# FOREWORD

## SHAKESPEARE AND ROMANIA—AN ENDURING LOVE AFFAIR

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The story of Shakespeare and Romania is one of a continuing love affair. It is a love affair which has been a constant in the life of that country called Romania, but like all enduring love affairs is one that has changed with time.

The territory of modern Romania itself does not impinge much into Shakespeare's world, though Transylvania does get a reference, in *Pericles*. It is not, I fear, a very uplifting reference: "The poor Transylvanian is dead, that lay with the little baggage." (IV, ii)

Marcu Beza, an inter-war Romanian Consul General in London, in a short book entitled *Shakespeare in Roumania*, argues that, while direct references to places in modern day Romania are vanishingly few, folk tales extant across Romania and neighbouring countries served as inspirations for Shakespearean plots, through intermediaries such as Boccaccio.

Shakespeare arrived in Romania at the end of the eighteenth century, through German theatrical groups touring Transylvania and Italian opera companies coming to Wallachia and Moldova. The translations of Shakespeare into Romanian were intimately associated with a westernising revolutionary spirit in the nineteenth century, in which western authors like Shakespeare served as beacons in the attempt to prise Romania's political and cultural space out of the influences of the eastern empires, Ottoman and Russian, and towards the west.

The earliest translations of Shakespeare into Romanian came from French or German versions, and Shakespeare was considered very much as part of the Western cultural cannon—his Britishness was in a sense incidental. A group of Romanian intellectuals close to the 1848 revolutionary movement, led by the poet Ion Heliade Rădulescu, planned to translate all the key Shakespearean plays, though in the end did not get much further than *Julius Caesar*. Oana-Alis Zaharia, in this volume, argues that the choice of *Julius Caesar* was no coincidence; with its debate on the right to overthrow tyranny, it was a play useful to the goals of the revolutionary leaders of 1848. And Zaharia finds too that the language used by its translator, Captain S. Stoica, suited the revolutionaries' purpose in anchoring Romania into the Latin world and away from the Slavic one; particularly in its frequent use of Latin-origin words rather than more familiar local words derived from Slavic roots. Thus, friend is "amic" rather than "prieten." A similar process



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was at work north of the Carpathians—the Hungarian 1848 revolutionary Sándor Petöfi translated *Coriolanus* in the very year of revolutions.

As the nineteenth century progressed, Shakespeare remained centre stage in the process of the formation of a Romanian cultural identity, firmly anchored to the west. Zaharia, in this volume, looks also at the first Romanian translation of *Macbeth,* by St Bâgescu, in 1850, following the defeat of the 1848 revolution. She sees the topicality of the choice of that play as a call to arms against the authoritarian foreign powers who had defeated the revolution, and more specifically a response to the corrupt rule in Moldova of Mihail Sturdza; drawing parallels with Macduff's description of the desperate state of Scotland under the tyrannical rule of Macbeth. She finds in Bâgescu's translation a frequent use of neologisms derived from the French. Thus roitelet (wren) is translated by a word coined by the translator, "roateletă", rather than the Romanian word "pitulice." This all rather brings to mind the parodies of nineteenth-century Romanian writers of the invasion into the speech of upwardly-mobile Romanians of French-derived neologisms like "furculision." The conservative politician Petre Carp translated both *Macbeth* and *Othello* into Romanian. Indeed, his *Othello* was read at the very first meeting of the Junimea literary society in Iași.

The most illustrious member of Junimea was Mihai Eminescu, and indeed a whole academic sub-discipline has grown up in Romania, exploring the influences of Shakespeare on the great Romanian poet. Eminescu himself acknowledges the debt in his poem *Cărțile* ("Books"). He reportedly himself intended to translate *Timon of Athens*, but this was a work left undone.

Beza, writing in 1930, quotes figures provided by the librarian at the National Theatre in Bucharest to the effect that there had been 850 performances of Shakespearean plays at the theatre from 1884 to that date—*Hamlet* topping the list at 215, followed by *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. Which clearly suggests a certain Romanian preference for tragedy.

When in 1893 Prince Ferdinand married his British Princess, Marie, what more fitting than the production of a new Romanian translation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "Un Vis în Noaptea de Sânziene," by GP Sterian, to celebrate the occasion?

A book by the editor of this volume, Monica Matei-Chesnoiu of the University of Constanța, entitled *Shakespeare in the Romanian Cultural Memory,* focuses on performances of Shakespeare in the communist and post-communist periods, identifying in particular a number of distinct phases in the communist era's relationship with the bard of Stratford.

In the period following the installation of communism, in which the leaders of democratic parties were denounced and imprisoned as Western spies, and Russian or Soviet playwrights were promoted, there were few Shakespeare productions in Romania. But the slight thawing of Soviet relations with the West from the mid-1950s, following Khrushchev's "peaceful coexistence" speech, and particularly Romania's increasing foreign policy independent-mindedness from the early 1960s, heralded a new relationship with Shakespeare. Mădălina Nicolaescu, in this volume,



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identifies Liviu Ciulei's 1961 production of *As You Like It* as representing a major departure from the previously dominant socialist realist approach to the staging and interpretation of Shakespeare in Romania, Ciulei instead casting the play as a comic fantasy, in the context of the mini-liberalisation of the times. Russian ceased to be a compulsory language in Romanian schools from 1963, and English was now the most important foreign language in the main Romanian universities. A UK/Romanian cultural exchange programme was signed in 1962 and the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth in 1964 provided an obvious focus for cultural exchanges. The Royal Shakespeare Company brought *King Lear* and *The Comedy of Errors* to Bucharest.

In this period, the regime saw performances of Shakespeare as a means of legitimising its high cultural credentials, but theatres by and large chose to produce rather safe plays, which did not raise difficult political issues. In that 1964 anniversary year of Shakespeare, the production of comedies dominated (Matei-Chesnoiu 107).

But from the 1970s, the focus changed—Shakespeare's plays became the vehicle for the delivery of coded political messages designed to caricature and criticise the regime. There was a change in the types of plays performed in order to meet these covert political objectives. Thus, *Timon of Athens* had its first airing in 1974 in Satu-Mare, with another version four years later in Bucharest, its plot ideal for hinting at the corruption and duplicity of the regime. In the 1970s, the criticism was implicit and subtle. Ileana Berlogea, writing in the *Shakespeare Quarterly* in 1979, notes of Dinu Cernescu's 1978 production of *Timon of Athens*, that the atmosphere conjured up was that of 1930s Nazi Germany, down to the inclusion of Lisa Minnelli's rendition of *Cabaret.* It would be left to the audience to draw rather closer and more contemporary parallels.

The battles with the censors were constant, and many cultural figures were forced into exile. Vlad Mugur's attempt to put on *Hamlet* at the Cluj National Theatre in 1971 failed when the play was banned during rehearsals. Mugur headed overseas. Production designer Helmut Sturmer later followed him. Other departures included those of Lucian Pintilie in 1975 and Liviu Ciulei in 1980; both suffered from regime displeasure over the 1973 production of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* at the Bulandra Theatre, Bucharest, where Ciulei had been the theatre manager and Pintilie the director of the production.

As the 1980s progressed, directors became bolder in their political critique. Dan Micu's 1985 *As You Like It* at the Nottara Theatre in Bucharest portrayed the court of Duke Frederick as a kind of prison, encircled by a fence and moat—the Forest of Arden symbolised freedom but escape from it was difficult and dangerous (Matei-Chesnoiu 123).

The production which most famously exemplifies the use of Shakespeare in a critique of the Communist regime was the 1985 production of *Hamlet* at the Bulandra Theatre in Bucharest. Richard Eyre, writing in *The Guardian* in 2005, in an article entitled *Hamlet's Role in Toppling a Tyrant*, recalled the origins of this production. He had first visited Bucharest back in 1973, making friends among an



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intelligentsia offering a "beguiling mixture of diffidence and subversion." These contacts led eventually to a suggestion by actor Ion Caramitru that he should direct a play in Bucharest. Arriving back in that city in the early 1980s, he found a much degraded place, a result both of the damage inflicted by the 1977 earthquake and that wrought by Ceauşescu's urban planning.

*Hamlet* was chosen as the play, the global reputation of Shakespeare serving to overcome the inevitable challenge from the authorities over such awkward subject matter. Eyre himself was unable to direct the production, due to other commitments, and the task fell instead to the young Romanian director Alexandru Tocilescu. The play was a great success. Eyre concludes that this was because it represented the story of the Romanian people: "Hamlet's oppression by Claudius mirrored theirs by Ceauşescu." Nicoleta Cinpoeş of the University of Worcester is wary of oversimplification in equating specific characters in the play to specific contemporary ones, but agrees that:

> The similarities between the play and Romanian life in the '80s were easily recognisable: a nation under surveillance, the rigidity of a totalitarian regime, the spying and plotting behind closed doors and the apparatchiks eager to please the rulers for personal advantages were the standard fare of Romanian daily life.
>
> (Cinpoeş 147)

Cinpoeş points out, for example, that Hamlet's "to be or not to be..." soliloquy starts with Hamlet sitting on a spot-lit chair as if he was undergoing a police investigation. The play's association with the downfall of the Ceauşescu regime was cemented by the prominent role played by its Hamlet, Ion Caramitru, in the 1989 Romanian Revolution, with his call on all Romanians to join the revolution and famous scenes of him sitting on a tank.

While *Hamlet* continued to run at the Bulandra Theatre until 1992, the production drew much more interest abroad than in Romania following the revolution, including a tour in the United Kingdom and Ireland in 1990. At home in Bucharest, it seemed to speak to events which had already passed. Nicoleta Cinpoeş, in this volume, explores the reception of Tocilescu's *Hamlet* in London in 1990, where she argues that it had a relevance in illuminating the revolution it had already lost at home. She notes too that press coverage in the UK took account of Romania's fast-changing politics. Thus, a headline in *The Independent* of 20 September 1990 ("A Prince Who Has Been Vice-President") referred to the recent political career of its Hamlet, Ion Caramitru. Cinpoeş goes on to explore Nicholas Hytner's staging of *Hamlet* at the London National Theatre in 2010, seeing many links with Communist Romania. She argues that the Communist experience has become a trope "intrinsic to the understanding of the play anywhere today." It is a short step from this to a line of reasoning that the use of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Communist Romania to highlight the contradictions of Ceauşescu's regime served not only to change Romania but also to change *Hamlet*, or at least the way in which that play is now perceived by international audiences.



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The *Hamlet* which served as the most popular production at the National Theatre in Bucharest from 1884 to 1930 had a very different function: this was a *Hamlet* fashioned to emphasise the greatness of a Romanian actor at the very top of his profession. Such was the performance of *Hamlet* in 1884 by Grigore Manolescu, who not only performed the leading role, but also directed the play and even translated it from a French version. As Beza notes, Manolescu was depicted as Hamlet in a statue which stood in the Athenaeum in Bucharest. In the early part of the Communist period, *Hamlet* had frequently been seen as just too difficult.

*Hamlet* in post-revolutionary Romania has played a different role again. Vlad Mugur returned to the Cluj National Theatre in 2001, the scene of his failed attempt to put on the play 30 years earlier. The constraints he faced this time were physical rather than political—the director knew he was dying. *Hamlet* served as a celebration of his artistic work (Matei-Chesnoiu 213). Vlad Mugur died just one month after the avant-premiere.

Immediately after the 1989 Revolution, Shakespeare was used as a vehicle for no-holds barred caricatures of the excesses of the Ceauşescu regime, as in Silviu Purcărete's 1990 production of *Ubu Rex With Scenes from Macbeth*, adapted from Shakespeare and Alfred Jarry, and performed at the Craiova National Theatre, later touring the UK. Ian McKellen, writing in the *New York Times* in 1991, described a tour earlier that year by the London National Theatre, with the support of the British Council, bringing *King Lear* and *Richard III* to a variety of countries, including Romania. He recollected that, on the death of Richard III, the Communist symbol at the heart of the Romanian flag was ripped out on stage and the flag was draped around the new king.

But productions of Shakespeare in Romania quickly moved on from a focus on the Communist period. Some looked to highlight more contemporary political challenges. Matei-Chesnoiu suggests that an increase in the frequency of performances in Romania of *Measure for Measure* in the 1990s is linked to the suitability of that play as a vehicle for discussion of issues related to corruption and profiteering (Matei-Chesnoiu 153).

In Romania today, Shakespeare remains popular, and widely performed. The Romanian Shakespeare is to be seen and enjoyed as part of the international Shakespeare family, as we see both in theatres across the country and at set piece events, such as the remarkable international Shakespeare Festival in Craiova, carefully nurtured by Emil Boroghină. And it is fitting that Ion Caramitru, the actor whose performance of Hamlet is so associated with the downfall of dictatorship, agreed to act as ambassador for the United Kingdom's "Shakespeare Lives" campaign in Romania on the 400$^{th}$ anniversary year of the playwright's death in 2016.

Shakespeare in Romania today is no longer a talisman of a western culture to which Romania aspires but has not yet reached, or a subversive agent of domestic political change, but a symbol of an international cultural family of which Romania is a proud and full member.



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