

READINGS OF THE QUESTION OF RIGHTS IN *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*--A ROMANIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: It is the main aim of this essay to analyse the modulations and inflections introduced in the treatment of law in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* in the process of cross-cultural transmission and dissemination of the play in the nineteenth century. Focus will be placed on the shift of emphasis from issues related to the law in Shakespeare's text to issues related to rights in two Romanian adaptations derived from French and German texts.

Keywords: audience reception, adaptation, dissemination, cross-cultural transmission, vocabulary of the rights of man, *The Merchant of Venice*

Introduction

In the French adaptation of the *Merchant of Venice* by Du Lac and Alboise Shylock confesses to his daughter:

J'étais né avec une âme tendre et généreuse ... et le juif comme le chrétien était *un frère* à mes yeux; ... je croyais qu'une âme grande, une figure humaine me rendait *l'égal des autres* hommes; je ne savais pas que le titre d'esclave était attaché aux vêtements de ma nation.

I was born with a loving and generous soul ... and the Jew just like the Christian was a *brother* to me ... I believed that a large soul and a human appearance would render me the *equal* of other men; I did not know that the label 'slave' had been attached to the clothes of my nation. (Du Lac and Alboise 14)

Parisian audiences at the *Théâtre de la Porte de Saint Martin*, the theatre where the play was first performed on the eve of the July Revolution of 1830, would most probably have recognised the reference to the famous slogan of the 1789 Revolution--*liberté, égalité, fraternité!*. So would Romanian audiences in 1854, whose experience of this adaptation, advertised as an imitation of the famous play by Shakespeare, represented their first theatrical contact with him. *The Merchant of Venice*, as disseminated in the south-eastern margins of Europe in the nineteenth century, was strongly inflected by the vocabulary of human rights that had been developed in France.

The present essay aims to investigate the modulations and inflections introduced in the treatment of law in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* in the process of cross-cultural transmission and dissemination of the play in the nineteenth century. Focus will be placed on the shift of emphasis from issues related to the law in Shakespeare's text to issues related to rights in two Romanian adaptations derived from French and German texts. One of the assumptions that the essay starts from is that the study of adaptations is crucial to the understanding of the dissemination and reception of Shakespeare in nineteenth century Europe. The plays as staged until well into the nineteenth century in Europe were mostly French or German adaptations, as well as translations of these adaptations. Hardly any theatre (particularly east of Vienna) staged a play that was a direct translation from the original and that had not been re-worked for performance so as to meet the expectations of the audience. In view of this reception of Shakespeare in European theatres as well as of contemporary developments, adaptations and "remakes" of Shakespeare's plays can no longer be dismissed as derivative and of little relevance to Shakespeare studies. A more productive approach is to include these texts as part of Shakespeare's "work", understood in a much more inclusive sense. Shakespeare's "work" is no longer restricted to the texts produced in early modern England but is in a process of continuous cross-cultural construction.

At the same time, a discussion of the adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* can be helpful in illuminating meanings related to law and the vocabulary of rights in Shakespeare's text that have so far been marginalised.

The Merchant of Venice and the Rights of Man

The Merchant of Venice seems to have had a particular resonance with the Parisian public on the eve of the July Revolution, as no fewer than three versions were submitted to French theatres: one was a loose, three act translation that Alfred de Vigny submitted to the Théâtre Français, which was rejected; the other two were adaptations that, unsurprisingly, proved to be more successful: Lamarche's *Le marchand de Venise. Comédie en 4 actes et en vers*, staged at the Odéon, and the above quoted *Shylock, drame en trois actes, imité de Shakespeare* by Du Lac and Alboise, performed at the *Théâtre de la Porte de Saint Martin*. The Shakespeare performed in Paris in 1830 inevitably found itself placed at the intersection of Romanticism, theatre and revolution. Hugo's famous *Preface to Cromwell*, published in 1827, had already established the relationship between Romantic drama (*le drame*), Shakespeare and emancipation, understood as freedom in both art and politics. (Hugo 75) To the French Academy this was nothing short of revolutionary effrontery. Jonathan Bate sees the storming of the barricades of the French Academy with Shakespeare in the avant-garde as a prelude to the 1830 Revolution (Bate 26). The latter put an end to the French Restoration and re-established a large number of rights and liberties ushered in by the great 1789 Revolution. Battles in the theatre and on the barricades were closely related--to be a Romantic meant to be against the government (Uebersfeld 20). At times of fierce political censorship and repression (what finally triggered the July revolution was the suppression of the liberty of the press), political issues were fought indirectly on the stage in the form of clashes over literary and theatrical norms and institutions. The Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin was itself a hotly contested place during the July Revolution, with theatre people fighting on the barricades (Duby 462).

Given this political context and the role theatres and Shakespeare played in it, it should come as no surprise that Shylock was not merely presented as a victim of persecution, as English actors had shown him in the early 1820s, but was further revalued as a champion of the struggle for human rights: the right for religious freedom and most importantly the right to equal treatment. These were enshrined in the famous *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (*Déclaration de droits de l'Homme et du citoyen*) of 1789. Both the right to equality, the major achievement of the Great Revolution, and religious freedom were later assimilated into the Civil Code introduced by Napoleon. The limitations and violations of the Rights of Man and Citizen

that the subsequent Restoration governments had introduced led to the outbreak of a sequel to the Great Revolution, namely the 1830 July revolution. The adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* can be said to have participated in the preparation of this event by increasing the audience's awareness of the need to take action against ongoing violations of the Rights of Man. Even if religious freedom, foregrounded in the Shakespeare adaptations, was not high on the new revolutionaries' agenda, a critical attitude in this respect was designed to have a symbolic metonymical value, standing for the violation of other basic rights; it also functioned as a stab against the much resented dominant role of the Catholic Church in the Restoration period. The reading of Shylock as a victim of religious persecution became the dominant perspective in France until the late nineteenth century. The popular *Galerie des personnages de Shakespeare*, (Pichot, 1844) an illustrated collection of excerpts from Shakespeare in both English and French issued in 1844, also emphasised Shylock's tragic dignity as a champion of this right, whereas Mézières, an important mid-century Shakespearean scholar, considered Shakespeare's play "a plea for religious and racial tolerance made well before these notions were defined theoretically" (Mezières 165).

The two adaptations expand on Shylock's sufferings, as originally depicted, and introduce narratives that unambiguously project him as the representative of the normative, oppressed Jew. The narratives sum up the history of the persecutions of the Jews in Europe: in Lamarche's play Shylock was first expelled from Spain, then moved to Rome where his eldest son was burned alive; when he came to Venice, famous for its tolerance towards whoever brought money, he suffered further persecution which caused his wife's death. Du Lac and Alboise's version also includes Shylock's wife, who was seduced and abandoned by a Christian, as well as Shylock's father, whose property was illegally seized when his son dared to defend himself and his honour and responded to the physical abuse that Antonio had heaped upon him. These additions are shown as solidifying the motivation of Shylock's desire for revenge and re-read it from a political perspective: his action should not be viewed merely as a form of personal revenge but as a form of protest against the violations of man's "natural rights".

Most interestingly, the claim to universal humanity--"Has a Jew not eyes" (3.1.46), which Shylock makes in Shakespeare's play is re-modulated in the French adaptations as a claim to the right to equal dignity and equal treatment: "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded upon the general good" (Lupton 73-103).

Du Lac and Alboise's version, the adaptation that was translated into Romanian, foregrounds the difficulty Jews faced when seeking redress. The plot of the play is organised around the description of the asymmetrical power relations which allowed a Venetian to abuse a Jew with impunity. (Du Lac and Alboise expand on the speech in Shakespeare's play and rewrite the situation in legal terms, as one governed by an unfair law in Venice that forbade a Jew to strike a Christian, even when the latter physically abused the Jew. In the prehistory to this adaptation, Shylock was physically attacked by Antonio and tried to strike back in order to "defend his honour". At that moment he was almost lynched for having transgressed the law. Shylock is therefore projected from the start as an agent, who does not take abuse lying down but seeks equal treatment and redress for injury. His desire to take revenge is coupled with a more impersonal legal initiative. He proposes to the Jewish community that they should use their financial clout and oblige the Duke and the Senate to pass a law that secures "*les franchises de notre nation*"[the rights/freedoms of our nation] (Du Lac 3.1, 50-51). The rights to be guaranteed by the new law are the rights to equal and non-discriminating treatment, to individual liberty and to the inviolability of property. One of the conditions attached to the loan is Shylock's personal request for justice related to his bond with Bassanio. This is the way that Du Luc and Alboise's adaptation re-establishes the link with the plot in Shakespeare's play.

The French Shylock feels confident that he has a right to become a full citizen of Venice without having to give up his religious and ethnic identity. Since the right to equality, as formulated in the French declaration, is universal and hence applicable to all men, this Shylock feels entitled to this right, from within the particularity of his Jewish identity. Jessica's assimilation into the dominant society via marriage and conversion to Christianity is rejected as a betrayal of her nation. The French adaptation makes a bolder bid for Shylock's emancipation: his absorption into the dominant culture is no longer acceptable. The French Shylock can no longer "disappear" at the end of the play, he can only die as a problematic tragic hero performing the unthinkable, the act that goes beyond the *horizon impensable* of Shakespeare's play. Shylock rejects any exchange, and carries out his vengeance. He transcends the "limits of hatred" that Greenblatt discusses, and since he is given the choice he performs the sacrificial act. When Shylock kills, he sacrifices both his victim and himself to the greater "cause". Though the act provides the French Shylock with a position of active mastery as opposed to the one of passive

obedience that he eventually accepts in Shakespeare's text (Shylock is "content"), his gesture is still inscribed with powerlessness, as it is necessarily a suicidal act (Schutz 2008).

Little is known about the translator into Romanian, but the two signatories who certify the quality of the translation at the end of the manuscript, I. Voinescu and Grigore Alexandrescu, are known as important literary and political figures who belonged to the generation of the 1848 Revolution (called the "forty-eighters"). In the 1853-4 period, preceding the production of *Shylock*, the "forty-eighters", at home and in exile in France and England, were organising a follow-up to the 1848 movement for national and political liberation. The revolutionaries were determined to use the Crimean War for the opportunities it opened up for liberating the country from its status as a Russian protectorate and for negotiating a greater measure of autonomy for the two Romanian principalities from the Ottoman Empire. Their goal was to oblige the Sublime Porte to acknowledge their republican government and grant extended political rights for the Romanian population. General Magheru, who was in charge of organising the military insurrection, makes explicit reference to the rights stipulated in "a new Constitution of the Romanian Principalities, drawn up on the basis of the desires of the Romanian people, the progress of time and the security of the Ottoman Empire" (Barbu 76). The topicality of the rights issue, the militant position that Shylock adopts in Du Lac and Alboise's version, might have led the translator to opt for this version of Shakespeare's text. The success of the performance met the expectations of the translator and his supporters. It exceeded by far that of a performance of *Hamlet*, based once again on the translation of a French adaptation, this time by Alexandre Dumas.

***The Merchant of Venice*--Another Translation**

The other adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* to be published in Romanian in the nineteenth century was *Chezășia* [*The Warrant*]. The title page describes it as "a drama in three acts after Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*" and further specifies that it is the translation of a play written by C. Almert. (The author could not be identified for reasons detailed below). The translation was published in Blaj, a city in Transylvania, in 1899. At the time Transylvania had lost its autonomy and had been incorporated into Hungary and its Romanian population was subjected to an aggressive campaign of Magyarization (aimed at the erasure of the national and cultural identity of the non-Magyar populations) undertaken by the Tisza government. Blaj was,

in fact, the political and cultural centre of the Romanian national movement, which was campaigning for rights and political recognition for the Romanian population. In 1899, when the play was published, the leaders of the movement had just been imprisoned for drawing international attention to the denial of civil and political rights to the Romanian population by submitting a Memorandum to the Habsburg court in Vienna. As the Memorandum resulted in large-scale persecution, there were serious doubts about the effectiveness of legal means as a strategy for the pursuit of rights.

In what ways does this particular context inform the adaptation of Shakespeare's play? On close inspection, the title page is only a red herring designed to circumvent censorship. The text is no more than a translation of Schlegel's version of *The Merchant of Venice*, albeit with the romantic Portia and Jessica plots left out and the action streamlined to focus exclusively on Shylock. Though the German text is translated faithfully, Schlegel's translation of the English word "law" as "Recht" is exploited so as to surreptitiously displace the play's concern with law and re-read it as an enactment of Shylock's claim for legitimate rights.

The German dictionary *Das grosse Duden* specifies that the word "Recht" means a) the totality of norms which are institutionally established in a set of laws and b) what can be translated by the English word "right", in the sense of "democratic right", "the right to work", etc. (Duden Bd 7). Schlegel translates the word "law" in Shakespeare's text using sometimes the German word "Recht" and at other times the word "Gesetz", which unambiguously means "law". Thus Shylock's claim in 4.1.141 "I stand for the law" is translated as "Ich steh hier um mein Recht", whereas his demand "I crave the law" (4.1.202) is translated by the unambiguous equivalent "Gesetz"- "Ich fordere das Gesetz" [I demand the law].

The Romanian version follows Schlegel's text faithfully and introduces changes only in the meanings given to the word "Recht". The result is a shift of focus from an insistence on law to a demand for rights. The above quoted German translation "ich steh hier um mein Recht" is translated further, in Romanian, to give a reading of "Recht" to mean "right" and not "law". Therefore Shylock's claim "I stand for the law" becomes in Romanian "I want my right" [*Eu voi dreptul meu*]. The same displacement occurs with the term justice: in her great mercy speech Portia says "though justice be your plead" (4.1.194). Schlegel translates the line by "suchst du nun Recht schon an"; the Romanian text not only reads "Recht" to mean "right" but further

disambiguates the German version to make the pursuit of right clear. Thus, in the Romanian version, Portia tells Shylock: “*Dacă-ți ceri chiar dreptul tău*” [if you claim your very right].

Sometimes the Romanian text misreads Schlegel so as to be consistent in focusing on the rights issue: when Shylock exclaims “I crave the law” (4.1.202) Schlegel, as mentioned above, translates “the law” with the word “Gesetz”, the Romanian text however, uses the term “drept” [right]. “I crave the law” becomes “*Îmi pretend dreptul*” [I claim my right].

The political context of the trials of the promoters of the Memorandum suggests that the subtle manipulations of the meanings of the word “Recht” in the Romanian version were designed to encourage the audience to identify Shylock as an image of the underprivileged and oppressed Romanian minority, claiming its rights from the superior authority in Vienna. The fictitious name of the author in the absence of any mention of Shakespeare on the title page would suggest that the translator wanted to circumvent censorship and distract attention from the changes introduced in the translation of Shakespeare’s play. The changes were politically charged and focused on the highly controversial issue of the rights of minorities in the Hungarian part of the Habsburg empire.

Both adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* which circulated in Romanian in the nineteenth century introduced a displacement in the play, from the focus on the reading of law to an emphasis on the right of oppressed minorities to the recognition of their cultural identity and the full enjoyment of their political rights. These adaptations can be said to have fully developed Shakespeare’s comedy into a citizenship drama.

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