

MESSAGES FROM WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



An exhibition inspired by Shakespeare's sonnets, which presented the paper collages of textile artist Erzsébet Katona Szabó, and the verse collages of Gyula Kodolányi, was put on in the Ars Librorum display area of the National Library's sixth-floor assembly hall. This unique high-quality collection was a valuable attraction among this year's smaller-scale exhibitions at the national library. Our library supplemented the exhibited works with items of decorative art, Shakespeare publications in the Hungarian language, hand-written notes, and a genuine relic from the Kossuth legacy, in three valuable display cabinets. Many attended the opening of the exhibition by poet and graphic artist István Orosz, which was preceded by László Boka, literary historian and Director of Academic Affairs, speaking about Shakespeare's sonnets and praising the history of their reception, the thought-provoking works of the two exhibiting artists, and the tremendous event itself. In October a closing event, a so called finissage was dedicated to the exhibition, where, in addition to recitals, sociologist Gyula Tellér had an interesting public discussion with translator István Orosz and actor Sándor Lukács about the exhibited works. What follows is the speech given at the opening of the exhibition.

Messages

"The faces of great poets reflect differently in the mists of different eras, and great works of art change continually with time. If they cannot change, they are not great works of art, because change is the test of vitality and viability for life." – as wrote Sándor Hevesi a hundred years ago in his book about "the real Shakespeare".¹

Ladies and Gentlemen, these lines bear witness to the fact that once we recognise the normative and temporal nature of so-called great literary works of art as one of the features that define what the classics are, it is quite difficult not to speak about Shakespeare in a cultic fashion and continually look for the "real Bard". In 1994, the very successful work by Harold Bloom called *The Western Canon* was published, a highly respected and authoritative summary, in which the sublime author undertook no less than to establish the so-called Western Canon in 567 pages. This is the essential canon that western civilisation wanted to set up as a foundation stone in the realm of literary works.

Even from the perspective of the attempt to preserve the treasures of literature, it is clear how little nuance there is in the picture that is drawn in this way – which, in principle, was only willing to assert anything, even in an international perspective, by reference to the works and literary productions available in the author's own language – when the list was deemed complete at around thirty-odd works. For Bloom the writer standing in the centre of the circle of ideals conceived in this way is obviously William Shakespeare, "who wrote both the best poetry and the best prose in the Western tradition".² It is no wonder then that



Gyula Kodolányi and Erzsébet Katona Szabó at the opening ceremony.

at one point our author states that the most important book to take to a desert island would be the complete works of Shakespeare, and only after that could come, say, the Bible. Péter Dávidházi, in his excellent book about literary cultism research (*Isten másodszületője [The Second Begotten of God]*, Gondolat, Budapest, 1989) wrote about precisely this stance when he stated that both English and Hungarian academic literature about Shakespeare abound with examples of cultic attitudes, though when he wrote this in 1989 he obviously could not have read Bloom's book.

It is conceivable that for this reason, thirty years before the publication of Bloom's book, at a celebration at Columbia University to mark the four hundredth anniversary



Part of the exhibition

(Fotó. Tóth Péter)

sary of Shakespeare's birth, Frank Kermode, in his convincing but at the same time humorous style, felt it necessary to emphasise that Shakespeare was a human being and not a god or a saint: he was a poet – at most a first among equals.

Rather than introducing this outstanding exhibition inspired by the sonnets of Shakespeare with the bowing and scraping associated with the cult worship of literary "revelation", I would like to follow today the example of István Géher,³ and speak above all about the internal features of the sonnets and the strength of their language.

Shakespeare wrote sonnets between 1592 and 1596, and left one or two miniature masterpieces for his circle of friends and confidants to pass between themselves, but – as Géher also correctly comments – he only intended a few carefully chosen erotic poems for the public, but no intimate sonnets! His well-known collection of 154 sonnets was eventually published in 1609, probably without the approval of the author. The sonnets did not perpetuate the Petrarchan tradition, but rather took a psychological form and can be read "as psycho-dramas with several characters": a man and a woman, or even two men, and a third person who disturbs their harmonious and sensitive relationship. For centuries, philology has, of course, painstakingly sought to find the main characters of the story and has claimed success in this task. However, the true story is to be sought in the inner realm of inspiration and not in the precise description of personalities. It is to be sought in the way that we see ourselves in Shakespeare's mirror even today. The lyrics of the dramatic poet are indeed a "drama of the soul: densely and profoundly passionate, with masterly and painful intelligence."⁴ The stirred-up mind sometimes breaks feeling into fragments, insatiable sensuality devours flavours, and tastes sweetness in the bitter, whilst in the same line sweetness itself becomes bitter. Extreme contrasts

swish, press against each other in an uncertain and sometimes chaotic whirl until greed is followed by surfeit, lust by self-hatred, and blessing by curse. Passion thus becomes ecstasy and agony, sin and catharsis at the same time.⁵

The sonnets occupy a prominent place in the history of the reception of Shakespeare's life works and, as Anna T. Szabó reminded us:⁶ it is perhaps only Hamlet about which critics have written more. Because of the subject matter of the sonnets (love triangles, explicit sensuality, and even possible references to homosexuality) for a long time only positivistic criticism tried to approach this important lyrical part of Shakespeare's

works, launching into exhausting speculations and disputes about the order, chronology, and dedications of the poems. Although, by Hungarian standards, the *history* of the sonnets was mainly an unexplored territory in our translated literature until recent decades, in connection with certain pieces the relative abundance of translations also reflects the approaches of literary movements over the past one hundred years. (We should not forget that the first two Shakespearean sonnets, 46 and 47, were published as long as 150 years ago on 27 March 1859 in the *Novilág* (Women's World) magazine, translated by Károly Szász). Interpreting the sonnets (in their entirety) is one of the hardest tasks of literary translation: the harmony and restlessness, the factuality and unreality, the sentimentality and "intellectual" objectivity, and the virtuosity of the sonnets is so compelling that it is rare for the source and target text to harmonise. All this was nevertheless achieved in Vilmos Gyory, Lorinc Szabó, Pál Justus and even Dezső Mészöly's interpretations, and, moreover – as Katalin É. Kiss pointed out⁷ – Lorinc Szabó sometimes indeed approached perfection.

Who could forget, for example, the opening lines of the 75th sonnet (in Lorinc Szabó's second series of translating the Sonnets from the 1940s, In: *Örök barátaink* [Our Eternal Friends]): "Az vagy nekem, mint testnek a kenyér / S tavaszi zápor fuszere a földnek." "So are you to my thoughts as food to life / Or sweet-season'd showers are to the ground", so runs the original.

Above all, it is not possible to overemphasise – something that, following the positivist approaches, was also pinned to the flag of New Historicism – that Shakespeare's lyrical poetry uses countless plays on words, which does not simply mean that the words have or might have several meanings but that the plays suggest several different readings of the text. (This is the reason that Booth's 600 page sonnet publication – *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Edited with analytic commentary by Stephen Booth, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1977 – analyses the text of the poems sonnet

by sonnet and offers several different interpretations for each word and collocation.) The several readings, and ever more layers of possible meanings, revitalise Shakespearean poetry again and again, and sometimes the interpretations of the whole oeuvre seeking the real Shakespeare referred to.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in this exhibition we can observe the inspiring nature of the multi-coloured search for the real interpretation, in an inter-art environment. Gyula Kodolányi's poetry collages are profound, thought-provoking pieces. It is not simple translations or texts taken from



Part of the exhibition

(Photo: Péter Tóth)

everyday life that become part of a work; the original lines by Shakespeare give productive inspiration to Kodolányi's bilingual poetry-workshop. Traces of translations and texts from everyday life can clearly be seen, but still they desire an ever-new appearance, a new chain of thought, light-flooded lines to be drawn in ink. The collages are on the boundaries of what really shows the process of creation and its essence, on the level of inspiration, sketches, and collages on the one hand, and a new, ready, independent artwork on the other. Erzsébet Katona Szabó's gripping works demand time and visual immersion – just like the inspiring poetry collages with their own need for slow, attentive reading. Here the goal is not the simple reflection and interpretation of the mental and visual content, but generation at two distinct levels and creation, truly bringing something into being. It is also to fix the borders between the self and the world for the occasion, and maintain an undisturbed process of contemplation. Only in this peace can artworks come into being and separate themselves from the chaos of everyday life which, since they are collages, show the deep current of human creativity, tradi-

tion, and novelty at the same time. Whether they come from the hands of a poet or a textile artist is now a matter of minor importance, and, I would point out, is beyond the artists' control anyway. They are two people with pens, brushes, ink, and paper.

The artworks exhibited here touch us and make us contemplate art, translation, and the artistic environment, as well its universality and necessary peculiarities. Of course, about moods, sufferings and catharsis too, which, with the help of eternal feelings, inspire us to examine ourselves, in the same way as the above-mentioned sonnets by Shakespeare. This is essential and I might say extremely important when we search these works not for a puzzle awaiting a solution, but for the success of poetic expression in uniting and maintaining contrasts.

The language of poetry – as Cleanth Brooks stated – is the language of paradox. As I have already indicated, several meanings that complement each other may be associated with every single word or sonnet line, and this axiom of literary science is clearly understood by the two artists exhibiting their work here today. Above all else, however, philo-

logical competence, amazing creativity, intellectual discipline and an empathetic emotional approach are required to bring to light the richness of the original artworks in a stimulating and inspiring way, in the case of such a spiritually distinctive model of a poet as Shakespeare of the sonnets, which is, after all, unsurpassable in its emotional and imaginative value.

László Boka

boka.at.oszk.hu

¹ cf. Sándor Hevesi, *Az igazi Shakespeare és egyéb kérdések [The real Shakespeare and other questions]*. A Táltos publication, Budapest, 1919.

² cf. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. N.Y - San Diego - London. Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1994. 10.

³ cf. István Géher, *Shakespeare*. Corvina, Budapest, 1998. 3rd revised and expanded edition

⁴ cf. Géher, *ibid*, p389.

⁵ In his Shakespeare reader, Géher gives as an example the compelling linguistic strengths of the giant compound of the 129th sonnet, which is compressed into only two sentences. cf. Géher, *ibid*, p389

⁶ cf. Anna I. Szabó, *Shakespeare szonettjei Szabó Lőrinc fordításában [Shakespeare's sonnets translated by Lőrinc Szabó]*. (Doctoral dissertation, ELTE, 1994.)

⁷ cf. Katalin É. Kiss, *Shakespeare szonettjei Magyarországon [Shakespeare's sonnets in Hungary]*. Akadémiai, Budapest, 1975. *Modern Filológiai Füzetek*, 22. 208.