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INTRIGUING CHANGES IN ROMANIAN TRANSLATIONS OF SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO

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Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to explore some of the changes produced in the Romanian translations of Shakespeare's Othello, focusing especially on the title of the play and the presentation of the protagonist in the cast list. The essay tries, moreover, to provide a number of possible explanations by building bridges between the original text, its translations and their historical, political and theoretical contexts. Therefore, we begin by making a review of each translation, its context, and specific features, and dedicate the final part of this paper to a comparative study, highlighting the translators' choices.

Keywords: adaptation, changes, protagonist, title, translation

Over the centuries, William Shakespeare's plays, whether they have been tragedies, histories or comedies, have captivated readers and audiences worldwide. Apart from the author's talent, an important role in this process was occupied by translators who have made these masterpieces accessible to a vast public, in different languages and cultures, places and time periods. Romanian versions of Shakespeare's *Othello* can reveal the translators' efforts of remaining faithful to the original text while adapting it to the necessities of each historic context.

In the late eighteenth century, cultural relations between Great Britain and Romania were insignificant and characterized by discontinuity, especially because of the long distance and the lack of common political and economic interests between the two countries. Romanian intellectuals were able to discover important English writings, including those of Shakespeare's, through Greek, Italian, French and German intermediaries, but their impact was still weak in this corner of Europe. William Shakespeare's name was adapted to

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Romanian and promoted as "Șacspear (…) the greatest genius of the English theater" in an article published by Cezar Bolliac in the 1836 'Curierul românesc' (Velea 46).

His 1604 tragedy, *Othello,* a theatrical reinterpretation of Cinthio's novella, *Un Capitano Moro* ("*A Moorish Captain*") was first performed in Bucharest, by a German band, lead Johann Gerger, in 1816 (Dutu, 7). The play continued to be staged and on the 9th of March 1845, Cezar Bolliac published in the 'Curierul românesc' newspaper a detailed analysis on the way in which Shakespeare transformed Cintio's story into a wonderful intrigue and concluded with a rhetorical affirmation whose echo might still be present: "Ce traducător ar putea să doboare pînă acolo geniul lui Shakespeare încît să nu mai fie mare în traducția lui?" (Dutu 463).

Three years later, Toma Alexandru Bagdat tried to fulfill this necessity and produced the first translation of *Othello* into Romanian. The text became part of a larger book on the playwright's life and works, titled: *The Biography of Viliam G. Sekspir after Le Tourneur; Followed by Romeo and Juliet and Othello; Tragedies in Five Acts Each, Composed by Viliam Ghiuilom Sekspir*. In the preface to his translation („consecuenţele morale") Bagdat uses examples taken from the plays to emphasize the moral and educational purpose of his translations (Velea 46). His text is seen, however, as being loose, limited and mediocre. The main problem is that the translator did not use the original text of *Othello,* but a French adaptation by Le Tourneur. Moreover, Bagdat wrote in Cyrillic alphabet, a common practice of that time, but a later problem to modern and contemporary readers (Matei-Chesoiu 53).

Bolliac and Bagdat's efforts of introducing Shakespeare and his works in our cultural space, doubled by several interpretations of *Othello, Hamlet, Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* (between 1800-1850) began a tradition within the Romanian intellectual circles, who tried to rally at Western ideas and principles (Grigorescu 57).

It was not until the nineteenth century, however, that radical changes took place. The struggle for national identity, state modernization and international affirmation along with important events such as the Revolution of 1848, the Unification of the Principalities (1859) and the Proclamation of Independence (1877) lead to important cultural transformations. In literature, the decade 1876-1886 was a prolific period dominated by the Junimea (Iași, 1863), a cultural group, initiated by Petre P. Carp, Vasile Pogor, Theodor Rosetti, Iacob Negruzzi, and Titu Maiorescu. Together, these men of letters tried to create "an opening towards the

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cultural and linguistic integration of Romania among the well-developed western civilizations, as well as a crystallization of the modern Romanian language'' (Matei-Chesnoiu 54). In this context, English texts, including Shakespearean plays received an increased interest.

A more accessible translation of *Othello* emerged due to Petre P. Carp, at Ediţiunea şi Imprimeria Societăţii Junimea, in 1868. The statesman and culture critic enjoyed great admiration when he read his version of the English play at a meeting of the members of Junimea. However, just as in the case of his previous translation of *Hamlet* (1864), Carp used as a source of inspiration the German interpretation of Ludwig and Dorotheea Tieck. The fact that Carp adopted many of the suggestions provided by his foreign colleagues makes us believe that this was a conscious, even a programed procedure, derived from a the "principle of unity and variety of European culture" (Mănucă 1). His transposition has many prosodic imperfections which prevent reading fluency, although, sometimes, the phrase retains some of its original blast.

In 1908, Victor Anestin, a journalist and science fiction writer, published a new translation of *Othello* (Bucuresti; Editura Librăriei Leon Alcalay). He was discontent with the previous translations which he considered incomplete and tried to offer the public an "exact translation" (2). His fidelity to the original was mostly in meaning and atmosphere though, "fidelity in the rendering of individual words can almost never carry over fully the sense they have in the original" (Weissbort & Eysteinsson 304). The author did not try to preserve the verses and translated the text into prose; a choice that can be motivated by quoting Goethe's statement from *Dichtung und Wahrheit*:

I honour both rhythm and rhyme, through which poetry become poetry indeed, but what is really deeply and thought operative, what really shapes and improves, is what is left of a poet when he has been translated into prose. What remains then is the pure, perfect essence which a blinding exterior often succeeds in deluding us with when it is not there, and in hiding when it is. That is why I think translations into prose are more advantageous than translations into verse in the Wrst stages of education (qted. in Weissbort & Eysteinsson 199).

Anestiu states that he tried to preserve the trivialities of the original text because otherwise "readers would not have had Shakespeare's play before their eyes" (IV, in my trans.). On the other hand, he further adds that he had to "hide them a little bit" (IV, in my

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trans.); a fact which makes us think that the translator was target oriented and consciously censured his text, obeying to the morals of his time. This attitude also reminds us of Schleiermacher who distinguished between the translations that took the author to the reader, by being target-oriented and domesticating ("verdeutschend"), and the translations which took the reader to the author, becoming source-oriented and foreignizing ("verfremdend") (Weissbort & Eysteinsson 205-6).

Five years later, Dimitrie Nanu brought a new approach regarding *Othello* (Bucureşti; Carol Göbl, 1913) and included at the beginning of his work, Goethe's opinion regarding translations:

Căci, orice s'ar putea zice de insuficiența traducerilor, arta acestora rămâne una din cele mai însemnate, și unul din cei mai nobili factori de viață universal. Coranul zice: D-zeu a dat fiecărui popor un profet în limba lui ». – În acest spirit, fiecare traducător este un profet pentru neamul său. Scrisoare către T. Carlyle (qted. in Nanu, 1)

In his afterword of the book, Nanu argues against A. C. Cuza's opinion that translations were "dead works", "mummified, waxed faces" incapable of reproducing the original (180). He states that despite the fact that the languages are different in terms of words and sentence structure, translations should not be excluded from the field of art because they ,,are only a version of the work and versions are possible within the same language, as well as from one language to another" (179 in my trans). Furthermore, he embraces the principle of the *belles infidèles* and the translator's freedom of choice, admitting that he did not try to be faithful to the original text. Nanu was not able to preserve the Shakespearian verse, nor the "rigid" Alexandrine one, used by the French, and chose instead to use the "eminently dramatic" trochaic verse (Nanu 181, in my trans).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, because of the new foreign ideas and the need of esthetical principles, the members of Junimea felt disoriented and failed to reach a compromise. In these circumstances, Mihail Dragomirescu, one of Titu Maiorescu's disciples, created a new critical school revolving around the literary magazine, "Convorbiri literare" (later, called "Convorbiri critice"). He took a "series of Maiorescu's ideas, developed and incorporated them within his own opinions, creating an original esthetic system, easily mocked, but difficult to break with the arguments used by the Romanian critics of the time" (Manuca 108, in my trans).

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His version of *Othello* (Bucureşti; Editura Casei Şcoalelor , 1923) reflects this new esthetic system and just like any other forms of art, represents a "transfiguration of this life, without falsification, till complete deformation… this is its concentration in its most energetic form, the most intellectually subtle and full of regularity" (qted in Manuca 106). Although, Dragomirescu does not try to preserve the Shakespearean rhythm either, he succeeds to create a poetical harmony of the lines. Extrapolating from Wunt, we can state that Dragomirescu transforms harmony into a concept which "summarizes specific and consistent ways to combine various kinds of formal elements or content of a work of art into a cohesive unit" (qtd. in Manuca 119).

In 1943, his former student, Dragoș Protopopescu, published another version of *Othello* at Fundaţia Regală pentru Literatură şi Artă. This time, the translator used empathy and militated for a "profound revival of the texts already established" (Papuc 2). His goal makes us think of Walter Benjamin's essay *The Task of the Translator,* which brought a new understanding of the translations. They were no longer perceived as "secondary" and "derivative" but as significant works which ensured the survival of the original (the Űberleben) and implicitly, its "afterlife" (Fortleben). Protopopescu revitalized *Othello* and the past it belonged to, creating a 'vital link' between the texts and producing a greater language, a 'pure language'. Unfortunately, because Protopopescu joined the Iron Guard, the Romanian Fascist party - an act of rebellion which led to the Communist harassment, his suicide and martyrdom - his works, including his translation of *Othello,* were banned from collective memory.

Florian Nicolau's new version of *Othello* (Bucureşti; Editura de Stat, 1948) suffered different reductions of the original text and numerous lexical eccentricities. Nicolau's translation was easy to perform, corresponded to the requirements of his time and was rapidly embraced by the directors and actors.

During the Communist period, despite the fact that Romania limited its economic, political and cultural relations with the West, Shakespearean theatrical shows went on. However, the English playwright was gradually appropriated and his tragedies "used either for cultural legitimization of Socialist practices, or manipulated to signify the superiority of Communism over Capitalism by applying idealized Marxist theories to the theater" (Matei-

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Chesnoiu 158). In short, Shakespearean plays were meant to draw attention to the dangers of accepting the perilous Occidental ‘‘Other’’.

According to Matei-Chesnoiu, the ‘‘domestic’’ version of *Othello* tragedy could give little scope for political or social stage readings. Yet, directors would see in Iago “the duplicitous motor of the conflict”, and emphasize “stereotypes, such as the synonymy between Moor and jealousy, or racial and pathological speculation” (Matei-Chesnoiu 168-169). Shakespearean plays would reveal “material deprivation under the official pretense of plenty; social injustice under the rule of the working class; and the moral disaster of hypocrisy” (Matei-Chesnoiu 169).

After the “proletcult” of the 1950s, Romania went through a relative liberalization, which occurred during the early years of Ceauşescu’s rule. Some freedom of expression created a prolific moment for the rehabilitation of major literary voices such as Ion Vinea. His translation of *Othello* appeared for the first time in the 50s (Editura de Stat pentru Literătură şi Artă, 1958) and continued to be republished even in the late 90s (Univers Enciclopedic, 1999), becoming a canonical work. Ion Vinea was a reputed avant-garde poet and set up a norm according to which 100 English lines should be translated into no more than 107 Romanian lines. A line per line translation would produce difficulties regarding particular words and vocabulary, mood, and overall meaning. An increase in the number of translated lines would also entail dilution, verbosity, and even the risk of literal translation. “The translation of rhyming couplets is a painful process, which confronts the translator with the same dilemma: either try to concentrate the meaning or increase the number of lines” (Vinea 185 in my trans).

Later on, Dan Amedeu Lazărescu, whose version of *Othello,* would be published posthumously by Pandora M., in Târgoviste, in 2006, reflected a system of translation in the foreword of the play. He alternated verses in rhymed prose and hendecasyllabic verses creating a special poetic effect similar to that of the ancient Greek and Latin poetry. However, just like many other predecessors, he struggled with the differences between English and Romanian in respect to vocabulary and syntax. Finally, he rimed 7-8 word hendecasyllabic verses, making sure that even the first verse of the play has actually 8 words:

,,Degeaba-mi spui la vrute și nevrute:’’

Sau :

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„Că nu sunt bun decât la rangul meu''

„Cum s-o câștigi. Darel nupoate spune…''

„ La mine-în noaptea asta, cum mi-ai spus''. (Introducere 25)

Romanian translators of *Othello* had always had to find a compromise between the meaning and the flavor of the original text, the structure of the verses and their domestication, in order to fulfill certain demands of their own historical, political, social contexts. In short, they had to choose between bringing the text to the reader or the reader to the text. We chose to exemplify their struggles by focusing on two relevant issues of the play, namely its title and the presentation of the protagonist in the cast list.

The title of the play represents an extremely important element, which is usually overlooked. However, it reflects right from the beginning the way in which the translator relates to the original text and encodes or decodes certain contextual aspects. In the case of Shakespeare's original title: The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice, Romanian translators have chosen different versions, approaching or moving away from the original.

Carp P. Petre: *Dramele lui Shakespeare: Othello. Tragedie in cinci acte.*

Victor Anestin: *Othello: Piesa in cinci acte.*

D. Nanu: *Othello.*

Mihail Dragomirescu: *Othello: Maurul de Veneția.*

Dragoș Protopopescu: *Othello.*

Florian Nicolau: *Othello: Piesa in cinci acte.*

Dan Grigorescu: *Othello in Biblioteca pentru toti*

Dan Amedeu Lazărescu: *Othello, The Moor of Venice.*

At first glance, it seems that translators faced a certain difficulty in dealing with the word "moor", which refers to the Islamic Arabic inhabitants of North Africa who conquered Spain in the eighth century. During Shakespeare's time, the term was applied to Africans from other regions as well. In *A Brief Description of the Whole World of 1599,* George Abbott makes a clear distinction between "blackish Moors" and "black Negroes" and in *The History and Description of Africa* (1600) while John Leo separates the "white or tawny Moors" of the Mediterranean coast of Africa from the "Negroes or black Moors" of the South. (qtd. Sanders 27). In other words, the reader cannot know for sure whether Othello was black or just darker than the average Europeans.

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Dragoş Dragomirescu is the only translator who tried to offer a complete reproduction of the title: "*Othello: Maurul de Veneția*" while all the others avoided this intriguing element. By adding the nobiliary particle "de", Dragomirescu underlines the noble descent of the character. The particle "de" which came from French, was also quite common in England and Wales, during the Middle Ages; for instance: Simon de Montfort, de Houghton, de Ros and de Mowbray families. Nonetheless, Dragomirescu's title conveys a sort of sad irony. It is clear that "*Maurul"* is artificially connected to *"Veneția"*; a place where he does not belong to. Meanwhile, Dan Amedeu Lazărescu escaped this controversy by publishing a bilingual version and reconstructing Shakespeare's title - *Othello, The Moor of Venice.*

In translating the title, Petre P. Carp felt the need to add „*Dramele lui Shakespeare"* probably due to the fact that *Othello* alone would have had almost no effect on the readership. Shakespeare was known only by the intellectuals of the time despite the foreign theatrical representations and the articles written about him in different magazines of the time. Therefore, the translator felt the need to emphasize the name of the author. Moreover, Carp added the construction „*Tragedie in cinci acte"*, for its spectacular effect. The noun "tragedie" is the direct correspondent of the English "tragedy" or more precisely of the French "tragédie" and bounds the original text, of British origin, to the French theatre which Romanians consumed frenetically, back the nineteenth century. On the other hand, Victor Anestin, despite his desire of remaining faithful to the original text, added a more informative construction "*Piesă în cinci acte"*, which probably had no effect purposes but subscribed to the theatrical tradition of the time. Dan Grigorescu titled his translation: *Othello în Biblioteca pentru toţi,* (ESPLA, Bucureşti, 1958). This structure shows, perhaps, how profound Communist principles penetrated literature. Shakespeare's play was meant to be read by everyone and manipulate the masses.

The way in which Othello, the protagonist of the play, is presented in the cast list, "dramatis personae", deserves a few observations as well. Shakespeare states right from the beginning that the character was "a noble Moor in the service of the Venetian state" (26). However, Romanian translators chose different ways of rendering this denomination, according to the political, social, cultural expectations of their time:

P. Petre Carp: „Generalu: Moru" (4)

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Victor Anestin: ,,nobil maur în serviciul statului veneţian" (6)

D. Nanu:,,maurul "(4)

Mihail Dragomirescu: ,,un maur de neam nobil în serviciul statului venețian" (4)

Dragoș Protopopescu: ,,nobil maur în slujba statului venețian "

Florian Nicolau: ,,nobil maur în solda Veneției" (6)

Ion Vinea: ,,nobil maur în slujba Veneției" (7)

Lăzărescu: ,,Othello, un nobil Maur în slujba Republicii Veneția"(27)

Petre P. Carp chose to call Othello ,,Generalu: Moru" (4), reconstructing the initial meaning of the original text. An intriguing element in Carps' structure is the word "Moru" which seems not to convey the meaning of 'Moor' or 'maur' and makes no reference to the character's ethnic and racial origins. The Romanian word "Maur" which corresponds to the English "Moor" comes from the Latin "Maurus", German "Maure" and the French "maure". Therefore, it could not have been transformed into "Moru" and employed under this form during nineteenth century. "Moru" sounds more like the name of a person, unless Carp might have known the Moru ethnic group of South Sudan or Equatoria, and made a confusion. Likewise, the fact that the translator chose to add the noun "general" (coming from the French "général") in order to underline Othello's status and importance, makes us think whether he did not want to Westernise the character. This attempt can be justified by the historic context of the translation. The wars against the Ottoman Empire were still very recent in the collective memory, and Romanians of the time might have totally rejected exotic, Oriental elements while embracing the West in all its forms.

It is also important to underline the fact that while most of the translators chose the epithet "nobil maur" which might underline Othello's moral qualities (and which are debatable taking into consideration the events of the play) more than his decadence, Mihail Dragomirescu felt the need to add ,,de neam nobil" (4) accentuating this difference and orienting readers' attention towards the social status of the protagonist. On the other hand, D. Nanu defines Othello only as ,,maurul"(4) and leaves the reader free to discover the character by himself, while reading the text.

It is obvious that, no matter how many changes translators might make, their efforts help revitalize the original, and its past, make certain issues obvious but also obscure. Likewise, their translations ensure the "afterlife" of the original, its perpetuation and

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accessibility to present and future generations. The study of these eight Romanian translators, their historical and theoretical contexts as well as the examples taken from Shakespeare's *Othello*, which prove how easily the original text can change according to historic, political and cultural demands, makes us underline the importance of translations in hiding or revealing important a variety of meanings, all of them becoming an endless source of inspiration and interpretation for scholars passionate by this area of research.

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