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Shakespeare's Sonnets in Russian: The Challenge of Translation

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Abstract

Shakespeare's 154 sonnets have become the interest of several generations of Russian translators. Overall, after their first appearance in the middle of the nineteenth century, at least thirty-five Russian translations of the complete sonnet collection have been produced so far, though mostly during the last three decades. The overall objective of the present thesis is to examine the evolution of Russian translations of Shakespeare's sonnets over the years. The thesis is novel in that it offers an analysis of specific linguistic, literary and cultural challenges the numerous Russian translators have dealt with while translating the sonnets, as well as the strategies adopted in an effort to resolve them.

In order to achieve the study objectives, several individual sonnets and a number of their Russian translations have been selected as a sample representing challenging areas that have been more closely investigated in four articles. The method of cross comparison has been applied throughout the study. Both the introductory part and the articles address certain problematic translation issues, such as the sonnets' formal structure, the pronouns of address, grammatical gender, bawdy language, sexual puns, culture-specific items, and metaphors.

The results provide evidence for seeing translation as a multi-layered and ever-changing process, which, apart from the pure linguistic tasks, combines historical, political and ideological aspects. The findings of the study suggest that translation competence, namely deep understanding of the context and its fundamental cultural and social features, motivates the translator's interpretation of the contradictions and uncertainties of Shakespeare's poems. Those include the sonnets genre, relation to Shakespeare's biography, the order of the poems in the first 1609 Quarto. The analysis also identifies the ways in which the target language's social and historical context have had an impact on the choices made by the translators.

On the whole, the study's results do not contradict Mikhail Gasparov's model describing the pendulum-like movement from "free" to "literal" approaches through the history of Russian literary translation.

Keywords

Translation, sonnets, Russian, Shakespeare

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