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LAZA KOSTIĆ'S SHAKESPEAREAN WORLD: INTERPRETATION(S) AND INSPIRATION

Abstract: The paper analyses Kostić's essay on *Romeo and Juliet* from 1866, focusing on the anticipatory character of his methodology and discourse, as will emerge with the pioneers of the new criticism Caroline Spurgeon and George Wilson Knight. Kostić's debt to earlier drama theory is also considered, with reference to his implicit modification of Hegel's definition of tragedy, largely in line with the way it was later reformulated by British Shakespearean Andrew Cecil Bradley so that it could convey modern tragedy. In the end, it is pointed out how comprehending Shakespeare influenced the formation of Kostić's interpretative poetics in general.

Keywords: Shakespeare, interpretation, hermeneutics, romantic imagination, Hegel's theory of tragedy, New Criticism

In the tragedy, the content and movement
of the spirit are their own subject.
G.W.F. Hegel

Like many other areas of Kostić's work, his "shakespearology" is usually perceived as a set of highly promising fragments which eventually left the ultimate goals uncertain as well as methodological and ideological hypotheses undefined, but nevertheless the corpus of his works on Shakespeare (or inspired by Shakespeare) has been arousing certain interest, and was, occasionally, highly valued.

The first recorded trace of Kostić's work on Shakespeare is the translation of a scene in the Capulet family's garden, with Juliet on the

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balcony, from the second act of *Romeo and Juliet*, published by the eighteen-year-old author in the magazine *Serbski letopis* (*Serbian Chronicle*) in 1859. Before, in 1876, the entire translation was published in a separate book, his Shakespearean thought, having first given rise to the poem “On Shakespeare’s Three Hundred Years Anniversary” (1864), led to the essay *Romeo and Juliet*, published in the magazine *Matica* at ten sequels, from September 30 to December 31, 1866, and immediately reprinted in the separate book, with the distinctive subtitle “An offer to domesticate Shakespeare among the Serbian people”.¹

The initial question aroused by this corpus of Kostić’s works is what (if any) special quality it adds to the tradition of Shakespearean thought, but with the full appreciation of its features cognate with contemporary and/or future authors. The most noticeable element of nineteenth-century

¹ The complete list of Kostić’s Shakespearean works encompasses following titles:

- „Одломак из Шекспировог *Ромео и Јулије*” [„The Fragment from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*”], *Сербски летопис* [*Serbski letopis*], 1859, 1, 85–93.
- „Краљ Рикард III” [“King Richard III”], in: *Споменик тристагодишњице Шекспирове свейковане у Новом Саду на Бурђевдан 1864* [*Spomenik tristagodišnjice Šekspirove svetkovane u Novom Sadu na Đurđevdan 1864*], Novi Sad, 1864, 5–24. (Translation of first two scenes of the first act, together with Jovan Andrejević).
- „На Шекспирову тристагодишњицу” [„On Shakespeare’s Three Hundred Years Anniversary”], in: *Споменик тристагодишњице Шекспирове свейковане у Новом Саду на Бурђевдан 1864* [*Spomenik tristagodišnjice Šekspirove godišnjice u Novom Sadu na Đurđevdan 1864*], Novi Sad, 1864, 34–38.
- „*Ромео и Јулија*. Свршетак прве радње” [„*Romeo and Juliet*. The End of the First Act.”], *Даница* [*Danica*], 1865, 28, 649–650.
- „*Ромео и Јулија* од В. Шекспира. Други акт. Трећа појава” [„*Romeo and Juliet* by W. Shakespeare. Second Act. Third Scene”], *Даница* [*Danica*], 1865, 32, 745–746.
- „*Ромео и Јулија*” [„*Romeo and Juliet*”], *Матица* [*Matica*], 1866, 36–45. (Essay in ten sequels).
- *Ромео и Јулија. Једна понуда за одомашивање Шекспира у српском народу*. [*Romeo and Juliet: An Offer to Domesticate Shakespeare among the Serbian People*], Novi Sad, 1866.
- *Ромео и Јулија*. Трагедија у пет чинова. [*Romeo and Juliet*. Tragedy in five acts.], Novi Sad, 1876. (The entire translation in a book).
- „*Хамлет, краљевин гански*” [„*Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark*”]. (Translation), *Летопис Матице српске* [*Letopis Matice srpske*], 1887, 4; 1888, 1–4. (The entire translation in five sequels).
- *Хамлет* [*Hamlet*], Mostar, 1903. (The entire translation in a book).
- „Око *Ромео и Јулије*: историја једног превода” [„On *Romeo and Juliet*: the History of One Translation”], *Летопис Матице српске* [*Letopis Matice srpske*], 1907, 3 and 4; 1908, 3; 1909, 1. (The disputation in four sequels, not finished).

thought about Shakespeare is the admiration of his genius in depicting human passions and characters, his ability to express various extremes in feelings and to encompass all their diversity and richness in his work. But simultaneously with this attitude, there appeared the development of a different kind of approach, expressed by writers and philosophers rather than critics and scholar authors. Among them, prominent place belongs to Weimar classics, whose interpretation of Shakespeare is basically given from the point of view which can be called substantial: as Goethe had said, Shakespeare's spirit "joins the spirit of the world", it *permeates* the world, but, while the job of the world spirit is to keep secrets, the nature of poetry is to reveal them to us.

For this quotation we could say that it represents the (roots of) tradition that Kostić will join later, but his approach to one particular Shakespeare's work will thoroughly actualize the abstract idea of the spirit permeating the world, and formulate the distinctive meaning of the drama. But what – in particular forms of appearance of the notional omnipresent spirit – did young Kostić find so specially illuminating in *Romeo and Juliet* that made him set exactly this early work in the center of his interpretation of Shakespeare?

To answer this question, we should consider Kostić's view of Shakespeare's creative habitus given in the poem "On Shakespeare's Three Hundred Years Anniversary" two years earlier. The introduction to the poem is a kind of travesty of biblical genesis clearly aimed to deify Shakespeare's greatness: after six days of designing the world, God didn't rest, but took the enterprise of bringing into being not only the man (whose likeness to God appeared to be only in visage), but the existence basically akin to His own.

The verses below distinctly depict this venture:

In one figure, in one life,
to set the splendour of living in a whole
to merge the darkness and the light,
cherubic joy and infernal blaze

...

and all that wonder and turmoil
to assemble in one figure, one lodge;
that was done – Shakespeare was made by God.²

² All quotations of Kostić's verses and essay fragments are translated by the author of the paper and for the purpose of the given argumentation. The use of other translations will be notified.

Although paralleling poets' creativity with God's makings was anything but unusual in romantic imagination, so clearly declared similitude of the supreme creator and his final creation will become a ground for very specially structured interpretation of that poet's work. Two years later, Kostić's essay *Romeo and Juliet* begun with an introduction section with its own, separate title: "One Chapter from Shakespeare's Bible".

In the beginning there was passion, and passion was (with) a poet, and the poet was passion...

But in the poet's soul the creation of a new world upstarted.

And in the midst of the principle of passion appeared a principle called: ideal; in the Scriptures it is called: Heavenly Father.

And that principle disassembled stirred passions and divided them into two.

And the passion that subdued itself to the ideal was named: love, and yet the one that abandoned the ideal was named: hatred.

And love stood still in the heaven of ideals and did not move from there, and illuminated the whole poet's world with its grace.

But hatred was cramped in the hell of its own apostasy, and twisting around itself in anguish.

It is noticeable that the principle of motility is at the very beginning attributed to the hatred, as the negative principle of the universe, due to which it will appear as the initiator of a tragic action. And by the term "tragic action" here isn't to be understood some abstract and indefinite occurrence of that principle in the universe, but the concrete plot of the particular drama, conveyed in original, yet in the context easily interpretable metaphors. Namely, in Kostić's metaphorical representation of the course of action in *Romeo and Juliet* the substance of each of the essential forces, as well as of the characters in the play, are projected into celestial bodies and cosmic movements. In its own "vigorous twisting", hatred kicked out "two last relics that remained inside it from the struggle with the love and the ideal, and threw them away to the right and to the left".

And these two thrown offs from hatred's gruff pith set on their journey towards their original wellspring, towards the sun of love.

Thus, the clash between characters in the drama appears connected to cosmic order and celestial motions, still firmly referring to the concrete story in the very well-known play. To make that references concrete and definitive, Kostić for the first time denotes these two entities as "stars" and introduces

their names: Romeo and Juliet. But still, in the nature of these “stars”, or at least in their initial thoughts and doings, we can perceive the environment from which they were extruded. “Of love their harts were made”, says Kostić, “and striving for the ideal laid inside, but in the surrounding air remained the vehemence of hatred that threw them out.”

That vehemence, or the daring energy of plans and acts of the protagonists of the play, is exactly what ties them to their original provenance and propel their actions. As Kostić says further:

And the more the hell of hatred were pushing them apart, the more the sun of love were pulling them closer.

And love was stronger than hatred, and drew them to itself.

....

And in that vehemence they met and crashed to each other, and got smashed in that crash.

And disappeared in the sun of love.

But in the same time that hell of hatred, which strained all its forces to set the lovers apart, “spent all its blazing flames, and only the pile of ashes remained, and that pile was dispersed by cosmic winds”. “And all that”, concludes Kostić, “because of those two errant stars”.

This is where the first section of the essay ends, covering less than two small format pages, and at the beginning of the second one Kostić declares that the concluded section was something like genesis of *Romeo and Juliet*, while everything further will be its exegesis.

In that extensive second chapter (which will spread over next nine sequels) Kostić will later state a lot about sources of this play, about other writings on the same topic and influences they might have exerted on Shakespeare’s work, about his outstanding style, but the first and main aspiration of the whole essay is to elaborate “Shakespeare’s philosophy” and its revealing in this particular play.

The starting point of Kostić’s discussion is the view that Shakespeare’s philosophy is “pretty simple” and entirely anthropocentric. But that relative simplicity he promptly connects with the range of philosophical and religious doctrines: basically, Kostić claims that “Shakespeare’s philosophy” is akin to Brahmanic teachings, but without formal theocentrism, affine to those of Moses, but without ethnic exclusivity, to some point related to Socrates heritage, but without oratorical dialectics. Above all, in that philosophy there is no evangelical trust in the kingdom of heaven.

This controversial statement Kostić tries to clarify from the point of view that implies anthropological attitude of the Bible: one breath from the Creator's chest, breathed out into a clod of mud, that is the man. That breath, representing the divine presence, and the mud were left to themselves to put up with each other, but within the limits that Creator made as the condition of their unity. United but struggling, these opposites appear as "harmonious disharmony", they represent "the first peripeteia of the existence", which constantly cause the tragedy and martyrdom of men, but also the possibility for salvation.

Though, once again, he insists that this controversy of human existence is the occurrence of everlasting cosmic drama and also transfers the metaphors of "divine spirit" and "mud" to the realms of world history and struggle with forces of nature, we can assume that Kostić himself thought of those sections as of a digression in the course of interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet*.³ However, they will appear meaningful and functional on other levels of the text, and Kostić's return to the topic of his essay will mean the return to interpretation of the drama in the terms of struggle between love and hatred.

During this struggle each of those categories gets contaminated by the contact with the other one. Overwhelming love gradually crumbles the hatred, but exactly that process paved lovers' path to the Capulet family tomb, and – according to Kostić – exactly from the Romeo's poisoned vial and the mortal wound on Juliet's chest ascends love to overpower hatred, ascends "the spirit" to submerge "the mud".

The fact that only through death hatred was overmastered by love incited Kostić to round off the circle, or to make the connection between the above interpretation of the ultimate meaning of *Romeo and Juliet* and the cosmological reflections from the first sections of his essay. In his view, the story of Resurrection and the catastrophe in *Romeo and Juliet* in two images represent one very same idea: the first image is divine, but the second one is more comprehensible, because it's more human.

³ The expanded sections of the essay are dedicated to different matters of world's political and cultural history, including the author's view of British role in the course of progress (Britain, as the representative of human spirit, overcomes the ocean, as the symbol of blind force of hostile nature), but also of the country's imperial attitude which (basically for supporting Turkey) transforms it into the participant of world's (metaphorical) "mud" (Kostić, 1866: 44, 1034 –1036).

In order to tie the metaphor of “mud and spirit” to the realm of human’s moral and emotional development and human relations, Kostić will later upgrade it with the images of black and red blood fighting on the battlefield of heart. They are conceived as doubles to the previous concepts – “black (vein) blood”, as the representation of lower parts of human body and lower drives in human nature, is paralleled with “mud”, and “red (arterial) blood”, ensued as a result of its purifying by the contact with the air in lungs, is paralleled with “spirit”. In this way Kostić emphasizes the aspect of perpetual struggling in human’s inner self, but still points out that the inside-conflicted powers are, in the same time, “cosmic principles”. The view that an everlasting cosmic affair does regularly occur in human behaviour in particular forms and condensed joints of events, accentuates the dramatic quality of such plots, as well as the universal dimension of their meaning.

Exactly this last quality answers the question of why Kostić puts *Romeo and Juliet* in the centre of his thought of Shakespeare: after extensive digressions about other Shakespeare’s plays, he underlines that, to the best of his knowledge, it is the only one in which the bard “took out of hell just such amount sins, that they melted as soon as he exposed them to the bright sun of God’s judgment”. In the same time, that is what gives that play the quality of aesthetical harmony: “No part of its aesthetical structure is overdeveloped on the expense of others.”, says Kostić, and what he meant by it takes us to the core of his understanding of the art of drama.

In the tradition of Serbian literary criticism, Kostić is seen as the greatest Hellenist and, in the same time, the most devoted Shakespearean. How did these two affiliations coexist and, especially, what appeared as a result of their merge in this particular essay? To answer these questions we first should consider the ideas that must have directed his early thought of tragedy. In the context of classical education, “tragedy” implied ancient Greek tragedy and the principal guideline for its understanding was Hegel’s theory of the Absolute Spirit dividing into two conflicting parties, which are to be individualized as acting figures. In that view, both parties are right for defending the chosen aspect of the Spirit, but wrong for denying the other, also legitimate one. Since each of them has a standpoint in the formation of the Spirit, actions of any side can’t be immoral by themselves – so the hero’s tragic fault can’t be understood as the moral wrongdoing, but as the (more or less vehement) interfering in the superior order, and his/her calvary is the way of reconciliation of the originally united opposite forces.

As it is obvious from the first part of this essay, the opposite parties in *Romeo and Juliet* in Kostić's view are not equal participants in the eternal and uncreated Spirit, but the forces torn apart exactly on the base of their attitudes towards the inception principle of the Universe and its moral order. So, the ethic component of the drama is disclosed by the fact that hatred, as the negative force, is defeated by love (which brings its closure next to the biblical Chapter of Resurrection and the legend of Phoenix), while its aesthetics is fully manifested in the balance made by the fact that death of the protagonists in the same time is the triumph of the power they represented.

In the 1960thies, when this essay aroused certain interest among the dramatists and literary scholars of the time, it was compared to the works of "modern Shakespeareans" Caroline Spurgeon and George Wilson Knight. In the paper "The Anticipation of one critical method" from 1964–1965 (on the occasion of Shakespeare's four hundred years anniversary and right before a hundred years anniversary of Kostić's own essay) Svetozar Brkić (Brkić, 1964–1965: 80–85) underlines the fact that in his writing on *Romeo and Juliet* (although it's meant to be analytical) Kostić uses poetic images of the same kind as those that Shakespeare himself used in the text of the drama: images of celestial bodies, light and lighting objects, and then of darkness and plants, exactly the ones that Caroline Spurgeon listed as typical for this play in her book *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (Spurgeon, 1971, 310–314). Even more explicitly, Brkić stated that Kostić's concept of interpretation – based on the view of the entire drama as an expanded metaphor – is more or less direct anticipation of the methodology in the present time carried out by George Wilson Knight. Advocating this thesis, Brkić referred to the Knight's recent book *The Sovereign Flower* (1958), but the same principles of interpretation were also presented in his much earlier work *The Wheel of Fire* (first ed. 1930, following ed. 1947, 1953, 1955).

Having distinguished "criticism" from "interpretation", Knight decisively opted for the second approach, stating that, at first, "we should ... regard each play as a visionary unit bound to obey none but its own self-imposed laws". Further, it means that "any given incident or speech [should be related] either to the time-sequence of story or the peculiar atmosphere [...] which binds the play" and that, being aware of this, "we should not look for perfect verisimilitude to life, but rather see each play as an expanded metaphor, by means of which the original vision has been projected into forms roughly correspondent with actuality" (Knight, 1955: 14–15).

Knowing this, we have to agree with Brkić's insight in the anticipatory nature of Kostić's Shakespearean thought, which links it with the approaches of precursors and pioneers of New Criticism. But what Brkić didn't pay attention to is the relation between the concept of interpretation revealed in this particular essay and the postulates of Shakespearean thought in works of the later 19th century authors, and especially with certain conclusions about *Romeo and Juliet* itself.

At this point, we should refer to the work of Andrew Cecil Bradley, which at the turn of the centuries will be considered as the most comprehensive scholarly interpretation of Shakespeare's plays. He emphasizes that – disparately from Greek tragedy, from which Hegel primarily drew his conclusions of the art of tragedy as a whole – the subject of the major part of modern tragedies is the passion or the goal to which the hero aspires, and the conflict deriving from it is individual, with particular characters and their destiny in its centre (Bradley, 1926: 77).

But with this conception of tragedy, one key question arises: how can a person who represents only oneself demand to be tied to the interest of something that represents the universal? Bradley's answer seems self-evident and, which is of special interest to us, adequate to the conclusions that Kostić drew much earlier, using poetic images and metaphysical analogies. Essentially, the British scholar concludes that in a tragedy a conflict breaks out between two people or two groups of people, one of whom is dominated by a hero, but since they are driven by passions, aspirations, principles, etc., we can say that opponents are *two passions* as movers of opposing persons or groups (Bradley, 1926: 85–86).

As the first and most obvious confirmation of this thesis, Bradley cites *Romeo and Juliet*: their love is in conflict with the hatred of their families, represented by many other characters (Bradley, 1924: 24). At the same time, in an effort to reformulate the character of catastrophe so that it corresponds to the poetics of modern tragedy, he establishes the following: apart from the negative (suffering from a force incomparably superior to the force of the initiator of the conflict), catastrophe also has an affirmative aspect which is the source of the feeling of reconciliation and which we describe as the strong self-renewal of split spiritual unity. The hero must die and unite with "eternal justice" and that unification also must be eternal and ideal; he dies, and with him our hearts die down, but still because of that we exult more than we suffer (Bradley, 1926: 91).

Although he underlined this as a general feature of modern tragedy, in lectures on Shakespeare Bradley makes some additional and, in relation to this claim, controversial special observations about his writings of this kind. Apart from the external conflict of characters, in Shakespeare's plays there is also a conflict of forces in the hero's soul and that element, which becomes more and more pronounced in later tragedies (Bradley, 1924: 25), significantly affects the quality and intensity of the tragic feeling caused by a certain play. As an example of a drama based on this second type of conflict, Bradley specifically analyses *Macbeth*, pointing out that the viewer must admire Macbeth's abilities and mental qualities that are good in themselves, but conflict and tragicness stem from the insight that different elements in human nature are so strongly tied in that goodness itself enforces the evil, instead of resisting it (Bradley, 1926: 87–88). From this perspective, it is a matter of the decay of the spirit, and according to Bradley, any spiritual conflict that implies such decay is tragic. It is clear, however, that this kind of tragedy does not lead to reconciliation that would imply a feeling of compassion for the hero simultaneous with exulting over the majesty of his death – we actually have the compassion for his victims and the main source of tragic feelings becomes the stage turned into a scene of global horror. That is why Bradley, emphasizing that in early tragedies, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, the hero struggles with an external force, but relatively little with himself, implicitly claims that Shakespeare's understanding of tragicness changed in the course of his work. Although he never thought of *Romeo and Juliet* as of the highest achievement of Shakespeare's genius, nor contemplate Shakespeare's work from the point of view established on the ground of the particular poetics of that drama, as Kostić did, Bradley agreed with the Serbian poet on the issue of character of tragicness in this play, and obviously noticed the distinguishing quality of reconciliation in its dénouement.

Basically, we can say that Kostić noted the importance of poetic images in Shakespeare's plays, which Caroline Spurgeon later on made a subject of her lifework, that he also consciously interpreted *Romeo and Juliet* as an expanded metaphor, which George Wilson Knight will afterwards define as a productive method of research, but also that he made a strong statement about the "essence of tragicness". Although the source of his attitude could have been in the classic philosophical idea of the divided Spirit as the reason of tragic action, his thought actually diverts from its radical abstractness. Not only that tragic action in the concrete tragedy is initiated by certain

personal emotion, but the primordial, stirred passion was once divided on the base of the attitude that inner forces had taken towards "the ideal". Due to this, passions (or characters as bearers of certain passion) are made the subject of tragedy, but the dénouement of their conflict appears as explicitly ethical, and Kostić sees the death of the protagonists as a special kind of reconciliation, considering that their death in the same time is the triumph of the principle they were representing.

These views partly correspond with those that later on will be carried out by Bradley, who did reveal that his approach to modern tragedy in general, and particularly to Shakespeare's, is based on the attempt of modification of Hegel's principles in order to outline the new doctrine, applicable to his works. But while Bradley emphasizes dissimilarity of tragicness in different Shakespeare's plays and tries to describe each of those variations as the particular quality itself, Kostić focuses only on *Romeo and Juliet* as the unique case of taking out conflicting powers whose vigor is balanced just so that the one tied to the love and ideal overpowers through the death of the protagonists. In this case, reconciliation means that hatred, becoming aware of its own destructiveness, steps back and the world on the stage is balanced, though still complex: hatred is an indivisible element of the existence, but for the given time its power is overthrown.

For these reasons, in Kostić's view *Romeo and Juliet* appears as the prototype of tragedy as such, as the image of what it ideally should be. That special view of *Romeo and Juliet* is obvious from the fact that short digressions on other Shakespeare's plays deal only with some particular aspects of the text, such as the psychology of the characters or the system of motivation of their acts, but Kostić never indicates an intention to interpret them in the same way as this one. Also, in the closing sequels of the essay he underlines that this is exactly the play that should be treated as the proto-drama, the hypothetical model from which all other kinds of tragedy derived. In the extensive arguing he makes a parallel with Goethe's idea of the proto-plant, the herbal form that must have existed once in the course of time, before it disappeared through the process of giving diversity to the world's flora.

Comparison of the work of art to the life of the self-generated natural phenomenon is, of course, another tribute to the romantic vision of correspondence, or even unity, between the course of nature and the process of poetical creation. But in this essay, Kostić suggests that, while Goethe's proto-plant might have disappeared, *Romeo and Juliet* is here and asks to be recognized as the proto-drama, the archetype of tragedy in which the

“controversy of existence” is to be solved in the way that restore moral order and harmony. If only our experience of the human world didn’t become too diverse to accept this concept as sufficient, tragedies of other kinds wouldn’t have appeared – that seems to be Kostić’s standpoint for developing the argumentation on the archaic perfection of *Romeo and Juliet*.

However, in regard to this essay we can wonder why Kostić – who in later life would strive to create a universal aesthetical doctrine and whose own tragedies were hardly related to the poetics he so ecstatically admired – didn’t make any attempt to define some general aspects of Shakespeare’s tragedy. And the answer is simple and self-evident: he singled out *Romeo and Juliet* on the ground of the emotionality and world view that he embraced as similar to his own, at least at that point of his life and literary work. Inspired as a poet, he exerted all his scholarly knowledge and skills to interpret this tragedy in the text that is poetical itself, and which he named “exegesis”.

But in the years to come, obviously convinced of the verity of his statements, he will make them a critical tool and implicitly or explicitly referred to the conclusions and insights he once made on his favourite of Shakespeare’s tragedies. That remarks will appear in the wide range and, surprisingly, the bard’s supreme play will be referred to from different points of view.

The typical and expected is the one which sets *Romeo and Juliet* as the role model for plays of such kind, and underlines the problem of authors who tends to model their writings according to it, but without comprehending its substance. The most distinguished example of this kind is the dispute over his review of the play *Dobrila i Milenko* by Matija Ban: death of lovers which brings an end to the hatred and conflict of their families isn’t sentimental concession to the audience, as Ban thought, but the core of the sense of dramatic action, and the ending where the hostility between them becomes even more severe (for which Ban opted) isn’t more tragic, but entirely non-poetical (Kostić, 1875: 476–479). On the other hand, somehow unexpected appears to be Kostić’s view of the nature of love thematized in *Romeo and Juliet* and in Serbian folk ballad “The Death of Omer and Merima”. This comparison is underlined in different Kostić’s texts associated with the issues of female characters in drama and poetry, where it appears to be controversial for the fact that the love of Romeo and Juliet, however magnificent is the dramaturgy of its birth and evolvent, isn’t any more the paragon of love itself: the special poetical quality of its thematization is to be found in the ballad about lovers driven to death solely by the grieving souls.

Though Kostić still in the essay from 1866 mentioned “Omer and Merima” as the humble match of *Romeo and Juliet* and developed the argument on the similarity of the atmosphere and the suggestible images in both works, later on he defined the love in “Omer and Merima” as superior to that of Romeo and Juliet (Kostić, 1870: 8, 183–184). Despite the strength of his feeling, Romeo’s love – since the fatal attraction strikes him at the sight of Juliet’s beauty – springs from the eye, while Omer’s and Merima’s derives from the intuitive matching of souls, which pays no attention to physical appearance: when sees the beauty of Fatima, to whom he is forcibly married, Omer says to her:

„Beautiful art thou, o fairest Fata,
Beautiful art thou far more than Mera,
Yet my Mera is my heart’s own treasure.”⁴

That quality is what makes the balladical narrative of successive dying – not by accidental failure or suicide, but solely due to the grief and inhibition of overwhelming love – artistically purposeful, and the pine and the around-it-wrapping rose, that will grow out from their joint graves symbolize the lasting of love beyond the death. Implicitly, Kostić must have seen these plants as the counterparts to the monuments to Romeo and Juliet promised for each of them by the opposite family in the closing scene of the drama, but in the same time they are even more: self-generated and immersed into the life of nature, they imply that such resolvent comes from the higher power and appears as a sign of the victorious tie, far transcending the world recognition expressed by marble statues.

Though we can think of these insights as of the proof that Kostić’s adoration of Serbian oral poetry and traditional folklore culture in general surpasses even his infatuation with Shakespeare, there *vice versa* is the question of the ways of comprehending the qualities and meanings of literature. As both examples – the view of Ban’s play and of the ballad “The Death of Omer and Merima” – point out, in Kostić’s literary thought comprehending Shakespeare’s poetics opens other horizons as well: the particular interpretation of just one of his dramas set the guiding principle

⁴ The translation by Phyllis Harrington Lockley, published in 1929 in *Slavonic & East European Review* (see: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4202373>). The translator (as she did confirm) made a compilation of different versions of the ballad, so this item wouldn’t be sufficient for complex comparative analyses, for which is necessary the knowledge of all variations of the text. More about it in: Krnjević, 1980: 109–114.

for thematization of tragic love and inspired profound insights into the substantial qualities of the ballad known for its grasping mysticism. The fruitful reading.

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ШЕКСПИРОВСКИ СВЕТ ЛАЗЕ КОСТИЋА: ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЈА И ИНСПИРАЦИЈА

Резиме: Рад анализира есеј о *Ромеоу и Јулији* из 1866. године у светлу теорије трагедије у оквиру које се Костићева књижевна мисао формирала, истичући методолошке и теоријске иновације које су тај текст довеле у везу са каснијом шекспиролошком мишљу, али и уопште са новим интерпретативним начелима, у двадесетом веку промовисаним у оквиру школе англосаксонске нове критике. У овом домену рад се умногоме ослања на запажање С. Бркића из шездесетих година прошог века, који је (позивајући се на

истраживања К. Спрџен) истакао сродност песничких слика у самој драми са онима које Костић користи у њеном тумачењу, као и приступ који се заснива на тежњи да се формулише метафорички смисао целине дела (за шта је пронашао паралелу у актуелним настојањима Д. В. Најта). Посматрајући драму као јединствену метафору, Костић је борбу начела љубави и мржње посматрао паралелно на људском и космичком плану, доводећи тако значење драме до апсолутне универзалности, што оправдава и библијски дискурс којим у уводном сегменту успоставља оквире њеног тумачења. У завршним сегментима, рад указује како је оваквим читањем Шекспира Костић успоставио критеријуме за оцењивање других дела сличне тематике, што се показало у осврту на једну драму М. Бана, али и да је карактер љубави приказане код Шекспира видео као недостатан у поређењу са тематизацијом истог осећања у „Смрти Омера и Мериме”.

Кључне речи: Шекспир, интерпретација, херменаутика, романтичарска имагинација, Хегелова теорија трагедије, нова критика.