

**„THE EYE SEES NOT ITSELF  
BUT BY REFLECTION“:  
A STUDY IN SHAKESPEARE'S  
„CATOPTRICS“ AND OTHER ESSAYS**

**GEORGE VOLCEANOV**

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## PREFACE

*"The Eye Sees Not Itself but by Reflection": A Study in Shakespeare's "Catoptrics"* is my third book on Shakespeare issued in less than three years, after *"Methinks You're Bêiter Spoken": A Study in the Language of Shakespeare's Characters* (Institutul European, 2004) and *The Shakespeare Canon Revisited* (Niculescu, 2005). It consists of articles and essays that have not been published in academic reviews or volumes of conference proceedings. How can one become a prolific Shakespeare critic in middle-age, after decades of silence? The answer to this question is quite simple. After decades spent on translating literature (with an output of more than forty titles, including some Shakespeare and other Elizabethan texts), compiling dictionaries and writing courses of lectures. I felt the urge to return to my one-time great hobby: writing about Shakespeare.

As the title of *The Shakespeare Canon Revisited* suggests, this second book was a return to the past and a re-link trip to Shakespeareland. In its preface I showed that *Methinks You're Better Spoken* had been a long-neglected, dormant project: it had been the revised and updated version of research conducted in the years 1978-79. The second book was a return to past interests, and so is the monograph on Shakespeare's "catoptrics" included in this volume. It is yet another dormant project, first drafted in 1982, after the issue of the Romanian version of Jurgis Baltrusaitis' acclaimed book *Le Mirroir, essai sur une légende scientifique, révélations, science fiction* (Le

Seuil, 1978)<sup>1</sup>. Baltrusaitis' fascinating book aroused my curiosity about Shakespeare's use of the mirror as a symbol in his plays and poems when I was still in my early twenties. It was clear to me that Shakespeare had impressive knowledge about "catoptrics", was well-read on the subject and seemed to be, at times, obsessed with the symbolic values of mirror. But, in the worst years of the Ceaușescu regime, for an anonymous recent graduate it would have been an impossible task to persuade a publisher to issue his research on Shakespeare, especially in English; so I abandoned work on this project and embarked instead on a rather rewarding career of literary translator. Times have changed since then and the issue of Sabine Melchior-Bonnet's *Histoire du Miroir* (Éditions Imago, 1997), the English version of which was titled *The Mirror: A History* (Routledge, 2001), rekindled my interest in this topic. As such, my essay on Shakespeare's mirrors is, to use Gary Taylor's words, the result of a "posthumous collaboration between a deceased younger self and a living older self"<sup>2</sup>.

"Mimicry, Dissimulation, Disguise: Jesuitical Strategies of Survival in Shakespeare's Plays" is a sequel to my earlier monograph *Methinks You're Better Spoken*, in which I discussed the notion of *linguistic mimicry* in Shakespeare's plays from several viewpoints (linguistics, stylistics, rhetoric, performance criticism, etc.). This new article fills in a blank, adding a historical dimension to my previous work and speculating on the possibility of the Jesuits' strong influence on Shakespeare's dramatic art. It corroborates Richard Wilson's archival findings and attempt to establish links between Shakespeare's plays (with their now subtle, now more than overt allusions to contemporary events involving the English Catholics of his day) and Elizabethan and Jacobean history. My

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<sup>1</sup> Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Oglinda*, Romanian translation by Marcel Petrișor, București, Meridiane, 1981. All references hereafter shall be to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1990, p. 359.

article endeavours to substantiate that Shakespeare's unusual penchant for mimicry, dissimulation, and disguise, and the misfortunes of his characters involved in such theatrical games point to the outlook and anxieties of a crypto-Catholic who managed to survive in an âge of religious persécutions only thanks to his ability to adapt to urgent situations in the way Edgar in *King Lear* and so many other fictional characters do.

"Shakespeare versus Webster; Or, Shakespeare *and* Webster?" is a polemical pièce against those radical tendencies in postmodern criticism which elevate the status of Elizabethan and Jacobean writers to the détriment of Shakespeare. In an âge in which Shakespeare and his contemporary fellow-dramatists were practically setting up the early modern industry of *showbiz* they were both competitors in the cultural market and collaborators that belonged to a newly established trade of "professional" playwrights. And, in âge in which there were no such regulating rules or laws as the copyright, words, images, proverbial phrases, whole sentences, ideas, and dramatic situations freely floated from one text to another, from one playwright to another, and from one theatrical company to another. That is why, ail dramatists, regardless of the company that employed them, wittingly or unwittingly participated in the shaping of the discourse of their âge. Elizabethan and Jacobean drama is a huge intertext: in every play one can discern more than a single authorial voice<sup>3</sup>.

The next article endorses my view that a translator is also an interpréter, a critic. After my Romanian translation of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* was issued by Polirom in 2002, I wrote several articles on this collaborative play. It had been included in the Oxford Shakespeare in 1986 and at présent it is stili one

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<sup>3</sup> This is not my first article on the more or less visible ties between Shakespeare and his contemporaries. See, for instance, "Shakespeare and Marlowe as Collaborators before 1593: Secret or Taboo?," in University of Bucharest Review, Vol. VI, no. 3, *The Secret and the Known*, 2004, pp. 75-84.

of the less explored régions of Shakespeareland, inviting further interprétations. In "Différence versus Sameness in Shakespeare and Fletcher's Palamon and Arcite: A Study in Characterization" I réfute the current consensus about "sameness" being the keyword in the characterization of the eponymous two noble kinsmen. On the contrary, I contend that their personalities are distinct throughout the play, that Shakespeare is the one that sets the tene in constructing two distinct personae, while Fletcher vacillâtes between complying with the Shakespearean model and deviating from it. Notwithstanding Fletcher's vacillations, the two kinsmen appear as round, consistent, and clearly differentiated characters. It is not their indistinguishable features but the co-authors' skill in maintaining a balance between our sympathies for one or the other that makes them seem so much alike.

The last article included in this book is a revised and expanded version of a paper given at the Masaryk University of Bmo, the Czech Republic, during the international conférence "Shakespeare and His Collaborators over the Centuries" on February 10, 2006. As its very title suggests, it's the confession of a literary translater and an académie who undertook the task of enlarging the Shakespeare canon in Romania in an effort to synchronize the Romanian reception of Shakespeare with the Western, especially Anglo-Saxon, académie and publishing practices. Far from being a self-flattering account, "The Ups and Downs of the Enlargement of the Shakespeare Canon: A Romanian Example" is a taie of hardships and misfortunes which aims at an objective présentation of the stratégies underlying this project and the ambivalent responses it triggered in the Romanian académie and literary world.

I have been a Bardolater for more than thirty years and I have written dozens of articles on the Bard in the past six or seven years, not to mention my earlier writings dating back to

the Communist regime. I have had plenty of time to learn that in Shakespeare studies no project can ever be finite, as things are moving extremely fast in Shakespeare criticism. Myriad-minded Shakespeare g n r tes endless critical opinions and counter-opinions. Like my previous books on Shakespeare, this new volume is an unfinished project, waiting for a sequel or a coda. One of the articles in this book is a sequel to *Methinks You're Better Spoken*: the years (weeks? days?) to come may prompt me to revise or enlarge the monograph on Shakespeare's "catoptrics" or any other article in this book. Writing about Shakespeare resembles in a way Sisyphus<sup>1</sup> task but, at the same time, anyone undertaking such a task must be a happy Sisyphus.

