

Ivan Franko:
A Ukrainian Interpreter of Shakespeare

OREST STARCHUK

THE LITERARY PRODUCTION of Ivan Franko as a poet, prose-writer, dramatist, publicist, literary critic and translator covers a whole epoch and represents a most prolific and distinguished contribution to Ukrainian literature. From the middle 1870's down to the end of his life (1916), Franko laboured in many spheres of cultural activity, leaving deep traces on all aspects of the spiritual life of the Ukrainian people. No single Ukrainian writer has ever shown such profound interest in everything human everywhere as Ivan Franko did.

This was best expressed in one of the appreciative comments that appeared in the Lviv newspaper *Dilo* (May 31, 1916) upon Franko's death:

Everything that the human spirit has been reaching out to down through the countless ages of its progress, that the nations and tribes of the world have continued to live on, every sphere of life and thought—all this came within the scope of Franko's deep interest. This was not mere contemplative reflection, ephemeral at best, but real, active and limitless. Ancient Egypt or Assyria, Plato or Spinoza, Shakespeare's England or prehistoric Australia, Dante's Middle Ages or American capitalism, Verlaine or K. M. Meyer, Polish rebels or Hutsul brigands, Khmel'nytsky or the leaders of the Great Revolution, Byzantine decadence or the simplicity of folk poetry, Goethe's *Faust* or Shevchenko's "Monk," daily paper or scientific periodical, philology or stern philosophy—these and many others are the matters that the active mind of Franko tried to attack and to solve.

Franko was aware that literary translation contributes to international understanding. He pointed out, moreover, that fine translations of the great literature of other nations are the foundation of one's own native literature. It was in this way that Franko aimed at raising the standard of Ukrainian literature.

Gathered in one volume Franko's translations would represent a vast anthology of world literature. Franko translated literary works of the ancient Hindus, the ancient Chinese, Arabs, Greeks, Norwegians, Germans, English, Icelanders and those of other nations. It should be

noted that Franko chose for translation only those foreign works which would aid in the cultural enrichment of the Ukrainian people, or in the struggle against conservative ideology, and which were favourable to the liberation movement. In his article "Internationalism and Nationalism in Contemporary Literatures"¹ Franko writes: "Only that writer can have some importance today who has a message to give to the whole educated world about those great questions which stir the soul, but in a form to match the national character."

In an autobiographical letter to M. Drahomanov, Franko wrote that while he was in the gymnasium he had thrown himself with fervour into the reading of Shakespeare, Schiller, Goethe, the *Nibelungenlied*, Mickiewicz, Slowacki and other writers. Franko's library contained the works of Dickens, Auerbach, Heine, Burns, Shelley, Byron, Victor Hugo, Hood, Moore, and Lessing. He was greatly impressed by the ancient literature of Homer, Sophocles and Tacitus, which he had read at school where he had translated into Ukrainian the *Antigone* and *Electra* of Sophocles and two songs from the *Odyssey*. He had also translated at this period a few songs from the Nibelungen Cycle, two acts from *Uriel Acosta*, a tragedy by the German writer Karl Gutzkow, and the Czech heroic poems, known as the Manuscripts of Kralove Dvur. Franko had acquired a fine command of the English language, and thus he not only read Shakespeare with zest in the original, but also mastered the works, noting the multiple themes and the many historical periods of the plays, dealing with topics from the ancient world down to the Renaissance. Franko valued Shakespeare mainly because his works serve as a mirror to humanity, to see itself in "full growth," and also for the great, truthful observation of life with which all his works were permeated. Franko said further that the talent of Shakespeare "shines with an immortal blaze" because of his strong, passionate heroes and their deep humanity.

In many of his surveys of literature Franko referred to the works of Shakespeare to support his observations, or to offer adequate review of the work of some other author. Thus, in his article "Topolya,"² devoted to the famous ballad by Shevchenko, Franko wrote that Shevchenko had an influence on the Ukrainian people similar to that exercised by Shakespeare on the English nation.

In his articles "We have no Literature," "Literature, Its Aims and Latest Characteristics,"³ and others, Franko advised writers to study

¹I. Franko, *Tvory v dvadsyaty tomakh*, Kiev, 1955, XVIII, p. 504.

²*Ibid.*, XVII, p. 66.

³*Ibid.*, XVI, pp. 5, 41.

the works of the great Western authors, especially Shakespeare. To enrich the Ukrainian theatre's repertoire of Western plays he translated, among others, *The Merchant of Venice*, *King Lear*, and fragments from *The Tempest*. To encourage greater knowledge of Shakespeare he wrote an article "Shakespeare and the Ukrainians," in which mention is made of the activity of a Shakespeare Fund which he had organized in Lviv, and for which he translated some of Shakespeare's sonnets.⁴

Franko is truly recognized as the founder of the Shakespearean movement among Ukrainians. Of course, he knew well one of the first translations of *Hamlet*, by Pavlin Sventsits'ky, parts of which appeared in 1865 in the periodical *Nyva* in Lviv; fragments of *Macbeth*, translated by Lesya Ukrayinka; the translation from Shakespeare by Pavlo Hrabovs'ky; M. Staryts'ky's translation of *Hamlet* which appeared in Kiev in 1882, the translation of *King Lear* by Panas Myrny, and others. However, Franko was the first Ukrainian author to start a serious critical study of Shakespeare's works. A special interest thus attaches to Franko's prefaces and explanatory footnotes to the translations of twelve of Shakespeare's plays. An ardent student of English culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as of international relations during the Renaissance, he was able to draw upon historical data from various countries in his comparisons. Franko liked to approach a subject from a prehistoric angle and conclude with a reference to present conditions. Thus he regarded every Shakespearean play as a historical study of a given period in English history, connecting it with the activity of the great dramatist.

It has generally been accepted that Shakespeare depended upon three main sources of information: first, Italian novels, such as the *Decameron* by Boccaccio, and the novels of Matteo Bandello; second, Plutarch's *Lives* of illustrious Greeks and Romans; third, the English historical chronicle of Holinshed. Although Shakespeare drew his plots from these sources, the development of character amid conflicting situations and emotions was strictly his own.

Franko was acquainted not only with the original sources of Shakespeare's plots, but also with the works of all the great Western authorities on Shakespeare, such as Simrock, M. Landau, G. Brandes, Alois Brandl, Theodor Elze, L. Fraenkel, Sidney Lee, Th. Vischer, A. W. Schlegel, L. Tieck, G. V. Loeper, J. O. Halliwell, P. H. Silling, F. Thimm, R. W. Lowe, R. Gosche, and others. Franko frequently quoted these scholars either in agreement or in disagreement with

⁴*Ibid.*, XV, pp. 171-4, p. 581.

them, forming his own conclusions. His interpretations display much erudition and highly objective research, showing certain analogies or antitheses which can be made in the relation between the individual plays and themes of the English dramatist and the original sources. Franko had little difficulty in understanding the finest shades of meaning in the works of Homer, Ovid, Terentius and Plutarch, or in grasping ancient history and mythology and the works of Spanish, Italian and French writers. In his critical researches Franko examines in detail additions and omissions made by Shakespeare, changes in character and action, alterations and autobiographical notes. The smallest items did not escape his critical eye. Franko carefully analyses the structure of every play, noting the great philosophical depth of Shakespeare's tragedies, which deal with such questions as the value of life, the nature of ethical conceptions and the social order. He ranked Shakespeare very high as a dramatist. He considered him to be a great psychologist, capable of the most delicate analysis of the human soul, baring every phase of its joy, grief, and suffering. He expressed this in his reviews of *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Coriolanus*, showing that while the plot was not Shakespeare's, or all the characters, he permeated them with so much of his human understanding and real power as a poet and injected into them so much of his own view of life that what he borrowed he made his own. Franko considered *King Lear* the greatest and the most easily understood of the tragedies of Shakespeare, in which the author "presented not a tragedy decked up in royal costumes, but a tragedy of royalty with a family base".⁵ The tragedy of *King Lear* lay in the fact that he neither knew nor understood people, having lived for so long in strict isolation.

As a critic Franko clearly understood what qualities made Shakespeare world-famous. The prefaces and explanatory notes he added to Ukrainian translations are of great assistance to the student of Shakespeare, composed as they were with great erudition and deep thought and with a deep desire to disclose to the reader the riches of Shakespeare.

In 1899-1902 Franko published the translations of ten of Shakespeare's plays, made by P. Kulish and prefaced by himself with copious notes: *King Lear*, *Coriolanus*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Measure for Measure*, *Much Ado about Nothing*.⁶

P. Kulish had published the first volume in Ukrainian of Shake-

⁵*Ibid.*, XVIII, p. 381.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 309-401.

speare's plays in 1882, including *Othello*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *A Comedy of Errors*. He also translated into Ukrainian two other Shakespearean plays: *The Merchant of Venice* and *Cymbeline*, but the manuscripts unfortunately have been lost.

In 1902 translations of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* by Yu. Fed'kovych, with prefaces by Franko, were issued in Lviv. Franko praised the richness and the brilliance of the language, but did not agree with Fed'kovych's approach to the subject-matter, criticizing the flaws in the translation. Always a conscientious critic, Franko did not spare even Kulish's translations, and when and where necessary, offered excerpts from his own translation if he thought they came closer to the original. In his tireless activity as an interpreter of Shakespeare's works Franko is recognized as a pioneer in the field.

University of Alberta