Chapter 2

SWISS SHAKESPEARE: CREATIVE TRANSLATION AS RESEARCH AND APPROPRIATION

ELISABETH DUTTON

SWITZERLAND'S SELF-PERCEPTION IN relation to Europe is richly paradoxical. On the one hand, the Swiss have repeatedly voted to remain independent of the European Union, claiming instead a special "Associated" status and pegging the Swiss Franc to the Euro rather than embracing the Euro themselves. On the other hand, Switzerland is geographically positioned at the heart of Europe, and the Swiss consider themselves thoroughly European, mixing, as they do, various major European languages, cultural forms, religious orthodoxies, and cuisines in a tiny national space. Switzerland has four official languages—French, German, Italian and Rumantsch; Swiss German exists in numerous distinct dialects, and even Rumantsch, which is spoken by only 60,000 people worldwide, is divided into five distinct varieties and one newly created standard. In addition, like most European countries, Switzerland has substantial immigrant communities who preserve their own non-Swiss language among themselves while accommodating to French or German as the situation requires.[1] On the border between the two largest linguistic communities, Fribourg is a French-German bilingual canton with Switzerland's only bilingual university—an institution which also attracts large numbers of Italian-speaking Swiss. While the status of English as ubiquitous but not officially 'Swiss' is hotly contested by national politicians, journalists, and academics, English is nonetheless often embraced when Francophone and German-speaking students, for example, have to communicate—rather than speak the other's language, they can often be observed speaking English. Belonging, historically, to none of the different Swiss language groups, English seems strangely uncontroversial, to many students at least.[2]

Like the English language in which he writes, Shakespeare may also occupy an unusually "neutral" position, identified with no group and therefore open to all. Less confident than my students in this perhaps naively optimistic view, I was hesitant when they asked me to direct them in a Shakespeare play for the University of Fribourg's Jubilee celebrations: I expressed to them my reservations about an English

Elisabeth Dutton, University of Fribourg.

[1] At the University of Fribourg, the most obvious example of this is the largely Portuguese workforce of cleaners.

[2] Raphael Berthele, "Demography vs. Legitimacy: Current Issues in Swiss Language Policy," in *Perspectives on English in Switzerland*, ed. Patricia Ronan (Lausanne: Institut de Linguistique et des Sciences du Langage, 2016), 27–51.

director staging in English the work of the iconic English playwright to celebrate the anniversary of a University which is proudly French-German. The students, however, proposed a solution inspired by the South African Mysteries of the Isango Ensemble, which presented the medieval English Chester Mystery plays multilingually, each actor performing in their own South African language or dialect: impressed by Isango's work, the students had already experimented in class with multilingual translation of medieval plays from the York and Chester Cycles, and had performed their translations as part of their course assessment to audiences of fellow students and Faculty.[3] The success of these experiments encouraged the students' proposal for a multilingual Shakespeare, and encouraged me, as their teacher as well as the proposed director, to agree to the project, because I had seen the benefits of the creative multilingual translation the students had already undertaken. In order to translate the language of a historically remote English text, they had first to understand it in great depth, appreciating the register as well as the literal meaning of words, and indeed the ways in which the literal meanings develop diachronically, paying attention to aural effects, verse and prose rhythms, and puns. As each student tried to recreate these meanings and effects in their own language or dialect they deepened their awareness of the structural differences between their first language and English; furthermore, when in rehearsal they brought their own lines into conversation with the lines others had translated into different languages and dialects, they sharpened their awareness of connections and contrasts among the Swiss languages. They reflected, too, on the use of code-switching in various Swiss contexts: in which situations do Swiss speakers change languages, and what might this indicate about power relations, for example? The nature of the relationships portrayed in the medieval mystery plays lent itself superbly to this exploration, because the scriptural stories told are at once familiar and remote from the students' experience: for example, the students all knew the story of the Annunciation, but, not having themselves spoken to angels, they had to consider closely what the Middle English text indicated about how Gabriel would address Mary, and then discuss whether this would imply code-switching and the use of "tu" or "vous."

By this process of creative adaptation, the students sharpened their linguistic skills, and at the same time made a medieval text in "difficult" English their own: the text became something they relished, not something imposed on them by a requirement for course credits in Philology. I was therefore confident that a multilingual Shakespeare project would be, at least, a creative learning opportunity for the students. I was less certain about its possible effects on an audience, not because I doubted the theatrical talents that the students had already richly demonstrated, but because of the question

---

3 The Isango Ensemble, *The Mysteries*, dir. Mark Dornford-May, was staged in South Africa and then, to great acclaim, in London (2000 and 2008). The students watched the film of this production by Heritage Films. South Africa has eleven official languages and many more unofficial languages and dialects.

of a story. The South African Mysteries and the students' Swiss Christmas plays adapted medieval drama that pursues a single narrative line, telling a story familiar to, and often beloved by, their audiences. By contrast, the convoluted plots and subplots of many Shakespeare plays are both difficult to follow and difficult to remember in detail: it is language and character that make Shakespeare great, and even native speakers of English are more likely to be able to quote "to be or not to be" than explain what Fortinbras is doing in *Hamlet*.

For these reasons I suggested we undertook Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost.* Its theme, of young men torn between the charms of study and of sex, is appropriate to the university: I hoped we could exploit this to create a sense of familiarity in the student setting at least. Furthermore, the play depends for much of its comedy on four pairs of student lovers acting in parallel, so that each action or speech happens, with slight variation, four times: I thought that, if we could distribute languages among the lovers, this patterning would mean that an audience member who could understand what was happening between one pair of lovers could guess what was happening between the others. Finally, *Love's Labour's Lost* is a comedy that explores language alongside learning and love: in it, words are not only Shakespeare's tools but also his theme, and multilingual translation therefore seemed to offer possibilities for an adaptation very much in the spirit of the original.

The troupe which evolved from this, The Swiss Stage Bards, has now produced Swiss versions of *Love's Labour's Lost* (for the University's Jubilee in 2014), *The Merchant of Venice* (2015), and *Henry V* (2018): in this chapter I will discuss the first two of these, as *Henry V* is discussed elsewhere.[4] The productions have toured various venues in universities, museums, art galleries, both in Switzerland and abroad: touring is facilitated by a production style that, in imitation of early English theatre, allows actors to interact closely and directly with audience members, and does not depend on elaborate sets or modern technological effects. Their adaptations develop localized staging, drawing not only on the idiosyncratic linguistic resources of different varieties in a di- or polyglossic setting, but also on satire of regional cultural heritage, to translate Shakespeare for an audience from a geographically highly restricted area who nonetheless daily partake of a "great feast of languages." The students use their own linguistic recreation of Shakespeare's plays to explore Shakespeare's social hierarchies, family relationships, puns, and parodies: at the same time regional traditions of costume and music, for example, can be used to "translate" Shakespeare's characters. The process of creative translation motivates the students to deepen their understanding of the content and style of the Shakespearean original and appropriates Shakespeare for the rich enjoyment of a local Swiss audience.

---

4 See Elisabeth Dutton, "Helvetic Henry? A Swiss Adaptation of *Henry V*, or Something Near Enough," in *History and European Drama up to 1600*, ed. Peter Happé and Wim Hüsken (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 247–66.

Love's Labour's Lost

Love's Labour's Lost questions the value of oaths—written or spoken words that might be expected to show language at its most powerful. "Language" as a topic is also highlighted through Don Armado's linguistic *faux pas*, Moth's puns, Holofernes' over-erudition. But how was any of this to be translated? "Naturalistic" language choices, such as having the Princess of France speak French, were quickly rejected when Raphael Berthele, of Fribourg's Institute for Multilingualism, offered to contact a colleague who could put the lines of the King into sixteenth-century Navarro-Aragonese: his point is well-made, for Shakespeare makes no effort to imitate natural language choices either—it is very difficult to imagine that a late-sixteenth-century King of Navarre and Princess of France would talk to each other in English, and in blank verse. Nevertheless, as Berthele pointed out, in order to draw attention to a play of "language" we would need to surprise the audience. The Fribourg student at lunch in the University canteen will hear conversations in English, French, German, Swiss German dialects, Italian, Spanish: multilingualism is too transparent, in Fribourg, for the audience to pay it attention, and therefore it is only through non-naturalistic language choices that the Fribourgeois can be made aware of "language" as a topic.[5]

The relationship between the different national languages of Switzerland is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a highly politicized one. First-language German-speakers are numerically a majority, but are divided into different dialectal groups: the different dialects are used informally and are perceived, by those who speak them as well as those who do not, as to a greater or lesser extent "unsophisticated."[6] Used in certain settings, such as the theatre, they seem to have an almost inevitable humour, and we had to work creatively to exploit this humour while also avoiding simplified stereotypes such as making Dull the stupid, Swiss-German speaking policeman. We followed the example of Isango's work: rather than having each scene played in a different language, which would simply give the audience the unsatisfactory experience of watching several distinct productions at once, each character would speak in the first language of the actor playing him or her, changing language when situation demanded it. Code-switching, in the translated text, thus becomes a way of marking particular movements in Shakespeare's script—moments of heightened tension or the search for accord; shifts from formal to informal interaction; asides, confessions, proclamations.

Therefore our Princess of France was a Swiss German speaker, who chatted to her ladies in Bernese dialect but nonetheless switched confidently to High German in public settings, and to French when speaking to the—francophone—King of Navarre. The romantic couples of lords and ladies were linguistically mismatched, with a particularly comical pairing of Dumaine as the speaker of the tiny minority language

---

5 Sender Dovchin and Jerry Won Lee, "The Ordinariness of Translinguistics," *International Journal of Multilingualism* 16 (2019): 105–11.

6 Roland Ris, "Innerethnik der deutschen Schweiz," in *Handbuch der schweizerischen Volkskultur*, ed. Paul Hugger (Zurich: Offizin, 1992), 749–66.

Rumantsch with the English-speaking Katherine: as the couples fell in love, however, this was marked in their efforts to speak each other's language, to humorous but also touching effect. Holofernes was presented by an Indian woman dressed in a sari and Oxford academic gown: she imitated the complexity of the Shakespearean character's self-consciously learned language, with its frequent Latin citations, by code-switching frequently among all the Swiss languages, English, and occasionally Indian languages, too. A particularly powerful moment in performance was the brief entrance of Marcadé, to announce the death of the King of France; Marcadé addressed the Princess and the audience in the Patois Gruyerién, a variety of Franco-Provençal now largely dead but spoken by the grandparents of the Marcadé actor in his memory.

The adaptation was coordinated by a core student team, who agreed provisional cuts with the Director, and then produced a skeleton translation of the main passages of French, German, Swiss German, and Italian: the team consulted published translations in French, Italian, and German, but for Swiss German there was no published translation available.[7] The actor playing Dumaine was the only native speaker of Rumantsch, and so had to prepare his own translation in consultation with the University's Rumantsch professor. The script was then collated and distributed to all the actors. However, the process of translation continued far into the rehearsal process, as each actor was encouraged to discuss changes to the suggested translation in rehearsal, for example where the Swiss German dialect did not match their own. During this process the cast grappled with language—their own, and those of others— in exceptional detail: for example when three actresses who describe their own dialect as "Bernese Swiss-German" disagreed on how a line would naturally be pronounced, or when the Rumantsch passages could be rendered in either a recently codified written standard or one of several spoken idioms.[8] These rehearsal room discussions often provoked hilarity, but were also highly instructive for the student cast who deepened their awareness of the difficulty in defining a "language" or a "dialect," or of locating an "accent": each was, in fact, exploring their own idiolect through an appropriation of Shakespeare's language—or perhaps, especially in *Love's Labour's Lost*, the idiolects he creates for his characters—into their own. For the Marcadé and Holofernes actors, there were particularly marked personal appropriations in their Shakespearean translation, since the phrases of—respectively—Patois Gruyerién and Malayalam which they introduced were rooted in their family history and were inaccessible to other cast members and audience.

---

7 This team was Thomas Aeppli (German and Swiss German), Maud Fasel (French), Elisa Pagliaro (Italian). Given the concentration required of even the most confidently multilingual in watching a performance in several languages at once, we aim to keep all productions below 100 minutes in duration, so cutting is required.

8 On Rumantsch standardization see Raphael Berthele, "Language planning and standardization in a minority language context: A Case Study of Rumantsch Grischun in Switzerland," in *Language Planning and Microlinguistics: From Policy to Interaction and Vice Versa*, ed. Winifred V. Davies and Evelyn Ziegler (London: Palgrave, 2015), 39–61.

In April and May 2014 the play was presented to audiences at the University of Fribourg, and then taken on tour around the Canton; it was very warmly received. Between performances, the cast worked with Mark Jones, a professional film-maker, to prepare a film of "The Fribourg *Love's Labour's Lost*."[9] Scenes were shot in various locations around Fribourg: in the buildings and grounds of the University's Miséricorde and Perolles sites, at the train station, at the Loreti Chapel, in the public Petit Paradis gardens and the Sculpture Garden, even in a Nail Bar on the Rue de Lausanne. The aim was to produce a truly local Shakespeare, and we envisaged making the film available to the Fribourg public online. However, since it is intended for an audience beyond Switzerland, we needed to find a "way in" to the film for an audience to whom its linguistic and cultural setting is alien. The figure of Don Armado was the natural choice for this: in Shakespeare's script he is the outsider trying to fit in, linguistically and culturally, and never succeeding. Our Don Armado was dressed as a Swiss Guard; the bright, anachronistic costumes which the Swiss Guard still wear while "relocated" from Switzerland to the Vatican provided an ideal example of a symbol which is at once correctly Swiss but egregiously inappropriate in a modern Swiss town, particularly when worn by a visiting Spaniard. Much humour is generated in the film by Don Armado's appearance; at the same time, audience identification with him as the foreigner, the outsider, potentially causes the non-Swiss audience of the film to reflect on their own experience of oddity in the film. The outsider is at once bemused and, to the insiders he observes, amusing, perhaps cruelly so.

The Merchant of Venice

The Merchant of Venice is not a play about language in such a marked way: there is no Moth in the *Merchant*. It is, however, clearly a play about racial and cultural identities, and of course language is one of the many ways that such identities are built. Shakespeare's plot depends on the interaction of two very different places: Belmont, a fairy-tale land with a princess, Portia, who has a fairy-tale plot involving suitors' choice between three caskets; and Venice, a real place of lively and sometimes hostile intercultural exchange. David Scott Kastan notes that it is no coincidence that Venice is the setting for the two plays—*Othello* and *Merchant*—in which Shakespeare most urgently explores the exclusionary impulses of Western Christendom. "Christian Europe invents a bifold Semitic other—a nomadic Arab and a wandering Jew—as part of its own efforts at self-definition, and in the process renders both Arab and Jewish histories largely invisible";[10] and the early modern Christian was perhaps most likely to meet the Jew and the Arab on the Rialto, which was "rather *Orbis* than *Urbis forum*, that is, a marketplace of the world,

---

9 The film can be viewed at: Institut für Mehrsprachigkeit—Institut de plurilinguisme—Istituto di plurilinguismo, "Shakespeare's Love's Labour's Lost: The Fribourg Adaptation," https://tube.switch. ch/videos/a388f009.

10 David Scott Kastan, *A Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 85.

not of the citie," where one might "see all manner of fashions of attire, and heare all the languages of Christendome, besides those that are spoken by the barbarous Ethnickes."[11] Today, several Swiss cities might give Venice a run for its multilingual money, and the students involved in adapting *Merchant* for a Swiss audience were keen to explore the ways in which Swiss languages could be used to portray racial and cultural encounters occasioned by diversity within the country, and by immigration into it. The notorious Swiss referenda that resulted in a ban on the building of minarets and a cap on the number of immigrants sit, for many of the students, uncomfortably with their sense of Switzerland as embracing diversity of religion, language, and culture.

It was important that the Fribourg *Merchant of Venice* mirror the contrast between the ideal Belmont and the real Venice. The translation team decided that Portia, in Belmont, was Helvetia, the collective construction of an idealized Switzerland: multilingual, with borders which are potentially permeable but which are closed to the undesired (the undeserving, who cannot choose correctly between the caskets); a realm of elegant culture in which the financial backing to keep it all going is just spare change (for it is surely an aspect of Portia's status as fairy-tale princess that she has no trouble supplying Bassanio with ten times any sum of money he might require). In order to help the audience grasp this identification, we decided that the Portia actress should first appear dressed as Helvetia herself—on the premise that Nerissa was sketching a portrait of her, she wore a classical dress and crown, with spear and shield decorated with the Swiss flag, a white cross on a red background.

The primary language of interaction between Nerissa and Portia was Italian, a language that seems inextricably linked for all Europeans with culture, pleasure, and beauty, though the discussion of Portia's European suitors inevitably lent itself to multilingual play. In the Shakespearean original, there is surely a metatheatrical humour, rooted in the non-naturalistic use of English by all the characters in the play, when Portia declares that she objects to her English suitor, Falconbridge, because of the language barrier: "he understands not me, nor I him; he hath neither Latin, French, nor Italian, and you will come into the court and swear that I have a poor pennyworth in English. He is a proper man's picture, but, alas, who can converse with a dumb-show?" (1.2). In the multilingual Shakespeare, Portia and Nerissa discussed the Neapolitan Prince in Italian, the County Palatine in German, the French lord in French, and Falconbridge in English: the Portia actress's fluent but heavily accented English both drew attention to her potential ability to communicate in more than dumbshow with Falconbridge and highlighted that such communication would disadvantage her in a way she apparently found unacceptable. The national stereotypes on which the humour of the original text depends were emphasized in our adaptation not only through the code-switching but also through gifts which Portia unwrapped from each suitor: some sexy lingerie from the French Monsieur le Bon; a bulldog statuette and English dictionary from Falconbridge; a heavy volume of "Very Difficult Philosophy" from the German Count. These gifts also

---

11 Coryate, *Coryats Crudities* (London, 1611) sig. O7, cited by Kastan, *A Will to Believe*, 86.

glossed the comments Portia makes on each suitor so that audience members unable to understand each of the languages in the rapid code-switching would nonetheless be able to follow the central—nationally stereotyping—ideas of the dialogue.

Hereafter, Portia continued while in Belmont to speak in Italian, forcing the Prince of Morocco to code switch into Italian though he was uncomfortable in it, and finally moving to German to accommodate the successful suitor, Bassanio, a German-speaking actor. The Portia actress was in fact least comfortable in German, and this marked beautifully her submission to Bassanio when he wins her hand. The modern audience may feel discomfort with the sentiment of her declaration of love: that she hopes to learn much from Bassanio, and that she is

> Happiest of all in that her gentle spirit
> Commits itself to yours to be directed,
> As from her lord, her governor, her king.
> Myself and what is mine to you and yours
> Is now converted (3.2).[12]

But there was nonetheless something deeply affecting about Portia's struggles to articulate this in language to her so difficult, and native to her lover—it was the struggle, perhaps, of loving accommodation, the challenge of in reality converting "mine" to "yours."[13] Bassanio matched her impulse to linguistic accommodation as a mark of love, and replied in Germanically accented Italian, appropriately with the protestation that "Madam, you have bereft me of all words" (Signora, mi avete lasciato senza parole).

Bassanio was a German, not a Swiss German, national, though the actor was also comfortable in Swiss German dialects, which were the linguistic medium of his fellow Venetians Salerio, Solanio, Salerino, and Gratiano. Although it is uncertain that Shakespeare intended Salerino to be a separate character, we retained him and allocated to him some lines from Salerio and Solanio, thus creating a three-person boy band, "The Salads," who wore hoodies, danced to hip hop, and rapped on "My daughter, my ducats" (2.8) when mocking Shylock's distress at Jessica's betrayal. Although entirely capable of code-switching, for example to accommodate their friend Lorenzo whose first language was Spanish, the Salads rigidly insisted on Swiss German in the presence of Shylock: Swiss German thus became a language not only for brotherly bonding among the "in-group" of Venetian society, but also for the exclusion of the unwanted foreigner. This re-enacted a familiar paradox of language use in Switzerland as experienced by the outsider: although Swiss German is the majority language of Switzerland, its individual dialects belong to minorities, and there is no Swiss German written standard; the oral nature of Swiss German dialects gives them their cultural power as speakers will

---

12 Am glücklichsten darin, dass sich ihr Geist / Dem Euren anvertraut, um ihn zu lenken, / Als ihr Gebieter, ihr Gemahl, ihr König. / Ich und was mein ist sei von nun zu Eurem / Besitz geworden.

13 See Ingrid Piller, "Language Choice in Bilingual, Cross-cultural Interpersonal Communication," *Linguistik Online* 5 (2000): 1–2; and on bilingual couples in Fribourg, see Claudine Brohy, *Das Sprachverhalten zweisprachiger Paare und Familien in Freiburg/Fribourg (Schweiz)*. Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1992.

immediately recognize and bond with each other, and, as it is very difficult to learn Swiss German from a book, this tightly bonded "minority" can appear exclusive to anyone who has not been raised in a particular community.[14] In rehearsals, occasional jokes among non-Swiss-German speakers when their fellow actors quibbled over dialectal details were perhaps a device to defuse this sense of exclusion through humour, but the actors were aware that, for the characters they presented, the stakes were higher.

Shylock's isolation was linguistically marked by the "Venetians'" use of Swiss German dialects which were impenetrable to him: his first language was English, which allowed the preservation of some of Shakespeare's most celebrated lines (the "Hath not a Jew eyes?" speech, for example) in their original tongue. Fortunately, the Shylock actor performed with such clarity that the audience appeared to have no problem understanding him, though for most of them English was a third language. None of the other actors performed much in English, apart from Portia, who addressed Shylock in his own language in court: having thus created an irony in which English, the world language, isolated Shylock, the production then made it a whip with which to beat him. Solanio's line "A Daniel! I thank thee, Jew, for teaching me that word" (4.1), was also retained in English, accenting the power of actual language teaching which imagistically underpins the Shakespearean line. The Swiss *Merchant* also developed more fully the traces of languages other than the official languages of Switzerland, plus English, that had appeared in *Love's Labour's Lost*: as in *Love's Labour's Lost*, the mother tongues of the actors inspired this, contributing to a richer sense of the linguistic diversity in Fribourg. For example, having cast a Russian actor as Tubal, we made Russian the language of the Jewish community, which was thus as exclusive of most of the audience as Swiss-German speaking Venice was to Shylock himself. Nonetheless, the figure of the Russian-speaking Jew carried great pathos. Just as it is common that the second generation of immigrants master the language of the country in which they settle more readily than their parents, so our Jessica had mastered High German, and used it to speak to her father whose replies were then made halting as he was disadvantaged even in his own home.

Shakespeare's *Merchant* of course portrays not just anti-Semitic but also other racist attitudes, and these the Swiss *Merchant* sought to challenge through linguistic play. The Prince of Morocco spoke Portuguese, since Morocco was at one point a Portuguese colony, and also because with only one Portuguese speaker in the production the language would isolate the Prince, just as his racial difference does within Shakespeare's script: "Mislike me not for my complexion, The shadowed livery of the burnished sun" (2.1) he asks Portia, but her notoriously racist pleasure at the failure of his wooing—"let all of his complexion choose me so," indicates the deep vein of discrimination even in the ideal Belmont. The actor who played Morocco was Asian rather than North African: one Cameroonian actor auditioned for the production, and we decided to challenge the play's attitudes to race by casting him as the Duke of Venice. As this actor was also able

---

14 On the experience of linguistic "exclusion" of Germans in Switzerland, see Werner Koller, *Deutsche in der Deutschschweiz: Eine sprachsoziologische Untersuchung* (Aarau: Sauerländer, 1992).

to speak Turkish, we had him command court officials in Turkish, thus rendering the lawcourt initially as inscrutable to almost all of the audience as it ultimately proves to Shylock; Portia he addressed in her native Italian, and to Antonio and Shylock he spoke French, albeit a distinctively North African French. The Duke thus mirrored the linguistic competence of the Helvetian-ideal Portia, and of the cosmopolitan traders of Venice, but perhaps also represented an alternative aspect of multilingualism in Switzerland: many immigrants attain impressive levels of multilingualism not through the pursuit of a cultural ideal but rather from pragmatism, the necessity of learning languages in order to find jobs.[15]

The fourth official language of Switzerland, Rumantsch, was used, like Swiss-German, to create a socially exclusive bond; Rumantsch was the particular language of address between Bassanio and Antonio. A bond which in many modern productions is often marked as homosexual love was in this production marked linguistically, a "secret" language shared only between these two friends, marking the intimacy of their utterances. This led to moments of comedy, as for example when in Belmont Bassanio has to read out to Portia, Nerissa, and his friends the letter he has received from Antonio: a private communication, the letter was in Rumantsch, and incomprehensible to all (including most of the audience) until translated. The particular function of letters in Shakespeare, as the means of communication between two private individuals, with comic or tragic potential when read by the wrong people, was thus highlighted: Nerissa translating "If your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter" from the personal Rumantsch to the public German was bitterly comic in its impropriety. Rumantsch was also given a more light-hearted resonance when, at the beginning of the play, Antonio performed the 1989 Swiss Eurovision Song, the Rumantsch "Viver senza te," a moment of high kitsch before his opening line "In truth, I know not why I am so sad."

The Benefits of Swiss Shakespeare

Audiences commented that the multilingual Shakespeare surprised them with its accessibility, even for young people: they had expected that the multilingualism would be a greater obstacle to understanding, but they also in many cases seemed to have preconceptions that Shakespeare, while "great," would also be slow, dull, and impenetrable. That they found it otherwise is encouraging: processes of translation and adaptation had made manifest the lively qualities of the original. Intriguingly, Swiss audience members also learned something about their own national languages: many commented, of the passages of Rumantsch, that they were struck by the beauty of a language they had not heard before (although, strangely, audience members over a certain age could all sing along to "Viver senza te"). Very few members of the audience were, while watching, fully aware of the way that languages were being used to include and exclude, though they were intrigued by the idea in after-show discussion. Perhaps the Fribourg *Merchant*

---

15 Georges Lüdi and Iwar Werlen, *Le paysage linguistique en Suisse* (Berne: Office fédéral de la statistique, 2005).

demonstrated most strongly that both the Swiss multilingual ideal and its challenging realities are so normal to the Swiss that they no longer even notice them.

But the primary beneficiaries of the creative process of making Shakespeare Swiss are the students who have translated and performed these adaptations, and their comments (here cited with their permission) are revealing. I collected their written reflections about what they learned from the experience, and these can be considered, perhaps, in three main categories: what they learned about Shakespeare; what they learned about their own national languages; how they built a creative network that surmounted their normal social and linguistic boundaries. Firstly, then: as one actor wrote—"Shakespeare was meant to be played on the stage!" and in the process of preparing a stage production the students had to be sure they understood the play. This involved grappling with the Shakespearean original in order to facilitate translation, but then also, "the translated script forced us to engage with the text on a deeper level as the content had to be extra clear in our acting, to facilitate the transitions between languages for the audience." Another actor wrote: "I have learnt new things about theatre, space, Shakespearean performance techniques": as with the medieval drama class in which the Swiss Shakespeare had its roots, the actors were encouraged to develop performance styles for spaces that were not proscenium arch theatres, particularly how to block for thrust stages or "in the round," and how to exploit direct interaction with the audience.

Secondly, the actors were challenged by the need to communicate across language barriers, and surprised and excited by their ability to do so: "It was incredible how we switched from one language into another!" One actor overcame some prejudice and some lack of confidence: "I have become more acquainted with languages I used to pretty much despise (i.e. Swiss German). I haven't learned much Italian or Rumantsch but I know some words and am definitely more comfortable with them." Another actor, a student of linguistics, had some very specific insights about Swiss German: "I had the unique experience of helping with the translation of my own text which had already been translated into Swiss German but not into my native dialect. I realized just how different the grammar and vocabulary between two different Swiss dialects are as I usually only compare Swiss German and high German."

The third category of comment may seem, perhaps, the least important academically, but is perhaps the most illuminating about the realities of multilingual Switzerland: "Swiss Shakespeare has allowed me to meet people I would never have talked to otherwise because of the language barrier"; "Even though our university is multilingual I have felt that there is a tendency for social groups to form according to mother tongue"; "I met people from different parts of Switzerland. By getting to know them—and since they had different backgrounds and experiences—I reinforced the desire to improve my language skills, and I learnt interesting aspects about other regions I was unaware of." "This project means encouraging acquaintances between students of different languages and breaking down the *Röstigraben*."[16] That Switzerland is as much divided as united by

---

16 *Röstigraben* is a humorous term to refer to the cultural divide between the French- and German-speaking parts of Switzerland.

its languages is a possibility we explored further in the Swiss *Henry V*; that translating Shakespeare could bring diverse students together is pleasingly reflected in the fact that many of the cast members have subsequently collaborated in other creative projects in the Fribourg community.[17] These projects have, in many cases, continued to reflect on aspects of language, power, and community in Switzerland, and to challenge linguistic segregation: for example, two Swiss Stage Bards went on to direct a bilingual *Romeo and Juliet*, with Capulets and Montagues as French-speakers against German-speakers, in high school—a challenging project given that education, in Fribourg, is linguistically segregated. As one *Love's Labour's Lost* cast member wrote: "I learned about literature and theatre, while actually being part of it. And I improved my language skills because I wanted to talk to my new friends. There is no better way to learn how to do something than by doing it because you are driven by passion and love for it."

Bibliography

Berthele, Raphael. "Language Planning and Standardization in a Minority Language Context: A Case Study of Rumantsch Grischun in Switzerland." In *Language Planning and Microlinguistics: From Policy to Interaction and Vice Versa*, edited by Winifred V. Davies and Evelyn Ziegler, 39–61. London: Palgrave, 2015.

——. "Demography vs. Legitimacy: Current Issues in Swiss Language Policy." In *Perspectives on English in Switzerland*, edited by Patricia Ronan, 27–51. Lausanne: Institut de Linguistique et des Sciences du Langage, 2016.

Brohy, Claudine. *Das Sprachverhalten zweisprachiger Paare und Familien in Freiburg/Fribourg (Schweiz)*. Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1992.

Dovchin, Sender, and Jerry Won Lee. "The Ordinariness of Translinguistics." *International Journal of Multilingualism* 16 (2019): 105–11.

Dutton, Elisabeth. "Helvetic Henry? A Swiss adaptation of *Henry V*, or Something Near Enough." In *Staging History: Essays in Late-Medieval and Humanist Drama*, edited by Peter Happé and Wim Hüsken, 247–66. Leiden: Brill, 2021.

Kastan, David Scott. *A Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Koller, Werner. *Deutsche in der Deutschschweiz: Eine sprachsoziologische Untersuchung*. Aarau: Sauerländer, 1992.

Lüdi, Georges, and Iwar Werlen. *Le paysage linguistique en Suisse.* Neuchâtel: Office fédéral de la statistique, 2005.

Piller, Ingrid. "Language Choice in Bilingual, Cross-cultural Interpersonal Communication." *Linguistik Online* 5 (2000), https://doi.org/10.13092/lo.5.1015.

Ris, Roland. "Innerethnik der deutschen Schweiz." In *Handbuch der schweizerischen Volkskultur*, edited by Paul Hugger, 749–66. Zurich: Offizin, 1992.

---

17 See Dutton, "Helvetic Henry?".