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THE CIRCULATION OF SHAKESPEARE ADAPTATIONS IN EASTERN EUROPE

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Abstract

The paper discusses the stage adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* that were circulated in the German Länders and the Habsburg Empire in the late 18th and early 19th century. The various forms of re-writing Shakespeare are linked with processes re-contextualizing the text and are discussed as forms of localizing a transnational Shakespeare. The analysis zooms in on the contexts of performance of the German adaptations in two Transylvanian cities. The paper highlights the cultural and linguistic negotiations performed when further translating the already multilayered re-writings of the Shakespearean text and focuses on a Romanian translation of a German adaptation of *Hamlet*.

Keywords: *18th century German adaptations of Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet, first Romanian translation of Hamlet, Habsburg Empire and Transylvania, itinerant players*

The dissemination and circulation of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in Europe in the 18th century followed two routes: one was the German connection covering the space of German culture, including the multi-lingual and multicultural Habsburg Empire and a second connection was the French one, reinforcing the French cultural hegemony on the continent in this period.

This article will focus on the German connection and will highlight some aspects of the process of multiple re-writing and adaptation of Shakespeare's plays in the process of their dissemination in the marginal provinces of the Habsburg Empire, with particular focus being placed on Transylvania. As the German language had been imposed as the official language in the Habsburg Empire, replacing Latin, German touring actors could reasonably expect a public that had the linguistic skills to understand their performances.¹ At the same time,

¹ Joseph II imposed German as the official language in 1780, after his death in 1790, however, Latin was reintroduced as the result of the pressure exerted by the Magyar aristocracy.

however, the various ethnic communities of the Habsburg Empire embraced the enlightenment ethos that encouraged them to develop their own distinctive traditions and national identities. Hence there were two parallel trends in the circulation of Shakespeare adaptations in this area: in the first place there was the spread of German adaptations all across the Habsburg Empire; secondly, there was an almost concomitant emergence of adaptations of Shakespeare in the vernacular languages. The adaptations in the vernacular languages were basically translations of the German texts which were further heavily rewritten in a process of localization that reshaped Shakespeare to meet with the local demands of the various national and cultural communities.

The agents of the circulation of Shakespeare adaptations were by and large actors – for example Karl Wahr and Christoph Seipp, who are credited with having spread the first German adaptation of *Hamlet* to the southern parts of the Habsburg Empire via Pressburg to Hungary and then to Hermannstadt (now Sibiu), Kronstadt (now Brasov). Another influential actor was Bulla, who was active in Prague and then in Pressburg (now Bratislava), then went to Pesta and Temesvar (now Timisoara) and further travelled north east to Cracow and Lemberg (now Lvov). Some of the actors were also the first translators of the adaptations into the national languages: for example, the Polish actors Boguslavski and Kaminski translated the German adaptation into Polish and then disseminated these translations in Ukraine, including Kiev and Odessa, or further North to Lithuania, in Wilna (Vilnius).² The actors were excellent cultural mediators coping with a wide range of political and social differences that were the specific feature of the multinational Habsburg Empire. Both the German actors and vernacular competitors performed several actions of adjustment to local factors. In the late 18th and early 19th century there was a diversity of theatrical spaces to be coped with by touring actors. To give just two examples: the theatre in Lemberg (now Lvov) was a former convent (Cetera 81), the one in Kronstadt (Brasov) used to be the merchants' hall, (Filtsch 577) etc. What the touring actors in the Habsburg Empire had to modulate and inflect locally was a multiple adaptation of theatrical regimes, as they took over the staging practices developed by the Hamburg theatre which in its turn had taken over Garrick's theatre of illusion and had adapted it to the requirements of the German bourgeois drama.

The adaptations of Shakespeare's texts followed a similar pattern. The starting point were Garrick's plays, which could be regarded as local products, already disconnected from the cultural context of Elizabethan England, and which echoed the adaptations practices of 18th century England. These local texts were reprocessed in Germany and adapted to particular cultural and

² On the circulation of German actors in the Habsburg Empire in the late 18th century see Stahl and Schultze.

political circumstances of the German enlightenment and the German stage, and then circulated in the German speaking area (the German Länder and the Habsburg provinces). The play-texts were successively de- and re-contextualized, abridged or expanded, localized and remediated in order to function on a variety of stages and for different audiences. The adaptations of Shakespeare's plays can thus be said to have functioned as a form of mediation between different cultural and political worlds, while at the same time making for the first transnational reception of Shakespeare.

The progressive translation and adaptation of Shakespeare's plays suggests a diffusive pattern, from the centre to the margin. The margin was recently conceptualized as Eastern Europe (also called *Europe orientale* or *l'Orient de l'Europe*), a demi-orientalised area, providing the counterpart of the civilized Western Europe within the same continent (Wolff 6-7). The players themselves were convinced of their "civilizing mission," thereby promoting German culture in "Eastern Europe," as the actor Seipp is noted to have said about his work in Hermannstadt/Sibiu. Another German actor playing in Kronstadt/Brasov, complained that he "was but one step off barbarity" (Filtch 566, 570). Both Transylvanian cities were liminal towns, at the border of the Habsburg Empire with the Ottoman Empire.

The major centre of the diffusion of the German adaptations of Shakespeare was Hamburg for the German Länder and Vienna for the Habsburg region. Other centres like Leipzig in Germany and Prague and Lemberg in the Habsburg Empire, took their cue from these centres and further continued the process of transnational and trans-cultural dissemination of Shakespeare.

II

Which were the first Shakespeare plays to be staged in the Habsburg provinces? In the early 1780s and 1790s German touring actors performed the first German adaptation of *Hamlet* by Heufeld, initially staged at the Vienna Hoftheatre, as well as a radical rewriting of *Romeo and Juliet* by Weisse, which dominated the stages of the German Länder until late in the 19th century.

Mention must be made of the fact that for all the high appreciation of Shakespeare that Lessing and his followers, including Goethe and Schiller, had promoted in the German culture, Shakespeare was not the most successful playwright and fared poorly when competing with Kotzebue.³ A play like *Hamlet* was generally performed only a few times during a season, and that in a radically changed and adapted version. The stage adaptations not only had to meet the demands of the new illusionist, surprisingly multimodal theatre of the

³ To make sure that the production would fetch large audiences a play by Shakespeare was sometimes repackaged and advertised as a play by Kotzebue (Minier 37).

time, but also the demand for clarity of speech. Adapters had the duty to omit all parts that were not acceptable or where Shakespeare's language "was no longer the language of nature" (Schinkqtd. in Häuptlein 31, 76). They had to change Shakespeare's idiom so as to make it sound familiar and conversational ("natural") enough to enable the audience's rapid identification with the characters (Häuptlein 76-77). The most important requirement, however, was one of genre: Shakespeare's tragedy had to be refashioned to fit in with the pattern of the new dominant genre of bourgeois drama.

The best example of a reworking that met these requirements is Weisse's *Romeo und Julia*, written in 1767. Weisse's radical reworking turned out to be the most successful German play in the 18th century and was played in the provinces, such as Hungary and Transylvania until late into the 1820s. *Romeo und Julia* was translated into French by Mercier and as such crossed borders over to the area of French influence. Its dissemination reached Russia where it was performed in Moscow in the 1790s. Weisse's text was further turned into a successful opera by Gotter and Benda which held the stages all over the Habsburg Empire until it was replaced by Bellini's opera in 1836.

Weisse set out to write an enjoyable bourgeois drama (*Bürgerliches Trauerspiel* is the term he coined) for the newly emerged German National Theatre. He didn't consider it to be an adaptation "after" Shakespeare and claimed total ownership of the text (Weisse 7). In fact Weisse relied heavily on Garrick's adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* (published in 1753), and imported the latter's changes to Shakespeare's text as well as the arguments Garrick had brought in favour of his "corrections." For example, Weisse took on board Garrick's belief in the need to do away with "the unnecessary jingle and quibble" (i.e. puns and rhymes) of Shakespeare's text (Garrick 4). Weisse adopted Garrick's "innovations" added to Shakespeare's text such as the inserted scene with Juliet's waking up in time to have a final good bye conversation with Romeo. The German multilayered adaptation of Shakespeare negotiated Garrick's text with the norms of neoclassical tragedy still influential in Germany in the 1760s and with the emerging pattern of the bourgeois drama.⁴ One of the results of these multiple negotiations was an exclusive focus on the intergenerational conflict within the family, with the feud between the Montagues and Capulets being only mentioned in the background. Weisse drastically curtailed the action and started his adaptation with the lovers' intimate conversation after Tybalt's death. The number of characters is cut down from 21 to 8 and there are only two major changes in the set. The reduced design suited the needs of small, itinerant troupes with limited resources. Equally convenient to touring actors was the highly idiomatic language which raised no

⁴ On an extensive discussion of Weisse's debt to Garrick and the former's adjustment to the emerging bourgeois German theatre see Häuptlein 38-53.

acting difficulties and made for a quick emotional identification with the characters.

Weisse's play was too much of a bourgeois play to have any success in the aristocratic court theatre in Vienna, yet it was hugely popular in provincial cities like Hermannstadt/Sibiu and Kronstadt/ Brasov. The theatre journal issued in Hermannstadt *Theatral Wochenblatt*, praises Weisse as a "world famous playwright" and places him on a par with Lessing and Goethe. No mention is made of Shakespeare. Hungarian versions of Weisse's adaptation were part of the staple fare of the Transylvanian theatres until 1848.

Franz Heufeld's adaptation of *Hamlet* in 1772 at the Vienna Hoftheater also attempts to make Shakespeare's text cohere with the rules of the neoclassicism embraced in absolutist Vienna, without, however, "modernizing" it as one critic of the time commented (i.e. without radically re-writing it, as Weisse had done in his *Romeo und Julia*) (Hauptlein 71). An important objection raised to Shakespeare from a neoclassical perspective was the "irregularity" of his plays, i.e. the "uncouth" mixtures of style, genres or characters belonging to different social classes leading to frequent breaches of decorum, linguistic or otherwise. Heufeld's text thus leaves out the indecorous grave diggers. The Latinized names of Polonius, Horatio, Marcellus, Claudius were replaced with similarly sounding Germanic names: Oldenholm, Gustav, Franzow. This was designed to cancel the disruptive heterogeneity in names and to render the narrative world more familiar to the audience. The plot was streamlined, with characters like Laertes and Fortinbras excised as unnecessary diversions from the main action. The latter was recast so as to observe the three neoclassical unities of action, time and space (Hamlet no longer leaves Denmark and the entire action takes place in the queen's cabinet). Almost all of Hamlet's monologues were omitted as they were considered to disrupt the illusion of reality. Most importantly, the ending was changed into a happy one, Gertrude dies confessing her complicity in old Hamlet's death, Hamlet kills Claudius and carries on as the new king. In an unexpected way, by bracketing the political aspects and focusing on the conflicting family relations, Heufeld indirectly smuggled the paradigm of the domestic bourgeois drama onto the aristocratic stage of the Hoftheatre. Another highly influential adapter of Shakespeare, Jean Francois Ducis, also adopted this move for the elitist Comedie Francaise (Willems 237). Heufeld's version was taken all over the southern parts of the Austrian Empire in the 1770s and 1780s, to be later displaced by Schröder's adaptation.⁵

⁵ Both Heufeld's and Schroder's translations of *Hamlet* were reproduced with a valuable introduction that discusses the differences between the various versions in Alexander von Weilen, *Der erste Bühnen-Hamlet. Die Bearbeitungen Heufelds und Schröders*.

Friedrich Ludwig Schröder watched a performance of Heufeld's *Hamlet* in Prague in 1776 and subsequently produced two revised versions for the Hamburg Theatre. He restored a larger part of Shakespeare's text in Eschenburg's revised version rather than in Wieland's first German translation, reintroduced the figure of Laertes and most of Hamlet's monologues, albeit in reduced form; in the first version he even dared to stage the grave diggers, but left them out in the second version. However, Fortinbras and the political issues are missing, nor does Schroeder change Heufeld's highly moralizing happy ending. The template of the bourgeois drama is therefore preserved and even expanded. Schroeder's reworking was hailed all over Germany and even replaced Heufeld's version at the Burgtheatre in Vienna, where it was performed 104 times between 1778 and 1820. It dominated the German speaking stages until well into the 19th century and was disseminated and translated all across the Habsburg Empire.

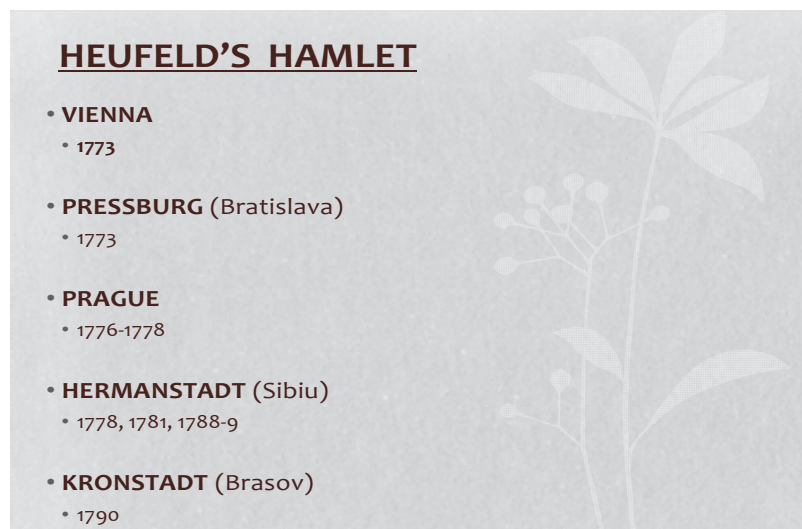


Fig.1. The circulation of Heufeld's Hamlet in the Habsburg Empire



Fig.2. The circulation of Schroeder's *Hamlet* in the Habsburg Empire

III

The next section of my paper will focus on the first performances of Shakespeare in the Transylvanian cities.⁶ Productions in Hermannstadt/Sibiu were designed to reproduce the centre in the margins. Hermannstadt was at the time the capital of the Siebenbürgen/Transylvania, a province of the Austrian Empire since 1699. In 1777, the governor of Transylvania, the baron Bruckenthal built a magnificent baroque palace, housing a large collection of paintings and books, the latter being available to the public, organized in a reading society (Wagner 41). The collection includes an impressive number of English books: novels and pre-romantic poetry, English philosophers, Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights. Bruckenthal bought two editions of Shakespeare, Dr. Johnson's edition and the Edinburgh edition. He also provided

⁶ Transylvania, an autonomous principality under loose Ottoman sovereignty, was incorporated into the Habsburg monarchy at the end of the 17th century (1689). The 1692 *Diploma Leopoldinum*, the basis of public law in Transylvania until 1848, recognized the political autonomy of the principality and confirmed the rights and privileges of the Magyars, Saxons and Szeklers, yet not of the Romanians, and established Latin as the language to be used in public. Joseph II imposed German as the official language in 1780, after his death (1790), however, Latin was reintroduced.

the two existing German translations of Shakespeare's plays by Wieland and Eschenburg. Weisse's plays were also included in the collection. The readership, made of Habsburg officers and clergy, the Hungarian nobility (German had become the official language in the Empire since Joseph II), local patricians, teachers and students also made up the audience of the theatre performances which started in the 1760s (Filtch 576). One can presume that the audience to Shakespeare's plays might have compared the theatrical adaptation with the printed text and discussed the different versions within the debates of the reading society, as was the practice in German cities. This was not so, as the comparison between the performance and Shakespeare's play will take place later in the early 19th century, when Tieck and Schlegel had become terms of reference in discussions of Shakespeare. In 1778 the German troupe headed by Hulverding published a theatre journal, named after the famous Hamburg journal, *Theatral Wochenblatt* (fig. 5). The journal set out to refine the manners and tastes of the Hermannstadt society so as to make it vie with that of important centres like Pressburg (then the capital of Hungary), Prague or even Vienna. Next to theoretical essays on the theatre, it provided comments on performances in the 1778-79 season, including Heufeld's *Hamlet* and Weisse's *Romeo und Julia*. Shakespeare is not mentioned, but Weisse is praised as a "world famous" playwright, on a par with Lessing and Goethe. His *Romeo und Julia* compared favorably with *Miss Sara Sampson*, a play by Lessing which had become the model for German bourgeois drama.

The theatre bill for the 1815 production of *Hamlet* in Hermannstadt helps us understand some of the adaptation strategies that the players adopted when staging the play for the Hermannstadt public (see fig. 3). The troupe's leader, Gerger, is, of course, mentioned in the first place. The bill does not specify who the adapter is, only the fact that the play is *after* Shakespeare. Mention must be made that unlike Garrick's published adaptations, which foregrounded his name thereby stressing the adapter as agent that authorizes the text, the published versions of Heufeld's and Schröder's adaptations did not mention their respective names. The translator/adapter was invisible in print yet widely known in the theatre world. We can only infer that Gerger's 1815 performance is based on Schröder's second version on the following grounds: Laertes features among the dramatis personae (he does not appear in Heufeld's text), whereas the grave diggers, present in Schröder's first version, are absent. At the same time, as the production is announced to be in five acts, it can rely only on Schröder's second version as the first one was in six acts. In any case the text employed in the Hermannstadt theatre must have been much abridged, as the performance only lasts one hour and a half – from 7 to 8.30 p.m. This means that there were no changes in the set and that the action must have been cut down in a way similar to its reduction in Heufeld's adaptation. We can infer that the play staged in

Hermannstadt might have been a hybrid between Heufeld's and Schröder's versions, plus local interventions in the text.

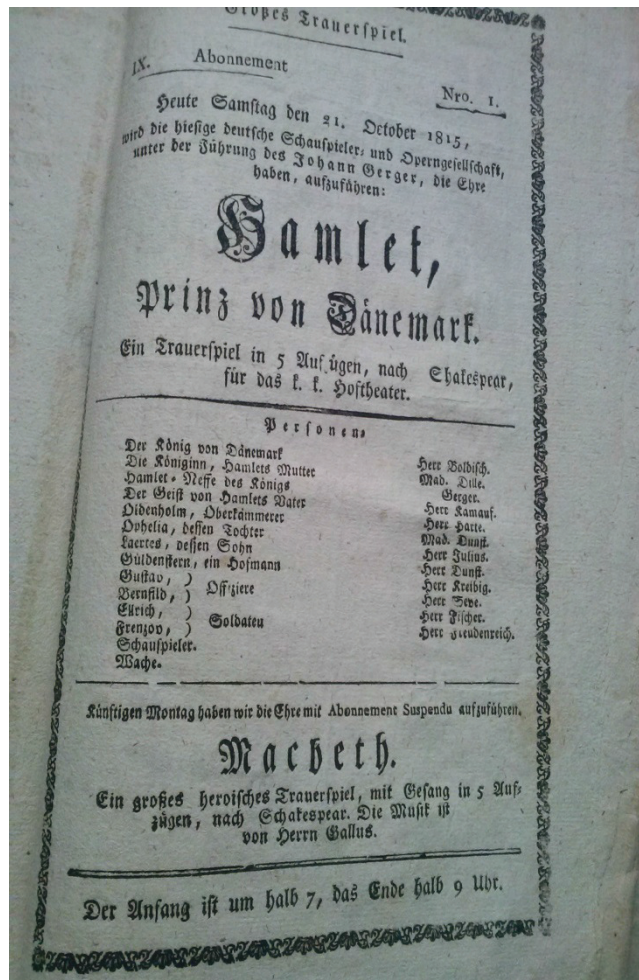


Fig.3. Theatre bill for *Hamlet*, Hermannstadt/Sibiu, 1815

What legitimizes the production and offers it prestige is the fact that it stages a text that was performed at the Viennese Hoftheatre. This aspect both conferred symbolic value to the performance (much more than the name of Shakespeare) and at the same time it represented a condition that touring actors had to fulfil: ever since 1795 imperial censorship required that touring actors

perform only plays that had been previously staged in Vienna and had hence been accepted as “safe.”⁷

The bill announces the next performance of *Macbeth*, which is described as “*ein grosses heroisches Trauerspielmit Gesang*” – a great heroic tragedy (not merely a great tragedy as Hamlet) with songs. The musical component seems to be of particular importance as the bill also mentions the composer. The line between theatre and opera performances of Shakespeare adaptations was rather thin, provincial theatres generally opting for the opera. Between 1830s and 1880s most Shakespeare performances on the stage in Hermannstadt (Sibiu) were almost exclusively operas – Gotter and Benda’s *Romeo and Julia*, based on Weisse’s text, then Rossini’s *Othello*, first performed in 1836, Bellini’s *Cappuletti and Montechi* one year later and then Verdi’s *Macbeth* in 1856. The bill for Verdi’s opera mentioned Verdi as composer and Schiller as author of the play.

Performances in Transylvania’s second important Saxon city, Kronstadt/Brasov, showed a higher degree of localization. Performances were often added topical relevance and political teeth to appeal to a public that was less elitist and more heterogeneous than the one in Hermannstadt/Sibiu. For example in 1796 the local authorities of Kronstadt/Brasov decided to celebrate their traditional local autonomy, contested by the Habsburg regime by commissioning a performance of Schiller’s *Die Rauber* [the Brigands] and *Hamlet* (Filtsch 580). Schiller’s play had been banned the previous year and its association with Hamlet gave the latter a political if not downright an oppositional ring.

Kronstadt (now Brasov) was a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual town, with performances, including those of Shakespeare’s plays, both in German and in Hungarian. German itinerant players would spend half the season in Hermannstadt and half in Kronstadt so that the latter could watch a performance of *Hamlet* as early as 1794. The German and Hungarian troupes occasionally played in Romanian, particularly after 1821 when a large number of Wallachian rebels took refuge in Brasov. It is for these bilingual (or even trilingual) actors that the first translation of *Hamlet* in Romanian was written in the 1820s, though unfortunately it was never performed.⁸ The translator and adapter of the Romanian *Hamlet*, Ion Barac, had previously worked with both Gerger’s

⁷ The new regulations introduced in 1795 were a form of defence against the perceived threat of a “Jacobin” revolution and censured even the very words “liberty” and “equality,” as well as the term “Enlightenment.” See Yates 26.

⁸ Bilingualism was a common accomplishment of actors in the Habsburg Empire. Czech actors in Prague would also perform in German and German actors in Lemberg often performed in Polish as well.

German and Pali Elek's Hungarian troupe, giving them texts that they had previously staged either in German or in Hungarian (Duica 22-24).⁹

Barac's Romanian translation provides interesting evidence of the practice of localizing Shakespeare adaptations in Transylvania. The title page follows the same format as the one in the playbill of Gerger's performance: it provides the title, the number of acts, the fact that it is after Shakespeare and that it had previously been performed at the k.k.Hoftheatre – *Amlet, printul dela Dania, o tragodie in cinci perdele dupa Sakespeer, s-au producaluit in c.craiescu teatru al curtii* (Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, a Tragedy in Five Acts after Shakespeare, as performed in the Royal and Empirical (k.k) Court Theatre). What Barac translated was a combination of Schroeder's second version, with passages from Heufeld. Some phrases echo Kazinczy's Hungarian translation of the play that had been performed in Kolosvary/Cluj since 1793 and which Barac might have watched as well (Duica 23). Barac preserves the happy ending, but compresses it; he cuts the queen's plea for forgiveness to two lines and even leaves out Hamlet's moralizing final speech that Schroeder had introduced. The Romanian version sounds almost revolutionary: the final stage directions describe how "the country" (meaning "the people") were outraged at the events and placing Hamlet in his father's throne (*toata tara s-au cutremurat si au pus pe Amlet Kraiul in scaunul tatina-sau*) all the country was shocked and placed Hamlet in his father's throne). The Romanian reworking of the end indicates the changes injected in the initial adaptations written in the period prior to the French Revolution. The 19th century translations of Schroeder in Eastern Europe betray the influence that the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars had left on the political vision of the time.

Barac's adaptation is also indicative of the way in which Shakespeare adaptations, while being circulated transnationally, were simultaneously employed to foster a national revival movement. When translating Hamlet's soliloquies, Barac introduces verse (the German adaptation was in colloquial prose) and adds lines, sometimes even doubling the soliloquy. The passages in verse display the lexical and stylistic features of Romanian popular ballads and inject into the colloquial, pragmatic conversation in Schröder's text the kind of poetry, passion and ethics typical of Romanian folklore. In this respect Barac followed the example set by the Hungarian translators of Shakespeare, who often domesticated the English text by blending in references to Hungarian

⁹ Ioan Barac was teacher, poet and official translator in Kronstadt/Brasov in the first half of the 19th century and was also one of the first translators of popular works (e.g. *The Arabian Nights*) into Romanian. His style and language were highly accessible to the less educated lower middle class and were strongly influenced by popular literature; the goal he pursued was of educating the Romanian lower classes in Transylvania, whose access to education was severely restricted.

mythology¹⁰ (Minier 33). Barac was familiar with Romanian popular ballads as he had joined his Hungarian friends in the project of collecting folklore, which, as Herder had indicated, was thought to embody a pristine national identity. Barac's version was not designed as merely an ethnocentric translation, but rather as an opening towards Western culture. He deliberately sprinkled the text with borrowings from German and Hungarian and with surprising neologisms such as "economie" for the word "thrift" in Hamlet's retort to Horatio "Thrift, thrift Horatio! The funeral baked meats/Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (II, ii, 180). In the process of rewriting *Hamlet*, Barac creatively negotiates between the enlightened western European culture that Shakespeare's play stood for and Romanian folklore, which was thought to be steeped in Eastern, Byzantine beliefs and practices.

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¹⁰ Bowdlerization of the texts and their assimilation to Hungarian dominant values were carried on until late into the 19th century; even the texts in the first edition of Shakespeare's complete works in translation were "mutilated" so as to make them acceptable to Hungarian (upper) middle class audiences. See Peter Davidhazy 37, see also Minier 43.

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