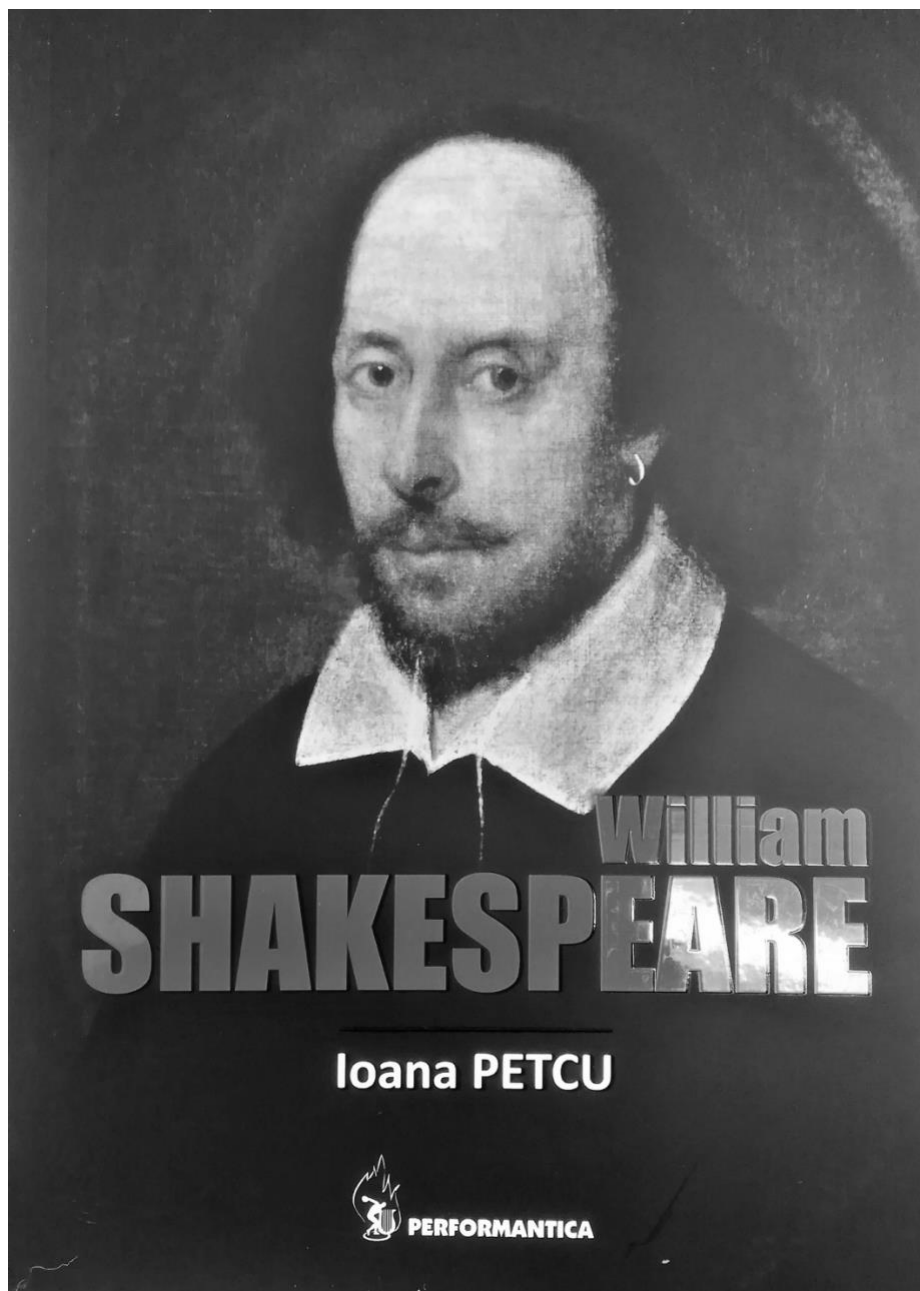




**THE GREATEST ELIZABETHAN
PLAYWRIGHT REVISITED –
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
BY IOANA PETCU**

William Shakespeare
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Abstract: The present volume is a revisitation of the great Elizabethan playwright whose immortality in the world of letters and performance is an undeniable fact. Ioana Petcu's collection of essays tackles his most important plays under all their aspects, inviting the reader to see all the movies and performances available, as well as the ones to be released, with a critical eye. Moreover, one is compelled to go back to the reading of the plays, either in original or translation for the Barthesian pleasure of the text and (re)discovery of facts that have perhaps been forgotten.

Keywords: staging and screening Shakespeare, Romanian and international performances, philological drama studies.

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Ioana Petcu's book is a selection of nine essays on the great Elizabethan playwright, bringing into play performances of his tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard III*) and comedies (*The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, *The Tempest*).

In the preface, signed by the senior researcher Gabriela Haja from the Romanian Academy, Iași branch, we are asked whether we enjoy Shakespeare, a rhetorical question to which we will find answers in this volume since the perspective of a Romanian lecturer from the Faculty of Theatre, "George Enescu" University of Arts is more than a hermeneutical lesson, addressing philologists less and actors, along with researchers of drama studies, more (pp. 5-6).

The author also invites us to reflect on Shakespeare and his writings demystifying the romantic misconception according to which we might imagine him drafting his plays at candlelight, unaffordable those days. We could, however, admire his portrait as depicted by Chandos, an unconventional male figure with an earring, a regular actor who stood by his company (The Chamberlain's Men, later on called The King's Men) and tried to make a living from writing, as well (p. 7). Remembered as 'the sweet swan of Avon' (Ben Jonson) and 'a tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide' (Robert Green) (p. 8), his reception would take a separate chapter in literature (p. 9) and is not the topic of the current volume. Theoretically speaking, one could argue that he challenged genres due to the blurred edges between tragedy and comedy that hybridlike mingle in his work (since he introduced comic scenes in tragedies and bitterness in comedies) (p. 11). The plays in the volume are tackled following the model provided by Ion

Zamfirescu in the third volume on the history of theatre, starting with *Richard III*, continuing with his great tragedies and ending with comedies, considered in their chronological and thematical dimension (pp. 12-13).

The essay on *Richard III* has, as motto, a quote from Saramago's *Blindness*, "I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see." (1999, p. 120), stressing the importance of the main character against the background of the Wars of the Roses. Labelled as "a negative human hyperbole" by Zoe Dumitrescu Buşulegna (p. 15), and a "sublime performance of human evil" by Leon Leviţchi (*ibidem*), Ioana Petcu argues that he is a paradox, a creation and victim of turbulent times, of an off-centred and non-rational London; however, he is not the only blindman, figuratively speaking, but all Londoners are (especially the Tower people). King Richard elicits disapproval and fascinates through his irony and hypocrisy, similarly to Don Jonson's Volpone and Moliere's Tartuffe (p. 16). The play is analysed considering Steinbeck's *Winter of Our Discontent* as a main theme, the Romanian specialist arguing that the king is aware of his singularity (*I am I*), thus preceding the theatre of the absurd, well before the 20th century (as assessed by Romanian criticism though Romul Munteanu) (p. 22). Recent rewritings such as Matei Vişniec's *Richard III Will Not Take Place or Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold* (2005) or the older *Cousin Shakespeare* by Marin Sorescu in which Richard III plays a secondary role. (p. 25)

In *Waiting for... Hamlet*, the second essay of the book, the author tries to decipher the first lines of the play, as so many others before her, in an existentialist and ontological stance (p. 26). Hamlet is a Treplev of an "unweeded garden" (p. 29) who needs the truth and is willing to do anything to uncover it; we are dealing with a character that makes room for 17th century cartesianism, foreshadowing the *cogito* triad (*ibidem*). As Shakespeare character's shows us, theatre is supposed to mirror the world as the directors of the beginning of the 20th century will show (Stanislavski); some will provide a distorted image (Meyerhold, Vahtangov), will keep a distance from it (Brecht) or turn this image into an experiment (the avant-garde theatre) (p. 34).

Romeo and Juliet as a Spring Awakening has as motto a quote from the Prologue of the play, "Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean" (p. 37) and is prefigured in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in the tragic story between Pyramus and Thisbe, to be enriched by Renaissance Italy before Shakespeare (p. 38). The intricacies in the play where everyone seems to mock the Montague and Capulet families, in a world with an overlap between Monday and Thursday, are compared

to the fate of Ionesco's Mr. and Mrs. Smith whose clock gets the hour wrong (p. 39). The two statues that the families would rise to commemorate the death of their only children are an opportunity for critics to engage in art criticism; thus, Monique Borie analysed the link between the body in sculpture and the flesh, intrinsically connecting movement and inertia, life and death (p. 43).

In *Othello, Ego, Alter-Ego and Iago*, the Romanian lecturer underlines the fact that the play has enjoyed tremendous popularity outside theatrical performance, as well, being adapted for opera (with the libretto signed by Arrigo Boito and the musical composition by Giuseppe Verdi), ballet (with choreographies by Serge Lifar in 1960, John Neumeier in 1985 and Lar Lubovitch in 1997) and cinema (movies directed by Franco Zeffirelli in 1986, Oliver Parker in 1995 and Tim Blake Nelson in 2001). The tragedy led to outstanding acting such as Laurence Olivier's (who played Othello in 1965) or Ian McKellen's (as the 1989 Iago), to name but a few (p. 49). In trying to account for the literary celebrity of the tragedy in which a Moor strangles his wife and then commits suicide, critics have explored its various themes; from Othello's splitting between self and alterity to postcolonial theories (Jyotsna Singh), the shame that guides the characters (Ewan Fernie) and Harold Bloom's controversial ideas on the effects of frigidity and impotence around which the tragedy is centred (p. 50), the play testifies to Eco's concept of *opera aperta* due to its inexhaustible interpretations.

Macbeth, the shortest of the tragedies is tackled in *When Some Laugh in Their Sleep* and has as motto, a quote from act IV, scene 2: "But cruel are the times when we are traitors/ And do not know ourselves" (p. 59). Considered a study of philosophy and psychology of evil (Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor), a tragedy of ambiguity and paradox (Wilbur Sanders) built on obvious contrast and a strong claustrophobic sensation (Graham Bradshaw) (p. 61), this is a Jacobean play devoted to James I of England, hence the references to Edward the Confessor, portrayed in a positive manner; the content subscribes to the monarch preferences since sorcery and mystery were his favourite topics when he financed theatre. Listed second based on the public's preferences after *Hamlet* six hundred years from Shakespeare's birth (*Time Out*, 2016) (p. 60), it was also enriched by film industry who released successful productions: Justin Kurzel's in 2015 (starring Michael Fassbender and Marion Cotillard) or Kit Monkman's in 2018 (starring Mark Rowley and Akia Henry) and the most recent, Joel Coen's in 2021 (starring Denzel Washington and Frances McDormand). Among the international stagings, at Barbican Theatre, London, the director Adrian Noble laid particular

emphasis on the theme of corruption and human error in 1993, whereas the national ones could not ignore Silviu Purcărete's collage *Ubu Rex with Scenes from Macbeth* from the National Theatre of Craiova in 1991 or Mihai Măniuțiu's 2007 one, among others (pp. 60-61). Sleep, a recurrent theme in Shakespeare's plays (natural for positive heroes and unnatural in negative characters tortured by its absence), translates into Macbeth's insomnia since night dominates the whole play (pp. 64-65), the lecturer concluding that *The Tragedy of Macbeth* is a dream's dream (p. 76).

King Lear or About Nothing opens with Anthony Hopkins's thoughts who was 80 when he last played Hamlet and a quote from Andrei Șerban who pictured Romanian actors fit to act in the play (p. 77). To a beginner in the study of Shakespeare, Holinshed's chronicles are recommended, along with a collection of English poems, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* and an episode from Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* that inspired the playwright (p. 78). Interpretation stances revolve around contrasting pairs (madness – reason), nature, old age and eyesight to shed light on the dysfunctional relationship between parents and children, implying sacrifice and suffering mainly of the former for the latter. Lear is Shakespeare's Job, tragedy itself, irrespective of the age of the staging or screening (in Richard Eyre's movie, for instance, the main character is a modern old man who throws himself in the supermarket cart because he has nothing to lose) (p. 87). According to Leon Levițchi, unlike Timon of Athens, *King Lear* evolves from a moral viewpoint and his way of thinking improves (p. 88), acknowledging his condition of an old man that ended in poverty, illness and is despised by everyone. Apart from the offence brought to monarchy, this may be one of the reasons that led to Nahum Tate's happy ending of the play, and its rewriting to please the public between 1681-1843, i.e., Lear getting the throne back and Cordelia marrying Edgar (p. 93).

In *The Taming of the Shrew – A Performance of the Subtext*, the author elicits from her readers, rhetorically speaking, whether this is an atypical love story or a repetitive scene of the endless conflict between women and men or a farce in which servants trick their masters (p. 94). The text is quite misogynistic in itself, portraying barbaric characters of the 16th century and, in their staging, Romanian directors attempted at portraying the therapeutic transfer of behaviour that the couple Petruchio and Katherina had on each other (p. 95). Inspired by Arabian Nights, an English ballad, *A merry jest of a shrewd and curst wife lapped in morel's skin for her good behaviour*, and *I Suppositi* by Ariosto (1509), as well as

the old Latin comedy and *Commedia dell'Arte*, the play is sometimes surrealist in its lack of verisimilitude (p. 96) and invites to anthropological reflection in a historical and cultural context (p. 107).

Looking at the Nightmare through a Crack in the Wall – A Midsummer's Night Dream overviews the fantasy choreographies that the play inspired, in shining decora with puffy objects, silk clothing and fluid movement of dancers that seemed translucent as in George Balanchine's and has been screened since the 1930s, either in classic adaptations (1935, 1999) or modern ones starring tattooed characters of today's world (2017). Escaping the cliché of romantic comedy that takes place in a fairy world, the work induces a conjunction point between reality and fantasy with an overlapped psychoanalytical dimension, given the political and social context (p. 108). Without it, August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* and Luigi Pirandello's *Tonight We Improvise* will not be the same (p. 108). There are various layers of communication in the text and

the audience situated in the performance space reconfigures the theatre audience's responses. Like a prism, the theatre audience takes the refracted or double consciousness inherent in the apparent failures of Bottom and company and reintegrates them into a unified consciousness, a single, embracing view of everything represented on stage. (O'Neill, 1997, p. 19)

A parallel is drawn between Pirandello's *The Mountain Giants* where actors and characters exit the scene and theatrical art and its Thanatos spirit find a home; analogously, the death of the characters in the performance, Pyramus and Thisbe prepare the scene for the world of ghosts, leaving room for Puck's epilogue (p. 120).

The Tempest as a Winter of Discontent on an Island discusses Shakespeare's comedy that respects the rule of three unities, unlike many of his other plays. Its role is that of a will, legacy for posterity and many critics superimposed Prospero's voice on Shakespeare. However, recent critics (cf. Robert Egan, 1972) feel that the magician is a tragedy actor as Lear or Hamlet (p. 123). Mostly employed by postcolonial theory due to the influence exerted by the white European man on colonies, a quote by Miranda from the text (act IV, scene 1) can be also encountered in Huxley's dystopia, *A Brave New World* (p. 124). Rewritings pertaining to intercultural, feminist or gender studies show that the Elizabethan playwright is connected to the problems of the 20th and 21st centuries as far as domination, power abuse, inequity, lack of morality or stigmatisation are concerned (e.g., Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête*, 1969; Fernandez Retamar's Caliban,

1971; Michelle Cliff's feminist essay, *Caliban's Daughter*, 1991) (p. 134). On Romanian stages, Liviu Ciulei's variant (first released at Bulanda Theatre in 1978, then at The Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis in 1981) and Cătălina Buzoianu's are worth mentioning and discussed by the Romanian lecturer (pp. 141-142). In an almost baroque edifice (p. 135), deformity is a sign of alterity, and the monster becomes a victim in the colonisers' imagery which leads to a stereotypical mentality and stigmatisation (p. 128).

Conclusions are drawn in *Shakespeare or the Impossible Separation* and depart from a quote from Jorge Luis Borges's *Shakespeare's Memory*; the author argues that we understand Shakespeare differently at different ages, hence the various editions to reach the public, especially abroad. The current book is merely an attempt to grasp the performances of his plays, with a bird's-eye view on the movie adaptations in a non-biased way related to personal preference (pp. 142-143). It is, therefore, a must read for everyone interested in Shakespeare's theatre, its screening and staging at national and international level.

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1. O'Neill, Michael (1997). 'Audiences of "A Midsummer's Night Dream"', *Shakespeare Bulletin*, The John Hopkins University Press.
2. Saramago, Jose (1999). *Blindness*. Translated into English by professor Juan Sager. First Harvest Edition.