring for its protagonist’s astringent wordplay.

In the second scene, for example, Claudius introduces him as “cousin Hamlet, and my

---

<sup>1</sup> This spelling, with the pun marked by inverted commas, is the one in the current Arden Edition. (Shakespeare 2016: 200).

son”, and the world-weary young pretender mutters: “a little more than kin and less than kind”. An entire paper might be dedicated to a gloss of that one line, but suffice to say that the dark quibble on *related, child, king, similar, equivalent, affectionate, well-meaning, congenial, congenital, and bound by filial duty* is not only a rejection of his relationship with Claudius. It is also a metatheatrical quip: i.e. ‘it is no more clear than the subtle difference between these words what my own relationship is to myself, and to my other textual incarnations’. Kin or kind?

In French, *Hamlet* has been done over often enough to suggest it is impossible to do the play to death. There are at least sixty different published French translations<sup>2</sup>. This insatiable desire to reinterpret the play is not easily explained, but is certainly related to its seminal influence on every artistic and intellectual movement since the romantic period. As Dirk Delabastita shows, in *There is a Double Tongue* (Delabastita 257-258), the rise of romanticism in Europe also coincided with a sea-change in the acceptability of wordplay. Where the Enlightenment had generally thought punning frivolous, romanticism sought to harness the *sublimity* of all kinds of ambiguity, ushering in the modern period’s radical refractions of the verbal sign. Tellingly, Delabastita traces the high point of this shift to the “breakthrough of Freudianism, with its emphasis on [...] the connections between rhetoric and erotics” (Delabastita 258). This is no mere coincidence. More powerfully than any other canonical text, *Hamlet* reveals the pun to be no joking matter.

Fast forward to the second half of the twentieth century and, in the work of many of the stars of so-called ‘French theory’ (e.g. Derrida, Lacan, Cixous), wordplay had become almost an entire methodology. Of course, most also wrote extensively on *Hamlet*<sup>3</sup>. This dovetailing is suggestive. The apparently fetishistic use of paronomasia as a structural principle in theoretical texts goes hand in hand with a desire to reinterpret *Hamlet*.

To be clear about my terminology, ‘paronomasia’ covers all forms of wordplay in which the proximity of formally similar signifiers acts as a nodal focus for semantically divergent signifieds. An apparently morbid predilection for such linguistic partialism is what is meant by ‘paronomastic fetishism’.

---

2 For a full list of French versions of *Hamlet* (the corpus of this research project), and thoughts on their proliferation, see my forthcoming article: “*Trop(es) au soleil*: form as ‘metaphoric calculus’ in sixty French translations of *Hamlet*.”

3 E.g.: Lacan’s *Séminaire VI* (Lacan 2013), Derrida’s *Spectres de Marx* (Derrida 1993), Cixous’s preface to *Hamlet : le livre*, (Shakespeare 1986), her play *La Fiancée aux yeux bandés* (Cixous 2010, 215-277), and her essay “Shakespeare Ghosting Derrida” (Cixous 2012). The subtitle of Cixous’s play is itself a portmanteau pun, *Amelait* (*âme-lait*: ‘soul-milk’).

## 1. b) Shakespearean wordplay and the history of fetishism – *too much in the pun*

The putative pathology at play is a kinky, reifying approach to language. It seeks out formal knots and clusters and fiddles with them, pawing at them and poring over them, as if their material were capable of stimulation, producing more and more semantic entanglements. “*Nouer et dénouer n’étant pas ici des métaphores, mais bien à prendre comme ces nœuds qui se construisent réellement à faire chaîne de la matière signifiante,*” insists Lacan (Lacan 1974: 22). *Kin... kind... king... kink...* It can elicit vicarious stimulation – *jouis-sens* as Lacan calls it (spell it how you like, he says: “*conformément à l’équivoque qui fait la loi du signifiant*”)<sup>4</sup> but, like all fetishisms, part of its *frisson* derives from the sense that it is *illicit* and would baffle or disgust a projected *vanilla* majority.

Of course, fetishism is itself a problematic concept. Lacan reveals it to be fundamentally reliant on a perverse sensitivity to the ‘knot of signifiers’ (Lacan 2013). In defining sexual fetishism, Freud gives the example of an Anglo-German subject who describes an excessive erotic response to the ‘shine’ on women’s noses “*Glanz auf der Nase*”, which Freud interprets as an unconscious paronomastic calque of the English ‘glance at the nose’, as the patient’s mother was English (Freud 1928). This kinky gloss allows Freud to postulate an oedipal analysis in which the projected mother’s nose acts as a displaced phallus for the subject, who is unwittingly suffering from castration anxiety. In *Séminaire VI*, Lacan uses this anecdote as a key justification for treating fetishism as intimately related to the equivocal nature of the arbitrary signifier.

Two simple observations are relevant here. Firstly, Lacan obfuscates the Latin word *glans* in the anecdote<sup>5</sup>. It is a suggestive paronomasia, lurking beneath the textual surface, which casts the anecdote itself, by its own psychosexual logic, as a fetishistic subject displacing the fear of its own *glansectomy*. Secondly, Lacan’s ahistorical approach underestimates the extent to which an obsession with paronomasia, as a means of revealing hidden realms of thought, can be traced to the cultural *milieu* of the analyst. My own quip on *glansectomy*, for instance, might be placed in a postmodern context:

---

4 i.e. *jouissance* (pleasure, use), *jouis-sens* (I climax[ed]-meaning), *j’ouïs-sens* (I heard-meaning)...

5 *Nœud*, Lacan’s word for the ‘material of signification’, is historically an argotic term for the *glans* of the penis in French.

the time of Derrida's (dis)juncture<sup>6</sup>; but for the original anecdote, it would be Freud's milieu of European modernism.

The influence of *Hamlet*, and its translations, was pre-eminent in this cultural milieu. Freud's own writings on the play make this abundantly clear. It seems likely that the oedipal theory itself would have been inconceivable if the model of Hamlet, as unconscious oedipal analogue, had not provided Freud with his cornerstone idea of 'repression' (*Verdrängung*) (Freud 1997). In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he writes:

In *Oedipus Rex* the basic wish-fantasy of the child is brought to light and realised as it is in dreams; in *Hamlet* it remains repressed, and we learn of its existence – as we discover the relevant facts in a neurosis – only through the inhibitory effects which proceed from it. (Freud 1997: 158)

He goes on to describe his diagnostic hermeneutics as 'translating': "I have here translated into consciousness [*ins Bewußte übersetzt*] what had to remain unconscious in the mind of the hero" (Freud 1997: 159). While Freud consistently quotes *Hamlet* in the mode of erudite illustration, the strategy belies a more fundamental influence. Many of his ideas are seemingly traceable directly to a reading of *Hamlet*. Even if the play is only illustrative, as he claims, the fact he treats it as an unimpeachably salient example of human psychology demonstrates how fundamental it had become to Freud's culture prior to the formulation of his theories. So, when writers like George Steiner and Serge Gravonsky propose explicitly oedipal translation theories (Steiner 1975, Gravonsky 1977), often with reference to Shakespearean translation, a problem of logical circularity is produced as a result of the preeminence of the concept of translating Shakespeare on the development of both translation science and oedipal theory itself. Freud's hermeneutic approach cannot be disentangled from the iconic status, in the nascent translational discourses, of Schlegel's versions of Shakespeare<sup>7</sup>.

So, notwithstanding an analogous risk of logical circularity, I shall briefly outline two contrasting forms of paronomastic fetishism in the analysis and practice of French translation of *Hamlet's* wordplay, before outlining an approach of my own definition that might allow translator and critic alike to move beyond it.

---

6 Derrida's Shakespearean *disjointure temporele* ('the time is out of joint') is haunted by its own paronomastic calque: an untranslatable pun on the English *juncture* (Derrida 1993: 42).

7 See Steiner's discussion of Schlegel's embodiment of Shakespeare's *Seelenstoff*. (Steiner 382)

## 2. Paronomastic Fetishism in Translation Studies – *A Poor Ear for a Pun*

### 2. a) The paradigmatic approach

The first of these fetishisms is a structuralist methodology that posits a catalogue of ‘techniques’ of wordplay translation, extrapolated from a categorical analysis of a corpus of existing ‘solutions’. It is espoused by analysts like Malcolm Offord and Dirk Delabastita. It is ostensibly an objective approach: a tool for comparing cultural translation norms (after Gideon Toury) with regard to the acceptability of wordplay. However, its reification of the pun, and a monastic self-denial of wordplay in its own writing, arguably combine to reveal a repressed example of paronomastic fetishism.

Since it analyses *Hamlet* translations, Delabastita’s is the model I shall briefly outline. However, the corpus of French translations used as illustration is my own.

Delabastita differentiates nine categories of translation techniques, themselves broken down into two or three semantic subsets. The following list is a brief synopsis<sup>8</sup>:

1. PUN > PUN. A pun in the ST is translated using a pun in the TT<sup>9</sup>. It is a reductive model of Nida’s ‘formal equivalence’. It is subdivided thus:
  - a) Parallel: ‘both’ senses in the ST pun are kept in the TT pun. This is the *holy grail* of what he calls ‘congeniality’. The pun is treated as implicitly binary. Morand and Schwob’s (1899) odd translation of the *kin/kind* pun comes closest to this putative ideal: “un peu plus que *germain*, mais moins que du même *germe*”
  - b) Semi-parallel: one of the senses in the ST pun is kept in the TT. E.g. “mon *cher* neveu Hamlet, et mon fils... HAMLET. Un peu plus que ton *cher*, mais bien moins que ta *chair*.” (Collin 34)
  - c) Non-parallel: none (he says ‘neither’) of the senses of the pun in the ST are

---

8 The translations in this list are for *Hamlet* 1.2.64-67, the epigraph to this paper: “But now, my cousin Hamlet and my son – HAMLET. A little more than kin and less than kind. KING. How is it that the clouds still hang on you? HAMLET. Not so much, my lord, I am too much in the ‘son’.” All italics are mine. See ‘Versions *Hamlet* cited’ in the bibliography for publication details.

9 The standard abbreviations ‘ST’ for ‘source text’ and ‘TT’ for ‘target text’ are used throughout this article.

maintained in the TT; i.e. it is a different pun. E.g. (for the *sun/son* pun): “je suis face au *plus beau des astres*” (Loayza 13)

2. PUN > NON-PUN. No attempt is made to emulate or compensate for wordplay in the ST, but semantic content is transferred. Delabastita identifies three types:

a) Non-selective: an iteration of the senses. E.g. “je suis *trop le fils du soleil*” (Lepoutre 20)

b) Selective: only one of the senses is kept. E.g. “je suis trop près du soleil” (Hugo). It is to be inferred that this represents either an oversight or an acceptance of semantic loss.

c) Diffuse paraphrase: a prosaic clarification which ‘unpacks’ the senses with a gloss. E.g. “Je me tiens trop près du *soleil*, pauvre *fils* que je suis.” (Guyot 25)

3. PUN > PUNOID. By ‘punoid’ Delabastita means any form of stylistic compensation: “imagery, assonance, alliteration, rhyme, [...] ambiguity, irony, under-statement, allusion” (Delabastita 207-208). Vercors’s second translation of line 65 (the *kin/kind* pun), for example, uses internal rhyme: “Ton cousin, *tu m’amuses* ; mais ton fils ! *tu abuses*” (Vercors 28). The Bournet version alliterates: “Un peu plus que *parent*, et moins que *pareil*” (Bournet 193). For line 67 (*sun/son*), Roux cranks up the sarcasm: “Votre éclat, seigneur, y a fait une percée!” (Roux 10). And Déprats offers a more oblique (helio)trope<sup>10</sup>, relying on the audience to turn themselves towards the *sun/soleil* of the established versions: “le nom de fils m’éblouit trop” (Déprats 57).

4. PUN > ZERO. The content is cut. Dumas and Meurice, for example, provide no translation for the ‘sun’ pun, opting for an odd self-referentiality: “laissons la chose telle qu’il plut à Dieu de la faire” (Dumas 6).

5. DIRECT COPY: PUN ST = PUN TT. The pun is kept intact in the original language.

6. TRANSFERENCE: PUN ST = PUN TT. Like DIRECT COPY, except that the

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, “White mythology” (Derrida 1982). It is unclear if any of the *Hamlet* translators who use it are aware of the possible pun on (helio)trope in their variants of ‘trop[e] au soleil’.



pun is naturalised phonically and/or orthographically.

7. ADDITION: NON-PUN > PUN. A new pun is interpolated into the text, often as compensation. E.g. Loayza adds an extra pun on 'fils' (*son*) – “quoique tu *fisses*” (Loayza 13).
8. NEW TEXTUAL MATERIAL: ZERO > PUN. Like ADDITION, but the translator also adds new material. Mesguich, for example, inserts a set-up in Claudius's question (li. 66), “D'où vient ce *maléfice*...”, so his Hamlet can quip, “vous ne sauriez dire « *le mal est fils* »” (Mesguich 51. Speech marks in the original).
9. EDITORIAL TECHNIQUES. Paratextual compensation takes the form of glosses in footnotes and commentaries. This includes ‘anthological translation’, in which translators give multiple versions to cover more semantic and stylistic ground. Sometimes an edition will be designed to provide plural translations throughout. E.g. the double translation of *Macbeth* by Angellier and Montégut (Shakespeare 1876)<sup>11</sup>.

True to the tenets of Toury's ‘descriptive’ translation studies, Delabastita explicitly denies that any hierarchy is implied: “the order in which the nine pun translation procedures will be presented does not reflect any order of preference” (Delabastita 191).

I beg to differ. A reductive logic of formal equivalence is clearly implied by this ‘competence model’, in which all other techniques are deemed fallbacks for the primary solution, PUN > PUN. Most tellingly, the subordination of all alternative stylistic effects under the heading ‘punoid’ excludes the salience of any other qualities a translator might discover in the ST item (besides its being a pun). In truth there is no such thing as a word or phrase that is only a pun, nor was anyone ever a specialist ‘translator of puns’.

Other problems are also evident that appear to be shared by all such paradigmatic approaches to wordplay translation. They can be very briefly summarized as follows:

1. Techniques are inferred from outcomes, imposing an artificial model of contrastive choice as the primary cognitive process of translating.

---

<sup>11</sup> A related phenomenon is collaborative translation. The *Hamlet ultime* (2015) online translation is the most recent example (<https://www.hamletultimetraduction.fr>). Unfortunately, their version of 1.2.64-67 breeds maggots in a dead dog. The *neveu/ne veux* pun, first introduced by Derocquigny in 1924, is reproduced as a solecism: “moins fils que je *neveu*”, all the stranger as Claudius has not previously referred to Hamlet as his *neveu*.

2. There is a semantic bias and an apparent deafness to tone, rhythm, vocal characterisation etc.
3. An arbitrary hierarchy is established, favouring the (reified) ‘congenial pun’ as the translation solution best equipped to carry the ‘metalingual load’ (Delabastita 182) in the ST.
4. The scope is highly reductive. Formal equivalence is only identified where it relates to semantic ambiguity. Even then, puns are limited to binary senses (which is inadequate for multi-faceted puns, such as those in *Hamlet* 1.2.64-67).
5. Retranslation and multi-version editions of texts are conceived only as replacements or aggregates. The dialogic dimensions of translation are not discussed.
6. The ST is considered inaccessible in reception.

All of these problems can be traced to the fundamental presupposition of the ideality of the reified ‘congenial pun’ as a retroactively conceived translation solution. This is fetishistic. Commentaries based on this assumption work backwards from Lacan’s *j’ouïs-sens*. The resulting deafness to other (prosodic, tonal, dramatic, multivocal) considerations is symptomatic of a repressed paronomastic fetish, deeply ingrained in the structuralist theories which inform the approach. Thus the apparently stringent self-denial of wordplay in the prose of Delabastita and Offord appears symptomatic of a Freudian *Verdrängung*.

## 2. b) The performative approach

The second fetishistic approach to wordplay translation does not repress its *jouissance*, but brings it to the fore. Deeply influenced by Antoine Vitez’s slogan “traduire est déjà mettre en scène,”<sup>12</sup> this modern tendency among French translators and critics values above all the creative input of the translator as instigating dramatist of textual performance. The fundamental metaphor is of translation as enactment (the TT in the role of the ST, the translator in the role of the author): a creative performance from which subsequent performances are to take their cue. There is a natural tendency for its

---

<sup>12</sup> Antoine Vitez, *Le Théâtre des idées*. Paris: Gallimard, 1991, p. 586.

exponents to be actors and directors in their own right. This is the case for the vast majority of recent French translators of the play.

In the translation studies literature the best-known proponent of the performative approach is Henri Meschonnic, who favours a supra-mimetic realisation of the rhythmic, dynamic, and dramatic features of poetic texts. Meschonnic's analysis of the French translations of wordplay in *Hamlet*, in *Poétique du traduire* (Meschonnic 238-256), is highly pertinent to this study for two reasons. Firstly, his take on the need to capture the paronomastic knots that cluster around the naming of Ophelia (the words: fair, fear, feel, farewell, folly, failure etc.) in the chapter "Le nom d'Ophélie" is a perfect example of paronomastic fetishism, not least because it takes as its object the same *alluring* character as Lacan's *Séminaire VI*. The creepy *jouissance* of Lacan and Meschonnic is palpable as they feel up Ophelia. Secondly, the chapter "La critique distinguée contre le fils du soleil", framed as a defense of Raymond Lepoutre's foreignizing translation of *Hamlet* (at the behest of Antoine Vitez), cements the performative approach to wordplay as exemplary of the future of dramatic translation as a whole, within a teleological metanarrative. Immediately after commending Lepoutre's and Déprats's handling of the *kin/kind* and *sun/son* puns, he sets out his stall:

Quelque chose change avec ce *Hamlet* dans l'histoire de la traduction. Ou plutôt le changement en cours dans la théorie et la pratique de la traduction – de la *langue* au *discours*, du *sens* au *rythme* – passe par cette aventure dans *Hamlet*. (Meschonnic 240. Italics in the original.)

Unlike the structuralist approach, with its synchronic snapshots of formal congeniality, this vision of a dynamic diachrony derives from a desire to treat translating as a process that transcends the mimetic, becoming a performative *diegesis* whose ongoing evolution can in turn be the subject of a critical *diegesis* of progressive retranslation.

It seems likely that Meschonnic's reading directly influenced the two most recent performative *Hamlet* translations by Loayza and Mesguich. Loayza, in particular, appears to have been inspired to produce his virtuoso pun "je suis face au *plus beau des astres*" by the praise Meschonnic heaps on Lepoutre's combination of "je suis trop le fils du soleil" and his calque of Horatio's portentous "disasters in the son" as "désastres dans le soleil". Meschonnic lauds this as "une éclipse de signifiant" (Meschonnic 239)<sup>13</sup>.

---

13 Meschonnic means to concur with Walter Benjamin's exposition of *Wörtlichkeit*: "Die wahre Übersetzung ist durchscheinend, sie verdeckt nicht das Original, steht ihm nicht im Licht". But Gandillac's French translation complicates the issue here: "la vraie traduction est transparente, elle ne

More generally, Mesguich's most recent version of the play suffers acutely from a kind of *éto(u)ffement d'esprit* – surely a predictable pitfall when prioritizing the translator's dramatic prowess. The quibble on *maléfice / mal est fils* is one of many examples where the pudding has been over-egged. Crudely put, Mesguich's *Hamlet* overreaches when it comes to wordplay, and the protagonist comes off as a bit of a smart-arse. This deformation is only slightly preferable to its antithesis, in Pasternak's Russian version, where the protagonist becomes an avenger of unwavering determination who eschews linguistic ambiguity (Sulick 271-272).

This excess is unsurprising given that Mesguich had cut his teeth as a director on Vittoz's high postmodernist 1977 version of the play<sup>14</sup>, which had mixed a deliberately archaic translation with modern intertexts. Romy Heylen, an enthusiast for this kind of *mashup*, provides an account of the extraordinary process:

There is a first translation, [...] a translation of seventeenth-century English into French of the same period [...] a play signed “Guillaume Branlance” of which Shakespeare's text would be only the translation [...] There is a second translation which consists of the first, or the original text, but supplemented by the historical layers that have covered it ever since the fictitious date of its production. This second translation reflects the thoughts of Mallarmé, Joyce, Ernest Jones, Sibony, Freud, and Mao. [...] It “translates” French into French, it translates François-Victor Hugo, André Gide, and Yves Bonnefoy, thus placing itself within (and against) the French translation tradition of *Hamlet*. (Heylen 126)

Such knockabout postmodernism is good fun, but it fails as an artistic endeavour to achieve anything more than half-baked parody. It is less transgressive, in terms of fidelity, than the first French adaptation by Jean-François Ducis – who admitted in his preface: “Je n'entends point l'Anglois” (Ducis 2) – and its archaism is handled with less gusto than that of Morand and Schwob's translation for Sarah Bernhardt. Such adaptations are more effective when presented as genuine pastiche – like Loayza's *Hamlet : un rêve*, or Cixous's *La fiancée aux yeux bandés*.

Mesguich has watered down the postmodernist schtick in subsequent adaptations, but

---

*cache pas l'original, ne l'éclipse pas*” (Benjamin 257).

14 “Le *Hamlet* de Shakespeare”. Grenoble: Maison de la Culture, 04-03-1977. Centre Dramatique National des Alpes. Dir. Daniel Mesguich. Trans. Michel Vittoz. See Vittoz 1986.

has compensated by gilding the lilly of Shakespearean wordplay, reproducing the same tendencies as Vitez's other acolytes. Below is another very brief summary of what I see as the main structural drawbacks of the performative approach Vitez espouses:

1. It encourages virtuosity and excessive *jouissance*, undermining tonal features of oral characterisation.
2. Translators want to outdo or encapsulate previous versions, including the ST, thus amplifying problems 1 and 3. Again, the ST is assumed to be inaccessible in reception / performance.
3. Retranslation is conceived as a teleological dialectic.
4. An inevitable self-referentiality encourages the foregrounding of translators' creativity to the detriment of other concerns.
5. Whilst an attempt is made to create polyphonic effects, the ST is not an active participant, and is *drowned out*.

So, despite producing some brilliant puns (*le plus beau des astres*), the performative approach to wordplay translation tends to *eclipse* the shady subtleties and troubling ambiguities of *Hamlet*. Such translations strive for a sense of triumphant metalingual closure (*jouis-sens...* shooting one's 'metalingual load'), which is not in keeping with the protagonist's vacillations, or the global refusal of the drama to resolve itself (into 'adieu'). It therefore appears symptomatic of a fetishistic lack of sensitivity to the displaced object of desire.

### **3. Overcoming Paronomastic Fetishism with Contrapuntal Poesis – *Aporia***

The pun on the Greek *aporia* has been crudely foreshadowed, I admit<sup>15</sup>. It is a fundamental component of the *contrapuntal* approach to wordplay translation<sup>16</sup>. This approach seeks to carry through the vocal effects of the ST, not by encapsulating or reproducing them (in their implicit absence) – as both Delabastita and Meschonnic

---

15 A lengthy discussion of translations for 'hebenon' (1.5.62), with its extended pun on 'poured in the ear', has had to be dropped due to space constraints.

16 This is my own translation theory. It forms the basis of a forthcoming monograph, *Transparent Desire: the contrapuntal future of translation*.

propose – but by employing a Keatsian ‘negative capability’ to boost the sense of their presence with something akin to musical counterpoint. This would usually consist of a different stylistic effect (what Delabastita calls a ‘punoid’) with a syncopated rhythmic interaction, reinforcing the original melody of the ST.

This ‘syncopation’ – an *off-beat* disjuncture – is crucial to the effect. Where Delabastita generally glosses over such concerns, Meschonnic’s take on rhythm is rooted in the notion of mimesis. The TT is judged in terms of its ability to emulate the rhythm of the ST, which it thereby replaces. The contrapuntal theory conceives of the relationship between ST and TT in different terms. It encourages the ‘time’, as Hamlet puts it, to be ‘out of joint’. The translation is designed not to reproduce the rhythms of the original – and those of other translations – but to complement them, allowing them to remain clearly distinguishable within a polyphonic interplay that emphasises the particularity of each metaphorical *melody*. It boosts the original by allowing it the rhythmic space to resonate.

The temporary deferrals of harmonic resolution in musical counterpoint, treated as synchronic dischords, are what I liken to *aporia*. It is not synonymous with failure or surrender. *Aporia* is a considered resistance of premature resolution which thrives on *disjuncture*. It is Hamlet’s definitive idiom.

The best expressions of this subtle concept in relation to the practical translation of *Hamlet* are to be found in Yves Bonnefoy’s writings on the subject. *Aporia* haunts his meditation on the word ‘hebenon’ in *La hantise du ptyx...* (Bonnefoy 2003: 108-109), and his dialogic descriptions of hearing and responding to Shakespeare’s voice. In an interview for *Le Monde*, he put it like this: “L’enjeu, pour moi, c’était de *sauver* dans la traduction *cette voix qui monte* chez Shakespeare des situations les plus diverses qu’il met en scène.”<sup>17</sup> The ambiguity of Bonnefoy’s terms reveals the aporetic subtlety of his thinking – *la voix qui monte chez Shakespeare...*: intransitively, ‘the voice that emerges’, and transitively, ‘the voice that stages’.

Stéphanie Roesler provides a neat summary:

Bonnefoy conçoit la traduction en termes de dialogue : elle est écoute de cet Autre qu’est Shakespeare, en même temps que tentative de lui répondre [...]  
Bonnefoy ne s’efface pas derrière des traductions-reproductions. Il cherche à

---

17 Yves Bonnefoy, interview with Fabienne Darge, *Le Monde* 05/07/2016. My emphases.

faire entendre sa propre voix de poète [...] Cette voix peut-elle résonner de concert avec celle de Shakespeare de façon harmonieuse ? (Roesler 14-15)

The answer to her apt musical question can be found in Bonnefoy's deeply considered decision to translate *Hamlet* with an original 11 syllable line of blank verse (Bonnefoy 1998: 202-206). The tight syncopations created are crucial to his contrapuntal success, especially in instances of semantic divergence such as wordplay. Just like Hamlet's grip on sense, the relationship of Bonnefoy's prosody to Shakespeare's iambic pentameter is genuine, but also tenuous and 'out of joint': "*Ce nombre, qui paraîtra sans pour autant s'établir, ce sera en somme la régularité de Shakespeare en tant que toujours proche et pourtant toujours refusée, en tant que virtualité affleurante*" (Bonnefoy 1998: 205). Again, the aporetic ambiguity is the source of its power. As Clive Scott comments:

Bonnefoy's hendecasyllable is [...] a number of syllables constantly exploring their combinational possibilities, influenced by, and influencing, contextual lines, a space free for the translator and the translator's reader to exercise their variable responses. (Scott 42)

Space, above all, is left for the ST to resonate, in all its ambivalence, without the rhythm flagging or becoming irrevocably detached from Shakespeare's. A quick survey of the prosodic solutions in French translations of *Hamlet* reveals an array of incompatible poetic structures, ranging from the domesticating doggerel of the rhyming *alexandrins* used in mid-nineteenth century translations, to the foreignizing attempt by Markowicz to produce French iambic pentameter. At both of these extremes Shakespeare's own rhythms are drowned out: in the former case as a result of a cultural disparity, and in the latter because they are too tightly overlaid by an untenable formal mimesis. Neither produces an effect of counterpoint; thus neither leaves the rhythmic space for an original pun to resonate.

In the specific example of wordplay analysed above (*Hamlet* 1.2.67), Bonnefoy's translation highlights the subtle possibilities of counterpoint. It does not shoot its metalingual load (or prematurely "resolve itself into a dew" [1.2.130]):

je suis **si** près du soleil  
I am too much in the '**son**'

Rather than mimetic closure, Bonnefoy favours tone and nuance, overlaying an ironically divergent vocal line, whose potential plays on '*si*' (but yes) and '*ici*' (here) at

the displaced nucleus of its contrapuntal tone-group are subtle enough to remain almost unconscious. *Mais si, l'accent se trouve ici...* This reading relies on the audience's sensitivity to the shift of syntactic intonation brought about by a pointed adaptation of Hugo's 'trop près du soleil', whose Icarian trope has soared above the French canon, but whose end-loaded rhythm eclipses Shakespeare's similarly accentuated pun. This is part and parcel of the polyphonic conception of translation. Not only is the ST considered accessible, but so are previous translations (even without postmodern interpolation). It is the syncopated interaction that creates the counterpoint, allowing the original pun to shine through, and thus producing a translation which Benjamin might consider *durchscheinend* ('see-through', literally 'appear/shine-through').

Shakespeare's playful voice emerges intact in the mind of any actor (in the broadest sense) with a sufficient knowledge of what is after all a peerlessly famous play. To categorise sophisticated polyphony like this as a 'punoid', like Delabastita, would be insultingly reductive. To dismiss it as "juste une variation" of Hugo (Meschonnic 239) is to betray a poor ear for aporia.

## **Inconclusion**

The only viable conclusion to be drawn here is that conclusion is itself the problem. A desire for closure is part and parcel of the fetishistic conception of wordplay translation. This is the quality that unites the seemingly disparate paradigmatic and performative approaches criticised above. The closure sought by the former is schematic integrity. For the latter, it more closely resembles the quasi-*Gestalt* model of "objectless belief" described by I. A. Richards (Richards 262) in his foundational study of stylistic closure: the desired e/affect of a poetic artifice that mimics the "conclusive answering of a question" (Richards 265) – a Eureka moment. More generally, an excessive desire for closure – be it a neat encapsulation, a brilliant solution, a dazzling performance or a perfect cadence – is at odds with the vocation of the literary translator, who properly seeks to open up, rather than to close down, the interpretative processes and possibilities of texts. Much the same might be said of the translation theorist. Translating is about raising the curtain, not bringing down the house.



## List of works cited

- Benjamin, Walter. 2000. 'La tâche du traducteur'. Trans. by Maurice de Gandillac. In Walter Benjamin, *Œuvres I*. Paris: Gallimard. 244–262.
- Bonnefoy, Yves. 1998. *Théâtre et poésie. Shakespeare et Yeats*. Paris: Mercure de France.
- . 2003. *La hantise du ptyx : un essai de critique en rêve*. Bordeaux: William Blake.
- . 2015. *L'hésitation d'Hamlet: et la décision de Shakespeare*. Paris: Seuil.
- Cixous, Hélène. 2010. *The Portable Cixous*. Ed. by Marta Segarra. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2012. 'Shakespeare Ghosting Derrida'. Trans. by Laurent Milesi. *Oxford Literary Review*. Vol. 34, Issue 1: 1-24.
- Delabastita, Dirk. 1993. *There's a Double Tongue*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1993. *Spectres de Marx*. Paris: Galilée.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1928. 'Fetishism'. Trans. by James Strachey. *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* IX: 161–166.
- . 1997. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Trans. by A. A. Brill. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions.
- Gavronsky, Serge. 1977. 'The Translator: From Piety to Cannibalism'. *SubStance* 6/7 (16): 53–62.
- Heylen, Romy. 1993. *Translation, Poetics, and the Stage: Six French Hamlets*. London: Routledge.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1974. *Télévision*. Paris: Seuil.
- . 2013. *Le Séminaire, Livre VI, Le désir et son interprétation*. Paris: La Martinière.
- Meschonnic, Henri. 1999. *Poétique du traduire*. Lagrasse: Verdier.
- Offord, Malcolm. 1990. 'Translating Shakespeare's Word Play'. In *Translation in Performance: Papers on the Theory and Practice of Translation*. Ed. by Peter Fawcett and Owen Heathcote. Bradford: University of Bradford. 104–140.
- . 1997. 'Mapping Shakespeare's Puns in French Translations'. In *Traductio: essays on punning and translation*. Ed. by Dirk Delabastita. Manchester: St.

Jerome. 233–260.

Richards, Ivor Armstrong. 2001 (1926). *Principles of Literary Criticism*. London and New York: Routledge.

Roesler, Stéphanie. 2016. *Yves Bonnefoy et 'Hamlet': histoire d'une retraduction*. Paris: Classiques Garnier.

Scott, Clive. 1997. 'Translating Rhythm'. *Translation and Literature*, no. 6: 31–47.

Shakespeare, William. 1876. *Macbeth (expliqué littéralement par M. Angellier, traduit en français par M. E. Montégut)*. Paris: Hachette.

———. 2016. *Hamlet*. Ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. London: Bloomsbury.

Steiner, George. 1975. *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*. London: Oxford University Press.

Sulick, Michael John. 1977. *Hamlet in translation: André Gide and Boris Pasternak*. PhD thesis. City University of New York. [*DAI*, vol. 38, no. 4 (Oct. 1977), 2103A-2104A]

Toury, Gideon. 1995. *Descriptive translation studies and beyond*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins.

### **Versions of *Hamlet* cited (by translator, alphabetical)**

Bonnefoy, Yves. 1988. *Hamlet*. Paris: Mercure de France.

Bournet, Daniel and Geneviève. 1994. *Shakespeare, Théâtre complet*. Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme.

Collin, Pascal. 2010. *Hamlet*. Montreuil: Éditions théâtrales.

Déprats, Jean-Michel. 1983. *La tragédie d'Hamlet Prince de Danemark*. Paris: Edit 71.

Derocquigny, Jules. 1924. *La tragédie de Hamlet, prince de Danemark*. Paris: J.-M. Dent.

Ducis, Jean-François. 1770. *Hamlet, tragédie, imitée de l'Anglois*. Paris: Gogué.

Dumas, Alexandre and Paul Meurice. 1847. *Hamlet, prince de Danemark*. Paris: Théâtre historique.

Guyot, Édouard. 1946. *La Tragédie d'Hamlet, prince de Danemark*. Paris: Payot.

Hugo, François-Victor. 1859. *Oeuvres complètes de W. Shakespeare*. Tome 1, *Les deux Hamlet*. Paris: Pagnerre.

Lepoutre, Raymond. 1983. *Hamlet*. Paris: Théâtre national de Chaillot.

- Loayza, Daniel. 2006. *Hamlet: (un songe) d'après William Shakespeare*. Paris: Avant-Scène.
- Markowicz, André. 1996. *Hamlet & Macbeth*. Arles: Actes Sud.
- Mesguich, Daniel. 2012. *Hamlet*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Roux, Jean-Louis. 1990. *Hamlet, de William Shakespeare*. Montréal: Théâtre du Nouveau Monde.
- Schwob, Marcel and Eugène Morand. 1900. *La tragique histoire d'Hamlet prince du Danemark*. Paris: Charpentier et Fasquelle.
- Vercors. 1978. *Pour Shakespeare*. Paris: Galilée.
- Vittoz, Michel. 1986. *Hamlet: le livre*. Preface by Hélène Cixous. Paris: Papiers.