

# Shakespeare in Polish and Russian Classicism and Romanticism

by

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The first contact of the Western Slavs with Shakespeare occurred in his lifetime. In the early 17th century the English comedians brought him in their repertoire to Prague and Warsaw. Their arbitrary distortion and adaptation of his tragedies and comedies gave a rather vague idea of his genius. However, the first period of contact left some traces among the Czechs and Poles in the form of dramatic popular plots such as a "Comedy about Frances," "Shailok the Jew," shown in the Bohemian puppet theatre<sup>1</sup>, or several Polish interludes which apparently resemble some version of "The Taming of the Shrew"<sup>2</sup>.

At this stage there was no closer contact with Shakespeare and his theatre in the Slavic countries. It was in the middle and second half of the 18th century that a new theatre followed and made possible the perception and application of the English master's dramatic art in the Slavic world.

French classicism, exercising a dominating influence on the literature and theatre of the Poles and Russians, opened the door into their countries for Shakespearean drama and became its only intermediary and interpreter. A predominant and unique role in popularizing Shakespeare in France was played by Voltaire, a great discoverer of Shakespeare's genius. His "Lettres anglaises ou lettres philosophiques," especially the chapter "Sur la tragédie," constitute the cornerstone of the basic French and also Western European ideas about Shakespeare.

Voltaire's enthusiasm for Shakespeare's incomparable genius on one hand, and his criticism of Shakespeare's "vulgarity" and "barbarism" on the other remained a permanent theme in the whole of Polish Shakespeare criticism of that period.

Although Adam Czartoryski, the first Polish Shakespearean, praised the English master as having the most outstanding talent, he also took

care to brand him as a dramatist, whose "works are lacking in that regularity and order which comes from education and the reasonable application of rules". A series of Polish critics and writers, such as Golanski, Dmowski, Ignacy Krasicki, looked at Shakespeare through Voltaire's glasses. Following Voltaire they displayed an admiration for the master from Stratford, but they tempered it with criticism of his "barbarism" and "vulgarity," which they considered to be inconsistent with classical taste and Boileau's rules.

Voltaire paved the way for Shakespeare's entrance to the Polish stage. His "Zaïre," inspired by and practically based on "Othello," became the most popular item in the Polish theatrical repertoire. Between 1747 and 1821 it was five times translated into Polish and was a forerunner of Shakespeare's "Othello" in Poland. Voltaire's "Caesar's Death" and "Brutus," a modified classical version of "Julius Caesar," enjoyed equal popularity and gave Polish audiences a foretaste of the tragedy, which of all those written by Shakespeare, was most popular in the French classical world<sup>4</sup>.

The same Voltairean and classical trend in the interpretation of the master from Stratford was noticeable in Russia. Sumarokov, the founder of the Russian theatre, admired Racine and Corneille from whom he derived almost all his dramatic inspiration. In 1748 he wrote his "Hamlet," no doubt as a result of his acquaintance with the French version of the English tragedy. The very loose and vague connection between Sumarokov's play and the English original is rendered still more tenuous by the employment of the three classical unities and the reduction of the Shakespearean Hamlet theme to the typical Corneillian conflict between Hamlet's love and his duty.

In her literary activities the Russian empress Catherine II displayed a great interest in Shakespeare with whom she became acquainted through Eschenburg's German translation. Inspired by "Merry Wives of Windsor" she wrote her comedy "A Basket and a Washing"<sup>5</sup>, with subtitle "Free and poor adaptation of Shakespeare." Then she wrote her drama "Rurik's Life" giving it the subtitle "Imitation of Shakespeare," and finally produced the dramatic essay: "The Beginnings of Oleg's

Rule." All these dramatic endeavours of the Russian empress, although inspired by Shakespearean dramatic plot and motifs, show the rationalistic features of the Age of Enlightenment and traces of the outlook of Voltaire, her friend and teacher<sup>6</sup>. French classical aesthetics were a dominant factor in transplanting Shakespeare into the Polish and Russian world.

Beside the German Eschenburg's translations of Shakespeare's works, the complete translation by La Tourneur ("Shakespeare traduit de l'anglais, dédié au Roi, Paris 1776-82) as well as the translations by Ducis are the sources from which the Shakespearean texts came to the Poles and Russians. Adaptations by Voltaire, Ducis and Mercier brought Shakespeare onto their stage. "Romeo and Juliet" appeared for the first time on the Polish stage in Mercier's adaptation which was published under the title "Les Tombeaux de Vérone." J. Kossakowski, the Polish translator, gave the tragedy the title "Groby z Werony" and it was staged for the first time in Poland in 1798. "Othello," which had been preceded by Voltaire's "Zaïre," appeared for the first time in a Warsaw theatre in 1801 in Ducis' adaptation. It was therefore listed in Poland among the French dramas<sup>7</sup>. In this alteration, Jago and all violent scenes, inconsistent with classical taste, were removed from the play and a happy ending was added by the French adapter. "King Lear," staged for the first time in Poland in 1805, also in Ducis' adaptation, was presented as a typical moral drama of the Age of Enlightenment to be shown by parents to their children.

The same traces of the age appear also in the Czech adaptations of "Macbeth" made by H. Tham, and of "The Taming of the Shrew" and "King Lear" made by Prokop Šedivý. In the Czech version, for example, the essence of the plot of "King Lear" was reduced to the simple theme of the ingratitude of children and included a sharp reminder to honour one's parents and show them filial love<sup>8</sup>.

In Poland "Macbeth" was the only play, which was brought here in anything other than a French disguise. Translated from Schiller's adaptation by S. Regulski in 1812, it preserved its Shakespearean

character and may be considered a symbol of the changes in the evaluation of Shakespearean art.

When French classicism still seemed to be the only interpreter of Shakespeare's dramas, a new factor arose, soon to be of tremendous importance.

After the decline of Gottsched, the first German interpreter of Shakespeare, Lessing established new aesthetics, undermined the principles of French classicism and consequently its basic interpretation of Shakespearean art. Wieland, then Schiller, in their translations, revealed the essence of the creative spirit of the English dramatist<sup>9</sup>. The new trend in the German literary school also affected the literary and artistic outlook of the Poles and Russians, particularly when August Schlegel published his famous lectures *Ueber dramatische Kunst und Literatur* (1809) ; the 12th lecture was dedicated to Shakespeare. Schlegel proclaimed the postulate of romantic drama ; he undermined the authority of Corneille, Racine and Voltaire, and thus also the classic interpretation of Shakespeare. His reappraisal of dramatic art destroyed Voltaire's domination and emancipated the English dramatist from the grip of classical tradition.

This was a fact marking the birth of the second phase in Slavic Shakespeareanism, a phase to some extent already prepared by the Polish and Russian followers of German "Sturm und Drang."

In Russia, Karamzin, influenced by the German literary movement, in the introduction to his translation of "Julius Caesar" in 1787 (the first translation of Shakespeare into Russian, based on La Tourneur's French translation<sup>10</sup>, severely criticized Corneille, Racine and Voltaire and glorified Shakespeare's great tragedies as "profound poetry of heart"<sup>11</sup>.

Schlegel's appearance strengthened the romantic trend and united the adherents of the new aesthetics. It was in harmony with this movement that Shakespeare, liberated from the classic restraints, was raised to the summit of admiration in Poland and Russia.

The young Russian intellectual and artistic elite, such as : Merzlov, Kuchelbeker, Polevoi, Griboedov, Kroneberg and others turn to

England and Germany as principal sources of art and poetry. They see in Shakespeare a "magician," "Homer's twin brother" and the "English Aeschylus," the highest incarnation of the creative spirit<sup>12</sup>. Young Pushkin and Zhukovskii become enthusiasts of the English playwright; Lermontov, still a very young poet, is deeply impressed by the master from Stratford. Soon under "Othello's" influence he will write his "Masquerade". Numerous adaptations and translations of Shakespeare's tragedies issue from the pen of Volkov, Chakhovskoi, Viazemskii, Chevyrev, Vronchenko (translator of "Hamlet") and Rochev (translator of "Macbeth"). The tremendous dramatic power Pushkin experiences reading the great English tragedies inspires him to write his "Boris Godunov," in which he merges the features of "Richard III," "Macbeth" and "Henry IV." The number of Russian translations and stage performances grows steadily.

In Poland, the younger generation, inspired by Schiller and Schlegel's *Ueber dramatische Kunst...*, shows the same admiration. Węzyk, while commenting on Schlegel's essay (*O poezji dramatycznej*, 1811), makes the first good translations of Shakespeare's plays into Polish. Brodzinski, promoter of the romantic movement in Poland (*O klasyczności i romantyczności*, 1818, *Myśli o dążeniu polskiej literatury*, 1820, and Korzeniowski, (*Kurs poezji*, 1823) admire the English dramatist. Adam Mickiewicz, the new rising star of Polish Romantic literature, translates excerpts from "Romeo and Juliet." The motto he takes from "Hamlet" and gives to his ballade "Romantyczność," and "Dziady" (część II) shows his interest in the Shakespearean art.

But it is Maurycy Mochnacki who becomes the true representative of Shakespearean art in Poland. Educated on Schlegel and Schiller, familiar with the young representatives of the romantic trend, such as Sainte-Beuve and Chasles, he may be considered the theoretician of the romantic Polish theatre. In "King Lear," "Othello," "Hamlet" he finds the plays which should lift Polish theatre out of stagnation resulting from the imitation of the French classics. He gives an extensive and deep analysis of Shakespeare's tragedies, of "Hamlet" in particular, and classifies Shakespeare as "altissimo poeta," on whom the modern theatre



should be based. Mochnacki's promotion of romantic drama ends forever the classical dramatic tradition and establishes Shakespeare's firm place in Polish theatre.

It was no accident that at the same period in Bohemia J. Kajetan Tyl, dramatist and actor, produced his valuable interpretations and translations of "King Lear," "Henry IV," "Macbeth" and "Romeo and Juliet" <sup>13</sup>.

Shakespeare's triumphant entrance into the theatre and literature of Slavic countries coincides with the most intense period of their romantic movement and this has its origins also in the political and cultural situation in Europe. After Napoleon's fall, England's and Germany's political and cultural influences began to penetrate the Slavic world rapidly. Romanticism that brought Shakespeare was a product of the English and German spirit.

Apart from these factors, however, a close association of Slavic romanticism with Shakespearian art must be sought in the inner nature of both.

The young romantic generation, intensively occupied with the perplexing, irrational problems of human life, found a strong organic connection between their own spiritual situation and that of the great Shakespearean tragedies.

The romantic notion that poetry and art are means of sensualizing human spiritual life (Novalis, Schleiermacher, Coleridge, Mochnacki), as well as the devaluation of human material life as a mere reflection of the interior man — are echoed in Shakespeare's great tragedies.

The romantic notion of escaping from reality by turning to historical problems brought the Slavic romantics close to "Julius Caesar," "King Lear," "Henry VI," "Richard III," "Richard II," "Henry IV" and "Henry V". This is why the trend found such a strong expression in the dramatic works of Julius Slowacki, the greatest follower of Shakespeare not only in Poland but in the whole Slavic world. Enchanted by Shakespeare tragedies he enriches the topics of "Mindowe," "Horsztynski" and "Lilla Weneda" with the motives of "King Lear," "Richard III," "Macbeth" and "Hamlet." As a result of his direct experience of the

English theatre in London and his complete grasp of the Shakespearean spirit he creates "Balladyna," the most perfect expression of Shakespearean art in the Slavic literatures — a Polish "Macbeth," enriched with dramatic elements of "King Lear," "Midsummer Night's Dream," "Romeo and Juliet" and "The Tempest."

And finally there is one more important inner link between Shakespearean dramatic art and Slavic romanticism. The German idealistic philosophy with its notion of "Weltgeist" and "Goettliche Weltregierung," which obsessed the intellectual elite in Slavic countries in the period of romanticism, was entirely consonant with Shakespearean dramatic art. Belinskii, prominent Russian critic, praised the English dramatist more highly than any of his predecessors<sup>14</sup>. In Belinskii's conception Shakespeare — a unique and incomparable phenomenon — played an epoch-making role in restoring to literature its Homeric dignity and wisdom. In him Belinskii sees the realization of Hegel's great ideas. Hamlet's problem is the problem of mankind, cursed with weakness but faced by strong reality. In Shakespeare's heroes Belinskii sees the manifestation of Hegel's eternal spirit (*ewiger Geist*) which is incarnated in human life. "After watching "Hamlet" the spectators leave the theatre with a feeling of spiritual harmony and peace, they are reconciled with life, since in the individual's battle and conflict they have watched absolute life, in which there is neither good nor evil in a relative sense, but everything is absolute good" — he says. Such is, in Belinskii's opinion, the association of Shakespeare with Hegel's philosophy which so strongly influenced the Slavic romantic mind.

In the years to come the situation was to change. The enthusiastic romantic approach was replaced by more academic, analytical studies and evaluation. As Schlegel replaced Voltaire, so in the middle of the 19th century Gervinus replaced August Schlegel by giving a new direction to Shakespearean studies (Gervinus, *Shakespeare*, Leipzig, 1850). Shakespeare remains an attractive subject of study not only in Poland<sup>15</sup> and Russia but also in other Slavic countries<sup>16</sup> where new translations of his work constantly appear.

## SLAVIC AND EAST EUROPEAN STUDIES

Brought by French classicism and eminently celebrated by Slavic romanticism Shakespeare finds a permanent dwelling place in the literature and theatre of the Slavic nations.

### NOTES

1. J. POKORNY, *Shakespeare in Czechoslovakia* (Prague, Orbis, 1955), p. 4.
2. J. CALINA, *Shakespeare in Poland* (Oxford, 1923), p. 7.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
4. M. SZYJKOWSKI, *Dzieje nowożytnej tragedji polskiej* (Krakow, 1923), p. 35.
5. A. P. COLEMAN, *Humor in the Russian Comedy from Catherine to Gogol* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1925), p. 8.
6. A. LIRONDELLE, *Shakespeare en Russie, 1748-1840* (Paris, 1912), pp. 46, 52.
7. SZYJKOWSKI, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
8. POKORNY, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
9. F. GUNDOLF, *Shakespeare und der deutsche Geist* (Berlin, G. Bondi, 1927), pp. 71, III — 113, 280 — 291.
10. N. I. MORDOVCHENKO, *Russkaja kritika pervoj chetverti XIX veka* (Moskva, 1959), P. 27.
11. *Istorija russkoj kritiki* (Moskva, 1958), I, p. 203.
12. LIRONDELLE, *op. cit.*, pp. 130, 134, 136.
13. POKORNY, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
14. V. G. BELINSKII, "Pro rosijsku povist i povisti Hohola," (Pereklad O. Kudina) *Vybrani Statti*, (Kyjiw, 1948), pp. 98, 103.
15. R. M. SAMARIN, "Zarubezhnaia literatura pervoi poloviny XIX veka v ostenke V. G. Belinskogo," *Issledovaniia po slovanskomu literaturovedeniiu i stilistike* (Moskva, 1960).
16. W. HAHN, *Shakespeare w Polsce, Bibliografia* (Wroclaw, 1958).
17. I. VANINA, *Shakespeare na ukrajinskij siseni* (Kyjiw, 1958), I. FRANKO, "Iz stattej pro zakhidnoevropejski literatury" *Tvory, Literaturno Krytychni statti, XVIII*, (Kyjiw, 1955), pp. 307-401.