

François-Victor Hugo’s French Shakespeare, or What is in the archive of a translation?

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Project Description:

In the Fall of 2022, I began researching the story of François-Victor Hugo’s nineteenth century French translation of William Shakespeare’s complete works. The translation was published in 18 volumes, between 1859 and 1866. It included the so-called “apocryphal plays” as well as lengthy introductions, supplementary notes and appendices detailing the Bard’s “obscure collaborators”: the ur-texts, the helping hands, the sources out of which he fashioned his masterful plays.

Shakespeare was not new to France when Hugo’s translations were published. At least four other iterations of francophone Shakespeares had been published over the course of the nineteenth century, fueled by the Romantic *engouement* for what the Bard’s “mixture of styles” (the blend of high and low comedy, tragedy, its lack of regard for unity of time and space) could do to transform the restrictive neo-classical codes of the French theatrical tradition. Yet, this version stood out for various reasons. Written from the Anglo-Norman Channel Island of Guernsey, while François-Victor had followed his illustrious father in political exile, it exemplified the kind of mythical re-working of how “Shakespeare” (and the notion of “author” more generally) was to be understood, which characterized the century. Scholars of literary history often describe this as the Romantic myth of the “single, solitary author, genius, hero”.

I became interested in the tension between the accessibility and production of knowledge, and the relationship between archives and myth. Thanks to the College Alumni Society Undergraduate Research Grant, I was able to visit the archival fonds of the translation project, housed at the *Maison Victor Hugo* in Paris (France), in December 2022. From this investigation, I was able, on the one hand, to piece together the fascinating story of the conditions of production of the translation. On the other hand, the process of this research led me to meditate upon the conditions of production of the archive itself: the presence or absence of certain documents, and the stories we can tell with the “known” as well as the “unknown”.

ACT 1. Positive Traces

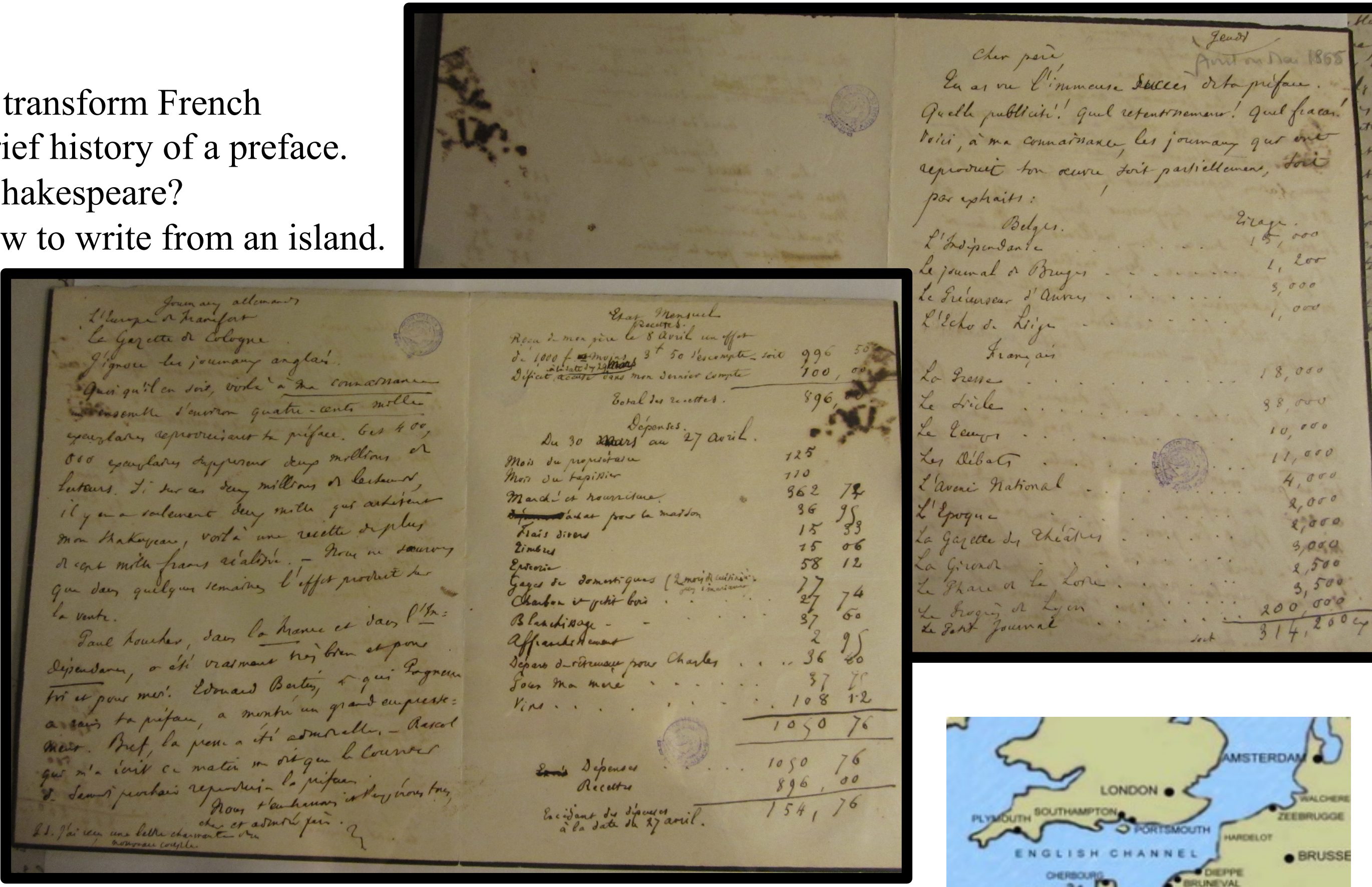
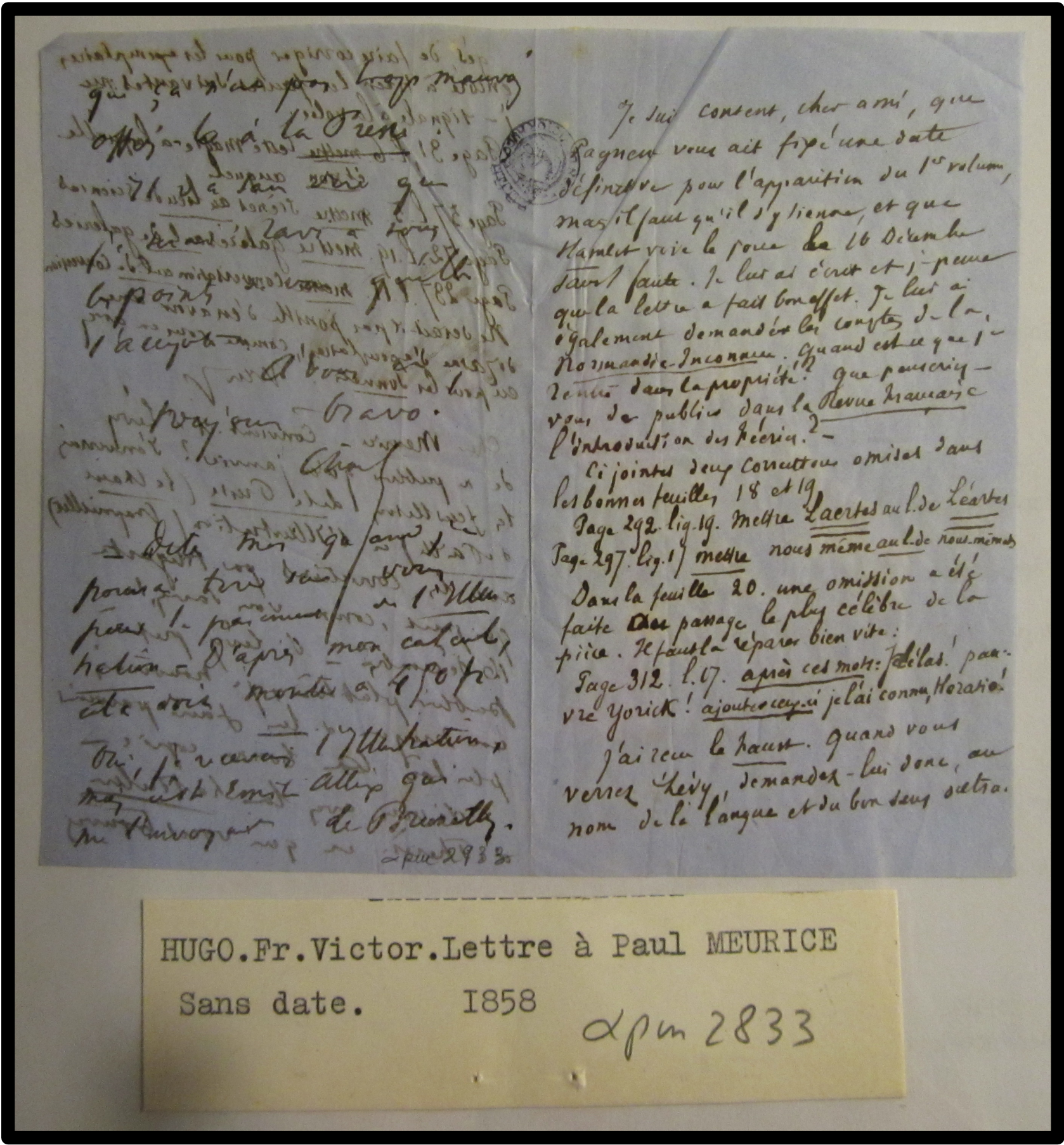
Scene 1. Victor Hugo: Translating Shakespeare to transform French theater, selling the Bard to cover the wine bill. The brief history of a preface.

Scene 2. Charles Pagnerre: Why publish Hugo’s Shakespeare?

Scene 3. Paul Meurice: Corrector, collector, or, how to write from an island.

(Below) Unpublished autograph letter from François-Victor Hugo to Paul Meurice. Undated. 1858.

“I am happy, dear friend, that Pagnerre has given you a definitive date for the publication of the first volume, but he must stick to it, and Hamlet must be born on December 10th. [...] Please find here attached some forgotten corrections to pages 18 and 19 [...]”

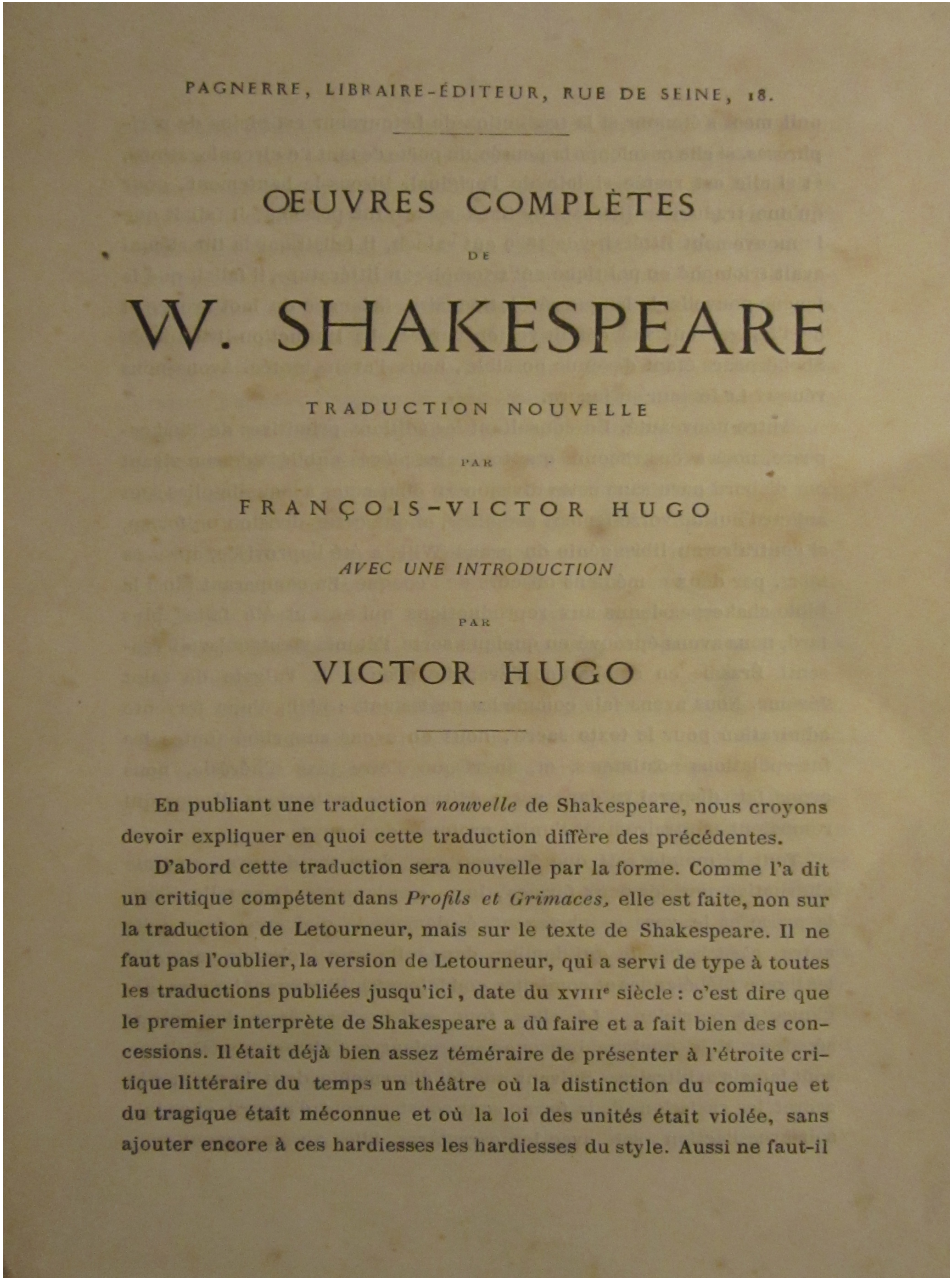


(ABOVE) Unpublished autograph letter from François-Victor Hugo to Victor Hugo. April or May 1865.

“Dear Father, you have seen the immense success of your preface. What publicity! What thunder! What a smash!”

The letter goes on to list the number of European journals which reproduced the preface partially or in full. He supposes an overall total of about 400.000 copies. He writes: *“These 400.000 copies suppose two million readers. If, of these two million readers, only two thousand buy my Shakespeare, that’s a profit of over 7000 francs!”*

On the backhand side of the letter is detailed his expenses for the month of April (his rent, his groceries, the salaries of his domestics (cooks, cleaners, upholsterers), his coal, his stamps, and - the second-largest sum of the list - his wine budget.



ACT 2. Negative Traces

Scene 1. Juliette Drouet: Mistress of the Father, copyist of the Son

Scene 2. Emily de Putron: The perks of having an English-speaking fiancée.

(RIGHT) Portrait of Juliette Drouet in Guernsey. Undated. Photographer unknown.

(LEFT) Portrait of Emily de Putron in the garden of Hauteville House (the Hugo residence in Guernsey). 1858–1863. Photographer Unknown. Albumen print.

