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Chapter 1:

# Raising the (Iron) Curtain: The Heritage of 1989 in the New Europe

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# Shakespeare in Purgatory: (Re)Writing the History of the Post-war Reception

Anna Cetera-Włodarczyk

**Abstract**

The aim of the essay is to reflect on the current substantial and ethical complexity of the research into the history of Shakespeare reception in the post-war period, both within the Polish national context and, by parallel, within a wider context of post-Communist countries. This refers in particular to the large-scale release of documents, testimonies, and archives which cast light on the operation of Communist authorities in respect of artists and men of letters, revealing a variety of manipulative mechanisms such as censorship or selective patronage. Secondly, the essay proceeds to scrutinise the contents of the *Archives of Jan Kott*, showcasing the traces of Kott's continuous preoccupation with Shakespeare's themes and productions. The (un)finished projects (such as 1973 *Hamlet*) elucidate Kott's understanding of history and his compelling ability to endow drama with a contemporary and universal appeal.

**Key words**

archive, post-Communism, Jan Kott, rewriting history

> So tell him with th'occurrents more or less
> Which have solicited. – The rest is silence.
> (*Hamlet* 5.2.341–342)

When old Hamlet returns to Elsinore, his goal is explicitly revisionary. 'Remember me' says the ghost and retreats to his secret vantage point. Young Hamlet, an agnostic, does not invest much trust in messages coming from the land 'from whose bourn / No traveller returns' (*Hamlet* 3.1.78–79). When the play ends, Horatio is an eye-witness of the tragedy, but his knowledge is fragmentary. Tell Fortinbras 'more or less', says the dying prince, and far more famously, 'the rest is silence' (*Hamlet* 5.2.341–342). The distortion of chronicled history begins instantly: the Norwegian invader wins the Danish election, and Hamlet, a truth-seeker, gets his soldier's funeral.

The aim of this essay is to reflect on the current substantial and ethical complexity of the research into the history of Shakespeare reception in the post-war period, both within the Polish national context and, in parallel, within a wider context of post-Communist countries. This examination refers in particular to the large-scale release of literature, documents, testimonies, and archives which cast light on how the Communist authorities acted with respect to artists and men of letters, and how they themselves manoeuvred their ways through the controlled spaces of public discourse. The rapid emergence of previously classified sources alters the picture of the past, but it can also puzzle researchers uncertain as to the ethical status of reports produced by security police or informers. Do we wish to listen to turncoats, spies or opportunists? And if not, can we cling to some well-rehearsed narratives, ignoring the knowledge which pours from what can be seen as repulsive chronicles of terror and duplicity? Writing the lives of those recently buried is a heavy task. 'And let me speak,' cries first Horatio, 'of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts [...] All this can I / Truly deliver' (*Hamlet* 5.2.363–370). But can he? As doubts are swiftly arising, Horatio asks for more time so that men's minds may become less wild, 'lest more mischance / On plots and errors happen' (*Hamlet* 5.2.378–379). Time shall prepare Horatio's future audience, but it may also reshape his own memories, making them fickle or biased. Should this be the case, when and how can the 'more or less' story of the Prince be reported?

'The documents we fashion in the present record the same burden of their own making as the documents we inherit from the past' (MCGANN 2014: 5), Jerome McGann warns us in his seminal study of the uses of philology in the age of digital revolution:

> What we know and what we have known are ongoing. So Philology: *to* preserve, monitor, investigate, and augment our cultural inheritance, including all the material means by which it has been realized and transmitted. [...] *Homo sum; sit humani nil a me alienum puto* – or, 'Nothing human *should* ever escape my interest.' Terence in a new key. (MCGANN 2014: 37)

Naturally, the insights of McGann were never meant to account specifically for the political and moral predicaments of scholars faced with the post-Communist legacy. However, spurred by the awareness of the consequences of the ease and seeming

egalitarianism of digitalisation, McGann's formulations share the New Historicist concern with margins and peripheries. The expectation of revisions and reassessments as images of the past gradually break free from the shaping pressure of past regimes, ideological, political, or otherwise. McGann's call for caution remains in tune with a number of earlier somewhat visionary reflections by Jacques Derrida, who pondered over the very concept of an archive, and exposed traps in our approaches to recording human intellectual (and material) history:

> The archive, as printing, writing, prosthesis, or hypomnesic technique in general is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content *of the past* which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been [...] the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. (DERRIDA 1995: 16–17)

Thus, the archive both reflects cultural practices and shapes the cultural memory of them, and in this sense, it remains a potent resource inherently devoid of neutrality. What for McGann and Derrida was source of intellectual anxiety, for post-Communist researchers has turned out to be a necessary moral dilemma which underscores our efforts to scrutinise the past. Thus the ideological liability of the archive has become one of the most important elements of the historical experience of generations who have lived through the dissolution and abolishment of the Communist system.

The problem of rewriting history, which has haunted post-Communist societies ever since the dissolution of the system,[1] was hardly seen as central in the initial stages of the transformation. An oft-repeated sequence of national euphoria, disorientation, and, finally, disenchantment preceded the identification of past secrets and the possible sway they may hold over budding Central and Eastern European democracies. The investigative turn backwards has been fuelled by the abundance of newly released resources; it was often motivated by a soring sense of injustice or mounting frustration over the unequal distribution of wealth and prestige in what was meant to be re-formed societies.

Given the circumstances, the post-war histories written before the abolishment of the Communist system appear partial and (self)censored, therefore lacking. On the other hand, the new historiography of post-Communist countries had to rely on strongly heterogeneous resources which became available in a rapid and occasionally uncontrollable manner. These included: the inherited printed histories of the period (often censored or biased), the parallel accounts and studies published by underground publishers or émigré authors abroad, private archives (damaged, scattered, uncatalogued, guarded by owners or heirs), donated émigré resources (e.g., the *Archive of Jan Kott*), and, finally, security service records (occasionally forged, incomplete, or damaged, as well as sometimes of unclear legal and ethical status).

1 The commonly accepted temporal caesura of the Communist period in Central and Eastern Europe is the year 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, in some countries the transitions, including public access to archives, began earlier or later, or in some cases are still being negotiated.

Whether willingly or not, post-Communist historians faced the task of scrutinising the resources, assessing their informative value, and carefully rewriting the descriptions of events and processes in a way which would reflect the political and ideological complexity of the time. Reconsiderations of history were called for in a somewhat biblical separation of the wheat from the chaff. The emergent studies revealed stunning ambiguities regarding the politically charged literary and theatrical uses of plots and characters. An intensely scrutinised and yet uncontainable process capitalising on the *oeuvre* and status of major European playwrights came to the fore. Significantly enough, the fact-finding zeal often targeted the biographies of major literary critics, writers and translators, re-examining their lives to ensure that honours and prestige had not been bestowed undeservingly.

## The reckoning

> What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,
> That he should weep for her.
> (*Hamlet* 2.2.494–495)

Should the post-war reception of Shakespeare really have become subject to the historical revisionism emergent in the post-Communist period? Naturally, the scale and intensity of the uses of Shakespeare in the contemporary politics varied depending on the country. Since the reception of Shakespeare had been key to high culture ever since the 19th century in Central and Eastern Europe, these practices became an intensely watched and controlled process.

For similar reasons, the neurotic relationship of Shakespeare and Communist regimes has already received a great deal of critical attention, both in and outside the Eastern bloc (e.g., HATTAWAY, SOKOLOVA and ROPER 1994; KUJAWIŃSKA-COURTNEY 2007; CINPOEŞ 2010; MAKARYK and PRICE 2013; BŽOCHOVÁ-WILD 2014). Apparently, the Polish approach solidified in the mid-1950s and soon escaped the confines of the Warsaw Pact, with Jan Kott's *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* published first in French (1963) and then in English and German (1964), in a process which took place almost concurrently with the three successive Polish editions (1961, 1962, 1965). In fact, the swift dissemination of Kottian criticism can be seen as an apt illustration of the paradoxes of the Communist cultural policies.

Initially a devout adherent of Marxism, Kott left the Communist Party in 1957 and became an increasingly vocal critic of the regime. And yet it was the state-owned publishing house Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe (PWN) which commissioned the first English translation of his essays, with the resultant book printed in Poland (MÁRKUS 2012: 155). In 1966 Kott accepted a visiting professorship in the United States. By the time his writings were put on the censor's list in 1968, his career abroad was already in full swing, and this restriction of Kott's work brought no harm to his reception overseas. Translations into the languages of European Communist countries appeared

a few years later (e.g., Czech in 1964, Romanian in 1968, Hungarian in 1970). Nevertheless, negative interpretations circulated widely, not least due to the efforts of local Shakespeare scholars condemning Kott's 'reactionary', 'primitive', 'nihilistic' approach, one so readily embraced in the West (NICOLAESCU 2012: 130–131). As a result, while in Poland Kott was rebuffed for his dogmatism under Stalinism and censored for his subsequent political volte, and in the East stood for a politically subversive theatre, in the West Kott's essays were seen as trustworthy testimonies of life behind the Iron Curtain, a value augmented by publisher policies such as, for example, enhancing the French edition of Kott's essays with a photo of Stalin's funeral (SAWICKA 2010). The heart of the collection was the account of the 1956 Kraków production of *Hamlet*: 'The *Hamlet* produced in Krakow a few weeks after the XX Congress of the Soviet Communist Party lasted exactly three hours. It was light and clear, tense and sharp, modern and consistent, limited to one issue only. It was a political drama *par excellence*' (KOTT 1965: 48).

The production, and perhaps even more so Kott's reading of it, established a political subcode which would run through all subsequent stagings of Shakespeare.[2] Hence the Elizabethan became local, and then the local evolved into the universal, rendering Shakespeare both subversive and untouchable. Significantly enough, the suggestiveness of Kott's interpretations stemmed not from the quality of his textual analyses, but from the strength of his parallels, which repeatedly transgressed the confines of the historical period or even those of literature as such:

> Kott combines his own sense of theatricality [...] with the experience derived from the dissident Shakespeare produced on the Polish stages [...] to rewrite the officially sanctioned versions of both Shakespeare and recent Polish history. His undertaking is not that of the 'professional' Shakespeare scholar but of a universally educated intellectual, 'homme de lettres', whose lineage goes back to Francis Bacon and Montaigne. (NICOLAESCU 2012: 130)

The assumptions of universality added strength to the contemporary appropriations of Shakespeare, but they also soften the edge of his potential anti-Communist stance. Shakespeare became a sharp critic of *any* power relations, but not a radical oppositionist. Interestingly enough, such an approach to Shakespeare remained in tune with the influential analyses of Stephen Greenblatt, who repositions Shakespeare against the poet's original social contexts:

> [Shakespeare's plays] are centrally, repeatedly concerned with the production and containment of subversion and disorder, and the practices that I have identified [...] all have their

2 Kott emphasised the way the production mirrored the situation inside the country, and yet the forming of his own perception of the social mood appears to be rather complex. Aware of his 'perfidious memory given to fantasy' (KOTT 1994: 5), Kott nevertheless reported: 'The weeks that preceded October [1956] have once again merged into my memory into a single accelerated time. Every evening as well into the night we listened to Radio Free Europe, which was being more violently jammed day by day' (KOTT 1994: 203). For specifics regarding the overall Polish post-war reception of *Hamlet*, see (ŚWIĄTKOWSKA 2019).

> recurrent theatrical equivalents, above all in the plays that meditate on the consolidation of state power. (GREENBLATT 1989: 40)

It thus became the built-in ideological flexibility which shielded Shakespeare against censors of all times. The mystery of Shakespeare's co-habitation with Communist regimes called for renewed scrutiny, one that would reflect both official records and individual memories, and thereby expose the confines of the putative 'velvet prison', a task undertaken by a number of scholars from the post-Communist countries (HARASZTI 1987; BRAUN 1996; SCHANDL 2009). Was Shakespeare a mutually agreed safety valve or a genuine field of struggle? What kind of extra knowledge has been gained from studying the archives from and in various decades of the post-war history? And last but not least, what have we learnt since the system finally crumbled?

## The legacies

> What do you read, my lord?
> Words, words, words.
> (*Hamlet* 2.2.188–189)

'When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the Polish theatrical topography seemed sharply defined' (KUBIKOWSKI 2006: 7), recalls the artistic director of the National Theatre Tomasz Kubikowski, who proceeds to reconstruct the polarities of the times: for or against the Solidarity Movement;[3] for or against Martial Law; the public theatre vs. the underground theatre; those who stayed and those who left. The following decades saw the advance of democracy and the gradual disappearance of earlier divisions. In Kubikowski's view, the first (and arguably the last) great production of the period was *The Marriage* by Witold Gombrowicz (dir. Jerzy Jarocki, 1991). Written in 1946, Gombrowicz's play was a menacing travesty of Shakespearean themes, those of *Hamlet* in particular, exposing the traps of memory and the suffocating grip of dead forms of human self-expression. Gombrowicz explained:

> The play depicts the tragedy of a modern man whose world has been devastated, and who saw (in his dream) his home turned into an inn, and his fiancée into a prostitute. In his desire to recover the past, the man proclaims his father the king, and tries to perceive his fiancée as a virgin. All in vain. (GOMBROWICZ 1986: 101–102)[4]

'Is Elsinore even worth returning to?', Gombrowicz asked *mutatis mutandis* as he himself was stranded in Argentina, to the end of his life refusing to return. In 1991, the theatre was addressing this question again, thereby suggesting the return of an old

3 The Solidarity Movement was a trade union established at the Gdańsk Shipyard in 1980. The Movement protected workers' rights and pressed for social and political reforms of the country.

4 All translations from Polish sources are my own.

question for émigré writers along with a tide of shameful revelations as regards the country's recent past.

At first, given the scale of necessary economic and social reforms, historical issues received less priority. The Polish policy of 'the thick red line', separating the new and the old policies of the government,[5] and commonly misinterpreted as an absolving gesture as regards the past, emphasised the need for a joint national effort to set the country on a course of reform. And yet the question of personal and institutional responsibility for collaborating with the Communist regime kept resurfacing, leading to the adoption of successive lustration laws (1992, 1997, 2006, 2007), and spurred by acts of 'wild lustration' with lists of alleged agents and collaborators released unchecked. As far as the legal efforts served mainly to prevent former agents' and collaborators' access to public offices, the media activities targeted prominent individuals, thereby exposing long-term hypocrisy.

The manner of dealing with security service records differed from country to country, from instant opening and swift verification (like in the case of the German Stasi) to more complex and long-lasting processes (like in Czechoslovakia, where the lustration law was adopted in 1992, and then, following the split of the federation in 1993, prolonged in the Czech Republic till the present and allowed to expire in Slovakia in 1996). In Hungary, the law was implemented in 1994 and expired in 2005, with the present access to archives limited to historians only. In Romania, the Securitate archives were used to verify candidates for public offices, but the adoption of a lustration law was postponed till 2006, with access to documents still remaining limited. In some countries, the archives have been renamed and transformed into research centres, such as for example the Polish Institute of National Memory (IPN 1999), the Slovak Institute of National Memory (UPN 2002), the Hungarian Committee of National Remembrance (a research institution, without its own archives, 2013), or the Czech Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (USTRCzR 2007).

Insofar as newspaper disclosures stirred uproar, historical assessments came with hesitation due to the growing awareness of the complex nature of the extant documents. Understandably enough, a significant number of cases of collaboration with the regime were linked to the academic community, writers, and translators whose expertise and professional interests made them prominent inside the country and recognisable abroad. Aware of the traps of personalised case studies, scholars have been inclined to search for more general mechanisms which would explain the functioning of literature, Shakespeare in particular, under a totalitarian regime. The emergent research questions pertained to the scale and effect of the security service operations in spheres related to Shakespeare performances, the ways of controlling academic discourse, and the attempts to censor or manipulate Shakespeare's reception in translation.

5 The image of 'the thick red line' was invoked in August 1989 in the exposé of Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first democratically elected Prime Minister of post-Communist Poland. His intention was to renounce any responsibility of the new government for the past and, at the same time, prevent bloodshed if endeavours were made to square accounts prematurely.

The usefulness of hitherto classified resources varied. For example, the penetration of security agents into theatrical communities can be said to have produced a new genre, a review of sorts, one which offered a combination of plot synopses and comments on the effects of the relevant lines spoken on stage. In 2006, Teatr Dnia Ósmego [Eighth Day Theatre] staged a production entitled *Files* in which passages from classified reports were juxtaposed with fragments of respective productions described by informers.[6] The enterprise produced a puzzling effect of tragicomedy, as live scenes clashed with the formalised language of reports, exposing and condemning their ideological malice. Leaving aside the literary or theatrical value of *Files*, the documentary value of the documents incorporated into the production text shall certainly be explored and assessed by future theatre historians.

Despite the seemingly less complicated history of Shakespeare translations (due to the limited number of state-owned publishers, centralised planning and restricted access to paper), the reconstruction of reception processes appears equally challenging. The immediate post-war period gave rise to a heterogeneous wave of Shakespeare translations motivated by a variety of reasons such as attempts to fulfil pre-war commitments, escapist activities during the war or post-war period, the financial incentive stemming from royalties or publisher's fees, or the urge to find a creative niche free from immediate ideological pressure. In some countries, such as Romania and Hungary, translation was the only choice left to those whose works have been already blacklisted. It must be emphasised that many of the post-war translators of Shakespeare (e.g., Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Roman Brandstaetter) were also writers in their own right, predominantly poets and playwrights. Translation was seen as a supplementary activity, occasionally the fruit of voluntary 'splendid isolation' against the politics of the times. Typically, security police did not see these writers as mere translators. Greater attention was focused on their overall ideological stance, possible connections with the outside world, and usefulness in shaping the literary landscape of the country. Interventions took the form of probing the limits of loyalty, e.g., using the writers to secure public support for repressive actions towards dissident groups or individuals.

Within the Polish context, the lives of translators were often affected by the activities of the security services, though not in connection with their work on Shakespeare. Routinely, the services showed a great deal of interest in the new (and rather ephemeral) works produced by these author-translators, carefully assessing their subversive impact. Inasmuch as the documents do not refer to any specific issues related to Shakespeare translations, they bear witness to the psychological conditions under which the translations were undertaken and sustained. The reports document brutal interference into

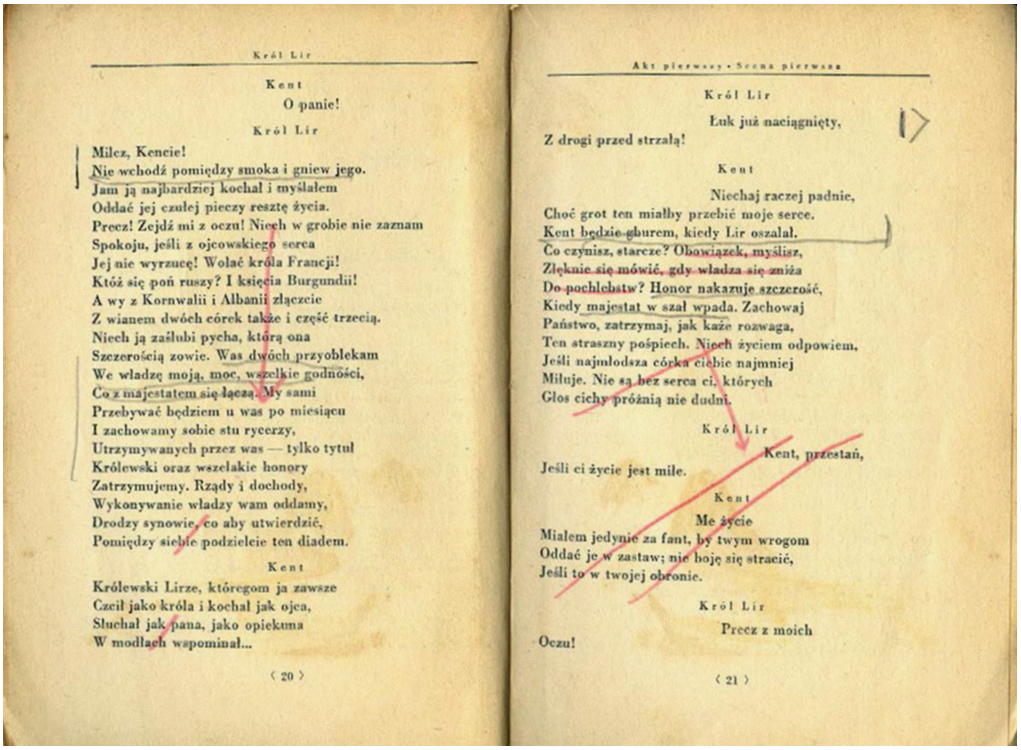
6 Teatr Dnia Ósmego was a leading dissident theatre of the 1970s, many members of which left Poland in 1981 when Martial Law was introduced. For an account of the production see https://ninateka.pl/film/teczki-teatru-dnia-osmego. In Hungary, a similar production based on Kristóf Kelemen's *Megfigyelők* (agents, observers) won the Critics' Prize for Best New Drama in 2019. The play tells a story set in 1965 and invokes the questions of sexual orientation and 'spying' for the West. (I thank Natália Pikli for drawing my attention to this example.)

friendships, as well as elaborate plots to exploit causal contacts to probe loyalty or obtain some dirt. Hence the archives show translators directly exposed to the pressure of the system; they were approached and questioned, remaining painfully aware of the kind of surveillance they might be subject to. In this sense, the characteristic introvert movement, the voluntary withdrawal into the seclusion of private dens, can be seen as an act of escapism or a search for consolation stemming from being immersed in literature depicting the universal misery of the human condition. Sometimes esteemed works came from artists whose biographies rapidly disintegrated when classified sources came to light. 'There is no simple correlation between individual ethics and the quality of art produced by this individual' (KLEMENTOWSKI and LIGARSKI 2008: 23), says the editorial preface to one of the comprehensive inquiries into the impact of the security policy on Polish writers and artists. Collaboration often shattered the lives of the collaborators, but it did not diminish the strength of the works produced by those individuals, whose distress often boosted creativity propelled by ethical crises. Conversely, as argued in the same publication, even though ostracism and suppression would spur creativity, 'there are forms of moral pressure which destroy the integrity of men to the effect that art loses its compensating value', whereas 'administrative or organisational pressure may enforce submissiveness and destroy more ambitious projects' (KLEMENTOWSKI and LIGARSKI 2008: 23). Hence, we shall never know what exactly came into being and what was lost due to the circumstances. Which works emerged to alleviate the sense of guilt and which were abandoned for the lack of prospects of success or persistence is largely lost to today's researchers.

## The (re)visions

The unreliable nature of formerly classified archives is hardly counterbalanced by the findings in private collections, left in chaos or checked carefully for damaging information before the final donation to posterity. A resource of unique value is the *Archive of Jan Kott,* held by the Museum of Emigration of the UMK University Library in Toruń.[7] These documents bear witness to Kott's vivid relations with fellow writers and critics as they sought the support of this luminary of Polish culture living overseas. The Shakespearean traces in Kott's archive are many, but perhaps not as abundant as one might expect from the leading critic of the age: there are copies of *King Lear*, *The Tempest,* and *Hamlet* with directorial cuts and notes, a few blueprints of critical essays and proofs of publications. The copies of the plays were published

7 The resource *Archiwum Jana Kotta* [Archive of Jan Kott] has of yet not been arranged and catalogued. I refer here to the following units within the resource: the annotated copies of the Polish translations of *Hamlet* (transl. by Roman Brandstaetter, PIW), *The Tempest* (transl. by Zofia Siwicka, PIW), *King Lear* (transl. by Zofia Siwicka, PIW), the *Hamlet – układ tekstu i założenia reżyserskie* [Hamlet – playscript and dramaturgical concept] (1973), typescripts of Kott's articles, and his preface to the Japanese edition of *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*. I wish to thank Ms. Grażyna Kwaśnik from *Archiwum Emigracji Polskiej* in Toruń for her kind assistance in exploring the documents online during the period of prohibited access due to Covid restrictions.



Król Lir

Kent

O panie!

Król Lir

Milcz, Kencie!
Nie wchodź pomiędzy smoka i gniew jego.
Jam ją najbardziej kochał i myślałem
Oddać jej czułej pieczy resztę życia.
Precz! Zejdź mi z oczu! Niech w grobie nie zaznam
Spokoju, jeśli z ojcowskiego serca
Jej nie wyrzucę! Wołać króla Francji!
Któż się poń ruszy? I księcia Burgundii!
A wy z Kornwalii i Albanii złączcie
Z wianem dwóch córek także i część trzecią.
Niech ją zaślubi pycha, którą ona
Szczerością zowie. Was dwóch przyoblekam
We władzę moją, moc, wszelkie godności,
Co z majestatem się łączą. My sami
Przebywać będziem u was po miesiącu
I zachowamy sobie stu rycerzy,
Utrzymywanych przez was — tylko tytuł
Królewski oraz wszelakie honory
Zatrzymujemy. Rządy i dochody,
Wykonywanie władzy wam oddamy,
Drodzy synowie, co aby utwierdzić,
Pomiędzy siebie podzielcie ten diadem.

Kent

Królewski Lirze, któregom ja zawsze
Czcił jako króla i kochał jak ojca,
Słuchał jak pana, jako opiekuna
W modłach wspominał...

‹ 20 ›

Akt pierwszy • Scena pierwsza

Król Lir

Łuk już naciągnięty,
Z drogi przed strzałą!

Kent

Niechaj raczej padnie,
Choć grot ten miałby przebić moje serce.
Kent będzie głuchem, kiedy Lir oszalał.
Co czynisz, starcze? Obowiązek, myślisz,
Zlęknie się mówić, gdy władza się zniża
Do pochlebstw? Honor nakazuje szczerość,
Kiedy majestat w szał wpada. Zachowaj
Państwo, zatrzymaj, jak każe rozwaga,
Ten straszny pośpiech. Niech życiem odpowiem,
Jeśli najmłodsza córka ciebie najmniej
Miłuje. Nie są bez serca ci, których
Głos cichy próżnią nie dudni.

Król Lir

Kent, przestań,
Jeśli ci życie jest miłe.

Kent

Me życie
Miałem jedynie za fant, by twym wrogom
Oddać je w zastaw; nie boję się stracić,
Jeśli to w twojej obronie.

Król Lir

Precz z moich
Oczu!

‹ 21 ›

**Fig. 1:** A copy of *King Lear* preserved in the *Archive of Jan Kott* with cuts in the lines of Kent and Lear to foreground the speed of the conflict in the division of the kingdom scene (1.1). Courtesy of *Archiwum Emigracji Polskiej* w Toruniu [The Archives of the Polish Emigration in Toruń].

in the 1950s, whereas the adjustments and glosses allow us to see Kott's work as a dramaturg and not as a critic.

The manner of how Kott processed dramatic texts is often striking in its brutality: the arrows and slashes of the red-pencil cuts stand out as massive, imposing, adamant (see Fig. 1). In *King Lear*, the mediating efforts of Kent in the division scene are reduced to a few angry exchanges, each carrying a bare argument. In *Hamlet*, Kott's mode of re-imagining the text is fundamentally political, a stance best exemplified by indexing each character with a contemporary sub-code: 'a Khrushchev', 'a Cyrankiewicz', 'a Kliszko', all well-established members of Communist elites.[8]

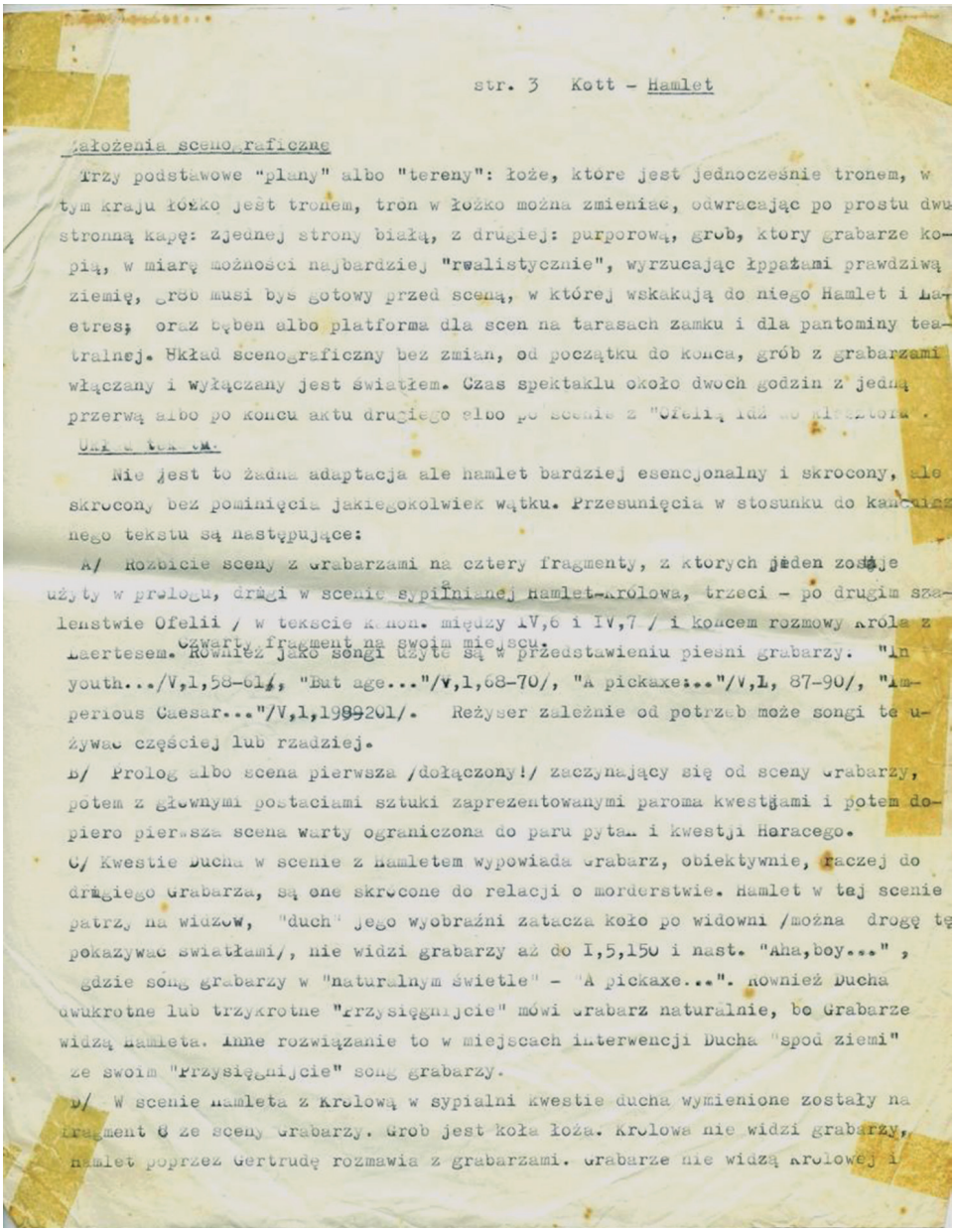
8 Nikita Khrushchev replaced Stalin as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1953 until 1964, when Khrushchev was removed from power. Józef Cyrankiewicz was Polish Prime Minister in the years 1947–1952, 1954–1970 (five terms). Cyrankiewicz was dismissed following the social riots which were brutally suppressed in 1970. Zenon Kliszko held many posts, including that of the Speaker of Parliament in the years 1957–1971. Persecuted under Stalinism, he became the leading politician in the period that followed Stalin's death and was removed in the aftermath of the events of 1970. Examples of Kott's indexing appear later in this essay.

However, it is Kott's concept of a production of *Hamlet* which appears to be the quintessence of his interpretative method (see Fig. 2). Marked with surprisingly prominent copyright notes ('Jan Kott, 1973, all rights reserved'), the text is dated 1973, but cannot be linked to any of Kott's activities at the time. The project notes are written in Polish, including instructions assuming the reader's acute familiarity with local politics. The play, however, is cited in English, and at some point Kott mentions the importance of German prosody for the rearrangement of the text. The project was completed after Kott had directed a number of student performances in English at Stony Brook University, before he became a guest dramaturg at Burgtheater in Vienna in 1976. Putting together his ideas, Kott could have targeted Konrad Swinarski (a leading Polish director of the time who staged Shakespeare plays in Germany), but there is nothing to prove they had any contact with each other at that time.[9] The careful preservation of the text is meaningful, as it seems to testify to Kott's deepest longing to go beyond reviewing, and to at last work with the raw material of the theatre.

Kott begins with denying the obvious: 'This is no adaptation of any kind, but a *Hamlet* which is more quintessential and shortened' (KOTT 1973: 3).[10] But every now and then the succinct descriptions of central characters show that the stage design runs contrary to the text, thus calling for bold dramaturgical interventions. Women are not central to Kott's design: they hang about in the background, knowing little more than their own sentiments. Gertrude, 'hardly older than Ophelia, knows about everything from the start but she has not partaken in her husband's poisoning; she wants to protect Claudius from Hamlet, and Hamlet from Claudius and finds it impossible; her suicide is entirely deliberate' (KOTT 1973: 1). Ophelia, 'older and taller than Hamlet, a young lady from the establishment, daughter of the prime minister (Cyrankiewicz?), aloof, hates everybody and everything, feigns madness out of malice and gets caught up in her role to the point of suicide' (KOTT 1973: 1). What is striking, however, is the compassionate attitude towards the culprits: Claudius is an optimist, 'thinks that one crime will suffice, and strives to stay noble as long as possible', 'he is not any worse than Khrushchev' and 'should arouse sympathy for a long time' (KOTT 1973: 1). Polonius is 'an unsuccessful actor, such as Kliszko, not quite aware he is a prime minister in a criminal underworld and an ideologue for murderers' (KOTT 1973: 2). The backbone of the performance is the double casting of the pair of gravediggers and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. From the very onset of the performance, the former are the only truly realistic figures on stage, busy with digging the grave as they exchange dour witticisms. The latter 'work in the secret police, partially for ideological reasons, partially for the prospect of profit', 'both unsuccessful Warsaw literati, arrivistes' (KOTT 1973: 2). Significantly enough, it is the gravediggers who set the plot in motion. The lines of the Ghost are split between the two of them and cut to sustain the illusion of their report's neutrality. Hamlet ('young and contemporary, from my essay but without the illusions of the early 1960s')

9 Kott also never showed the project to his friend Kazimierz Braun, a director and theatre historian based in the States (email communication with K. Braun, July 2020).

10 The citation comes from *Projekt scenieczny Hamleta* (1973). As this document remains uncatalogued, the references here refer to the original page numbers written by Kott.



str. 3 Kott - Hamlet

Założenia scenograficzne

Trzy podstawowe "plany" albo "tereny": łoże, które jest jednocześnie tronem, w tym kraju łóżko jest tronem, tron w łóżko można zmieniać, odwracając po prostu dwustronną kapę: zjednej strony białą, z drugiej: purporową, grób, ktory grabarze kopią, w miarę możności najbardziej "realistycznie", wyrzucając łppażami prawdziwą ziemię, grób musi bys gotowy przed sceną, w której wskakują do niego Hamlet i Laertes; oraz bęben albo platforma dla scen na tarasach zamku i dla pantominy teatralnej. Układ sceneograficzny bez zmian, od początku do końca, grób z grabarzami włączany i wyłączany jest światłem. Czas spektaklu około dwoch godzin z jedną przerwą albo po końcu aktu drugiego albo po scenie z "Ofelią idź do klasztoru".

Uwagi ogólne.

Nie jest to żadna adaptacja ale hamlet bardziej esencjonalny i skrocony, ale skrocony bez pominięcia jakiegokolwiek wątku. Przesunięcia w stosunku do kanonicznego tekstu są następujące:

A/ Rozbicie sceny z grabarzami na cztery fragmenty, z ktorych jeden zostaje użyty w prologu, drugi w scenie sypialnej Hamlet-Królowa, trzeci - po drugim szaleństwie Ofelii / w tekście kanon. między IV,6 i IV,7 / i końcem rozmowy króla z Laertesem. Również jako songi użyte są w przedstawieniu piesni grabarzy. "In youth.../V,1,58-61/, "But age..."/V,1,68-70/, "A pickaxe..."/V,1, 87-90/, "Imperious Caesar..."/V,1,198-201/. Reżyser zależnie od potrzeb może songi te używac częściej lub rzadziej.

Czwarty fragment na swoim miejscu.

B/ Prolog albo scena pierwsza /dołączony!/ zaczynający się od sceny grabarzy, potem z głownymi postaciami sztuki zaprezentowanymi paroma kwestjami i potem dopiero pierwsza scena warty ograniczona do paru pytań i kwestji Horacego.

C/ Kwestie Ducha w scenie z Hamletem wypowiada Grabarz, obiektywnie, raczej do drugiego Grabarza, są one skrocone do relacji o morderstwie. Hamlet w tej scenie patrzy na widzow, "duch" jego wyobraźni zatacza koło po widowni /można drogę tę pokazywac światłami/, nie widzi grabarzy aż do I,5,150 i nast. "Aha,boy..." , gdzie song grabarzy w "naturalnym świetle" - "A pickaxe...". Również Ducha dwukrotne lub trzykrotne "przysięgnijcie" mówi Grabarz naturalnie, bo Grabarze widzą Hamleta. Inne rozwiązanie to w miejscach interwencji Ducha "spod ziemi" ze swoim "przysięgnijcie" song grabarzy.

D/ W scenie Hamleta z Królową w sypialni kwestie ducha wymienione zostały na fragment 8 ze sceny Grabarzy. Grob jest koło łoża. Królowa nie widzi grabarzy, Hamlet poprzez Gertrudę rozmawia z grabarzami. Grabarze nie widzą Królowej i

**Fig. 2:** Jan Kott *Założenia scenograficzne Hamleta* [Dramaturgical Concept of *Hamlet*] (1973), description of the setting and major textual shifts. Courtesy of *Archiwum Emigracji Polskiej* w Toruniu [The Archives of the Polish Emigration in Toruń].

can hear their dialogue, but he cannot see who is speaking. 'His main concern is not to become Hamlet' (KOTT 1973: 2), but he does swallow the bait and soon gets caught up in his role of an errant avenger. The gravediggers prove to be the keepers and ministers of memory, but the truth they reveal – anonymous, uncertain, fragmentary – does hardly any good to Hamlet, or to Elsinore.

The prince dies laughing (as in Peter Hall's production of 1965, notes Kott), and the foreign troops march onto the stage, scattering away the gravediggers who have been stealing the corpses. At the beginning of the 1970s, Kott's diagnoses remained in perfect accord with the way many dissident thinkers saw the ultimate limits of rebellion. With Soviet troops stationed in and around each of the Communist countries, there was no time for national catharsis, and the disclosure of past truths could trigger catastrophe. This argument was also directly invoked by the Communist authorities, insisting, as was the case in Poland, that the introduction of Martial Law in 1981 shielded the country from Soviet intervention similar to the invasions of Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968).

However, the deep ironies of Kott's reading of history in 1973 came to full light in the post-Communist period. Trading in their first-hand information, the gravediggers easily disarm Hamlet's intellect, and the prince does not profit from his innate intelligence nor from his familiarity with previous productions or even Kott's critical essays. Sinking in his anxieties, the prince leaves the fragile borders unguarded: and this is the only truly Kottian *Hamlet* that Kott designed and left for us to study. Insofar as the idea of history, or the memory of it, entrusted to gravediggers could be seen as embedded in the original concept of the play, the reassignment of the Ghost's lines indicates the dismissal of the metaphysical framework of the play, wherein the voices of the dead were mistrusted but nevertheless heard. In this sense this typically Kottian *Hamlet* is a play set in a materialist world with no guarantees of justice offered by providential forces or destiny. With the unreliability of testimonies along with our devious uses of them rightly exposed, it is the suggestive power of Kott's parable which addresses the chaos of the collapsing totalitarian system as delineated in his dramaturgical design. Thus Kottian truth hangs simply on the identification of manipulative mechanisms, which are exposed with no expectations as to the accuracy or relevance of individual histories, princely or otherwise.

Indeed, the multitude of institutional and private resources released in the post-Communist period has already proved to be an important source of knowledge about the age, although they must also be taken as neither obvious nor trustworthy. McGann's rephrasing of Terence – *Homo sum; sit humani nil a me alienum puto* – can be interpreted as an encouragement to explore all the qualities of the human, every situation and every interpretation, regardless of the writer's intention. And yet the documentary complexity of archives, the absence of a temporal gap, and the defamatory nature of extant records induce certain repulsive reactions which inhibit comprehensive research and may have to wait for the next generations born after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The passage of time will cool down emotions, but it will also diminish the chance of confirming accounts or finding witnesses. With all our efforts intensified or suspended, the

past preserved and conserved in the archive will remain fragmented and presumptive. And thus, we join Hamlet in his insistence, and his resignation: 'Tell them [...] more or less. The rest is silence'. Unsatisfactory as this may appear to us, the actual exploration of the archives may begin after the passing away of those which have deposited there their secrets. Some of these secrets are bound to be something touching Shakespeare.

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