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SHAKESPEARE'S UNTRANSLATABLE ENGLISHNESS TRANSLATED INTO OPERA

Abstract: This article will analyse the various ways in which opera translations of William Shakespeare's works are part of the cultural adaptation process. Using examples from various libretti, from the classical to the Romanian versions, the author claims that these adaptations are actually making Shakespeare more accessible across linguistic and cultural borders.

Keywords: Shakespeare, translations, opera libretto, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*

During the four hundred years that have passed since his death, commemorated this year (1616-2016), William Shakespeare's work has been translated into almost all the languages of the world. Romanian translations appeared around 1850, and a number of scholars like Mădălina Nicolaescu, George Volceanov, Ana-Karina Schneider, and Oana-Alis Zaharia have studied these renditions in depth. Such translations, just as their other European counterparts, are not so much transpositions from one language into another as retellings or adaptations. In any literature there are authors, works, fragments, sayings or words that are untranslatable. Each nation alternately complains and boasts about it. Such "obstacles" are often seen as marks of the linguistic uniqueness.

Thus, according to the geographical area, moment in time, type of religion and civilisation and, most of all, the strict conventions of what is or is not acceptable as decorous on stage in a certain age, each culture has made Shakespeare its own. Until well into the twentieth century – when a new sense of respect for an author’s style and for the individuality, authenticity, and integrity of each work was born, as well as a new ethics of translation – each nation cut, added, turned into prose, paraphrased, simplified, bowdlerised, censored, purged or downright altered Shakespeare’s plays, adding a drop of its own local colour or bias, of its approval or reproof to the versions that it offered to the audience. Discussing a rewriting of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* from 1692, Constant Lambert describes it as “a seventeenth-century hotch-potch” (Lambert 20) and Edward J. Dent remarks that the author “must have shared Pepys’s contempt for the play, for he (...) made verbal alterations in Shakespeare’s own text which destroy all his poetry and reduce his language to the level of very common speech” (Dent 16). In modern times, the urge to adapt and appropriate the Bard’s texts has become so overwhelming that Rustom Bharucha contends that its decontextualisation and reductionism may have come to violate the “ethics of representation” (Bharucha 4).

Oddly enough, there have been no notable complaints about Shakespeare’s untranslatability, for it is not the words he uses that find no counterpart in other languages, but the ineffable spirit and atmosphere that he wove into his works, as well as his peerless art of combining those common words, of expressing ideas. This is what often makes us unable to recognise one of his very famous sonnets when translated into a different language.

The advent of opera as a genre preceded Shakespeare’s death by very little. The first surviving work considered to be an opera was Jacopo Peri’s *Euridice* in 1600 (Peri’s earlier *Dafne* being lost). Initially inspired by Greek myths, opera started as a form of remediation, as Bolter and Grusin have recently identified it - a process through which new media achieve their cultural significance by paying homage to, rivalling, and refashioning earlier media – in this case theatre and literature. This process was forged by the cultural context in which the opera was written, the conventions of the lyrical theatre in each age, social and political factors, trends and fashions, as well as the tastes and expectations of the public. Therefore, in order to understand the adaptation of the

veteran Elizabethan drama into opera, the researcher must delve into the history of mentalities, since cultural and historical barriers render not only language, but also mentalities untranslatable.

Likewise, this realm provides another kind of “translation” – that of the spoken text into its sung version. Opera has the possibility of increasing dramatic tension and the ability of outlining characters through the means germane to music: tonal structure, rhythm, timbre, vocal virtuosity, agogics, dynamics, balance between the types of voices, the right proportion and distribution of arias, ensembles, choruses, ballets and orchestral interventions, as well as many other elements.

Libretti may be original, that is, written on purpose for certain operas, but most of them are based on historical events or on literary works – novels, short stories and, most of all, theatre plays. In this case, the passage from one genre to the other entails a dramatic metamorphosis resulting in the alteration of the plot, the reduction of the number of characters, or the contraction of several characters into one, and the need to shrink the text, an imposition that derives logically from the fact that in music each syllable may be stretched over several notes and that there are many repetitions as well as rests and orchestral interludes, but also from a phenomenon explained by Eleonora Enăchescu: “a sung text widens the perception of the temporal dimension considerably” (Enăchescu 16). Thus, situation, state of mind, feeling and conflict are “translated” according to the conventions of opera and all the factors that are paramount in the play become subordinated to music and its pace in the corresponding opera: “Everything that contributes to the making of the performance relinquishes its own rhythm in favour of the rhythm in the score” (Ionescu Arbore 47) [my translation]. But proper translation is also a central issue in this process of adaptation, as the language of the original literary source (in the case of Shakespeare’s plays – English) is replaced with the new linguistic richness specific to the language of the libretto.

The present article will illustrate the various ways in which opera can translate Shakespeare’s untranslatable Englishness first by making a detailed analysis of how the typically English language humour of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is adapted in Salieri’s *Falstaff* (as an example), and then by making several more cursory references to various operas that reinterpret the realities of Elizabethan England according to their

own cultural stamp¹. Antonio Salieri wrote his *Falstaff o Le Tre burle (Or the 3 Tricks)*, with a libretto signed by Carlo Prospero Defranceschi, in 1799 at the Kärntnertortheater in Vienna, where the author was appointed composer and Kapellmeister of Italian opera at the Court of Habsburg Emperor Joseph II². Salieri had collaborated with the greatest librettists of the day including Beaumarchais, Goldoni, da Ponte, and Casti. Therefore, his *flair* induced him to preserve a priceless quality of Shakespeare's text in a highly original way, which none of the other adapters have done. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the play on which the libretto is based, sparkles with the enormous fun of, in Mrs Quickly's words, "abusing... God's patience and the King's English" (I, 4, 4-5) H. J. Oliver, the editor of the 1971 Arden edition, writes of "one of the most astonishing galleries of perpetrators of verbal fun that even Shakespeare put in a play". Sir Hugh Evans, a parson, speaks with specific Welsh mistakes, converting the b's into p's, the d's into t's, and the v's into f's. Nevertheless, he confidently corrects the others. When Slender asserts, regarding his marriage to Ann Page, "I am dissolved, and dissolutely" (I, 1, 262), Sir Hugh remarks the right word is "resolutely", but does not attempt to correct "dissolved" (resolved).

Dr Caius, the physician, benefits from all the malicious irony aimed at Frenchmen by the English. Thus he pompously declares: "If dere be one or two, I shall make a de turd" (III, 3, 251) instead of the third. Ineluctably, Sir Hugh is sent to meet Dr Caius for their duel in Frogmore ("Frog" being a disparaging term for Frenchman). Mine Host of the Garter, when confronting Gallia and Gaul, satirises them both by saying that the physician offers him "the potions and the motions" (III, 1, 105), while the priest provides "the proverbs and the no-verbs" (III, 1, 107), thus reducing them both to non-efficiency, ignorance, and quackery. Shallow, Justice of the Peace, is as profound as his name indicates. He teaches Latin to William Page (IV 1, 45) and sententiously declines hig – hag – hog and, in the accusative, hung – hang – hog (IV 1, 50.)

A delightful addition to this panoply is Mrs. Quickly. During this same lesson, she is horrified to hear the declination horum – harum – horum (IV 1, 64), as she takes whoring to be a thoroughly indecorous word, and who declares that "hang hog" is Latin

¹ Each of these examples can make the object of a detailed analysis in a study of ampler dimensions.

² An emperor that was truly receptive to opera: the premiere of Cimarosa's *Il matrimonio segreto* thrilled him to such a degree that he asked for a second performance in his private apartments that very same night.

for bacon. When commending Mrs Ford to Falstaff, she describes her as a “fartuous” civil modest wife, as close as she can get to “virtuous” (II, 2, 101.) An irresistible finishing touch is conveyed by her indignant “I detest” (I, 4, 156), intended to mean “I protest”. Another character with a fatidic name, Simple, declares to Falstaff, when talking about his secrets with Mrs Quickly, “I may not conceal them” (IV, 5, 45), meaning he cannot reveal them, to which Mine Host rashly replies “Conceal them or thou diest” (IV, 5, 46.)

This raving verbal delirium, which must have inspired Sheridan’s endearing character Mrs Malaprop in *The Rivals*, is surprisingly echoed in Salieri’s opera in the scene of the embassy to Falstaff. Instead of the inexistent Mrs Quickly, it is carried out by the prima-donna, Alice Ford, as a good opportunity for her to be present on stage and sing an aria. Thus, the delivery of the message is still carried out and the status of servant of the messenger is preserved. Unexpectedly, Mrs Ford comes to Falstaff’s room disguised as a German virgin (and, to prevent recognition, she should be properly “imbacuccata” – muffled and wrapped up) and converses with him in Germ-Italian. In light of the fact that eighteenth century Vienna was, linguistically at least, the most cosmopolitan city in Europe, and that Salieri’s audience was perfectly able to enjoy all the subtlety of this *scena tedesca*, this audacity becomes highly interesting. In the dialogue, Falstaff makes mistakes in German, since it is a foreign language to him, but he also massacres Italian (conventionally used for English) in order to make the German girl better understand:

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| Falstaff: Mein Jungfer, | Mein Jungfer, |
| Ich sag in Confidenz: | Ich sag in Confidenz: |
| Von Deutsch nix haben viel Intelligenz: | Von Deutsch nix haben viel Intelligenz: |
| Vor das ich dir pregieren | Vor das ich dir asken |
| Nostra lingua du will mit mich parlieren. | Our language du will mit mich |

speaken³.

³ All translations from Defranceschi’s libretto are mine.

German mostly lends its word order and affixes to Falstaff, while Italian gives the lexical and semantic core of the text (*confidenza, intelligenza, pregare, nostra lingua, parlare*). The reference to the English language (conveyed through Italian in the opera) is cleverly and dexterously avoided by the neutral term “nostra lingua”. In turn, the disguised Mrs Ford feigns to speak very poor Italian, yet she also makes mistakes in German, as it is not in fact her mother tongue⁴.

Mrs Ford: Ma io far molti Böcke...But I to make many Böcke...
 Voler dir... molti falli. Mean say... many mistakes.

The result seethes with humour:

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|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Falstaff: Ebben: che preme? | Well: what if you do? |
| Anch'io far Böcke: | I make Böcke too: |
| ne faremo insieme. | we'll make some together. |

Falstaff's lascivious inclination urges him to make a pun between making language mistakes and making moral mistakes together (as he will ask her if she too likes his figure and would like to “converse” with him). This is deftly supported by the vocabulary chosen by Defranceschi. For instance, he could have chosen the noun *sbaglio* for mistake, but instead he chose *fallo*, which also means phallus (in which interpretation the German maid would say “I do many phalluses”). Likewise, Falstaff's question could easily have been “che importa?” but it is “che preme?”, a verb that means ‘to press’.

The insinuating vein continues throughout the scene:

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| Mrs. Ford: | Bitt' um Vergebung! Ich noch nicht Frau: ich Jungfer. |
| Falstaff: | Oh, gratulieren! E was wollen von mir, schöne Jungfretta? |
| (Mrs. Ford: | I beg your pardon! I am not yet a woman: I am a virgin |

⁴ There is, of course, no valid reason why Mrs Ford, a bourgeois housewife of Windsor, should speak German. The veracity of the character is momentarily suspended for the sake of the Viennese audience, who can thus enjoy a scene that is half in their own language.

Falstaff: Oh, to congratulate! E what you want from me, beautiful
virginetta?)

In Italian, *fretta* means haste, which makes this diminutive-sounding compound mean “young haste”, or maybe her haste to lose her virginity and his to take it.

Mrs Ford: Io dir, Signor, che lei – Bitt’ um Vergebung! – ma star ben grosso
Spitzbub.

(Mrs Ford: I to say, Sir, that you – Bitt’ um Vergebung! – but to be really big
Spitzbub.)

Spitzbube in German means rogue, but is formed of the noun *Bube* (boy) and the adjective *spitz*, which means pointed and therefore is very akin to Shakespeare’s bawdy spirit.

Mrs Ford: Sie sind ein loser Mann!

Sie haben, kleiner Schelm, zugleich zwei Herzen

So – mir nichts dir nichts – weggefischt. (...)

A due Madame aver geschnipft il core.

(You are a dissolute man!

You have, little knave, two hearts

Just like that – in the twinkle of an eye – caught at once. (...)

To two Ladies to have pinched the heart.)

Here, an additional humorous effect is lent by the fact that Mrs Ford plays her part well and uses the language register of a fishwife (wegfischen = to steal/pinch/snatch, schnipfen = regionalism for to pinch).

When he hears he is invited to Mrs Ford’s place at 11 o’clock, Falstaff exclaims:

Schon recht: a lei tu dir,

Ch’io gewiss nit mankir,

La Madama a veder gewiss venir.

Schon recht: to her you to say,

That I gewiss (?) not failen,

The Lady to see gewiss to come.

Even the punctuation is amusing, since here the commas mark the direct object clauses, which in Italian is not done, but is compulsory in German. When she must speak about Mrs Slender's feelings for the knight, the disguised Mrs Ford says:

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|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Ma pur per lei, mein Herr, | As for her, mein Herr, |
| Aver gross infezione. | To have gross infection. |

Blaming it on her poor mastery of “nostra lingua”, she uses the word *infezione* instead of *affezione*, thus equating Falstaff with an infectious disease. Moreover, Mrs Quickly could easily be imagined to say that Meg has great infection for the knight, and the crippling of the word is hardly accidental, being genuinely akin to Shakespeare's deliberate language distortion.

The librettist is even more humorous in sometimes spelling nouns with capitals in Falstaff's cues and with small letters in the “German” girl's, as if out of respect for the other's language or as further proof of confusion. And the dialogue goes on – “Ich bissel Deutsch, du bissel nostra lingua, / A bissel Pantomime, / A bissel Discretion... assicurieren / So très bien miteinander explicieren.” And lo, Falstaff even feels the need to add the Wienerisch dialect (*a bissel* instead of *ein bisschen* = a little) to the delight of the Viennese audience and a third language, French (*très bien*), as if in memory of Dr Caius, who was eliminated from the libretto.

If the stage director is faithful to Shakespeare, he can stretch the language humour even further and evoke the mockery against the Welsh Parson Evans, who mispronounces English sounds. Thus, Michael Hampe, in his production for the Schwetzingen Festspiele in 1995, has Mrs Ford pronounce “f” instead of “v” after the German fashion (*fostra* instead of *vostra*) and “gv” instead of “gu” (*lingva* instead of *lingua*). Likewise, she pronounces Schlender instead of Slender which, of course, enhances the effect of the whole charade. The way she speaks is a far surer way of rendering her unrecognisable to Sir John than her German folk costume. Her disguise thus becomes not only visual, but also auditory.

Her aria in G major, in which she complains about men's insincerity and luring strategies, is extremely simplistic musically and vocally. Its only point of interest is that

more than half of it is in German only, after which there is a short transition in German-Italian to her cues aside, which are obviously in Italian. Salieri rightly comments that this aria “could only be liked enormously, recited and sung as it was. The music is well suited to such a joke” (Salieri 6).

Thus, the time and place for which the opera was composed, as well as all the social realities they implied, led to this unique translation of the Shakespearean language humour. As Rice aptly remarks,

The ‘scena tedesca’... partakes of a tradition of multilingualism and comic attempts to speak foreign languages that goes back to Goldoni... Having translated at least three German libretti into Italian, Defranceschi knew enough German to cobble together the ‘scena tedesca’. Salieri, for his part, sprinkled his German with Italian and French: he was used to communicating in the manner proposed by Falstaff to Mistress Ford (Rice 579).

The libretto of Charles Gounod’s masterpiece *Roméo et Juliette* (1867), signed by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, follows Shakespeare’s play quite faithfully. The confusing religious configuration of Elizabethan England is common knowledge and Stephen Greenblatt depicts a vivid image of Shakespeare’s ambiguous denomination in *Will in the World*. However, in the staunchly Catholic nineteenth century France, what is added is precisely the religious dimension that the Bard’s play lacks. If the Bard’s notorious dislike of men of the cloth renders Friar Laurence morally ambiguous at best, in Gounod’s opera the monk becomes a luminous character, rising above the omnipresent suspicion of self-serving opportunism that hovers over him in the play.

Since the protagonists’ marriage is quintessential, it takes place on stage in the opera, in front of the audience, while in the play, the ceremony is only reported. All the vile innuendo that Shakespeare casts onto the monk is gone, and he performs the service with piety and self-abasement:

FRIAR LAURENCE

O God who madest man in Thine own image⁵
And of his flesh and blood
Created woman, and, joining her
To man in wedlock,
From Zion's summit consecrated
Their inseparable union!
Look with a favourable eye upon
Thy miserable creature
Who prostrates himself before Thee!

The whole scene is a prayer to God, and the bride and groom are prostrated:

ROMEO AND JULIET

Lord, we promise to obey Thy law. (...)
Lord, be Thou my support, be Thou my hope! (...)
Lord, from darkest sin it is Thou who dost protect us! (...)
Lord, deign to look down upon our love! (...)
O happiness unalloyed! O immense joy!

Heaven itself has received our/their loving vows!
God of goodness! God of mercy!
Be Thou blessed by two happy hearts!

The implicit submission of women sententiously pronounced by Friar Laurence in the play is reinterpreted here in the spirit of nineteenth century France, where women had already started to get emancipated and become empowered:

Ordain that the yoke of Thy handmaiden
May be a yoke of love and peace!

⁵ Translated by Joseph Allen, 1969. Web. <http://www.murashev.com/opera/Rom%C3%A9o_et_Juliette_libretto_French_English>. All quotations from the libretto will be given in this translation.

In the lay atmosphere of the play, marked by the mercantile society of Elizabethan England, Juliet uses an economical metaphor when she thinks Romeo is dead, calling her heart “this poor bankrupt” (III, 2, 57). In the libretto, this pecuniary image is given an entirely new valence in terms of moral worth: “Let virtue be her wealth” – Friar Laurence prays. Far from Shakespeare’s mundane monk, who is ready to suspect carnal sin, but is a stranger to true love, his equivalent in the opera perceives precisely this latter dimension of the lovers’ attachment and, wishing them to beget children and grandchildren, prays that, “united in the life eternal”, they should “come at last to the Kingdom of Heaven”. Too much in love to be able to live without each other, Romeo and Juliet still commit suicide. But, in an exquisite duet, they die singing “Lord, Lord, forgive us!” – imploring God’s absolution for their capital sin, which lends the opera a Christian dimension entirely absent from Shakespeare’s play.

Hamlet (1868) by Ambroise Thomas is a clear instance of the syntagm that has become a truism by now: *traduttore – traditore*. Loosely based upon Alexandre Dumas père’s translation, Thomas’s opera is constrained by the conventions of *grand opéra* and of the tradition of classical theatre in France. It therefore preserves the five acts, but the rest is altered almost beyond all recognition, triggering either anger or laughter in Shakespeare lovers. The cast is decimated and, since the opera is French, Hamlet is far more preoccupied with love than with the Ghost’s request! Again due to the country of origin, the Ghost is Catholicised, and his line “Un divin pouvoir m’arrache aux feux d’en bas” clearly indicates Hell, not Purgatory, and Hamlet addresses him “Spectre infernal!”

Even if love throbs stereotypically on the French stage, nineteenth century prudishness bans bawdiness, librettists shrink from it and directors shirk it. Violent death on stage is also an absolute taboo, which is why Polonius does not die. Mad scenes, on the other hand, were the rage, even if especially in Italian opera, but the latter exerted great influence on opera in the whole of Europe. Ophelia’s insanity, therefore, is reinterpreted in light of these conventions. She loses her wits solely because she no longer has the prince’s love (since her father is alive) and only speaks to the Chorus. All the bawdy allusions are purged from this decorous scene. This bowdlerised and cleansed image of a happy married couple, as she sees herself wedded to Hamlet, is followed by the repetition of the “Doubt that the stars are fire” couplet and by Ophelia’s drowning

(offstage, naturally). Unrequited love resulting in madness and death are solid operatic conventions. Yet, this scene is a musical masterpiece.

The aversion to violent death on stage was so great, and the crave for happy endings too, that the initial conclusion of the libretto took over that of Dumas's 1840 translation, in which Hamlet lives and is announced to be the future King of Denmark (in the presence of the Ghost). Nevertheless, an outraged English response to the opera made Thomas write an alternative ending, in which the Ghost is absent. Distraught at seeing Ophelia's lifeless body, Hamlet kills Claudius and then kills himself. English icons, therefore, sometimes refuse to allow themselves to be translated badly.

Bawdiness was also frowned upon on the nineteenth century Italian stage. That is why Arrigo Boito, who wrote the libretti to both Verdi's *Otello* (1887) and to his *Falstaff* (1893), eliminated all the coarse, obscene comments made by Iago when obsessing over the sexual encounters between the Venetian blonde and the thick-lipped Moor, as well as Sir John's inappropriate cues.

The same imposition coupled with the *donna angelicata* female ideal that Verdi and Boito held dear, but that Shakespeare lacked completely, transforms Desdemona's character quite radically. In the play she is constantly under suspicion for her unnatural choice of husband and is an ambivalent character, seen as deceptively innocent and submissive, but actually rebellious and manipulating – a carnivorous man-eater, an emasculating vampire. In the opera, she is exactly as candid as she seems, blameless and morally lily-white.

In *Falstaff*, an insightful modification is that Alice – a merry, bright, and broad-minded woman – cannot be, as in Shakespeare, short-sighted enough to misconstrue the affection of her own daughter. Thus, Ford is the only one who supports a suitor who is not welcomed by Nannetta. Her mother furthers her interests and helps her get married to her true love. The daughter is also chosen to impersonate the Fairy Queen, rather than Mrs Quickly in the play, a much more plausible choice given her youth, grace, and elf-like slimness. But not only improper Elizabethan sexual liberties and views on women are “translated” in these libretti. Boito was not merely a librettist, but also a major Italian poet and composer. In his literary creation, Boito was especially accomplished in the long allegorical poem *Re Orso*, strongly influenced by Nordic romanticism, Baudelaire and Victor Hugo. It introduces a character that was to remain

central to his writing – the Eternal Worm, the ultimate inescapable principle of destruction.

Obsessed by a sense of the dualism inherent through nature and above all in the human condition, he sees good and evil, weakness and strength, creation and destruction as interdependent forces, and a man's life as 'an eternal wavering between heaven and hell.'

(Mandeville, 16)

Accordingly, his opera masterpiece, *Mephistophele*, draws upon Goethe's *Faust*, another demonic figure characterised by a schizoid split. Likewise, no view could have been more appropriate for the adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* and the fashioning of one facet of the Eternal Worm, Iago, whose monologue, *Credo* (Act II), was written by Boito himself. With no word taken from Shakespeare, nothing could be more Shakespearean – a nihilistic fiend, two-faced, atheistic and iconoclastic:

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| <p>Credo in un Dio crudel che m'ha creato simile a sè, e che nell'ira io nomo. Dalla viltà d'un germe o d'u atòmo vile son nato. Son scellerato perchè son uomo, e sento il fango originario in me. Sì! Quest'è la mia fè! Credo con fermo cuor, siccome crede la vedovella al tempio, che il mal ch'io penso che da me procede per mio destino adempio.</p> | <p>I believe in a cruel God who created me in his image and whom in fury I name. From the very vileness of a germ or an atom, vile was I born. I am a wretch because I am a man, And I feel within me the primaeval slime. Yes! This is my creed! I believe with a heart as steadfast as that of the widow in church that the evil I think and that which I perform I think and do by destiny's decree.</p> |
|---|--|

| | |
|---|---|
| Credo che il giusto è un istrion beffardo | I believe the just man to be a mocking actor |
| e nel viso e nel cuor; | in face and heart; |
| che tutto è in lui bugiardo, | that all his being is a lie, |
| lagrima, bacio, sguardo, | tear, kiss, glance, |
| sacrificio ed onor. | Sacrifice and honour. |
| E credo l'uom gioco d'iniqua sorte | And I believe man the sport of evil fate |
| dal germe della culla | from the germ of the cradle |
| al verme dell'avel. | To the worm of the grave. |
| Vien dopo tanta irrision la Morte. | After all this mockery then comes Death. |
| E pio?... e poi? | And then?... and then? |
| La Morte è il Nulla, | Death is nothingness, |
| è vecchia fola il Ciel. | Heaven an old wives'tale. ⁶ |

Shakespeare inspired an impressive number of composers, but very few of them were British. This is also due to the fact that Britain has not given many composers in general, since it did not develop its own national school of music. Henry Purcell wrote his brilliant semi-opera *The Fairy Queen* in 1692, whose music was performed alternating with scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* according to the definition of the species. But a modern masterpiece by an Englishman was to see the light of day only almost three centuries later, this time a full-fledged opera based on the same play. Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is set to a libretto adapted from William Shakespeare by the composer and Peter Pears. It was premiered on 11 June 1960 at the Aldeburgh Festival, conducted by the composer. Britten was in awe of baroque music in general and of Purcell in particular, many of whose scores he rearranged and re-orchestrated for modern performance, including *The Fairy Queen*.

Britten's immense advantage was that he could work with Shakespeare's original text in the original language and in the country that had also begotten the play.

⁶ DECCA translation by Avril Bardoni, 1991.

However, he too made it his. To render it even more English, he eliminated Athens completely and the whole opera takes place in the forest. But Britten and Pears do not only render the local colour more vivid. They also make underlying comments that bring the play well into twentieth century England – not only through the visionary modernity of the music with its atmospheric harmonies and tone painting, but also through gender hints. Britten was a declared homosexual and his life-long partner was tenor Peter Pears, also his partner in writing this libretto. It is a rarity in modern opera that the lead male role should be written for a countertenor – another tribute to baroque opera, so fond of the castrati. The part of Oberon was created for Alfred Deller and Britten wrote specifically for his voice, which was weak in the high notes. Therefore, Oberon is almost never required to sing both at the top of the alto range and *forte*. The result is a typically postmodern “translation” of Britten’s homosexuality, since Oberon, the epitome of male power and even macho vanity in Shakespeare’s play, appears to be completely emasculated in the opera and, vocally, quite dominated by Titania’s virtuoso prowess.

Pascal Bentoiu⁷, Romanian composer and musicologist, wrote his *Hamlet* only a few years later, between 1966 and 1969, and it was first performed on stage in 1971. He wrote his own libretto, about which he said:

It is therefore not Shakespeare’s play; it is only inspired from the famous tragedy, which it re-pencils – to musical ends – in a much simplified form. The great themes remain, but denuded, stripped of poetry, almost abstract. The music attempts to re-create – if it can – the poetry, the psychological depth, the dramatic vehemence, the human and philosophical significance. The author therefore proposes *not* illustrative music to *Hamlet*, but a *musical* drama that constitutes a contemporary interpretation of the Shakespearean theme (Bentoiu 7) [my translation]

Unlike Ambroise Thomas’s opera, Bentoiu’s is extremely faithful to the spirit of Shakespeare’s play and to his text, which he preserves as far as possible. Yet, as he himself says,

⁷ Pascal Bentoiu, born in 1927, died four hundred years after Shakespeare, on 21 February 2016.

Opera is in no way the musical illustration of a text, but – in a performance – the visualisation of a complex musical structure which is in its turn based upon a literary and dramatic structure. And the libretto cannot be regarded as a theatre play, but as a necessary foundation that determines to a large extent the big picture of the future musical construction (Bentoiu 7) [my translation]

The libretto, therefore, “translates” valences of the initial literary work into the “language” spoken (and understood) by the audience. It is a well-known fact that Shakespeare’s plays, as well as other powerful, poignant works of art, have been used as political weapons or at least as means of subterfuge across the ages. Colonised peoples have been identifying with Sycorax and Caliban, while the title role of *Richard III* has been personifying dictators all over the globe. In a tacit conspiracy between stage directors, actors and public, Shakespeare comes to express the innermost traumas, dreams or aspirations of a people. In communist Romania, such stagings were frequent, as they were a form of solidarity and of psychological refuge, helping in the survival and the healing process of the nation.

However, this is not how Bentoiu chose to translate *Hamlet* into a Romanian opera, but both the time and the place in which he composed it shaped it as such. Besides the text, which is in Romanian, social, historical, and cultural facts have also left their imprint. Historically, the libretto was influenced by the reality of the communist regime. Thus the scene in which Claudius is praying (III, 3, 35-72) and the prince refrains from killing him lest he should be redeemed is suppressed altogether, since religion was banned by communist ideology. Consequently, the act of praying could not be represented on stage, the idea of afterlife was denied, sin was reinterpreted in terms of moral trespassing or infringement of the law, while the possibility of a merciful God that might save souls was out of the question. No composer or librettist would have been allowed to include such a scene in their work; it had to be eliminated.

Likewise, Bentoiu purged Ophelia’s ravings of all bawdy allusion, since socialist censorship was bound to bowdlerise all unhealthy lack of decorum. Art was meant to teach and educate, and sexual innuendo on stage was not a good example for the masses, even if uttered by a deranged damsel. Besides, decades of censorship had succeeded in rendering the audience quite shy, prudish, and sensitive. Therefore, those

marks of loose morality of the rotten West and of an unfortunate society ruled by despotic monarchy had to go.

But if Benteiu did not make his opera subliminally or overtly anti-communist, he did make it movingly Romanian. A slight hint is apparent from the very beginning of the libretto, when the prince addresses the Ghost as “Hamlet-King-Father”. The national demarcation present in the play – Dane (I, 4, 24) – is left out, which immediately suggests the universality of the play, in no way connected to Denmark. This strategy is quite akin to Shakespeare’s, in fact, since he himself used cultural matter from all nations only to make it English. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* he turns Athens into a duchy, Theseus into a duke, and surrounds the arid city with deep woods reminiscent of Britain., while in *Hamlet* itself he carefully maps the political and social hollowness of Denmark only to ironically imply he is portraying England: “My tables,--meet it is I set it down, / That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain; / At least I’m sure it may be so in Denmark” (I, 5, 108-110). It is not in the state of Denmark (I, 4, 65), but in that of England that something is rotten.

The same can be said of Benteiu’s opera, in the case of Romania. However, the most moving tool that he uses to translate Englishness into Romanian-ness is music. Even before the beginning of the text, the modal wordless *a cappella* choral Prologue bears a strong Byzantine influence (even if the chorus is mixed⁸), which immediately renders this *Hamlet* more eastern. In the original version, this chorus did not exist. But the composer felt that something was missing, and he added it in guise of prelude or overture, which announces that this *Hamlet* was born and bred in Greek Orthodox churches. The minor mode and the mournful pace make it sound like a threnody, frequently in Orthodox Easter music.

The concluding Epilogue, which is also a chorus, is accompanied by the orchestra and does have a text to go with the music: “A noble soul is dwindling. / Good night, sweet prince. / May the song of angels’ wings / Eternally shroud thy rest” (Benteiu 26) [my translation]. The libretto echoes Ophelia’s lines “Good night, ladies; good night, sweet ladies; / good night, good night” (IV, 5, 69-70). The collective character behaves like the ancient chorus in Greek tragedies, while the text also gives an equivalent to

⁸ Mixed choruses include both male and female voices, while Byzantine music is traditionally written for male voices only. But nowadays, this has changed and women are frequently included in Byzantine choirs.

Fortinbras's final words: "such a sight as this / Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss" (V, 2, 354-5). What it subtly adds, however, is the blessing – the religious, Christian dimension lacking in the play written by a man who was notoriously distrustful of the church, but taken over by a composer who lived in a time and place where belief in God gave hope and strength that the horrors of a totalitarian regime might be overcome. Even such a covert blessing – a mere reference to angels – was an act of courage in a society where faith was surveyed by the secret police.

Musically, the Epilogue provides precisely the dirge that Shakespeare prescribed, "A dead march" being the stage indication after Fortinbras's speech. Going hand in hand with the blessing in the text, the sonorities of the Epilogue remind the listener of Paul Constantinescu's *Byzantine Easter Oratorio*, lending symmetry to the opera through a conclusion that matches the religious atmosphere of the chorus in the Prologue.

Four hundred years after the Bard's death, the differences between all these variants are enriching, making Shakespeare more accessible across linguistic and cultural borders. Sometimes, his Englishness surges and is relished by the foreign opera audiences, such as the Order of the Garter and the Garter Inn (La Giarrettiera) in Verdi's *Falstaff*. But more often than not, besides language, cultural notions are also translated, so as to ease the bond between the new, remediated version and its public all over the world, making Shakespeare travel transnationally and across the ages.

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