

SHAKESPEAREAN HYPERTEXTS IN COMMUNIST BULGARIA¹

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Since the first days of the reception of Shakespeare's work in Bulgaria during the second half of the nineteenth century down to the present time two of his tragedies, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, have held an unrivalled sway on the national stage and over the people's minds. Another one, *Othello*, was produced very frequently in the beginning, though often by non-Bulgarian troupes, and yet another, *Macbeth*, was a set text at the schools for many decades but rarely took the fancy of theatre directors and audiences. It is hardly surprising then that these plays, and especially the first two, have penetrated more deeply than the others into the nation's consciousness. Their cultural diffusion can be gauged by the number of references to their characters and stories in all kinds of public discourse. One can often hear remarks like "He's a real Hamlet/ Othello/ Romeo" or "She's a true Ophelia/ Desdemona/ Juliet". Adjectives and abstract nouns have been derived from some of these names to refer to the central quality they stand for, such as '*hamletovshchina*' ('hamletism'), meaning an inability to overcome hesitation. A few quotations from the plays, such as "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" and "To be, or not to be:

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that is the question", are frequently adduced in various contexts and discourses.

Such wide spread of the appropriation process could not leave the nation's literature unaffected. Shakespearean motifs had started filtering into it long before communist rule was imposed on the country after the Second World War, and the development of this tendency since then cannot be truly understood without a preliminary glance at the earlier period.

Shakespeare's influence is already detectable in the first attempts to create modern drama in the country before its liberation from Ottoman rule in 1878. The most impressive among these was Vasil Drumev's (1840-1901)² historical tragedy *Ivanko, Asen's Murderer* (1872), which seems to have drawn on both *Macbeth* and Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* (the latter being itself heavily indebted to Shakespeare). It is the story of the usurpation of the throne by a worthy general at the court of King Asen, the founder of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom after the emancipation of the country from Byzantium in the twelfth century. This act is motivated by the general's overriding ambition spurred not by a demonic wife or weird sisters but by a Byzantine nobleman held captive in the Bulgarian capital and intent on undermining the newly recovered sovereignty of the state.

After the usurpation, the general sinks more and more into the anguish of remorse coupled with a fearful tyranny, which makes him hateful to his subjects. An unjustly banished prince, Asen's brother Peter, is prevailed upon to fight against the usurper and restore the pilfered crown to his family. He is, of course, victorious, for most of the Bulgarians flock to his side and help him to succeed. The drama may owe to *Macbeth* not just the rough outline of the plot but also some of its episodes. There is for instance a rather long-drawn scene in which the King's chaplain tries to persuade Prince Peter to take arms against Ivanko the usurper and has to overcome Peter's innate meekness by shaming him into action. If this encounter is strongly reminiscent of the Macduff/ Malcolm exchange (4. 3.), another one, showing the preparation for a feast in Ivanko's palace and containing a strong

anticipation of the visit of Asen's apparition, quite obviously echoes the striking appearance of Banquo's ghost at the royal banquet in 3.4.

Other Shakespearean plays also seem to have offered useful tips. *Hamlet* has been especially helpful. Asen's daughter Maria, who has been prompted by her love for Ivanko to let him into her father's chambers and thus become the unwitting accomplice to the latter's murder, now goes mad and emerges unexpectedly from her hiding to stun everybody with her revelatory little ditties based on the similar Ophelia episodes. Towards the end of the play the chaplain returns to the palace disguised as a rhapsode and, single-handed, employs the *Mousetrap* stratagem with a similar effect on the guilty audience. Some other elements in the plot might be related at a distance to *King Lear*. What is perhaps more important to note is the relative sturdiness of plot and a certain subtlety of psychology that are surprising at this early stage of the development of national drama and can again be referred to Drumev's apprenticeship under Shakespeare, both directly and through Pushkin's mediation. The play's dramatic virtues, coupled with its patriotic appeal at a time of national regeneration, ensured its popularity and won it a prominent place in the history of Bulgarian drama.

Ten years later, in 1882, Konstantin Velichkov (1855-1907), one of the most important figures in the fields of literature, education and politics during the initial phase of modern Bulgaria's independent development as a European country³ and an early translator of Shakespeare, produced a play called *Vicenzo and Angelina*, whose Shakespearean connections are equally hard to miss. Times had changed and this is, unlike Drumev's *Ivanko*, not a nationalistic historical drama but a sentimental romantic tragedy suddenly turned tragicomedy through a narrowly averted catastrophe.

The action takes place in Naples. Vicenzo knows that his father Minotti, a respected nobleman, has been foully murdered and it is the son's duty to discover the perpetrator of this crime and take his revenge. Meanwhile he and Angelina fall in love with each other, but it soon turns out that Minotti's murderer was Angelina's father, Paolo Donato. The discovery is a terrible shock for the young lady, who deeply loves

and respects her father, and she goes through a formidable trial of divided loyalties, while Vicenzo is torn between his revenger's mission and a desire to fly away with Angelina and leave the caitiff to fry in his own fat. At the very end Paolo Donato brings him down from the horns of the dilemma by dying of a heart attack as a result of an awful ordeal of remorse. After a series of swoons Angelina finally falls into Vicenzo's arms and it is clear that the two tormented lovers are destined to live happily ever after.

The play is a kind of crossbreed between *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, though, curiously, it is closer to Beaumont's histrionic re-working of Shakespeare in *Philaster*. Corneille's *Cid* and the theatre of French Classicism as a whole have also left their recognizable stamp on it, though their typical preoccupation with honor is less noticeable here. In addition, there must have been some influence from more recent examples of European drama, betrayed by the long sentimental monologues and fine romantic gestures in which the play abounds. A typically local cultural touch can be discovered in the young heroine's loyalty to and affection for her father, unshaken even by the terrible revelation of his crime and turned into heart-felt commiseration rather than hatred or accusation. The strongly patriarchal tradition of the still largely rural Bulgaria had this theme close to its heart. Even her love for Vicenzo is unable to extinguish Angelina's daughterly attachment. It is probably because of such deep-rooted familial reflexes that the play proves unable to soar above the realm of melodrama, though its ambitions are undeniably heroic.

Shakespearean echoes can be found in Velichkov at various levels. Like Lady Macbeth before him, Paolo Donato discovers in his troubled sleep that his hands are still bloody and calls for water to wash them clean only to realize in horror that the stains reappear anew and the entire ocean would not bring back his lost purity. A little later, while trying to pray, the murderer, like Claudius in *Hamlet*, finds out that he is unable to unburden his soul of its secret sin. Minetti's ghost, on the other hand, appears several times, first as a subterranean voice in the graveyard and then as a spectral presence torturing the conscience of

the murderer rather than steering the action of the revenger, as the respective figure does in *Hamlet*. The closing scene is a curious mixture of the catastrophes of *King Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet*, in which first a decrepit father and then a heart-broken lover mistake Angelina's repeated swoons for death and wish that they were themselves in the same state.

With Velichkov and the completion of the National Revival, the rather unfocused attempts to turn Shakespeare's example to some use in the creation of a new heroic drama in Bulgaria seem to have come to a premature close. Subsequent resorting to the Bard's work for the needs of indigenous literature is of a different kind.

Ivan Vazov (1850-1921) won the reputation of a patriarch of modern Bulgarian literature already in his life-time and succeeded in living up to it by setting high standards in all major genres. In the last analysis, this meant integrating the newly formed national literature in its contemporary European context. It was, above all, a question of method but also, no doubt, one of thematic orientation and even of occasional references to a common civilizational stock. Vazov was keenly aware of all these aspects of his titanic task and he strove to situate Bulgarian writings in this larger framework, among other things, through the standard textbook for the state secondary schools which he and Velichkov edited in 1884, through his manifold public activities,⁴ but primarily through his own impressive creative work. Shakespeare has a definite place in this writer's large number of allusions to names and narratives extracted from the rich fabric of the European tradition. Two poems included in Vazov's last collection (Vazov 1919) deal briefly, in romantic terms, with stereotypical notions of Romeo and Desdemona respectively.

Vazov's truly original tackling of a Shakespearean topic, however, is contained in his short story "The Balkan Romeo and Yulia [sic]" (Vazov 1902). Like Velichkov's earlier drama, this narrative work promises to repeat Shakespeare's tragic development, yet at the last moment manages to evade it. Two young people coming of provincial middle-class Bulgarian families have fallen in love but their parents, led by pig-headed pride and petty rivalry, will not consent to a marriage.

The lovers run away and, as the girl's hat is found floating on the river, it is assumed for some time by both the locals and the readers of the story that they have drowned themselves out of despair. This, however, turns out to be a mere ploy, and the two are discovered by worried relatives hiding in a roadside inn, whence they are brought back home and allowed by their hugely relieved and penitent families to have it their own way. The story is sustained in a mildly ironical tone and although it is not without some suspense, there is hardly any premonition of real tragedy in it. The whole suggests that the Balkans in the opening years of the twentieth century are a comic rather than a tragic place and any attempt at a heroic vision is bound to be deflated by a new middle-class realism. This is both reassuring and disappointing.

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Vazov's use of *Romeo and Juliet* as a hypotext for an overview of the new age became a precedent for the writers in the communist period after the Second World War. Of course, such liberties in dealing with the classics would have been unthinkable before Khrushchev's demolition of Stalinist dogmatism, which had incorporated Shakespeare in its rigid hierarchy of inherited cultural values and determinately resisted all attempts at tampering with the letter of his sacrosanct legacy. Two Bulgarian one-act plays of the mid-sixties contain an overt reference to Shakespeare's love tragedy both in their titles and in their plots.

One of these, *Romeo, Are You Still Living?* by Pancho Panchev, b. 1933 (Panchev 1967), pleads for the right of private happiness in the midst of a crassly collectivist society. The lovers, cast in the roles of their Verona prototypes, are given names that are similar in sound yet do not deviate from common Bulgarian usage – Roumen and Yulia. Roumen is a university student who is forced to interrupt both his studies and his career as a promising sportsman and start working as a laborer in order to earn some money and make their marriage possible. But he is denounced by his fellow-workers for suspiciously keeping to himself and refusing to take part in their social life. The

detractors accuse him of “un-socialist” egoism and acquisitiveness. A journalist who has chosen to praise Roumen’s record professional achievements in the press is ordered by his boss further to explore the case and recant if necessary.

In the meantime, Yulia’s father, who is part of the nomenklatura class, is given a prestigious diplomatic post in Athens and the entire family (Yulia being still at school and a minor) have to leave for Greece. Yulia’s mother is very much against the romance of the two. For one thing, she feels her daughter is too young to have an affair that could affect adversely her studies and her future career and, for another, the young man, being an orphan who has to support himself, apparently has a much lower status and is therefore an inadequate match. The very connection with the hypotext suggests a tension between two social groups, in this case not rivaling aristocratic clans but the fairly well-defined classes of the ruling political elite and the common people in an avowedly egalitarian society. Though this theme is somewhat muffled, the implications are inescapable. The play ends without a final resolution yet on a fairly optimistic note. The editor of the paper which has advertised Roumen’s accomplishments is convinced that the young man is a good guy after all and decides to back up his reporter. Now Roumen’s name will be fully restored and he will be able to get together with his girl once again. For the time being, however, he has to work hard in order to earn enough to set up a new family and to keep the planned wedding secret for fear that Yulia’s parents might try to prevent it from happening. At the very end, the honest reporter (who is also the narrator of the story) addresses the audience directly on behalf of the company and, obviously, as the author’s chosen mouthpiece:

We turn to you, dear spectators, with this request: if, by any chance, you happen to know our Juliet’s parents or some other parents of this kind, don’t reveal to them the secret of their children’s great love and brave happiness! Such love must be looked after.

The links between this play and its hypotext are not confined to the similar names of the protagonists and the secrecy of their love-affair. There are in Panchev's text direct references to Shakespeare's tragedy. A preliminary pointer to it can, of course, be found already in the title. Fairly early in the action, in the episode of the first encounter between the two lovers on the step of a Sofia street-car, Roumen mentions his prototype to Yulia, declaring that if Romeo was capable of poisoning himself for Juliet's sake, he in his turn would not be left behind and would demonstrate his own prowess by, for instance, outstripping the moving vehicle on foot – surely, an exploit much more consonant with the life-affirming philosophy of communism! And it must be said for Roumen that he proves as good as his word, thus combining Romeo's romantic propensities with a truly classical athleticism and, in the event, winning the heart of his lady. A similar point is made in the dialogue of the lovers towards the close of the play, when they are about to separate on the eve of Yulia's departure for Athens and Roumen tries his best to reassure her by referring to the power of their attachment:

YULIA. I am afraid. I can't say why, but I'm afraid. Romeo and Juliet loved each other too, didn't they?

ROUMEN. Yes, but we have their example before us!

YULIA (intoning a little). If some day you come to me and find me lying deprived of breath, don't assume that I'm dead. Don't hasten to drink up the poison.

ROUMEN (intoning a little). If some day you wake up and find out that I have breathed my last beside you, don't assume that I'm dead. Don't hasten to stab your heart.

Obviously, the moral of this transformation of the original story is that in the new superior social order the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet can be averted and a much more felicitous solution can be reached for their problem. The last verbal reference to the hypotext occurs in the reporter/narrator's closing address to the audience, in which he calls Yulia "our Juliet".

Some structural parallels between the two plays, particularly those on the level of plot-construction, are also hard to overlook. The lovers are forcefully separated, though in the hypertext the one who is compelled to leave is the female rather than the male partner and now this is not due to a banishment but to a parental decision. The wedding-night scene antedates the marriage vows and takes place in the male's lodgings. This modified borrowing is apparent enough to maintain the interrelation between the two texts. There is little else in the new play that has been directly derived from the old one in terms of structure, unless we consider Roumen's coach as modeled on Father Lawrence and playing like him the rather ambiguous role of a matchmaker in a situation more complex than he can see.

The other play of that period, *Romeo and Juliet* by Ivan Radoev, 1927-94 (Radoev 1968), is much less closely related to Shakespeare's tragedy in its details, though it repeats the title literally, thus preparing the audience for a close analogy. The action takes place in a student's cheap rented room, which is really an attic. Romeo has brought there his fellow-student Juliet (Zhulieta). While dancing to the tape-recorder music the two are studying for an exam in political economy. The play opens with their trying to memorize the dry textbook formulae about the composition of a society's productive forces. Their thoughts, however, keep drifting to other, more exciting things like love and dancing. Their dialogue, skeptically-ironical and witty, shows the estrangement of the young from their hypocritical social environment which conceals a primitive selfish greed behind a façade of grand words. The following exchange is characteristic:

ROMEO. [...] Listen... It is most natural for us, while we are still young, to have follies as it is for you to have ideals. Yesterday, for instance, I saw a mother and a child in the store. The mother was examining a carpet spread over the floor in all its Persian glory. The mother asks: 'How many ideals do you charge per square meter?' And before the

shop-assistant can come up with an answer, the little boy, pardon my language, takes a pee on the carpet.

JULIET. O dear, what words!

ROMEO. Why, the child didn't say a single word. He just took a pee. The mother slapped him across the face, then she did it again and, finding that insufficient, hit him one more time. The child fell down on the carpet. She pressed his face on it and yelled: 'Lick it, you beast! Lick it off!'

JULIET. Is that possible?

ROMEO. You are asking me... I forgot to tell you that at this very moment I had the rare privilege of seeing her eyes. Oh those eyes! They were so sparkling and fiery—like those of Jeanne d'Arc! As a matter of fact, this woman is the ideal person. One can only approach her heights by treading on carpet upon carpet. A Kilimanjaro of carpets!

The society in which Radoev's characters live is paternalistic and covertly philistine. It thrives on the oppression and humiliation of the young. A grotesque sketch acted out by Romeo and Juliet next shows how easily the two lovers can be embroiled in an ugly neighborhood row because of their unconventional behavior and how their love can be sullied irreparably by the indignant clamor of the "vigilant citizenry". The young are expected to be docile and unimaginative. As Romeo puts it, there are no angry young men in Bulgaria, only the old can be angry. The ironical song the two lovers sing mimicking the establishment needs no commentary:

Go to sleep, all you young ones! Sleep, sleep!
Be reasonable, don't be angry!
You must sleep all the time. Don't think!
Close your eyes, you who are our pride,
so that our most beautiful dreams
become your reality.

Go to sleep, all you young ones!
It is important for us that you stay asleep,
run organized cross-country races, keep quiet...
Go to sleep, all you young ones, sleep, sleep!

This is the plight of the new generations in a totalitarian state, which deprives them of all initiative and tries to plan their every move for them. The young in the play, however, are not ready to spend their lives in this enforced hibernation of conformity. Romeo's closing monologue makes it clear that the gap between them and their elders is unbridgeable:

ROMEO. The world is paradoxical, Romeo! And you, the young, are a paradox. It is your task to make this paradox come true. [...] Did you hear? I have talked to Einstein. Do you know who is Einstein? There's a small guy in section 24... But what do you expect from us? To invent the differential calculus? That has already been invented. To become trade-mission representatives in the Scandinavian countries? Well, we don't fancy that. Too bad!

JULIET. Sorry!

ROMEO. (Towards the audience). Did you hear? We have talked to Einstein! Listen to this paradox now: we the young are the same as you, only we are entirely different...

And although the tape-recorder is switched on again and the two lovers go back to their studying-in-dancing pastime and to the dull textbook quotations about the productive forces, the line has been drawn and there can be no doubt that their world is light-years apart from the world of the old. And that they are working to an entirely different agenda.

Both plays are determined to establish this generational difference. And both turn to address the audience directly at the end. But while the first appeals for sympathy and conspiratorial support, the second has no illusion and its final words sound like a warning and an open threat

to the public. The young are in no need of sympathy or support here. They are strong enough to wage their war of defiance on their own. Behind the walls of their attics. Preparing, not to die like their Verona prototypes, but to live and fight for their human right to be happy and different.

It is interesting that both plays are left open-ended and both problematize the Romeo-and-Juliet story in the conditions of an East-European totalitarian state during the second half of the twentieth century, shying away from the tragic tone and plot of the original and handing the resolution of the conflict over to the real life off-stage in the mood of “guarded optimism”. One can sense in them the rejuvenating spirit of the Prague Spring with its striving towards a “socialism with a human face”.

A few years later, after the brutal crushing of the movement in the summer of 1968 and the ensuing tightening of central control over the dangerous intellectual ferment in the whole of Eastern Europe, it became practically impossible for Bulgarian theatres to stage even such mildly critical plays as the two outlined above. Anything that managed to squeeze through the internal censoring mechanism of the world of entertainment—through its “artistic councils”, repertory committees, etc.—but was found unpalatable by officials present at the first-night performance, could scarcely reach a week-long run. Authors of such plays were picked up for a particularly close monitoring and their further careers were far from easy, unless they showed clearly that they were willing to compromise.

It is in this context that Pancho Panchev’s next recourse to *Romeo and Juliet* has to be considered. His new play appeared in 1973 under the title *The Discovery of Island Lyubomir* (Panchev 1973). This time the author of *Romeo, Are You Still Living?* opted for a light-hearted comedy steering clear of social problems that were not recognized by official ideology. What was presented to the audience was the absurd feud of two families living in the two halves of what the British would call “a semi-detached house”. The feud goes back at least a century and is rooted in an endless litigation over something that no one can

remember any longer. It is semiotically expressed by the mandatory color each family wears and sports on the façade of its half of the house. And it erupts sporadically in noisy rows.

This senseless enmity has become burdensome for everybody, including the members of the two families. At the very beginning we can see that the two youngest boys, both called "Lyubomir", are in fact the best of friends and cannot understand why their elders should behave in this ridiculous fashion. One of the Lyubomirs has an older brother and the other an older sister, who have fallen in love with each other but are compelled to keep their affair secret. The parents and the grandparents of the young, we gradually find out, have also been long engaged in surreptitious contacts across the dividing line while keeping up the appearance of complying with the tradition of mutual resentment.

As it soon transpires, the little Lyubomirs have discovered an uninhabited island and after school escape there to play together. When first their siblings and then their parents and grandparents get wind of it, they also betake themselves to the island in pairs formed in tacit defiance of the feud. It is there that they all finally come to face the fact of their double life and decide to co-exist in love and peace. "Love of peace" is, by the way, the meaning of the name "Lyubomir", which the boys give to the island too. At the end the families are told that their old house will be torn down and replaced by a block of flats. Their unanimous wish is to live next to one another in the new building together again. The future family of their older children, the Romeo and Juliet born under more auspicious stars, will also join them.

In his notes to the first printed edition of the play in 1973 the author makes the following statement:

It has been my aim to suggest in this comedy that all members of the two families—in spite of the fact that the older ones are prisoners of inertia and an ill-advised conformity to received moral norms,—all of them, from the little Lyubomirs to their granddads, are on the verge of their rebirth as authentically new human beings who have shaken off the conventions of

philistinism and yearn to start living as friends in accordance with the laws of the newly found Island Lyubomir. (Panchev 1973, 47)

The struggle against philistinism was an official shibboleth of the time. The 1970s were characterized by the build-up of relative affluence in the Soviet bloc, meant to fend off the recrudescence of revolutionary ferment of the Czech type. The corollary of this development, however, was a gradual disintegration of the hitherto compact society, a new taste for the material values of comfort and luxury (already noticed as a tendency by Ivan Radoev's *Romeo and Juliet* in the previous decade) and a desertion of the glorious collectivist ideal of communism for the sake of personal well-being. While it was abundantly clear that such ills were an inescapable aspect of the new orientation, the ideological establishment kept denouncing them as a dangerous aberration and instructed the "artistic intelligentsia" to help castigate and purge them in its creative work. Some of the representatives of this class were, of course, eager to respond to the summons and thus show their loyalty, but others—like the public at large—were sincerely disgusted by the current upsurge of crass materialism and would have struck out at it even without outside encouragement.

What the authorities and their tools insisted on was that the phenomenon of philistinism was not an integral part of socialism but rather a vestige of the previous, imperfect stages of history and therefore was to be carefully exorcised, so that the new society could continue unhampered its evolution towards the eventual triumph of full-fledged communism. This prescribed treatment of all evil elements as foreign to the new social order and inherited from the one it has come to replace is amply illustrated in Panchev's play. The family feud is rooted in the distant past and no one is able to understand its meaning any longer. As a matter of fact, all three generations represented on the stage—and the young more than the old—thirst after the replacement of the traditional hatred with new love-and-peace mores congenial to the just and happy world that is being built.

Island Lyubomir—whose very name, as we saw, contains these two social virtues in combination and whose special moral climate has raised them to the status of a natural law—is an idyllic utopian dream symbolizing the perfections of communism as they were envisaged by the doctrine and adumbrated by its propaganda. It is indicative that the two boys, who have been the first to discover the place in their innocent purity, think of it as a state of being which has dispensed with money, a recognizable feature of the final stage of communist eschatology.

In such general outline, the play appears entirely conformist and shallow, lacking the questioning spirit of its predecessor. It was even recommended by the Ministry of Art and Culture to be used by the national network of amateur theatres. Still, an artistic work, and a drama in particular, can never be fully trusted to do the bidding of its paymaster. Every now and then it will turn back to bite the hand that has been feeding it. A few such disloyalties seem to be scattered through this admittedly tame comedy. The two lovers, for instance, find faults with the puritanical morals of their environment, which puts up willingly with the ugliest manifestations of hate but considers any openness in erotic love inappropriate. Such behavior, they remark ironically, is only tolerated when official delegations are met or seen off at the railway station. This is a comic shot at the current Brezhnevian fashion among East-European leaders to embrace and kiss each other on the mouth on all public occasions.

A final, much more pervasive irony emerges in the closing scene, in which the old family feud is cured only to be replaced by new gender tensions cutting across each married couple. And although these are soon hushed up and superseded by the general merriment of the ring dance, the old neighborhood gossip, whose chief pleasure has always been to egg on the two families in their bickering and who has so far stayed away from the island, now appears in the midst of the idyll to express her conviction that the old rows are bound to erupt again in the contemplated communal block of flats. Human nature, it is implied, will have its way despite all ameliorative policies.

One should also not overlook the fanciful character of Island Lyubomir. This place is indeed no more than a mere utopia, because, as it turns out, there is no sea or river near the town where the action takes place. Thus the dream of social harmony remains a figment of the imagination with no actual existence. While this fact does not deprive it of its appeal, in the hands of a subtler theatre director it may smack of a skeptical comment on the feasibility of the communist project.

The intertextual dependence of *The Discovery of Island Lyubomir* on Shakespearean antecedents is multifarious and the overall message of the play with its intriguing ambiguity is impossible to imagine outside this connection. First of all, the entire comedy is placed within the familiar framework of *Romeo and Juliet*. The two warring families are called Montev and Capulev, slaviced versions of the original anglicized Italian names. The Montevs are distinguished by their preference for the color blue, while the Capulevs stick to pink, a visual contrast probably borrowed from Zeffirelli's celebrated film after Shakespeare's tragedy. The notion of an archetypal age-old feud is thus strongly suggested from the very beginning. The two star-crossed lovers have the same Bulgarianized variants of Romeo's and Juliet's names as in Panchev's earlier hypertext, Roumen and Yulia. At no point, however, does this relationship approach a tragic dimension and such a revision of the generic tonality of the original is significant: the conflicts of socialism are, as the ideologists insisted, not antagonistic and therefore they can always be resolved happily.

Another Shakespearean element that permeates the entire play is more generally structural and derives from a basic pattern of the Bard's romantic comedy. This is the usual opposition between the sphere of everyday social reality, on the one hand, and that of a romantic dream-world, on the other. Panchev imitates the author of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It* and, particularly, *The Tempest* in transferring his characters into an out-of-the-walls place where they can find their true selves before returning home as reformed, much more mature and happy individuals. The engrafting of this typically comic structure on the tragic story of Romeo and Juliet plays an important

role in the revision of that story. The familiar Shakespearean mechanism is employed with its characteristic techniques of pairing off the personages and making them roam around in fairyland long before they all finally come together to celebrate their regeneration. Since Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* itself is in effect a romantic comedy soured into tragedy by accident, its generic transformation was not difficult to accomplish. What the later playwright had to sacrifice was no more than the gripping dramatic tension of the earlier work. But that is exactly what he was eager to dispense with.

Starting in the mid 1980s, Gorbachev's *Perestroika* soon proved a failure as a last-minute effort to reform and revive the moribund economy of the Soviet empire. In the political sphere, however, it changed the system out of recognition. The *Glasnost* campaign lifted the many taboos that had long stifled all public debate. Meant to relieve totalitarian society of its double-think and double-talk and thus re-charge it with the constructive energy that had effectually petered out, this new openness became the beginning of the end. The shocking revelation of the atrocities of the regime, hitherto only dimly surmised, brought about a wave of disgust that, coupled with the economic catastrophe, precipitated the collapse of the clay-legged giant.

On the eve of the final breakdown, in the memorable 1989, a new Bulgarian play based on *Hamlet* appeared to reflect the distinctive spirit of this crucial moment: *The Murder of Gonzago*⁵ by Nedyalko Yordanov, b. 1940, a poet and theatre director who had staged Shakespeare's Danish tragedy in a markedly radical version a few years earlier.⁶ Interestingly enough, this new hypertext was above all an act of self-reflexivity on the part of the Bulgarian theatre, which tried at this juncture to cast a critical glance at the uses it had been put to during the communist period.

The play reconstructs the entire plot of *Hamlet* from the vantage point of the troupe that happens to pass through Elsinore and is invited to perform at the royal court. This entertainment for the august spectators, naturally, proves less innocent than it appears at first, for it is meant to inconvenience the king himself and to help his enemies undermine

his power. The latter do not form a consolidated group, but they seem to include such important figures as Prince Hamlet, his associate Horatio and even the high official Polonius, who are all in one way or another connected with the Norwegian Prince Fortinbras and work together with him for the deposition of the usurper of the Danish throne, Claudius. The simple players are drawn into this political game before they fully realize how dangerous it can be and, as a result, they are accused of participation in a conspiracy instigated from abroad. The state inquisition cracks down on them with its utmost severity and manages under duress to extract from most of them false confessions, self-denunciations and denunciations of their fellow-actors. The only character who retains his dignity is the director of the troupe, Charles. This man believes that he has now accomplished the mission of his vocation, for he has been given the opportunity to show the truth about his time on the stage for everybody to see. Charles is ready to assume the whole responsibility for what has been done and die as a hero. The tragic denouement is fended off when Fortinbras does arrive in Elsinore at the last moment to clear the carnage and replace the dead tyrant on the throne. Not only are the actors set free now but they are rewarded for their gallant participation in the struggles for the liberation of the country. Their theatre is granted royal patronage and their exclusive status is secured by a special decree.

This Stoppardian reworking of the original play is further removed from the generally existential concerns of the theatre of the absurd than *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, for its interest is entirely political. It sets out to show how the dramatic art is utilized by various factions within a totalitarian system to promote their own group interests. It also reveals how, in the process of playing a part in their game, the theatre can endeavor to suggest to the public some of the truths about its conditions that have been most carefully suppressed by those in power. In a dictatorial set-up where political discourse is stifled the theatre is called upon to perform the role of the forum. However, it can only do that by adopting a language of indirections and veiled analogies, the notorious Aesopian language of art subject to state control. The

entire stage history of Shakespeare's dramatic legacy during the communist age is Aesopian par excellence: most Shakespearean productions in Eastern Europe were designed so as to convey to the audience in a roundabout manner the problems that could never be discussed in public openly.

Yordanov's play itself demonstrates this tendency of its contemporary theatre by referring obliquely to a number of features in current Bulgarian life which were only now being laid open for discussion outside the close circle of one's trusted friends. At several points in it there are reminders that Elsinore is a place where "walls have ears", for it is the common occupation of its denizens to eavesdrop and report on other people's activities and opinions. If you want to be left alone, it is concluded, you have to pretend that you are either a madman or a fool. And if you are ambitious to succeed in life, you must excel in the art of flattery. Even absolute mediocrity will obtain advancement in this way.

Denmark is also a state of overgrown bureaucracy whose enormous expenses suck the country dry. And it is straddled by an arrogant oligarchy. The children of the rulers (such as Hamlet, for instance) are above the law. They are sent abroad to study in prestigious universities and are particularly drawn to art subjects. No one in Bulgaria at that time could mistake such details for Danish peculiarities and miss the thinly disguised allusions to realities at home.

When it comes to the smaller world of the theatre, the play, as we saw, sheds light on the attempts of the political establishment to use this institution for its own advantage. The continuous interference with the life and work of the actors, the ubiquity of censorship, of suspicion and organized slander, the ugly acts of oppression, persecution and corruption, the dependence of the careers of actresses on their willingness to pass through the beds of the divinely anointed on their way to glory—all these unseemly features of the life of the craft are highlighted in the play. At the close of the communist age Nedyalko Yordanov sketched its summary portrait—or, rather took its death mask—

from the somewhat narrow yet symbolically meaningful angle of the theatre: a play within the play becoming *the thing*.⁷

The sense of imminent catastrophe emanating from *The Murder of Gonzago* had already been expressed in another play of the same period which used Shakespeare as a springboard. The work of the most renowned dramatist of that time, Yordan Radichkov, 1929-2004, *Image and Likeness* was published by a literary periodical in 1986 (Radichkov 1986) and at once electrified the atmosphere of the country. Its parabolic reference to the predicament of the nation was crystal-clear. The action opens with the encounter between a woodcutter bemoaning his lot and the sorely beset King Richard III clamoring for a horse and offering his kingdom in exchange. On seeing the woodcutter's jade Richard decides that this is his last chance and grabs it, forcing the throne on the bewildered peasant. Then he disappears never to come back again.

The new peasant-king does not really know what to do with this inadvertently acquired kingdom until, following the advice of his many councilors, he decides to dig enough earth from one end of the country and pile it up at another so that it can rise to the skies and win the respect of all neighbors. Eventually the huge pile collapses into the pit from which it has risen bringing about universal destruction. The resemblance between the inept yet ambitious peasant-king and Todor Zhivkov, the peasant-leader of communist Bulgaria during the last three decades, was striking. The general apprehension of the approaching total failure of the system became the central allegory of the play. Not unexpectedly, this work was banned from ever reaching the stage, but it had already appeared in print and became the talk of the town. Richard III provided an interesting ironical framework for it, bestowing some of the blame for what had happened in Eastern Europe on the irresponsibility of its former monarchical rulers or, perhaps, on the betrayal of the West, depending on how you decided to treat that figure.

Shakespearean themes, plots and characters punctuate the history of Bulgarian drama grappling with the problems of an oppressive political regime during the second half of the twentieth century. It is significant that a remarkable Shakespearean villain-hero should slide

emblematically along the edge of one of that period's last plays and eventually fade into the surrounding dusk, dragging after him his modern shadow.

A few conclusions could be drawn from the above survey of the role played by Shakespearean hypertexts in Bulgarian literature during the communist period. First of all, it should be mentioned that the general aim of the writers was to use the mechanism of intertextuality in order to refer to the reality of their own day by indirection. This was useful since in most cases their orientation was critical and such attitudes could be expressed only obliquely. Moreover, the Shakespearean connection gave sanction to their work, because the Bard had been established as an unquestionable genius and a major precursor of socialist realism.

Secondly, the two plays that proved by far the most popular, were *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. Such preference can to a certain extent be explained by reference to the national tradition in Shakespeare's reception since the second half of the nineteenth century, which was also discovered at work in the domain of intertextuality. There is, however, a more important aspect to this continuity than a mere cultural inertia. While it is clear that the particular familiarity of the public with these two dramas was a significant factor in the choice of hypotexts, the specificity of their material should also be taken into account. During the nineteenth-century National Revival they became very useful as dramatizations of the central conflict of an emerging modern society, that between the young and the old, between the new liberal tendencies in the life of the country and its ossified patriarchal tradition. Under communism the same generational opposition acquired another meaning, suggesting the unwillingness of the young to put up with the social habits of their elders and, hence, their unacceptance of the status quo, i.e. their essential dissidence. The authors' obvious siding with the young made their works subversive by definition.

Thirdly, the pervasively intertextual character of these works encouraged the writers to plunge into daring aesthetic experimentation and produce new, fairly complex patterns of artistic encoding that

veered further and further away from the stiffly normative method of socialist realism and began to resemble some of the tendencies in contemporary Western art that had been blacklisted by communist ideology as pernicious. On this level too the process proved innovative and therefore uncongenial to the existing order of things.

Since the change in 1989 there have not been any noticeable attempts to use Shakespeare's dramas as hypotexts for the creation of new Bulgarian plays. The collapse of censorship has made Aesopian indirection in the expression of political criticism unnecessary. Shakespeare's dramas however are now as central as ever in the repertoires of all Bulgarian theatres. And again the first ones to appear on the stage after the democratization of political and cultural life were *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, to be followed by a flurry of others: *The Tempest*, *Macbeth*, *A Comedy of Errors*, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida*, etc. But most of these new productions, created by young directors uninhibited by the former official reverence for the immortal Bard, have dealt with the plays so freely that they can themselves be seen as hypertexts or postmodern medleys in which the share of the classical author is often no more than a distant inspiration or, at best, a warp on which a variety of new patterns can be woven. Nonetheless the palimpsest character of these ventures makes itself known at every step.

The dynamic potential of Shakespeare's legacy, unabated by the passage of time, is a source of continual wonderment. Of course, it is no more than a potential and its realization is dependent on the unceasing efforts of an army of the poet's enthusiastic collaborators stretched through the centuries, turning his work into a collective creation that will always remain incomplete and therefore vigorously—may we say, at times dangerously—alive.

Notes

1. This study is in parts a spin-off of a larger collaborative one dedicated to Shakespeare's theatrical and critical reception in Bulgaria (Shurbanov 2001). The

terminology adopted for the purpose is, I hope, familiar from the seminal work of Gérard Genette (Genette 1982).

2. Vasil Drumev received his education in Odessa, Russia. Later he was going to become a bishop of the national church and one of the first prime-ministers of sovereign Bulgaria.
3. Konstantin Velichkov was educated in the Istanbul French Lycée. After the Liberation he became one of Bulgaria's first ministers of education.
4. Vazov, like Velichkov, was involved in the creation and promotion of a new, Europe-oriented Bulgarian culture immediately after the Liberation. He too was one of the country's first ministers of education.
5. The text of the play has now been made available in print - in Yordanov 1999, 9-104. It was first staged in the Burgas Theatre in 1989 and since then has enjoyed several productions abroad, particularly in Russia.
6. Nedyalko Yordanov's *Hamlet* production in the Burgas Theatre in 1981 is considered in Shurbanov 2001.
7. It is important to remember at this point that only a couple of years after *The Murder of Gonzago*, the first post-communist *Hamlet* on the Bulgarian stage (dir. Alexander Morfov) was similarly contracted to the inner stage of the Mousetrap interlude.

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