

Theses of a Ph.D.-dissertation

**Bálint SZELE:**  
**Shakespeare's Plays Translated by Lőrinc Szabó**

Ph.D.-Programme in Literary Sciences  
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**I. The Research Project and the "Hungarian Shakespeare"**

The aim of this dissertation is to present Lőrinc Szabó's Shakespeare translations in their entirety. This aim leads the researcher to a considerable distance already in the time of delineating the actual topic of the dissertation as the work of a Shakespeare-translator can not be studied without the knowledge of the phenomenon called "the Hungarian Shakespeare," which can be described as a continually changing, organically built-up tradition with its own ideological and literary background and theory crystallising from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hungarian Shakespeare reached its culmination in the work of Mihály Vörösmarty and János Arany, and was developed further by the successive generations of the periodical *Nyugat* until the Shakespeare-renaissance of the 1960s that led to an unprecedented multiplication of interpretations and translations by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, it seemed necessary to find the position of Lőrinc Szabó in this tradition, as the significance of his work can be fully understood only in this broader context.

In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the theoretical work of Sándor Hevesi and György Király, and the new Shakespeare translations of Babits and Kosztolányi redefined the concept of the Hungarian Shakespeare, there was an upsurge of interest in a new, modern, living Shakespeare, which appeared in 1935 in the first Shakespeare translation of Lőrinc Szabó. The demand for a new Hungarian Shakespeare and the voice that the poet had developed by the 1930s were brought together by the assignments of Antal Németh, the director of the Hungarian National Theatre. His efforts finally resulted in the birth of an outstanding Shakespearean *oeuvre* in translation.

Lőrinc Szabó's Shakespearean translations unite in themselves an uncompromising textual fidelity and philological accuracy with the power of the poetic text and a modern, speakable language. In his work, we can always find the effect of the school of Babits and Arany, but the last translations tend to incorporate more from the translator's own voice and are more similar to the poet's own work. This fact led us to find a way of describing the development of the poet-translator who had an enormous effect on the following translators never realised by the poet himself. Lőrinc Szabó has become a classical creator among the personalities of the Hungarian Shakespeare in every respect. In our dissertation, we make an attempt at describing the processes and elements of this phenomenon.

The results of this paper will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of Lőrinc Szabó's theory and practice in literary translation and enrich the reception history of the life-work of the classical Hungarian poet.

**II. The Corpus and the Methods of the Research**

The corpus of our research is made up of Lőrinc Szabó's translations of Shakespeare's plays. These include every version, fragment and correction that comes from a Shakespeare play. It

is important to note here that the primary focus was on the written texts, stage adaptations are only mentioned as illustrative examples. The reasons for this is first that Lőrinc Szabó himself was more interested in poetical translation; second that the text used in theatres is usually quite different from what the translator has written on the paper.

In the introductory chapter of the dissertation, an essay presents the history of the Hungarian Shakespeare, which also deals with the theory of Shakespeare translation through time and the literary translations of Lőrinc Szabó. The reason for such a detailed treatment of the topic is the conviction that neither the work of Lőrinc Szabó, nor that of other Shakespearean translators can be understood without an extensive knowledge of the history of the Hungarian Shakespeare. Our analyses will therefore cover not only the text but also its full context: we shall deal with the history of the Hungarian translations, their critical reception, and their afterlife as well.

The dissertation presents Lőrinc Szabó's five full-length translations in five sections. The first is about *Timon of Athens*, which has three versions. The topic of the second section is *As You Like It*, the first version of which appeared in 1938, the last in 1955. In our analysis, we will present all the four versions. The third section presents *Macbeth*, which is known in three versions; the fourth deals with the two versions of *Troilus and Cressida*. *Twelfth Night* has only one version; in our analysis we shall focus on this (the text was published by the author of the dissertation). The complementary Appendix discusses Lőrinc Szabó's three revisions (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*) and some fragments of translations in a chronological order. The *Sonnets* have not been dealt with in this dissertation.

The analysis of the translations was carried out based on the historical and theoretical background described in the introductory chapter. After discussing each play focussing on its general features, its place in the Shakespeare-canon, and its critical reception, we drew an outline of the Hungarian history of the plays translated by Lőrinc Szabó, describing in detail the circumstances under which the poet made his own translation. This is followed by the detailed analysis of the translation, during which—with the exception of a few places—we did not concentrate on any definite elements of the text but on the text itself as a whole.

Here we can justly quote George Steiner, who said that “attacks on the translation of poetry are simply the barbed edge of the general assertion that no language can be translated without fundamental loss.” The faults of a translation must be judged based on the fact that “perfect translation would include all possible units of the text, taking and adding nothing. [...] Understanding is always partial, always subject to emendation. There is no way of stating whether a translation is good or not.” It is difficult to state indeed, but in the same context with other translations some conclusions can be drawn. That is why we tried not to vivisection the text by means of any kind of linguistic analysis, but to analyse and understand the text in its entirety in the context of the Hungarian Shakespeare.

In the dissertation, we tried to realise a text-level analysis, the theory of which we deduced from Anton Popovic's definition. In the discussion part, the literary and aesthetic analysis of carefully selected representative English texts is followed by the analysis of the Hungarian version and the comparison of the two texts. A description of the different text versions is also included in this extensive descriptive and comparative translation analysis. This analysis is the most expansive part of the dissertation. Up to now, no one has ever produced such a detailed analysis of the Shakespearean translations of Lőrinc Szabó, that is one of the reasons why we thought it was worth doing an all-inclusive treatment of the plays and the texts in both languages. The analysis of *Timon of Athens* is realised with the use of approximately 360

lines; that of *As You Like It* with 400; *Macbeth* with 410; *Troilus and Cressida* with 420; *Twelfth Night* with 330 lines. Such an extensive corpus has never been analysed in the history of the reception of Lőrinc Szabó's literary translations.

During the time of the research, we tried to find all the original documents, so besides the editions available in public libraries we read through Lőrinc Szabó's unpublished letters, the handwritten notes in his own books, the manuscripts, the proofreading copies, and the reports of the control editors, if available. These could be found in the original library of the poet, in the Manuscript Collection of the Széchenyi National Library and in the Petőfi Museum of Literature. We also read through the Antal Németh-collection in the Collection of Theatre History and the remains of the documentation of the National Theatre. Information about the stage presentations could be found in the National Museum and Institute of Theatre History. We also had an opportunity to make interviews with Shakespeare translators and experts well-versed in the subject; the interviews recorded and published can be considered one of the most important achievements of the research.

The final aim of the dissertation is to draw a detailed map of Lőrinc Szabó's literary translations and to find the regularities and features that are valid in a general sense; also to explore the Shakespearean universe of the poet, which can be regarded as one of the milestones of the Hungarian Shakespeare. In some cases—for the sake of better placement and comparison—we compared Lőrinc Szabó's texts to other Hungarian translations. We have also made an attempt at describing the career and *ars poetica* of the Shakespeare translator. Last, but not least, we tried to find a place for Lőrinc Szabó's *oeuvre* in the history of Hungarian Shakespeare translation and in the Hungarian Shakespeare-canon.

### III. The Results of the Research

As we have already stated, we can only understand Lőrinc Szabó's achievement if we make an attempt at locating his Shakespeare-related work in the history of the Hungarian Shakespeare. Lőrinc Szabó is not an outstanding figure because—for example—he translated the most plays by Shakespeare into Hungarian, but because of what he introduced newly and gradually made an established rule in the practice of Hungarian Shakespeare-translation. The translations of Lőrinc Szabó were accomplished with an eye on the earlier work of Babits and Kosztolányi. These two pioneers were the first to show the way to the next generation of translators but Babits realised only one translation and although Kosztolányi produced an outstanding—although inexact—translation of *The Winter's Tale*, he later made a much weaker translation of *Romeo and Juliet* and *King Lear*.

Lőrinc Szabó's 1935 translation of *Timon of Athens* meant the appearance of a new paradigm in Hungarian Shakespeare translation, however, together with a conscious continuation of the old tradition. Lőrinc Szabó's translations can be characterised by an absolute fidelity; line-to-line, rhyme-to-rhyme, with a strict insistence on the number of lines in the iambic pentameter verse. The roots of Lőrinc Szabó's concise manner of expression reach back to János Arany; his condensed, poetical way of translating and his fight for even the smallest elements of the meaning can be found in Lőrinc Szabó's translations as well. The respect of the two poets for the text is also similar. Lőrinc Szabó's greatness in translation can be seen from the fact that he is ready to reject a well-sounding but inexact solution for the sake of a more literal, sometimes less appealing solution. This is due to the effect of Babits,

and this is what differentiates his translations from the more unfaithful translations of Kosztolányi and the *Nyugat*-poets.

This does not mean, however, that it is not Lőrinc Szabó's voice that we hear in the translations. Like most of the best translators, he left the marks of his personality on the text; we find his "Lőrinc Szabó-isms" everywhere in his translations. These are the imperfect rhymes, the brutally broken run-on lines, the anxious, nervous lines disintegrated by means of punctuation marks, the diluted iambic lines. But he gets away with it, because the power of his poetic language can be clearly felt even from this modern use of Shakespearean poetry.

Lőrinc Szabó's modernising ambitions had a strong critical response. Today, the general opinion is that Shakespeare should be translated using a natural, up-to-date, modern language. Lőrinc Szabó's work is provocative in this respect as he uses conspicuously modern, metropolitan words in his texts. His translations are, however, modern in a way that does not altogether do away with the traditional archaic-sounding poetical devices of the Shakespeare play.

Lőrinc Szabó did not strive to produce an over-stylised, over-regular iambic pentameter. He rejected the mannered style of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hungarian Shakespeare and introduced a natural Hungarian verse form. He was the greatest master of the verse form written basically in a descending rhythm, which becomes naturally iambic by the end of the line. His iambic verse was closer to the spoken Hungarian language, which resulted in a natural, unpolished Shakespearean style. His slightly prosaic and free verse is an excellent vehicle for Shakespearean drama as it can incorporate and represent the style and tone of the text, keep the rhythm, and follow the movements of the text—the rhetorical devices, the logical framework, the game of opposites—in a flexible way, at the same time safeguarding its comprehensibility. The constant interaction of the opposing requirements of maximal fidelity and natural speech-like verse leads to a characteristic balance that is so typical of Lőrinc Szabó's Shakespeare translations. The interplay of these two elements is what makes his translations so living and throbbing.

Lőrinc Szabó's translations are more exact, controlled, they are not concerned with the invisible play of language and words but with what the text wants to express and its logical framework. He was very good at handling the meaning that can be paraphrased, but he himself admitted that he did not know the rules of English pronunciation so he was unable to note most puns and quibbles, hidden meanings. He understood but did not speak the language, which serves as an explanation for the fact that he was far more concerned with the intellectual and linguistically describable elements of English. There is a shift of focus from the hidden play of language towards textual meaning, atmosphere, and imagery, and Lőrinc Szabó's Shakespeare thus become exact, lyrical, concise, and metaphorical, sometimes even in the predominantly prosaic parts.

The power of the Hungarian text comes from the well-selected expressions, the free flowing of the language, and the suddenly flashing images, which extend the style-scale of the text and make it much more vivid and expressive. Lőrinc Szabó often highlights an important element of the text (a curse, irony, a pun, a stylistic device), this way pushing others in the background, that is why sometimes the intellectual or the emotional element dominates the play.

This highlighting does not mean that the translator forgets the musical elements of Shakespearean language; the sound effects or alliterations of the Shakespearean text can be found in his texts as well. Rhymes are even more prominent. Many critics have complained

about the unattractive, dry rhymes and “spoilt” assonances of Lőrinc Szabó. We should not forget though that Shakespeare was not a romantically “lyrical” poet for whom rhyme is a means of attracting attention and not an adornment of the verse. Shakespeare used very simple rhymes, and Lőrinc Szabó always remembered this; he abandoned the jingling rhymes that draw the attention away from the text.

Lőrinc Szabó often re-uses the well-done passages from the translations of his predecessors, be it good sentences, sayings, puns or jokes. He does not strive for originality at all cost, but he regards himself as a contributor to the organic tradition of the Hungarian Shakespeare, most characteristically as an heir to Mihály Babits. What is truly original in his art—apart from the typical Lőrinc Szabó-isms—is what Antal Németh called the “translator’s resource.” His translations are characterised by new words, collocations, and expressive imagery, which give a taste of Shakespeare’s language admittedly rich in neologisms.

We can find shortcomings in every translations, and Lőrinc Szabó’s are no exception. In his Shakespeare translations he often omits important secondary meanings if they are too difficult to translate. He usually sticks to the text, tries not to deviate from the original, and if he does not find a good solution, he leaves the difficult part or makes do with a weaker solution. In the humorous scenes he does not strive to find substitutive solutions like Dezső Mészöly or Ádám Nádasdy, because he does not want to improve Shakespeare’s text. Here we get back to the above-mentioned ‘respect for the text;’ does the translator show respect for Shakespeare’s original if he “improves” his texts without remorse, if he does so for the sake of the audience even if the play is very good as it is? This is an eternal dilemma in Shakespeare-translation. Lőrinc Szabó did not find these openly theatre-centred considerations so important.

Theatre experts or actors could find many weaknesses in Lőrinc Szabó’s translations. For the actors, some poetical solutions may seem strange. The translator, for example, sometimes plays with the short and long accents, which is a part of his poetic technique, but is available only to the eye as pronouncing the words in that way would be nonsense. His translations—usually in the prose sections—are not speakable enough because of the use of long words and long sentences that have a negative effect on the flow of the text. The prose parts are often airier, longer, which works against stageability. In the descriptive parts, where the representation of tension is not important, where the text does not push the drama forward, the translator is less exact because he concentrates on denotative meaning instead of dramatic effect. Lőrinc Szabó is not good at *l’art pour l’art* linguistic play and low comedy; he does not feel at home in this sort of drama. These parts do not match his translator’s personality, and he handles these with less care, sometimes even with a contemptuous shrug.

Still we can not say that Lőrinc Szabó’s translations are not fit for the theatre—in that case, Antal Németh would not have been so enthusiastic about them. One important feature is that the open punctuation of the translator lets the actor decide how to pronounce the text; often we can see from the translation that the translator reconstructed the dramatic situation in his mind’s eye, imagining himself into the place of the characters. After *Macbeth*, Lőrinc Szabó developed an interest in the inner life of the characters, which results in a more personal, motivated and emotional way of presenting the characters’ lives. His empathy is due to the personal and philosophical development and intensive intellectual quest of the *Harc az ünnepért* period.

The task of the theatre is also made easier by the fact that the translator pictures very well the general and individual characteristic features of the characters. The stageability of Lőrinc

Szabó's texts is enhanced by the poet's analytical way of translation, which helps him if there are holes to be filled in the text or if an ambiguous passage has to be interpreted. This is where the translator smoothes the inconsistencies of the drama. Sometimes the translator's analysis—without any kind of consciousness—prepares the reader for the events to come. Lőrinc Szabó is aware of the metaphysical background of Shakespeare's plays and deduces his translation from that knowledge. That is why his text is so coherent and solid, even if there are slight inaccuracies in it. It is an interesting experience to see that Lőrinc Szabó does not translate a poem but a play regarded as a unified whole thus producing a text-level translation.

Lőrinc Szabó has established a school with his literary translations. His two collections of translations, *Örök barátaink I. and II.* and his *Collected Translations* that appeared in 1950 set the grounds of a new tradition. Lőrinc Szabó himself wrote that "I think today's translators are going to follow my steps. The theory and practice of *Örök barátaink* is exemplary; even more so than that of Babits." This is true of the Shakespearean translations too. Sándor Maller wrote a few years ago that "Lőrinc Szabó's four and Dezső Mészöly's nine translations are better on the stage, the others are better for the reader: the duality of the 'theatre' and 'literary' Shakespeare [...] is still alive." Since then, several Shakespeare translators have appeared—with various translation theory and practice—but all of them appreciate Lőrinc Szabó's interpretations, which are slowly getting the status of classical translations. Lőrinc Szabó is still an ideal, who was a predecessor to the "poetic" translations of István Vas, István Eörsi, György Jánosházy, and he often serves as a point of departure for the adapting, modernising "theatrical" Shakespeare-translators represented by Dezső Mészöly, Ádám Nádasdy, András Forgách or Imre Szabó Stein. Eörsi was apparently a follower of Lőrinc Szabó: he liked exact ways of expression with a narrower scope of meaning, but with a more direct, more unambiguous syntax. Dezső Mészöly did express his critique of some of Lőrinc Szabó's solutions, but never questioned his greatness as a Shakespeare translator. Lőrinc Szabó is a watershed in the history of the Hungarian Shakespeare, and he has become a sort of "touchstone" in the eyes of the Shakespeare translators of the time after his death.

#### IV. Publications connected to the topic of the dissertation

*A Vízkereszt, vagy: amit akartok Szabó Lőrinc fordításában.* In: Szabó Lőrinc kiadatlan drámafordításai 1. *William Shakespeare: Vízkereszt, vagy: amit akartok.* A szöveggondozást végezte és a kísérő tanulmányt készítette Szele Bálint. Csokonai Kiadó, Debrecen, 2004. pp. 124-152.

*Catherine Turney: Keserű aratás.* In: Szabó Lőrinc kiadatlan drámafordításai 2. *Catherine Turney: Keserű aratás.* A szöveggondozást végezte és a kísérő tanulmányt készítette Szele Bálint. Csokonai Kiadó, Debrecen, 2004. pp. 120-149.

*A Vízkereszt magyar fordításainak összehasonlító elemzése.* In: *Modern Filológiai Közlemények*, 2003. V. évf. 2. szám. pp. 42-62.

*The Rebirth of Language in T. S. Eliot's Sweeney Agonistes, or how Jazz Fertilised the Language of the Stage.* In: *Proceedings of the HUSSDE 1. Conference.* Ed. by Mária Kurdi and Péter Szaffkó. Published by the Department of English Literatures and Cultures, University of Pécs. 2004. pp. 52-57.

„Minden mű a saját kora gyümölcse.” *Eörsi István az újrafordítás buktatóiról és a magyar Shakespeare-ről. Interjú a Shakespeare-fordító Eörsi Istvánnal* (2005. február 18.) In: Szabad-part, 24. szám.

*Szabó Lőrinc Rómeó és Júlia-átdolgozása.* In: *Bástya/2.* A Vörösmarty Társaság és a Kodolányi János Főiskola antológiája. Székesfehérvár, 2005. pp. 195-206.

*A fordító szeme mindent lát.* Interjú a Shakespeare-fordító Nádasdy Ádámval. In: *Pannon Tükör*, 2005/3. pp. 50-54.

„A fordítás is tud klasszikus lenni” – *Ruttkay Kálmán a ma és a tegnap Shakespeare-fordításairól.* Interjú Ruttkay Kálmánnal. In: *Fordítástudomány*, 2005/1. szám (VII. évf.). pp. 98-104.

*A Julius Caesar és a Lear király. Szabó Lőrinc emendációi az 1955-ös Shakespeare-kiadás számára.* In: *Bástya/3.* A Vörösmarty Társaság és a Kodolányi János Főiskola antológiája. Székesfehérvár, 2005. pp. 221-230.

#### **Forthcoming (place of appearance indicated)**

„Mi Shakespeare-t akarjuk kiadni.” Interjú Borbás Máriával az 1955-ös és az 1988-as Shakespeare-kiadásokról. (*Szabad-part*)

*Shakespeare-rituálék: színház és fordítás.* Interjú Géher Istvánnal. (*Fordítástudomány*)

*A drámafordítás elméletéről, különös tekintettel Shakespeare-re.* (Megjelenés alatt a Tinta Kiadó készülő tanulmánykötetében.)

*A Shakespeare-fordítás korszakai Magyarországon.* (Megjelenés alatt a Pro Scientia Aranyérmesek Társaságának 2005-ös konferenciakötetében.)