The Complete Works of Shakespeare in Ukrainian: A Breakthrough or a Slowdown?

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Abstract

During the times of the USSR, only four of its states managed to publish complete works of Shakespeare in their local languages. The first edition to include 37 plays of the Great Bard appeared in Russian SFSR in 1937 – 1945. Among other Soviet nations, Estonia was the first to publish the complete works of Shakespeare in its native language (its seven volumes were released from 1957 to 1975); in the 70s Georgia followed. The Ukrainians were the last to join the "elite" club, with their six-volume edition published from 1984 to 1986. The publication was a remarkable feat of a team of translators, editors and literary scholars and is widely regarded as a cornerstone of the Ukrainian Shakespeareana.

The paper focuses on the history of the multi-volume editions of Shakespeare in Ukrainian, showing the wide cultural and political context that led to the appearance of the complete works of the Bard in the Ukrainian SSR. The author shows the directions of critical re-evaluation of this edition that in the independent Ukraine has acquired the critical immunity which resulted in the shift of this set to the periphery of readers and literati's interest. The reconsiderations of the translations and critical apparatus of the complete Ukrainian Shakespeare would intensify the creation of new Ukrainian versions of Shakespeare's plays and undermine the well-established image of the Bard as an antiquated and pretentious playwright.

Key words: *Shakespeare, complete works, multi-volume edition, accuracy, performance-oriented translations*

Among the cultural mythologems of the Soviet Union, one is particularly long-standing. It is the widely publicized myth that the USSR was the country whose people read the most in the world. It has long been established that these statistics were based solely on quantitative data – the print-run figures that, as a rule, were enormous. Among the highly sought-after items at the times of the "Soviet book boom" (which started in the late

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1970 and lasted for almost a decade) were multi-volume editions of the complete works of classical authors of the past. And the most coveted of them were collections of foreign writers. These sets were valued not just for the artistic virtues of the pieces the books comprised; quite frequently, they were treasured for the classy look in the bookcases that had become the essential part of Soviet omnipresent wall furniture units. The complete works in the USSR oftentimes came with a complex critical apparatus: prolegomena, notes and appendices. All these elements bear interest for literati, but not for the majority of readers; they were, however, deemed necessary for raising the status of these editions (equalling scholarly editions to high quality editions), in turn elevating the social standing of their owners. The vast majority of complete works of foreign writers appeared in Russian, and on very rare occasions such sets were published in national languages of the Soviet republics. Only once in the Soviet Ukraine all the known works of a foreign author were presented in Ukrainian, and it was William Shakespeare who was honoured with this edition of complete works. The set has six volumes and was published from 1984 to 1986 as a subscription edition (which posed an "in for a penny, in for a pound" situation – one could only order the full set and wait for each separate volume to be released).

Today, it is not difficult to come across a virtually untouched set of dark crimson hardbacks entitled Complete Works of Shakespeare in Ukrainian for bargain prices (approximately 30 US dollars for 6 volumes). But it is quite a daunting task to find at least some information about the history of compiling, editing and publishing of what happened to be the last Complete Works of Shakespeare in the Soviet Union (but for one review from 1988 and the interview of the editor-in-chief from 1987). Now, as 32 years have passed since the last part of this six-book set was brought out, some important questions remain unanswered. How adequate is the image of Shakespeare it creates? Do these translations resonate with readers and theatre-goers in modern-day Ukraine? Should it be revered or criticized, reissued with the new cover and illustrations or superseded by a set of contemporary translations? All these trick questions should be answered regarding the broader perspective of the complete Shakespeare's plays in Ukrainian which might have appeared even before the Ukrainian SSR was established.

It should be noted that the pursuit of the complete works of Shakespeare in Ukrainian started in 1882 – a century and two years before the first volume of the Soviet Ukrainian set was brought out. In that year,

the famous Ukrainian author Panteleimon Kulish made a commitment to translate 27 plays of the Bard and publish them in 9 volumes. Through this project Kulish intended

1) to create the elevated style of the Ukrainian language, which in the last decades of the 19th century was practically inexistent;

2) to enrich the language by coining new words or borrowing and adopting lexemes from Polish and Old Church Slavonic.

3) However, his main goal was quite an idealistic one – to steer Ukrainians towards European values and lifestyle through their exposure to Shakespeare's masterpieces. Already since the 1880s, Shakespeare earned the reputation of the nation's guide to the Western world, away from the Asian savagery (perhaps implying the legacy of much revered Ukrainian Cossacks). In his poem "To My Countrymen Giving Them the Ukrainian Translation of Shakespeare Works" Kulish unequivocally demands:

> Look in the global mirror
> Realize that you are just a poor Asian,
> Do not be proud of your plundering
> Forget the awful predatory ways
> And return to the family of cultured people (Kulish 1989: 189).

Further in the text, he even resorts to calling his compatriots "the nation without way, without honour and respect" (Kulish 1989: 189).

In his earlier verse, entitled "To Shakespeare, Having Started the Translation of His Works", Kulish calls the English playwright "our father, native to all nations, the lantern of creativity, Homer of the new world" and begs him, "Take us into your care" (Kulish 1989: 187).

Kulish grand intentions failed – he managed to translate 13 plays, three of them were lost in the fire that destroyed his house. The surviving works were released posthumously, being almost rewritten by another Ukrainian intellectual colossus, Ivan Franko. In the preface to the six-volume set of the 1980s, Kulish is mentioned once, and his translations are labelled as obsolete and only appropriate for studies of the history of literature (Zatonskyi, 1984: 42). But even if you are a scholar, it is not easy to find the unedited versions that still have not been published and are preserved as manuscripts in the National Library of Ukraine (as if in revenge for the severe criticism Kulish levelled at the Ukrainian readers of the 1890s).

However, this unfinished project did not go unnoticed. It helped the translators of the 20th century to gather momentum, which culminated in the six-volume edition of complete works.

In Soviet literary studies before the 1930s Shakespeare's works were considered to have "aristocratic tendency"; moreover, it was believed that their author "despised common people and held reactionary feudal views" (Normington 2013: 209). But the state of affairs changed in the early 30s. It is the time when the simplicity of modernism in architecture, literature and music started to give way to grandiose art of monumentalism. The artists of the vast communist empire started to develop a flair for pretentious music, bombastic eulogies and elaborate Renaissance-style decorations on gigantic and menacing buildings showing the imperial strength and drawing ties with the great empires of the past.

So, it is not accidental that the cultural emblem of the young and burgeoning British Empire – William Shakespeare – was swiftly included in the Soviet pantheon of the great artists of the past. In a monumentalist vein, the English playwright quickly became omniscient and God-like figure, "comrade Shakespeare" – in the critical writing of that time he was hailed as "the first realist", "the fighter for humanistic values", "the herald of the social revolution" etc. This appropriation of Shakespeare deprived him of his first name – the foreign sounding "William" almost never appears on the cover, drawing an analogy with Lenin, Stalin, Marx, Engels, Cervantes, and Goethe, whose given names were mostly omitted.

But Shakespeare in the Soviet perception was two-faced. His second identity may be called "Shakespeare as your comrade" (or as the Polish theoretician Jan Kott much later put it "Shakespeare as our contemporary" (Kott 1966: 5)). This angle suggested that Shakespeare's works are not only ever modern and topical but also potentially appealing to the wider readership.

As Russian was the lingua franca of the Soviet state, Shakespeare's complete works were deemed necessary only in that language. However, during the Stalin's reign in 1950 and 1952, a two-volume edition of the selected Ukrainian translations appeared in print. It comprised 11 plays that were mostly translated specially for this edition. It is worth noting that the only history it included was *Richard III,* focusing more on comedies and tragedies from the core of the Shakespearean canon. The preface to the edition was translated in Ukrainian from the article written by the Russian scholar, Alexander Smirnov. Instead, they might have used the article on Shakespeare by the Ukrainian scholar Sehyi Rodzevych which opened the

collective *William Shakespeare* monograph published in 1939. The destiny of this book is disastrous but typical for the late 1930s – shortly after its publication, all the print-run was destroyed. Fortunately, one book remained in the Kharkiv library. It is still kept there, waiting for digitalization and re-entering the Ukrainian scientific discourse of Shakespeare studies.

The three volume set of selected Shakespeare's works in Ukrainian was brought out in 1964 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the Bard. Once again, the histories were conspicuously omitted and it added only one play to the list of 11 translations that that had been published in the early 1950s. This was *The Tempest*, in a brilliant version of a gifted poet Mykola Bazhan. Another welcome addition was the preface this time provided by Ukrainian Shakespeare scholar Nataliya Modestova.

The *Complete Shakespeare* edition in Estonian was published from 1959 to 1975 in seven volumes. In the seventies, *Complete Shakespeare* appeared in Georgia. In 1976, Mykola Bazhan, giving a speech at the congress of men of letters in Moscow, voiced a concern that two Soviet nations already had the complete works, whereas the Ukrainians – the second nation in terms of number of people – had not managed to produce one (Bilous 2012: 296). But, in general, for two decades – from 1964 to 1984 – not much was happening in terms of the Ukrainian Shakespeareana but for some translations ordered by theatres and articles of Ukrainian scholars appearing in journals.

For the study, I interviewed Natalia Zhluktenko – a well-known Ukrainian literary scholar who worked on *Complete Shakespeare* in Ukrainian. According to her notes, this edition appeared in the project-planning schedule of Dnipro Publishing for 1984, 1985, 1986. So, the team of the project had to grab this opportunity – order the translations of new plays, write critical commentaries, provide prefaces, and supply each volume with illustrations. More than twenty plays had not been translated by 1984; however, it was necessary to stick to the tight schedule – any backlog might have proved to be disastrous. In the Soviet system, one had to meet the deadlines or, otherwise, the funding for the project would not have been given. Therefore, all the work was done in a rush but with a great attention to detail. It took a great effort to make the overall quality of translations and print immaculate, and the project team managed to provide the highest standards, despite the haste and novelty of the experience.

The publication of *Complete Shakespeare* in Ukrainian should be rightly regarded as a remarkable achievement. To quote the Ukrainian scholar Maksym Strikha, in 1986 "we have finally joined the family of nations that have their complete Shakespeare – the undisputable measure of maturity for any national culture" (2003: 105) At long last, it gave a sense of closure, having fulfilled the dreams that Ukrainian intellectuals had been harbouring since the times of Kulish's endeavour. More than 20 pieces had to be newly translated for the edition (almost all histories and later-period plays, as well as poems). So, the three-year period from 1984 to 1986 was the most fruitful in terms of Shakespeare translation productivity in Ukraine. To attain this ambitious goal, an impressive team of translators was set up. What strikes is the versatility of its members, including the renowned Ukrainian poets (Dmytro Pavlychko, Ivan Drach), a theatre director who turned out to be a skilled translator (Les' Taniuk), and a theorist of translation studies who applied his special expertise (Viktor Koptilov) to name but a few.

The publication of *Complete Shakespeare* in Ukrainian may also be regarded as a bold political gesture. First of all, since Kulish's times, the works of the Bard have been widely regarded as the "cultural gate" to Western values. Secondly, *Complete Shakespeare* appears before Perestroika and Glasnost, at a time when more than the half of political prisoners of the agonizing Soviet regime were Ukrainians. On the 4th of September 1985 (4 volumes of *Complete Works* had been released by that time) one of the Ukrainian foremost poets, Vasyl Stus, died in Perm-36 – a Soviet forced labour camp for political prisoners – after having declared a hunger strike. So, in that unfavourable political environment it was a matter of moral courage, tremendous perseverance and genuine commitment to complete the Shakespearean publishing project.

Each play in the edition comes with commentary notes that deal with the critical, theatrical and historical contexts. Today, the comprehensive apparatus prepared by the most prominent Ukrainian literary scholars of the time reveals its ideological limitations. For instance, in the preface, Professor Dmytro Zatonskiy quotes Russian, English and German Marxist Shakespeare scholars 17 times, never quoting any Ukrainian ones (Zatonskyi 1984: 5-43). However, in the mid-80s, the critical apparatus was tangible proof that Ukrainian Shakespeare scholars were able to come up with accessible, trustworthy and ideologically non-extreme notes. According to Natalia Zhluktenko, the team of literary scholars involved in the project used English, German and French editions to

provide quality notes on texts, making them more elaborate than in the Russian-language set of the Bard's complete works.

Thus, despite all the imperfections and drawbacks, *Complete Shakespeare* in Ukrainian still holds appeal as a significant milestone and massive undertaking. However, after more than three decades since its publication the edition has largely been enshrined and currently seems to have become a sacred cow – something beyond criticism and of little interest not only to readers but also to the literati and theatre practitioners. The translations (written in the time span from the 1930s to 1985) call for critical audit from the theoretical standpoint of the contemporary literature and translation studies. It is absolutely vital to check these versions for accuracy (especially when word-for-word translations were used as a source for the final text) and to determine how performance-oriented these texts are (it should be noted that most of the translations in the Ukrainian *Complete Shakespeare* were produced not with the stage but with the page in mind).

Furthermore, the Ukrainian language has changed dramatically in the past thirty years – since the 1980s, it has distanced from Russian due to numerous alternations in grammar, spelling and vocabulary (a lot of words have been borrowed or revived). Lexis that in the 1980s could have been considered as "bourgeois nationalist words", or as unnecessary borrowings used just for the purpose of being different, these days has become the core of inherently Ukrainian vocabulary. This critical re-evaluation should also be based on modern critical editions which at present are much more readily accessible.

Eventually, there might appear the idea of revisiting the *Complete Shakespeare*. The first and foremost reason for that is the recent reshaping of the Shakespearean Canon, which now includes *Two Noble Kinsmen* by Shakespeare and Fletcher, *Edward III*, fragments from Sir Thomas More and an epitaph all attributed to the Bard. *Edward III* was translated by Maria Hablevytch but has not been published yet, whereas the rest of the aforementioned pieces still wait for their translators.

Moreover, one must admit that the six-volume set was produced in a different country – the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic – so it should be viewed as a product of its time. The Soviet translators had to compromise on the style of their versions, avoiding lexical experimentation, softening bawdy jokes and using elevated language instead, thus establishing Shakespeare's image as an antiquated and pretentious playwright.

In the new Ukrainian reality, there is a need for contemporary Ukrainian renditions of the Bard. As for the strategy and "poetics" of the future translations, we can take the example of the newest *Complete Shakespeare* in Romanian – the project headed by the translator and scholar, George Volceanov. This edition is characterized by "the use of modern vocabulary, that is accessible to present-day readers and theatre-goers; the recuperation of previously self-censored political, social and religious terms; the de-bowdlerization of Shakespeare's text; the creation of performance-oriented versions" (Volceanov 2016: 39). This Romanian edition also became a reality due to "the complaints by people working with theatres about the dusty, outdated translations, which are not of much use in bringing to stage a play by the Bard" (Volceanov 2014: 214).

This connection once worked in Ukraine in the 21st century – translations of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* by a well-known Ukrainian postmodernist author, Yu. Andrukhovych, were made for the stage, and only 8 years after that, published in beautiful and ornate editions which have become best-sellers. Andrukhovych modernizes and domesticates these texts, boldly filling them with recognizable political and cultural allusions, offensive language and youth slang. His translation style, however scandalous, paves the way and becomes a viable template for future Shakespeare's translations in Ukraine. Still, this recipe might work only for the plays from the core of the canon, as Andrukhovych's translation of *The Twelfth Night* is kept as a manuscript, perhaps due to little awareness of Ukrainian readers with Shakespearean comedies. In the competitive book market, this fact might eventually not let this edition pay off all the expenses. To understand the causes of this poor awareness, we have to return to the six-volume edition that stopped to have resonance, shifting to the periphery of reading and theatre practice. Therefore, retaining its status of a historic breakthrough in the current situation, it has caused a regrettable slowdown. Nevertheless, when treated not as an object of veneration but as an area for unbiased research and criticism, the *Complete Shakespeare* in Ukrainian can still arouse interest, generate discussions and provide inspiration.

Before Shakespeare is interpreted by the voices of the present-day Ukraine, we do need to hear all the voices of the past. That is why it is crucial to create an open-access database containing all the existing Shakespearean translations in Ukrainian. It may also include the Ukrainian scientific discourse on the Bard, as well as media materials about Shakespeare productions at Ukrainian theatres. Hopingly, the ability of

quick reference to the past of Ukrainian Shakespeare will secure its future. And having been cleansed of the Soviet cliché of a dead white classic, the Bard's works will come alive sharing the wisdom of the old times by the language of today for the people who make the future happen.

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