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Shakespeare: The Unmaking of a National Poet

*Balz Engler*

At international rugby matches, the Welsh fans sing “HenWlad Fy Nhadau” [Old Land of My Fathers], the Scots “Flower of Scotland,” and the English “God Save the Queen,”<sup>1</sup> referring to “Her Majesty Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and of Her other Realms and Territories, Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith”—her official title. In other words, the English fans don’t have a song of their own.<sup>2</sup>

Another example: I remember embarrassing an English colleague by asking him, whose national theatre is the National Theatre in London? England’s or Britain’s? He conceded that he had never thought about this and did not really know. I am sure that he was not alone in this. Could the fact that it receives its subsidies from the Arts Council England, and not from its equivalents in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, be indicative? The issue has, of course, been fudged since, by renaming it the *Royal* National Theatre.

Why this lack? Why this sense of uncertainty?

Due to devolution, the problem of English nationhood has been much debated in recent years, and it has been exacerbated by the rise of regionalism in the European Union. Other members of the European Union have also been affected by such centrifugal tendencies: in particular Belgium, Spain, and Italy. But the case of England seems to be special: the reasons for this seem to be poignantly illustrated by a text in which Angela Carter describes her experience of Empire Day as a schoolgirl:

There was a procession of flags and emblems: England, Scotland, Wales, Ulster. The emblems, of cardboard carried on poles, were a Tudor rose, a thistle, a daffodil and shamrocks. Those who carried the Scottish, Welsh and Ulster flags wore a national costume—kilt, steeple hat,

Kathleen Mavourneen headscarf; but the little girl who bore up the cross of St George wore just a regular gymslip.

And she goes on: “The lesser breeds, evidently, were picturesque; the English, not.”<sup>3</sup> “The lesser breeds”—what Angela Carter says ironically may indeed point to the special problem of English nationhood: it contains an element of vertical differentiation. Having been installed on the top of the pile for so long, and taking it for granted that what was valid for England was also valid for Britain, it has been difficult for the English to find a comfortable place for themselves among equals and to restrict themselves to myths around which they can gather as a community,<sup>4</sup> a community equal to and distinct from the other nations on the British Isles, and indeed Europe.

In this context Shakespeare and his plays are of particular interest. As Willy Maley and Margaret Tudeau-Clayton have reminded us, Ben Jonson in his prefatory poem to the First Folio writes, “*Triumph, my Britaine, thou hast one to showe, / To whom all Scenes of Europe homage owe.*” They insist that to “opt for Britain rather than England at this point was a politically charged choice consciously made by the author.”<sup>5</sup>

This prefigures later problems with claiming Shakespeare for the English. Discussing how Shakespeare and his plays may serve the affirmation of nationhood (or question it) in England and elsewhere, I should like to focus on three elements: narratives, language, and poetics.

As Michael Dobson has shown, it was only in the eighteenth century that Shakespeare became the national poet of England or Britain (again the distinction does not become clear). Where narratives are concerned, it was mainly the histories and certain figures in them, like Falstaff and Henry V, the good commander of, among others, Fluellen, MacMorris, and Jamy, that could be used for this purpose. The histories could serve to glorify one’s own sense of a community with a shared past. In a more indirect manner, other plays offered material as well, like *King Lear*, *Cymbeline*, or *Macbeth*. I am deliberately saying “could be used for,” because interpretation can make texts serve a wide range of purposes: *Henry V* was performed in Germany in 1917,<sup>6</sup> which was possible for reasons to which I shall return.

Language, on the other hand, presented a problem because it was considered antiquated and crude. Graham Holderness and Andrew Murphy have rightly pointed out that Shakespeare’s texts could only come to be considered representative of English as such in “translation,”<sup>7</sup> by being modernized and standardized, a process that started with the eighteenth-century adaptations and editions of his

plays. With the rise of Britain to the status of a global empire, however, the language of the English lost its power of defining England/Britain as a nation among equals. Shakespeare became the poet of the Empire, whose language created an enduring bond among its far-flung lands, epitomized by an institution like the British Empire Shakespeare Society, founded in 1901.<sup>8</sup>

The third element concerns poetics. Shakespeare was, first only apologetically, presented as a poet of Nature, unaffected by a learned poetics based on the classical tradition. To Pope, for example, who felt that Shakespeare's writing lacked polish, Shakespeare's inspiration became the primary argument to defend his greatness: "he is not so much an Imitator as an Instrument of Nature; and 'tis not so just to say that he speaks from her as that she speaks thro' him."<sup>9</sup>

Drawing on the concept of Nature, which is universal (at least in Western culture), had a serious disadvantage in establishing Shakespeare as the poet of one nation among others. It introduces an element into one's definition of nationhood that either dilutes, even empties it, or raises it above other definitions, by including imperial aspirations. The same is true, of course, for language. Michael Dobson, in his account of *The Making of the National Poet*, is aware of this when he writes, "That Shakespeare was declared to rule world literature at the same time that Britannia was declared to rule the waves may, indeed, be more than a coincidence."<sup>10</sup>

The consequences of this vertical differentiation are illustrated by two cycles of Shakespeare productions, proposed about one hundred years apart. Before the First World War had started, Beerbohm Tree proposed an international production of all the history plays for the Shakespeare centenary of 1916, with a cast including Germans, Frenchmen, Italians, and Americans, a project that reflects, in its generosity, the intact self-assurance of the British Empire. For the 2012 Olympics, on the other hand, Dominic Dromgoole announced a Shakespeare cycle that seems to reflect the kind of lack suggested by Angela Carter's observation. His plays were to be performed in thirty-eight languages, because "Shakespeare is not a national possession. His works have been translated into scores of other languages, and indeed have become a world language in their own right."<sup>11</sup>

On the Continent, the problem of using Shakespeare for national purposes presented itself differently. The first two factors I mentioned, narratives and language, did not have much of a role to play. None of the plays offers the audience a memory of their own rich, even heroic past—the history plays in France may be an obvious example.<sup>12</sup>

Language does not have a role to play either, because Shakespeare is usually read and performed in translation.<sup>13</sup> And as translations do not have the canonical status of originals, they are revised whenever changing tastes or new insights seem to demand this.

As in England, Shakespeare played a crucial role in the displacement of a classicist, largely French, rule poetics. It was Voltaire, who, with all his reservations, brought “les monstres brillants de Shakespeare” [the brilliant monsters of Shakespeare] to the attention of an educated Continental audience, not only in France. Interestingly, he sees Shakespeare’s poetics as typically English. Shakespeare and English literature remained alien to him, a natural force impossible to be controlled by culture. “The poetic genius of the English resembles, at this day, a spreading tree planted by nature, shooting forth at random a thousand branches, and growing with unequal strength; it dies if you force its nature, or shape it into a regular tree, fit for the gardens of Marly.”<sup>14</sup> The English obviously saw no reason to accept this stereotype for themselves.

As the poetics of genius was gaining ground on the Continent, displacing, to different degrees in different countries, classicist rule poetics, Shakespeare became a general standard to be emulated, and it is only a slight exaggeration to say that Shakespeare became great on the Continent as a romantic author.

Germany deserves special attention in this context. The way the Germans enthusiastically took possession of Shakespeare has often been discussed, especially his influence on the writers of the eighteenth-century Sturm und Drang and romanticism, among them Goethe and Schiller. As Roger Paulin, who has given us an excellent history of German Shakespeare reception, writes in a 2010 essay,

When Schlegel in 1796 famously—or infamously—said that Shakespeare was “ganz unser,” completely ours, he was making the first important utterance of proprietary and annexational claims by the Germans, ones that the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were only too happy to echo.<sup>15</sup>

It is worth having a closer look at his observation. There were indeed claims for annexation—notoriously, when, during the First World War, in an example of belligerent rhetoric, a journalist demanded that Shakespeare should be formally turned over to the Germans if they should win the war.<sup>16</sup> Considering the context of Schlegel’s statement “ganz unser,” however, a different picture presents itself, one that is important for the later reception of Shakespeare. Schlegel writes,

It may boldly be claimed that he does not, *after the English*, belong to any people as much as to the Germans, because he is not, both in the original and its copy, read so much, studied so deeply, loved so warmly, and admired so judiciously. [. . .] he is not alien to us: we need not make a single step out of our character to call him entirely ours.<sup>17</sup>

This definitely refers to *sharing* the spirit of Shakespeare, not to taking him away from the English; it is emulation, not annexation. Due to his role in freeing German literature from the dominance of French models in the eighteenth century and in establishing a German *Nationalliteratur* [national literature], the fascination with his works continued, and led to impressive scholarly achievements in Shakespeare philology and criticism, even to the attempt to establish him as the third German classic. Often, the deep affection for Shakespeare was explained—in common nineteenth-century fashion—by race, by the shared Anglo-Saxon ancestry of the English and the Germans, in the words of G. G. Gervinus, “the old Germanic kindred and fellowship.”<sup>18</sup>

There was a problem though: The English/British and the Germans were increasingly perceived in certain stereotypes, the English/British as people solely interested in their own material gain, as a “nation of shopkeepers,”<sup>19</sup> whereas the Germans seemed to be permeated by idealism and the love of the arts. These stereotypes are also echoed in English literature, for example, in the two families, the Wilcoxes and the Schlegels, in E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910).

In the late nineteenth century, as Germany began to build an empire of her own, the tensions between the two nations made it increasingly difficult to *share* Shakespeare. The problem was solved by a curious gesture: The Germans claimed that the contemporary English were no longer the English of Shakespeare’s time, and that his spirit was now truly alive among themselves. As the dramatist Gerhart Hauptmann put it, addressing the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft in 1916, Shakespeare belongs to the whole world, but there is no nation in the world,

not even the English, who have earned a right to Shakespeare in the way the Germans have. Shakespeare’s figures are part of our world, his soul has merged with ours: and if he was born and buried in England, it is in Germany where he truly lives.<sup>20</sup>

Shakespeare had not become German; rather the Germans had alone become the people that lived up to his universal greatness.<sup>21</sup>

Shakespeare then does not lend himself to be used for national or nationalist purposes. For the same reasons, he cannot be claimed as a European icon, even though there have been attempts to do so. Ben Jonson, as I indicated, also refers to Europe: “Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show / To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe.” In 1984 five quality newspapers in five European countries—*Lire*, *El Pais*, *La Stampa*, *Die Zeit*, and *The Times*—asked their readers for the names of the most important European writers. The French chose Shakespeare, the Spanish Shakespeare, the Italians Shakespeare, the Germans Shakespeare. Only the British preferred Dante: the rules of the poll barred the naming of writers from one’s own country.<sup>22</sup>

This suggests that Shakespeare may have a crucial role to play in defining Europe as a cultural entity, and indeed, in 1948, at a meeting promoting unification in Den Haag, the Dutch scholar and politician Hendrik Brugmans,<sup>23</sup> in an influential speech, celebrated Shakespeare as a representative of the free and multifarious spirit of a united Europe:

Europe, this is a sense of liberty, the drama and gentleness of which the huge majority of people who have ever lived have never imagined, Europe, this is Mozart on the one hand, this is Péguy on the other, and it is Shakespeare incorporating both. Europe, this is the civilization of the non-conformists, this is the world where people are continually struggling with themselves, this is the place where no certainty is accepted as truth unless it is continually re-discovered.<sup>24</sup>

The values Shakespeare here represents do not seem to be specifically European, but Western, and universal (in the Western sense). Brugmans’s rhetoric echoes the view of Shakespeare as the poet of true humanity.

The upshot of it all is that Shakespeare, because of his rise to global status since the eighteenth century, cannot be claimed as an exclusive possession by any nation or other political entity.

His works, however, have played an important role in nations defining themselves. Shakespeare has become a universal standard to be emulated, against which national literatures could compete with each other and articulate their similarities and differences. Translating his works into one’s own national language could serve the purpose of ennobling it, by showing that the language is able to live up to a revered standard. As such he has become the modern equivalent of the classics of antiquity.

The status Shakespeare has acquired since the eighteenth century has also counteracted his usefulness in promoting

the definition of English/British nationhood. Where imperial aspirations have lost their force, where the definition of one's nationhood can no longer be based on vertical differentiation, he may rather subvert the attempt he is meant to serve. The problem is not dissimilar from the one illustrated by the English rugby fans singing "God Save the Queen."

## NOTES

1. David Goldblatt, "There's an Official Anthem to This Six Nations Tournament: The Fans, However, Have Their Own Songs to Sing," *Prospect* 180 (2011): 69.
2. The situation seems to be different in cricket, where Blake's hymn "Jerusalem" is sung.
3. Angela Carter, "So There'll Always Be an England," in *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings*, ed. Jenny Uglow (London: Vintage, 1998), 185.
4. Balz Engler, *Poetry and Community* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1990), 23–57.
5. Willy Maley and Margaret Tudeau-Clayton, "Shakespeare, Neither Simply English Nor British," *Our Kingdom*, November 30, 2010, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/willy-maley-margaret-tudeau-clayton/shakespeare-neither-simply-english-nor-british> (accessed November 13, 2012).
6. Egon Mühlbach, "Statistischer Überblick über die Aufführungen Shakespeare'scher Werke [. . .] im Jahre 1917," *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 54 (1918): 107.
7. Graham Holderness and Andrew Murphy, "Shakespeare's England: Britain's Shakespeare," in *Shakespeare and National Culture*, ed. John J. Joughin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 25.
8. The British Shakespeare Association was founded in 2001, the Shakespeare Association of America in 1923. The shared language and history have even made it possible for another imperial nation to claim his possession as one of its ancestors; see, for example, Kim C. Sturgess, *Shakespeare and the American Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 124–25. On the role of the Folger Shakespeare Library in this, see Balz Engler, "Shakespeare, Washington, Lincoln: The Folger Library and the American Appropriation of the Bard," [http://pages.unibas.ch/shine/shine\\_folgerwf.htm](http://pages.unibas.ch/shine/shine_folgerwf.htm) (accessed March 29, 2012). It may be noted here that American English is in many respects closer to Shakespeare's language than is the one spoken in England today.
9. Alexander Pope, "The Preface of the Editor to the Works of Shakespear," in *The Major Works: 1725–1744*, ed. Rosemary Cowler (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 13.
10. Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660–1769* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 7.
11. Derek Brown, "All the World's a Stage with Many Accents," *The Guardian Weekly*, January 28, 2011, 15.

12. The only exception I can think of is *Romeo and Juliet* and its association with romantic love, and thus with Italy—but this is another topic.

13. This has the interesting effect that foreign audiences understand his texts more easily than English-speaking ones.

14. Louis XIV had the Château de Marly and its gardens built as a summer residence.

Voltaire, *Melanges*, ed. Jacques van den Heuvel (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 152 (unless otherwise indicated, translations from French and German are mine).

15. Christine Roger and Roger Paulin, “August Wilhelm Schlegel,” in *Voltaire, Goethe, Schlegel, Coleridge*, ed. Roger Paulin (London: Continuum, 2010), 103.

16. Ludwig Fulda, *Deutsche Kultur und Auslandsrei* (Berlin: Max Kuhl, 1914), 13.

17. August Wilhelm Schlegel, “Etwas über William Shakespeare bei Gelegenheit Wilhelm Meisters,” in *Samtliche Werke*, vol. 7, ed. Eduard Böcking (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1846/47), 38 (italics added).

18. G. G. Gervinus, *Shakespeare*, trans. F. E. Bunnett (London: Smith Elder, 1853), xi.

19. The phrase was coined by Adam Smith, a Scotsman, and disparagingly applied to the English by Napoleon.

20. Gerhart Hauptmann, “Deutschland und Shakespeare,” *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 51 (1916): xii.

21. Balz Engler, “Shakespeare in the Trenches,” *Shakespeare Survey* 44 (1991): 107.

22. Fritz Raddatz, “Die Europäische Literatur-Gemeinschaft,” *Die Zeit*, June 8, 1984, 45.

23. Hendrik Brugmans (1906–1997) was one of the mentors of the European Union. He won the prestigious Charlemagne Prize in 1951 and was the founding rector of the College of Europe in Bruges (1950–1972).

24. Hendrik Brugmans, “Speech at the Congress of the International Committee for the Coordination of the Movements Promoting the Unity of Europe,” Den Haag, May 7, 1948. Quoted in Giordano and Giulia Altarozzi, “Gli Interventi, le Risoluzioni del Congresso e Il ‘Messaggio Agli Europei’: Ricordando il congresso dell’Europa (L’AJA 7–11 maggio 1948),” *Eurostudium* 3 (2010): 78, [http://www.eurostudium.uniroma1.it/rivista/numeri\\_completi/Eurostudium3w\\_14completa.pdf](http://www.eurostudium.uniroma1.it/rivista/numeri_completi/Eurostudium3w_14completa.pdf) (accessed November 13, 2012). Brugmans does not specify in more detail why he has chosen these three artists.