

Shakespeare as an Intellectual Challenge in Early Modern Romanian Culture

The early Romanian encounter with Shakespeare's work should be best understood if considered within the larger framework of the selective appropriation of the Western paradigm that best suited the commandments of an emerging society in search of cultural models.

The period between the closing of the 18th century and the early decades of the 19th witnessed a crucial moment in the evolution of the Romanian Principalities of Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania, when a cultural model was being constituted as a synthesis of traditionally inherited ideas, partaking of the South-East European context, and innovative ones, inspired by the more civilized European cultures, whether Roman or Germanic.

Such were the common Latin origin and the permanence of all the Romanians inhabiting the geographic area between the Carpathians and the Danube, the same as the social and cultural emancipation through general instruction for all. These ideas soon turned into a motive force among the intelligentsia of middle class extraction and the progressive-minded aristocrats, moved by the tenets of the Enlightenment and of the French Revolution to reject the outdated Oriental way of life and its institutions.

Sick and tired with the old state of affairs these new people, educated at the universities in Paris, Rome, Vienna or Berlin, were determined on return to contribute to their country's progress. Back home they would start imposing the Western example by changing the lodging conditions, furniture, clothing, habits and intellectual preoccupations, to touch the very

essence of the social and political standards. This was the preparation stage that paved the way for the period of social and political unrest preceding the 1848 Revolution, whose ideals were aimed at overthrowing the outdated feudal structures and accomplishing the political union of the historical provinces of Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania into a modern, unitary Romanian state.

While the French and Italian cultural models were prevailing in Moldavia and Wallachia, the German model was favoured in Transylvania, then part of Hungary, soon to be incorporated into the Habsburg Empire. There is no denying, though, that among the range of cultural interests at the time could also be detected the existence of an English model which, if less spectacular, was sustained by the intellectual admiration for all matters English, generating pro-English feelings among the educated people. The more so as England's presence in South-East Europe increased with the recession of the Ottoman supremacy in the Balkan area and with the English growing concern for maintaining the European equilibrium in a zone considered the under-developed world, a ferment of seething aspirations and a permanent source of potential conflict between the great powers.

I have presented elsewhere facts, numerous enough, to allow for the identification of a typical attitude, relevant for a general mental representation which, going beyond strictly individual tastes and preferences, conferred England the status of a model for the emerging modern Romanian culture (Gavrilu 1996: 23–30).

Nor was the assimilation of Western models exempt from errors caused by the irresistible eagerness with which the changes were enforced by top-level administrative measures rather than by a well-thought out strategy waiting for the internal conditions to get ready enough to assimilate them. Hence the phenomenon later labelled and criticized as “forms devoid of content” identified with the immature haste with which the Western patterns were imposed upon the modern Romanian society barely in the making.

To do justice, though, to the pioneers of the Romanian cultural awakening, we should acknowledge the merits of their strenuous efforts which were so highly effective in setting off the whole process of the modernization of the Romanian society within the time span of a single generation. Spectacular changes occurred especially in literature and the arts in the effort of catching up with and then keeping abreast of the developments in Western and Central Europe.

To the early cultural mentors of the moment engaged in forging the foundations of a modern national culture, Gh. Asachi in Moldavia, Cezar Bolliac and Ion Heliade Rădulescu in Wallachia, George Bariț in Transylvania, their task was equal to the rejection of the oriental patterns, imposed by

the 400 years of Ottoman suzerainty, and the assimilation of the experience of the advanced cultural centres of Western Europe. Editors of the major periodicals at the time and owners of printing and publishing houses as well, while eager to usher in the master-works of European literatures, they shared their endeavour in promoting a national literature that was able to accomplish the civilizing tasks of the moment. For such people the translations represented a badly needed instrument for promoting the cultural integration within the European mainstream.

Heliade saw the translations as a means of “softening the morals, of weakening prejudices [...] and of instructing every man in his duties” (CS 1837: 238) while Bariț urged translations from classical authors (by „classical” he obviously meant „exemplary”) in order „to increase the ideas, to enrich the language with words and phrases and then to start writing original compositions” (F 1838: 115).

They held themselves responsible for the educational content of the works selected for translation which were supposed to answer the patriotic desiderata of guiding the people along the paths of progress through a gradual process of moral instruction.

In their hands book printing and editing became a patriotic deed meant to meet educational needs and their inciting appeals were not late in drawing volunteer response. Thus the tremendous era of translations commenced in the early 1830s with a non-professional stage, which engaged some three hundred of people moved by the enthusiastic belief that they were accomplishing a patriotic duty.

Statistical data, unsavory as they be, will reveal the unprecedented translation effort which resulted in 651 titles. With its 56 titles, English literature comes third as compared to translations from other European literatures: 385 from French, 83 from German, 44 from Greek, 43 from Russian, 40 from other European languages.

An examination of the content of the translations will further spotlight the peculiarities of the process. As English was, with a few notable exceptions, practically unknown in the Romanian countries, such English works would be translated as had already gained continental reputation and had become accessible through previous translations into French, German, Greek or Serbian.

Shakespeare’s penetration into the Romanian cultural background was therefore mediated, like most of the other English writers’, by his continental prestige which rose high when the Romantic Movement began to draw clusters of adherents around a doctrinal platform, and his work was being adopted by the theorizers of European Romanticism as a model to illustrate the autonomous creativeness of an artist of genius, independent of classical strictures. Stendhal and V. Hugo in France, Lessing, but also Schröder and

Schlegel in Germany, Manzoni in Italy, Karamzin in Russia were unanimous in raising Shakespeare to the status of an icon in whose creation they found full confirmation of such salient Romantic concepts as genius, talent, originality, artistic truth, the perennial in man and nature, the philosophy of human passion, all ideas that resonate through his work.

Casual and scarce at first, mediated by stage production of his plays, the Romanians' contacts with Shakespeare grew in substance and significance throughout the 19th century to cover the whole gamut of literary relations, from individual cases of non-mediated contacts, through overt, public manifestations of Bardolatry in the periodical press, to the first published translations and doctrinal argumentation in favour of the Romantic tenets.

The *discovery stage* in Shakespeare's reception in Romania could be located in the first decade of the 19th century and consisted in isolated, personal cases among the intellectual élite. Such a case was Gh. Asachi, later to become a prominent figure in Moldavia's cultural emancipation who, while attending academic courses in Rome between 1805–10, is known to have compiled a comprehensive list of "men of learning and genius" including Shakespeare with the mention of "42 tragedies and comedies" that were believed at the time to make up the Shakespearean canon. His notes also contained lengthy excerpts in the original from *The Merchant of Venice* (Asachi 1805: 10). Such close contacts with English authors would mark Asachi's subsequent literary creation which would waver between allegiance to the classical rules, and a keen awareness of the need of renewal in poetic diction as required by the new trends. Throughout his career Asachi would continue to be impressed by Ossianism, while Shakespearean echoes could be traced at various moments in his writing.

A close examination of the periodical press¹ along two decades during the 1830s and the 1840s has indeed revealed a next stage in Shakespeare's appropriation in Romania, marked by attempts at critical estimation and by the publication of the first translated fragments from his plays. Through their wide penetration into various social strata, the periodicals proved far more instrumental than books did, in establishing the playwright's nation-wide reputation.

It was I. Heliade-Radulescu that opened the series of events with his review on the first theatrical performance by the students of the Philharmonic School in Bucharest with the play *Mahomet* by Voltaire in 1834. Celebrating

¹ The periodicals referred to are: *Curiosul* (The Curious), C in the main text. *Curierul românesc* (The Romanian Courier), CR in the main text. *Curierul de ambe sexe* (The Courier for Both Sexes), CS in the main text. *Foaie pentru minte, inimă și literatură* (The Sheet for the Mind, Heart and Literature), FM in the main text. Quotations in the original have been translated into English.

the event as an auspicious beginning, Heliade hoped to see “Orestes, Brutus, Hamlet on the Romanian stages” (CR 1834: 39), a statement which reveals his estimation of a Shakespearean character as an archetype of human condition and as an exemplary dramatic achievement.

In his pioneering efforts to establish a system of aesthetic principles for the guidance of contemporary writers, Heliade would select a scene from *Macbeth* in order to illustrate the notion of the sublime, in a comprehensive and highly theoretical article, *Despre sublim sau înalt* (On the Sublime or the Lofty), later to be included in his *Course in General Poetry* (vol. I, 1868). The example, borrowed from Marmontel’s *Elements de Littérature*, was the scene (IV, 3) in which Macduff received the news about the slaughter of his family at the hands of Macbeth’s men. Macduff’s cry: “He has no children” (l. 216), the precise meaning of which has remained obscure to generations of translators since the seventeenth century, was presented by the Romanian scholar as the greatest utterance of distress that ever resounded on a stage, the supreme expression of the sublime in dramatic art (CR 1834: 302–303; 314–316). However, Heliade, who certainly followed Marmontel, was stumbling upon the same translation crux when explaining “il n’a point d’enfants” in the intermediary French version as “Macduff utters only two awful words: They’re gone ! He has no more children”, meaning by that Macduff’s own massacred children.

It should be noted that when ascribing “he” back to the speaker, Heliade was obviously quoting second-hand. In his interpretation the remark refers neither to Macbeth, who having no children could not be inflicted a similar punishment, nor to Malcolm, who having no children either, could not understand a father’s grief, the only two possible interpretations that have been disputed by translators and Shakespeare scholars to this day (Du Plessis, 1998: 360). This and further cases will sustain the assumption that early Romanian contacts with Shakespeare’s work were mediated by access to Shakespeare exegesis currently circulated in Europe.

Consonant with his aspirations towards broadening the Romanian cultural vistas, the same Heliade would later select *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar* for his ambitious *Project for a Universal Library* modelled after Louis Aimé Martin’s *Parthenon Littéraire* and meant, in its author’s words, “[...] to include the most remarkable authors, ancient and modern, whose writings have contributed to the fulfillment of the great deed of civilization with a view to shaping the human mind and soul, towards Man’s perfection” (CR 1846: 7). Although Heliade’s *Universal Library* got little beyond the project stage, it remains as telling evidence of the zealous effort in an epoch when mass education was seen as the only means

of catching up with civilized Europe, while the *Project* bears witness to Shakespeare's presence among the enlightening factors of the moment.

The year 1836 saw the widening of Shakespearean information through the publication of the comprehensive monograph *Şakspear* by C. Bolliac, which ranked its author as the best informed and most competent Shakespearean critic at the time (C 1836: 25–31). Besides accurate biographical data, Bolliac introduced titles previously unknown in Romania: *Timon of Athens*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*. Due mention was made of the *Sonnets* and the epic poems. Far more interesting was the part dedicated to the critical estimation of Shakespeare's work, because Bolliac praised Shakespeare for what the Romantic age found fascinating in him: the blend of the national with the universal, the variegated range of characters, the unity of the tragic and the comic, all signposts of the Romantic poetics. In the Romantic fashion Bolliac proclaimed Shakespeare "the greatest genius of the English theatre", introducing in the Romanian cultural circuit the concept of *genius* which, ever since Diderot, had been associated with Shakespeare, as an epitome of originality and creativeness.

It is obvious, though, that Bolliac had not read Shakespeare completely himself since he mistook Cymbeline for a female character and presented *Venus and Adonis* as two separate works.

Nor should Bolliac's *Şakspear* be underrated for its second-hand information, but invested with the significance of a moment of reference as marking a first attempt at placing Shakespearean criticism on a professional basis in this country.

The framework for a critical approach to Shakespeare's work was profitably enlarged to European vistas with the publication of a large section from Goethe's *Conversations with Eckermann* (CS 1836: 56–63).

In the part dedicated to Shakespeare the Titan of Weimar was warning against the contaminating power of the Titan of Stratford: "How rich and strong he is ! A man of a prolific nature must not read more than one book by him a year: because he is lost [...]". The points Goethe further made anticipated the tendency to detach Shakespeare from the tradition and the convention of the Elizabethan theatre and to interpret his dramas in terms of representation of character, a tendency that was to dominate Shakespearean criticism throughout the 19th century: "[...] He is not a poet of the theatre: he never thinks of the stage, it is too narrow for his genius".

Goethe's pronouncement on Shakespeare was pointing to more than one salient direction, each beneficial for an emerging national culture. For one thing, it urged the young writers to resist enslavement to their literary models, an essential first step towards an original literature. For another,

it imposed a system of critical evaluation that was to mark Romanian criticism of Shakespeare for a long time: the Romantic emphasis placed on characters and their psychological truthfulness. Third, it afforded the pioneers of Shakespearean exegesis in Romania their arguments in evaluating Shakespeare as a genius.

The concept of genius, constitutive and supremely expressive for Romantic aesthetics, expressed the Romantic vision on the creative process. The theorizers of European Romanticism, A.W. Schlegel, J.P. Richter, S.T. Coleridge had all associated the idea of genius with creative originality and generative energy, resulting ultimately from poetic imagination, identified in Shakespeare's artistic personality. Through Shakespeare, Romanian literary criticism was placed, early in the epoch, within the mainstream of the European literary debates.

The 1840s brought increase and variation in Shakespeare's circulation in the periodical press. G. Bariț published two pieces of fictionalized biography drawn on the history of Tudor England that must have prepared the public for the atmosphere of the Shakespearean drama (FM 1840: 25–28). Both *Maria Stuart* and *Ana Boleyn. Omorârea ei (Ann Boleyn. Her Killing)* fit into the romance pattern meant to satisfy the taste for the sensational and the sentimental of the reading public in the early stages of literacy. It should be noted that the spirit of the age was aptly highlighted and so were the characters: the cruel and whimsical Henry, the shrewd and unfeeling Elizabeth and the victims, Mary and Ann. The political, religious and psychological reasons underlying the tragic events were also minutely and pertinently interpreted.

The merit of having published the first Shakespeare texts resides with the same G. Bariț who translated two excerpts, one from *The Merchant of Venice* (IV, 1, ll. 184–197) and another from *Julius Caesar* (I, 2, ll. 24–213), published at close interval in his periodical (FM 1840).

The fragment from *Julius Caesar* was preceded by a motto in German by Goethe, revealing the translator's intentions to "arouse impetuous love of the original", while his own note praised Shakespeare, in the Romantic manner, for the truthfulness to life of his characters and for the accurate historical foregrounding. Bariț further made a statement which deserves comment for his overt estimation of the encounter with Shakespeare's work as a cultural challenge. When the Transylvanian scholar was raising the issue: „Whether we, the nation, have reached the age in which we should need to read Shakespeare, that teacher of emperors and beggars, of the peoples and individuals [...]”, he made the point that general access to Shakespeare's dramatic universe was only possible after the society at large had reached a certain stage of intellectual maturity. It was due to the clear-sighted efforts of the era's cultural mentors that the stage had been duly prepared and eventually attained in the 1840s.

Brutus, voicing his obsession with a ruler's commitment to his people: "If it be aught toward the general good, / Set honour in one eye and death i'the other, / And I will look on both indifferently" (ll. 85–87), and Cassius, claiming the individual's freedom to choose his own moral and social condition: "Men at some time are masters of their fate: / The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves that we are underlings." (ll. 138–140) must have met the public aspirations in the seething atmosphere preceding the 1848 Revolution, calling for energetic suppression of tyranny in the Romanian countries.

The excerpt from *The Merchant of Venice*, was Portia's plea for mercy, much in the spirit of the aphoristic literature so widely spread to meet the educational needs at the time.

Bariț's translations in prose, done from a German intermediary, most probably the Schlegel-Tieck version, were remarkable for the precision and neatness of the language, which proves the extent to which translations were instrumental in tempering and forging the Romanian literary discourse, as anyone conversant with Romanian could judge from the samples below selected from the Julius Caesar fragment.²

Interest in Shakespeare continued as a constant preoccupation in the periodical press and G. Bariț, again, would attempt a comparative approach by placing the poet in a relevant context alongside the Germans Goethe, Schiller and Jean Paul Richter. Bariț was trying a sketchy definition of the Shakespearean universe by means of a few characteristic strokes, essential in their emphasis on darkness, mystery, passion and violence: "Shakespeare (appears n.n.) like a moonlit night: ghosts from everywhere, all night's fears free; the day will shudder at its deeds". (FM 1843: 8).

The preference for the night's darkness as a scenery favouring passionate outbursts had been appropriated by the Romantics through a long connection which, via Young, Ossian and Milton, could be traced back to Shakespeare. The night, with its power of suggestiveness, was the characteristic setting against which so many of Shakespeare's tragic characters experience their dramatic fate, and Bariț's note seized most aptly upon that specific Shakespearean touch.

Shakespeare's dark universe would proliferate as the background for Romantic attitudes, and numerous examples can be found among aspiring poets who, stimulated by readings of Shakespeare, would produce creations parasitized by undigested Shakespearean imagery.

² "Dacă e ceva, prin carele binele comun înaintează, atunci pune-mi cinstea la un ochi și la celălalt moartea și pe amândouă le voi înfrunta cu privire statornică..." (ll. 85–7); "Oamenii câte odată singuri sunt stăpâni pe soarte-și, scumpe Brutus, greșala este la noi, nu la stele, dacă noi ne facem șerbi umiliți." (ll. 138–40).

Such a one was I. Catina with his poem *O noapte pe stânci* (A Night on the Cliffs) where he built up a Romantic atmosphere sustained through recourse to Shakespearean effects. Although the poet chose to place his poem under the authority of an epigraph in French: “Des flambeaux, des flambeaux, des flambeaux” which obviously sends to “Lights, lights, lights” in *Hamlet* (III, 2, l. 286), while his lyric persona is Hamletizing over the “to be, or not to be” dilemma against a fiercely dark setting, the whole poem remains as telling evidence of the paralyzing effects of the Shakespearean model upon a lesser literary personality (CR 1846: 160–1).

Shakespeare’s name would continue to be resorted to as supreme authority during the doctrinal disputes at the time, and Bolliac, in his iconoclastic outbursts against classical dicta would rank the English dramatist, alongside Hugo and Ossian in the now famous diatribe against Boileau which stands for the Pronunciamento of the Romantic movement in Romanian culture: “Shakespeare and Hugo will live Mr. Boaló, (sic !) without rules, as long as Ossians shall live, and are born in every nation without having their language forged at your machine” (FM 1845: 64).

A review on an opera performance with *Othello* by Verdi occasioned Bolliac anew, another manifestation of Shakespearean scholarship. This time he considered the problem of the playwright’s originality, which, Bolliac maintained, should not be sought in the choice of the subject-matter but in the way the dramatist had explored it. “The great Shakespeare turned that novella (Cinthio’s n.n.) into a tragedy and built a wonderful plot of the Moor of Venice, he achieved the character barely sketched in the novella.”. Bolliac concluded by proclaiming Iago, Desdemona and Othello “types in dramatic art”, relevant for Shakespeare’s originality in the representation of human character (CR 1845: 79). This judgement that emerged in mid-eighteenth century has remained valid to this day when a preeminent Shakespeare scholar has reiterated in a compelling, if controversial study, the estimation of Shakespeare as the most articulate representer of the human universe (Bloom 1998).

The *battle for Shakespeare*, running concurrently with and circumscribed to the efforts of forging the means for promoting the advancement of Romania’s national culture, embarked upon a new stage with the publication of the first fully-fledged translations of his plays stimulated by the growing interest in stage performances. Mediated, as previously stated, like most of the early translations from English literature, by German and French intermediaries, the translations from Shakespeare were benefited by the reputed Schlegel-Tieck version in German and the Letourneur version in French, which afforded the public in Romania their first-hand access to his dramas.

It should be noted that, early in the century, the first Shakespearean translation ever known in this country, *Hamlet prințul de la Dania, tragedie în cinci perdele după Shalasppeare* (*Hamlet of Daneland, Tragedy in Five Acts by Shakespeare*), had been produced by Ioan Barac, using a stage adaptation by F.L. Schröder. Remained in manuscript and generally considered of little literary value, Barac's translation has preserved only a documentary interest, proving the early penetration of Shakespeare into the intellectual strata in Transylvania.

Significantly enough, the first complete Shakespeare play to be translated and published in 1844 was *Julius Caesar* another time, the constant interest in the play being sustained by the revolutionary atmosphere of the pre-1848 moment. There soon followed *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* in 1848, *Macbeth* in 1850, *Hamlet* in 1855.

Alexandru Bagdat's translation of *Romeo and Juliet* and of *Othello* in 1848 was preceded by a comprehensive *Biography* drawn on Letourneur which was a new attempt, after Bolliac's, to acquaint the public at large with Shakespeare's life and work. It deserves to be further detailed here because in the range of information and the scope of critical estimation Bagdat surpassed his predecessor by far.

On the one hand, Bagdat's *Life of Shakespeare* included all the major moments ascribed by tradition to the Shakespearean curriculum vitae: the early marriage, the poaching scandal, the purchase of New Place, the alleged affair with the Oxford innkeeper's wife, the "second best" issue in Shakespeare's will, the description of the poet's grave and monument at Stratford, the Gastrell episode. Furthermore, Bagdat was interested in the posthumous career of Shakespeare's fame and work and he would consequently mention the *First Folio* with its preface quoted in full, the Shakespearean Controversy, the subsequent editing of the poet's work by Rowe, Pope, Johnson and the corresponding Shakespearean scholarship by Malone and Addison among others. Milton's poem *On Shakespeare*, antedated by some years the first Miltonian translation in Romanian, generally believed to have occurred in 1851.

Bagdat ranked his own endeavour in the wake of a series of prestigious biographers comprising Pope, Johnson, Warburton, Guizot and Letourneur. Besides mentioning the poems dedicated to the Earl of Southampton and the *Sonnets*, the translator and editor presented a "chronological order of the composition" of the plays including 36 titles which mainly corresponded to the now unanimously accepted Shakespearean canon. He also attempted a typological classification into "dramatic comedies", "dramatic histories" and "tragedies proper".

On the other hand, what renders Bagdat's study the more noteworthy is the consideration of Shakespeare's drama within the tradition of the

Elizabethan theatre, associated with the popular trend. The condition of the pre-Shakespearean drama was most aptly touched upon, and reference was made, for the first time in this country, to such plays as *Gorboduc*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *The Yorkshire Tragedy* in order to highlight Shakespeare's greatness as compared to his contemporaries, all in the encomiastic rhetoric of the time: "Shakespeare's profound genius civilized the uncultivated and barbarous spirit of his fellow-countrymen and enabled them to understand and admire the immortal writings he was creating" (Bagdat 1848: 17).

In his estimations Bagdat laid emphasis on the depth of human passion, the power of imagination, the mingling of the national with the universal and the moral lesson taught by his plays, all such assessments in which we recognize the era's unabated adoration for the poet whom he proclaimed, using an already overworked term, "the greatest genius", an overt pronouncement of Bardolatry which may epitomize the pioneering days of Shakespeare's reception in Romania.

Shakespeare's constant presence in the spectrum of intellectual interests along two decades, during the 1830s and the 1840s, may well be considered to have contributed to the progress and maturity of the intellectual atmosphere which was by then fully prepared to assimilate his influence as a great challenger of original creation in the years to come.

Indeed the appropriation of Shakespeare by Romania's greatest Romantic poet, Mihai Eminescu, later in the century would represent a special case of literary encounter between two akin spirits, the latter's intimate recourse to the Shakespearean universe irradiating an intellectual aura of catalytic influence to fertilize his own creative originality.

Eminescu, from whose poetry all the subsequent generations of poets have claimed descendance, is revered in Romanian culture as one of the greatest lyricists of the world, comparable, on equal footing, with Byron, Hugo, Hölderlin, Leopardi, Lermontov, Petöfi and Mickiewicz.

Pertinent comparative scholarship in this country has revealed Eminescu's recourse to Shakespeare to have covered the entire range of literary relations from allusive references through overt quotation and subtle paraphrasing to original creations stimulated by a certain Shakespearean character, atmosphere or particular poetic texts, all supplying evidence of the extent to which Shakespeare's universe flooded Eminescu's artistic consciousness (Vianu 1963, Grigorescu 1971, Dumitrescu-Buşulenga 1976).

Early in his career Eminescu proved his intimate intercourse with, and unabated admiration for Shakespeare in the poem *Cărțile* (The Books), actually an ode extolling the formative factors that influenced his poetic apprenticeship, of which the first sixteen lines pay full tribute to the English poet. Through an elaborate rhetorical apostrophe the young disciple addressed

his master as “Gentle friend of my soul” (l. 2)³ which is indeed an attitude of appropriation sustained by awareness of an intellectual affinity, highlighted through such open statements: “The fulsome source of your melodious numbers/ Oft haunts my mind when I repeat your song” (ll. 4–5), to culminate in the pronouncement of Shakespeare’s status as a life-long model, beyond good or evil:

To err with you, in error I can rave:
To be like you, for this I always crave (ll. 15–6).

Beyond the youthful encomiastic enthusiasm, needless to say, induced through the Bardolatry of the previous generation, what is to be noticed is Eminescu’s mature perception of Shakespeare as a demiurgical force, creative of an autonomous, protean universe, fashioning the sensible world in the light of eternal ideas, much in the spirit of Neoplatonic philosophy:

God-like, you show yourself in thousand faces each,
And teach us what a full age fails to teach (ll. 7–8).

Significantly enough, he saw Shakespeare’s excellence located in the diversity of human character in a way similar to Harold Bloom’s nowadays, who sustains Shakespeare’s universalism on similar grounds: “No one, before or since Shakespeare, made so many separate selves” (1998: 1).

Eminescu, who is also known to have attempted his own translations from Shakespeare as proved by the two manuscript copies extant, *Sonnet 27* and an excerpt from *Timon of Athens* (I, 1), was especially drawn to the Shakespearean poetic discourse: the striking antitheses, the wide variety of comparisons and epithets and the range of rhetorical strategies, all so much to lure a young Romantic poet in search of surprising stylistic effects. His familiarity with the Shakespearean texts, the result of non-mediated, continuous reading, can be further sustained in the light of textual evidence selected from a number of poems written between 1866 and 1880, prior to the period of his education in Vienna and Berlin. Worth mentioning in this respect is the Hamletizing in *Mortua Est!*:

Indeed, who could answer ? Whichever is better,
To be ? To be not, though ? But no truth is netter:
The sorrows are many, the pleasures are few (PP 73).⁴

³ The text is referred to M. Eminescu, *Poezii*, Editura pentru literatură, București 1961: 306–307. My English version (EG).

⁴ This and all subsequent verse quotations are referred to M. Eminescu, *Poeme/ Poems*, transl. by Leon Lvițchi and Andrei Bantaș, Editura Minerva, București 1978, hereafter PP in the main text.

Other cases in point of intimate intercourse with Shakespearean texts may be presented out of numerous instances, such as the diatribe denouncing the moral degradation in *Junii corupți* (Depraved Youth), in which the oxymoronic “with myrth in funeral and with dirge in marriage” can be traced back to Hamlet (I, 1), or the appearance of old King Lear, “hoary headed, with a dark brow severe/ Upon which there was the crown of straw, all dry” (PP 141), in the poem *Împărat și proletar* (Emperor and Proletarian) to embody the idea that “A dream of death eternal is life to everyone” (PP 145). The funeral scene in the unfinished novel *Geniu pustiu* (Waste Genius) seems to have been suggested by the graveyard scene in *Hamlet* (V, 1) while echoes from *Macbeth* or *Henry IV* could be detected in Eminescu’s dramatic projects, if never achieved, drawn on the Romanians’ historical and mythical tradition: *Alexandru Lăpușneanu*, *Mira*, *Gruia Sînger*, *Bogdan Dragoș*.

Equally relevant for the objectives set to this paper may appear Eminescu’s constant consideration of Shakespeare’s status as a cultural model, so urgently needed to sustain the construction of a lasting and reliable national culture. For Eminescu the English playwright ranked among the perennial universal values as a landmark of intellectual eminence. In his splendid emblematic force, “the Great Briton” stood up in Eminescu’s estimation, in his twofold capacity as dramatic genius and representative of a civilized and civilizing nation.

The Romanian poet made such statements public through his journalistic activity, gazetteering as a professional interest, running concurrently with his poetic writing.

Due to his early connection with the theatre media, Eminescu had come to translate *The Art of Dramatic Representation* by Heinrich Theodor Röscher, a treatise on dramatic aesthetics, imbued with Romantic ideas, published in 1864 to celebrate Shakespeare’s 300th anniversary in Germany. The translation, which engaged the young poet between 1868 and 1872, seems to have afforded him the first expression of unabated admiration for Shakespeare as an unsurpassed dramatic genius, whose characters were gradiose projections of humankind, hallmarked for eternity. It is from this doctrinary stance that Eminescu would later evaluate current theatrical performances, or discuss such a topical issue as the state of the national dramatic literature at the moment.

Chief among the latter there surely is the comprehensive article *Repertoriul nostru teatral* (Our Dramatic Repertoire)⁵ which deserves further consideration here for the salient points the poet, now turned a drama critic, was making

⁵ All quotations in prose are referred to M. Eminescu, *Opere* (Works), IX, Editura Academiei, București 1980, hereafter O in the main text.

when he analysed in retrospect “our dramatic dowry” up to the year 1870. His theoretical view, drawn on Röttscher’s book, was permeated with veneration for Shakespeare’s genius while cautioning young aspiring dramatists against the danger of following the “genius-like eagle of the North” into “the severe and terrible territory of accurate historical matter with its huge demand of being true, above all.” (O 86).

Much in the manner of Goethe before him, Eminescu was raising the issue of literary influences warning against the devastating power of the Shakespearean model for an inexperienced, though authentic, talent: “Shakespeare is not to be read, but studied and this in such a way that you may come to realize what lies in your powers to imitate in him” (O 85).

Eminescu would return to Shakespeare when he discussed the problem of the accessibility of the dramatic performances for the public at large ranking the latter alongside the Spanish playwrights and the Norwegian Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson as the few dramatists “to have achieved this wonderful work of raising the public to themselves while making themselves thoroughly understood by the public” (O 86). In this last statement there rings the same obsession of the early cultural mentors regarding the state of cultural maturity as a necessary prerequisite for a profitable encounter with Shakespeare’s work that has persisted in the Romanian intellectual consciousness to this day, as most cogently explained by a contemporary Romanian comparatist:

[...] the investigation of the specific way in which Romanian culture has responded to Shakespeare’s work will give the extent to which our culture has integrated itself within the European phenomenon. (Grigorescu 1971: 14).

Even this, rather cursory, presentation of the Romanian creative engagement with Shakespeare’s work may have given some measure of the power accumulated in the Shakespearean cultural capital with its force of stimulating creative originality and cultural revigoration.

The literary facts examined have situated Shakespeare’s early circulation in Romanian culture between the fourth and the fifth decades of the 19th century, the dramatist being first accepted by virtue of his continental fame. Direct access to his work started with translations of German and French intermediaries. Critical evaluation, expressed in periodical articles and in two comprehensive monographs, would spotlight such aspects that were relevant to the Romantic tenets as universal and national truth, natural genius, psychological verisimilitude of the characters, disobedience of classicist constraints. Significantly enough, while unanimous in commending “the action and the dramatic genius”, the critics would refrain from any estimation of the Shakespearean poetic language, which may be only partially explained

by the mediated access to his work. It was also the inferiority complex of the mentors of a culture situated at the margins of the European area, barely in the early stages of critical competence facing the challenges of Shakespeare's drama and badly in need of adequate operational concepts.

It has also been part of this paper's aim to prove that the early contacts with Shakespeare afforded the literary men in Romania their arguments for providing the Romantic Movement in this country with a theoretical basis. There is no denying that while endeavouring to explain Shakespeare's work to the public, the litterati themselves were becoming aware of the movement towards Romanticism upon which Romanian literature was then embarking.

The extension of the foreign dimension of Shakespeare's afterlife into the South-East of Europe, partially a terra incognita to Shakespeare reception studies may prove beneficial for both emitting and receiving cultures. For one thing, this type of research can further enhance the pattern of Shakespeare's appropriation as a Romantic icon and intellectual challenge, a process similar in the Romanian countries to that in Britain, where his Romantic defenders, from Wordsworth to Coleridge and Keats, had to argue against the current view on the dramatist as "a wild irregular genius" from the standpoints of the Romantic aesthetic tenets.

For another, it bears witness to the variety of the ways in which Shakespeare met his success in the Romanian countries as inaugurator of modernity. In their efforts to understand, translate, imitate and appropriate Shakespeare, the pioneers of modern Romanian culture engaged a cultural intercourse that remained articulated in our intellectual inheritance. If diversity is a sign of intellectual potential, then surely the early encounter of modern Romanian culture with Shakespeare testifies to the intellectual vitality of both.

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