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THE RENAISSANCE AS A REVOLUTION OF EUROPEAN CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE REFLECTION OF HUMANIST IDEALS IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S WORKS

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The article discusses the factors that facilitated the development of an unprecedented, large-scale phenomenon such as the Renaissance. This flourishing era, which repositioned humankind in relation to science and knowledge, lifting it out of the darkness of the feudal Middle Ages, was established both due to economic transformations and to the emergence of a new vision of the human being—as a rational, creative, and dignified individual. The humanist movement supported this shift. In this context, the William Shakespeare's works stand out as an emblematic expression of the Renaissance spirit. The great English playwright portrayed in his plays the human being in all its multiple facets and vast spiritual universe, without omitting the abyss within the human soul. His works pay tribute to love, the joy of living, forgiveness and reconciliation, and to humanity's capacity to shape its own destiny.

Keywords: *Renaissance, feudalism, classical studies, humanism, optimism, individualism, anthropocentrism, Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, The Tempest.*

RENAȘTEREA CA REVOLUȚIE A CONȘTIINȚEI EUROPENE ȘI REFLECTAREA IDEALURILOR UMANISTE ÎN OPERA LUI WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Articolul pune în discuție factorii care au înlesnit dezvoltarea unui fenomen de anvergură, fără precedent, precum este cel al Renașterii. Această epocă înfloritoare, care a re poziționat omul în raport cu știința și cunoașterea, scoțându-l din bezna Evului Mediu feudal, s-a instaurat atât datorită transformărilor economice, cât și apariției unei noi viziuni asupra omului – ființă rațională, creatoare și demnă. Curentul umanismului a susținut această mișcare. În acest context, opera lui William Shakespeare se impune ca expresie emblematică a spiritului renașcentist. Marele dramaturg englez a descris în piesele sale omul cu multiplele sale fațete și cu un univers spiritual vast, fără să omite să redea și abisul din sufletul omenesc. Lucrările sale sunt un omagiu adus dragostei, bucuriei de a trăi, iertării și împăcării, precum și capacității omului de a-și modela destinul.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Renaștere, feudalism, studii clasice, umanism, optimism, individualism, antropocentrism, Shakespeare, Romeo și Julieta, Hamlet, Furtuna.*

Introduction

Literature is not born suddenly or instantaneously. New ideas have always encountered resistance due to deeply rooted beliefs or group interests invested in maintaining the status quo. However, phenomena such as the Renaissance represented a significant and far-reaching step forward. In this article, we highlight a series of factors that facilitated Europe's unprecedented development—economically, politically, and socially, as well as conceptually, literarily, and in terms of ideas and mentalities—during the Renaissance. This period brought about a paradigm shift: the displacement of the center of interest from medieval theocentrism to anthropocentrism, reaffirming the dignity and creative potential of the human being. Nowadays, the world is perhaps in need of a new Renaissance—one to glorify humanity and celebrate human potential, to restore value to human personality and faculties. We are overwhelmed by technology; robots “threaten” to replace even the human mind. Thus, one might say that there is now a renewed need to return to the classics. The Renaissance remains eloquent in this respect, as it brought into society a wave of optimism and confidence which, through a virtuous circle, gave the world great masterpieces. Even today, we need great spirits capable of placing the human being—human essence—at the center of concern and restoring humanity to its rightful status of glory.

The universe of William Shakespeare is extraordinarily vast and continually fertile. We find dilemmas as

well as possible solutions in his works. The English Renaissance playwright shapes in his plays a complex world in full transformation, where tensions between old and new, between power and morality, between reason and passion reflect both the dynamics of his age and our own contemporary anxieties.

The methodological and theoretical-scientific framework of the present article includes valuable works from the national space—Romania—as well as from the broader international context. These include scholars such as Leon Levițchi, Victor Lazarev, Eugenio Garin, George Volceanov, Pia Brînzeu, Aureliu Manea, Andrei Oțetea, Sergiu Pavlicencu, Emilia Taraburcă, Anatol Gavrilov. Various scientific research methods have been employed: textual analysis, the comparative method, synthesis, and deduction. The words of the characters that underpin the Renaissance creed were identified through the analysis of Shakespearean texts. Synthesis was used in working with the cited sources, revealing a common thread in the evolution of the Renaissance phenomenon. The comparative method facilitated the confrontation of different critical perspectives, highlighting both similarities and differences in interpretation. Deduction was used to emphasize the main ideas of the studied authors and to formulate the conclusions.

Results and discussions

In his elaborate work *The Renaissance*, published in 1964, Academician Andrei Oțetea highlights essential aspects of the Renaissance phenomenon—its origins, premises, reference figures, paradigm, and content, as well as certain aspects that have been contested and revised, such as the view held by some Protestants “who regarded the contemporary religious crisis as having its origins in the Renaissance” [8, p. 33]. To begin with, when discussing the historical evolution of some phenomena, it is important to mention that “a historical process unfolds in a much more complex way. After periods of boom, there are often periods of stagnation and the rates of development sometimes increase, sometimes decrease unexpectedly” [5, p. 5].

Andrei Oțetea underlines the role of emerging capitalism in shaping a new landscape in Europe, in establishing a new reality and new social relations. It is indisputable that the Renaissance was born in Florence, but it became a pan-European phenomenon. The economic and social factors, which propelled it, combined with new ideologies, new conceptions of the human being and his role in the world, a new philosophy of life, and new perceptions. Flourishing trade removed barriers, drawing people out of isolation, which had been characteristic of the feudal economy. Urban development prepared the ground for the emergence of new approaches to human capabilities. The characteristic of urban life dynamism instilled in the population confidence in their own strength and a zest for life. A number of Christian teachings promulgated by the clergy are called into question, such as the idea that human life is a “vale of tears” and that reward comes only in the afterlife. The population becomes more strong-willed and more eager to live in the present.

Human titanism is reflected in the appearance on the world stage of individuals with phenomenal abilities, fully developed in multiple fields, whose achievements in the realm of human knowledge are impressive. The bourgeoisie claims credit for the creation of these new realities. One can speak of an antagonism between it and feudalism, which had kept a large part of the population under the yoke of dependence and incapacity. The researcher Andrei Oțetea notes that the feudal regime, considered wasteful, violent and lacking a well-established order, “no longer corresponds to the industry and commerce and is therefore eliminated” [8, p. 13]. The same thing is noted by Professor Leon Levițchi, who points out that the Renaissance appears as a result of the gradual decomposition of the feudal order and the formation of capitalist relations within the feudal system: “The bourgeoisie, promoting the new capitalist mode of production, asserts itself during this period as a revolutionary class, fighting against feudalism not only on an economic and social level, but also on a cultural and ideological ones” [6, p. 94]. The idea of peace increasingly asserts itself as the supreme aspiration, an idea that will later overwhelmingly shape the discourse of modernity.

Naturally, we are speaking of a weakening of the authority of the Church: “The modern state subsequently favored the development of a secular and national culture, which also curtailed the Church’s authority in the spiritual sphere” [8, p.14]. As mentioned, convictions are reassessed: “But it is not only the Church’s former position that is contested; Christianity itself is attacked in its very inner essence. Florentine humanism had already risen against the dogma of original sin and against the doctrine that made earthly life ‘a vale of tears.’ Despite his theological orthodoxy, Dante could not resign himself to placing, as Catholic

dogma required, the sages and heroes of antiquity in Hell solely because they had not been baptized. Two centuries later, a French humanist, Maigret, proclaimed: “A pagan who intends to follow reason is saved, even if he has not been baptized” [8, pp. 14–15]. In the human sphere, the sovereignty of reason asserts itself, as an opposition to “sterile” scholasticism. As Oțetea notes, an ever more pronounced “apotheosis of earthly life” [8, p. 15] takes shape. Existence and all human faculties are celebrated as factors of human and social progress. One might say that the Renaissance represents the “springtime” of knowledge and of the valorization of the human intellect. Against the contemplative life practiced by the Church, the active life is promoted, involving human participation in the affairs of the city. Our view is that the principle of the contemplative life should not be diminished in its positive aspects, since a contemplative life calls for reflection, depth, and silence. Nevertheless, the principle of the active life is closely linked to the enterprising spirit, which is essential to progress.

It is worth pausing briefly on an essential aspect: the term “humanism,” indissolubly linked to that of the Renaissance era. Professor Pavlicencu notes that the term “humanism” first appears in the German language in the work of F. J. Niethammer, *Der Streit des Philanthropismus und des Humanismus* (1808). It was later used to designate various contemporary currents of thought, such as “existentialist humanism,” “Christian humanism,” “atheist humanism,” and “socialist humanism,” among others. Pavlicencu writes that “the human being, as the most precious and supreme value, stands at the center of humanist thought. The ancient idea that man is the measure of all things, that all other things acquire value only in relation to man, is taken up and placed at the foundation of the humanist conception of the world” [9, p. 17]. This current is not a literary one in the general sense of the term. S. Pavlicencu maintains that we are dealing with an ideological and cultural movement. As emphasized above, it is characterized by a form of anthropocentrism and serves to support the entire scaffolding of the Renaissance movement.

Where did the humanists seek their point of support? “In order to combat the ‘philosophy of the supernatural,’ the humanists needed the support of a new authority that they could oppose to the authority of the Church. This function was fulfilled by classical antiquity” [8, p. 18]. Yet, curiously, “the Renaissance nurtured the ambition not only to equal it, but even to surpass it” [8, p. 18].

Classical antiquity, through its principles of study that place reason at the head of the table, literally represented “a coming out of darkness” in contrast to the Middle Ages. Andrei Oțetea cites the words of a French humanist, Nicolas Bourbon, who powerfully expressed this contrast. Bourbon states that before the Renaissance, philosophers had in mind only “twisted syllogisms, sophisms of every kind, tedious nonsense, empty words, vapors, and madness” [8, p. 22]. Bourbon denounces the fall of these “monsters”. Oțetea states that the humanists of the Renaissance had the impression that they were living in the midst of “a golden age” [8, p. 23].

In this discussion, it is important to state that the humanist movement had adherents among many of the prominent and wealthy citizens of Florence. For some of them (for example, for Niccolò Niccoli) humanistic studies became the main goal in life. Lazarev mentions that these people became either scholars themselves, or excellent dilettantes or patrons of scientists:

“At the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries, they played a huge role in popularizing humanist ideas, facilitating their rapid spread. Later, popes and governors followed in their footsteps. Humanism also took quite deep roots at the court of the most cultured tyrants (especially in Northern Italy) who often demonstrated a subtle understanding of classical literature, on the models of which they educated their taste” [5, p. 53].

The renowned scholar Lazarev argues that the strength and originality of humanism lies precisely in the fact that it represented a much broader movement than the simple “rebirth” of Antiquity: “It was formed on the ruins of the medieval conception of the world, being antagonistic to it (...). Humanism freed thinking from the prejudices that had held it in chains for centuries” [5, p. 54].

When does the term “Renaissance” date from, and who coined it? “The first to use the notion in this sense was the French historian Jules Michelet. He entitled volume VII of his *History of France*, devoted to the sixteenth century, *La Renaissance* (1855) and defined its content through the famous formula ‘the discovery of the world, the discovery of man’” [8, p. 22]. But another name becomes more imposing in shaping the term and its content. This is Jacob Burckhardt, who published *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* in 1860.

A key point of Burckhardt's conception is that the Renaissance is characterized by a particular trait—individualism. This trait fundamentally distinguishes the modern man from the medieval type. Andre Oțetea writes, according to Burckhardt that “whereas the medieval man could assert himself only within the framework of a collectivity—the guild, the Church, or the state—the modern man is an individualist, because he relies solely on his own powers in order to achieve his purpose in life” [8, p. 27]. Classical antiquity thus proves to be “a guiding light.” In his work, Burckhardt predictably devotes special attention to classical studies.

The researcher Andrei Oțetea cites another humanist who states that the thinkers believed they were witnessing a pinnacle of knowledge: “In our own days a new age begins writes the French humanist Fichet in 1472, congratulating himself on the momentum gained by the study of classical letters” [8, p. 25].

Another reference figure in defining the “Renaissance” is Georg Voigt, even though his conception influenced only a limited circle of specialists. He too explains Renaissance culture through the rediscovery of classical antiquity, downplaying the importance of economic and political transformations. Voigt focuses almost exclusively “on the interpretation of literary documents—especially Latin ones—according to the rules of philological criticism” [8, p. 28].

Later scholars called Burckhardt's understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon into question: “He turned the Renaissance into a static phenomenon, isolated in space and time (...) In Burckhardt's conception, an abyss separates the Renaissance from the Middle Ages and Italy from the rest of Europe. Thus, the Renaissance appears as “a flower that suddenly sprang up in the desert” [8, p. 29].

The humanists proposed a new positioning of man in society, not recognizing class privileges. The fact admitted by the humanists was that every strong and talented personality “had the right to hold power and establish social order” [5, p. 55]. But the path of these Renaissance scholars was not an easy one at all, at every step they had to “face the papacy, scholasticism, the pressure of the routine environment, the dominance of conservative traditions” [5, p. 57].

In any discussion of the Renaissance, the name of Eugenio Garin—co-author of the renowned work *L'uomo del Rinascimento* (The Man of the Renaissance)—cannot be omitted. From this work, we retain the following passage: “If the famous phrase of Jacob Burckhardt—borrowed, in fact, from Jules Michelet—that “the civilization of the Renaissance is the first to discover and bring to light the figure of man in his integrity and richness” is imbued with rhetoric and has become almost unbearable, it is nonetheless true that it is rooted in a reality in which the histories, adventures, figures, and even the bodies of human beings stand at the center of attention: a reality in which painters and sculptors portray unforgettable human faces and in which philosophers never tire of repeating that “man is a great marvel (*magnum miraculum est homo*)” [2, p. 14].

Within the old–new, medieval–modern (Renaissance) equation, it becomes necessary to illustrate a certain dualism that characterizes the thought and work of a foundational poet of the period, Dante Alighieri. We retain the observations of Professor Pavlicencu:

“The Divine Comedy is, on the one hand, a synthesis of medieval literature and culture in general, and, on the other hand, it represents a narrative of humanist literature from the Renaissance era; that is, it may be regarded as a pre-Renaissance work. Although the poem's subject matter appears to be purely religious, focusing on the afterlife, it is largely suggested and animated by the real world, by the contemporary problems of its age. In the poem, the dualism characteristic of Dante finds expression: he combines a still old, medieval conception and attitude toward the world and humanity with a series of elements belonging to a new conception—Renaissance and humanist—of the world and of the human being. In addressing various problems, Dante interprets them in the spirit of medieval conceptions, yet he often transcends these frameworks, offering approaches that prefigure the humanism of the Renaissance” [9, p. 11].

Among the issues treated by Dante in his *Comedy* (later called “divine” by commentators) are “the problem of the Church and the clergy, the problem of antiquity, the problem of love, the problem of human activism, and others” [9, p. 12]. Dante is aptly described as the last poet of the Middle Ages and, at the same time, the first poet of modern times.

In this context, we introduce into discussion the subject of Shakespearean drama, as this great play-

wright, the glory of the English people, represents the pinnacle of English theatre during the Renaissance. The work of the Great Will captures the Renaissance in both its positive dimensions—revolutionary for European civilization—and its darker depths: a certain existential and social tragic vision, an age of disillusionment following a flourishing and ultra-optimistic period in which society celebrated the love of life, the supremacy and triumph of good, progress, and confidence in its capacity for renewal. We state the observation of the English studies scholar Levițchi, who claims that “among the authors who, in one way or another, influenced the thought and literature of the English Renaissance, Seneca is the most resounding name” [6, p. 106].

Although this aspect is debatable, the researcher Pavlicencu (and, of course, not only he) states that there are three periods in the playwright’s creation (Levițchi also prefers this phasing, as being “broader”): the optimistic period, the tragic period, and the romantic period. This periodization is based on the principle of the evolution of the English dramatist’s humanist ideas, which is considered more relevant than the strictly chronological criterion.

In the works written during the first period, the optimistic one, “there generally predominates an optimistic conception of man and of the world; the author believes in the possibility of resolving the contradictions of social life harmoniously, in the way most favorable to humanity. The writer’s optimistic humanism emerges especially from his comedies.” [9, p. 114]. The Moldovan researcher emphasizes that the conflict between the old and the new is usually resolved in favor of the new. It is also relevant that in the chronicles written during the same first period, despite the many bloody events—with good and evil heroes, deaths, conspiracies, intrigues, and tragic happenings (a kind of “barbarism” that appealed to the Elizabethan audience)—the dominant line is that of historical progress. Professor Pavlicencu observes that, in most historical dramas, the central idea that emerges is that of England’s political evolution “from feudal barbarism and anarchy toward absolute monarchy” [9, p. 115]. It is noteworthy that, among all the monarchs who became characters in his historical plays, the one closest to the humanist ideal is Henry V. After a turbulent youth marked by revelry and excess, this king develops a sense of responsibility and becomes the most balanced and beneficent character in the history of fifteenth-century England. Suddenly matured, this king becomes aware that the crown imposes limits and obligations, that a monarch cannot allow himself the freedoms available to his subjects, that “*noblesse oblige*.” In his time, Shakespeare was equally loved by both the aristocracy and the masses. In his first creative period, marked by optimism, Shakespeare still believed that the absolutist state could satisfy the major interests of all social classes. Upon becoming king, his character Henry V, a model ruler in the playwright’s vision, “tries to act by taking into account the interests and capabilities of his subjects.” [9, p. 116]. As mentioned in the first part of the present article, Renaissance conceptions stand in opposition to outdated feudal forms of life; therefore, “in intention and in artistic achievement, the historical dramas correspond to the ideals of the Renaissance through their struggle against old feudal orders and their attempt to affirm new forms of life, through the titanic nature of the characters and the magnitude of the events portrayed” [9, p. 116].

With regard to this first period, we note that the famous Shakespearean tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* was also written during this time. The Great Will employs a highly successful metaphor. According to the researcher Pavlicencu, “the conflict between two epochs and two worlds is represented through the vendetta and hatred between the Montague and Capulet families, as an expression of feudal anarchy, while the understanding and love that unite the two young lovers of Verona represent the expression of the new Renaissance world” [9, p. 116]. The researcher states that “the families reconcile, which means that the new has prevailed” [9, p. 116]. Belated though it may be, forgiveness and reconciliation ultimately prevail (it is true, at great cost!). For Harold Bloom, this work is a tragedy of rare complexity and beauty, while for Thomas McAlindon it represents “a triumph of dramatic lyricism” [apud. 1, p. 9].

This famous couple, made up of two teenagers—Juliet not yet 14, and Romeo 19—embodies the desire for freedom and the right to personal choice. Through their will, they call authority (personified by their parents) into question and seek ways to fulfill their destiny. A particularly important aspect of this couple is that both, thanks to the powerful feeling that dominates them, come to mature. The scholar Pia Brînzeu states that “Romeo’s transformation occurs at the moment he sees Juliet: the immature teenager becomes the symbol of

a strong and ‘healthy’ masculinity. Meeting Juliet divides his life into before and after” [1, p. 24]. Compared to the young people around him, Romeo becomes “a peaceful idealist.” Unlike the cynical Mercutio or the violent Tybalt, he is not always willing to get into fights. When friar Laurence decided to secretly marry the two young lovers, he sensed in Romeo “that he loves Juliet differently—desperately, tenderly, and idealistically; that he has become fearless after breaking away from his family, even willing to give up his name; and, finally, that Romeo has a strong sense of honor and deserves to be defended when he kills Tybalt, even if by doing so the friar would endanger his own life” [1, p. 25].

Pia Brînzeu compares Romeo with the other men in the play, young or old, noting that the latter are self-destructive sons and ineffective fathers: “Can anything be crueler than Capulet’s angry outburst when Juliet refuses to obey him and is sent into the streets to beg? Repetitive in their helplessness, the men of the play do not know how to learn anything from their failed emotional experiences. Romeo’s motto is different: eroticism and pacifism—that is, *eros* and *agape*” [1, p. 25].

We can also speak of maturing in Juliet’s case: “The most obvious contradiction in Juliet is not only the love born from hatred, but also the fact that she is a mature child. Her love for Romeo makes her change rapidly, so that before the age of fourteen she becomes a true woman. No one ever thinks of Juliet as an unripe teenager. Everyone sees in her a woman in love, who truly knows what she wants” [1, p. 27]. Juliet experiences her feelings at their highest intensity; she is certain that her beloved Romeo deserves her devotion, yet she is also aware that love can sometimes be unstable: “Juliet is convinced of the young man’s affirmative response, but she also knows that lovers can be perjured, capricious, and unfaithful. Where did she learn all this at such a young age? We are not told directly, but we may imagine that the Nurse initiated her into worldly matters” [1, p. 29]. Marjorie Garber notes Juliet’s transformation: “In the evening after the wedding she becomes entirely different, as reflected by a simple comparison between the soliloquies in II, 5 and III, 2. Her love is now so full of faith and so rich that its treasures cannot be counted. In the scene where she awaits her husband (III, 2), her innocence is different from that at the beginning—it is the impatience of a woman awaiting erotic fulfillment, not that of a naive child” [apud. 1, p. 29]. Another sign of Juliet’s maturity is that she sees death as a form of sexual ecstasy. Pia Brînzeu remarks on Juliet’s steely nature, stating that “abandoned by her intransigent parents in their desire to marry her to Paris, as well as by a nurse all too willing to give her immoral advice, she has no choice but to rely on herself” [1, p. 29]. “In a few moments, the child becomes a woman,” observes Harold C. Goddard [apud. 1, p. 29]. As a conclusion, the following is a curious detail: “This is what has allowed Juliet to be played by mature actresses, such as Ellen Terry, who at the age of 36 achieved one of the greatest theatrical successes of the 19th century” [1, p. 29].

We should also mention that, in the current period, the play has been performed in Chișinău at the National Theatre „Mihai Eminescu”. The director, Luminița Țăcu, is a remarkable creator of atmosphere. In her vision, from the first to the last scene, gloom predominates in this tragedy; death “knocks at the door,” and the spectator senses and intuits that something terrible is about to happen, that the union of the two adolescents will not last long (despite their secret marriage). However, a very determined Juliet emerges, possessed of a strong ambition—perhaps too strong for an adolescent—who knows exactly what she wants. Romeo, in the aforementioned production, is profoundly idealistic, sacrificing everything in the name of love and believing that nothing stands above this feeling.

From the second period, with the chronological limits of 1600 to 1608, we shall refer, for the purposes of our study, only to what is perhaps the most illustrious Shakespearean tragedy, *Hamlet*. The playwright’s profoundly bitter vision during this period may also be explained by certain sad experiences in his life. The death of his only son, Hamnet (he also had two daughters, one of whom, Judith, was Hamnet’s twin), deeply affected him, as is understandable. However, as the Moldovan researcher Anatol Gavrilov observes, “Great writers are great precisely because they experience the events of their time not so much through the prism of individual destinies as through the prism of the cardinal problems of the epoch” [3, p. 60]. He further specifies: “These biographical data explain Shakespearean tragicism no more than Eminescu’s personal material hardships explain his disillusionment” [3, p. 60]. This statement, however, could be questioned. Let us recall the words written by another literary titan, Victor Hugo, who also suffered the loss of a child, and who says the following in reference to the fact that Shakespeare “decided” to kill Cordelia, but also “killed” old Lear:

“To continue living after the angel has flown, to be the orphan father of your own child, to be the eye that no longer knows the light, the dark heart that is no longer given joy, to stretch out your hands sometimes in the darkness, trying to touch again someone who was here – where could he be? – to feel forgotten at departure, to have lost your reason for being on earth, to be a man who walks to and forth in front of a tomb, without being received into it, is a terrible fate. Poet, you did a good thing to kill this old man” [4, p. 245].

Let us also consider the fact that the great Romanian scholar Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu also suffered a great inner imbalance after the loss of Iulia. But it is equally true that the world also knew great transformations, some of them very worrying. Researcher Pavlicencu is quoted as saying:

“The crisis of humanism, reflected in the tragedies written during this period, is conditioned by the hostile attitude of the new capitalist world toward the humanist ideals of the Renaissance and by the intensification of the feudal reaction in England (...). The humanist hero dies in the struggle against anti-humanist forces, but remains faithful to his ideal, thereby triumphing both over evil itself and over the evil that surrounds him” [9, p. 116].

Consequently, Professor Pavlicencu states that “it would not be entirely correct to speak of a certain pessimism characterizing this creative period, as some critics have claimed, since even when the heroes die in their struggle against the evil around them, Shakespearean tragedies radiate confidence in human greatness and in the triumph of humanist ideas.” [9, pp. 116-117]

The new term that characterizes the end of the era is “tragic humanism.” We are dealing with the idea that humanism enters a crisis. “However, this tragic dimension remains a heroic one” Professor Pavlicencu notes [9, p. 117]. The Moldovan researcher Emilia Taraburca also refers to “tragic humanism”, noting in her study on the crisis of values that “at the same time, everyday reality challenged many of the ideals, the state of mind of the loss of illusions, of the crisis of values, specific to the late Renaissance, acquiring the name of *tragic humanism*” [10, p. 95].

The character of Hamlet is quintessentially a Renaissance figure, his personal crisis reflecting the crisis of an entire epoch. In this tragedy, man’s disillusionment in the face of knowledge of the world and—most importantly—self-knowledge reflects the turmoil of thousands of people. Even today, this “crisis” remains relevant. Hamlet is not disappointed only in the society at the Court (with the famous observation that Denmark is a prison), nor solely in his own mother (which will affect his attitude toward women); he is also “horrificed” by his own inner abyss. He recognizes that man is both noble and fallen. He turns the mirror toward himself, and this act of self-knowledge is absolutely necessary for what the Renaissance thinkers called the idea that man is “the measure of all things.”

We reproduce Hamlet’s words: *“What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable; in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me, no, nor women neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so”* (Act 2, Scene 2).

Hamlet suffers a profound disillusionment. Educated in philosophy, he lived in a world of ideals, yet “the mysterious death of his father and his mother’s hasty remarriage torment him by forcing him to discover in his homeland a world entirely alien to the ideas he had formed about it and about his compatriots. This awareness of estrangement between the hero’s ideals and reality is a new element in the treatment of this subject, which is absent in the sources that inspired William Shakespeare” [3, p. 62]. As has been shown elsewhere, “caught in a web of intrigues that directly target him, Hamlet must—he feels this inner calling—discover the true face of things, uncover the truth about human nature, while at the same time trying to survive with this truth, which could bring him profound disappointment” [11, p. 189].

An important aspect in the discussions of the Renaissance period is that acting now takes on a tendency toward realism, something to which Shakespeare contributed. We may recall the advice given by the refined Hamlet to the troupe of actors summoned to the court. This vision of acting reveals the acute need for authenticity that Hamlet feels is necessary in the world—in his relationship with his mother, in the court, or with the chaste Ophelia—as well as the prince’s conception of the fundamental role of theater. Hamlet tells the actors to “be guided by common sense.” They must “suit the action to the word, the word to the

action.” An important point is “not to overstep the modesty of nature,” “for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her (own) feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (Act III, Scene 2).

We shall also refer to a play from the final period—indeed, the last play written independently by William Shakespeare before his retirement from the world of theatre (three collaborative plays with the younger playwright John Fletcher followed: *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Henry VIII*, and *Cardenio*). Considered the “poetic testament” of the great genius, *The Tempest* brings together a collage of themes reflecting the Renaissance worldview. The great English studies scholar Levițchi states that “similar to the play *Hamlet*, *The Tempest* is a mosaic of themes: labour, freedom, slavery, forgetting, remembering, education, colonialism, forgiveness (as a form of maximum punishment), science” [6, p. 226]. Prospero, the central character, is a profound humanist for whom study is vital and all-consuming (more important than the “affairs of the state”). Through knowledge—note that it is a matter of “white magic,” as opposed to Faustian “black magic”—the character comes to dominate the world and nature, yet he also attains an almost divine wisdom. Quoting Nietzsche, in a book about tragedy and man, Aureliu Manea exemplifies the fact that in the play *The Tempest* “the tiger and the panther sit down obediently at the feet of the creative man”. The great theater director notes that in this play we see how “the world is haunted by vices, passions, lies and deceit. What Hamlet said about Denmark remains valid until the last play of the titan” [7, p. 35].

We also find the issue of colonialism, reflected in the relationship between Prospero and Caliban, whom the former attempts “to civilize.” George Volceanov mentions: “For Prospero, the true beginning of the story is the usurpation that took place twelve years earlier; for Caliban, however, the beginning is the moment he becomes Prospero’s slave, the latter being (in neo-Marxist interpretations) an exponent of colonial ideology, according to which reducing the Other to the status of a slave was a natural act—the white man being born to rule, and the native to provide him with food and labor.” [12, p. 330].

The “story” of Caliban has generated numerous debates and spilled much ink over the legitimacy of Prospero’s actions, caught between “civilizing” and “subjugating”/“colonizing.” Moreover, in the second half of the 20th century, the Caribbean poet Edward Brathwaite refers to his poem *Caliban* “as more than a confrontation between cultures, between whites and blacks, between European and African conceptions, namely, a confrontation between culture and nature” [12, p. 347].

We likewise encounter Miranda’s famous exclamation before the “brave new world” (an expression later adopted by Aldous Huxley as the title of his well-known dystopia, *The Brave New World*) when confronted with civilization (with or without quotation marks). And, of course, there is the final note expressing forgiveness and reconciliation. Shakespeare (does he perhaps identify himself with Prospero?) takes leave of a world that loved him (yet also judged him), rewarded him with applause, and now the curtain falls. “Rarely has Shakespeare suffered so cruelly under the guise of a comedy” - these are Aureliu Manea’s words [7, p. 35].

Conclusions

The Renaissance phenomenon represents a turning point in the history of European civilization. The economic and social factors that made it possible intertwined with humanism as a new philosophy of life. An important emphasis is that, according to Jacob Burckhardt, an essential characteristic of the Renaissance is individualism. Certainly, in terms of the evolution of the human spirit, the Renaissance provided fertile ground and favorable conditions for the full manifestation of the individual. In the article, we reflected on aspects regarding the beginning of the Renaissance phenomenon, with its prosperous ideals, but we also mentioned what the state of things was in the late period.

A representative of the English Renaissance, William Shakespeare captured in his work all the major issues and inner tensions of this era, oscillating between an optimistic and a somber outlook. He created powerful characters and portrayed the world and the spirit of that period in such a way that he remains a representative figure both of Renaissance values and of the eternal dilemmas of the human soul.

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