

HARD WORDS FOR CHILDREN

Shakespeare, Translation and *The Merchant of Venice*

“Hath not a Jew eyes?” or “I’m really just like you” – rewriting the Merchant for the twenty-first century

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In the introduction to this workshop, participants were asked to conceive of ‘Shakespeare’ as a foreign language and to consider two fundamental questions:

- What is translation?
- How does translating for children and young adults differ from translating for adults?

The notion of ‘equivalence’ was introduced and the basic fact that there is no straightforward equivalence between languages, as was Jakobson’s (1959) tripartite system of categorising different types of translation: interlingual, intralingual and intersemiotic (or translation between different languages; translation between different forms of the same language; and translation of the written word into a different sign system). The binary concepts of ‘domestication’ and ‘foreignisation’ (moving the text closer to the reader’s own cultural context and conforming to target-language literary norms versus making the reader do the work of crossing the cultural divide and allowing the source language to be felt in the target text) were also discussed and illustrated with examples from translations of contemporary children’s literature. The censorship and adaptation of literature for children which is commonplace in the Anglophone world was placed within the context of the adult-child power dynamic that lies at the heart of children’s book production. This attitude was contrasted with the fact that Grimms’ *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* contain antisemitic stories and elements, e.g. the story ‘Der Jude im Dorn’, but are commonly found in unabridged versions in the children’s sections of British bookshops, perhaps because of Anglophone society’s ignorance of the precise contents of this collection.

In the second part of the workshop, participants were given Shylock’s famous “Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech from Act 3, Scene 1 of *The Merchant of Venice* and asked to ponder which elements of the speech 12-13 year olds might find challenging. Elements identified as potentially requiring clarification included changes in the grammatical forms of the English language (e.g. wilt, hath, thou), unfamiliar lexical items and phrases (e.g. What is his humility?), rhetorical devices and the concept of antisemitism (i.e. scorned my nation). Participants, working in small groups, were then asked to adapt or rewrite Shylock’s speech so that it reflected one of the following scenarios:

- A British Muslim teenager who is thinking of running off to join ISIS in Syria or Iraq;
- A pre-teen or teen who is being bullied on social media;
- A Bulgarian or Romanian child living in UKIP territory;
- A Mexican child living in a firmly Republican state of the US in the Trump era.

Following readings of the rewritten speeches to the group as a whole, the workshop concluded with a discussion of what one might want children to take from this speech; of the potential benefits and pitfalls of de-historicising and de-contextualising texts; and of how to give young readers/a young audience a sense of how Shakespeare’s language interacts with his stories.

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