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AN OVERVIEW ON DEMETRIUS'S TRANSLATION OF HAMLET (1878-1942)

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Abstract

Vasile Demetrius was a remarkable writer of the time, contributor to countless literary journals, poet, novelist and prose writer. Unfortunately, the posterity didn't pay much attention to him, although he dedicated his whole life to writing. As a translator, his modest knowledge in languages and exaggerated tendency to find a lively manner of expressing the text, based on bold associations, led to the creation of inaccurate translations. On a lexical level, Demetrius's translation of Hamlet can be identified as a meeting point between the tendency of the previous translations of the XXth century to finding Romanian equivalents and the trend manifested in the versions before 1900 to finding new vocabulary entries. Analyzing the facts, we can mention two categories: on one hand there are the terms from the familiar register, consisting of archaic words and, on the other hand, we have the neological register, with expressions and terms from the French language, as a consequence of the impact of French literature. This influence offers modernity and actuality to the text. Although the value of Demetrius's translation is debatable, it managed to follow the Shakespearean version as it was.

Keywords: *Hamlet, Demetrius, translation, Shakespeare, Romanian language*

Rezumat

Vasile Demetrius a fost un scriitor remarcat al vremii, colaborator la nenumărate reviste literare, poet, nuvelist și prozator. Din păcate, posteritatea nu i-a acordat o atenție deosebită, cu toate că și-a dedicat viața scrisului. Ca traducător, cunoștințele modeste de limbă și tendința exagerată de a găsi o exprimare vie, bazată pe asocieri îndrăznețe, a dus la crearea unor corespondențe nepotrivite. La nivel lexical, textul dramei Hamlet, în traducerea lui Demetrius, poate fi identificat drept un punct de întâlnire al tendințelor de etnicizare al celorlalte traduceri anterioare din secolul al XX-lea și al tendințelor neologice manifestate în variantele dinaintea de 1900 și, din această cauză, se poate vorbi de două categorii de termeni. Pe de o parte, se includ termenii din registrul familiar, cu termeni popular-regionali, iar, pe de altă parte, registrul neologic, cu expresii și termeni neologici din limba franceză, urmare a influenței textelor franceze. Această influență conferă textului modernitate și actualitate. Deși valoarea traducerii lui Demetrius este discutabilă, aceasta are meritul de a fi urmat în întregime textul Shakespearean.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Hamlet, Demetrius, traducere, Shakespeare, limba română*

At the beginning of the 20th century, the intense confrontation with various inherent ideological trends causes less interest in translation, noticing preferences for decadent literature that cultivates the morbid side and trivial

inspiration as the critic T. Vianu points out: "The library store is beginning to be flooded by translations the selection criteria of which are only their commercial value..." (Vianu, 1955, p. 4). Thanks to people with a taste for literature, the classics are also translated, including W. Shakespeare's works, which have never lacked of public interest. In the literary context of that time the opinion that governed was that of which: "the translation was appreciated as a literary annex reserved for the dilettantes and writers who were deprived of talent" (*ibidem*), which include V. Anestin and V. Demetrius.

V. Demetrius was a remarkable writer of those times, a contributor to countless magazines, a poet, novelist and writer. Unfortunately, posterity did not pay any particular attention to him, although he devoted his life to writing. In *Dicționarul general al literaturii române (Dicționarul, 2004, pp. 625-626)* it is mentioned about "his refined lyrics with symbolic meaning which combine both meditation and the floral colours of the rainbow", and about his novels that "brought a high quality to the realistic prose of the first two decades of the 20th century" to which are mentioned the two translations from Hamlet and Macbeth.

In the time of his difficult childhood, he comes into contact with books, as a worker at Sfetea library, an episode evoked by his daughter L. Demetrius: "It was only when they hired him at the Sfetea library that he had calmed down. Books had drifted into his hand before, he had looked for them, but there were plenty of books here. He could read as much as he wanted. He even had to read, as Sfetea sent its employees to workers' home with a quiver of books, which they had to recommend from what they knew. My father was very good at it" (Demetrius, 2005, p. 9). A writer herself, his daughter, sharing the literary destiny of his father, published a volume of memoirs covering the period 1975 to 1991, in which "privileged by the intense affectivity of the author, her father, V. Demetrius, is the key figure. Under his daughter's pen his biography acquires the dimensions of an exemplary destiny of a novel character" (Burța-Cernat, 2006). In the preface of the volume, O. Dimiseanu considers as exaggerated the way the daughter "overpraises her father from the literary point of view", and he accuses the critics of those times of ill will: "some people's attitude toward her father, and especially of those who had been close to him, remains a human evaluation criterion, perhaps the most conclusive one" (Demetrius, 2005, p. 9).

In *Portrete și amintiri* [Portraits and memories] V. Eftimiu thinks that V. Demetrius is not capable to accept his own limitations, and that he has a superior way of thinking about himself compared to the world, he writes about Demetrius's unwillingness to find the appropriate audience category that would have made him known and valued. The feeling of frustration is exaggerated by the hard work he was doing as head of "Biblioteca pentru

toți”, from 1923, when he has to publish volumes which he considered inferior to his own literary creations. According to V. Eftimiu, „V. Demetrius publishes, under miserable technical conditions, novels about the suburban life of Bucharest, serious novels in which not the humor and vulgarity of the slum vibrate, but the human preoccupations of a distinguished soul. He approached people and things with a lot of understanding and delicacy. He was indeed a delicate soul, a poet as poets imagined at the time, an isolated, timid, almost grumpy man, a man who lived only for his inner dreams, in the world of his poetry, without any other preoccupations” (Eftimiu, 1965, p. 217).

Because there is a dating problem, the year in which the translation is published may be subject to controversy. The translation is recorded into the archive of the University library in Iasi, in 1936 and is also mentioned in *Dicționarul general al literaturii române* [General Dictionary of Romanian literature], “Translations” part in the article dedicated to V. Demetrius. In the same time number 139-140 from „Biblioteca pentru toți” is released. Following a simple and logical algorithm, P. Brânzeu calculates the date of publication according to the year 1896, when the volume with no. 114 comes out of print and comes to the conclusion that V. Demetrius' translation dates around 1910 (Brânzeu, 2006, p. 29). In *Bibliografia românească modernă* [Modern Romanian Bibliography], V. Demetrius' translations of H. de Balzac, Bl. Ibanez, P. Bourget and G. de Maupassant published between 1911-1918 are mentioned (Teodorescu et al., 1986, p. 64). He joins I. Barac, D. P. Economu, A. Stern and Gr. Manolescu in their attempt to transpose the meanings of the Shakespearean masterpiece into our language.

The result reached by V. Demetrius in his attempt to translate, in prose, the short complex-sentence succeeded by moments based on subordinations using many epithets, metaphors and comparisons, manifested in a rare tension and beauty in the human internalizations of Hamlet, which is not avoided, especially due to the level of knowledge of English. The translation, as Vl. Stinu notes is "unsatisfying even for minimal requirements" because of its countless errors, together with some press slips: *apuze* instead of *apuse*, *putrn* instead of *patru*, *acuastra* instead of *aceasta*, etc.

We can also point out some deficiencies in grammar and vocabulary, which make the style of the translation difficult and the meaning often ambiguous. The translator imitates the structure of Anestin's sentence, even the vocabulary, as he confesses in the preface to his version, that he used "English interpretations" and other sources (Demetrius, 1913). His text is full of neologisms: *comtagiune*, *heraldică*, *bioba*, *cancanul*, *comesticuri*, which diminishes the metaphorical and dense meaning of the original. Due to the fact that Demetrius, following Anestin, adopts a too flexible attitude to the English text, he fails to overcome the linguistic traps of the hamletian verse. The

fact that word games in the original text are not used properly, can be noticed in the passage of Polonius' advice to Laertes: *Give every man thy ear but few thy voice* reproduc: *Pleacă-ți urechea la orice om și foarte rar spre tine* (*idem*, p. 29). While the first sentence in the original text (*Give everyman thy ear*) is translated *Pleacă-ți urechea la orice om*, while, the second sentence (*But few thy voice*) is wrongly translated "*și foarte rar spre tine*".

The translator's modest knowledge of the English language and the exaggerated tendency to find a lively expression, based on bold associations, led to the combination of some unsuitable translations, such as Hamlet's words: *Te-ar costa un geamăt, dacă mi-ai ascuțit țeapa* (*idem*, p. 96).

To avoid the discrepancy between the translation and the original, it should be noted that the only decisive thing for the value of the translation is to preserve the authenticity of the tone and the atmosphere of the original, requirement written by T. Vianu in his article *Ceva despre arta traducerii* [Something about the art of translation] (*Gazeta*, 1955). In Demetrius's translation it is this aspect that is neglected. We should see the reply of Polonius given to Reynaldo at the beginning of scene 1, act II: *Pe legea mea, nu, dacă, știi să păstrezi o măsură în acuzări. Astfel nu-l vei acuza de cusurul obrăzniciei. Nu, acesta nu e gândul meu; aruncă-i defecte ușoare, așa ca ele să pară numai urmările libertății* (Demetrius, 1913, p. 47), a difficult to understand translation, lacking the dramatic vibration of the original verse:

"Faith, as you may season it in the charge,
You must not put another scandal on him,
That he is open to incontinency,
That' s not my meaning, but breathe his faults
So quaintly
That they may seem the taints of liberty" (V. 28-32, p. 90).

The frequency of the negative adverb *no* distorts the text, not present in 3 of the 5 original verses and it gives an opposite interpretation of the meaning of the translated sentences: *aruncă-i ușor defecte* pentru *breathe his faults so quaintly*, *urmări* for *taints*, *obraznic* for *incontinency*.

The lack of a nuanced understanding of the images and the necessary sensitivity, compared to the ideas of the great English playwright, leads to a blurred, colorless interpretation, making the beauty of the original text and the Shakespearean intention fade. Metaphors like *nici pîrîul nesecat al ochilor* or the comparison *neagră ca cerneala*, obviously used to deepen the protagonist's pain, represent minor achievements of Demetrius while the frequent use of vocative and interjections, inexistent in the source text, doesn't increase the literary quality of the translation, but changes the way the original character expresses himself (for example: *Semne! Hm! Așa! Ei!...ei!...ah. ...ah! băieți!*).

At the graphic level, we identify the same features as for other translations after 1900, the translator usually follows the spelling of that time. The

text is written using *â*, excepting *pîrîul* (104), *urîtă* (109). Final unaccented *u* is used for the auxiliary verb for future tense, in the first person singular: *voiu trăi*, *voiu pune* (143). The apostrophe is used as much as the hyphen, the first one being used to mark the elimination of a sound: *n'am* (8), *iat'o* (9), *printr'un* (11), *v'am* (16), *m'am* (63), *s'a* (119), *s'ar* (141), *s'au* (174). The hyphen connects the verb to the other enclitic or proclitic atonal pronominal forms: *a-mi* (39), *luându-i* (64), *să-mi* (67), *ia-ți* (81), *de-ar* (99), *mi-aduc* (162), *despărțiți-i*, *văzându-te* (174). We can also notice the way the verb *to be* is written in the 3rd person, plural with the letter *â*: *nu sânt* (p. 90), and the auxiliary verb *a avea* [to have] that is used to form the present conditional is wrongly written like this: *ași amorți* (p. 96), *putea*, *vedea* (p. 97), *crede* (p. 146).

When we study the text from the phonetic point of view, we see that some of the words were written with *e* instead of *ie*: *trebue* [*trebuie*] (pp. 11, 120, 138), *proect* [*proiect*] (p. 147), or words that are written with *i* instead of *e*: *deosibesc* [*deosebesc*] (p. 67), *închiagă* [*încheagă*] (p. 39), or the lack of *i*: *or-care* [*oricare*] (p. 112), or *s* instead of *z*: *desnădejdea* [*deznădejdea*] (p. 35), *sboară* [*zboară*] (p. 69), words ending in *iu*: *temeiu* [*temei*] (p. 127), double *e*: *scânteetoare* [*scanteietoare*] (p. 169), *e* used instead of *ă*: *sufer* (p. 171), and the double consonant: *Regina: Innecată, înneacă* (Shakespeare, p. 148), *tennis* (p. 48).

At the morphological level, the archaic form of plural is noticed today: *boalele* (p. 121) for *boli* (illnesses), the form of the adverb *spaimantator* (p. 35) for *înspăimântător* (frightening). In the case of the verb there is the alternation of the past perfect tense and perfect simple with the future, in forms ending in *-u* at the first person singular: *îmi voi aduce aminte* verbal expression [*îmi voi aduce aminte*] (p. 40), gerund form *rămâind* (p. 165), the use of the interrogative pronoun *cari* for *care* in the accusative (*Ce actori sunt acei pe cari i-ați adus?*) and the relative pronoun (*Chiar aceia cari vă desfătau odată, tragedienii din oraș* (*ibidem*)).

At the syntactical level we notice the inversion: *Dați-mi voe să primesc după obicei, pentru ca primirea bună, ce voi face-o actorilor și pe care trebue, să le-o fac să nu vă pară mai bună de cât aceia pe care v'o fac* (*idem*, p. 67), phrases that do not have a logical syntactic coherence.

We would like to mention the following sentences that do not have a verb: *Gânduri întunecate, mâna dibace, otravă minunată, ocazie favorabilă, anotimp propice și nicio ființă de față* (*idem*, p. 96).

At the lexical level, Demetrius's translation of Hamlet, can be identified as a meeting point for all the other previous translations from the XXth century and of the tendency for using neologisms before in the versions before 1900. Because of this we can talk about two categories of words. On one hand there are the words included in the familiar register, consisting of regionalisms like: *hal*, *liman*, *crezământ*, *a adăsta*, *arvună*, *rachiu*, *grozavă*, *hâd*, *a tămădui*, and, on the other hand there are the neologisms, mostly from

French, inspired by the French texts Demetrius translated from: *investit* < fr. *investir*, *himeră* < fr. *chimère*, *a uzurpa* < fr. *usurper*, *tiran* < fr. *tyran*, *leal* < leale, *principe* < it. *principe*, *avaritie* < fr. *avarice*, *credulitate* < *crédulité*, *simptome* < fr. *symptôme*, *purgativ* < fr. *purgatif*, *sanguinară* < fr. *sanguinaire*, *bravoură* < fr. *bravoure*, *laș* < fr. *lâche*, *a se prosterna* < fr. *se prosterner*, *funeră* < fr. *funèbre*.

The French influence gives the text modernity and timeliness, even if some terms seem very bookish.

Although the value of Demetrius's translation, as well as Anestin's, is questionable, it has the credit of having followed the Shakespearean text, and together with the one written by Stern, has a modest contribution to the perception of Shakespeare's work by the Romanian readers.

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