

SHAKESPEARE BETWEEN ADOPTION AND ADAPTATION: A ROMANIAN CASE STUDY

Elena PALIȚĂ

Assistant Lecturer PhD

Constantin Brâncuși University of Târgu Jiu

ABSTRACT.

IN SKETCHING THE PROCESS BY WHICH “THEIR” SHAKESPEARE BECAME “OUR” SHAKESPEARE IN ROMANIA, A NON-ENGLISH-SPEAKING AND LATIN-ORIGIN CULTURE, THE FOCUS IS ON THE APPROPRIATION, ASSIMILATION, AND TRANSFORMATION OF SHAKESPEARE’S LANGUAGE THROUGH TRANSLATIONS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY. WHEN DEALING WITH EARLY TRANSLATIONS, A NUMBER OF ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS CAN BE RAISED. THIS PAPER TRIES TO ANSWER SOME OF THESE QUESTIONS, BASED ON THE EXAMPLE OF EMINESCU’S ADAPTATIONS OF THE SHAKESPEAREAN TEXT. THE ESSENCE OF EMINESCU’S ARGUMENT IS THAT ROMANIAN PLAYWRIGHTS MUST STUDY ATTENTIVELY THE DRAMATIC STRUCTURE AND PROFOUND SYMBOLISM OF SHAKESPEARE’S PLAYS BEFORE BEING ABLE TO DRAW ON HIM EFFECTIVELY.

KEY WORDS: ADOPTION, TRANSLATION, STRUCTURE, DRAMA, ADAPTATION

In surveying the nineteenth-century translations of Shakespeare in Romania, it becomes visible how various translators interpreted the allusions existant in the Shakespeare text. The underlying inference is that the early Romanian translators addressed the complex philosophical issues in the tragedies in a particularly orthodox mode. Despite the popularity of the Roman plays with the theatrical audiences in the three provinces, and later in the unified Romania, the four tragedies, Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, and King Lear, provided material that could satisfy the public’s need for interiority. In addition, the cultural authority of the Shakespeare figure was perceived as a means of facilitating the country’s exit from the status of a marginalized Balkan elsewhere. By promoting mostly the translations of Shakespeare’s plays that they perceived to raise the universal issues of humanity, Romanian intellectuals during the 1848 revolutionary period and later hoped to advance the people’s cultural interests and integrate them in the European family of nations.

The Romanian 19th century is deeply marked by the Shakespearean obsession. The Shakespearean repertoire found its foremost position among the first theatrical representations; it is the reason why its translation into Romanian started at the same time with the founding of the first Romanian theatres. During a few decades only, the taste of the audience, refined by the Shakespearean productions, came to sanction plagiarism and the cheap localization and to firmly encourage the original plays. This aspect of the stimulation of original creativity is by far the

most important of all, as it is difficult to find a Romanian playwright who was not influenced by the Shakespearean model.

In sketching the process by which “their” Shakespeare became “our” Shakespeare in Romania, a non-English-speaking and Latin-origin culture, the focus is on the appropriation, assimilation, and transformation of Shakespeare’s language through translations in the nineteenth century. “There is a close relationship between the people and the languages. Like people languages appear, develop and disappear.”¹When dealing with early translations, a number of essential questions can be raised. How does Shakespeare “translated” into other cultures reveal dimensions of the plays not apparent in their early modern origins? Is Shakespeare outside English still Shakespeare? How have the early translations of the plays served as a vehicle for cultural domination and the dissemination of ideas? In these terms, translation means both verbal literary treatment, which is the object of this chapter, and more broadly, translation and interpretation in the theater. Early nineteenth-century Romanian poets saw in Shakespeare a good vehicle for promoting their revolutionary ideals, one of the insertion points of cultural strategies within the political setting of the 1848 revolution. Moreover, the multiple questionings and the ethical issues raised in the plays, explored mainly in the tragedies, were good ways of raising the people’s awareness and developing a sense of national identity.

Shakespeare reached Romania at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth with the German theater groups that toured Transylvania and arrived as far as Bucharest. The theaters set up in Transylvania in this period housed companies led by well-known actors who performed plays from the world classic dramatic repertory of the Viennese stage. When Shakespeare was first discovered in Romania, through French and German translations, he found a receptive audience there. His plays used language that was familiar to Romanians, since they spoke of fairy tales, Alexander the Great, the story of Troy, ancient Roman history, and the Biblical allegories. In the public and private libraries of the period, Shakespeare’s works, and those of other English writers, were only available in French and German versions. Besides the translations, the writings of French and German literary historians and critics were instrumental in introducing Shakespeare’s plays into Romanian culture.

The political conditions prevailing in the early nineteenth century did not favor the publication of the whole range of translations from Shakespeare, even in a mediated foreign version. The revolutionaries were unable to carry out their extensive and superb plans, despite their aspirations for a culturally united Romania. Political and especially material constraints were drastically prohibitive. However, the fact that a group of progressive writers, all enthusiastic pioneers of Romanian culture, admired and promoted Shakespeare determined those who were associated with the theatrical life to come forward and encourage the production of Shakespeare’s plays by Romanian actors, for the benefit of the public at large. In the next three decades following the 1848 revolution, translators focused only on Shakespeare’s great tragedies, probably responding to the audience’s need for the transcendental significance these plays may assume. The rhetorical texture of these tragedies suggests a metaphysical logic that would have appealed to the sophisticated readers of the time. They were already familiar with the scriptural symbolic language not only from customary church attendance, but also because of

¹ Adina Paicu, *The study of foreign language in modern society*, Annals of the “Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu-Jiu, Letter and Social Science Series, Issue 4/2014

the various translations of the Bible and other religious texts. Ever since the first printing press was brought in to Walachia (1635) and Moldova (1643), a large number of religious books in Romanian were published in these provinces; in Transylvania, Genesis and Exodus were printed even earlier, in 1582. The first full-text Bible in Romanian was printed at Bucuresti in 1688.

Eminescu was perhaps the most famous Romanian writer influenced by the Shakespearean drama. The interest of our national poet for the literary work of the Bard was not a secret as “Eminescu read Shakespeare’s work from childhood, from school years in the German version of Schlegel and Tieck”¹. In his early years, as a prompter of a theatre company, the now National Poet of Romania knew very well not only the authors – mostly French and German – he was prompting from, but also Shakespeare. Thus, in 1868, when he had started his novel *Geniu pustiu* (“Empty Genius”), he was mentioning “the genius of the divine Brit” in a sentence that he would resume later, in his story, *Sărmanul Dionis* (“Poor Dionysus”): “It looked like the genius of Shakespeare, the divine Brit, had expired upon the earth a new lunatic angel, a new Ophelia”. It is in the same period that the young poet dreamed at writing a number of tragedies, one inspired by Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.

But the most important moment of this period is the poet’s own translation of H. T. Röttscher’s *The Art of Dramatic Representation*, in which Shakespeare’s work is frequently mentioned. This translation – started in Bucharest and completed in Vienna – testifies not only to the young poet’s mastery of all aspects of dramatic representation, but also to his vast literary and humanistic initiation.² Eminescu’s indebtedness to Röttscher is fully identifiable in his cult for Shakespeare – the German aesthetician’s treaty being one of the most profound apologies of Shakespeare’s theatre of the time. It also means that Eminescu was not only familiar with the writings of Goethe, or Schiller, but also with the complete works of the *divine Brit*. It is in his poem *Emperor and Proletarian* that, after the fall of the Paris Commune, the Caesar – deep in thought and full of remorse for the horrors committed, seems to see the gigantic shadow of old King Lear:

“It seemed to him that under the star-bespangled sky,
Over the crests of forests, over the waters’ sphere,
He saw how, hoary-headed, with a dark brow severe
Upon which there was hanging the crown of straws, all dry,
Passed on the old king Lear.
The Caesar watched intently the shadow in the cloud;
Through rifts where stars peeped trembling his mind could see the sense,
The whole sense of the pictures depicting all intense
And glamorous existence... The peoples’ echoes loud
Were voices that betokened a world of vile offence.”³

¹ Mirabela Curelar, *Influences of the work of William Shakespeare in Mihai Eminescu’s poetry*, Analele Universității “Constantin Brâncuși” din Târgu Jiu, Seria Științe ale Educației, Nr. 3și 4/2011

² H. T. Röttscher, *Die Kunst der dramatischen Darstellung* (3 vols. Berlin, 1841-1846). For his translation, Eminescu used the second edition of the work, H. Th. Röttscher, *Die Kunst der dramatischen Darstellung. In ihrem organischen Zusammenhänge wissenschaftlich entwickelt*, zweite vermehrte Auflage, Leipzig, Verlag von Otto Wigand, 1864.

³ Mihai Eminescu, *Emperor and Proletarian*. Translated by Leon Levițchi. Mihai Eminescu: *Poezii / Poems*, translated by Leon Levițchi and Andrei Bantaș, Bucharest: TEORA, 2007, 1999, p. 105.

One further example is Eminescu’s moving obituary upon the death, on 31 December 1882, of Léon Gambetta, Prime Minister of France, where he quotes Shakespeare in prose, but in a surprisingly correct translation:

“Life is only a travelling shadow, a comedian that for a full hour shouts and gestures on the stage, and then is not heard any longer; it is a story told by an idiot, full of storms and agitation, and finally meaning nothing.”⁴

For a comparison, here is the original Shakespearean text:

“*Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*”

(Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, v.5, emphasis added)

One remarkable example of the poet’s knowledge of Shakespeare is to be found in an article published in 1870 where, commenting on the Romanian dramatist Bolintineanu’s plays, more artificial and vulnerable to criticism, he writes:

“The cause of the profound failure of Mr Bolintineanu in these creations seems to be that he cast a glance at the genial eagle of the North: on Shakespeare. Indeed, when you have his [Shakespeare’s] works in your hand, they seem so broken, so disconnected that you think there is nothing easier to write like him, and even exceed him in regularity. But perhaps there never lived a tragic author with such a command upon his matter, an author who wove so consciously all the threads of his work, like Shakespeare; it is because the break is only apparent, and a clear sight would immediately visualize that unity full of symbolism and profoundness which rules in all the creations of this powerful genius. Goethe – a genius – stated that a dramatists that reads more than one play by Shakespeare per year should not be read, but studied in such a way that should allow you to know as much as you can in order to imitate him because, on my opinion, the Shakespearean domain that Mr Bolintineanu could have more successfully tackled would have been that of absolute abstraction, as in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *A Winter’s Tale*, *As You Like It*, etc...”⁵

It would seem that as early as 1870 Eminescu had read *all the creations of this powerful genius*. But Eminescu does not only eulogize his master by opposing him to the artificial and vulnerable drama of the 19th century, but also goes deeper in defining the essence of this creation by its roots, starting from the folk songs, whom he calls

“...fragrant flowers, but as wild as the flowers in mad King Lear’s crown. Isn’t the seemingly meaningless mixture of the wild flowers that mingle in the locks of the old king the vivid metaphor of his brain, in which the images – flowers of his thought – mingled wildly and without any meaning? And how profound those thoughts are, and how fragrant the flowers! This is how the wild flowers – the folk songs – are. It is on their field that Shakespeare and any other national poet

⁴ Quoted in Perpessicius, *Studii eminesciene*. București: Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2001, p. 199, my translation.

⁵ The article was first published in *Familia* – 30 January 1870, and quoted in Perpessicius, p. 199, my translation.

harvested. [...] Shakespeare spoke of man as he really is. His drunkard is a drunkard, his hero a hero, his fool a fool, his sceptic a sceptic, and each of them generously painted with the colour of his character, because the People creates what he sees, and Shakespeare was one of his people, by excellence.”⁶

One mention should be made: Eminescu had seen *King Lear* in Vienna, in 1870, before Christmas.

During his years in Berlin (1872-1874), Eminescu was trying a failed attempt at a parody meant for the puppet-show, and entitled *The Infamy, Cruelty, and Dispair, or The Black Cave and the bad Censers, or Elvira in the Desperation of Love*. The characters are the King, the Queen, the Ministers, and Pepelea, the schemer. Here is a sample of his notes for the play:

“It is highly necessary to translate the foreign classics.
Therefore, let us start with Shakespeare.
Accepted – but he should be naturalized.
Good – which play are we starting with?
Richard III.
Good. Let’s nationalize the types. We turn the king into a Turkish captain,
the queen into a virgin and R. III into a Jesuit.
When would you like the translation completed?
Who’s the idiot to ask such a question? Tonight, of course.
How could it be? A tragedy until tonight?
Oh! How stupid you are! Aren’t you a genius, like us all?
Pepelea, you write the parts of the captain and the Jesuit.”⁷

All these are the strivings and feelings of a poet.

As a journalist, Eminescu wrote a critical pamphlet in *Familia* a popular literary journal published in Transylvania. With an acute critical spirit, the poet remarks that, when Romanian playwrights draw on Shakespearean models in their historical plays, the result is desultory, because the approach is negligent and superficial. According to Eminescu, “Shakespeare must not only be read, but studied, so that one may understand what lies in their power to imitate from him.” In the adoption of the any text all “the five classical senses namely vision, hearing, touch smell and taste have been considered as channels providing information”¹. Moreover, in the particular case of Shakespeare, Eminescu recommends authors to pay attention to the capacity of “absolute abstraction”, considering that the dramatist has the talent “to raise the public to his height and still to be under-stood completely by them.”

When such a playwright addresses any public, the question of whether a certain national audience is or is not prepared to understand him becomes irrelevant. The essence of Eminescu’s argument is that Romanian playwrights must study attentively the dramatic structure and profound symbolism of Shakespeare’s plays before being able to draw on him effectively. In emphasizing the need for careful consideration of Shakespeare’s plays by Romanian writers, Eminescu adduces, in an indirect manner, the problem of translation of the Shakespeare opus.

⁶ Qtd in Grid Modorcea, *Shakespeare și Eminescu*. Craiova: Editura Aius PrintEd, 2006, p. 228, my translation.

⁷ Ms. 2285, p. 377, quoted by both Perpessicius, p. 201, and Modorcea, p. 230.

¹ Mihaela Manasia, *The biological systems and perception verbs*, Annals of the “Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu-Jiu, Letter and Social Science Series, 1/2016

For an author to be understood at such profound level by the writers of a nation there would be a high demand of good translations. Nineteenth-century Romanian writers were educated at French and German schools, and their English proficiency was almost nonexistent. Only good translations could give them the opportunity of studying Shakespeare intensely, paying special attention to symbols, dramatic structure, motifs, and style. Eminescu’s manuscripts, now in the Romanian Academy Library, show that he was an assiduous reader of Shakespeare (probably in German translations), and that he even intended to translate *Timon of Athens*. Moreover, Leon Levițchi argues that in Eminescu’s translation, 132 lines in *Timon of Athens* are translated from English, not from German or French.

References:

1. Grid Modorcea, *Shakespeare și Eminescu*. Craiova: Editura Aius PrintEd, 2006, p. 228
2. Mihai Eminescu, *Emperor and Proletarian*. Translated by Leon Levițchi. Mihai Eminescu: *Poezii / Poems*, translated by Leon Levițchi and Andrei Bantaș, Bucharest: TEORA, 2007, 1999, p. 105
3. Mihai Eminescu, *Emperor and Proletarian*. Translated by Leon Levițchi. Mihai Eminescu: *Poezii / Poems*, translated by Leon Levițchi and Andrei Bantaș, Bucharest: TEORA, 2007, 1999, p. 105.
4. Mirabela Curelar, *Influences of the work of William Shakespeare in Mihai Eminescu’s poetry*, Analele Universității “Constantin Brâncuși” din Târgu Jiu, Seria Științe ale Educației, Nr. 3și 4/2011
5. Mihaela Manasia, *The biological systems and perception verbs*, Annals of the “Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu-Jiu, Letter and Social Science Series, 1/2016
6. Adina Paicu, *The study of foreign language in modern society*, Annals of the “Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu-Jiu, Letter and Social Science Series, Issue 4/2014
7. Perpessicius, *Studii eminesciene*. București: Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2001, p. 199