ИСТОРИЯ НА КНИГАТА

BOOK HISTORY

A SURVEY OF VLADIMIR POLYANOV'S TRANSLATION OF EDITH NESBIT'S SHAKESPEAREAN TALES IN THE CONTEXT OF SHAKESPEAREAN ADAPTATIONS FOR CHILDREN IN BULGARIA (1878–1944)

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Abstract: *The article considers Vladimir Polyanov's volume of Shakespearean plays adapted for children, published in 1937, within the context of other such adaptations during the period 1878–1944. Entitled "Shakespeare for the young", the volume indicates that it is Polyanov's translation from the English but the original text remains unnamed. Although it has not been previously acknowledged, the translation, as I argue in this essay, is of Edith Nesbit's Shakespearean tales published in the first decade of the twentieth century. Together with other findings in the National Library in Sofia, Polyanov's volume is presented as belonging to a felicitous period for Shakespearean editions for children, the majority of which were translated from English, German and Russian.*
After an overview of the beginnings and context of Shakespearean adaptations for children in Great Britain and Bulgaria, I focus on Polyanov's volume and explore the choice of plays, elucidating various aspects of the translator's engagement with the original text.

Keywords: *Shakespearean drama; Bulgaria; translation; reception; adaptations for children; Vladimir Polyanov; Edith Nesbit*

The emergence of the Anglophone literary phenomenon of Shakespearean adaptations for young readers at the beginning of the nineteenth century was the result of a shift in the social perception of children – their transformation from miniature adults and workforce to school pupils and a social group progressing through a separate stage of life with its own specific needs. This, together with the general improvement of standards of living, which allowed people better access of books and magazines, and, later, the introduction of compulsory primary education, facilitated the familiarization of children and adolescents with

Shakespeare in an institutionalised form. More importantly, as Susanne Greenhalgh notes, Shakespeare was employed in the upbringing of these young people in the Victorian social and gender roles (Greenhalgh 2007, 128).

While all children's Shakespeare was (and is) essentially didactic, the validity of this claim was more candid in the adaptations in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. However, their authors faced the challenging task to steer the interpretation in such a way as to avoid the pitfalls of overt moralistic message and to introduce necessary alterations and abridgement without compromising the plays' action and Shakespeare's masterful characterization. These edifying projects were undertaken mainly by women and this fact correlated with one of the main aims of the Shakespearean adaptations – to make the plays accessible to girls.[1]

Although Georgianna Ziegler has demonstrated that the idea that children could benefit from learning the Shakespearean plays in the form of a story dated from the eighteenth century (Ziegler 2006, 132–151), it was perhaps most famously put to practice by Charles and Mary Lamb. Their *Tales from Shakespeare,* a hugely popular re-telling of twenty plays, was originally published in 1807. It has been reprinted numerous times over the years and heralded a steady wave of children's Shakespearean adaptations across Europe. The same year saw the publication of the now somewhat infamous *Family Shakespeare* by another brother-sister team – Thomas and Henrietta Bowdler. This first edition contained twenty plays adapted by Henrietta (the selection included history and Roman plays, thus differing from the Lambs' compilation which entirely omitted them), while for the second edition in 1818 her brother added another sixteen works. The Bowdlers went to great lengths to "sanitize", as it were, Shakespeare's texts – their heavy-handed moralizing strategy to make the plays less obscene, enforced by omissions of any sexual innuendo, has earned their approach the moniker "Bowdlerization" (Whiteing 1916, 100–111).[2]

At the turn of the century, in 1897, another woman, Edith Nesbit, a prolific children's author and co-founder of the socialist Fabian society, published her compilation of adapted plays – *The Children's Shakespeare*. The book comprises twelve plays and opens with an introduction, in which the author converses with her children who, while interested in reading Shakespeare, find him difficult and tedious but welcome the re-tellings of the plays in the form of fairy-tales. A second edition entitled *Twenty Beautiful Stories from Shakespeare* was published in 1907 and includes eight additional stories. A third version, *Children's Stories from Shakespeare* (1912)*,* consists of eleven of the previously published texts and features an original essay – *When Shakespeare was a boy* by F. J. Furnivall.

Nesbit's novel ways of story-telling are evident in her renditions of Shakespeare. Naomi Miller states that although her texts are still patronising the young reader, they are "less gendered and hierarchical" than those by the Lambs and the Bowdlers (Miller 2007, 141). Nesbit is inclined towards emphasising the more entertaining, fantastical, fairy-tale aspects of Shakespeare while at the same time displays sensitivity to the political and social implications of the texts,

especially in relation to the experiences of women. As Amy Scott-Douglass points out "she pays especially careful attention to Shakespeare's female characters, altering Shakespeare's plots in ways that draw attention to the larger social tensions contributing to the plights of girls and women" (Scott-Douglass 2011, 357). In her introduction to the 1997 edition of selected Shakespeare tales by E. Nesbit, Iona Opie claims that Nesbit "has rehabilitated the plays as pure entertainment. She tells the stories with clarity and gusto, guiding the reader through the twists and turns of the plot, and giving the flavor of each play by the skillful use of short quotations" (Nesbit 1997, 7).

An overview of Shakespeare adaptations for children in Bulgaria (1878–1944)

Shakespeare's plays were first translated in Bulgarian in the nineteenth century and soon after the liberation of the country from Ottoman rule, the desire to westernise and catch up with the cultural processes in Europe shaped a new generation of artists and intellectuals whose knowledge and output brought the Bard's works to the young Bulgarian reader. The National Library in Sofia holds a plethora of remarkably heterogeneous re-tellings of Shakespeare's plays for children, mainly translated from English, German and Russian. Since these works have not been sufficiently explored yet, especially in the Anglophone field of reception of Shakespeare, I offer a brief outline of the majority of them before focusing on the specific volume, subject to examination in this essay.

The earliest editions available at the National Library are two translations from the Russian of Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*. These are *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*, translated by Toncho Marinov and published in two separate small volumes in 1881–1882. Boika Sokolova lists more published tales – *The Comedy of Errors* (1881), translated from the Russian, but also *King Lear*, *The Tempest*, *Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth* (1882–1887), all translated from the English (Sokolova 2006, 170).[3] While this seems to be the only *Measure for Measure* for children for the given time frame, *The Merchant of Venice* proved a very popular text.[4] It appeared in at least another three different versions. A volume comprising adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice, Macbeth, Coriolanus,* and *King Lear*, translated and edited by G. Palashev, was published in 1914. The format is unconventional – although re-told as a prose narrative, each story contains various scenes, deemed more important by the editor, which are presented in verse. The book is a colourful assemblage of translations: Palashev uses A.W. Schlegel's German translation of *The Merchant of Venice*, his *Macbeth* draws on Konstantin Velichkov's translation, with elements introduced by Palashev himself, based on Friedrich Bodenstedt's translation. *King Lear* comes in the verse translation of Georg Herwegh's German version, while *Coriolanus* is translated in prose from the verse translation by Adolf Wilbrandt. All sources, including those of the illustrations – by John Gilbert – are duly acknowledged by the editor.

Another book series entitled “Shakespeare for the young”, which is distinct from Palashev’s volume, features original adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Macbeth* by Nikolai Rainov, published as two separate volumes (the former also including illustrations by Gilbert). Rainov, who was a prolific literary figure with affinity to fairy-tales, wrote detailed introductions, extracting from the Shakespearean text and characterisation universal statements about the human nature and the moral norms one should abide to.

Yet another “Shakespeare for the young” series was launched c. 1931. *Othello, Hamlet, King Lear*, a *Romeo and Juliet* (listed in the National Library catalogue but unfortunately unavailable) and a *Falstaff* were published as small paperbacks. Three translators worked on these editions – Zh. M. Stanev (the pseudonym of Nadezhda Geleva Yanakieva), N. Georgiev and V. Kutikov. However, the original texts and source language(s) remain unknown.

Three versions are particularly obscure insofar as they do not acknowledge even the names of the translators and authors. An anonymous version of *The Tempest* was published in 1938. A small book containing *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark,* plus fairy-tales and poems unrelated to Shakespeare, appeared in 1939. The volume is edited by Iliya Glavusanov. An anonymous 1942 edition of *Falstaff,* with colour illustrations lists B. Velev and Gr. Trichkov as editors. *Falstaff* is a curious addition to the Shakespearean children’s canon in Bulgaria. Both available editions present the life of the eponymous character by constructing a comic narrative combining episodes from *Henry V*, *Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* – none of these plays had been adapted for children in Bulgarian at the time.

With the exception of the Lambs’ *Tales* and Palashev’s compilation meticulously listing his sources, the majority of adaptations provide little or no information regarding the provenance of the source material and/or even the translator of the text. These striking omissions point to a major issue which the Bulgarian book publishing dealt with (or rather attempted to bypass) at the time, namely acknowledging the foreign authors’ copyright. Vasil Zagorov points out that the belated development of literature and science in Bulgaria (due to various circumstances related to its position under Ottoman rule) which only accelerated its progress in the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century was marked by difficulties in distinguishing between author, translator and editor (Zagorov 2013, 26) – a problem evident in the Shakespearean adaptations discussed above. Even though a copyright law was introduced in the aftermath of the First World War, the legislation was often ignored and as Zagorov writes “despite the wide public debates in Bulgaria, during that period only the rights of local authors were protected, while the works by their foreign colleagues were regularly published as pirate reproductions” (Zagorov 2013, 31).[5]

Vladimir Polyanov's translation of Edith Nesbit's Shakespeare

The problem of acknowledging the author of the original Shakespearean adaptations is also manifest in the selection of eleven re-tellings of Shakespearean plays, translated from a non-identified English original by Vladimir Polyanov and published in 1937. Polyanov (a pseudonym of Georgi Todorov (1899–1988) was a writer and theatre director – author of numerous novels, short stories and plays, he was among the pioneers of Bulgarian expressionism. Upon close examination and on the basis of linguistic comparison, I have identified Polyanov's text as a translation of Edith Nesbit's adaptations, published between 1897 and 1910. The remainder of this article examines these translations more closely, with particular emphasis on the choice of plays and various facets of Polyanov's engagement with the original text.

The 120-page book stands out with its uniformity, remarkably different from the other Shakespearean adaptations considered during the period – it is a rare example of a single volume containing texts by the same author. The assumption that Polyanov worked mainly with Nesbit's first edition – *The Children's Shakespeare* – is confirmed by the presence of the introduction, which appears only in that edition, translated by Polyanov in full. The selection of plays also points to *The Children's Shakespeare*: out of twelve texts included in it, Polyanov omits only two – *Pericles* and *Cymbeline* – and to the remaining ten he adds *Macbeth*, taken from the second edition of Nesbit's stories. However, the book features illustrations found in Nesbit's third edition (J. H. Bacon, A. R. A., Harold Copping, and Arthur Dixon, uncredited).

The subtleties of the process of adapting plays into prose stories are aptly described by Megan Lynn Isaac: "The process of turning the dialogue of a play into the narrative of a story forces the editor to take interpretive positions. There are no stage directions in *Hamlet* to explain how King Claudius should deliver his lines, but if an adaptor of the play tells readers that Claudius spoke 'slyly', 'with a sneer', or 'in an oily voice', readers receive a very specific message about how to interpret the King" (Isaac 2000, 7). These observations are also valid for Polyanov's translation. The degree of liberties taken by the translator varies from play to play but on close inspection, certain patterns which reveal artistic and interpretative strategies emerge. The translation of some of the texts, such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, does not show any obvious discrepancies or deliberate changes. The majority of other plays, although retaining the original meaning of Nesbit's adaptation, demonstrate various purposeful (and on some occasions perhaps unintended) variations. I suggest that these can be ascribed to three main strategies: to add more emotional intensity to some characters (resonating with Isaac's statement above) or to reduce it; to omit or alter elements in the narrative that might sound too foreign to the Bulgarian young readers. Although a detailed linguistic analysis is beyond the scope of this article, a few examples of each of these aspects of his treatment of the text will elucidate Polyanov's approach.

In the final scene of *Romeo and Juliet* Romeo confronts Paris in the tomb of the Capulets; Nesbit writes: “Then Paris said, ‘I defy you — and I arrest you as a felon’” (Nesbit 1997, 17). Polyanov embellishes Paris’s emotion – “I despise you… and I arrest you as a villain, – yelled Paris, full of hatred” (Shakespeare 1937, 16). He also enhances Macbeth’s internal tribulations. After being addressed as Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth thinks of the third prophecy made by the witches – that he would be king. In Nesbit’s text, he turns to Banquo asking him: “you see that the witches spoke truth concerning me. Do you not believe, therefore, that your child and grandchild will be kings?” (Nesbit 1997, 68); compare this with Polyanov’s addition: “he felt overwhelming excitement. Macbeth was quick to hide his feelings. He turned to Banquo and asked him jokingly…” (Shakespeare 1937, 81). In *The Merchant of Venice*, although portraying Shylock as stone-hearted and resentful, neither Nesbit nor Polyanov mention that he is a Jew. However, Polyanov adds an extra sentence to highlight the usurer’s hatred for Antonio “This cannot continue like this much longer. The day will come when Antonio will be at my disposal and I’ll have my revenge for the humiliation that I am suffering now” (Shakespeare 1937, 31).

The Tempest and *The Winter’s Tale* provide examples of the opposite approach – to reduce the characters’ emotionality or to alter the perception of it. Prospero’s enemies are naturally vicious – Nesbit writes: “In their cruelty and hatred they put his little daughter, Miranda (not yet three years old), into the boat with him, and sailed away, leaving them to their fate” (Nesbit 1997, 48). Polyanov, more impassively, just states that both Prospero and Miranda were put on the boat (Shakespeare 1937, 92). Prospero’s relationship with the inhabitants of the island is subtly re-defined; thus Nesbit: “For he treated them kindly as long as they did his bidding, and he exercised his power over them wisely and well” (Nesbit 1997, 49); the sentence according to Polyanov: “He treated them favourably and exercised his kingly power wisely. This is why they followed his orders” (Shakespeare 1937, 94). While Nesbit clearly presents Prospero as a ruthless master, Polyanov’s Prospero appears more benevolent and regal. In *The Winter’s Tale* Nesbit demonstrates particular resentment towards Leontes, who accuses his wife Hermione of adultery. She describes him as a “violent-tempered man and rather silly”; also “he took it into his stupid head that…” (Nesbit 1997, 85). This moral judgment is toned down by Polyanov, whose Leontes is “rowdy and unthinking”; “he got into his head a stupid suspicion…” (Shakespeare 1937, 101). In both cases Leontes’s inherent stupidity is not reflected in the Bulgarian version. When presenting the baby to his husband, Nesbit’s Hermione is hoping to appease him, convinced that she “has done nothing wrong and loved him more than he deserved” (Nesbit 1997, 86). In Polyanov’s version she hopes to “soften the king’s hard heart so that he may be kind to the poor queen” (Shakespeare 1937, 102). Thus, although judging Leontes’s flaws, Polyanov mitigates Nesbit’s characteristic female partisanship.

The changes Polyanov introduced for clarity begin with the introduction. Entitled "Why I wrote these tales", it adds an edifying element by informing the reader of Shakespeare's importance: "That day we went to the theatre to watch a play by Shakespeare, the great English writer, who lived three hundred years ago and wrote the most beautiful plays in world literature" (Shakespeare 1937, 5). Notable omissions include Ariel's songs in *The Tempest*, which may have been deemed too difficult to translate for children; however, in place of the first song, Polyanov adds a beautiful original description: "he sang quietly and gentle, as if the leaves that were falling on the mirror-like surface of the nearby lake were sighing" (Shakespeare 1937, 96). In translating Prospero's address to Ferdinand "'you come here as a spy,' [...] 'I will manacle your neck and feet together, and you shall feed on fresh water mussels, withered roots and husk, and have sea-water to drink. Follow.'" (Nesbit 1997, 54), Polyanov reduces it to "You have come here as a spy, [...] I will put you in shackles and make you a prisoner. Follow me!" (Shakespeare 1937, 96) When the sight of Ferdinand and Miranda playing chess is revealed to Ferdinand's father Alonso, Polyanov's version of the scene omits the game, leaving the two lovers "happily embraced" (Shakespeare 1937, 99). In her verdict in *The Merchant of Venice,* Portia addresses Shylock as a "foreigner" (Nesbit 1997, 28); Polyanov replaces it with "usurer" (Shakespeare 1937, 37), a decision, which, given the fact that Shylock is not defined as a Jew, avoids possible confusion about his identity.

Conclusion

This article aimed to bring to light the connection between two literary works from the first half of the twentieth century – Edith Nesbit's re-tellings of Shakespearean plays and their Bulgarian translation by Vladimir Polyanov. Albeit uncredited as the author (this omission was not a precedent but indicative of a problematic practice in Bulgarian publishing during the period), eleven of Nesbit's stories reached the Bulgarian reader as part of a stable and vibrant trend in book publishing of Shakespearean adaptations for children. Thus Amy Scott-Douglass's observation that there is a public consensus, "an underlying if not outspoken notion that Shakespeare is good for people, and that Shakespeare is particularly good for the young" (Scott-Douglass 2011, 350), found an expression in Bulgarian society as the Shakespearean adaptations were, according to their publishers, recommended for children and often bearing the seal of approval of the Ministry of education, and in Polyanov's case, of the Ministry of war as well.

As my comparative analysis of specific aspects of Polyanov's translation hopefully demonstrated, despite the various slight modifications his version retains its fidelity to the originals and displays consistency and sensitivity to the English linguistic expression. His prose reflects the vibrancy of Nesbit's narrative and renders it comprehensible for younger readers. A more detailed analysis would undoubtedly reveal further facets in Polyanov's approach and motivation behind his interpretative choices, especially if his translation is positioned more

firmly in the context of the educational practices in Bulgaria at the time. Illuminating connections may be established with the recently published (2024) Bulgarian edition of Nesbit's tales, in a new translation by Christina Dimitrova, attesting to Polyanov's acumen in choosing to introduce the Bulgarian children to an author who proved to be of such enduring fame.

NOTES

[1] On Mary Lamb's more compassionate portrayal of female characters, see Scott-Douglass (2011, 354).

[2] On the "taming" of the female sexualised body in these adaptations, see Scott-Douglass (2011).

[3] Selected stories from The Lambs' Shakespeare were also translated from the English by Nadia Budurova and others in the 1930s.

[4] On the early reception of the play in Bulgaria, see Sokolova (2006).

[5] All translations from Bulgarian are mine unless otherwise stated.

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