

The Recourse to Shakespeare in *Vărul Shakespeare* by Marin Sorescu

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Abstract

The paper, intended as an analysis, at the level of plot, characters, diction and the reality-fiction relationship, of Marin Sorescu's appropriation of different elements of the Shakespearean canon (especially of Hamlet and A Midsummer Night's Dream) in his play Vărul Shakespeare/ Cousin Shakespeare, aims at demonstrating Shakespeare's everlasting actuality in our postmodern world, along with considering Sorescu's resourcefulness in recreating his spirit in a remarkable play.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Sorescu, adaptation, postmodernism, intertextuality

Shakespeare has always been regarded as not of an age, but for all times, and we Romanians cannot but be pleased to discover that his tremendous influence has transgressed not only centuries, but also the English borders, imposing the bard as a transnational spiritual icon, part and parcel of the world culture and thus of the Romanian culture. Today's Shakespeare cannot possibly be contained by a single tradition or culture, or by a single language, for that matter; the postmodern reader is unable to shake the strong feeling that nobody could be so naïve and narrow-minded as to assign it to a single nation (Kennedy, 1993: 16). In brief, Shakespeare has become a trans-temporal literary symbol, a universal creator to be revered and constantly referred back to by posterity.

Among the various intertextual readings of Shakespeare, Marin Sorescu's intriguing approach in *Vărul Shakespeare/ Cousin Shakespeare* (1987) is undoubtedly one of the most interesting in Romanian literature. His is a new response to Shakespeare – the recreation of his spirit in a play of remarkable wit, critical insight, philosophical depth in Hamletian fashion, and Shakespearean diction. In short, the plot is centred on Shakespeare the dramatist who finds himself at a loss for inspiration over his play *Hamlet*. His wife and the Dark Lady, his mistress, as well as

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Sorescu the Dane try to get him over this crisis. Meanwhile, Essex's execution is carried out, and Shakespeare's rival writers hatch a plot against him, aiming at getting him executed on political grounds, but they fail. Shakespeare refuses Voicea's request to write a play on Michael the Brave's tragic fate. On the other hand, Hamlet ponders upon his desperate situation, only to be finally killed by mistake by Shakespeare himself. Dying as he is, he still manages to stab Shakespeare to death. The final scene depicts Shakespeare's symbolic resurrection.

The most salient issue when reading Sorescu's play is his extreme ease in handling and imitating, half-seriously, half-parodically, the Shakespearean type of discourse, managing to be convincing but also taking his distance from the source of his literary game. Thus, one might assert that the main concern of the Romanian dramatist seems to be the unlimited power of Logos to create a whole world out of nothing, blurring and ultimately erasing the boundaries between reality and fiction – the poet is able to conjure up a second reality, since “he gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name” (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.1.16-17). That Logos should indeed be endowed with poietic force is obvious in Sorescu's treatment of his character Shakespeare; the latter is often referred to as “the Word”: “*Chiar Cuvântul/ Răpus de plăsmuirea sa, se stinge*” (VII.5.52-3) [Even the Word,/ Slain by his own figment, now expires.], a mighty God-like figure: “*Sorescu: Încărcător-descărcător de vieți/ Doar Shakespeare a mai fost*” (VII.10.8-9) [Sorescu: And Shakespeare was the only one, / A loader and unloader of lives.]

In the same respect, Sorescu the scholar could not resist the temptation to establish a foreseeable parallel with Prospero, the white magician and master of his island, which he assimilates, along with many critics, to Shakespeare:

Shakespeare (scos din pepeni): Vrei c-o furtună/ Să ți-l întorc din drum? Ce-s eu, Prospero?/ Să am puteri și duhurile toate să mă slujească? (pe gânduri)/ Iaca o idee... (începe să scrie precipitat) (V.5.2)

[Shakespeare (enraged): You want me with a tempest/ To send him back his way? Who am I, Prospero? / To possess powers and the spirits all/ To attend upon me? (deep in thoughts)/ Here's an idea... (Starts writing hastily).]

Besides, the underlying web of Biblical allusions is subtly disseminated throughout Sorescu's play, whenever a reference to Shakespeare is intended:

Hamlet (foarte stins): Eu mor fără temei.../ Părinte Shakespeare,/ Vino să-ți spun finalul piesei... (V.7.4)

[Hamlet (very feebly): I die a most unjust death.../ Father Shakespeare,/ Bend over me to hear the ending of the play...]

One easily recognizes in such an instance the customary ritual performed at somebody's deathbed; the appellative 'father' used by Hamlet when referring to Shakespeare bears a double significance, i.e. Creator/ Godlike figure, and priest administering the Last Rites and providing the final comfort to a dying person.

An aspect that should not pass unnoticed is the intertextual game constructing a variation on the authentic scene of Hamlet's death: while in the original play the prince is poisoned in a final duel with "envenomed swords" (V. 2.336), Sorescu parodically combines the different scenes of the play, reshaping a previous one, viz. Hamlet's slaying the eavesdropping Polonius through the curtain (III.4.24). Only this time, the parts are interchanged, and Shakespeare's role dictates a similar killing of Hamlet, his literary offspring. This slight alteration in the wind-up of the plot results in a complete relativisation of the play's signifying system, alongside with the postmodern trick of placing on equal footing the author and the figment of his imagination – the creator and the created coexist in the same plane of existence. However, the two denouements are not as dissimilar as they seem at first sight: the restoration of order and moral law in the kingdom of Denmark guaranteed by the arrival of Fortinbras vs. the return to normality and allegedly to the reality beyond fiction – Shakespeare rises up from 'the dead' and resumes his ordinary existence, and no trace is left of what has happened, cf. *The Tempest*: "[...] and like this unsubstantial pageant faded, / Leave not a rack behind" (IV. 1. 157-8).

This latter ending may well be interpreted in the light of Shakespeare's original version. As Jan Kott most observantly pointed out, *Hamlet* is not a treatise of philosophy, morals or psychology, but pure theatre, i.e. a script and some roles. And if this be true, then one should carefully ponder upon Fortinbras's character, as he is the one determining Hamlet's script (1969: passim). In this respect, Fortinbras's role is extremely close to Shakespeare's; it is not altogether devoid of significance that both are assigned the task of carrying on and starting afresh.

In Sorescu's play the final reconciliation is summarized by Shakespeare's words:

Shakespeare (frecându-se la ochi): Căci mi-a trecut și moartea într-o clipă. / Și ea degrabă, tot ca viața, curge.../ M-am odihnit murind... Acum, la lucru. (V.7.11).

[Shakespeare (rubbing his eyes): And in an instant too, I got round death. / It too, just like life, swiftly flows.../ In death, I took a rest... Now back to work.]

In addition, the same hint at Shakespeare's Demiurge-like stature is to be seen in V.7.11, the very last words uttered by Sorescu on the stage, meant as an epitaph for Shakespeare:

Sorescu: Adio, Shakespeare, stâlp de foc, ești rece. / Ți-aprind cu viața mea o lumânare. (V.7.11)

[Sorescu: Farewell, Shakespeare, post of fire, you are cold. / I light you up a candle with my life.]

The "post of fire", an image of overt biblical extraction, clearly alludes to the violent nature of the vengeful God, endowed not only with the power of creating new worlds, but also with the capacity of wilfully destroying them at his pleasure. So, Shakespeare, just like an omniscient author, has the power of absolute decision over his creations, taking the liberty of reprimanding them for their unsuitable behaviour:

Sorescu: Încoace m-a trimis să-ți spun: Nu-i place/ Purtarea ta la Elsinore! Te schimbă./ Să poată scrie el o altă piesă./ Pe-a veche, bucățele mici a rupt-o. (I.1.1.)

[Sorescu: He sent me over with word for you: He hates/ Your behaviour at Elsinore! So change your ways/ So that he'll have a reason to rewrite the play. / The old one, he's torn to smithereens.]

Nevertheless, in a postmodern fashion, that considers noteworthy not only the clashing perspectives upon the one and the same event, but also the interchangeability of statuses, roles and positions, the reshaping of *Hamlet* in Sorescu's new vision is not exclusively an auctorial privilege. On the contrary, a remarkable character, who has entered the common stock of literary figures, may decide his own fate (cf. the later day theory of the autonomy of characters with regard to their authors, since the former impose themselves as clearly delineated entities, often rebelling against their origin, and escaping from the control of their 'fathers', once they have had the chance of becoming a part of the literary mainstream):

Shakespeare: Doamne,/ De când dar personajul pe-autor/ Îl controlează și își dă avizul?

Sorescu: Așa e regula în piesa asta. (V.1.4).

[Shakespeare: Oh, God, / Since when a character may be so bold/ As to control and give his author notice?

Sorescu: That's how rules are in this play.]

It looks like an echo of Flann O'Brian's famous statement in *At Swim-Two-Birds*: "it was undemocratic to compel characters ... each should be allowed a private life, self-determination, and a decent standard of living" (in Stevenson, 1993: 259).

In addition, the Shakespeare whom Sorescu portrays in his play is made to appear as our contemporary, a hard-working, responsible writer, critically scrutinizing the quality of his creations: "*Nu pot livra posterității slabe/ Imagini...* (III.4.1) [I can't deliver to posterity weak/ Images...]. This quotation might well render the postmodernists' fundamental concern, i.e. living in an age of literary 'exhaustion', as John Barth put it, when further innovation seems almost impossible. So not only the postmodernist writers, Sorescu included, but also Shakespeare are perceived as strenuously fighting to find and assess their identity, while permanently "weighed down by their awareness of their literary antecedents, oppressed by the fear that whatever they might have to say has been said before, and condemned to self-consciousness by the climate of modern culture" (Lodge, 1992: 207).

Shakespeare: Totul s-a scris, iar eu rescriu ca prostul... (V.4.2).

[Shakespeare: 'Tis all been written, and I, a fool, rewrite...]

Sorescu: E-n criză și de timp și de creație.../ Căci vârsta, știi... (I.1.12)

[Sorescu: He's in a time, and creation crisis.../ As age, you know...]

Sorescu's endeavour to bring Shakespeare, the great classic, closer to a present-day audience, to make a rather forbidding – due to his widespread fame – literary figure come out of the book and become our contemporary, is materialized in a symbolic reunification transgressing time:

Sorescu: Din balamale/ poate-i sărită vremea... Da, mileniul/ că, uite, ne-nțlnirăm trei din anii/ o mie o sută-aproximativ/ tu, Hamlet/ o mie șase sute – Shakespeare și două mii eu, cu puțin noroc./

Hamlet: Da un mileniu...

Sorescu: Bizareriile provin din faptul că, trăind în vremi diferite, ne înțelegem ca niște contemporani... Formăm cum s-ar zice aceeași gașcă... (III.2.1)

[Sorescu: Out of joint/ The time must have sprung... Yes, the millennium/
 As, mark you, here have we met, the three of us, from years/ eleven hundred or about so/ You, Hamlet,/ a thousand and six hundred – Shakespeare, and I two thousand, with a bit of luck.
 Hamlet: But a millennium...]

The abrupt insertion of the final term, which brings about bathos in such a highly articulate and nobly worded speech, although foreshadowed in a way by the sudden change of discursive registers – from the lofty iambic pentameters to plain conversational style – stimulates the reader's attention with a very fashionable 'jolt' resembling the famous surrealist device for arresting attention (Barthes, 1974: 160). This is the first signal that makes the audience even more aware of the fundamentally parodical and ironical intentions of the author of *Singur printre poeți/ Alone among Poets*. The image of Shakespeare that he advances is a demythised, desacralized one, i.e. that of a regular man, tortured by the constant fear of not being gifted enough as a playwright, plunged in the middle of an inspiration crisis, as well as in a marital one (he is having, to the distress of his wife Anne, an affair with the Dark Lady, who eventually gets pregnant and bitterly reproaches him since her husband is due to return from an eleven months' voyage). Moreover, he is trying hard to make ends meet as an actor, permanently watching his step against rival actors and writers, having only Sorescu on his side. The latter is his only ally who keeps struggling to put him back on track and help him rewrite the 'loose' and 'unsuccessful' *Hamlet*. And on top of it all, the malicious clichés concerning Shakespeare's appearance, that have been handed down to us by the few trustworthy sources, have not been overlooked. There is mention of Shakespeare's 'glowing bald-headedness' as well as giddiness (he does not recognize, because of his inspiration troubles, his own wife when he walks in on a very heated domestic dispute between her and his mistress at a London inn; moreover, versatility completes his portrait, as he is not sure at all about the person to whom he dedicated his sonnets).

Anyway, Sorescu's regard upon his illustrious predecessor is tolerant, understanding and compassionate:

Sorescu: Cu capul, Shakespeare punct a pus pe foaie? / Nu, n-o să-l las! Căci martor îmi e cerul, / Doar el ne-a mai rămas... (II.1.1)
 [Sorescu: His head Shakespeare used to dot his sheet? / Oh no! I won't allow it! As heaven is my witness,/ He's all that we have left...]

The dramatic rhythm is constantly sustained by counterpoint techniques, as is the case with the lines immediately following the previous 'pledge of faith', which reverse the tone and thus create a humorous effect:

Sorescu: Și restul lumii./ Ce chiar de nu-nțelege tot, l-acceptă.../Deși cârteli...
(II.1.1)

[Sorescu: And all the others,/ Who even if not wholly comprehending, give him credit.../ Although some grumbling...]

Humour and irony are real stepping stones in the postmodernist doctrine, as well as important dimensions in the Shakespearean canon. In fact, the entire plot in *Vărul Shakespeare/ Cousin Shakespeare* may be said to unwind under the sign of one of the jesters' hearty remark which achieves an apophthegmatic value: "*Cine râde mai mult, trăiește mai mult*" (II.2.11) [He who laughs more, lives longer.] This is an obvious dimension of the play which could well be paralleled with *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* 'renewed jollity'.

In Sorescu's play the jocular vein is so pervasive that it impregnates even the gravest statements as the well-known Hamletian "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.4.90):

Sorescu: Nimic în Danemarca nu e putred!/ Așa să știi. Orice danez cunoaște./ E totuși mică-această țărișoară./ Chiar fetele, cu genele, forțază/ Prea strâmte graniți, când clipesc din gene,/ Și ochii peste cap și-i dau, ochioase. (I.1.1)

[Sorescu: Nothing is rotten in the state of Denmark!/ So you should know. As any Dane does./ Nevertheless this little country's small,/ Even the girls are forcing with eyelashes/ Too narrow borders when they blink/ And roll their eyes, wide-eyed]

However, Sorescu's discourse does not lose its moralizing power even under such circumstances, as he aims at demonstrating the actuality and validity of the source-text:

Sorescu: E ceva putred azi în toată lumea,/ Așa să spui, te rog. În general./ (Încet, prietenește) Te roagă Shakespeare... (I.1.3)

[Sorescu: Something is rotten now the whole world over,/ That's what to say, will you. In general. / (subdued and friendly) It's Shakespeare who kindly asks you to...]

The jocund undertone is at work starting from the very choice of characters. The Romanian dramatist proposes a copious list that

intermingles real persons – ‘Shakespeare–playwright and actor’, ‘Anne Hathaway Shakespeare–Shakespeare’s wife’, ‘Ben Johnson–playwright’, ‘the Dark Lady– Shakespeare’s lover’ (although she is placed at the border between real life and literature); characters of Shakespearean origin: Hamlet–prince of Denmark, the Ghost, Yorick’s skull, Ariel–elf, or a Macbethian witch; figures inspired by, but not actually found in, Shakespeare’s plays – Camelia – Ophelia’s sister, the twins Mary and Valy, the aristocrats Birmingham, Nottingham and Bristol, and especially the jesters Titirez/ Top, and Gâlmă/ Bulge (recalling the significant names of the fools in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as Quince, Snug, Bottom, Flute, Snout, Starveling, or in *As You Like It*, as Touchstone). In addition, the same type of vivifying and individuating appellation is applied to Shakespeare’s rivals. The envious plotting writers proudly bear names such as Thomas Blur, Porcius Blister, or the oxymoronic Sir John Downtown zis Periferie (his name being the most overt point of articulation between the British and Romanian cultural contexts). In the same manner, the actors in the play are called by derogatory names, such as Richard Zero, Fly, and Heifer. The heterogeneous list also includes weird characters, such as the *Julius Caesar*-inspired Ides of March, or Voicea, a Wallachian. The Ides may well be considered as the embodiment of time, a kind of androgynous, double-faced Janus, explicitly described as “not human”. It is assigned to pronounce the Prologue, a character in itself, in disguise, entering the stage *à l’antique*, togated, masked, and wearing buskins. The minute details into which Sorescu goes in describing this costume cannot but remind the ridiculously contrived disguises for Moonshine or Wall in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: “Ay, or else one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern, and say he comes to disfigure or to present the person of Moonshine” (III.1.53-6); “Some man or other must present wall; and let him have some plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast about him, to signify wall” (III.1.62-5). On the other hand, Voicea, a genuine Romanian name with no English correspondent, intriguingly qualifies as “the character that does not fit inside Shakespeare”, he is the only one to be seen as possessing an undeniable tragic stature and escaping the ever-present mockery: *Voicea: Eu v-am adus o tragedie adevărată.*” (V. 6.1) [Voicea: I bring you a real tragedy.] The peasant has taken the journey to England in order to persuade Shakespeare into writing a play about the tragic fate of Michael-the-Brave and his historically wronged people, bringing as proof the severed head of the Romanian prince (a subtle parallelism to Yorick’s skull?) and the bloody

story of his assassination. Voicea's comment on Shakespeare's refusal speaks volumes: "*Shakespeare nu mai intră în Shakespeare*" (V.6.1) [Shakespeare no longer accommodates Shakespeare.], for he had become synonymous with whatever was worth treasuring for eternity. It is interesting to note the possible derivative of the Wallachian's name that its phonological content alludes to, viz. Voice, perhaps a counterpart to the inner voice of Shakespeare's consciousness.

Last but not least, the Romanian dramatist includes himself among the characters, under his real surname, Sorescu, but accompanied by the surprising indication, "a Dane". Is it an attempt at integrating himself into the Hamletian context, a means of singling out Voicea as the only Romanian on stage, a convenient method of blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction? Hard to say, but, despite his extraneous nature, Sorescu the character is crucial to the development of the plot, the only concession he makes being that the closing lines of the play are left to Shakespeare to utter. Otherwise, he seems to know everything that happens and guides Shakespeare in rewriting *Hamlet*, providing him with entire passages, in the manner of an omniscient "grey eminence". Besides, he assumes the task of the *raisonneur*, especially in Act IV, and of Shakespeare's protector. It is not without reason that he is constructed as an intermediary link, a kind of a go-between connecting Shakespeare and Hamlet, in an interesting intertextual re-evaluation of the motif of the twins:

Downtown: Cu Hamlet seamă nă leit (Sorescu, a.n.) / Sunt gemeni? (I.2.5)
[Downtown: He looks just like Hamlet...? Are they twins?]

Sorescu himself admits of his parallel destiny with Hamlet's:

Sorescu: Eu te-am iubit...

Camelia : Și tu ?

Sorescu : Ca Hamlet pe Ofelia.../ Aceasta a fost drama mea... (V.7.9)

[Sorescu : I did love thee...]

Camelia: You too?

Sorescu: As Hamlet loved Ophelia.../ And this has been my drama...]

It is not only Hamlet who is swept along in this game of interchangeable identities, but Shakespeare himself: "*Richard: Ba foarte des se crede Sorescu (Shakespeare, a.n.)*." (V.6.1) [Richard: But very often even, he fancies he's Sorescu.] This game of constantly switched identities, announced from the very beginning in the Prologue—the "tangled souls" (16)—

bears a striking resemblance to Jaques's "All the world's a stage" monologue in *As You Like It*:

...Toți de-a valma/Ne-mpleticim parcă-n aceeași piesă,/ Pe care încercăm s-o tot rescriem....

[All in a heap/ We seem to stagger in the same play, / Which we are ever trying to rewrite.]

All in all, this abolishing of distances between the real and the literary, past and present, Renaissance and postmodernism, as well as the smooth and unhindered migration of the dramatis personae from one century to another, from one play to another, changing the mask of the character with that of the playwright (cf. Tupan 1991: 31) stand as irrefutable proof of Sorescu's becoming aware of the common heritage he had to assume gracefully and deliberately, and of the necessity to approach tradition in order to find his own identity. The utopian world he depicts is a world shared by 'cousins', i.e. artists not biologically, but spiritually related, the younger writer viewing himself as a kindred spirit with his great ancestor. And isn't this return to a harmonious, spiritualised golden age of universal reconciliation the secret, cherished wish of each of us, not only as postmodernist readers, but also as human beings?

Notes

*All the translations from Romanian into English are mine.

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