Importing and Writing Tragedy in Nineteenth-Century Romanian Principalities

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Abstract: This article examines the overlooked import and production of tragedy as a literary genre during the long nineteenth-century Romanian literature. It is not that Romanian tragedies had not been written until 1918, but they were not reprinted, and the critics' interest in these early tragedies diminished considerably over time. Starting from the observation that this poor acknowledgment is a result of a narrow and de-contextualized perspective, one that leaves aside the earlier as well as non-canonical literature, I investigate what and how tragedies were imported as well as written at the time. Whereas the imports were oriented predominantly towards the Romance-speaking countries and cultures—more than towards the Greek Antiquity—, local production explored, as expected, the historical (inter-imperial) past of the Romanian Principalities. More important, however, is the configuration of imports, which can be divided, as I aim to argue, into three categories: the latecomers, the cognates, and the diversifiers. Hence, this taxonomy, along with the local production, cast light on the fact that not only do we have tragedy—translated and local—but also that it was, as most of the cultural production, instrumentalized to promote the national ideals.

Keywords: tragedy, Romanian Principalities, long nineteenth century, import, local production.

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In a 1927 article, Mihai Ralea sought to answer the same pressing question Nicolae Iorga had posed nearly 40 years earlier: why do we Romanians have no novels? If Iorga attributed this phenomenon to a lack of professional writers,[1] Ralea advanced a different, more nuanced explanation; first, he argued that the lack of epic poetry hindered the natural evolution of genres from epic poetry to novels, leading instead to imitations of Western novels.[2] Second, he pointed to the belated emergence of the bourgeoisie and the high illiteracy rates in Moldavia and Wallachia as contributing factors to this delay.[3] However, another remark Ralea made in the same article is even more intriguing.

Comparing the novel with other literary productions, Ralea argues, "one can ask themselves why we didn't import the novel from the very beginning of our literature, a century ago that is, as we did with the theater (neither theater was preceded by anything in popular literature)."[4] This suggests that, unlike the novel, theater was well represented in Romanian literature. In fact, Iorga's article describes a similar evolution process; according to the critic, theater precedes the novel and is then replaced by it,[5] supporting the idea that we Romanians had drama before we had Romania.

1. Nicolae Iorga, "De ce n-avem roman", *Lupta*, no. 1090 (1890): 2-3.
2. Mihai Ralea, "De ce nu avem roman?", *Viața românească*, no. 4 (1927): 83–84.
3. Ibid., 86–88.
4. Ibid., 85, translation mine. Original: "[s]-ar putea întreba, de ce n-am importat romanul încă de la începutul literaturii noastre, adică de acum un veac, după cum am făcut cu teatrul (nici el n-a fost precedat de nimic în literatura populară)".
5. Iorga, "De ce n-avem roman?", 2.

It is true that at the time when the novels mentioned by Ralea were published—Duiliu Zamfirescu's 1894 *Viața la țară* [Life in the Countryside] and Alexandru Vlahuță's 1894 *Dan*[6]—several authors, including Vasile Alecsandri,[7] I.L. Caragiale,[8] and B.P. Hasdeu with his *Răzvan și Vidra* [Răzvan and Vidra] (1867), had already published plays that were re-released and staged over time. However, few well-known plays were explicitly entitled or surtitled "tragedy," and they were only occasionally referred to as such. For instance, in a preface to an edition of Hasdeu's play, the author notes that "the dramatist is the first to elevate *historical plays* from the obscurity of run-of-the-mill productions."[9] Moreover, both this preface and Ralea's article reveal a paradoxical reception of theatrical production: they discuss theater without truly engaging with it. Specifically, they acknowledge the existence of a rich domestic theatrical tradition—or, in any case, richer than that of novels—without providing substantial information about it.

This study begins by addressing the neglect of non-canonical literature and tragedy, given the prevailing preference for comedy and drama. This absence, I propose, results from a narrow and decontextualized perspective on both translations and the local production of literary[10] and dramatic products. In the first section of the article, I will demonstrate that, counterintuitively, the greatest interest before 1918 lay not in Greek tragedy but in modern tragedy, particularly Italian and French. In the second section, I examine what Margaret Cohen terms "the small unread"[11] of domestic production, which did not make the canon; rather, this umbrella includes lowbrow literary works and theatrical plays. My argument is that both translations and domestic productions are intrinsically linked to the process of nation-building and were therefore instrumental in promoting the national ideals that shaped Moldavia's and Wallachia's socio-cultural milieu until 1918.

Translating Tragedies: Latecomers, Cognates and Diversifiers

In an 1885 theater review, I.L. Caragiale highlights the supposed diversity of productions at the National Theater in Bucharest by noting that within just five days, the theater featured an Italian opera, an English tragedy translated from French, a Greek play, and a French comedy.[12] As I will demonstrate, most of the tragedies rendered into Romanian were indeed French, Italian, Greek, and English. However, their success varied; the greatest interest was shown in what I term "cognates," referring to Italian and French tragedies. They were followed by Greek works, whom I classify as "latecomers," and then English and German works, which served primarily as "diversifiers" in the theatrical repertoire.

When Goethe coined the term *Weltliteratur* in 1827, he placed the Ancient Greeks at the top of the literary hierarchy.[13] This observation alone might justify the delayed translation of Greek tragedies into Romanian; these masterpieces appear to have been read in their original language. Indeed, the development of an educational system in the Principalities was influenced by Western models, as

6. Ralea, "De ce nu avem roman?", 82.

7. Vasile Alecsandri's series of comedies have Chirița as the protagonist and were published between 1850 and 1875.

8. I.L. Caragiale published his most notable comedies in the second half of the nineteenth century, as follows: "O noapte furtunoasă" ["A Stormy Night"] (1879), "Conu Leonida față cu reacțiunea" [Master Leonidas Faces the Reactionaries] (1880), "O scrisoare pierdută" ["A Lost Letter"] (1884), and "D-ale carnavalului" ["Only During a Carnival"] (1885).

9. Mihai Drăgan, "Prefață", in B. P. Hasdeu, *Răzvan și Vidra* (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1975), ix. Emphasis mine.

10. Although when it comes to prose and poetry, there are several analyses that approach the relationship between local production and translations during the long nineteenth century. See, for instance, Ștefan Baghiu, "Translations of Novels in the Romanian Culture During the Long Nineteenth Century (1794–1914): A Quantitative Perspective," *Metacritic Journal* 6, no. 2 (2020): 87–106, or Vlad Pojoga, "The Last Bastion of European Romanticism: A Quantitative Analysis of Poetry in the Romanian Literary Magazine *Convorbiri literare* (1867–1916)", *Primerjalna književnost* 47, no. 2 (2024): 9-30, https://doi.org/10.3986/pkn.v47.i2.01.

11. For the concept of "the great unread," see Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 23.

12. I. L. Caragiale, "Cronica teatrală", in *Opere*, vol. 4 (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură, 1965), 158.

13. See J. W. von Goethe and J. P. Eckermann, "Conversations on World Literature", in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 22: "but, if we really want a pattern, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind if constantly represented. All the rest we must look at only historically, appropriating to ourselves what is good, so far as it goes."

evidenced by the 1833 *Regulament Școlar* [School Regulation],[14] but it was several decades after *Regulament* was published that discussions appeared on Greek works in schools. A relevant example in this regard is D. Bănescu and Iuliu Valaori's debate, which took place in a series of articles in *Revista Generală a Învățământului* [The General Magazine of Education]. In his reply to Bănescu's article, Valaori reemphasized the need to include only Sophocles and specifically *Oedipus at Colonus* in the curriculum, justified primarily by the limited number of classes per week and the main goal of studying such works, namely that of translating from Greek.[15] In this context, it is worth noting that a *systematic* translation[16] of Sophocles' plays was undertaken only in 1909–1910, when Eugeniu Dinescu released three volumes, which included Romanian renditions of *Electra* and *Philoctetes* (vol. 1), *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* (vol. 2), and *Ajax* and *Women of Trachis* (vol. 3).[17] The intensification and diversification of translations picked up only in the 1920s, after the unification of the Principalities, when several new translations and editions appeared.

Before examining the translations that preceded the systematic translation of Greek tragedies, it is essential to address the Principalities' problematic relationship with the Greeks and, by extension, the Greek language. In his landmark study of the Balkans, Misha Glenny begins his discussion of the nineteenth-century Principalities with Tudor Vladimirescu's 1821 uprising against Phanariot rule.[18] Glenny describes this uprising as "driven by hostility to Greeks,"[19] noting that "[t]hroughout the eighteenth century the *hospodars* [the Greek princes] … had administered an economic regime that forced Romania's indigenous aristocracy, the boyars, to sell a large part of their produce to Constantinople at prices fixed below the value of the goods in western Europe."[20] Consequently, while an extremely small portion of the population[21] could read Greek tragedies in the original, there was a general reluctance to invest in translating from Greek due to the boyars' strained relations with the Phanariotes.

It is in this context that the dream of uniting Moldovia and Wallachia began to gain prominence among the intellectuals from the two Principalities. As previously suggested, the translation of tragedy was intertwined with the national project. The translation and publication of Shakespeare's plays, such as *Julius Caesar* (1599) in 1864 and *Hamlet* (1623) in 1887,[22] should be seen as exceptions to the rule, given that Italian and French modern tragedies were more prevalent. For example, in 1836—the same year that Cezar Bolliac published the first Romanian essay about Shakespeare's drama in the magazine *Curiosul* [The Curious][23]—Vittorio Alfieri's tragedies *Saul* (1782) and *Virginia* (1777–1783) were published in Romanian translation. An even earlier translation is that of Voltaire's *Alzire ou les Américains* (1736), released in 1835.

The intellectual who likely played the most crucial role in the dissemination of Italian and French modern tragedies in translation was Ion Heliade-Rădulescu (1802–1872). His extensive activities significantly impacted at least four areas: printing, theater, translation, and language. For instance, the three tragedies

14. See Alex Drace-Francis, *The Making of Modern Romanian Culture: Literacy and the Development of National Identity* (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), 100: "The decisive regulation, the *Regulament Școlar*, entered into force in May 1833: its authors, Barbu Știrbei and Costache Moroiu, had been educated in the West and were advocates of the modern pedagogical systems of Beccaria and Pestalozzi."

15. Iuliu Valaori, "Lectura tragicilor greci în liceu (un răspuns)," *Revista Generală a Învățământului*, no. 1 (1906): 23–24.

16. Various plays were translated before these editions but they were not part of a larger project. For instance, *Philoctetes* was translated by I. P. Simon in 1888, *Oedipus Rex* by Th. Aslan in 1894, and *Antigone*, by Mihail Dragomirescu in 1896.

17. See Sofocle, *Tragediile lui Sofocle*, vol. 1-vol. 3, transl. by Eugeniu Dinescu (Câmpulung: Tipografia, Legătoria și Librăria N. Vlădescu, 1909–1910).

18. The Phanariots, who were members of Greek families in Phanar, ruled in the Principalities from 1711/1716 until 1821.

19. Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War, and the Great Powers (1804-2012)* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2012), 58.

20. Ibid., 57–58.

21. Drace-Francis, *The Balkans.*, 3: "However, the dissemination of ideas through 'culture' (meaning here literary activity, even if such a definition is generally problematic) rarely took place very smoothly. In Romania, most of the population remained illiterate to the end of the nineteenth century."

22. On the early translation and critical reception of Shakespeare's play into Romanian, see Anca-Simina Martin, "Critical Reactions to and Early Research into Shakespeare's Bawdy (Worldplay) in Romania(n)," *Transilvania*, no. 9 (2019): 45–50.

23. See Dan Grigorescu, *Shakespeare în cultura română modernă* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1971), 45–49.

mentioned in the previous paragraph were all published by Heliade's printing house, as indicated in the paratext: "În tipografia lui I. Eliad" [In I. Eliad's Printing House]. Regarding theater, Heliade, along with Costache Aristia—the translator of Alfieri's *Saul* and *Virginia*—and others, founded "Soțietatea Filarmonică" [The Philharmonic Society] in 1833, which operated until 1838, while in 1852, he participated in founding the National Theater in Bucharest. One of his translations was even performed by graduates of the Philharmonic Society as part of their practical examination. However, what interests me at the moment is how Heliade used certain translations to advance his linguistic ideas.

Heliade's focus on emphasizing the Latin origins of the Romanian language and its similarity to other Romance languages is well-known.[24] Less recognized, however, is the fact that many of his ideas were also disseminated through his translations. One such example is the Romanian rendition of Lord Byron's *Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice* (1821). In the notes following the preface, Heliade offers a justification for the "poor" orthography: "Readers, if you find in this translation the old orthography with ъ and ѫ[25] and others like these, I must explain that this tragedy started to be printed in 1837 and even though it has just been finished, neither the translator nor the printing house could change the orthography once we had begun this way." [26] Although an admirer of Byron, Heliade seems more interested in contributing to the development of the Romanian language. This conclusion is supported by (1) his acknowledgment that the translation[27] was made from A. Pichot and E. de Salle's French version, which was considered a rather mediocre rendition, and (2) statements such as that of Petre Grimm, who finds Heliade's translation interesting only from the perspective of the history of the Romanian language.[28] However, a more important question remains unanswered: Why Byron? Does this discussion not concern, as I argued before, the import of Italian and French modern tragedy? The answer, I believe, comes once again from Heliade. Surprisingly, Byron's name is not mentioned in the preface signed by the Romanian intellectual. Instead, Heliade focuses on Marino Faliero and, by extension, Italian culture. For him, "everything about Venice is or was extraordinary; its scenery—a dream and its history—a novel,"[29] and his goal seems to be that of "[bringing] into the Romanian language a historical deed worth remembering."[30] It follows, then, that Heliade's concern is neither tragedy per se nor its structure, but simply the plot or, more precisely, the mere story.

Returning to the theatrical representations of two tragedies translated by Heliade, they include Voltaire's *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète* (1739), published in 1831, and Felice Romani's *Norma* (1831), released in a bilingual edition in 1843. The reason why I have chosen these two works is because their reception differed considerably. For instance, the Romanian rendition of Voltaire's tragedy went almost unnoticed by the wider public (likely due to the low literacy rates at the time as well). Notes from a critical edition of Heliade's translations, published in 1985, indicate that the print run of the first edition was resold under a new cover in 1834.[31] That same year, on August 29, the play was staged by the students of the Philharmonic Society as part of their examination, suggesting an effort to disseminate the translation. Conversely, *Norma* was met with success from the very beginning. Vladimir Drimba, the editor of the critical edition, notes the existence of three renditions published in quick succession: G. Asachi's, Heliade's, and M.A. Canini and I.G. Valentineanu's. He also speculates that Heliade's rendition was likely prompted by the visit of an Italian opera ensemble whose series of shows was to start with *Norma*.[32]

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24. See, for instance, Ion Heliade-Rădulescu, "Repede aruncătură de ochi asupra limbei și începutului rumânilor," in *Scrieri alese* (Bucharest: Albatros, 1984): 183–192.

25. These two letters are the equivalent of *ă* and *â* in the current Romanian Latin alphabet.

26. I. Eliad, "Însemnare a traducătorului," in *Din operele lui Lord Byron*. Transl. by I. Eliad, vol. II (Bucharest: Tipografia lui I. Eliad, 1839), xix, translation mine. Original: "Cetitorule, de vei vedea în această traducție încă ortografia veche despre ъ și ѫ și altele sunt dator a-ți da socoteală că această tragedie începuse a se tipări încă din anul 1837 și cu toate că s-a săvârșit acum, dar nici traducătorul, nici tipografia n-au putut a schimba ortografia în vreme ce se începuse odată altfel".

27. Petre Grimm, "Traduceri și imitațiuni românești după literatura engleză," *Dacoromania* (1924): 301.

28. Ibid.

29. I. Eliad, "Prefață", in *op. cit.*, v, translation mine. Original: "Toate câte țin de Veneția sunt sau au fost extraordinare; priveliștea ei seamănă un vis și istoria ei un romanț".

30. Ibid., xiii, translation mine. Original: "am adus în limba noastră o faptă istorică vrednică de pomenire".

31. I. Heliade Rădulescu, *Opere*, vol. 4, critical edition by Vladimir Drimba (Bucharest: Minerva, 1985), 571.

32. Ibid., 685.

What both narratives highlight is a high interest in Italian and French modern tragedy, driven by the growing influence of national ideas, and the emergence of a local literary field in which translations play a significant role. However, translations were imported fairly neither geographically nor chronologically. The broader picture reveals three possible categories of renditions: latecomers, cognates, and diversifiers. Latecomers, which include Ancient Greek works, were *studied* but not widely *read* until the early twentieth century. The cognates, or Romanians' "Latin siblings"—the Italians and French—had their tragedies translated from the first half of the nineteenth century, instrumentalized to promote national unity. Diversifiers, including English, German, and other tragedies from core literatures, played a limited role compared to the first two categories; they were neither studied extensively nor relied upon to promote national values.

Local Tragedies: The Hidden Inter-Imperiality

One of the innovations highlighted by modern tragedy is what Moretti refers to as "the deconsecrated king."[33] Moretti's analysis reveals significant differences not only between Ancient Greek and modern tragedy but also within modern tragedy itself, particularly between Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy.[34] In another work focused on the novel, Moretti describes novelistic production in peripheral literatures as a compromise between foreign form and local content,[35] a process "usually prepared by a massive wave of West European translations."[36] Before proceeding, several points need to be addressed. First, while tragedy and the novel are distinct genres, it is useful to view Romanian tragedy as a form of compromise. The import of foreign tragedies, as discussed earlier, raises concerns about local production: the nationalistic selection of translated tragedies and the focus on language over text may have influenced how local tragedies were written. Second, an exhaustive analysis of the tragedy form is beyond the scope of this research. Instead, I aim to provide an overview of literary production, highlighting several overlooked or lesser-known authors, followed by a brief reinterpretation of Hasdeu's notable play. Third, and stemming from the previous point, the lack of a nuanced discussion might overlook an important detail: the "purity" of the genre or the potential misclassification of these plays. Much like the emerging Romanian novels, which Ralea suggests may not fully conform to the novelistic form, the tragedies produced in the nineteenth-century Romanian Principalities may not be purely tragedies;[37] they might also be historical plays.

Conversely, works identified as drama might also be considered tragedies. In this context, B.P. Hasdeu's *Răzvan și Vidra* (1878), often labeled as a drama or historical play, can also be interpreted as a tragedy, as I will demonstrate later. Addressing the crucial issues of slavery abolition and Roma emancipation, the play is deeply rooted in its social context. This led G. Călinescu to remark that "[l]eaving aside its social intention, the drama remains in itself an admirable work with an *original* conflict."[38] Less enthusiastic, Caragiale acknowledges the play's formal flaws but concludes that it is an "honest" play and the only one worth noting from the entire theatrical output.[39] However, a critical rereading reveals a more significant flaw related to social emancipation, specifically that it does not exclude racism. For example, Răzvan, a free Roma man, tries to help a beggar, but his help is rejected solely because he is Roma: "had you been Romanian, I would've let you! But a Gypsy, I'd hope not! I'd hope not!"[40]

The stigma relates to an enduring insistence on "pure" Romanian origins, a theme prevalent in almost all tragedies published in the nineteenth century. Most of these plays feature eponymous characters who were rulers of Moldavia, as seen in Alexandru Pelimon's *Curtea lui Vasilie Vodă* [Vasilie Vodă's Court] (1852), Samson Bodnărescu's *Alexandru Lăpușneanu* (1884), Iuliu I. Roșca's *Lăpușneanu* (1886),[41]

33. Franco Moretti, "The Great Eclipse: Tragic Form as the Deconsecration of Sovereignty," in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*. Trans. by Susan Fischer, David Forgacs and David Miller (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 42.
34. Ibid., 42–82.
35. Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 2, no. 1 (2000): 58.
36. Ibid., 59.
37. Ralea, *art. cit.*, 82–83.
38. Calinescu, *History of Romanian Literature*, transl. by Leon Levițchi (Milan: Nagard Publishers), 1988, 318. Emphasis mine.
39. I.L. Caragiale, "Cercetare critică asupra teatrului românesc," in *Opere*, 133.
40. B.P. Hasdeu, *Răzvan și Vidra* (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1975), 12, translation mine. Original: "De-ai fi român, cale-vale! dar țigan, păcat! Păcat!".
41. The paratextual information indicates that the play was staged on March 5, 1881, prior to its publication, at Dacia Theater in Bucharest.

and N.A. Bogdan's *Bogdan I* (1890). Wallachia, by contrast, is less frequently depicted, with Toma Strâmbeanu's *Radu Leonu Vodă și miniștrii săi fanarioți* [Radu Leonu Vodă and His Phanariot Ministers] (1856) being a rare example of a tragedy set in this region with a Wallachian ruler.[42] Regarding Lăpușneanu, the interest in him as a protagonist likely has a literary basis. Costache Negruzzi's novella "Lăpușneanu" (1840), published in the first issue of *Dacia literară* [Literary Dacia], the most important literary magazine at the time, may have inspired these tragedies. Another thematic link exists between Pelimon's tragedy, featuring prince Vasile Lupu and his daughter Ruxandra, and Asachi's short story "Rucsandra Doamna" [Lady Rucsandra], which also focuses on Ruxandra Lupu. These comparisons are significant as they reveal a unique aspect of Romanian tragedy: a strong interest in exploring Moldavia's historical past. Historically, Moldavian rulers were often caught in inter-imperial struggles.[43] For example, Lăpușneanu, who ruled Moldavia between 1552–1561 and 1564–1568, was aided by the Poles in his accession to the throne, resulting in an oath of fidelity to the King of Poland, which complicated relations with the Habsburgs and the Ottomans. This overview of local tragedy highlights a tendency to align with broader cultural productions rather than drawing from Ancient Greek or modern tragedy, leading to further examination of whether these works belong to the category of tragedy or historical plays.

Before moving on to the final point of this article—a brief discussion of B. P. Hasdeu's play—I want to highlight an alternative pattern in Romanian tragedy. In the previous section, I showed that even when tragedies were translated from non-Romance literatures, there was a tendency to choose plays with plots rooted in the history or culture of Romance countries. This, I believe, is a subtle strategy to emphasize the similarities between Romania and the Romance-speaking world. However, in domestic production, the reliance on imported plots seems to gradually give way to local material. This point is far from redundant, given that Caragiale's study on theatrical repertoire categorizes plays into adaptations, plagiarism, and translations.[44] According to Caragiale, adaptations or plagiarisms often followed the French model, favoring comedies and boulevard melodramas.[45] This perspective invites us to scrutinize plays such as Samson Bodnărescu's *Rienzi* (1868), dedicated to Titu Maiorescu, and Sava N. Șoimescu's *Catilina* (1886). *Rienzi* focuses on Cola di Rienzo, a fourteenth-century Italian politician, while *Catilina* centers on Catiline, the Roman politician known for the Catilinarian conspiracy. These examples suggest that the importation of plots may extend beyond simple borrowing, indicating a fragile and unreliable boundary between translations and local productions.

Now, let us turn to B.P. Hasdeu's *Răzvan și Vidra*, a play that illustrates the inter-imperial predicament. First, I will explain why this often-called "Romantic drama" qualifies as a tragedy. On the one hand, the plot of the play checks all the attributes of the tragic form, as it is defined by Terian.[46] The "original conflict" in this play is not about the fate of princes or rulers but about a newly freed man. The failure depicted in the play is not just an individual's failure but the failure of an entire class, whose upward social mobility is continually obstructed. As the play shows, other characters do not oppose Răzvan because he is a ruler but because he belongs to a certain race and class: "I know that in Moldavia, there is only one Răzvan, I swear / It's a pity that he is a Roma... Damn it!... This is his only fault."[47] In his remarkable study on modern tragedy, Raymond Williams argues that

> "[w]e must ask whether tragedy, in our own time, is a response to social disorder. It if is so, we shall not expect the response to be always direct. The disorder will appear in very many forms, and to articulate these will be very complex and difficult. A more immediate difficulty is the ordinary separation of social thinking and tragic thinking."[48]

42. An interesting case is that of *Moartea lui Brâncoveanu* [Brâncoveanu's Death] (1872), a play written by Antonin Roques, a French writer who came to Bucharest. See I. L. Caragiale, "Cercetare critică asupra teatrului românesc," in *Opere*, 134.

43. See Laura Doyle, *Inter-imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 4: "Both political leaders and everyday folks thus occupy what I call the condition of inter-imperiality, a fraught position, lived all at once in the neighborhood, at the imperial court, on the road, in the body, and amid the invasive stream of political events and news. The *inter-* of *inter-imperiality* refers to multiply vectored relations among empires and among those who endure and maneuver among empires".

44. See Caragiale, "Cercetare," 133.

45. Ibid., 135.

46. See Andrei Terian, "Tragedy in Romanian Literature: Some Conceptual Delimitations," Transilvania 53, no. 5 (2024): 12-22

47. Hasdeu, *Răzvan*, 135, translation mine. Original: "Eu știu că-n țara Moldovei unul e Răzvan, mă jur! / Păcat că-i țigan... La dracu!... Ăsta-i singuru-i cusur!".

48. Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 88.

Of particular note here is the need to connect two ways of thinking. The social dimension is woven into the original plot, which is unusual for a tragedy. Instead of focusing on a king or a deconsecrated king, this play features a free Roma man, which is quite atypical for Romanian tragedy of that era. By the end, his struggle for upward social mobility becomes tragic. To paraphrase Williams, the tragedy of a free man can be as compelling as that of a prince.[49] Beyond social upheaval, reflected in class struggle and persistent racism, the character himself stands out. Unlike most contemporary tragedies, which feature protagonists from a single class, Hasdeu's play breaks this mold. As Lukács puts it, this represents a shift in the structure of tragedy that we can also observe in Hasdeu's work:

> "Although in Elizabethan drama the representatives of several classes appear, the true human beings, the dramatic characters, are derived on the whole from a single class … The lower classes merely take part in comic episodes, or they are on hand simply so their inferiority will highlight the refinements of the heroes. For this reason, class is not decisive in structuring the characters and the action of these plays"[50].

The inclusion of diverse social classes is a distinctive feature of modern tragedy. However, Hasdeu's play still grapples with unresolved issues. While it is a modern tragedy that features a protagonist from the lower class and among marginalized groups, it does not resolve the underlying social disorder. Răzvan's tragic end bears a striking resemblance to the fates of princes and kings in classical tragedies.

According to Lukács, modern tragedy is also historicist and has a sociological foundation.[51] The abolition of slavery is a prominent issue, but it is only one aspect of the socio-historical context. Another significant factor is the presence of inter-imperial tensions. Răzvan's social mobility highlights the inter-imperial nature of the Romanian Principalities. Throughout the play, from the first to the fifth act, Răzvan evolves from a free Roma man and hajduk captain to a Polish army officer, eventually becoming a Moldavian hetman.[52] Additionally, Act III's setting at the fringes of the Moskal territory[53] underscores Moldavia's position at the crossroads of multiple empires—the Ottoman, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian Empires—and its experience of their internal and external conflicts.

Moreover, the play features ethnically complex characters, whose Romanian identity is frequently highlighted and questioned. A notable dialogue between Răzvan and a freeholder revolves around the latter's ethnic origins: "Was your father Polish?"[54] asks Răzvan, followed by, "And your mother, was she Hungarian?"[55] Similarly, Act III introduces new characters and further enriches the inter-imperial ethnic mixture. Alongside Răzvan, now depicted as a Polish soldier, the act presents other "Romanians," Polish soldiers and captains, a Moskal scout ("Iscoada Muscălească"), and three soldiers with no specified ethnicity. Despite this, the initial conversation among these soldiers reveals them as Polish and, as they claim, superior to the Moskals. Minski and Piotrowski's references to Răzvan are particularly telling; they do not view him as inferior due to his Roma heritage or lack of bravery—though Minski envies him for his bravery—but because they see him as "an old dummy from Moldavia" and a "*vir valachicus*."[56] This portrayal reflects the play's successful depiction of the heterogeneous and adaptable nature of ethnicity, shaped by the inter-imperial dynamics of the time.

Thirdly, the play's action underscores the inter-imperial context. Up to this point, the setting, the protagonist's social mobility, and the characters appear to have been all influenced by the interactions and tensions between competing empires. As Doyle argues, "[t]he *inter-* of *inter-imperiality* refers to multiple, overlapping relations among empires and among those navigating between them."[57] The play highlights victories against the Turks and Tatars, suggesting the Principalities' active role in shaping

49. Ibid., 73.
50. George Lukács and Lee Baxandall, "The sociology of modern drama," *Tulane Drama Review* 9, no. .4 (1965): 147.
51. Ibid., 151–152.
52. Each Act starts with the list of the characters, where Răzvan's role is mentioned to indicate his social mobility, but each time this mobility is followed by an adjective denoting his belonging to an imperial army, for instance, "ostaș leșesc" [Polish soldier]. See Hasdeu, *Răzvan*, 5, 39, 69, 102, 129.
53. Ibid., 69.
54. Ibid., 121, translation mine. Original: "Tatăl dumitale a fost leah?".
55. Ibid., translation mine. Original: "Însă maica dumitale, se zice c-a fost maghiară?".
56. Ibid., 71, translation mine. Original: "Un nătărău din Moldova".
57. Doyle, *Inter-imperiality*, 4.

regional inter-imperial dynamics. However, several lines in the play also point to broader rivalries between empires that negatively impact the Romanians' fate. For example, after meeting with the hetman, Răzvan expresses his concerns to his wife, Vidra, about the complex interplay among empires: "He first told us that the Polish don't get along with the Germans, / and having connections with the Turks, they would like to secure them; / He also told us that Aron, the new ruler of Moldavia, / Is against the Turks, together with the German emperor."[58] Additionally, Bașotă voices deeper concerns about external politics: "We are fighting with the pagan powers, / And, as it is said, we may see that tomorrow / The Polish … will help the Turk."[59] Moldavians appear to have little room to maneuver; they are essentially trapped between the competing empires. The same applies to the protagonist, whose actions are constrained by fellow Moldavians due to his ethnicity and by the imperial powers.

In summary, a new—though brief—reading of Hasdeu's play reveals that what seems like a purely local historical drama is actually a tragedy deeply rooted in the long history of inter-imperial relations. While the issue of slavery is undeniably important and deserves critical attention, focusing solely on this aspect oversimplifies the play's sociological foundation. Instead, the play reflects Romania's complex emergence from a lengthy and often overlooked inter-imperial legacy. Hasdeu's *Răzvan și Vidra* serves as a prime example of this. Other works, like those about Lăpușneanu, could also support this interpretation, revealing that behind the historical narrative and national focus lies a tragedy shaped by inter-imperial influences.

Conclusion

Tragedy is notably absent from the canon. However, this does not mean that tragedy was not produced during the long nineteenth century, but rather that it was largely forgotten or obscured by subsequent generations of readers, audiences, and critics. It was forgotten because it was neither reprinted nor restaged, and it was hidden because critics such as Ralea and Drăgan discussed it without even mentioning specific titles. My aim has been to address this gap. In investigating the production and circulation of tragedy in the nineteenth-century Romanian Principalities, I have considered the peripheral status of Romanian culture within the global literary landscape. As evidenced by the study of the novel, Romanian literature was more focused on importing than on producing its own. Therefore, my analysis includes both translations and locally produced tragedies. Fundamental yet necessary questions needed to be addressed: What tragedies were translated? What tragedies were written? Answering these questions has led to the key finding of this study.

The main conclusion can be summarized as follows: while translations and local productions were geographically divergent, they were teleologically convergent. An overview of translations reveals a clear preference for modern tragedies from Romance-language countries, with Ancient Greek, and modern English and German tragedies receiving less attention. In contrast, local productions focused on exploring the Romanian context. This divergence reflects the national ideals and nation-building efforts prevalent before 1918. Thus, while imports aimed to reinforce the idea of Romanians as descendants of the Romans and integrate Romanian culture into the broader Romance cultural sphere, local productions sought to delve into the historical past of the Principalities, often highlighting inter-imperial dynamics. Returning to Moretti's concept, if there was a visible compromise, it was not formal but strategic: tragedy itself was compromised, repurposed to further the national ideals of the time.

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58. Ibid., 115, translation mine. Original: "Ne spuse dintâi că leșii sunt rău cu țara nemțească, / Ș-având legături cu turcii ar dori să le păzească, / Ne mai spuse c-Aron-vodă, noul domn moldovenesc, / Ține-mpotriva Turciei, cu-mpăratul cel nemțesc".
59. Ibid., 125.

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