ON THE ROYAL STAGE: KING STANISŁAW AUGUST'S THEATRICAL CANON

SOPHOCLES

The earliest of the playwrights represented on the plafond is Sophocles, conventionally shown as a bearded man. He was highly esteemed by Polish Enlightenment thinkers and ranked among the greatest Greek authors. The works of Sophocles and ancient Greek theatre formed the foundations that shaped and supported the identity of eighteenth-century theatre, although the return to ancient sources can already be observed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The tragedies of Sophocles were recorded in the catalogue of Stanisław August's library compiled by Jan Chrzciciel Albertrandi.

SHAKESPEARE

The second playwright whose image appears on the plafond is William Shakespeare. His name is written on the medallion in its original spelling. This is noteworthy, since eighteenth-century printed books and manuscripts contain many erroneous variants of Shakespeare's name. The Polish monarch's admiration for the master from Stratford preceded the wider European fascination with his work by a quarter of a century. Stanisław August held the English playwright in exceptionally high regard. He became acquainted with Shakespeare's works during his youthful travels around Europe. In late 1754, while in London as a 22-year-old, he attended Shakespearean performances and recorded his impressions in his memoirs.

The focus of Stanisław August's fascination was the tragedy Julius Caesar, as indicated by his attempt to translate passages from the play from English into French. The monarch's great admiration for the master from Stratford is also attested by a letter containing the famous declaration: 'J'adore Shakespeare' – 'I adore Shakespeare'.

The king's fascination with the English playwright was well known to those closest to him. From his youngest brother, Michał Poniatowski, the monarch received a portrait by Jacob Christoph Le Blon and his workshop which, in the eighteenth century, was believed to depict Shakespeare. The painting, which has survived to this day and can be seen in the Palace on the Isle, in fact portrays Edmund Spenser, an English poet of the Elizabethan age.

RACINE AND MOLIÈRE

The plafond in the Royal Theatre also includes portraits of Racine and Molière, whose plays were frequently staged in Poland. The inclusion of their portraits resulted from a deliberate policy pursued by Stanisław August. The king and his supporters wanted these particular French authors to be seen as representatives of Western civilisation. Racine and Molière embodied complementary faces of this cultural sphere: Racine, the refined author of courtly dramas, and Molière, the comic playwright from a bourgeois family who believed in the efficacy of teaching from the stage. By placing their likenesses close to his own, the ruler showed that theatre, as a medium serving – through appropriate means – to disseminate knowledge and models of conduct, should reach all strata of society.

Sculptural images of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Molière and Racine also appeared on the attic of the Amphitheatre at the Royal Łazienki, which opened on 7 September 1791. Statues of sixteen playwrights were placed above the auditorium: alongside the four already mentioned stood Aeschylus, Euripides, Aristophanes, Menander, Plautus, Terence, Seneca, Calderón, Metastasio and Lessing. Also included were two authors living in the king's own time: Stanisław Trembecki and Jan Ursyn Niemcewicz. By commissioning figures of two native writers for the attic above the auditorium, Stanisław August was constructing his own literary canon and erecting a monument to Polish authors. The eighteenth-century statues were made by the Italian sculptor Tommaso Righi, to designs by Stanisław August's 'first sculptor', André Le Brun. The originals did not withstand the test of time and, in the 1920s, were replaced by eight sculptures designed by Jan Antoni Biernacki.