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“The play’s the thing”: A Farcical Re-writing of *Hamlet* as Subversive Anti-Totalitarian Discourse

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Abstract

Polonius, Romanian author Victor Cilincă’s farcical rewriting of *Hamlet*, is worth mentioning among the many postmodernist adaptations of Shakespeare’s works, despite the fact that it is virtually unknown to both theatregoers and critics. The play premiered in 1996, in Galati, having been ‘hidden’ in the writer’s drawer for more than a decade for fear that censorship might grasp its anti-totalitarian implications. In 2011, it was translated by Petru Iamandi for an American indie press.

Prefaced by a brief overview of drawer literature and “refashioning of Shakespeare’s image along the lines of Communist ideology” (Colipcă-Ciobanu 2016: 26), in communist Romania, the paper focuses on the meta-dimension of the two-act play, as well as on the subversive aspects identifiable at the textual level.

Keywords: *political humour, communism, drawer literature, intertextuality, Hamlet*

Shakespeare in Romania has a centennial tradition, his plays having been translated, commented on, staged, broadcast, critically interpreted, and even used in advertising (see Colipcă-Ciobanu 2016: 25-46). Extensively studied at the academic level, in the *English Language and Literature* B.A. programmes throughout the country, he has been made familiar to audiences of “all time” –i.e., an *all-time* that can be reasonably considered when one refers to a flourishing Romanian culture – from the nineteenth century onwards. However, the advent of postmodernism, in the second half of the twentieth century, somehow bypassed the Romanian cultural (and geopolitical) territory due to its chronologically overlapping the early years of totalitarian communism. Postmodernism, with all its interrogation, uncertainty, and incredulity (Lyotard 1979), could not have been allowed to destabilise the communist reader/audience, nor could the latter have been

allowed to access its cultural products – adaptations, parodies, pastiches or, to use an overarching term, rewritings. While the world was celebrating Shakespeare’s legacy with an immense number of film productions meant to bring him closer to contemporary audiences, thus laying the foundation of a “Shakespeare-on-film canon” (Gheorghiu 2015: 12), Romanians could only access his works in theatrical staging and on the page, in the sequential translations of Shakespeare’s Complete Works in the 1950s and later, in the 1980s. The former, the effort of Mihnea Gheorghiu and his team of translators, “bears enough marks of the refashioning of Shakespeare’s image along the lines of Communist ideology” (Colipcă-Ciobanu 2016: 26), and was widely circulated in the Romanian cultural space, which was both a blessing and a curse. Their Shakespeare was cunningly aligned with the official narrative, in many instances making his verse sound as if it were anti-feudalistic or anti-bourgeoisie, but the silver lining was that his works didn’t fall prey to censorship, as it happened with so many other writers’, and remained constantly available for a readership that was capable of reading between the lines.

In what concerns the postmodernist practice of recycling, rewriting and readapting older texts into new shapes and frameworks of interpretation, by means of various forms of hypertextuality, communist Romania does not provide a significant collection of such examples when it comes to the vast area of Shakespeare adaptations. A noteworthy, widely acknowledged text of this kind is the play by the renowned dramatist Marin Sorescu, *Vărul Shakespeare* (*Cousin Shakespeare*), published in 1987. Loosely based on *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, with some occasional inroads in other plays, *Cousin Shakespeare* introduces Shakespeare himself as a character, seemingly in a crisis of inspiration when writing *Hamlet* – whose titular character he accidentally kills. By parodically imitating the Shakespearean discourse, with critical distance and overtly metafictional authorial intrusions, and thereby observing “the teachings of the twentieth-century art forms” (Hutcheon 1984), the play’s main concern seems to be “the unlimited power of Logos to create a whole world out of nothing, blurring and ultimately erasing the boundaries between reality and fiction” (Dobrotă 2014: 158), although the addition of a fictional character requesting Shakespeare to write a heroic chronicle play on Michael the Brave, the Romanian ruler contemporary with his time, might open an avenue of interpreting the text as a slightly parodic and subtle critique of the propagandistic history very much ‘in fashion’ in the 1980s Romania.

However, much more obviously oriented along these lines is another dramatic text, which has received little critical attention, for reasons that I will briefly mention in what follows. The play, entitled *Polonius*, is – as expected – an intertextual game that relies on *Hamlet*, but which displaces the focus from the Danish prince and his existentialist (*avant la lettre*, of course) disquietude and interrogations to the artisan of machinations in the Shakespearean text, the humble ‘fishmonger’ Polonius. According to the information provided by the author, Victor Cilincă, in private correspondence, “*Polonius* was done in 1983, [he] presented it in a reading group of *Orientări* literary magazine, conducted by future

theatre director Attila Vizauer. [He] wouldn't dream at the time that [he] could have been staged, even with a 'normal' play. It is a useful exercise in memorising or learning history" (mail, 2011). After the fall of communism, the play premiered on February 10, 1996, in Galati (Romania) the author's city of residence, staged by the local theatre. In 2000, Cilincă's long-time friend and colleague at the regional branch of the Romanian Writers' Union, a renowned translator and academic, Associate Professor Petru Iamandi, PhD, embarked upon the thorny task of translating the text, with the support of a native translator, the American writer Richard Wright. This version, which is also used for reference in this presentation, was published in 2011 by an American independent publishing house, Borgo Press. Nevertheless, what is important to stress is the fact that this play surfaced some 13 years after its creation and that for the most part of the 1980s existed only as a piece of "drawer literature", which, in hindsight, speaks of its subversive nature and of the dangerous 'stings' at the regime that it contains behind its loosely *Hamlet*-based plot.

Drawer literature, i.e. unpublished and unpublishable pieces, much in the spirit of the Russian samizdat, is actually a term contested by many Romanian critics, who assert it only as an exception rather than the rule when it comes to Romanian literary dissidence. Monica Lovinescu, quoted in Elena Iancu-Botezatu's book on *Identity Reflections in Post-1989 Romanian Drama* (2019) is categorical: "We had no samizdat, we were in lack of dissidents – the cases were not only rare, but also isolated – therefore we do not have that drawer literature that we imagine in our moments of enlightenment" (2019: 159, my translation). Similarly, the critic Nicolae Manolescu asserts that "we had no drawers... as there was nothing to hide in there" (Ibid.). Notwithstanding, Iancu-Botezatu cites the author of *Polonius*, who disagrees: "The general perception is that 'secret' drama was not good, aesthetically speaking. One cannot draw the line and make generalisations... What is more, one cannot affirm that there wasn't any drawer literature" (161). The dramatist lists his own plays, *Polonius*, *The Cats' Revolution*, *Let's Lick This Wall* or *The Little Lighter Girl*, *Mrs Warren's Disappearance*, etc., as examples of texts produced by an author who was not a part of the totalitarian "inner circle" and who could not, consequently, dare to propose for publication/staging dramatic texts that could raise the eyebrow of those in charge of censorship.

Polonius is revealed from its very subtitle as "a political farce in two acts", the play being intended as an allegorical identification of the Romanian space with the Danish one – Danish inasmuch as Shakespeare's *Elsinore* can be considered truly Danish and not yet another allegorical representation of his own time and space. Although obviously based on *Hamlet*, the play does not feature a Hamlet character. He is replaced with a generic Freeman, "a man at a loose end, revolutionary by profession" (Cilincă 2011, list of characters). As already mentioned, the main character is the chamberlain of *Elsinore*, who is at all times accompanied by a 'lieutenant', Daisy, the chief housekeeper, in charge of safeguarding Ophelia's chastity. Yorick is alive and well in Cilincă's play,

although he is later revealed as “Yorick II”, the son of the “fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy”, having the function that all Shakespearean fools have in his plays, that of saying uncomfortable truths veiled under the appearance of ‘foolishness’.

In fact, the most significant part that Cilincă retains from his famous Shakespearean intertext is the metatheatrical device used in *Hamlet* to reveal Claudius’s crime, namely the play-within-a-play *The Mousetrap*. Much of the Romanian text, aside from Freeman’s very explicit calls to revolution, is, in fact, a parodic rewriting of the respective play, adorned with side-line comments of the ‘actors’. The Queen and the King are designated from the very beginning as “actors”, Claudius and Gertrude are only alluded to, just like Hamlet and Ophelia. The play is announced by Boogie Man, a character introduced because “they needed an evil one”, with an obvious intertextual allusion to the mechanics’ play in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as “a wonderful and terrible drama” (2011: 15). The lines of the King and Queen characters start, very early in the play, from the first scenes, signalling not only subversion, but also an explicit attack against the regime in power at the time of the writing of the play: the totalitarian regime of the Ceausescu couple: “before death, any sovereign is good enough for his subjects to dedicate odes to” (15) or “My country glorifies me, the ballads that have been dedicated to me are witness to that. The people jeer... (coughs) cheer whenever they see me on the balcony” (17). It is general knowledge, in Romania at least, that Nicolae Ceausescu had imposed, after his visiting North Korea, Vietnam, and other Asian communist countries in the early 1970s, a genuine cult of personality, which was to manifest, more and more powerfully, until his ‘deposition’ and execution in December 1989. Cilincă amplifies the praise of the dictator and his wife by attributing them no less than the invention of... the Law of Gravitation – “He’s passed a number of clever laws. There was the Law of Nourishment, the Law of Censorship, the Law of Gravitation” (18).

The allusions are anything but transparent for the Romanian readership, but the question that arises is what is left of them in this form of ‘back-translation’ into the language of *Hamlet* undertaken, years later, by Iamandi and Wright. The King and Queen are said, not at all allusively again, to thrive while their subjects are starving. Spatially, they are placed in a “green garden” from where they do not have the time or disposition to deal with the country’s issues of poverty, on the one hand, and of independence from the great shadow of the USSR on the other. “So far the Norwegians have taken about ten thousand square miles from us, but I haven’t had the time to take care of that” (18). The allegorical replacement of the Soviet threat with the Norwegian Fortinbras’ invasion of Denmark in the Shakespearean hypotext is again straightforward and comes to reinforce the idea that the play could not possibly pass censorship even in the event that a very naïve ‘eye’ would have it assessed.

The first scene follows the plot in *Hamlet* closely – the former ruler, who was also sleeping in the already proverbial “green garden” (mentioned at least 15 times) had hemlock poured in his ear by the current one, then a funeral and a wedding

ensue: “An hour later he was cold. Colder than usual. I can tell you now that he was a tyrant. We buried him. Well. With pomp. Then we had the wedding meal. The best counsellor of the loathsome monarch and the mourning Queen” (19), lest the reader should forget that *Polonius* is a postmodernist tribute/rewriting. Very soon, however, Cilincă introduces a New Historicist-inspired comment on the textuality of history, of its being altered by the will of the rulers:

This has, indeed, been everything—the official version. When the living evidence is lost, destroyed, stolen or locked fearfully away, historians will finally reconstitute an approximate, fictionalised account of these events. A little later, an Englishman will write a play about the customs of the ruling classes in today’s Denmark, and all will laud it (19).

As obvious from the quote above, the intention seems to be at least threefold. Aside from the ‘historical note’ artfully introducing the commentary that history, just as any other text, nears fiction, and therefore cannot be taken for reality, the source is also acknowledged within and by the text, and Shakespeare is subtly critiqued for re-writing history so as to please the ones in power. The fictocriticism, that contamination, that blending of literature and literary criticism for which Derrida asked a name and a more proper distinction (in *Acts of Literature*, 1992), continues in the subsequent scenes with the ‘additional’ characters from *Polonius*, namely Daisy and Boogie Man, commenting directly on the characters from *Hamlet* that are missing from the derivative play. Quoting bits and pieces from Hamlet’s lines in the Shakespearean play, it is concluded that the Prince cannot be considered crazy, but eccentric, because one simply cannot call the rulers “crazy” and, anyway, that his charm comes from his handsomeness. Somehow, from this ‘unorthodox’ critical analysis of Hamlet’s madness, the text manages to return to its actual concern, i.e., the political situation in Romania and the intoxication of the people: “The people are sentimental— they bear anything as long as there are photos in the paper, and the leader’s smile is sweet enough...” (Cilincă 2011: 24).

Pointing to the unreliability of fiction (or drama), the main character, Polonius, states that “it is not in plays that the truth is written!” (26), thus drawing attention to the status of the play in relation to the truth, but this is just an artifice probably meant to safeguard the author against any risks of his being exposed as an enemy of the people for this text. It is not real, it is not supposed to be real, and it is also a thing of the fools, which should not be subject to any inquiry of the ‘truth police’. In a similar manner, Yorick II also passes a comment that can be read both metafictionally and politically: “Look, when you tell the truth—for example, “the king has grown decrepit”— everyone thinks it’s a metaphor. However, if I say “the weather is bad” they start whispering. They imagine I’m hinting at the disastrous social conditions or the bankrupt economy. In the latter case, the Censor’s Office deletes the sentence. Dear me, I shouldn’t have said “Censor’s Office”—those words are censored!” (48). Thus, the text basically refers to its own fate outside the text, once fallen in the hands of the vigilant eyes of censorship, which will “delete

the obvious and leave the sublehint...” (48).

Cilincă’s play, however, did not go through the process of being censored, neither was its author interrogated for his subversive intentions, as it remained a text hidden from the eyes of theregime. When emphasising that “the Dane is free to talk about anything he wants; the American, though, is free *afterwards* as well!” (52), an old, communist joke which featured the Soviet man instead of the Dane, the text of the play already alludes to the status of fiction as a possible troublemaker for its creator, and brings an extra-argument for its being left in the drawer. After all, “everything is possible in Denmark!” (67). It is thus possible even to rewrite a play that was, among many other interpretations, regarded as a play about surveillance and trap-setting, in which Shakespeare linked “the oppressive practices of political performance and surveillance at Hamlet’s Elsinore to the condition of citizens in interventionist states” (Hackett 2013: 11) in such a manner that would have severely impacted the freedom of its author, had it been discovered by the authorities. The resulting play remains, however, hidden, and surfaces years after the fall of communism, if only to remind its readers or viewers that the revolutionary postmodernism somehow managed to cut through the bars of that prison that was not Denmark, but Romania.

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