

**THE MODERN WOMAN AND WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION  
IN 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ENGLISH AND  
ROMANIAN COMEDIES**

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**Abstract:** The construction of feminine characters in nineteenth century English and Romanian comedies reflects the changes that the two societies were experiencing, especially the fact that women were no longer confined to domestic life. The plays feature women assimilating the latest fashions and lifestyles, their aspirations to change their status and their steps towards emancipation.

**Keywords:** feminine characters, nineteenth century English comedies, nineteenth century Romanian comedies, women's emancipation

### **Introduction**

Romanian drama in the nineteenth century before the début of Ion Luca Caragiale is largely comprised of comedies, many of which were adapted or translated vaudevilles (light and agreeable plays of French origin, easy to understand for the audience) and made suitable for the stage by Romanian playwrights, who replaced the conventional characters with ones taken directly from their society. Their contemporary setting and critical spirit are characteristic of these plays: they tend to reveal some negative aspects of life and argue for the correction of manners by means of satire. As Mihai Vasiliu (1995:63-64) states, the first examples of original drama are found in the form of satirical comedy. The authors exposed, with a corrective intention and use of comical means, the mores of society: the parvenus, the marriages of convenience, the deliberate imitation of

the customs and usages of the Western world, the Romanian language spoken with a foreign accent and many mistakes, captured in very simple structures and with theatrical resources that were still modest by comparison with the requirements of dramatic dialogue.

The English drama before Thomas Robertson, widely regarded as the first modern English playwright and as having introduced a new era in English drama, “the return of respectability” (Rowell 1978:75), drew the portrait of fashionable society, with the satirical intention of pointing out its flaws. The gambling scene, the fops and the social vices are portrayed, but the typical duel between the sexes of the Restoration, which usually ended with seduction, is omitted and replaced with material typically found in sentimental drama: a happy ending, sometimes with a marriage. Some of the characters are drawn from the comedy of humours and other elements, such as an unexpected inheritance in melodramas (Bailey 1966:28). Some of the situations and characters of the English comedies are drawn from the French vaudevilles, encouraged especially by the taste of the theatre audience: there was a huge demand for plays, to fill the bills, and these plays did not need to reach literary excellence but only to bring profit to theatres (Booth 1975:201-202) and please the working class and lower middle class audience. Likewise, the Romanian playwrights and managers took into account the level of the audience and their own financial difficulties, using “familiar forms, approved by the public (comedy, vaudeville, melodrama), an accessible stage language, a repertoire in agreement with the taste of those who paid for the tickets and yet skillfully adapted to the educational purpose of the stage” (Cornea 1980:262).

Concerning models, Mircea Angheliescu (1996:91-93) argues that Charles Drouhet’s previous comparative research on the French models of Alecsandri’s comedy created the impression that they were directly indebted to French sources that they imitate, localize or translate and have no “originality”. But the French comedy of the third decade of the nineteenth century was only one facet of the European drama of that time. Almost all the processes of Alecsandri’s comedies are found in the European comic drama of the first half of the century (not only in the French drama that Alecsandri had known when he was young, but also in German and English drama), common to many cultural areas, in which it is still impossible to discern what is “original” and what is

“borrowed”. From these European models, Alecsandri kept the general frame, the overall plot line and the characters with their traits, marital status and social position, while transposing the play in all its constitutive aspects to the Moldavian reality of the mid-nineteenth century (Anghelescu 1996:110).

Regarding originality, Michael R. Booth (2004:1989) states that the genres of English drama were mixed together and combined with stage adaptations of French and German plays. One can say that there is almost no such thing in this veritable maelstrom of dramatic writing as purity of form and singleness of genre. Definition is an acute problem in this period of theatre history, given the fact that tragic and pathetic parts, comic characters combined with serious ones and a constantly changing dramatic tone can be found in the same play. Similarly, Anghelescu notes the many factors that influenced Romanian theatre in the nineteenth century. Noting “the common air that characterises the whole production of the comic first half of the nineteenth-century”, Anghelescu shows that the frequent movement of theatre troupes across national borders made comedies move quickly from one end of the continent to the other, and the continuous need to refresh the repertoire led the most prolific authors to use, with the greatest freedom, ideas, plots, types, lines and gags from plays they had read or watched (1996: 92-93; 11).

The most easily visible feminine characters in these Romanian plays are ridiculous coquettes, who imitate Western fashion and strive to upgrade their social status through education or marriage (theirs or their children’s). The playwrights try to show and question the mores of the time. The feminine characters in these Romanian comedies are the first to adopt Western forms of civilization, are ambitious, eager to lead a modern life, emancipated and open to progress. Typically, the dull, narrow-minded and conservative husband, the traditional and retrograde element, has a conflict with his wife: he does not want her to go beyond his comfort zone. Nineteenth-century women have more time and are more concerned to take on new fashions, foreign words and expressions, the new ideas and habits and some of the female characters that imitate foreign models succeed in bringing about real change and progress. They manage to get away from the domestic sphere that was reserved for them and express their wish for emancipation through reading, learning foreign languages (especially French), travelling,

patronage and attending salons. Cocoana Mândica (*O soare la mahala/ A Soirée in the Neighbourhood* by Costache Caragiali, 1845) frequently criticises her husband, who has not adapted to the latest changes in language, dress and habits. Just like Alecsandri's character Chirița later on, she cannot understand why her husband does not like tea parties and is furious because he embarrasses her. Boyar Anastase says that he is protecting the family's "moral honesty" by banishing from his house the new fashionable habits, admired and imitated by his wife, of those who are ruining the language and traditions. Caliopei Busuioc (*Muza de la Burdujăni/ The Muse of Burdujăni* by Costache Negruzzi, 1851, an adaptation of Théodore Leclercq's *La Sapho de Quimpercoentin*) is a parvenue, not on the social scale, but in the realm of literature, although she is snobbish and whimsical and ready to fall for Baron Flaimuc, Signor Turlupini, or Kir Lacherdopulos. She is also a "Frenchified lady" like the characters of Costache Faccà's *Comodia vremii (The Comedy of Today, 1833)*, and her speech bears the mark of the kind of melodramatic and romantic literature which was later to be parodied by Caragiale. But of the utmost importance is her quest for an acknowledgment of her intellectual status as a way of becoming a part of high society. She is a poet and speaks good Italian and Greek, and is able to face the character Teodorini's challenges when he ridicules her wish to get married. Caliopei also imposes the Western fashions of educated people on Trohin: she is critical of Trohin's old clothes, which are no longer fashionable and give him a frightful appearance. Gahița Rosmarinovici (*Iorgu de la Sadagura/ Iorgu of Sadagura* by Vasile Alecsandri, 1844) sighs when she thinks about the benefits of civilization as seen in Chernivtsi. She is surprised that Damian does not know what the word "invitation" means, calls him an "arriéré" and states that it is pointless to talk to him about the elegance and delicacy of the French language. Gahița admires the elegant atmosphere of the salons abroad and the young unmarried men there. She wants to be in the midst of a society "full of grace". Iorgu and Gahița leave together for Iași and Iorgu is glad that he found someone who "unveiled their mind like a cauliflower in the warmth of civilization" and who travelled a lot.

Such examples can also be found in British comedies: Lady Duberly (*The Heir at Law* by George Colman, 1800) becomes rich by inheriting, with her husband, old Lord Duberly's fortune and wants her family to acquire noble manners overnight. She tries

unsuccessfully to civilize her husband with some help from a teacher. She cannot stand the fact that Lord Duberly does not know the difference between drinking tea from a cup or from a saucer, which is very important in high society, and regrets that the old Lord did not leave her husband some manners together with the money. Mrs. Templeton (*Education* by Thomas Morton, 1813) has an “active taste for expense, with a decided averseness from all household duties, produced by the indolent and deceptive spirit of procrastination”. She accuses her husband of treason against the monarchy of fashion that she is a loyal subject of. Her husband must become a modern man and take advantage of the rapid advances made daily in feelings, spirit and refinement. Lady Wellgrove (*The Faro Table* by John Tobin, 1816) is always bossing Sapling around (he had been sent to the city by his father, in the hope that he would marry Lady Wellgrove, just like Alecsandri’s character Pestiř in the comedy *Farmazonul din Hârlău/ The Freemason from Hârlău*, 1841), and avoids him because he is uncouth, despite the fact that she took him to the opera and to the theatre. Sapling realizes that she won’t marry him and asks her to allow him not to behave in a polite and distinguished manner any longer and to write to his father in a sophisticated and polite way explaining her refusal to marry him. Lady Charlotte (*The Round of Wrong* by William Bayle Bernard, 1846) is a fashionable woman who has style and is rich (Ducks thinks that she “washes in Ody Cologne water”). Her ideal life consists of a walk before dinner and a good book afterwards. Ducks hopes that he can persuade her to take him to London to see all the places where young people of fashion go and to refine his speech and manners. Even in the later comedies, such as *Caste* (1876) by Thomas Robertson, there are many feminine characters who want to rise above their station. Polly accuses her fiancé, Sam, of being uneducated and therefore inferior to the upper classes of society. Just like the characters of Caragiali and Alecsandri, Polly would like Sam to call her “my lady” and treat her accordingly, but Sam does not allow her to wear makeup and cares only about what the neighbours will say about the people who visit Polly and her sister, ballerinas of the Theatre Royal).

The Romanian feminine character who concentrates the types previously discussed is Alecsandri’s Chirița. Chirița is not interesting today as a satirical portrait, but rather as a cultural model (Ghițulescu 2008:54). She is ridiculous, vulgar and ignorant, but has the qualities needed to rise above her status. Although she is not able to find

husbands for her daughters in Iași, Guliță does not learn any French (although she claims to be speaking the language, making her famous “free translations”), is an *isprăvniceasă* only for a short period of time, sees herself mocked on the stage of the theatre in Iași, brings Western fashion and manners to her house, takes a ride in a hot air balloon and visits Vienna and Paris. Chirița is caught between two different worlds: the traditional one (the countryside) and the modern one (the capital, Iași). The trip to Iași (*Chirița în Iași/ Chirița in Iași*, 1850) is an adventure of knowledge, but Chirița is forced to return to the countryside, where she “belongs”, and is advised by Bârzoii not to try to “exceed her station in life”, although she wants to rise “as a lark” (and manages to do this in *Chirița în balon/ Chirița in the Hot Air Balloon*, 1874: “I’ll go up to the moon and stars”). Although criticised by the playwright in the second play of the series, *Chirița în provincie/ Chirița in the Countryside* (1852), for her lack of sophistication and for her upstartism, Chirița embraces Western civilisation by importing to the countryside the habits of Iași: she criticises and changes her husband’s and her servants’ clothes, will not cook traditional dishes, buys furniture, clothes, lamps, rides a horse and smokes, etc. She’s happy that both her daughters are married and that her husband has become an *ispravnic* (local representative of the ruler) and has even more plans, including travelling and finding a wife for her son Guliță. She travels to Vienna and Paris (*Cucoana Chirița în voiaj/ Chirița Takes a Journey*, 1863). In Paris, she takes Guliță to school to study politics, doesn’t visit any galleries, museums, monuments or go to the theatre, but has dresses made by “Madame Desal and Madame Fovel”, goes to balls, to the Mabilie, and even dances the cancan. In the last play of the series, Chirița rises into the sky in a hot air balloon, together with Moghior, despite her husband’s protests. When the balloon reaches the ground, Chirița is wearing only her corset, and her arms and shoulders are bare. It was the first time in Romanian drama that a female character had appeared on stage in such a revealing dress (though under the pretext that she had thrown her outer garments out of the gondola one by one in order to save her life). The nineteenth century English comedies feature feminine characters who, like Chirița (or Mândica in Costache Caragiali’s *Doi coțcari sau Păziți-vă de răi ca de foc/ Two Rogues*, 1849, one of Chirița’s predecessors, who, rushing to marry off her daughter Evghenița, finds herself about to be fooled by two charlatans, Burdicescu and Nicholae), have the ambition of seeing their

children married to people of higher social status. Lucretia MacTab (*The Poor Gentleman* by George Colman, 1802), an old-fashioned lady who looks like a frog, is angry with Emily, her niece, for not having taken her advice and married Sir Charles while they lived in London. She takes Emily out for a walk and arranges a secret meeting with Sir Charles. Lady Clanarlington (*Moonshine* by Lady Emmeline Stuart-Wortley, 1843) takes her daughters, Juliana and Maria, to Rome, planning to find them husbands at the balls, parties and picnics held there. They are accompanied by Geraldine, Lady Clanarlington's niece, a young woman with modern ideas, who is more successful than Juliana and Maria (the play *Chirița in the Countryside* features a similar character, Luluța). At the banquets and parties, Lady Clanarlington invites all the unmarried young men (she has a notebook with information about all the idle men of London and she introduces her daughters to them according to their incomes and fortunes). Kate (*Old Soldiers* by Henry James Byron, 1873) is taken by her father, Captain McTravish, to the Continent, to find her a husband, as if she were a commodity for sale. The father hopes to marry her to Mr. Lockhart or Mr. Leveret. Similarly, the widowed Mrs Moss takes her daughter, Mary, on a surprise visit to Mr Leveret's house, with the same intention. Captain McTravish thinks that women should not be let out of the house (the Turkish system is the best) and that women who express their opinions won't find husbands. Mrs. Colonel McCann (*Up at the Hills* by Tom Taylor, 1861) wants to marry off her nieces, Katie and Margaret, two simple and innocent girls, at Calcutta, and takes them to parties and introduces them to the rich and idle men there. They find suitable husbands, without much assistance from their aunt. Jane (*A Woman Never Vext* by James Robinson Planché, 1824) is a young girl who has reached the age of marriage. Her father, Brown, wants her to be married at all costs and introduces her to his friends, Sir Godfrey Speedwell and Master Lambskin. Some of the characters in the British comedies show similarities to Chirița's attitude towards her son Guliță (she smothers him and wants to "civilize" him): Mrs. Templeton (*The Beulah Spa* by Charles Dance, 1833), a widow, critical of the schools of that time, spoils her two teenaged sons, Magnus and Hector. Her attitude leads to the fact that they show immature behaviour and do not know how to behave in society. Moreover, they are both in love with the maid. Mrs. Swipes (*Exchange no Robbery* by Theodore Edward Hook, 1820) offers to help her husband to turn his son, Sam, into a fashionable young

man: everyone must think that he is Sir Christopher's son, left in their care. Lady Duberly (*The Heir at Law* by George Colman, 1800) wants her son Dick to learn how to dance and speak some French, assuming that trendy young men have their heads overburdened by knowledge, but she does not agree to him marrying Cecily, a poor girl.

From the viewpoint of gender studies, the most interesting feminine characters are the ones that express independent tendencies, modern and feminist ideas, questioning the traditional roles of men and women (the ideas promoted by men, the dominant group in the society of that time). In the Romanian comedies, the only feminine characters who have modern ideas without being portrayed as ridiculous are created by Alecsandri. The Princess (*Concina/ The Game of Cards*, 1864-1865) confesses that when she was young she was forced by her parents to marry Prince Michael, a sick and unlikeable old man (children were victims of parental despotism, as the parents did not want their children, but themselves, to be happy). Another Princess (*Boieri și ciocoi/ Boyars and Parvenus*, 1874) appreciates the atmosphere at the ball given for Iorgu Hârzobeanu's daughter, Elena, where she admires the elegant atmosphere, the dress and the improving of manners, which she and her younger friends helped achieve. Sânziana (*Sânziana și Pepelea / Sanziana and Pepelea*, 1880) is emancipated and has feminist ideals ("today we are free and independent", "it is only fair that we should choose our husbands ourselves"). Aglăița (*Farmazonul din Hârlău*) states that she will not change for a man. She will not marry the man her family wants if she hates him. Aglăița believes that all this is the painter Leonil's fault, because he waited for too long and did not ask her father for her hand in marriage. By contrast, other characters' feminist ideas and attitudes are hidden behind the more visible aspects of ridiculous coquetry. Gahița Rosmarinovici (*Iorgu de la Sadagura*) admires foreign young men and their politeness, especially their eloquence, the salons abroad and the elegant atmosphere there, the well-educated and distinguished women who do not ruin their hands cooking and washing. Marița (*Un poet romantic/ A Romantic Poet* by Matei Millo, 1835), Stan's wife, does not want to be like a man, even though she has feminist ideas and, when young, used to rule over her husband. She thinks that women's desire to replace men happens because of a mistake made by men: they forget their role and allow women to act like them. Costache Caragiali's Tincuța (*Doi coțcari*) defines women: "the ladies are made to be led, otherwise one



would see them writing the laws of the world”. Zoița (*Însurățtii/ The Newlyweds* by Matei Millo, 1846) deplores women’s fate when Stan, believing that women are given as a sacrifice to men, “as written in the Bible”, reminds her of women’s obligation to obey them (Stan takes her to a village and pretends to be a simple peasant, not a nobleman). Zoița goes to Spătăreasa and asks her to help her obtain a divorce, arguing that she is the one who deserves obedience from her husband and not vice versa. A similar feminine character is Juliana (*The Honey Moon* by John Tobin, 1805), a witty young noblewoman with beautiful manners but with a sharp tongue. Her husband, the Duke, hopes that she will soften after marriage, because he does not want to be the slave of a woman. To teach her a lesson about pride, he takes her to a shack and tells her that he is a peasant, not a duke, but does not use violence towards her. Stan does not use violence either, although he is advised to do so by Ichim. Like Millo’s Zoița (both reminiscent of Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*), Juliana thinks that men were born to serve women. Volante, her sister, is confident that Juliana’s husband will be like a puppet in her hands. Just like Alecsandri’s Aglăița, Emily (*The Three and the Deuce* by Prince Hoare, 1806) admits that she will not give up her freedom for a man whom she does not love. She gets to choose which one of the triplets, friends of her father, she will marry. She prefers Petrinax because he is just as serious and moderate as she is. The English comedies have even more independent feminine characters. Fanny Smith (*Partners for Life* by Henry James Byron, 1871), Tom’s wife, is rich, but sells everything so that her husband can succeed by himself in his career as a solicitor. Madeleine (*St Mary’s Eve* by William Bayle Bernard, 1838) takes advantage of the fact that her future husband has a high position in society and hides her brother in the bedroom. The latter is a Jacobin being chased by the authorities and her attitude stirs varied reactions in the community. Sophia (*The Blind Bargain* by Frederick Reynolds, 1805), deceived by Jack, a fugitive and homeless character, forgives him and swears she will work and will try to be independent. Rose (*The Vindictive Man* by Thomas Holcroft, 1806), beautiful, innocent and nice, does not want to receive the money she has inherited from her aunt, Leonora, the lover of a very rich man, because she doesn’t think that this would be fair and without honour she cannot live a peaceful life. Rose states that she is healthy and strong and can work for herself and her father. Rose wishes her aunt had died a poor and honest woman,

and that she had left behind, instead of wealth, a virtuous name. Rosine (*Education* by Thomas Morton, 1813), a schoolmistress, stands against an education system that has as its goal obtaining the applause of society and teaching the art of obtaining a husband instead of domestic happiness. Miss Grannett (*Cyril's Success* by Henry James Byron, 1868) is Kate's former schoolmistress, a "horrible creature who knows all sorts of things about chronology and Women's Rights", who left her husband when they encountered their first marital problems (like Millo's Zoița). Although not convinced that the women should obey men, Miss Grannett agrees to help Kate be reconciled with her husband, the playwright Cyril Cuthbert. Georgina (*Money* by Edward Bulwer Lytton, 1840) has not received much education from her father, who expects her to grab a rich husband (Evelyn). Inheriting a fairly large amount from her uncle, Mordaunt, Georgina secretly meets Frederick, the man that she likes more, in spite of her father, who is afraid that this may jeopardise her future marriage. Young and beautiful Melissa (*The Bride of Ludgate* by Douglas William Jerrold, 1829) manages to avoid marrying Shekel, a much older man, but is forced to marry Charles: if she refuses, she is threatened with seeing Mapleton, the man that she truly loves, dead. She does not give in: "I'd rather mourn a dead man than despise a living one".

### **Conclusion**

The construction of these Romanian feminine characters reflects the status of women in the nineteenth century, a period of progress and modernisation for the society of the Romanian Principalities. Influenced by Western civilization, women's interest progressed from the private and domestic field to social life. In the nineteenth century, the Romanian comedies adopted various European models, largely due to the fact that the playwrights were writing for the stage and also because these were the first productions of drama in the national language. In both Romanian and English comedies, it is difficult to draw a firm line between the playwrights' satirising of feminine characters and their reflection of and admiration for women's progress. Beyond mere affectation, mocked by dramatists, the feminine characters of the plays show modernising trends. The playwrights oscillate between trying to present and discuss the mores of the time and

delivering the first feminine characters who express the first emancipating and feminist ideas.

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