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## Theatre of the Nation: Romanian Historical and Allegorical Drama Before the First World War

### Abstract

This study investigates the way in which Romanian theatre before World War I contributed to the formation of Romanian national consciousness and to the articulation of the ideal of a unitary national state. My analysis addresses the historical drama and dramatic allegories of the nation, with special focus on the drama of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (and on the works of playwrights such as Alexandru Davila, Barbu Ștefănescu Delavrancea, Nicolae Iorga, Zaharia Bârsan, Ștefan Octavian Iosif and Victor Eftimiu). As a related topic, I address the rise of extremist nationalism in pre-war Romanian society. Mainly resorting to discourse analysis and close reading, I demonstrate the importance of theatre in the crystallisation of the Romanians' national-identity assertiveness, which culminated, politically speaking, in the achievement of the Great Union of 1918.

### Keywords

nation, dramaturgy, Romania, history, allegory

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Before addressing the topic of the present investigation, which concerns the way in which Romanian theatre prior to the First World War contributed to the formation of the national consciousness of the Romanians and to the emergence of the ideal of a unitary national state, I provide the readers with a number of historical explanations for context.

The foundations of modern Romania were laid in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, most Romanians lived in territories controlled by the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires (soon joined by Russia). These were the Grand Principality of Transylvania, the regions of Maramureș, Crișana, Banat and Bukovina – which were part of the Habsburg Empire – and the principalities of Wallachia<sup>1</sup> and Moldavia,<sup>2</sup> under Ottoman suzerainty. In 1812 the Russian Empire annexed the eastern part of Moldavia between the Prut and Dniester rivers, renaming it Bessarabia (after a region in southern Moldavia). However, in the favourable circumstances created after the Crimean War in 1859, the first important unification in Romania's history took place, namely that between Wallachia and Moldavia (not including the eastern territory occupied by the Russians). The name Romania was made official by the Constitution adopted in 1866. Following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, Romania freed itself from Ottoman rule by fighting on the side of Russia under the German-born ruler Carol, who had been crowned in 1866. In 1881, Romania was proclaimed a kingdom (constitutional monarchy) and prince Carol became King Carol I.

The struggle for national emancipation of the Romanians within the Habsburg Empire, which had begun in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, faced a significant hurdle in 1867 when – following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise – Transylvania, Banat, Maramureș and Crișana were incorporated into the Kingdom of Hungary, and Bukovina (part of

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1 Țara Românească in Romanian (which means, literally, The Romanian Country or Land).

2 Moldova in Romanian. Nowadays, the historical region of Moldavia is split between Romania, The Republic of Moldova (which share the same official language, Romanian) and Ukraine.

historical Moldavia annexed in 1774 by the Habsburgs) was made an imperial province. Under the dual monarchy, the Romanians of Transleithania<sup>3</sup> were subjected to an intense policy of Magyarisation, while a similar treatment was applied to the inhabitants of the Duchy of Cisleithanian Bukovina;<sup>4</sup> the forced assimilation of the Romanians living in Bessarabia under Russian occupation was even more harsh (Hitchins, 1994, p. 202). In this context, the issue of the Transylvanian Romanians (regarded as a tolerated nation and deprived of fundamental rights, despite their majority in the region) became an obsessive concern for public opinion in Romania. However, general hostility towards Austro-Hungary posed an immense challenge to Romanian politicians, and especially to King Carol I, who in 1883 concluded a secret pact with the Central Powers in order to counter the Russian threat. When the First World War broke out, dissent among the political elite – between the supporters of an alliance with the Central Powers and those supporting an alliance with the Entente countries – became more acute, at a time when the public had already decided in favour of the Entente (Constantiniu, 2008, p. 267). King Carol I, who intended to honour the pact with the Central Powers, was opposed by members of the Crown Council. He wanted to abdicate, but death took him sooner. He was succeeded to the throne by his nephew Ferdinand I.

Romania remained neutral until 1916, when those who advocated entering the war with the Entente prevailed. The ideal of national unity, namely that of Transylvania joining the ‘motherland’, outweighed considerations of national security (Constantiniu, 2008, p. 267). Within a short time the capital and two thirds of Romania’s territory were occupied by German and Bulgarian troops. However, the fortunes of war miraculously turned in its favour. Following the demise of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, Romanians living there demanded union with Romania in 1918, which led to the creation of Greater Romania, which in addition

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3 Transleithania was the informal name for the Lands of the Crown of St Stephen, i.e. the territories belonging to Hungary under the dual Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

4 Cisleithania was the name designating the territories in the Austrian half of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

to the Old Kingdom included Transylvania, parts of Maramureș, Crișana, Banat, Bukovina and Bessarabia.<sup>5</sup> The year 1918 was therefore recorded by Romanian historiography as the year of the 'Great Union', whose main landmark was the Old Kingdom being joined with Transylvania.

### **Allegories of the nation and Romanian historical drama in the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

The Great Union achieved at the end of the First World War was the culmination of the Romanian movements for liberation and national and cultural emancipation from the authority of the aforementioned empires. As these movements emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and throughout this period, the nation – in the sense of an 'imagined political community' (Anderson 1991, p. 6) – was the great *idée-force* that sustained and mobilised Romanian society, which had already embarked on the path of modernisation, giving it a general direction in almost all areas, from politics to the arts.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, some areas of Romanian education and culture developed precisely because of the awakening of national sentiment among the Romanian elites. This is also the case with Romanian professional theatre, which emerged in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see also Hațiegan, 2020). It was the product of one or two generations of intellectuals, most of them educated in the West and coming from the ranks of the lower and middle aristocracy of Wallachia and Moldavia. The ideal of national unity became prominent in Romanian theatre around the time of the Union of the Principalities in 1859, when many occasional pro-Unionist short plays appeared, usually ending with *tableaux vivants*, angels, voivodes and, last but not least, allegorical women representing the United Principalities and donning national

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5 Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia were later annexed by the Soviets. Northern Bukovina currently belongs to Ukraine, and Bessarabia is today's Republic of Moldova (minus historical Bessarabia, which was also incorporated by Ukraine after the breakup of the U.S.S.R.).

6 According to Alex Drace-Francis (2006), the term *nation* began 'to really be used widely' in Wallachia and Moldavia 'only in the 1820s and later', but 'ideas of national identity' had been circulating in Romanian-inhabited territories 'since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and even earlier' (pp. 84, 9).

costumes. Most of them dwelt on the religiously charged theme of the rebirth of Romania. A similar mobilising role was played by *Le Rêve de Dochia* [Dochia's Dream] (1877), an allegorical/dramatic poem composed at the beginning of the War of Independence by the French-Romanian writer Frédéric Damé (1849–1907). It was immediately translated into Romanian and performed at the National Theatre in Bucharest. The cast included several female characters portraying Banat, Transylvania, Bukovina and Bessarabia – provinces which at the time were under Austro-Hungarian or Russian rule. The poem thus expresses the unionist dream which prompted political action in the following century. An allegorical short play, *Visul României* [Romania's Dream] (1899) by Constantin Grigoriu (1866–1914), which tapped into the same unionist mindset – though with abrasive allusions to the plight of Romanians outside the country's borders – was performed by schoolgirls in 1898 at a secondary school teachers' festival. This outraged the head of government, who ordered the play to be censored for fear of the reaction from Romania's neighbours (Austria-Hungary in particular), sparking a huge scandal. The national issue was becoming increasingly heated.

In *Visualising the Nation*, Joan B. Landes points out that nationalist ideology involves a convergence of patriotic sentiment and eroticism (2001, p. 80). The nation is far too abstract a concept to stir the imagination of the masses in the absence of representations that appeal directly to the senses, Landes notes. When the political community is entirely male (as was the Romanian one in the era in question), female representations of the nation serve to stimulate feelings of desire and attachment (filial or passionate) in its members towards the concept thus personified. This may account for the proliferation of female allegorical representations of the nation in the period before the Unification of the Principalities and later, during the consolidation of the Romanian state (see also Hațiegan, 2018, 2019).

Romanian historical drama was slow to mature. The Shakespearean and Romantic-style plays of the period up to 1900 evince a predilection of the best authors for anti-heroes, adventurers and obscure and individualistic characters, which allowed for greater creative freedom. In plays such as *Răzvan și Vidra* (1867) by Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu (1838–1907) – the first great success of the

genre – or *Despot-Vodă* (1879) by Vasile Alecsandri (1821–1890), the protagonists are modelled on the figures of eccentric personalities in Romanian history, who did not have any major impact on the destinies of the countries they temporarily ruled. Also, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romanian historical drama was very receptive to the tenets of Romanian historiography of the period, concerning the origins of the Romanian people, the continuity of the Romanian population in the territories north of the Danube (disputed by Austrian and Hungarian historians, who sought to justify the discriminatory policy applied to the Romanians in Transylvania) and the awareness of their unity throughout time.

Borrowing these tenets and themes from historians, playwrights made an important contribution to the creation of a national mythology around them and thus to the formation of the national consciousness of Romanians. The dream of uniting the Romanians of Transylvania, Wallachia and Moldavia under a single crown also haunts the protagonists of Hasdeu's and Alecsandri's plays, despite their eccentricity. Another case in point is the writer Dimitrie Bolintineanu (1825–1872), who between 1865 and 1868 published a number of dramas deeply indebted to Romanian Romantic historiography, with all its exaggerations. Three of them are inspired by the figure of Mihai Viteazul (Michael the Brave), who ruled for a time (in 1600) over these three medieval states, roughly corresponding to the territory of Greater Romania. For this reason, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century he became the symbol of the national and state unity to which Romanians aspired at that time. Bolintineanu endows his hero with a modern national consciousness, projecting the ideas of his epoch onto the past.

### Post-1900

The theatre with a specific national character, centred around figures sanctified by national mythology and strongly anchored in the community, crystallised much better under the influence of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Neo-Romanticism. The masterpieces of the genre, *Vlaicu Vodă* (1902), a five-act verse drama, and *Apus de soare* (1909), a four-act play, were written by Alexandru Davila (1862–1929) and

Barbu Ștefănescu Delavrancea (1858–1918), respectively. The fashion for occasional allegorical short plays on a national topic, on the other hand, experienced a decline.

Davila is remembered in the history of Romanian literature and theatre primarily as the author of *Vlaicu Vodă* [Vlaicu Voivode], as well as a theatre director and a reformer of the performing arts. The inspiration for the play came from a friend who urged him to turn ‘the idea of the unification of the Romanian land into a play’ (Massoff, 1973, p. 97), referring to the Union of the Principalities. Davila promised him to write a play on the subject, but not ‘à thèse, to glorify this idea, because it is a *fait accompli*’. The huge success of *Vlaicu Vodă*, which premiered at the National Theatre in Bucharest on 12 February 1902, was due not so much to its retrospective as to its prospective character: although the play touches on the shared interests of Wallachia and Moldavia, the theme of the Romanian struggle and resistance against Hungarian expansion takes centre stage. This was an extremely hot topic when the play appeared, because of the persecutions suffered by the Romanians in Transleithan Transylvania. In fact, after the war, in 1923, Davila admitted that he had ‘looked into the Romanian past for times similar to those we were living in’, and had found them in the reign of Vladislav I (Vlaicu), who ruled Wallachia between 1364 and 1377, for ‘in our time, we were hoping for a fusion under the Romanian crown of all the Romanian peoples, and this is what Vlaicu Vodă sought to achieve as well’ (Rampa, 1923, p. 3). The playwright therefore resorted to the same kind of anachronism cultivated by his predecessors and attributed a modern national consciousness to his protagonist. Thus, at the beginning of the second act of the play, Vlaicu Vodă speaks of the ‘great’ dream that he has, namely that of seeing his own dynasty, the Basarabs, ruling ‘over the whole Romanian-speaking nation’ (Davila, 1929, p. 59). Also, according to his own declarations, the playwright, who was close to the Royal House, used ‘some character traits of King Carol I’ in his portrayal of Vlaicu (Massoff, 1985, p. 41), hence the modernity of the character, who no longer displays the classical heroic virtues but stands out mainly due to his diplomatic skills.

Finding himself at the beck and call of King Louis I the Great of Hungary (and Poland), who is holding his sister and brother-in-law

hostage, Vlaicu is forced to conceal his true feelings for a while, but he secretly plans a counter-offensive. Dissimulation is all the more necessary as his movements are closely watched by his stepmother, the Hungarian-born Lady Clara, who plays into the hands of King Louis I. Vlaicu Vodă's plotting behind the scenes confuses even his most loyal boyars (local aristocracy), who suspect him of treason. Only one character understands Vlaicu and stands by him to the end: Rumân Grue, the mute hero who symbolises the people devoted to the country to the point of supreme sacrifice. Finally, Vlaicu reveals his intentions, refuses to be the vassal of Louis and enters into an alliance with the Serbian king, to whom he promises to marry his sister. She is thus sacrificed on the altar of the motherland (for she is in love with Mircea Basarab, Vlaicu's nephew). The boyars rally around the ruler, and the plans of the truculent Lady Clara and her cronies are thwarted.

In the protagonist's character arc, Doina Modola (1983) identifies 'the pattern of a myth: the dissimulation under a humiliating camouflage, of a hero, of an exceptional character' (p. 54). Thus, Davila does not completely abandon the devices previously used by the playwrights who wrote historical drama before him: the archetype of the skilful diplomat, embodied by Vlaicu, conceals one much more familiar to the audience of the time, namely the Christ-like hero who suffers for the sake of his country. Interestingly, after the war Davila (1923) – a convinced supporter of the Entente – denied any substantial resemblance between his character and King Carol I, on the grounds that the latter preferred 'great Germany' to 'little Romania .... Vlaicu is, above all, a Romanian, a genuine Romanian, a true Romanian, the Romanian loyal to tradition, while King Carol remained, until the very end, a Prussian dragoon officer', Davila wrote, quite unfairly (p. 1).

The plot also has a religious side, in addition to the political one, from which it cannot be separated: while defending his country, Vlaicu Vodă also defends Orthodoxy against the expansion of Catholicism – a denomination that finds a zealous missionary in Lady Clara. Converting to Catholicism, Clara argues, would contribute to the country's progress, directing it towards the West of Europe, 'where knowledge and light is' (Davila, 1929, p. 154). Vlaicu Vodă and

the Romanian boyars' counter-arguments are the 'ancestral law' and the 'custom' of the land. In other words, Orthodoxy is inextricably linked to local tradition. This dispute echoes an older Romanian controversy, still unresolved today, between the proponents of westernisation and traditionalists. Throughout *Vlaicu Vodă*, the playwright seems to side with the latter. However, one of the play's characters, the Orthodox monk Nicodim, explains that Catholic propaganda is just a tool used by the Pope and his representatives to subjugate the people, as the Pope 'is patriarch and king, he is confessor and warrior' (Davila, 1929, p. 55). Resistance to Catholicism must therefore be understood primarily as a rejection of foreign domination.

When Davila wrote his play, Vladislav I was a rather obscure figure in Romanian history. This was not the case for Mircea, Vladislav's nephew,<sup>7</sup> who has a thankless role in Davila's masterpiece. Mircea I Basarab (known as Mircea the Elder or the Great) reigned over Wallachia, between 1386 and 1418, with a brief interruption, and distinguished himself in battles against the Turks. His figure was immortalised by the Romantic poet Mihai Eminescu in a poem published in 1881 (*Scrisoarea a III-a* [Third Epistle]), which conferred on him a mythical aura. The first version of Davila's play, written in 1902, ends with Mircea being banished with harsh words by Vlaicu, having tried to kill the voivode who opposed his love for Vlaicu's half-sister (and instead killing Rumân Grue, who throws himself between the two). According to Davila, who intended to write a trilogy, which was never completed, the character was to be rehabilitated in the other two plays, with the final one dedicated to him entirely. However, the scene mentioned above so displeased the audience that Davila was forced to rework it. In later anonymous editions of the play (1908, 1921, 1925 and 1929), Vlaicu forgives Mircea and makes him his right-hand man in Grue's place. Relevant for the atmosphere of patriotic exaltation in Romania before the Great War is the position taken on this issue by Eugen Lovinescu,

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7 Mircea I Basarab was actually the son of Vladislav I Basarab's son, and not Vladislav's nephew, as Davila believed. Consequently, he could not have fallen in love with the half-sister of his grandfather.

the literary critic who led the most pro-Western and cosmopolitan literary group in Romania during the interwar period. Writing about *Vlaicu Vodă* in 1914, Lovinescu (1927) stated that Davila's portrayal of Mircea was tantamount to 'a veritable national assassination' (p. 58). Lovinescu considered that, unlike history, which can also take an interest in the flaws of past personalities, art must confine itself to 'the ideal reality' when it comes to heroes who have become legendary (p. 55). Despite the initial 'assassination', by 1925 the play had been performed 100 times at the National Theatre in Bucharest alone (Cioculescu, 1988, p. 7) – a record for the Romanian theatre of that time.

Delavrancea's *Apus de soare* [Sunset], the other great success of pre-war Romanian historical drama, centres on the ruler Ștefan (Stephen) III the Great (or Holy), who reigned over Moldavia between 1457 and 1504. The play is part of a trilogy, which also includes the dramas *Viforul* [The Windstorm] and *Luceafărul* [The Morning Star], both published in 1910. They focus on the figures of two of Ștefan's descendants, namely Ștefăniță (Stephen the Younger, Stephen IV), ruler of Moldavia between 1517 and 1527, and Petru Rareș, who ruled Moldavia between 1527 and 1538 and between 1541 and 1546 (the playwright stops at his first reign). Doina Modola (1982) points out that the trilogy seems to be based on the well-known Hegelian triad: thesis-antithesis-synthesis, with Ștefan, Ștefăniță and Petru Rareș 'representing respectively the hero (in a hieratic, stylised manner), the anti-hero (in romantic Hugo style) [and] the modern hero (dilemmatic)' (p. 9). The first one ('the sun') appears at the end of his life and exemplary reign, imposing his will even beyond death; the second ('the windstorm') is depicted at the height of his bloodthirsty dementia, killing out of an inferiority complex in relation to his great predecessor and being murdered for it by his own wife; and the third ('the morning star') is presented as a follower of Ștefan, defeated by circumstances, but not without leaving behind a glimmer of hope for the country's progress.

The plays do not have equal literary value. The most impactful one, which most impressed the readership, is undoubtedly *Apus de soare*, although *Viforul* is more theatrical, according to classical canons. *Luceafărul*, due to its not very well-constructed episodic

structure, was always considered the least successful play in the trilogy. It is worth mentioning that the latter most often and explicitly raises the question of the unity of all Romanians, by resorting to anachronism (although Delavrancea based his dramas on thorough research). Thus, at the beginning of Act II, Petru Rareș speaks of ‘the suffering of the same nation scattered under three different crowns’ (Delavrancea, 1910, p. 72). And in the fourth act, a character laments the behaviour of some of the boyars, ‘conceited, and envious, and disloyal’, for if it were not for them, according to Rareș, ‘we would all be one, one and the same, all of us descendants of Rome, on either side of the mountains, from the steppes of Hungary to the shores of the sea’ (p. 187). All three plays of the trilogy converge, however, in supporting the ideas expressed by Petru Rareș in the final one. Delavrancea, who was not only a prolific writer, but also a lawyer and politician, was a staunch supporter of the cause of the Romanians in Austro-Hungary throughout his public career, and during the years of Romania’s neutrality he actively campaigned to support the country’s entry into the war alongside the Entente. ‘Let us close in on the Kesar, let us shorten his path by taking over Transylvania!... Oh! I have dreamt! Let my descendants dream too!’, says Petru Rareș in *Luceafărul* (p. 73), voicing the obsession of the author and his contemporaries.

Interest in Stephen the Great’s era was stimulated at the beginning of the last century by the 400th anniversary of his death in 1904 and the 450th anniversary of his accession to the throne in 1907. On the occasion of the commemoration of his death, historian Nicolae Iorga (1871–1940) published his *Istoria lui Ștefan cel Mare povestită neamului românesc* [History of Stephen the Great told to the Romanian nation], which was the main source of information for Delavrancea. He also wrote his trilogy under the influence of the great peasant uprising of 1907, which was bloodily suppressed, much to the writer’s horror. A convinced demophile, Delavrancea projected onto the reign of Stephen the Great ‘the utopia of peasant and national democracy’ (Modola, 1983, p. 66), perhaps in counter-reaction to that tragedy. He was likely also influenced in this sense by the opinions of Iorga, who was the main proponent of Sămănătorism, a literary movement and national/agrarian current of thought that dominated Romanian

cultural life in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hitchins, 1994, pp. 67–71). Though not affiliated with this movement, Delavrancea had clear affinities for it. Thus, Stephen the Great's court in *Apus de soare* resembles a peasant's household, run according to patriarchal ordinances. Stylised folkloric elements and motifs can be found in the scenographic details and costumes of the characters. The solidarity between the ruler and the people – the fruit of the convergence of the will and aspirations of Stephen and his subjects – is sealed by a bond of flesh: Petru Rareș and Oana, characters who feature prominently throughout the trilogy, are the illegitimate children of Stephen the Great and a commoner. In *Luceafărul*, this glorious filiation, on which Rareș prides himself, is elevated to the status of a symbol. 'In me the lineage of the Mușatins and the lineage of the people are merged into one', he says (Delavrancea, 1910, p. 243).

The protagonist of *Apus de soare* is shown by Delavrancea in three roles that equally reveal his greatness: as a hero of the nation and champion of Christianity, as a Christ figure (martyred by old age and illness) and as a patriarch revered by all of Moldavia (depicted, as we have already shown, as a great peasant family). The 'national character' of the play's atmosphere is achieved by merging the historical imaginary, the Christian imaginary and the rural imaginary. As the hero of the nation, Stephen (Ștefan) makes a final (victorious) military expedition to stabilise the northern border between Moldavia and Poland, setting milestones along the border of Pokuttia, the region he had won from King John I Albert of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth following the Battle of Codrîi Cosminului (1497). His descendants, however, later lost it.

In *Vîforul*, Ștefăniță intends to invade Poland in order to regain Pokuttia. The boyars disagree, as they feel that it would not be good for the country to break relations with the Poles. Ștefăniță falsely accuses them of plotting to bring Petru Rareș, who is taking refuge in Poland, to the throne in his stead, and executes the best patriots among them. In *Luceafărul*, Pokuttia is again the main concern of the Moldavian ruler, who suffered a humiliating defeat at Obertyn (in 1531) in his attempt to recover it. Delavrancea has Petru Rareș, during the middle acts of the play, engaged in a new attempt to conquer it, achieving a fleeting victory. Moldavia is later attacked

simultaneously from three sides – by the Turks, Tatars and Poles – and Rareș is unable to persuade the boyars to support him in resisting. As a result, he is forced to take refuge in Transylvania, where he holds several fortresses.

Not coincidentally, perhaps, the playwright focusses much more in his trilogy on Moldavia's conflicts with its north-western neighbours, Poland and Hungary, than on those with the Turks or the Tatars, given that the terrain of these confrontations was in possession of Austro-Hungary when he was composing his plays. Even the centre of Stephen the Great's power, Cetatea de Scaun (the Princely Citadel) of Suceava (in south-eastern Bukovina), belonged to Cisleithania in Delavrancea's time. So did the monastery of Putna, where the tomb of the ruler is located. In 1911, a Romanian theatre company performed Delavrancea's trilogy in Bukovina with great success at the invitation of the Society for Romanian Culture and Literature in Cernăuți (Chernivtsi).

As regards the martyr role of Ștefan, the characterisation made by Ion Luca Caragiale (2015) (a classic of Romanian theatre) of Delavrancea's masterpiece in the daily newspaper *Universul* in 1909 is very eloquent and pertinent: '*Apus de soare* is a play in the genre of the so-called Sacred Mysteries of the Lord's Passion' (p. 926). The protagonist stoically endures the ordeal of old age, weakness and the pain caused by an old leg wound, aggravated by the expedition to Pokuttia. His physical suffering culminates in the scene where his leg wound is cauterised with a red-hot iron. The treatment is not successful and Stephen dies, with the name of Moldavia on his lips, but not before executing the three boyars who were plotting to remove his designated successor from the throne; with his last breath he proclaims his eldest son Bogdan as ruler. In this fabulous scene, as historian Lucian Boia (2001) notes:

Stephen speaks out from beyond the grave and beyond history to confirm the communion of generations in the spirit of the eternal Romanian ideal: 'Keep in mind the words of Stephen, who was your shepherd far into his old age..., that Moldavia was not my ancestors', was not mine, and is not yours, but belongs to our descendants and our descendants' descendants to the end of time.' The words are those of

the great orator Delavrancea and in no way those of the old ruler, but what does it matter? The image of Stephen the Great that is imprinted in public consciousness owes much more to this play than to any document of the time or scholarly monograph. (p. 195)

Stephen the Great's (Ștefan's) patriarchal, 'clan chief' persona has no real rivals, which is why the only serious conflict in the play is between his weakened body and his spirit, which won't give in and fights to the last minute for the welfare of the country. Significantly, the conspirators dare not target Stephen directly, but only his successor. The boyars' plot is commonplace in pre-war Romanian historical drama, but it is always directed against the reigning ruler. With one exception.

In 1912, Iorga also published a play inspired by Stephen, namely *Înviearea lui Ștefan cel Mare* [The Resurrection of Stephen the Great], which was performed during the war to raise the spirits of the demoralised population, since it tells of a disastrous military defeat followed by the ruler's victorious return. The 1912 volume, entitled *Trei drame* [Three Dramas] and written in verse, opens with another play – about Michael the Brave (Mihai Viteazul). Its construction is reminiscent of Hasdeu's aforementioned *Răzvan și Vidra* [Răzvan and Vidra], whose protagonist was, incidentally, a contemporary of Michael the Brave, who reigned very briefly in Moldavia. In both works the ambition of the hero (endowed with exceptional qualities) is stirred by an evil woman, while the voice of the common man tries to bring (or return) the protagonist to the right path. And in both plays the hero collapses, like Icarus, because he cannot resist the temptation to soar higher than he should, though leaving behind a bright memory.

The evil genius of the protagonist of Iorga's play (his shadow, in the Jungian sense) is Lady Velica, a half-Hungarian, half-Romanian noblewoman. The voice of his self or his good genius is Vladika Ioan, a Romanian country priest from Transylvania who became a metropolitan. The plot moves from Wallachia, which the Turks are trying to turn into a pashalik against Michael's resistance, to Transylvania (which was an autonomous principality at the time), to the Prague court of Emperor Rudolf II of the Holy Roman Empire

(also King of Hungary), and back to Transylvania, where Michael meets his death. This is the time of the Holy League, headed by the Habsburg Empire, i.e. the alliance formed by Moldavia, Wallachia and the Principality of Transylvania, under the suzerainty of the Transylvanian Prince (of the Hungarian Báthory dynasty), against the Ottoman Empire.

After important victories against the Turks, achieved in the name and with the aid of the League, Michael – who had sworn allegiance to Rudolf II – removes the Prince of Transylvania from power because he was threatening his own reign, and prepares to do the same in Moldavia. This is the moment when Iorga chooses to have his hero face the dilemma of his life, exposed through Velica and Vladika Ioan. Velica entices Michael with the dream of royal and even imperial power. To this end, Velica advises Michael to rely on the Hungarian nobles of Transylvania. Vladika Ioan, on the other hand, awakens the hero's national Romanian consciousness and awareness of the nationhood uniting the Romanians of Transylvania and those of his native Wallachia. He urges him to liberate the Transylvanian Romanians (mostly serfs) from their status as a tolerated nation, excluded from the political and social life of the Principality, and to pursue his goals with their support. More skilful than Bolintineanu and other predecessors, Iorga avoids directly attributing to Michael the project of a unitary national state, and thus committing a historical inaccuracy. But he cannot refrain from putting into Ioan's mouth some bold words about 'the longing of the entire nation for union' (Iorga, 1912, p. 46), although the character is also based on a real person. Michael is moved by Ioan's speech, but Velica appears and diverts his thoughts. Choosing her path, the hero quickly loses the three principalities briefly united under his sceptre, being betrayed by both the Hungarians and the Habsburgs and even killed by his supposed allies. There is no perfect overlap between the cause of the Transylvanian Romanians and that of Michael, Iorga suggests, because of class differences (which were abolished in Delavrancea's utopian *Apus de soare*). The ruler is estranged, alienated, and must be reminded of his origins, while the peasant keeps his national identity intact, in Iorga's view (and not only his – see Cosma, 2019). Ironically, Michael cannot integrate into the Hungarian or Habsburg

aristocracy either, as they regard him as Romanian peasantry and show him imperialist superiority.

The Romanian village priest, apostle of the nation, holds a central position in plays by the Transylvanian writers Ștefan Octavian Iosif (1875–1913) and Zaharia Bârsan (1878–1948)<sup>8</sup>: *Zorile* [Dawn] (1907) and *Se face ziuă* [Day is breaking] (1914), respectively. Since the Romanians of Transylvania did not have access to the top echelons of politics or the military hierarchy before 1918, with rare exceptions, it is not surprising that Romanian historical drama with a Transylvanian setting generally selected protagonists from the lower strata of society (unlike the plays inspired by the history of Moldavia and Wallachia). This fixation on the figure of the village priest also has a sociological explanation: in order to avoid enlistment in the imperial army, many Romanian men chose the path of priesthood, whether or not they had a vocation. They played a key role in the national emancipation movement of the Romanians in Transylvania.

*Zorile* is a historical drama in two acts, written in verse and set in Transylvania during the 1848 revolution. *Se face ziuă* is a one-act drama set in 1784 during the peasant uprising led by Horia, Cloșca and Crișan in Transylvania. Both plays therefore focus on mass movements demanding rights, with an important national component. They depict the martyrdom of Transylvanian priests' families (against the backdrop of the aforementioned movements). Although written with the scenario of Christ's Passions in mind, like *Apus de soare*, the plays end on a threatening note, with the promise of revenge on the Hungarian oppressors (uttered, in both plays, by a mother grieving the loss of a son who died by their hands). Both plays also contain a confrontational scene between a Hungarian nobleman and a Romanian priest (or two, in *Se face ziuă*), from positions that prove irreconcilable. *Zorile*, in this sense, contains a true compendium of the arguments of each side in the historical dispute over the rights of the Romanian and Hungarian ethnic groups in Transylvania (Iosif, 1907, pp. 78–85). The premiere of *Se face ziuă* at

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<sup>8</sup> The authors had settled in Romania, where they worked together for a while in the editorial office of the journal *Sămănătorul*, issued by the eponymous group.

the National Theatre in Bucharest, scheduled for 25 March 1914, was cancelled by order of the head of government in order not to offend the diplomatic representation of Austria-Hungary. The Romanian press reacted immediately, denouncing 'Hungarian censorship at the National Theatre' (Cenzura maghiară..., 1914, p. 2). The incident attests to the highly charged, explosive nature of these dramas and their social impact at the time.

One year before Romania's entry into the war, another theatrical 'national assassination' stirred up public opinion: the one committed by Victor Eftimiu (1889-1972) in the play *Ringala*, a historical drama in five acts, published that year (1915). Critics of various literary and political affiliations attacked the play, from Lovinescu (1927, pp. 58-59), whom the drama reminded of Davila's *Vlaicu Vodă*, to Iorga, who demanded the Romanian Academy to require that the play be withdrawn until it was re-made, which the author did (Preda, 2022, pp. 182-187).

The main line of attack of the protesters was the construction of the character inspired by Alexandru I cel Bun (Alexander I the Good), ruler of Moldavia between 1400 and 1432. As Lovinescu (1927) stated in his reproach of the author, the ruler is reduced to 'the dubious role of an old man subject to the dictates of his younger wife' (p. 58), i.e. of *Ringala* (*Rimgailė*) – who in the play by Eftimiu, who was not at all scrupulous in his research – is the sister of the Polish King Władysław II Jagiełło and Svidrigel (Lithuanian: Švitrigaila, Polish: Świdrygiełło), although in reality she was their cousin. Another line of attack concerned the depiction of Alexander the Good's Moldavia, in Act I of the play, as a welcoming haven for all nations (Eftimiu, 1915, pp. 23-46), including the Jews, whose sympathetic portrayal angered the apostle of Romanian anti-Semitism and professor of political economy at the University of Iași, Alexandru Constantin Cuza (Preda, 2022, p. 186). For part of the Romanian intelligentsia, as well as the general public, the nation was becoming an exclusive notion. Like Davila, Eftimiu obeyed the critics without protest and altered the play, which returned to the stage in January 1916 (though he did not republish the new version, as the author of *Vlaicu Vodă* did). Despite the naysayers, the drama, with its moments of modern sensibility, was well liked, even in its original version,

perhaps also because Act II tells how the Moldavian army fought alongside the Poles and defeated the Teutonic Knights at Marienburg (Eftimiu, 1915, pp. 130–131) – a victory that the Romanian public of the time, eagerly following the news about the confrontation between the Central Powers and the Entente, would have liked to see re-enacted.

## Conclusions

From around the time of the Union of the Principalities in 1859, until the Great Union of 1918, Romanian theatre stubbornly supported, with increasing vigour, the idea of a unitary national state, while contributing to the creation of the pantheon of national heroes. Attempts to de-heroise certain historical personalities, promptly sanctioned by contemporaries, were immediately remedied by the playwrights who had been deemed guilty of ‘national assassination’.

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