

A brief introduction into the life and creation of William Shakespeare

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Abstract: *William Shakespeare will probably remain forever in the universal history of theater in top 10. His work is contained in dramas, comedies and tragedies that are of immeasurable value. Shakespeare discovered the key to success through the public. He was constantly attentive to the way he reacted to his ideas and constantly improved his plays. Although he remains in the collective memory as one of the greatest playwrights, he wrote over 100 poems, was an actor and theater director. The theater crew loved him because he managed to keep everyone together for better or worse. William Shakespeare is innovative in the way he writes, he is creative in the true sense of the word, he is a pioneer, he is a genius, he is a legend.*

Keywords: *Shakespeare; theater; Renaissance; drama;*

Geographical and political landmarks

Due to its geographical location, Britain was a fairly isolated and closed country. Its inhabitants realized that it would be best to trade as a living. Merchants and peasants treated economic and state issues on an equal footing with royalty because they were the economic power. When the Tudor dynasty came to power, it severed ties with the Vatican and the papacy, and so England became the leader of the protestant countries.

In the years of Elizabeth I we witness the culmination of the use of the fruits of the Continental Renaissance by the victorious Protestant bourgeoisie. In southern Europe, the arts had begun on the path of a new style, manifested in an abundance of movement and color, in the cultivation of tumult and immeasurable force: the Baroque. A similar luxury of ardor and energy characterizes the Elizabethan drama. Shakespeare comes to London at the height of this process, the commotion of the new times is everywhere. Due to its late nature, the English renaissance is enjoying the ideological legacy of humanists in other countries. Through the great voyages of their trading companies, the British had broadened their horizons.²

Queen Elizabeth I plays a very important role in Anglican culture. The Elizabethan era is full of contradictions, we find both cruelty and sensitivity in the same time. Elizabeth was extremely sensitive to flattery, encouraging contemporary artists to glorify her. There is a major change in art, the public being dissatisfied with the miracles and mysteries plays of the medieval era. Artists are beginning to draw inspiration from ancient Greek and Latin plays, many of which combine Greek myths with English folk legends and Testament accounts. Twenty theaters operated in London in the early 17th century.

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² Mihnea Gheorghiu, Preface to *Shakespeare, Works*, Bucharest, State Publishing House for Literature and Art, 1955, pp. 10-11

Life in Stratford upon Avon

According to Stanley Wells, from both paternal and maternal lines, William Shakespeare comes from farming families. The father grew in social rank and in 1568 he became chief magistrate - the official ruler of the city of Stratford-upon-Avon. William Shakespeare is the third born, and in total he had four sisters: Joan, Margaret, Joan, Anne and two brothers: Gilbert and Richard. Due to his father's good social standing, Shakespeare was educated in a humanistic spirit and has been in love with theater since childhood, and is a customary presence in the audience of the plays performed by traveling theater troupes who also visited his hometown. At the age of seven, he began attending New King's Grammar School, where he was admitted free of charge thanks to his father. Shakespeare learned Latin, as did his contemporaries, and this was the basic language in Elizabethan schools. Although the education system was strict and rigorous, he was a conscientious student who enjoyed his childhood and his games knowing and enjoying lively games such as hiding, catching, and later swimming and bowling. However, he dropped out of school around the age of fifteen, and did not attend any university, maybe because his father's fortune became smaller and smaller.

On November 27, 1582, when he was only eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, aged twenty-six, and the wedding was held by Bishop Worcester. Unusual because boys at the time were getting married around the age of twenty-five, but Anne was three months pregnant at the time of the wedding. In 1583 their first child was born, a little girl named Susanna, and in 1585 the twins Hamnet and Judith. While his children were still young, Shakespeare went to London. The reason for his departure is unknown, but it is certain that he will not return to Stratford soon. "What he did in all these years, in the period after the birth of the twins in 1585 and the one in which we find him in London in the theater as a screenwriter, is not well known."³

Ion Zamfirescu says in his book *The Universal History of Theater* that once in London, Shakespeare earns his living working as a carrier for a lawyer but not for long because he is helped by a fellow countryman whose son is beginning to be known in the theater world. That's how Shakespeare ends up working in the theater as a servant and the man who takes care of the horses of the nobles.

Opera and the beginnings of theatrical life

Once in the theater, he never leaves this world. Slowly he advanced and became a prompter, extra, tertiary actor, supporting actor and finally theater director. In the beginning he corrected the great classical plays and wrote poems. Most likely his first play was *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, written about 1590-1591. Shakespeare discovered the key to success through the public. Shakespeare himself expresses the essence of realism in Hamlet's text on the scene of the actors.

Say the tirade, please, that's what I said, as alive and flowing as possible. But if you shout, as many of your actors do, I'd better have the announcer of the fair shout my verses. And don't blow the air with your hand, look! Be in control as much as possible. [...] But don't be too slow! Common sense should be your guide. Match the deed with the word, and the word with the deed. Be careful not to overdo the restraint of nature; for all that transcends the measure deviates from the aims of the theater, the purpose of which is still the head of the place, to this

³ Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare for all time*, Leader Publishing, 2002, pp. 38-39

day is to portray a kind of mirror of nature, to show virtue its true face, its iconic pride, and every age, every age, their pattern and seal.⁴

Watching carefully the reaction of the audience, Shakespeare resumes characters, even whole plays, uses everyday events known to people and uses them in his works, thus, the public will always be attracted to his theater and its opera. And yet Shakespeare uses another secret, namely writing roles for the actors so as to ensure that the performance of the stage play is of the highest quality. Its parts are very well put together and finished. The characters are built with unparalleled sophistication, everything being mathematical, no characters included in plus or missing, all the scenes being in full accordance with the red thread of the play.

Like any man who becomes famous, Shakespeare is assailed by criticism and not only by praise. His contemporaries appreciate him but he also has enemies that go so far as to accuse him of plagiarism. "We know, in particular, the invectives of Robert Greene, the suspicious and irascible academic, irritated by the successes of the "provincial". Shakespeare is portrayed as "a raven adorned with the feathers of another"; He is told (paraphrasing a famous verse from *Henry VI*) that he "hides a tiger's heart under a histrionic skin." There is no evidence that the poet was willing to respond to these intrigues and betrayals."⁵ Another great playwright of the time who was in competition with Shakespeare is Christopher Marlowe. There are many stories circulating about this competition between the two playwrights, one of which is that Shakespeare wrote some plays as a replica of Marlowe's. *Richard II* for *Edward II* and the *The Merchant of Venice* for the *The Jew in Malta*.

William Shakespeare remains well known in history as an actor too. He became famous for playing the role of Hamlet's father, the king, who at the same time requires revenge and kindness, manages to restore the atmosphere of mystery and fear even if the show was held in the middle of the day. He was a shareholder in the Globe Theater and the owner of the Blackfriars Theater. Documents and contemporaries tell us that in 1611 he returned home, and died in 1616 surrounded by friends and family.

Shakespeare's opera is distinguished by its dimensions: by an extreme widening of preoccupations and by the extraordinary surge of thought. In his plays he found his reflection a huge variety of types, situations, eras, peoples and social environments. This richness of fantasy, as well as the condensation of the figures, the rapid development of the action, the force of the described passions, the tense will of the characters - are typical for the Renaissance era.⁶

Everyone knows the originality and beauty of Shakespeare's plays, but not everyone knows that there are more words in every Shakespeare play than there are in the Bible. The way he combined styles made him unique and will last forever in art and literature.

If from antiquity Shakespeare learned the concentration and clarity of figures, artistic logic, clarity of speech, from the people of the Italian Renaissance he borrowed picturesque elements and some foundations of his aesthetics, through the literature of the time. It is noteworthy that both sources have strengthened the humanistic and realistic basis of Shakespeare's creation. Creatively combining these influences, Shakespeare brilliantly continues the tradition of English folk drama. This includes, for example, the mixture of tragic and comic, heroic and buffoonish, characteristic of his work.⁷

⁴ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Act. III, Sc. 2, Works, vol. VII, State Publishing House for Literature and Art, Bucharest, 1959, pp.608-609

⁵ Ion Zamfirescu, *Universal History of Theater*, Bucharest, Universal Literature Publishing House, 1968, pp. 58-59

⁶ Mihnea Gheorghiu, Preface to Shakespeare, Works, pg. 42

⁷ Idem, p.43

According to Mihnea Gheorghiu, from sonnets to the last dramas, Shakespeare did not give up the humanistic idea of human progress, the right of every human being to think freely and to work freely, to the dream of a better world than the world of the past.

"Poems have greatly contributed to Shakespeare's literary status. They are aimed at a much more sophisticated audience than most of his plays, thus demonstrating that their author can enter into open competition as an imitator of classics with people with a university degree, such as Marlowe and Thomas Lodge."⁸ He wrote 154 sonnets shrouded in mystery. For centuries, great researchers and critics have tried to find out who some of the sonnets were dedicated to (Mr. W.H.), who the mysterious "brown lady" was, and whether these sonnets are autobiographical.

Harold Bloom, in his book *The Western Canon*, places Shakespeare at the center of the creative universe, from where all other great writers develop, including those who rejected his work and creation. "The meaning of a word is always a different word, because every word is more like a word than a thing and a person, but Shakespeare often suggests that words are more like beings than things."⁹

Dramatic works

Shakespeare did not write to be printed but to be played. Because his plays were published after the playwright's death, they suffered modifications in some places due to changes made by the scribes. The first editions of the early 1600s were full of mistakes, and sometimes some of the lines made no sense. This has improved over time. One of the myths of the time is that the great Will never erased a written line, but this cannot be confirmed as a fact or is a way for his contemporaries to express their admiration and appreciation for his way of writing. What is certain is that he was writing what he was thinking at the same time, from his writing pen flowing the lyrics easily and quickly. We must not forget that he outlined his characters according to the actors. The way the repetition of the first act took place influenced the evolution and the course of the characters in the next one. If Shakespeare's play is poor in something, then it is about stage indications. Unlike other contemporary playwrights but also his predecessors, Shakespeare does not give directions, does not suggest the stage plan, or the tones of the characters. This may be due to the fact that he, directing his plays, offered these suggestions in the rehearsal room and not on paper.

Shakespeare's plays fall into four categories: historical dramas, tragedies, comedies, and fairy tales. All its parts are built according to the same process, the genera and species mixing not having a pure species. According to E.K. Chambers, in 1930, the chronologically classification of Shakespeare's plays is:

Henry VI, Part 2 (1590–1591), *Henry VI, Part 3* (1590–1591), *Henry VI, Part 1* (1591–1592), *Richard III* (1592–1593), *The Comedy of Errors* (1592–1593), *Titus Andronicus* (1593–1594), *The Taming of the Shrew* (1593–1594), *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1594–1595), *Love's Labour's Lost* (1594–1595), *Romeo and Juliet* (1594–1595), *Richard II* (1595–1596), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595–1596), *King John* (1596–1597), *The Merchant of Venice* (1596–1597), *Henry IV, Part 1* (1597–1598), *Henry IV, Part 2* (1597–1598), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598–1599), *Henry V* (1598–1599), *Julius Caesar* (1599–1600), *As You Like It* (1599–1600), *Twelfth Night* (1599–1600), *Hamlet* (1600–1601), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1600–1601), *Troilus and Cressida* (1601–1602), *All's Well That Ends Well* (1602–1603), *Measure for Measure* (1604–1605), *Othello* (1604–1605), *King Lear* (1605–1606), *Macbeth*

⁸ Stanley Wells, Shakespeare for all time, p.62

⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, Art Editorial Group, Bucharest, 2007, p. 87

(1605–1606), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606–1607), *Coriolanus* (1607–1608), *Timon of Athens* (1607–1608), *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (1608–1609), *Cymbeline* (1609–1610), *The Winter's Tale* (1610–1611), *The Tempest* (1611–1612), *Henry VIII* (1612–1613) and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1612–1613).

"The huge world that the English Renaissance titan wields is alive and well. On the few boards of a tiny, primitive stage, his audience was invited to watch with poetic eyes: the royal courtyard, the London tavern, the gloomy medieval castle, the modest courtyard of an inn, the house of a provincial official, a battlefield, an alley in London."¹⁰

In Romania, Shakespeare remains one of the most played playwrights in the international repertoire. The influence he had on Romanian (and not only) playwrights is impressive. Over time, more and more linguists tried to translate the playwright's work again and again in order to try to better understand the true essence of the Shakespearean text in Romanian language.

The Shakespearean fascination of the Romanian nineteenth-century culture is obvious. The first translations are made in the 40's, using the Cyrillic alphabet, and later on the Shakespearean texts will be among the first published with Latin characters. [...] Not only the theatrical language benefited enormously from the Shakespearean translations, but also the stage directing methods, the art of performing, the technical apparatus of theatrical productions, and last but not least the theatrical education of the Romanian public.¹¹

Among the first lovers of Shakespearean opera are Caragiale, Eminescu, Creangă, maybe even the whole team of *Junimea*. Thanks to the first translations of his texts, our playwrights have gained the courage to outline characters that are as well defined as possible, as cohesive as possible. The thread of the action becomes more and more complex, the dramatic note being more and more nuanced. Thanks to Shakespeare's work, not only linguists, playwrights and poets benefited, but also the entire human mechanism that makes up the theater.

„In his theatre, Caragiale learns from Shakespeare, in the same way in which he learns from Poe in his prose writings. Yet, he remains extremely creative and profoundly original in both cases.”¹² Caragiale deeply admired the *great Will* and did not hesitate to make public the esteem he had for his dramatic work. If we were to find a feature that would apply to both playwrights, both Shakespeare and Caragiale, the first thing I thought of was the construction of comedies and comic situations. The red thread of the action seems to be made of the same dough, so the success of such a text is guaranteed. "The triggering of the comic mechanism occurs due to the information gap between the viewer and the characters in the play." ¹³

Eugen Lovinescu considers syncretism and imitation a normal process that the Romanian opera goes through due to its social and political context. The West is the ultimate model, the one that more and more creators follow due to its opportunities and visions. „Successive generations of translators, publishers, and actors did their best to integrate Shakespeare into the modern Romanian culture; and I guess that much of their activity was carried through in imitation of what was going on in the West.”¹⁴

In gratitude for the opera bequeathed to the generations that followed the great playwright, in Romania it is organized the *International Shakespeare Festival* founded by Emil Boroghină in the city of Craiova, this year being in its 13th edition.

¹⁰ Mihnea Gheorghiu, preface *Shakespeare - Works*, p. 24

¹¹ Cap-Bun, Marina. 2006. „Shakespeares influence on the plays of Ion Luca Caragiale”. In Monica Matei-Chesnoiu (ed). *Shakespeare in Nineteenth-Century Romania*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 109-110.

¹² Idem 111-112.

¹³ Corneliu Dumitriu, *Arheologia dramelor shakespeareiene*, vol II, Comediile, Ed. Allfa, București, 2001, p. 236

¹⁴ Volceanov, George. 2008. The Ups and Downs of the enlargement of the Shakespeare canon: a Romanian example”. In Monica Matei-Chesnoiu (ed). *Shakespeare in Romania 1950 to the present*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 80.

Conclusions

Although the great playwright's work and life have been researched and written since ancient times, Shakespeare remains shrouded in mystery, I would say even deliberately, so as not to suddenly understand all that his creative genius means. Like any famous creator, he did not escape the conspiracy theories, so a lot of hypotheses developed around his name that were more or less plausible or phantasmagoric. Did Shakespeare the man exist or is it just the invention of his contemporaries? Unfortunately, these kinds of questions still have their place in the 21st century. It is our duty to commemorate his life and work on every occasion, in order to promote true art, true culture and love of beauty.

One of the beautiful coincidences that took place over time between Shakespeare's play and the actors who played him is the one with the great British actress Judi Dench. Her first role in the Shakespearean repertoire was the role of Ophelia. Coincidentally, many decades after she played this role, Judi Dench set out in search of her genetic heritage and discovered that one of her relatives was at Elsinore's court in Denmark when Shakespeare was allegedly inspired by the personalities present there. Shakespeare has never been to Elsinore, but documents show that the Danish court hosted theater performances by an English theater troupe, and one of the actors there was part of Shakespeare's London theater troupe led by him. In this way we can imagine how Shakespeare listened carefully to the events that took place there, asked the right questions to be able to invent the true tragedy of Prince Hamlet and those beautiful characters.

William Shakespeare is more than a famous playwright. He is innovative in the way he writes, he is creative in the true sense of the word, he is a pioneer, he is a genius, he is a legend. You don't have to be a theater connoisseur or a lover of the genre not to be amazed at the mastery of building characters such as Hamlet, Lady MacBeth, Richard III, Ophelia, etc., which we can understand so well. In the depths of the soul but at the same time to be so different from them because of the decisions that these characters ultimately make. I strongly believe that Shakespeare manages to give birth to certain questions in us that we ordinary people are afraid to think about. What would I do instead of Viola? What about Gertrude? We may be ashamed to admit that we would do the same when the great Will puts us in front of the accomplished fact. We cannot remain the heroes of our imagination, we are those simple people, more selfish than altruistic, whom we see as negative characters but at the same time those who truly love.

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