DOI: 10.32782/2225-479X-2023-36-37-6
УДК: 82.111Шек: 82-2 (439)
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0067-4585

Palkóné Tabi Katalin
(Vác, Hungary)

Changing the playtext – changing the meaning. *An analysis of two Hungarian playscripts of* Hamlet *from the nineties*

Палконе Табі Каталін. **Змінюємо текст – змінюємо сенс: аналіз двох угорських сценаріїв «Гамлета» дев'яностих років.**

«Чи могли б ви, як буде потреба, вивчити кільканадцять віршів, які я напишу й приточу туди, чи ні?» [1] *– питає Гамлет у акторів, і ті, звісно, відповідають: «Можна, ясний принце». Чаба Кісс (1994), режисер одного з «Гамлетів», про які йдеться в цій статті, міг би спитати в своїх акторів те ж саме, коли вирішив поставити цю п'єсу на студійній сцені силами вісьмох виконавців. Використаний у його виставі текст зазнав значних скорочень (що не дивно), але, крім того, він вставив у шекспірівський оригінал свої власні сцени, які радикально змінили фокус і, відповідно, мессидж трагедії. Габор Жамбекі (1991), який здійснив свою постановку на три роки раніше, не додав до шекспірівського тексту жодного чужорідного матеріалу, лише скоротив деякі місця заради стислості. Обидві постановки мали успіх. В цій статті викладені міркування про вплив текстових скорочень і доповнень до «Гамлета» Шекспіра на матеріалі двох театральних постановок – традиційної та авангардної.*

Ключові слова*: Вільям Шекспір, трагедія «Гамлет», театральна постановка, текстові доповнення, текстові скорочення, Чаба Кісс, Габор Жамбекі.*

If the English think of *Hamlet*, they immediately have at least three texts in mind. If the Hungarians do, they have one: János Arany’s 1867 classic translation, the compilation of the Second Quarto and the Folio. However, if we think of the numerous theatrical versions of the play, the number of *Hamlet*-texts

[1] Переклад Л. Гребінки.

multiplies considerably. But can these theatrical playscripts be of the same worth as their literary sources? Time will tell. What seems certain for now is that playscripts can shed light on several otherwise unnoticed aspects of the play, and therefore, as this paper intends to prove, they are worth dealing with.

Playscripts have a special place in the textology of *Hamlet* because they are situated halfway between the printed and the acted versions of the play. Depending on whether it is the director's first version, or it shows a textual condition in the middle of the rehearsal period (it is very rare to obtain a playscript showing the final textual state as it was acted on stage); or whether it is the director's, the dramaturge's, the prompter's, the technician's, or the stage manager's copy, they all show different states and conditions of the same play-text. They are typically "postmodern" texts: transitory and multi-authored – paradoxically, in quite a similar way to Shakespeare's plays. Not a closed system like the traditional notion of a literary work, but an open one. Open to interpretation, open to change.

The shift in the British editorial practice, the growing number of the different Hungarian translations, and their ever-changing theatrical application can provide us with an insight into our changing attitude to a classic literary text and the textuality of this text in general. The reverence has gone, and it seems that the text has become an ingredient for creative work. In a broader perspective, the analysis of the playscripts of *Hamlet*, a canonical masterpiece, also raises the question of canonicity; of what it implies, and whether textual sanctity and constancy constitute the definition of a canonical work of art, or not. Finally, the analysis of the textual aspect of a theatrical production can reveal the director's ideas of the play, and this way it adds to the interpretation. In most cases it says "Shakespeare's *Hamlet*" on the playbill, but if we look at the wide variety of playscripts, the elusive nature of the Shakespearean text becomes obvious, raising the problem of adaptation.

In his Introduction to the critical legacy of the prominent Hungarian poet János Arany, Péter Dávidházi calls our attention to this shift in textual critical practice very succinctly. He asserts that

the twentieth century witnessed the turn from the centralized "genealogical" textual criticism towards the decentralized "genetic text-collage"; that is, today's textual critics accept the fragmented nature of the literary text, and are more intrigued by its open fluidity than its closed finality. This change is part of the so-called "postmodern turn", which, I believe, has had an overwhelming influence on our culture in the past few decades, and yet it is very difficult to define. Dávidházi cites Ihab Hassan who demonstrates the differences between modernity and postmodernity in pairs of contrast. Thus, modernity relates to postmodernity in the same way as purpose to playfulness, hierarchy to anarchy, a single artifact to a process, distance to participation, construction to deconstruction, centralization to dissemination and so on. In this context, the study of playscripts contributes to our understanding of the postmodern textual turn in many ways.

Taking Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as my test case, I would like to show how the theatrical handling of the play went through radical changes in the 1990s, an exciting period in Hungarian history either politically, culturally, or theatrically. There were altogether 12 performances in this period, but this paper focuses only on two playscripts: Gábor Zsámbéki's 1991 *Hamlet* in Kamra (Chamber), the studio stage of Katona Theatre, Budapest, and a studio performance directed by Csaba Kiss in Győr, 1994. I selected these productions primarily because their playscripts represent two extreme ends of the alteration-scale. Both are based on János Arany's classic translation, but Zsámbéki created a rather conservative and respectful playscript, while Csaba Kiss considerably de- and reconstructed Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Zsámbéki did not make any other textual changes than the so-called "classic cuts," that is certain major and minor speeches traditionally excised from *Hamlet* productions.[2] Kiss employed the same "classic cuts" together with further omissions, transpositions and his own insertions. This kind of subversion of Arany's cultic

[2] Classic cuts have already been collected in an article: Glick C. Hamlet in the English Theater – Acting Texts from Betterton (1676) to Olivier (1963). *Shakespeare Quarterly.* 1969. Vol. XX. No. 1. P. 17–35. Although there are significant differences between the English and Hungarian histories of *Hamlet* playscripts — the most important being the use of Q1 and Q2 in England, and the use of several translations in Hungary, — this article can be of great use for comparison.

translation, however, did not occur without any antecedents, so in the following I am going to discuss briefly the socio-political and cultural context.

Both productions were staged just a few years after the change of the communist regime when the society could experience a dense and tense atmosphere with a mixture of anger with the past and hope for the future, and the playscripts react, even if indirectly, to this political situation. Another, maybe from our point of view even more important process was the appearance of the new *Hamlet*-translations. In Hungary, János Arany is surrounded by just as much praise and reverence as Shakespeare in the English-speaking world. Thus when the new translations appeared in the second half of the ‘80s and the early ‘90s,[3] they had to be measured against Arany’s *Hamlet*-text. What is more, due to Arany’s cultic position, this was not an easy breakthrough. The ‘80s witnessed an intense debate about the question of retranslating *Hamlet* on the pages of a prestigious literary newspaper between literary scholars and theatrical people.[4] What actually made this debate break out was the well-known Hungarian writer and dramaturge István Eörsi’s “retranslation” of the play for the 1983 Kaposvár production, but in fact Eörsi did no more than made some alterations to Arany’s text, and he only prepared his own translation a few years later. However, his subversive “feat” was enough to generate a debate about whether it should be allowed to touch (or to overthrow outright, for that matter) Arany’s cultic translation in any way. Eventually, the fact that all the new translations were born to meet practical needs (they were all commissioned by theatres) had proved to justify their existence, and the debate settled down by the middle of the 1990s. Moreover, Arany’s text had not even been “dethroned”. Even today, because of its “magic” quality (the outstanding Hungarian Shakespeare scholar István Géher’s expression) it serves as a control text and a reference point for most directors.

Nevertheless, it has to be seen that there was a strong link between the need for retranslating Arany’s classic but at some

[3] István Eörsi’s in 1988, Dezső Mészöly’s in 1996, and Ádám Nádasdy’s in 1999.

[4] See the articles by István Eörsi, József Czímer, Tamás Koltai and Balázs Vargha in: *Élet és Irodalom*, April 21 and 22, May 27 and June 16, 1983.

points outdated and incomprehensible text and the directors' growing interest in manipulating the play-text. I also believe that this changed attitude can be interpreted as another phase of the so-called "director's theatre" present on the Hungarian theatrical scene since the '60s. As a third link, I would suggest that the postmodern turn in literature (especially the rediscovery of intertextuality) could possibly influence the directors' approach to the text as well. Due to the scope of this paper, these ideas cannot be elaborated any further here and now, but they hopefully suffice to illustrate how the different cultural-historical trends can affect each other.

The alteration of a play for the purposes of staging has always been a norm in theatre history. What was new from the eighties was the deliberate effort on the part of directors to rework the text to suit their conception. We will see how they exchanged old-fashioned words for modern ones, added new lines, slightly modified the order of scenes, or combined different translations.

Beside the shift from Arany's single classic translation to the plurality of new translations, together with the directors' reshaping of the the play-text, there was another process taking place in the theatrical world at that time: the changes in acting style and points of interest. By the nineties, the acting style became more intimate, closer to natural, and, along with this, the covert political messages gave way to the problems of the individual. At this point, let me give a brief account of the two productions under discussion to show how these changes are manifested in them. The nineties were the time of the studio *Hamlet*s. Nearly half of the 12 productions of this decade were directed in a studio space. This provided more intimacy between actors and audience, and also allowed the use of more natural voice and subtler gestures and movements.

Gábor Zsámbéki directed his *Hamlet* twice. In 1991 his first Hamlet was Zoltán Ternyák, who had to be replaced by Gergő Kaszás, and therefore there was a second premier in 1993. Both Hamlets were taking notes during the performance. Zsámbéki explained in an interview[5] that note-taking stood for Hamlet's intellectual attitude, and he wanted to understand Hamlet's

[5] Bartók FM, *Szalon*, 4 April 1993.

outsider nature: why the society cannot bear him. The sight of the acting space reinforced the bleak and gloomy world from which a young man with no prospects is trying to find his way out. The performance was played on an empty octagonal floor with no scenery, just props, and the colours of the ageless costumes were black, brown, white, and grey. The audience surrounded the players from four sides, so the atmosphere was intimate and suffocating at the same time. Zsámbéki was apparently interested in the hopeless situation of the individual. According to contemporary reviews, after Fortinbras's merciless orders the four captains did not appear to "bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage," so in the end poor Horatio was left alone dragging the prince's corpse irresolutely up and down. If we draw a parallel between the political context and the performance, Horatio's puzzled behaviour might stand for the transitory nature of the period when one political system has obviously been overthrown and another has come, but it is still a question who Hamlet is. Is Horatio holding the remnants of the old system in his arms or the already dead hopes of the new one?

In Csaba Kiss's direction the actors did not have so close contact with the audience, but Kiss also used minimal scenery and more props. His main conception was to *decentralize* the play and divert the focus of attention from Hamlet himself to his relationships with his mother, Claudius and Ophelia. He was looking for answers to questions like "What is sin?", "Is it possible to tell who is guilty?" and if so, "Who has the right to judge and punish?". He explained in a conversation that after the change of the regime there was a strong demand for political retribution on the one hand, but a kind of passivity or uncertainty on the other hand, and this hesitation in the society created tension within people. For the director this situation was so obviously Hamletian that he decided to articulate the problem in his staging of *Hamlet*. Kiss invented two frame-scenes to the original play in which two grave-diggers were speculating over the dead bodies about who could possibly be responsible for all the deaths. The first scene then was followed by Hamlet's homecoming from Wittenberg – another invention of the director's to be discussed later on. This

retrospective time-structure made a witness of the audience, who could not but identify with the witnesses rather than Hamlet or the other main characters.

When staging *Hamlet*, certain scenes and speeches inevitably fall prey to the director's pen because the whole play would last for more than four hours. In the following, I would like to discuss the most significant omissions, insertions, and transpositions. There are two major cuts that both Zsámbéki and Kiss eliminate from their playscripts. The first is the dialogue about the competition of the boy players and the adult companies in 2.2, which is omitted because it has evidently lost its topicality. The second cut appears in 5.2: a Lord challenging Hamlet to a duel with Laertes after Osric's similar scene. The Lord's short scene basically repeats what Osric has already announced to Hamlet a few lines earlier. One may well wonder whether it was Shakespeare's carelessness or conscious decision to place two resembling episodes one after the other. If it was conscious, then he possibly wanted to reinforce dramaturgically the ever-annoying presence of bootlickers in the court. No matter how attractive this explanation may sound, theatrical practice shows that producers often eliminate the Lord's entrance in 5.2 as unnecessary.

Most of the minor cuts[6] do not influence the meaning of the play significantly, but they can be omitted for several reasons. The lack of talk of the ghosts' peculiar habits in 1.1 and 1.4, for example, considerably rationalizes the world of the play leaving Hamlet alone with his wild phantasmagorias about his father's ghost. Another reason for smaller alterations might be to change the rhythm of a scene. Parts like the guards' scene (1.1) or the Claudius-Laertes scene (4.7) are supposed to be animated. Yet, in Shakespeare's text these scenes are lengthy and full of interesting but off the point elements – maybe the only exception being the

[6] For the sake of completeness, here is a short list of the minor classic cuts. Both producers excise Horatio's account of the war affairs between Old Hamlet and Old Fortinbras in 1.1, the numerous references to the ghosts' usual habits in 1.1 and 1.4, most of Laertes' speech to Ophelia in 1.3, Hamlet's short speech about the consequences of the shameful Danish drinking habits in 1.4, the complicated contemplation between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern upon the nature of dreams in 2.2, most of the Player King's speech in the Mousetrap-scene (3.2), the majority of the dialogue about the plans of Claudius and Laertes to kill Hamlet in 4.7, most of Hamlet's account of his sea voyage in 5.2, and finally the First Ambassador's short speech in 5.2 which includes the famous line "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead."

fencing-scene. They are "lengthy", but only theatrically speaking, because many of the so-called "superfluous" passages are lyrical inserts that used to work on the Elizabethan stage, but not so much in today's theatres. On the page, these details can contribute to the reading experience, but on the stage every useless piece of information diverts and gradually decreases the audience's attention and makes the action complicated and tiresome. If the events are exciting, the action demands a tighter acting pace with short sentences and quick replies.

The scene that suffers the most cuts in order to speed up the action is the discussion between Claudius and Laertes about how to kill Hamlet in the duel (4.7). Their conversation actually starts at the end of 4.5 after Ophelia's exit, but then it is interrupted by the Sailors' scene (4.6) in which they deliver letters to Horatio, and then it continues for another 232 lines in 4.7 until Gertrude's entrance. Although Zsámbéki keeps all the three scenes, in his script only 84 lines remain from the original 253, which is a massive reduction. Thus the action becomes considerably faster: Claudius and Laertes agree with icy brevity and cruel elegance on the ways and means of killing Hamlet. As one of the critics remarked, the cuts made the performance almost opera-like.[7]

Csaba Kiss keeps altogether more lines than Zsámbéki (133). Yet, what changes the tempo of his scene is not so much the excisions than the restructured scene sequence. In his playscript there is no Horatio, and consequently the sailors' scene is missing. Claudius and Laertes have their conversation in one go; the only person to interrupt them is Gertrude who always appears at the most exciting or (if you like) secret parts of their talk. So Kiss's cuts influence not only the tempo but also the characterization of the relationship between Gertrude and Claudius.

In the original play after having met her brother, Ophelia leaves the stage alone, but in Kiss's version she is accompanied by Gertrude. The king remains alone with Laertes, and takes the opportunity to explain to him how he personally feels about Hamlet. He tells him that Hamlet is still alive because "The queen his mother / Lives almost by his looks" and because of "the great

[7] Forgách A. Hamlet borotvaélen [Hamlet on a razor blade]. *Színház,*. March 1992. P. 8–13.

love the general gender bear him." (4.7.11-12,18) Then he continues to tell him about his personal attitude towards the prince) when the queen suddenly enters (originally there is a Messenger entering here), and Claudius has to drop his sentence. In the script it sounds as follows:

CLAUDIUS:
I loved your father, and we love ourself,
And that I hope will teach you to imagine –
So much for this. (*Enter the Queen*)
How now? What news?"

The sudden change of the subject creates a tense atmosphere. Gertrude enters to deliver a letter from Hamlet, and by the king's command she reads it out. Since there is no Horatio in this production, Gertrude takes over Horatio's role as Hamlet's best friend. Later on, in 5.2 Hamlet tells *her* about his sea-voyage. This alteration makes the mother-and-son relationship especially emphatic, which must have an effect on the Gertrude-Claudius relationship, too. After having read out the letter, the king asks Gertrude, "What do you say to this?" to which she leaves the stage speechlessly. After this episode the king and Laertes continue the discussion of their plans, and Gertrude enters for a second time with the news that Ophelia has drowned—an obviously uncomfortable entrance again.

As for Hamlet's characterization, there is, as I mentioned before, a significant difference between the basic conceptions of the two productions. Zsámbéki puts the emphasis on Hamlet's loneliness and misfit nature, while Csaba Kiss concentrates on the deformity of human relations that ends in tragedy. Zsámbéki shows the tragedy of the individual, while Kiss shows that of the community. Therefore, in Zsámbéki's script none of Hamlet's soliloquies are abridged by any means. Hamlet is often left alone soliloquizing to the audience.

As opposed to this, Kiss does not leave one single soliloquy without modification. His Hamlet also remains sometimes alone, but his soliloquies are considerably shorter, which suggests that the director was not so interested in the image of the lonely prince. Hamlet's Hecuba-soliloquy, for example, at the end of Act two, is shortened by one third of it. Four lines are missing from the "To be

or not to be" soliloquy, and more than half of Hamlet's last soliloquy starting with "How all occasions do inform against me" is omitted, too.

Kiss also puts more emphasis on the point of view of the average man. He inserts four scenes, some of which have already been mentioned earlier. In the first scene, two gravediggers (called "witnesses" on the playbill) are looking at the "quarry" of dead bodies and one of them mentions that he was there in the harbour when young Hamlet arrived from Wittenberg. This statement takes us back to the beginning of the story, and the second scene – still Kiss's insertion – displays Hamlet's homecoming. The director explained in a conversation that he wanted to see Hamlet's warm-hearted reactions when greeting his mother and uncle in the harbour before knowing anything about the home affairs. This way there is a sharper contrast when he becomes astonished by the unexpected news.

The third insertion is an extra scene between Hamlet and Ophelia, which highlights their intimate relationship. In this scene the girl is persuading the prince to take back the "remembrances" he gave her. This insertion is partly Shakespearean, partly the director's own creation. Ophelia enters saying:

OPHELIA: The sun is rising, my good lord… I've been awaiting you!

HAMLET: I'm sorry if you had to wait… Go to sleep…

OPHELIA: I'd like to talk to you, my lord…

HAMLET: Not now!

In the original play, Ophelia comes to Hamlet only in 3.1, after the grand soliloquy, but in this production this scene comes immediately after Hamlet's meeting his father's ghost. As the director explained, he wanted to find an explanation why Hamlet has no time to meet Ophelia. In the original play there are hardly any scenes which expand upon their relationship. Kiss believes that it is Hamlet's unwanted political mission that prevents him from dealing with his private life. Therefore, he places Ophelia's entrance after Hamlet's "Time is out of joint" speech. The girl finds the prince in a distracted and distressed mood, which is further worsened by the girl's rejection of his love. It is this

unpleasant situation into which Osric intrudes with his flamboyant style learning French phrases from a guidebook:

> Bonjour, that is good morning, isn't it?
> Je … je … je m'appele Osric,
> je suis danois … that is my name is Osric.

Csaba Kiss expands Osric's part by replacing Reynaldo with him, so at this point he is entering the stage to talk to Polonius about his journey to Paris to spy on Laertes. If the different moods created tension between Hamlet and Ophelia at the beginning of the scene, now the stylistic clash between the young lovers and Osric does the same.

Lastly, the director's fourth interpolation is the final scene when Fortinbras enters the stage to give orders in Norwegian, and then leaves. Only his Captain and a grave-digger remain on the stage with the corpses in the same position as in the opening scene. The Captain asks, "What assassination has happened here?" – to which the grave-digger replies, "I don't know," then leans the shovel against the wall and leaves the stage. This is the end of the performance. The uncertainty of this close invites the interpretation that the witnesses started an investigation at the beginning of the play to find out about the whys and wherefores, but in the end they could not come to any conclusions, so gave it all up: this time Hamlet's story remained unsolved again.

To sum up what I have been talking about so far, my aim with showing up certain elements of the two playscripts was to show the difference between the two kinds of dramaturgical work. Zsámbéki apparently decided to stage a classic interpretation of the play (the outcast, lonely young man with a mission impossible), while Kiss wanted to shift the focus of attention from the individual hero to the problems of the community. In fact, Kiss did not want Hamlet to act as a hero. He was just another man who got into a difficult situation that confused all his previous conceptions of family, love and politics. His production presents the play from the spectator's (that is the investigator's, or if you like posterity's) point of view.

We could also see, however, that beside the human problems (either the individual's or the society's), both producers tried to reflect upon the political situation of the period, too. Zsámbéki

tried to achieve this without using extra texts. Kiss wrote new speeches to be interpolated, and these insertions altered the structure of the whole production. His free use of the Shakespeare-play raises the question whether it is important to be textually loyal to Shakespeare. I suggest that not necessarily if the director diverts from Shakespeare's text for a justifiable reason like to unfold certain less elaborated aspects of the play or to give a particular edge to the production. It can only be acclaimed if a director wants to say something meaningful with the play – even if the price of this is some foreign material in the Shakespearean texture. I personally believe that the failure of most modern *Hamlet*-productions is the lack of conception or a personal conviction that this play *is* about something that is relevant for us here and now. However, there remains one question to be answered: Where does *Hamlet* end, and where does adaptation start?

References:

Forgách A. Hamlet borotvaélen [Hamlet on a razor blade]. *Színház,*. March 1992. P. 8–13.

Glick C. Hamlet in the English Theater – Acting Texts from Betterton (1676) to Olivier (1963). *Shakespeare Quarterly.* 1969. Vol. XX. No. 1. P. 17–35.