PARALLELED CHARACTERS IN THE DRAMATIC WORKS OF HORTENSIA PAPADAT-BENGESCU

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Abstract:

This article proposes a psychoanalytical approach to two paralleled literary characters whom Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu places into opposition in order to introduce her readers to feminine hypostases of wish fulfilment. It offers an in-depth exploration that focuses mainly on identity. Jacques Lacan's way of analysing the transcendence of the wish into the realm of the Real in *Hamlet* and *Antigone* is applied to Simona and Gina, who are the main characters of the plays *Povârnişul* [*The Upland*] (*A căzut o stea* / *A Star Has Fallen*), and respectively *Bătrânul* [*The Old Man*]. Like Hamlet, Simona is a woman who wishes for the impossible to come true and cannot overcome the losses that originated her inextinguishable grief. Gina, instead, like Antigone, breaks down the barriers of her secluded life and, as a result of her act of revolt, she succeeds in obtaining self-knowledge.

Keywords:

Interdisciplinary perspectives on literature, psychoanalysis, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, theatre.

In her *Autobiography*[1], text that was published in the *Literary and Artistic Truth* magazine in 1937, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu relates that one day she read in a medical magazine "an article of violent injury toward the Woman – pre-eminently" (Papadat-Bengescu, *Femeia în faţa oglinzei* [*The Woman in Front of the Mirror*], 1988, p. 20), and that she found it so revolting that right away she wrote the play *Povârnişul* [*The Upland*] (later

[1] V. Papadat-Bengescu, Hortensia, *Femeia în faţa oglinzei* [*The Woman in Front of the Mirror*], Bucharest, Minerva Publishing House, 1988, pp. 7-25.

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she changed its title into *A căzut o stea*[*A Star Has Fallen*]), whose main character is Simona.

Simona's tragedy consists in being "soulsick", which in medical (psychiatric) terms would mean that she suffers from neurosis. The nucleus of such neurosis resides in the lack of acceptance of the happenings in her past: Simona wished she had never got married and had to go through a divorce and, implicitly, on an unconscious level, had never given birth to her daughter, who looks just like her hated husband (Radu Demir). "*With me there's something different… It should not have happened*" (Papadat-Bengescu, *Opere* [*Works*], tome V, p. 76).

Jacques Lacan asserts that the lack of an object generates the desire for that very object[2]. J. Lacan comes to the conclusion that "*a woman lives out of her partner's castration*[3] *and sets it as a landmark for her desire. (…) This reference to castration is not enough for the desire to get fulfilled; in order to prevent any interdiction against the fulfilment of the desire, this castration additionally needs to lean on the Name of the Father."* (Larousse, 2006, p. 387). In other words, the man in a couple, and, in this case, the woman (Simona) ought to give up her desire for an object (i. e. the desire that what happened should never have happened – as regards this character) and adapt it to the symbolic order (i. e. the Name of the Father[4]). A

[2] "*Lacan's observations prove that the name of the lacking object makes way to the occurrence of such lack, in other words it makes way for the desire to come up.*" (Larousse, 2006, p. 386)

[3] The castration complex, in S. Freud's view, is generated in a man by the threat of castration, and in a woman, by the lack of the penis. For a woman, says S. Freud, this translates as depression and jealousy, and for a man as addiction to social life and to the woman. Jacques Lacan adds the cause of the consequences: the obedience towards the signifier. The fear of castration forbids incest but strengthens the obedience towards the father, which proves that the Oedipus was not overcome. To assume castration is to assume the lack that creates desire and this desire ceases to be subjected to the father's ideal. Melanie Klein believes that the oedipal conflict stems from the anguish of being torn to pieces, devoured, destroyed, and this anguish is perpetuated by another one, by the so-called castration anguish. (Klein, 1967) This can result in an identification with the aggressor (a person who is perceived as an aggressor), as a defensive means against the fear of castration. "*Its contribution to the crystallization of the Super-Ego is significant.*" (Zamfirescu, 2007, p. 290)

[4] The Name of the Father is a concept of J. Lacan's that designates the symbolic dimension of the law, the father role of the signifier, the symbolic order of the language (Larousse, 2006, p. 830).

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depressive state, says Lacan, is based on the lack of renunciation of thedesire. The subject's disorientation is triggered when he/she gives in to desire, and the way out of neurosis is found when he/she assumes the risk of surmounting it (*apud* Larousse). Lacan believes that Antigone, the ancient character, finds this way out – she assumes the risk of surmounting it by giving up "*the scrutiny of her ownlaw*" (*ibid*., p. 387). Surmounting desire depends on the *jouissance* (Lacanian term, referring to the accomplishment of the desire) that is represented by "*any good, any moral order or any ordinal instance*" (*ibid*., p. 387). Lacan says that "*there is no good other than what can serve to pay the price to access desire*" (*ibid*.).

In relation to the above, Simona seems to be a character who gave way to neurosis: in the final scene, because of the storm, she cannot tie back the yacht to the river board, and the author allows us to imagine that Simona might have died. This character is portrayed by Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu in contrast with Gina, the main feminine character in the play *Bătrânul* [*The Old Man*]. Gina defines herself as an Antigone (Papadat-Bengescu, *Opere* [*Works*], tome V, 1988, p. 212). In contrast to her, Simona embodies the masculine equivalent J. Lacan put up in order to illustrate neurosis fed by the maintenance of dissatisfaction (Simona wishes for the impossible), therefore Simona is Hamlet's equivalent.

Simona's wish is unattainable in the Real plane: the past cannot be undone, and she wishes that past had not existed. Her neurosis unfolds as an insuperable mourning for loss. Ian Balli's love cannot see her out of neurosis. Her marriage to Balli brings her riches and freedom but her unreachable desire – the mobile of her neurosis – causes her death. Similarly to Hamlet, Simona makes use of the verb "to be": who is she to be happy? Simona actually misses Gina's independence[5]. Simona defines herself by what she receives from the others on a material level.

Too wise a person, too submissive towards the Name of the Father[6], Simona wants to take a step into the Real by revolt. She imposes her own notion of Good on Demir, whom she castrates when she ruins his plans: Simona's husband, Demir, finds himself in a challenging financial situation

[5] Gina has a profession, she counts on the Old Man's support, she can live by herself, on her own. Unlike her, Simona depends on her husband's material support.

[6] Georgie, an admirer, describes Simona as "*restless, confused. (…) The woman I once knew for being so… wise… too wise*." (Papadat-Bengescu, *Opere* [*Works*], tome V, 1988, p. 71).

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and, in order to solve it, he throws a party where he expects to make use of Simona's charisma to obtain money from Ian Balli, the rich ship owner who is in love with Simona. Demir patronizes Simona and wrongly accuses her of seeking out lust, when he actually is trying to make her feel guilty of his financial situation and thus determine her to allow him to manipulate her into the direction he wants. Simona disagrees with Demir's lack of ethics: "*in a friendship it's delicate to bring up money*" (Papadat-Bengescu, *Opere* [*Works*], tome V, 1988, p. 31), she says. Faced with her disapproval, Demir abuses her even worse by an additional accusation: he says that Ian Balli is courting Simona. Simona replies that if he thought Ian was courting her, he would not ask money and favours of him. At the party, Simona interrupts her husband during the conversation, exactly at the moment when Demir is asking Balli for money. Demir has a violent reaction and chases Simona out of his life.

Following her divorce from the lawyer Radu Demir and her marriage to the rich ship-owner Ian Balli, Simona persists in her wish for the impossible. When she loses the yacht, too, she finds herself in a situation where she has to put up with another loss, an additional loss in a series of losses. As she seems unable to cope anymore, death intervenes. At a symbolical level, death acts in its capacity as a castrator, as in Hamlet's case (as if God punished the revolt of those who insist in wishing for the impossible). As Hamlet, Simona believes that she was not loved by her mother (despite her nanny's saying otherwise) and that she is the child of a widower. She is caught up in an oedipal complex which she is not able to get rid of. The loss of her mother introduces Simona to her first unhealed mourning grief, to a trauma whose wish for the impossible is later shifted onto the inability to accept the failure of her first marriage. The lack of acceptance as regards her mother's loss maintains her in a vicious circle of repetitive situations reiterating the abandonment and its non-acceptance. According to such logic, Demir is chosen under criteria that are dictated by her unconscious: he embodies a person who is likely to abandon and abuse her just like her mother used to. It is only when Demir chased her away that she got to divorce him. In order to make him chaseher away, in order to get abandoned, she sets herself in opposition to Demir, whom he provokes to abandon her. At an unconscious level, Ian Balli's

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love is not enough and is unable to satisfy her, since it does not fit into the pattern of the abandoner and the abusive husband.

As she realizes that she is being abandoned, that she concluded a failing marriage, she steps back into the position of her mother's signified (her mother wanted her dead since she abused her[7]): this is why Simona wants to die (driven by an unconscious death instinct), and this is why she loves twilight. "*Despite all light, at the hour of the wolf… the howling wolf inside us… the night still drives its way inside us. I've always preferred twilight."* (*id*., p. 86) As a widower, Simona's father also seems not to have accepted the loss of his wife and he unwittingly made Simona feel useless, since he behaved absent-mindedly, deeply sunken into his unending mourning and grief.

Coming from her mother, the rejection drove Simona into an oral fixation[8] (that manifests itself in the form of the unattainable desire, of the wish for the impossible). As we have said earlier, Simona chose her first husband according to the model of her late abandoner and abusive mother. Her second choice, Ian Balli, represents a potential healing, a chance of correcting her animus[9]. Yet, she unconsciously denies this potential, thus opposing her conscious attitude of a signified "wise daughter", who accepts Balli's love. Balli is an easy to get object that is already possible, therefore it does not catch her attention, as she has no interest in him. Simona is interested in the intangible only (oral fixation).

Moreover, Simona is driven by a Medeea complex[10] – Simona is unsatisfied with her child, who looks like her husband Demir and bears his

[7] Simona felt unloved by her mother, which, for a psychoanalyst, indicates that the subject was abused one way or another.

[8] The oral fixation refers to subjects whose psychic energy (libido) is stuck in the oral stage (*apud* Freud): these subjects are prone to depressions and addictions, neuroses, hysteria, demand for endearment etc. (see Gorgos, 1989, vol. III, p. 336 and Gorgos, 1988, vol. II, p. 284)

[9] The animus, a Jungian term, is the archetype of masculinity (the masculine unconscious or hidden element in a woman's psyche), and it is updated by projective mechanisms based on the girl's early experiences of her father. (The anima is the equivalent for the man). (see Minulescu, 2001, p. 174)

[10] In psychoanalysis, the Medeea complex refers to the mother's unconscious desire or phantasm of killing her offspring. This desire is unconsciously motivated by the revenge against her husband. The phantasm may be related to a sexual relationship that is felt as an exclusive act of possession from the man's side, whereas the child is the symptom or the result of that possession; a relationship that is felt like a loss of purity, meaning a

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negative imprint. She is willing to love her daughter, to fulfil all her desires because she feels guilty and consciously does not want to act like her own mother. Nonetheless, like her mother, Simona unconsciously wants to abandon Mietta, under the pretext that she looks like Demir. Mietta herself is living under an oedipal complex and manifests envy for her mother's boat (which she unties from the board). Simona wants to repeat the punitive act that her mother's loss brought about, she wants to be the aggressor this time, to be the one who abandons and not the victim of abandonment, as in her childhood. Most probably, this unconscious wish comes from her mother's showing satisfaction when abusing her. At an unconscious level, Simona wants to live that same satisfaction herself, the satisfaction she noticed on her mother's face during childhood. Simona wants to punish her daughter in the same way her mother punished her by her death, by symbolically committing suicide. Simona succumbs to neurosis: she dies in the storm, apparently killed by Mietta as Lajos was killed by his son Oedipus. As J. Lacan says, stalemates of the wish in neurosis take the radical shape of death due to the eluding of castration[11].

Simona represses her hate towards Mietta and takes the model of the nanny who raised her. Her unassailable grief is an insurmountable upland. Simona falls from the sky like a star, while her solar existence, her light and her awareness gives way to the unconscious, to darkness. Her consciousness, her awareness is darkened and killed by her longing for the impossible. Folklore says that when a star falls, people make a wish. In Simona's case, the falling star fulfils her wish to die.

Simona is but a victim (of an illness, of neurosis), a sacrificed person that is put into relation with Leonardo da Vinci's Monalissa[12] and with Madona ("the Sphinx") in the novel *Rădăcini* [*Roots*]. A symbolical analogy is made to the sacrifice of Christ with the only difference that Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's character does not rise from the dead. Most seemingly, this looks like a remission to Simon, the false prophet who pretended to be Messiah but who did not prove to have resurrected from the dead.

modification of the personal integrity or even a narcissistic wound. (Gorgos, vol. III, 1989, pp. 62-63).

[11] The individual does not accept to have the accomplishment of their wish rejected.

[12]Ian cherishes Simona by calling her "Monetta" (Papadat-Bengescu, *Opere* [*Works*], tome V, 1988, p. 83) or "Mona" (*id*., p. 85). Simona is perceived as Da Vinci's Monalissa, the one with an enigmatic smile. (*id*., p. 73).

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Gina Delescu in Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's play *Bătrânul* [*The Old Man*] proves to be the embodiment of Sophocles[13]'s Antigone, according to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical interpretation.

By Antigone J. Lacan underlines one's power to impose one's own notion of Good, to put a possible wish into practice, to make it transcend into the realm of the Real. Antigone's wish is not stricken by irrelevance as in Hamlet's[14] case.

Like Antigone, but unlike Simona Demir in *Povârnişul* [*The Upland*], Gina struggles with an impossible wish that she *does* put into practice (Gina wants to be free to do whatever she wants to). A variant of Simona Demir is given by the author of *The Old Man* by the character Lyly (Gina's friend), whom The Old Man sees as a very moral lady, though unable to do anything reckless; the Old Man tells Gina that "*a man must not do but he must be able to do it*" (id., p. 165).

The Old Man is for Gina the Name of the Father and the animus. They will coexist for the rest of their lives and, by their way of thinking and their way of life, they will support the possible wish to transcend into the realm of the Real (for their own life).

The author seems to have chosen Gina / Georgina's name for its Greek etymology (in Greek *gyne* = woman) and for the meaning of St. George's legend: St. George is the one who prevailed over the dragon (Bălan Mihailovici, 2003, p. 234). Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu has a few characters that she seems to foreground as life models for the woman: one of them is Gina Delescu. Other such characters are Manuela in the novel *Femeia în faţa oglinzei* [*The Woman in Front of the Mirror*] (a character who embodies the resurrected Christ, the realized Self, according to C. G. Jung's perspective), Ina in the novel *The Stranger* and Nory in Hallipa's Cycle and in the novel *The Stranger*. According to these representations, the author apparently tells us that women ought to go beyond their state of sacrificed Cinderellas, of the signified of others, of castrated beings. Gina sees herself as a "*Cinderella who took off her*

[13] V. Sophocles, *Antigona. Electra*, Bucharest, Eminescu Publishing House, 1974. Antigone defies King Creon's order of not burying her brother Polynices. Polynices had started the war against Creon, while Eteocles, their other brother, who had lost the battle against Creon, hadhad permission from Creon to be buried according to tradition. Antigone is punished by death by King Creon.

[14] See Larousse, 2003, p. 387.

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one-night fairy-tale gown" (Papadat-Bengescu, *Opere* [*Works*], tome V, p. 208). This perspective of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu explains why the author uses the term "Freudism" with irony. She surprises us nowadays by the way she actually anticipated the further development of Freud's concepts in Otto Rank and Jacques Lacan. Unsatisfied by S. Freud's solution for the oedipal complex (i. e. the acceptance of castration), the author suggests that castration can be overcome by a process of personal liberation (the revolt / rebellion is in Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's characters the means by which one can attain an upper level of existence).

By refusing and abandoning her husband, Gina surpasses her condition of signified[15] of the symbolic order and makes an excess of desire. By running away from home, she becomes aware of her shadow and, knowing it, she is able to keep it under control, she can allow it to be manifest or not according to her own conscious decision (as C. G. Jung recommends). Gina / Georgina (as the Old Man calls her) is a winner over her own dragon. Unlike Dinu Delescu and Sanda Raliu, who are led by their unconscious shadow, Gina is superior to them because she knows herself and because she is complete[16]. Unlike Lyly, Gina has both power and will[17]and she asserts her own identity through work, which provides her independence[18]. Gina can obtain freedom and richness on her own, unlike Simona, who receives them by means of her husbands (whom she depends on).

These two main characters (Simona and Gina) in Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's dramatic works constitute only the two main opposite examples, whereas the other three types of characters in her drama (Lulu, My Sister, Ana and La Roza in the *Medieval*) are rarer

[15]Signified is a term taken by Jacques Lacan from Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics, referring to the child who fulfils one of his parents' wishes and with whom he identifies. (See Larousse, 2006, p. 1089.)

[16] Being complete is the objective C. G. Jung recommends: one should know one's own unconscious and keep it under control; one should not feel compelled to be perfect, one should be complete, meaning that one should integrate into awareness the contents of the personal unconscious. (see Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 1998.)

[17] Will is a key concept in Otto Rank and Rollo May's theories; will plays a major role in freeing the psyche. (see May, 2007 and Rank, 1978.)

[18] At the time when Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu wrote her works, women overall depended on their husbands income, they lacked independence.

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variants of Simona or Gina. If Simona does not adapt to reality, La Roza takes a brave suicidal leap only to correct a wrong. Lulu is haunted by death, no matter what choice she might make, so there is no way out for Lulu. Sister Ana succeeds in adjusting to reality and overcome her castration complex.

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