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Foreword: Shakespeare in Ukraine

How can writers, artists, scholars, performers, best reflect a nation's values, desires, and ambitions in circumstances of censorship, oppression, prohibition, or, most radically, during the upheaval and brutality of war? How to convey the struggle against erasure of history, culture, and identity? And, ultimately, how to convey this to the rest of the world?

One possible strategy is to look outward. For nearly two-hundred years, Ukrainian poets, writers, scholars, dramatists, theatre and visual artists have communicated with the global community through the medium of Shakespeare, the most translated and performed playwright in the world. As more than a classic, as a hyper-canonical figure, Shakespeare inhabits a contact zone where many cultures can meet and, thus, where dialogue can take place. For Ukrainians, Shakespeare has, at various times, served as mirror, prism, and megaphone, amplifying and broadcasting their values, hopes and concerns. Such a long and deep engagement with Shakespeare confirms h istorian S erhii P lokhy's c ontention t hat U kraine's "claim to independence has always had a European orientation" (353).

Just days after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy addressed the British Parliament. Invoking Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Zelenskyy forcefully asserted Ukraine's affirmative re sponse to th e Da nish

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Prince's existential question: it was "to be". As one of the most translated phrases in literature, these two simple words nonetheless carried complex depths of meaning: the gravity of the threat to Ukraine's existence and the equally firm determination to defend Ukraine's sovereignty in the face of unprovoked aggression. In effect, this concise allusion acted as a metaphorical megaphone, asserting Ukraine's message of the right, and the firm intent, to exist. As importantly, it affirmed Ukrainians' identification with Western cultural markers and values. Thus, Hamlet's "to be" linked Ukraine to Britain, and, beyond that, to an international community of like-minded citizens and entities around the globe who instantly understood that message.

The second Shakespearean moment occurred only days after the war began. In Ivano-Frankivsk on 7 March 2022, citizens huddled together for a performance of the neo-opera *Hamlet* in the basement of the Ivan Franko National Academic Music and Drama Theatre. Directed by Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi, the quickly arranged performance, a revival, took on an additional, new function, that of sheltering its audience from air strikes. Derzhypilskyi chose not to stage a reassuring, amusing entertainment for his anxious spectators, nor did he choose a propagandistic play. Instead, he offered a piece about a deeply ethical prince surrounded by corruption and betrayal. A play about a man who thinks. But one gesture changed in this reprise of the play. The Prince, played by Oleksii Hnatkovskyi, came on stage draped in the Ukrainian flag, a poignant rallying gesture visually signalling the existence of Ukraine, its bonds with the 'universal' Bard, and with the West. The production was publicly dedicated to the people of the United Kingdom for unhesitatingly supporting Ukraine, and in recognition of what British civilians themselves had endured during the Blitz of the Second World War. A distillation of memory, identity and trauma, *Hamlet* thus simultaneously served as a wellspring of human connection, unity, and empathy.

The trans-historical and trans-geographical connections encapsulated by the two moments at the very start of the Russian war on Ukraine potently reveal Shakespeare's significance to the cultural history of Ukraine. Creating and confirming community, Derzhipilsky's production was also a terrible moment of repetition, of being haunted by history, including the history of this play in Ukraine. Nineteenth century imperial Russia censored and attempted to destroy Ukrainian culture, prohibiting performance and translation. But despite (or perhaps partly because of) these prohibitions, writers and translators intensely engaged with Shakespeare. It is notable that Ukraine's great literary trinity – Taras Shevchenko, Lesya Ukrainka, Ivan Franko – responded to the force of Shakespeare's works through poetry, drama and visual art.

Authorization to perform Shakespeare never came from the tsars. Even after the 1905 Revolution, imperial censors refused permission to stage *Hamlet* because, they argued, a Ukrainian production might evoke laughter in its presumption to

treat a world classic in a 'peasant' language. This prohibition forged a link between Shakespeare and Ukraine, and the imperative to stage his works as a symbol of cultural sovereignty and independence.

Maiia Harbuziuk, the late Ukrainian theatre scholar and Dean of the Faculty of Culture and Arts at the Ivano Franko University in Lviv, observed that "Theatre is the art about humans, by humans, with humans and for humans" (n.p.). She therefore considered Shakespeare a counter to war: whereas war is dehumanizing, Shakespeare is humanizing. Canadian scholar Annie Brisset has reminded us that theatre, the most social of the arts, "grows directly out of a society, its collective imagination and symbolic representations, and its system of ideas and values" (5). Unlike literary genres, theatre must stay 'close to the collectivity,' especially in periods in which the collectivity feels imperilled. For these reasons, theatre makes a particularly effective genre by which to examine assumptions about cultural identity, memory and value. Shakespeare, the playwright most often considered beyond nationality and the property of many cultures and nations, presents a useful prism through which to view Ukraine's cultural history. Conversely, Ukraine is able to speak to the rest of the world through the amplified voice of Shakespeare whose works have become, in effect, a shared, understood, symbolic space.

The first Shakespeare play on the Ukrainian stage, *Macbeth*, performed in 1920, was born in the crucible of revolution, world war, civil war and chaos. Despite the circumstances of great political, social, and economic upheaval, stage and film director Les Kurbas pushed his actors to take on this play after only five rehearsals, many on an empty stomach because distribution networks had broken down. Lyubov Hakkebush, his Lady Macbeth, fainted in the wings from lack of food. In his inspiring address to the actors, Kurbas pointedly insisted that, in performing Shakespeare, they were doing a great historical deed for Ukrainian theatre and culture. For Kurbas, the classics were valuable masterly works of construction that knew how to move audiences. He used *Macbeth* to test his theories about the conventions and traditions of theatre, including the concept of representation itself. Returning to *Macbeth* a number of times, the most radical version was created in 1924 and performed shortly after the death of Lenin. Arguably, this was the most remarkable Shakespeare production of the whole Soviet period. Re-imagined through the prism of contemporary early Soviet reality, it interrogated the ethics of a society built on war, violence and destruction.

As well as questioning Soviet reality on the stage, on the page, poets and translators in the 1920s and 1930s alluded to Shakespeare's works, using them to obliquely critique the politics and aesthetics of the times. *Hamlet* was tacitly prohibited by Stalin from being staged; nonetheless, the play and its author continued to be in the minds of creators like Maksym Rylsky, Mykola Bazhan and Evhen Pluzhnyk, including those who supported the regime. From the beginning of the founding of the USSR, the search was on for a Soviet writer who could

not only challenge but also supplant Shakespeare and provide the Soviet polity with an appropriate mythology. For Stalin, the micro-manager of cultural affairs, dramatist-propagandist Oleksander Korniychuk was identified as that champion. His plays pointedly turned Shakespeare's plays inside out, presenting a new myth of the glorious future and of the immortality of the Soviet people.

Yosyp Hirniak's remarkable 1943 production of *Hamlet* in Lviv under Nazi occupation during the Second World War served as an oblique comment on the times, a proclamation of cultural sovereignty and an attack on the prevailing theatrical repertoire of the day. For Hirniak, only this play, performed for the very first time in Ukrainian, could have such a tremendous effect. Indeed, audiences flocked to see the production despite interruptions from air-raid alarms, street roundups, violence and executions.

The reputation of Shakespeare changed in official commemorations sanctioned and directed by Moscow. These served a variety of political purposes, some ambivalently, suggesting a rapprochement with the West but also attempting to elide growing fissures in the Soviet polity. During post-Independence period (1991–), for the first time, Shakespeare could freely flourish in inventive productions, and in new translations and creations, including in puppet shows and cabarets. But, ironically, the real boom in Shakespeare productions came during the war. Since 2014, Ukrainians have been able to see 111 new productions.

During the war, the First Shakespeare Festival in Ivano-Frankivsk took place. Despite air-raids, drones, and Shaheds, the Ukrainian Shakespeare Centre in Zaporizhzhia, headed by Professor Nataliya Torkut, continues its work of publishing two scholarly journals, managing all-Ukrainian Shakespeare competitions; organizing lectures; and celebrating Shakespeare for a whole month in April. Their projects also include collaborations with Flute Theatre in the UK that uses Shakespeare as therapy for refugees and autistic children. A related project has begun for veterans of the war suffering from PTSD. Nataliya Torkut's toast, "To the Eternal Memory of William Shakespeare," delivered on the occasion of Shakespeare's birthday celebrations in Stratford-upon-Avon, U.K. in 2023, underscored Shakespeare's enduring power to inspire, provide solace, and amplify Ukrainians' creative and cultural imagination.

As this brief overview argued, Shakespeare has served in many capacities in Ukraine. Leading towards my conclusion, let us consider one more function: "entanglement," a term taken from quantum mechanics. As Steven Shapin explains, "[t]wo particles are said to be 'entangled', or correlated, when changes in one influence the properties of the other, even if they are separated by vast distances". Shakespeare has been entangled with Ukraine. His works have shaped and changed and enriched Ukrainian cultural history. But Ukraine has also given Shakespeare's works a new turn. A small example will suffice. One of Shakespeare's greatest spine-tingling orations is the famous St Crispin's Day speech when England's warrior

king, Henry V, galvanizes his small, greatly outnumbered troops to engage in battle with the vast French army. This rhetorically brilliant speech was the centerpiece of Laurence Olivier's 1944 film, meant to inspire the wartime defenders of Britain, and has been rousingly performed by many other actors before and since. In his version of St Crispin's Day speech, British filmmaker, writer and visual artist Jack Jewers shows how Ukraine and Shakespeare have become entangled. Through the juxtaposition of the measured tone of Eliza Butterworth's recitation of this speech with the powerful images from Ukraine today, we see the way in which both are entangled, changed. We see war's terrible, human cost. Can this speech ever be the same again?

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