

A. M. Schiffrin  
Hommage à Gide  
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REVIEWS

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André Gide: Hamlet. Edited by Jacques Schiffrin. Pantheon Books, New York, 1945. 286 pp.

For a publication such as *Symposium* sets out to be, an appreciation of Gide's *Hamlet* is a serious challenge. Any appraisal of this translation is replete with problems, doubly linguistic, poetic, dramatic. Yet, these problems must be broached even when their solutions are, from the very start and at best, the reviewer's arbitrary opinions. Again and again, there is a temptation to suggest changes; but, after as meticulous a study of the Schiffrin edition of juxtaposed pages as underlies this review, such impulses were quickly repressed.

There were also moments when, in view of the magnitude of the challenge before him, the present reviewer felt like repeating Thier's reply to de Bornier's insistence that the latter's older and more famous friend give his opinion of *La Fille de Roland*. 'Pourquoi voulez-vous toujours accomplir ce qu'il y a de plus ardu? C'est si difficile d'écrire une tragédie de cinq actes en vers, et c'est si facile de ne pas l'écrire . . . Alors?'

But André Gide is not Henri de Bornier, his *Hamlet* is by no means *La Fille de Roland*, and what we wish to say of the work is meant too seriously to allow any flippancy. The question is not at all why the grand old man of modern French literature should have undertaken the task of translating *Hamlet* into French. For, in spite of the many such attempts, past and recent, abortive or completed, there still seems to be an insistent demand for a better and newer French acting version. Even Gide's translation, now acted at the Théâtre Marigny, has not put a stop to this demand, since Marcel Pagnol is now preparing a version of his own for the *Comédie Française*.

That an otherwise reliable American judge of the French theater ('Genêt,' in the *New Yorker* of January 11) did not like the performance does not constitute a valid criticism of Gide's translation,—which, by the way, she did not like either. Nor is it entirely true, as she claims, that Gide's version of the play as a whole, or Jean-Louis Barrault's prince, was accepted by 'dutiful, admiring crowds.' A perusal of the reviews by the Paris critics, notably that of Pol Gaillard in *Les Lettres françaises*, leaves no doubt on that score.

Of course, the performance at the Marigny may or may not have been overfanciful, almost effeminate, as claimed by some, or top-heavy, as claimed by others. A suspicion that the latter may have been the case is strengthened by the fact that Pagnol, declaredly, proposes to 'restituer à la pièce un mouvement qu'elle n'a plus,' and to eliminate all the philosophic speculations as 'des bavardages ajoutés (!)'. Only reluctantly did he agree not to suppress the soliloquy. (Interview in *Arts*, December 20, 1946).

'Gide's version of the poetic masterpiece not only lacks wings, but is downright flatfooted modern prose,' says *The New Yorker's* correspondent.

Now really? One of the two quoted, and, incidentally, misquoted, examples of Gide's 'flatfooted prose' is the translation of 'Get thee to a nunnery' by 'Au couvent!', which sounds to her 'like an address tossed to a taxidriver.' This judgment may be a valid criticism of the actor's reading, but Gide's translation is not at all as wirelessly to the magazine. When Hamlet first says, (III, 1) 'Get thee to a nunnery: why would'st thou be a breeder of sinners?', the French text before us, 'Genêt' to the contrary notwithstanding, reads: 'Entre au couvent; pourquoi vouloir engendrer des pécheurs?' It is only when 'made mad,' peremptorily and for a fifth time he repeats the injunction, just before rushing off, 'To a nunnery go,' that Gide gives the translation referred to. But with what dramatic intent 'Au couvent! Au couvent!'

To reassure herself about the validity of her other illustration of Gide's 'flatfootedness,' she has recourse, of all possible authorities, to 'Cassell's bilingual dictionary' for the exact meaning of *gentil*—which fact would suggest that the *Bon nuit* of her quotation may not be altogether the typesetter's fault. (V, 2: Ainsi se brise un noble coeur. Bonne nuit, gentil Prince).

No. Gide's translation of *Hamlet* was neither haphazard nor hasty. Its first act was published almost twenty years ago, and of it he says, 'Ce premier acte m'avait fourbi; j'y avais consacré plus d'efforts qu'aux cinq actes d'*Antoine et Cléopâtre*' (Lettre-Préface). And he gives two reasons for at all undertaking the translation, which required, in his own words, 'toute mon attention, tous mes soins, toutes mes vertus, tous mes dons.'

To begin with, 'Shakespeare n'est pas un penseur; c'est un poète; et sa pensée ne nous importe guère sans les ailes qui l'emportent dans l'empyrée.'

And next, '... il ne s'agit pas de contenter le lecteur, mais d'offrir un texte à l'acteur chargé d'interpréter un rôle; et le pire défaut du texte des traductions que je consulte, est d'être ininterprétable, irrespirable, cacophonique, privé de rythme, d'élan, de vie, parfois incompréhensible, sans une attention soutenue...'

In view of Gide's stringent criticism of 'ces précédents traducteurs,' whether justified or not (and in the main it is fully justified) and of the daring double objective of his own version, the challenge to who would pass judgment on the present translation is, as we began by saying, at the same time arresting as well as inescapable. If the reviewer has not, as of course he hasn't, Gide's reach and grasp of creative French which 'emportent dans l'empyrée,' nor his sense of the coming dramatic moment that must precede the translation of each episode, the reviewer, has this advantage, however: he is not subjected to the stress and frenzy of creating; he is comparing and weighing; his enthusiasm, when it does come, comes after. Hamlet has already said it, though beyond our present pretense: 'Tis e'en so. The hand of little employment hath the daintier sense.' [C'est bien cela; la main de rare emploi conserve un toucher plus sensible].

And enthusiasm for the version before us mounts as the reading and the comparison with the 'next best' translation proceed.

I do not know which or how many of 'ces précédents traducteurs' Gide has studied and rejected; their possible number constitutes a vast and varied collection, in practically all modern languages. For this review I have chosen, in comparison and collation, a version he does not mention, that had appeared some five years before Gide's Act I, and that had in so many ways satisfied me as an excellent reading French translation. It is *La Tragédie de Hamlet Prince de Danemark* by the Shakespearean scholar, then professor at the University of Lille, Jules Derocquigny, as part of the *Collection Shakespeare* directed (and in parts translated) by his disciple, Professor André Koszul, and published in Paris by J. M. Dent et Fils in 1924. Both that and Gide's version are based on the 'Cambridge' text, and from this collation the conclusion is inevitable: the translation before us is a magnificent piece of work. And I say 'magnificent' advisedly.

There is, first of all, the seemingly spontaneous choice of words where the interpretation is otherwise the same, from the first lines to the end of act V.

Shakespeare: Welcome, Horatio: welcome, good Marcellus.  
 Derocquigny: Le bienvenu! Horatio; le bienvenu, bon Marcellus.  
 Gide: Salut, Horatio! Salut, bon Marcellus.

Or: S. Stay! Speak, speak! I charge thee, speak!  
 D. Arrête, parle-moi! Je t'en conjure, parle!  
 G. Reste! Parle! Je te somme de parler.

Only those who have never attempted translations of literary masterpieces, poetry or prose, will think these renditions by Gide, so simple and so more akin to the poetic outflow of the original, as obvious and unlabored; remember the confession in the *Lettre-Préface*. Even for Gide, in his own estimation of himself, there was the danger (and the dishonor) of proving easy traitor to Shakespeare.

Much greater than such problems of choice of words are the difficulties presented in the translation of whole phrases.

'Have you had quiet guard?' asks Bernardo, and, 'Not a mouse stirring,' answers Francisco. (I,1), which Derocquigny renders: 'Et la garde a été tranquille?—Pas un chat.' Gide's version reads, and speaks: 'Rien vu? Rien entendu?—Pas une souris bouger.'

Or Act II, scene 2, Hamlet's letter to Ophelia, as read and commented on by her father. 'To the celestial, and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia.—That's an ill phrase, a vile phrase; "beautified" is a vile phrase . . .'

Derocquigny, taking *beautified* for *beautiful*, translated: 'A la céleste créature, idôle de mon âme, la belle, tout belle Ophélie.—Que voilà une méchante locution et qui ne vaut rien. "Tout belle" est une méchante locution.'

Gide's version is: 'A l'idôle de mon âme, à la céleste et souverainement belle Ophélie—Mauvaise phrase; malhonnête expression. "Souverainement" est malhonnête.' That *souverainement* may come as a surprise to the reader,

I am with those interpreters of the play who hold that when, Act. III, scene 2, Hamlet asks, 'Where's your father?', he does so because he has become aware of Polonius' hidden presence. And now, Ophelia's answer, 'At home, my lord,' is proof to him of the girl's treacherous share in the conspiracy. For this, 'made mad,' he finds his revenge in tearing from her, before the assembled court, the last shred of a maiden's sense of virtue, just as the play within the play is about to begin and during its showing. There is, of course, no accusation intended of any timidity or squeamishness on the part of Gide in this criticism; it does seem strange, however, to this reviewer that he of all interpreters should not have favored such an interpretation. Still, in one line of this scene, at least, there seems to be a misreading—however hard it be to admit the thought. The text says *matters*, while the translation has 'manières'; in a line, at that, where the intention to abase Ophelia is both obvious and crude.

Perhaps also the translation of '... if I could see the puppets dallying' by 'si je pouvais voir vos simagrées' seems inadequate and, in this reviewer's interpretation of Shakespeare's purpose, woefully misleading.

On the whole, however, the version before us is, we repeat, a magnificent piece of work. I can think of no greater test or a more strenuous exercise in a teacher's knowledge of French than the study of this bilingual edition of

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Hamlet. And with the issue of the paper-bound volume, the use of the book as a college text should find no practical obstacle. Like all the works published by Pantheon Books, the physical make-up of both volumes is splendid. Here and there, as on pages 19, 91, 205, for instance, I should have liked to see a more carefully supervised punctuation, and on page 94 the original text should read *sun* instead of *son*, as is admitted on the opposite page by the translation *soleil*.

Our thanks and our praises are due to M. Schiffrin, not only for issuing his edition of André Gide's *Hamlet*, but, in a much larger way, for having helped establish, on this side of the ocean, his incomparable "Pantheon," and for the unusual, and unusually artistic and worthwhile, volumes his Pantheon Books has produced.

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