



'To truths translated'

Exploring Shakespeare in translation

Much like acting or staging a production, translation is its own form of creative interpretation. Thinking about Shakespeare in other languages can open his plays up to new appreciation, interpretation, and understanding.

What do we mean by 'languages'?

We communicate in countless ways. Some languages are written. Some languages are spoken. Some languages use gesture and movement, while some, like braille, are understood through touch. Throughout history, humans have used letters, symbols, sounds, pictures, and more to create thousands of different languages.

Some people think of music, art, dance, and mathematics as languages that transcend geography. Scientists are even beginning to codify what traditional knowledge has long respected: the language of plants, animals, and the natural world. So, when we talk about translating Shakespeare, we're not just interested in linguistic translation. The sky is the limit!



Things to consider when translating

Translating story

Translating stories into new languages can be challenging. Often, languages have words and phrases that just don't translate well. Languages are slippery, and sometimes it can be difficult to translate the full sense of a phrase into a new language. Translators often have to get creative as they move a story from one language into another.

Translation can also change the conceptual or cultural elements of a story. For example, settings like a castle, a bedchamber, a forest, or a marketplace might be imagined differently as language and culture intersect.

Translating character

Language and culture are deeply connected. When translated to another language, Shakespeare's characters can be explored in new cultural contexts, giving them new depth and meaning. As Shakespeare's rulers, rebels, lovers, parents, clowns, and others inhabit new worlds, they will resonate in new ways.

Translating poetry

Much of Shakespeare's language appears in iambic pentameter, a verse form that is well-suited to spoken English. Translators of Shakespeare usually abandon the original verse forms and find the best ways to convey meaning and tone in their new language. Other languages will likely have features that are better suited to other poetic forms or other means of expression.

Something lost and something gained

It's impossible to move complex, poetic, image-rich material into a new language without losing something in the process. However, there's much to be gained from translating Shakespeare. Translating Shakespeare's plays and poems to other languages makes them accessible to more audiences. Translations open Shakespeare's plays and poems up to new interpretations and new resonances, amplifying their impact and expanding our understanding of them.



Make it yours

Step 1: Have a look at the lines of Shakespeare's text below. Choose one that's interesting to you.

Step 2: Consider all the different ways to think about language and translation. How might you translate your line?

- Do you know any other languages? Did you grow up speaking or writing a language other than English? Or are you currently learning a new language?
- Would you like to try a method of translation that doesn't require words? (For example, using symbols, emoji, stickers, movement, drawings, music, or any other media)

Note: you don't have to be fluent in a language to be a translator. Professional translators, of course, are trained and highly skilled, but for this exercise, any level of ability in a language will do. As long as you feel comfortable working in a language, go for it!

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.	All that glisters is not gold.
I defy you, stars!	My drops of tears I'll turn to sparks of fire.
All the world's a stage.	This above all: to thine own self be true.
To be or not to be, that is the question.	If music be the food of love, play on!
Lord, what fools these mortals be!	These are but wild and whirling words.
You tread upon my patience.	Angels and ministers of grace, defend us!
Now cracks a noble heart.	A thousand times good night.
O, I am fortune's fool!	My heart dances.



Reflect

- How did you approach your translation? Did you find that a word-for-word approach worked better, or did you prefer a sense-for-sense strategy?
- How did you convey the feeling of the line as well as its meaning?
- What have you discovered about your line while translating it? Did you learn anything new?