Critical Reactions to and Early Research into Shakespeare's Bawdy (Wordplay) in Romania(n)

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Shakespeare's wordplay and bawdy have largely been neglected for most of the playwright's history in Romania. The only mentions made of this topic are often relegated to the occasional brief remark in paratexts or fleeting statements regarding characters that often deploy such language or stylistic device. Therefore, one cannot speak of a Romanian critical tradition in the case of Shakespeare's obscene vocabulary and ribald puns. However, several hypotheses on the evolution of scholarly and translational attitudes towards these instances of language can be extracted from these sporadic comments and the quantitative and qualitative analyses conducted on the translation of the playwright's bawdy and wordplay into Romanian. What this article aims to achieve is, on the one hand, to demonstrate that critiques of Shakespeare pun/ bawdy translation long predate contemporary studies of this kind and, on the other, to highlight the premises they give way to, which future research may validate or refute.

Keywords. pun, Romanian, Shakespeare, translation, translation criticism, wordplay

From the late eighteenth century until 1864, when P. P. Carp published his *Macbeth*, the first-ever translation of a Shakespearean play directly from the English text, the Romanian renditions of the playwright's works drew on German, French, and in some cases, Italian intermediaries. This is because the playwright's entry in the Romanian Principalities is closely linked to the performance of his texts by troupes of foreign strolling players. In Transylvania, it was the Viennese and German itinerant theatre groups who acquainted the educated local elite with Shakespeare's plays, while in Moldova and Wallachia, the French and Italian operatic adaptations of his works contributed to the intelligentsia developing a taste for the playwright's *oeuvre* (Duțu 1964: 7-8). Yet, almost fifty years would pass between Kristoph Ludwig Seipp's late-1780s stage representations of *Hamlet* and *Henry the Fourth* in Sibiu, Transylvania, and Cezar Bolliac's 1836 article in *Curiosul* [The Curious], the first to be dedicated to Shakespeare by a Romanian scholar (Grigorescu 45-49). From Bolliac's stance on the dramatist's rhetoric and his works, one may be tempted to deduce that the Romanian provinces were fully aligned with the Romantic trends pervading in Western Europe at that time; his paper on Shakespeare appears to draw heavily on Victor Hugo's defense of the playwright in the preface to his *Cromwell*, arguing, in a similar vein, that Shakespeare is "at once sublime

in his tragism, comedy, and fantasy; his faults were those of his age and not his own" (qtd. in Grigorescu 49, translation mine; Duțu 1969: 252). The Romanian scholar undoubtedly refers, along Hugo's lines and in a manner similar to eighteenth and nineteenth-century English apologists (see Brian Vicker's *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage 1623–1801*), to the dramatist's "coarse language" and "most farcical and eccentric of ridicules" (Bolliac 462, translation mine), which did not abide by the neoclassical norms of accuracy and correctness. In actuality, however, the cultural realities in the Romanian principalities were quite heterogeneous: in the eve of the 1848 Revolution, Romanticism, Classicism, and the Enlightenment, contradictory as they are, co-dominated the literary and critical thought after their importation from the West, where the erudites of this period furthered their studies. At that time, Voltaire, whose *Brutus* and *La Mort de César* had been rendered as early as 1819, was still as influential as the "anti-Voltaire" Romantic thinkers of the 1830s, yet his self-contradicting value judgements of Shakespeare, whom he ambivalently perceives as "a strong, fruitful Genius" who conversely introduces "the idle jests of Roman shoemakers [sic] and cobblers . . . on the stage with Cassius and Brutus" (qtd. in Albright 69), appear to have not produced any echoes in the Romanian provinces. In fact, as Alexandru Duțu notes, "it is Voltaire's spirit which created the intellectual climate that favoured," as he similarly did in France, "the penetration of Shakespeare into Wallachia" (1964: XI)

In 1840, George Barițiu, often styled George Bariț, would go on to prepare the first-ever fragmentary translation of Shakespeare into Romanian, namely two excerpts from *Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar*. Just four years short of the 1848 Revolution, which marked an abrupt divorce from the Ottoman Empire and a forging of closer cultural ties with Western Europe, Captain S. Stoica would produce, based on several French intermediaries, the first complete Romanian translation of a Shakespearean play, *Julius Caesar* to be specific. At the 1864 meeting of the Jassy-based literary group "Junimea" [The Youth], the very first in fact, P. P. Carp, recently returned from his studies in Germany, would read his rendition of the playwright's *Macbeth*, which he translated directly from the English text.

"The eighth decade of the nineteenth century represented a breakthrough in point of the Romanian translations of Shakespeare," notes Monica Matei-Chesnoiu (56). The developments in dramatic thought and stage productions demanded a departure from second-hand Romanian translations, which had co-existed for the last fifteen years with only a handful of original renditions. In 1877, when Romania was oficially recognized as an independent state, Adolphe Stern published the first *Hamlet* to draw on the original text and in his preface to the translation, notes how, up to that point, Shakespeare's plays had not been properly rendered and interpreted, acknowledging the limits of achieving an overlap, partial at least, between the playwright's language and his own (Matei-Chesnoiu 46). In his 1896 "Câteva păreri" [Some Opinions], Romanian writer and translator Ion Luca Caragiale would go on to emphasize the dramatist's essential role in settling the most prominent dispute of his age, which caused a rift between critics Titu Maiorescu, who argued for "art for the art's sake" and Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, an advocate for ideologically motivated art.

Writer and dramatist Haralamb G. Lecca's 1907 translation of *Romeo and Juliet*, which Duțu identifies as being based on a French intermediary (1964: 227), is harshly criticized by Garabet Ibrăileanu, a fervent supporter of the rendition of the classics, Shakespeare included, who deplores his publishing a stage adaptation of the play, while claiming that it is an actual translation of the original. In a brief yet insightful analysis of the separation scene, the critic refrains at first from accusing Lecca of "summing up those *concetti* [conceits], often of a questionable taste for the moderns, but characteristical of Shakespeare," only to conclude that his interpolations transform Juliet into a "heroine of *Noaptea furtunoasă* [I. L. Caragiale's satirical 'A Stormy Night'], albeit a crazed one . . . a suburbanite who has gone mental" (479-481, translation mine, original emphasis). What therefore transpires from Ibrăileanu's critique of this rendition is that, in many a respect and in the case of the playwright's wordplay too, the survival of the original is of the utmost importance, despite the changes in taste that have affected the reception of certain instances of Shakespearean language use.

In a similar vein, Nicolae Iorga, the ideologue behind the populist movement 'semănătorism', which cohabitated the Romanian literary scene with Ibrăileanu's 'poporanism', references the merits of the dramatist's anachronisms in his comparative 1916 article on "Shakespeare și Cervantes" [Shakespeare and Cervantes]. Published on the occasion of the tercentenary of their passing, his literary medallion focuses, among others, on the playwright's Europeanity and analyzes the influence exerted by foreign writers on his works: "When, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Valentine's clown, Speed, engages in quibbles (*ship* and *sheep*), he says: 'Such another proof will make me cry "Baa" [like a sheep],' one is reminded of the shepherd of Pat[h]elin, who at the trial cannot do anything but that [bleat]" (510, translation mine, original emphasis). Similarly, in *The Comedy of Errors*, Iorga finds an anachronistic description of Shakespeare's London: "in a play set in Ephesus and Syracuse, and which draws on Plautus, . . . we may discover in the 'Porcupine' the English inns, the English banquets,

the English quarrels and dissolution, which are not unknown to our actors either" (514, translation mine). In like manner,

> the Capulets speak the language of the street corners and the gangs of London. During the preparations for the festivity, for the wedding, the personnel banter loudly and coarsely with one another . . . Next to the inanimate Juliet, whom they all believe to be dead, the musicians who are supposed to carry her to grave exchange vulgar reflections (516, translation mine).

The interwar period would witness the proliferation of Shakespeare's plays in the repertoires of Romanian theatres. A similar trend can be observed in the case of the studies devoted to the dramatist, which were then published by both the academia and theatre critics. A prominent member of the first group is English literature Professor Petre Grimm, who outlines one of the most comprehensive histories of the playwright's translation into Romanian in his 1923 "Traduceri şi imitaţiuni româneşti după literatura engleză" [Romanian Translations and Adaptations from the English Literature]. There, he takes a stance at once modern and moderate on the translatability of wordplay. In relation to Mărgărita Miller-Veghi's 1911 *King Lear*, for instance, Grimm notes how the translator "could have indicated through a note the passages containing wordplay that could not be translated and otherwise properly replaced with another." Then, he praises her for the translation of Lear's pun on 'case', which occurs in his exchange with Gloucester whom he orders to read a letter, yet not without suggesting a more successful rendition of his own creation. Specifically, he argues for the substitution of Miller-Verghi's 'locul' ('cavity'), her target-language counterpart for Shakespeare's first occurrence of 'case', with 'punga' ('[eye] bag'), which confronted with the second in Lear's reply, where it denotes a coin satchel, produces a similar confrontation of meanings (343, translations mine). In other cases, such as Ion Peretz's *Twelfth Night*, he remarks how the translator resorts to omissions due to his incapacity to render the puns featured in the missing fragments. There, Grimm makes another pertinent observation: "[a] great obstacle in translating comedies, especially Shakespeare's, is the wordplay, which are frequently encountered therein . . . and, if possible, must be replaced with suitable substitutions, especially in those renditions that are designed to be employed on stage and not merely read in private" (347, translation mine). As for Adolphe Stern's translation of Hamlet's pun on 'valanced' in "thy face is valanced," he notes how

> in rendering the ensuing "comest thou to beard me," Stern hurried to deploy the first dictionary meaning of the word and not only does his translation "would you come and pull my beard" make no sense here, but it also fails to preserve the wordplay from the English text, which he claims he recaptures (357n1, translation mine).

Then, the critic goes on to express his regret for the scarcity of translations produced by poet George Topârceanu, whose "ease in creating wordplay" Grimm believes to be rivaled by Şt. O. Iosif's only (358, translation mine). Yet, in reference to Mercutio's ribald wordplay at the Nurse's expense, Grimm displays a rather rudimentary understanding of its semantics: the pun on the leporine and matronal 'bawd' quibbles, he notes, on a hunting interjection, 'hoar' denotes "the hare whose flesh has gone moldy and foul," 'score' plays on 'debt' or 'interest' and 'banquet' or 'dish'. This indicates that the homophony between 'hoar' and 'whore' and the sexual meaning of 'score' appear to have fallen under Grimm's radar, although the efforts made at that time to reconstruct Shakespeare's Early Modern pronunciation and rediscover his puns uncovered the former successfully, as is evident from Sidney Lee's 1906 edition of the play (66).

In 1931, Marcu Beza, the then Romanian Consul General in London and the author of the first grammar of the Romanian language for English-speaking audiences, would publish his *Shakespeare in Roumania* in the capital of England. Despite his uncontested merits in putting forward a bibliographic research method, the scholar's socio-political sympathies served to minimize his contribution to Romanian Shakespeare studies. A similar phenomenon is witnessed in Dragoş Protopopescu's case. One of the first Romanian doctors of English literature, who intended to devote his Ph.D. dissertation to English humour in literature, undertook the task of translating Shakespeare in April 1938 after deciding to distance himself from the legionary movement. What was an older endeavor of his, which he had pursued on-and-off since 1927 when he rendered *The Winter's Tale*, would become his main preoccupation in the early 1940s upon Al. Rosetti's invitation to join the first project for a complete Romanian Shakespeare translation. The back cover of his 1947 *Gramatica vie a limbii engleze* [The Living Grammar of the English Language] announced that the untranslated remainder of Shakespeare's works, a sum total of twenty-five plays, passed for press. Yet, "a shift in dialectics took place and the rendition," or better put, Protopopescu's translation, "of the greatest English poet to have ever lived was suspected of advancing an anglo-fascist agenda" (Eliade 51, translation mine).

Praised in 1941 for its heralding "the phase of Shakespeare's integration, contrasted by the dilettantism of a century-long tradition of sporadic, superficial, and, on many an occasion, more or less

crude translations" (Perpessicius 10, translation mine), Protopopescu's unfinished rendition project is barely mentioned after the onset of socialist realism. His cosmopolitan, lively translations, had to be replaced by updated renditions, fashioned in accordance with the scientific model of the Marxist-Leninist ideology. It is against this background and upon having his translations banned that writer and translator Mihnea Gheorghiu commenced the 1955-1963 Shakespeare project under the imprint of ESPLA, Editura de Stat pentru literatură și artă [State Press for Literature and the Arts], the first to be produced during the communist regime and fully survive hitherto. However, the relative absence of footnotes on peculiar instances of language such as the playwright's wordplay makes it difficult to ascertain the translators' attitude towards this aspect of his language. Hardly in line with the dominant ideology of the period, which "vigorously condemned [obscene slang] as belonging to the margins of society" (Doboș 60-61), Shakespeare's bawdy puns must have constituted a genuine thorn in the translators' side. Al. Philippide, who revised Șt. O. Iosif's rendition of *Romeo and Juliet* for this edition of the playwright's works, appears to confirm this theory in his 1963 "Note despre Shakespeare" [On Shakespeare]. At a time when the foreign academia had been making diligent efforts to recover the dramatist's wordplay and ribald vocabulary since 1947, the year in which Eric Partridge published his seminal *Shakespeare's Bawdy*, Romanian scholarly views on this topic appear to have stalled. In said article, Philippide insists on retrograde perspectives according to which "puns, very much in fashion during his [Shakespeare's] age," and "with which his works are filled to saturation" represent some sort of a concession the playwright made condescendingly to satisfy his heterogeneous audience (585-586, translation mine). His statements would find an echo in Lăzărescu's apprehension of Shakespearean wordplay, who re-worked, like Philippide before him, Șt.O. Iosif's translation of *Romeo and Juliet* in the early 2000s. In a footnote on a double meaning by Mercutio, he notes how, for this play, the dramatist "reduced the number of his puns, otherwise too numerous and frequently too awkward" (Lăzărescu 328-329n29, translation mine).

In 1982, Leon Levițchi, renowned Anglicist and former contributor to Gheorghiu's project, publishes the first volume of the new Romanian Shakespeare edition under the imprint of Editura Univers [Universe Press] and imposes a new paradigm of interpretation, which envisions the dramatist as "a dramatist – poet – thinker" (Volceanov 2012: 218, translation mine) rather than a Marxist *avant la lettre*, as the 'ESPLA' project depicted him some fifteen years prior. Although initiated a decade after the resolution of the 'thaw', which spanned the period between 1965 and 1971 and allowed for temporary closer contacts with the West, the 'Univers' project featured a thorough and relatively up-to-date critical apparatus, in addition to the newly rendered plays and the older translations it put forward. As for the translators' stance on Shakespeare's bawdy wordplay, there is nothing to suggest that the contributors to the 'Univers' edition were in any way compelled to produce edulcorated Romanian renditions of his works. In this case, unlike in Gheorghiu's, circumstantial evidence point to the existence of more lenient political circumstances: "[n]ow [in the 1980s], the interest was in maintaining the system by eliminating what was considered dangerous, whereas the resistance, more visible in theatrical performances, TV comical sketches or literature would make use of irony, allusions and innuendo to circumvent the attention of the censorship" (Milică 33). Also, in an interview given by Sonia Levițchi, the widow of the 'Univers' coordinator, to Romanian Shakespearologue George Volceanov, she argues that the communist translations of the dramatist's plays "were not censored by the authorities, and [that] 'Shakespeare was too great to be censored'" (qtd. in Volceanov 2006: 210).

The most recent translation project, commenced by Volceanov in 2010 under the imprint of Paralela 45 and now at its sixteenth volume published by Tracus Arte, has a clearer agenda with the playwright's bawdy language. On the back cover of the first volume, which reunites Violeta Popa's rendition of the *Sonnets* and Volceanov's *The Tempest*, the contributors put forward their mission in direct terms:

> [t]his ['Shakespeare for the Third Millennium' collection] is an author series that is 100% uncensored politically, socially, and religiously and *unbowdlerized* (i.e., uncensored in terms of bawdy language), . . . a step forward in the pursuit of preserving the ambiguity of the Shakespearean verse, which has caused so many a controversy over the past centuries (translation mine, original emphasis).

Prior to embarking on this project, Volceanov published a series of articles on the translation of Shakespeare's bawdy and puns, which paved the way for an alignment with the progress made abroad in point of this area of research.

In his 2005 "Bowdlerizing Shakespeare: Here, There and Everywhere," 2006 "Appropriating Shakespeare through Translation," and 2012 "On Shakespeare's Bawdy and Its Translation into Romanian," George Volceanov draws serious critical attention to this important, albeit frequently disregarded, area of Shakespeare studies by referencing the findings of his 2003 analysis of the renditions of 306 random indecent

words and phrases featured in twenty-nine plays and two poems translated within 'ESPLA' (2005: 120). His quantitative analysis revealed a surprising 69 per cent of faithful and/ or satisfactory Romanian translations (2012: 219). Specifically, he discovered that 179 out of the 306 ribald lexemes and expressions submitted for analysis had been rendered meaning-for-meaning, while thirty-four of them "nearly surpass[] the bawdiness of the original" (2005: 120). In reference to the ninety-three cases of mistranslation, representing 30.4 per cent of the surveyed sample, Volceanov posits that they are the result of "either shallow talent, self-censorship, or the lack of adequate translation instruments (dictionaries and glossaries, critical editions etc.)" (2005: 120; 2006: 210). Yet, these are hardly the only factors at play in this equation: according to the same scholar, the Romanian slang stock cannot fully accommodate the dramatist's rich bawdy vocabulary: the most comprehensive autochthonous argotic dictionary to date features "only fifty 'man-operative' and seventeen 'woman-operative' copulatory verbs," whereas his texts contain ninety-two belonging to the former category and thirty-three to the latter (2005: 119). Although not without its merits, the issue with Volceanov's study is that, apart from being referenced in later articles, it is, to the best of my knowledge, unavailable and hence susceptible to speculation. In the aforementioned papers, the scholar indicates that he selected the surveyed bawdy expressions from Eric Partridge's *Shakespeare's Bawdy*. Yet, this glossary of Shakespearean ribaldry features both obscene words and puns built on terms with a vulgar substratum. Since the articles published thus far do not provide a detailed account of the corpus, it is difficult to ascertain whether Volceanov's inquiry includes wordplay or is limited to studying bawdy terms.

Apart from Volceanov, two other Romanian academics touched upon this topic. In their 2013 "From Shakespeare to Sitcoms: Translating the Bawdy Wordplay," Oana Tatu and Raluca Sinu analyze the (un)translatability of titillating wordplay into Romanian based on the renditions produced for page and screen. What is particularly worth mentioning about their article is that Tatu and Sinu are the first autochthonous lecturers ever to use Dirk Delabastita's pun taxonomy and wordplay translation model to illustrate how Romanian translators of Shakespeare tackled bawdy vertical and horizontal puns based on polysemy, homonymy and homophony. However, the two scholars use a limited corpus of wordplay—eight ribald puns from seven different plays—and source translations—they deploy only one rendition for *Pericles* (44), *Henry IV, Part 2*, *King Lear* (47), *The Merchant of Venice* (48) and *The Tempest* (47), an understandable situation in the case of the first two plays, rendered for the second time ever in 2018 and 2016, three and five years after the publication of their paper. As for the latter three, for which more than two translations existed at that time, the absence of another rendition to analyze the selected one against puts their study at risk of formulating conclusions that may not apply to other existing translations of the same pun. Moreover, Tatu and Sinu do not distinguish between renditions drawing on intermediaries and translations deriving directly from the source text. As a result, their selection of target texts interferes, on at least one occasion, with the qualitative findings of their study (46).

The critical remarks discussed above and the findings of the studies conducted by the three scholars provide sufficient evidence for any study of the Romanian translation of Shakespeare's bawdy and/ or wordplay to start from several clear-cut premises: (1) since early scholars commented on the dramatist's vulgar language and its rendition into Romanian, it follows that they and their translator peers were aware, at least to some extent, of the double meaning and/ or ribald substratum in certain Shakespearean words and expressions. The question then arises as to the extent to which Romanian translators of that period divorced their craft from the deprecatory critical discussions prevailing in their geographical context and the Western world at that time and reproduced it in their native language; (2) Dragoș Protopopescu's first-ever edition of Shakespeare's works, now incomplete, was hailed upon its publication as the most successful to be produced up to that point. Although, to the best of my knowledge, it has not generated any reviews focusing on its effectiveness, or lack thereof, in recreating the dramatist's bawdy and/ or puns, there is circumstantial evidence to suspect that this project may have been particularly successful in this respect: Protopopescu intended to elaborate his doctoral thesis on humour in English literature and his translations were banned by the communist regime for their 'modernizing' approach to the Shakespearean text; (3) according to George Volceanov's statistical study of the rendition of bawdy in 'ESPLA', the censorship apparatus appears to have not interfered with the production of Mihnea Gheorghiu's 1955-1963 edition of Shakespeare, the first to be released after the imposition of the communist rule, and implicitly, with the translation of the playwright's ribald language. Yet, the question persists as to whether and, if so, how much this finding applies to his bawdy wordplay; (4) since the 'ESPLA' edition enjoyed no censorial intervention amidst an especial-ly active period in this respect, it is only natural to assume that Leon Levițchi's 1982-1991 'Univers' edition, produced during a time of prolongued thaw and subsequent separation from the communist regime, is, at the very least, just as faithful to Shakespeare's bawdy wordplay or significantly more so, given that no ideological agenda was forced upon it; (5) judging from Lăzărescu's

comments on the Bard's wordplay and the mission of the latest Shakespeare edition coordinated by George Volceanov, it seems that contemporary Romanian approaches to the playwright's bawdy wordplay tend to vacillate between the old school of thought represented by Lăzărescu, who condemns the playwright's use of bawdy and seeks to rationalize its existence, and the new, whose objective is to critically rehabilitate and redeem it in translation. A future study of Shakespeare's ribald wordplay in this geographical context may want to ascertain the extent to which these stances on his vulgar vocabulary manifest in how these instances of language were translated into Romanian.

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