

## V. Перекладацькі та інтермедіальні проєкції ренесансних творів

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### Mercutio's malediction: historical vs. colloquial<sup>1</sup>

**Вайлд Яна. Прокляття Меркуціо: історичне vs. побутове.**

У статті аналізується короткий уривок з «Ромео і Джульєтти» та його відтворення у словацькому перекладі 2005 року. В принципі, прокляття Меркуціо «Чума на обидва ваші дома» (III, 1, 101) не становить значної перекладацької проблеми, доки перекладач не робить спробу застосувати для його відтворення сучасну розмовну мову, щоб позбутися історичних відсилок. Дослідниця акцентує увагу на лінгвістичних особливостях найновішого перекладу «Ромео і Джульєтти» словацькою мовою, співставляючи його з Шекспіровим оригіналом та іншим словацьким перекладом 1960-х років. У новому перекладі історія веронських закоханих набуває інших конотацій, що вказує на іншу історичну та культурну вкоріненість тексту.

**Ключові слова:** Вільям Шекспір, трагедія «Ромео і Джульєтти», словацький переклад, Меркуціо, прокляття, чума,.

#### 1. Plague

In the third act of the play, Romeo's friend Mercutio is wounded by Tybalt. Knowing that he is going to die, he condemns the families of Montagus and Capulets who had involved him into this deadly clash:

„A plague o' both your houses!“ (III, 1, 91, 97, 106)

<sup>1</sup> Parts of this text were published in Slovak language within a longer paper: Wild J. Shakespearove kľiatby a zaklínadlá. Konotácie slovenských a českých prekladov. *Shakespeare. Zooming*. Bratislava : Európa, 2017. P. 109–129.

This sentence takes a form of ritual and magic spell: Mercutio would repeat it three times in his last speech. The key word, of course, is “plague”. Since plague refers to a historical disease, not existent in our times anymore, contemporary translators may be tempted to substitute this supposedly old word by another one. This was the case of the newest Slovak translator Ľubomír Feldek, who was clearly endeavoured to render Shakespeare in a modern, colloquial language (2005). Whereas his predecessor in the 1960ies, Zora Jesenská, maintains the word “plague”, Feldek is about to modernize the spell:

„*Mor na vaše rody!*“<sup>2</sup> [„A plague on your families!“]

(*Zora Jesenská, 1963*)

„*Čert zobral vaše rody!*“<sup>3</sup> [„The devil take your families!“]

(*Ľubomír Feldek, 2005*)

Whereas Jesenská translates “plague” philologically accurate as “mor”, pointing to the same disease and pandemic as Shakespeare, Feldek’s translation avoids “plague” while interpolating the “devil”. In his rendering, the severity, and the effect of Mercutio’s malediction have massively changed. Even if the purpose of both renderings – the malediction – is clear, they enter different cultural fields.

The word “plague” (“mor”) raises many connotations and associations. As the infamous black-death, it relates to history and is associated with Europe around and after the middle-ages. Though already eradicated in Western countries by now, in our imagination and cultural memory, plague has been present up till today. Most of the public would be widely aware of its medical, etiological, social, cultural, metaphorical and theological implications. The word “plague” would arouse associations with “black death”, i. e. a deadly pandemic devastating whole cities and huge territories, caused by lack of hygiene, manifested by bubonic rash, deflection, and pain, leading to radical counteractions of contact prohibition, isolation of the sickened, and, on the moral and religious layer, interpreted as the punishment of God. And in many European cities, there are plague columns as still visible

<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare W. *Romeo a Júlia. Shakespeare W. Tragédie /* Prel. Zora Jesenská v jazykovej spolupráci s Jánom Roznerom. 1. vyd. Bratislava : Slovenské vydavateľstvo krásnej literatúry, 1963. S. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare W. *Romeo a Júlia /* Prel. Ľubomír Feldek. 1. vyd. Bratislava : Ikar, 2005. S. 74–75.

architectural testimonies and memorials. (After the covid-19 pandemic, of course, the notion of an all embracing disease has got an immediate urgency and actual topicality.)

All the above-mentioned countless connotations that the word “plague” arouses determine our perception. On the rhetoric level, Mercutio's malediction (repeated three times in his speech) has the effect of a ritual, invoking a deadly pandemic to ruin the two families at enmity who caused his death. A pandemic that was historically documented, well known for its destructive power, thus arousing fear and horror. Therefore, Mercutio's malediction sounds hostile, bitter and threatening. And points to his despair facing his own pointless death.

## **2. A little devil**

The translator Lubomír Feldek omits the historical disease completely by altering it by the “devil”: “The devil take your families”. Rhetorically, the phrase “the devil take it”, in Slovak, as well as in English, is a commonplace, a frequent idiom, an expression of anger, dismissal, annoyance, impatience, meaning a sort of “shut up!”, “damned” or “go to hell”.

Yet it is important to note that the Slovak word „čert“ has specific connotations. For in Slovak, as in many other Slavic languages, there are two types of devils: „diabol“ and „čert“. The first, „diabol“ (etymologically from the Greek *diabolos*), means the supreme spirit of evil, the tempter, the ultimate destructive force, satan, the theological antagonist to God. The other word, „čert“ (the same in Czech, *чорт* in Ukrainian, *чёрт* in Russian, *czort* in Polish, *črt* in Slovenian etc.), used in the *Romeo and Juliet* Slovak translation, refers rather to a fairytale or mythological figure: a rogue, sort of little devil much lower in the demonic hierarchy than „diabol“. The ethnologist Martin Slivka argues that in the traditional folk and popular culture, “čert” is a derivation of the medieval fool, grotesquely connecting the human with the animal body (horns, tail, fur, hoof).<sup>4</sup> Other theories connect “čert” with Slavic mythology where he is a malign spirit, demon, embodying darkness, or the god Chernobog, “Black God”, God of

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<sup>4</sup> Slivka M. Slovenské ľudové divadlo. 1. vyd. Bratislava : Divadelný ústav. 2002. S. 191.

bad fate,<sup>5</sup> English language, supposedly, only knows the word “devil” and has nothing like “čert”; the same holds true for the German notion of “Teufel”. (Although, in South German, Austrian and Hungarian tradition there is a figure of Krampus, very similar to “čert”, accompanying the Saint Nicolas; yet his appearance is limited to the 6<sup>th</sup> December and the advent period.) “Čert” might also have a vague familiarity with a satyr, faun, pan etc. – a creature mixing up human and animal features. Generally speaking, “čert” might look fearsome and be connected with evil and hell, yet his deeds are rather ridiculous and entertaining. “Čert”, being grotesque, stupid and confused, does not arouse horror, he rather makes us laugh, doing mischief and frightening children. „Čert“, a popular figure from folk mythology, would not be found in the Bible and, in contrast to „diabol“, would not imply a metaphysic meaning.

Thus, when Mercurio utters the word “čert” instead of “mor” (plague) in his malediction, he not only refers to dissimilar dark matters, but the performance of his spell is much weaker and less destructive. For today, people would use the colloquial “*the devil take it*” (“čert to ber”) day-to-day, whereas to condemn somebody with “plague” in real life would be very rare and considered too extreme, exaggerated, overacted. Yet reading Shakespeare, Mercurio's idiolect definitely *is* and should remain expressive and bold.

### **3. Reading “plague” historically and horizontally**

Nevertheless, it is not only because of its strong metaphorical meaning that the word “plague” is so important in *Romeo and Juliet*. The arguments may be historical – as found in Shakespeare's own life and his time, and, what is even more relevant, intratextual as well, for plague plays a crucial role further in the play, too.

Historically, plague was a contemporary phenomenon that struck several generations in Elizabethan and Jacobian London. The strongest pandemic spreads were in 1563 (around 20,000 people died, i. e. more than a quarter of the population), 1592–1593 (more than 10,000 people died) and 1603 (more than a

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<sup>5</sup> <https://meettheslavs.com/chort/>.

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quarter of the population died again). London's theatres were also harmed, being not allowed to play during the plague pandemic (1592–1593: shortly afterwards, the play *Romeo and Juliet* was written; there were also bans on playing theatre during the plague in 1603 and 1608). Even in the family of William Shakespeare himself, the plague extinguished several lives. Presumably, the author's sisters Joan (1558) and Margaret (1563) died from the effects of the plague at the age of a few months, as well as the 7-year-old Anne (1579) and his 27-year-old brother Edmund (1607). The plague may also have been the cause of the death of the author's 11-year-old son Hamnet (1596).

Reading Shakespeare's tragedy horizontally, we would find another highly topical account of plague in *Romeo and Juliet*. For at the end of the play, Mercutio's condemnation seemingly had come true: the crucial message that Juliet is only temporarily "dead", would not reach Romeo because the monk John was detained to bring his letter; detained by plague!

The description of the monk's situation is compelling: there are sick, official city searchers who have sealed the door and the whole narrative is dominated by fear of infection.

**John** Going to find a barefoot brother out,  
One of our order, to associate me,  
Here in this city visiting the sick,  
And finding him, the searchers of the town,  
Suspecting that we both were in a house  
Where the infectious pestilence did reign,  
Seal'd up the doors and would not let us forth,  
So that my speed to Mantua there was stay'd.

**Lawrence** Who bare my letter then to Romeo?

**John** I could not send it – here it is again –  
Nor let a messenger to bring it thee,  
So fearful were they of infection.<sup>6</sup>  
V, 2, 5–16 (marked by J. W.)

In the Slovak translation of Ľubomír Feldek, the monk was detained not by plague, but by cholera:

**Mních Ján** Chcel som, aby mi do Mantovy robil  
sprievodcu bosonohý františkán,

<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare W. *Romeo and Juliet*. The Arden Shakespeare, III series / ed. by Brian Gibbons. London and New York : Routledge, 1994. P. 221–222.

čo navštevuje v našom meste chorých.  
Práve keď som ho našiel v jednom dome,  
získali obhliadači mŕtvol podozrenie,  
že je v tom dome cholera a už  
nám nedovolili vyjsť z neho von.  
Nevykonal som cestu do Mantovy.

**Mnich Lorenzo** A kto doručil môj list Romeovi?

**Mnich Ján** Nik. Nedalo sa. Nesiem ti ho späť.

Taký strach mali z cholery, že list som  
nemohol ani tebe vrátiť skôr.<sup>7</sup>

Transl. by Ľ. Feldek (marked by J. W.)

Medically, in stricto sensu, cholera (“blue death”) is a disease other than plague (“black death”). Cholera has different symptoms and, what is more relevant for the logic of the text, it is not transmitted through respiration neither by direct physical contact. Therefore, it would not prevent the monk to leave the house of the sick nor the town. Should we stick to historical pedantism (which, admitted, is far from Shakespeare), cholera did not spread in Europe before the first third of the 19th century. (The cholera epidemic in London in 1832 reportedly claimed around 3,000 victims, which is significantly less than the plague pandemic of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.)

Yet the most important argument questioning Ľubomír Feldek's translation is, that by using “čert” in act III and “cholera” in act V, the link between Mercutio's malediction and the final tragic denouement is completely lost.

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<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare W. *Romeo a Júlia* / Prel. Ľubomír Feldek. S. 118.