

PIA BRÎNZEU

FANTOMELE LUI SHAKESPEARE

[‘Shakespeare’s Ghosts’]

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“All stories are about wolves. All worth repeating that is” (Atwood 2001: 344) – was famously said by one of Margaret Atwood’s narrators in her Booker Prize winning novel, *The Blind Assassin*. In a similar vein, reading Pia Brînzeu’s work, we could say that ‘all stories are about ghosts’: fictional spectres, as they are used by Shakespeare in his plays, or ethereal presences influencing writers across the ages to give newer and fresher voices to originally minor, marginal – even absent – characters.

That “Shakespeare still haunts us mercilessly”³ (vol. I, 9) is the premise Professor Pia Brînzeu starts from in her complex investigation of twelve of Shakespeare’s most famous plays, chosen – as she herself acknowledges in the Introduction (vol. I, 19) and Conclusions (vol. II, 357) – because they have provided inspiration for many writers, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first. Every one of the twelve chapters analyses a famous Shakespearean play and several rewritings in various genres, each targeted at a different readership, all of which are brought together by more or less conventional tropes: Richard III’s hunchback and deformity; Richard II’s garden imagery and the protagonist’s ambiguous portrayal as victim or traitor; the (not so) obvious shrews and their taming in *The Taming of the Shrew*; the ever-present moon in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; the several triangles of *The Merchant of Venice*; the misremembered balcony of *Romeo and Juliet*; the characters’ obsession with words in *Hamlet*; the mysteries and ‘true’ colour of *Othello*; the inverted triangles of *King Lear*, the mysterious androgynous witches of *Macbeth*; the web of stories in *The Winter’s Tale*; the haunting presence of witch Sycorax and the utopian island in *The Tempest*.

Well-documented and cogently written, dense and extremely informative, with numerous historical and intertextual references, the two volumes of *Fantomele lui Shakespeare* [‘Shakespeare’s Ghosts’] actively engage Romanian readers not only through their overlaps of the Shakespearean texts with older and newer rewritings and reinterpretations, but also through rhetorical questions that

³ All quotes from Pia Brînzeu’s books have been translated by this reviewer.

leave room for the reader's own take: Why is Catarina in *The Taming of the Shrew* so angry? Is Romeo a serial seducer? What does Queen Gertrude actually feel for her second husband? Is Othello a hero or a murderer? Why did later writers change the ending of *King Lear*? Are *Macbeth's* "weird sisters" witches or Fates? Is Sycorax a witch or a ghost? How much of each adaptation is Shakespeare? The two volumes can therefore be seen as an appropriate place for the intricate dialogue between and around Shakespeare's own texts and other plays or novels inspired by him, thus developing a compelling intertextual worldwide web.

Explaining the title of her 800-page long study, Brînzeu argues in the Introduction that Shakespeare's initial stories are rewritten, recontextualized, transmediated, loved, and challenged, bringing thus to life a variety of ghosts that "enrich the [Shakespearean] text by overthrowing the perspective of a story and, of course, affecting the work used as a starting point, as well as all the other works that have been or will be written" (vol. I, 16). In the context of this polyphony and plethora of stories, Derrida's concept of "hauntology" (cf. Brînzeu vol. I, 17) can be easily applied not only to Shakespeare's work, but to all literary creation, opposing a romanticized nostalgia about the historical past and moving towards a future seen from a different angle, while also allowing texts to speak to one another, thus creating a whole range of echoes, allusions, and 'ghosts' of previously written texts.

Dedicated to *Richard III*, the "Renaissance pseudo-gangster" (vol. I, 26), because he grows to be tormented by his conscience, the first chapter focuses on Richard's exaggerated deformity (his hump, in particular) as described by Shakespeare, but contradicted by reality. The argument goes on to show how the protagonist's ugliness overlaps with his heroism and charisma, turning him into a symbol of masculinity and military bravery, which makes Henry VII pale by comparison. The two rewritings discussed here – namely Bertold Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941) and Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time* (1951) – are used to connect, in turn, the Renaissance text with the wider political implications leading to World War II and to redeem the Yorkist king, so harshly misjudged by history. Whereas Brecht's play is meant to show how history has a tendency to repeat itself, with the world's great dictators being only variations of the monstrous tyrant (vol. I, 25, 55), Tey's detective novel proves beyond doubt how an idea, once rooted in people's minds, will be difficult to change, despite any evidence to the contrary (vol. I, 66).

Chapter Two explains how, just as in the case of Richard III, Shakespeare's *Richard II* influenced the posthumous reputation of the king. The chapter centres on various forms of treason, the epitome of which is Richard's betrayal of himself through his own weaknesses (vol. I, 73). The garden scene (III.4), which draws Brînzeu's attention, is a parallel for the island where Richard reigns, offering a moment of respite to the queen and the opportunity for ordinary people to comment metaphorically on the situation in their country. It is this garden scene, added by the playwright to the story borrowed from other sources, that clearly connects Shakespeare's text to at least two novels: Margaret Campbell Barnes' *Within the Hollow Crown* (1947) and Ann O'Brien's *The King's Sister* (2014). While Barnes' novel mixes Richard's public and private lives, using the garden as a setting in three key scenes, and meaning to absolve him of all sins and to establish him as a monarch worthy of admiration and patriotic pride, O'Brien's novel takes on a feminine perspective to comment on Richard's unpopularity and frailty in connection to his responsibilities. At the same time, Brînzeu excitingly highlights

O'Brien's many strong women, who stand out through political force and warrior-like attitudes, but who are also victims of an unforgiving patriarchal world. The third rewriting – a detective short story by Margaret Frazer (“*Richard II: The Death of Kings*”) – resumes the trope of the traitor, this time depicted as an unnamed orchestrator of mind games, who betrays for the sake of power and manages to get away unpunished.

The following chapter discusses one of the most popular plays – *The Taming of the Shrew*. Here Brînzeu draws attention, on the one hand, to the absence of a happy end for Christopher Sly, the frame story protagonist, and on the other, to the various interpretations given by the scholarship to the play's shrews (Catarina, Petruchio, even Bianca), as well as to Kate's final monologue. Ann Tyler's novel *Vinegar Girl* (2016) – part of the larger Hogarth project – is the only rewriting discussed here with a special focus on the imagological aspect of the couple who meet at the crossroads of two very different cultures (American and Russian) and languages, and must learn to “tame their images of each other” (vol. I, 149).

Chapter Four concentrates on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the analysis zooms in on various metamorphoses (of the moon's, the lovers', their attitudes to the moon and to love). The moon imposes transitions and, quite paradoxically, becomes a symbol of constancy and of the torch guiding lovers on the path of true love. The two transmediations discussed here are very different in genre. Chris Adrian's *The Great Night* (2011) is a post-text to Shakespeare's play, in which three troubled, unhappy human characters, together with Titania, fight their dramatic past and naughty subconscious. In contrast, *Manga Shakespeare. A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2008) relies on reversed ekphrasis in order to explain how the play's linguistic references to the moon are extended beyond the level of words, becoming an actual graphic element of the drawings, engaging the manga reader through its colour, shape, and purpose, as it watches over all the important scenes and connects the three worlds (of the ruling classes, of the fairies, and of the tradesmen).

The fifth chapter focuses on *The Merchant of Venice*, where the captivating analysis deals with the prevalence of threes and triangles: of love, of money, of opened chests, of family, of wives and their rings, of the Italian cities, as well as, of the three times increased sum of money borrowed from Shylock. Some of the noteworthy aspects which Pia Brînzeu convincingly details here are the male characters' merchant status, with Antonio actually turning out to be Shylock's double, the importance of the ring in the Bassanio-Portia couple, or the economic and religious causes behind the Christian-Jew tense relationship. The two rewritings examined here are Howard Jacobson's novel *My Name is Shylock* (2016) and David Henry Wilson's play *Shylock's Revenge* (1989). While the former raises questions about Jewishness and the trajectory of Judaism, showing the Christian-Jewish relationship as always contradictory and unsolvable (vol. I, 229), the latter is a post-text to Shakespeare's, which blends in other Shakespearean characters and references, and is meant to offer a morally correct ending, where everything is resolved in Shylock's favour.

Starting from the somewhat shocking statement that the balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet* is a fake, the sixth chapter artfully explains how this architectural element, which has become iconic for the star-crossed lovers' story, is in fact a later addition, under the influence of similar plays staged in the 17th and 18th centuries. The chapter also highlights, in a captivating manner, the key issue of masculinity in the play, discussing in particular Romeo's evolution (or Juliet's

taming of him) from a foolish, melancholic, and talkative lover to a mature, wise, and self-controlled husband. This section brings together no less than four novels – David Gray’s *Escape from Verona* (1996), Lisa Fiedler’s *Romeo’s Ex: Rosaline’s Story* (2006), Anne Fortier’s *Juliet* (2010), and Suzanne Selfors’ *Saving Juliet* (2008) – all of which include the balcony as a key trope, representing, in turn, unexpected chances of escape for the running protagonists, places of clandestine meetings and stolen kisses, or a bridge between the medieval and the contemporary worlds, thus persuading readers of its existence.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, the longest chapter is dedicated to *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s longest play and the most productive in terms of adaptations and spin-offs. Starting from Hamlet, who is looked at in his roles as actor, director, writer, and audience (vol. I, 309), all of which centre on his brilliant play with words, philosophical ideas, and figures of speech, Brinzeu analyses, among other aspects, the play’s single men (Fortinbras, Laertes, and Horatio) who, despite their ambiguity, serve as foils to the protagonist. From the very vast plethora of texts inspired by *Hamlet*, no fewer than seven rewritings were selected for discussion: Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967), Marin Sorescu’s *Vărul Shakespeare* [‘Cousin Shakespeare’] (1987/88), Salman Rushdie’s *Yorick* (1994), John Updike’s *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000), Lisa Klein’s *Ophelia* (2006), Alan Gratz’s *Something Rotten* (2007), and Ian McEwan’s *A Nutshell: A Novel* (2016). As their titles suggest, these texts retell the story or create counter-stories from the perspective of various characters (including that of the marginalized women) always enriching the dialogue with Shakespeare’s work and creating heterotopias that allow (post-)postmodern writers to become famous by associating themselves with the core of the Western literary canon. Addressing various readerships, all texts emphasize the importance of words and the characters’/narrators’ talent at storytelling, used in order to make convincing cases for themselves and to provide answers to the questions left hanging by Shakespeare’s text.

Chapter Eight, “The Mysteries of the Moor”, begins the second volume and highlights Othello’s skin colour as a marker of exoticism and of racial ambiguity. However, while Othello’s blackness can be a suggestion of his slave-like inferiority, Iago too can be read as a white slave, victim of his own machinations. A curious aspect brought to the reader’s attention deals with the rare reading of this play as a comedy, with critics noting the parodic, burlesque, and caricatural elements related to the protagonist’s racial identity and the characters’ obscene language (vol. II, 30-32). The four adaptations analysed here come from very diverse cultures: Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis’ *Dom Casmurro* (1899), Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), Caryl Phillips’ *The Nature of Blood* (1997), and Tracy Chevalier’s *New Boy* (2017). Not only are all these novels connected to Shakespeare’s text through the male protagonist’s extreme jealousy and criminal/punitive impulses, but they also bring into contact the English Renaissance culture and other cultures around the world (Brazilian, Sudanese, Kittitian-British, and American-British), touching on imagology-related issues, gender power roles, racism and discrimination, as well as the relationships between colonizers and the colonised.

The following chapter deals with *King Lear* and traces (again) the trope of the triangles in the play (of nature, of society, of the human body, of the family), which are all inverted by Lear’s initial gesture of dividing his kingdom, becoming a diamond, along whose axes the characters move between heaven/spirituality and

hell/(their) destructive nature. “Movement is everything in this play” – argues Brînzeu cleverly – “and perhaps that is why nothing is clear” (vol. II, 126). This movement also seems somewhat triangular: first, characters raise their eyes upwards, to the sky, to gods and the stars that decide on human destinies; then, the movement is downwards, towards an aggressive and destructive nature, which, “disrupted by the king’s madness, tries to do justice through the noisy apocalypse of all collapses” (vol. II, 132); finally, the lesson in humility and compassion allows Lear to move back upwards. Three adaptations were chosen for discussion in this section: Edward Bond’s *Lear* (1978), Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* (1991), and Christopher Moore’s *Fool* (2010). Emphasising the ugliness of the political world, the men’s greed for land, or the role of the jester/narrator and his play-on-words, the texts overlap Shakespeare’s characters and bring to the forefront more contemporary issues, such as the present-day society’s pervasive violence, gender and family power relations, social power interactions, and personal stories.

The tenth chapter does an enthralling examination of *Macbeth*, particularly the ambiguity and androgyny of the witches, often called “weird sisters”, as well as on some interpolations (such as the dancing and singing scene). The witches’ androgyny then extends to the Macbeths, whose couple dynamics changes throughout the play, but makes them fit in the androgynous witches’ world and thus “reach absolute demonism” (vol. II, 201). “The Macbeth discourse” – as Tom Blackburn labelled the network of rewritings and interpretations (vol. II, 203) – includes skilful analyses of Samuel Beckett’s dramaticule *Come and Go* (1967), Eugen Ionesco’s tragic farce *Macbett* (1972), and Barbara Garson’s parody *Mac Bird!* (1966). What connects them all is the striking adaptation of the witches that are seen, in turn, as three middle-aged female friends who are afraid of the future and protect themselves with a gesture from a shared past, as repeated transformations between witches and kings’ wives or their ladies in waiting, or as marginalized representatives (a young woman, an African-American, and a beatnik) of the students militating against the Vietnam War.

Chapter Eleven centres on *The Winter’s Tale*, a fairy-tale told by the fire, where Brînzeu regards Shakespeare’s inconsistencies as less important than the use of doubles (two kingdoms, two triangles, two jealous men/patriarchs) and the happy-ending. Commenting on the play’s title, the author underlines the idea that the text is full of embedded stories told by all the characters, no matter how minor they may be. Related to this is the notion of the ‘theatre within the theatre’, which allows time to expand and contract differently for various characters, some of whom need to disguise themselves in order to save their lives; it is a world of performance, where music plays an essential role. Jeanette Winterson’s novel, *The Gap of Time* (2015), invites readers not only to return to Shakespeare’s play, but also to look inside themselves to investigate their personal wounds, creating a palimpsest of stories within stories.

Dealing with *The Tempest*, Shakespeare’s last play as a single author, the last chapter of Brînzeu’s study redirects our attention to the problematic figure of another famous witch, Sycorax, Prospero’s dark(er) double. Brînzeu argues compellingly that Sycorax comes from the Arabic world of culture and science, which is equal or even older than Prospero’s, thus challenging the male magician’s racial and gender superiority. Although she corresponds to the Renaissance model of evil, she is necessary in the play’s economy not only as a contrast to Prospero’s white, beneficial magic, but also as a starting point in his creating a new identity

for himself. It is therefore not surprising that Prospero first integrates Sycorax into himself and only then does he give up his magic. The analysis also skilfully revisits the scholarship's readings of the utopian island's location, as well as some of the character-related psychological complexes: the Prospero complex (of the colonial patriarch), the Caliban complex (the dependence of the colonized on the colonizer to win his freedom), the Miranda complex (the overprotected white femininity), ending with the author's own attempt to define the Sycorax complex (the highly sexualised coloured woman, who is also knowledgeable in spells and miraculous cures). The three adaptations – Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), Marina Warner's *Indigo or, Mapping the Waters* (1992), and John Brian Aspinall's *Sycorax* (2006) – all centre on the reinterpretation of this infamous witch at the crossroads of postcolonial and feminist studies, highlighting the multiple facets of history as *herstory*. In all three novels, the female protagonists embody an overlap between Shakespeare's Sycorax and Prospero (sometimes even Miranda), showcasing their complementarity even if, unlike Shakespeare's Prospero, they never give up on the symbols of their occult power.

Similarly to the way in which Pia Brînzeu ends her Introduction, stating that Shakespeare's ghosts "still haunt us relentlessly", readers are urged to embrace them in a "successful gesture of intertextual re-bewitching of the world" (vol. I, 21). Simultaneously engrossing and entertaining, Brînzeu's ample, in-depth analysis of the selected Shakespearean plays and their rewritings will also stay with the readers, encouraging them to always return to the Bard's texts as well as to their adaptations, in search of constantly new meanings. Thus, in the end lies the (new) beginning.

References

Atwood, Margaret. 2001. *The Blind Assassin*. New York: Anchor Books.