

THE GENIUS OF SHAKESPEARE AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURY EUROPE

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RESUMEN

A lo largo del siglo XVIII el término *genio*, referido particularmente al genio de Shakespeare, se convierte en central en las mayores reflexiones críticas y estéticas y se vincula con la formación y diversificación de las distintas naciones y culturas europeas, alcanzando múltiples acepciones. Este artículo se ocupa de la recepción del genio de Shakespeare teniendo en cuenta no sólo los diferentes contextos histórico-culturales, especialmente el inglés y el alemán, sino también la existencia de un significado elitista del término *genio*, usado solamente por un pequeño grupo de intelectuales, así como una acepción popular destinada a un público heterogéneo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Shakespeare, siglo XVIII, aproximación, nación, identidades, originalidad, lengua.

ABSTRACT

Throughout the eighteenth century the term *genius* with reference to Shakespeare was central to the first major critical and aesthetic reflections and became profoundly connected to the formation and diversification of the various national European cultures and identities. This paper traces the reception of Shakespeare's genius in Europe comparing not only different historical and cultural contexts, specially the English and German one, but considering also the existence of an elitist meaning of the word *genius*, used only in a small circle of intellectuals, and a popular one comprehensible to a heterogeneous class of reader.

KEY WORDS: Shakespeare, 18th century, appropriation, nation, identities, originality, language.

I think that a materialist definition of genius is impossible, which is why the idea of genius is so discredited in an age like our own, where materialist ideologies dominate. Genius, by necessity, invokes the transcendental and the extraordinary, because it is fully conscious of them. (Bloom, 2002: 129)

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In defining the term *genius* in his recent book on the subject, Harold Bloom declares that he does not believe in the importance of precise cultural-historical contextualisation. This led me to reflect upon the need to look again at the mean-



ings which *genius*—above all with reference to Shakespeare—assumed in Europe during the eighteenth century. Throughout the century this term was central to the first major critical and aesthetic reflections and became profoundly connected to the formation and diversification of the various national European cultures and identities¹. Indeed, in order to clarify the meaning of the word ‘genius’ and how it was used to describe Shakespeare in the eighteenth century, it is fundamental to understand not only how English and German cultural identities were formed, but also to highlight the role they played in Eastern Europe. In these countries, from the end of the eighteenth century Shakespeare was elevated to the status of genius and became a model for achieving their own specific cultural identity.

In order to historically contextualise ‘genius’, one must apply a comparative perspective and examine the way in which the term is connected to the formation and consolidation of national identities. This reveals that Shakespeare’s genius was seen as the model for the as-yet-unconsolidated linguistic and cultural German identity, as well as the ‘scapegoat’ for neo-classical taste, which was still dominant in France and in various European ‘courts’. Furthermore, a comparative approach allows not only a comparison between historical-cultural contexts, but also between the elitist meaning of the word genius, used by only a small circle of specialists, and the popular one, comprehensible to an extensive and heterogeneous class of readers who populate and form a nation.

As numerous eighteenth century essays upon genius noted, it is very difficult to keep the two interpretative spheres separate, particularly with reference to Shakespeare in England, where they were reciprocally influential. Such theories are the result of the process of transformation beginning in eighteenth century England and then in the rest of Europe, which saw Shakespeare elevated to ‘genius’ status, both in the first aesthetic essays, as well as in the literary magazines and popular imagination. This was the result of both his standing as actor and immortal poet, and the separation/identification with the inimitable characters of his plays².

The transformation of Shakespeare into critically and commercially-acclaimed national genius has featured in various recent studies on Shakespeare’s reception in England, by the likes of Michael Dobson (1992), Jonathan Bate (1997), Peter Dàvidhàzi (1998) and Gary Taylor (1989), as well as in studies by eighteenth century German critics, who chose Shakespeare as a new symbol for linguistic and national-cultural unity.

¹ The eighteenth century, like most European historical-literary criticism has shown, is the century in which not only were various nationalities delineated, but also the historical-cultural moment in which the new national literatures made their debut and the formation of various critical and literary canons was designated. With reference to this, see particularly: George RUDÉ (1972), Linda COLLEY (1990), Franco MORETTI (1993), Homi K. BHABHA (ed. 1990: 44-70, 145-176).

² I would like to underline an important exhibition dedicated to Shakespeare (Ferrara, Palazzo dei Diamanti, 16 February-15 June 2003). See also the useful catalogue: *Shakespeare nell’Arte*, edited by Jane MARTINEAU and Maria Grazia MESSINA (2003).



This transformation into genius for the future German nation, and a model which would inspire German writers in their institution of a new language and a national theatre, was profoundly influenced by the powerful aesthetic and ideological image of Shakespeare which had been exported across the continent by the English critics. Therefore it is necessary to look again not just at the meaning which in the course of the eighteenth century saw Shakespeare as the 'poet genius', but also to recontextualise certain thorny concepts which, above all in Germany in the last two centuries, have been dangerously manipulated. A link emerges from these between the meaning of genius and that of *Geist* (spirit), *Sprache* (idiom), or *Volk* (populace), which was manipulated by national-socialist Germany, which modified and decontextualised the interpretation of Shakespeare and his works. Using a comparative reading, which takes into account both the different interpretative levels to which the genius of Shakespeare has been subjected, and the recontextualisation of the various meanings, one is able to discover the definition of 'genius' as it relates to national identity and the formation of a nation. This theme which German critics still regard with great caution, needs profound investigation since the readings of Shakespeare's genius of the eighteenth century German writers influenced Shakespeare's reception in Europe and the East and exported the idea of national genius and of the existence of a specific European cultural identity. Indeed, if it is legitimate to ask: «would we have had Shakespeare if England was not an island?»³, it is also legitimate to question the role which central Europe, in particular Germany, might have had in transmitting the image of the genius of Shakespeare to the countries of the East.

I am thinking particularly of how the German reception and translation of Shakespeare influenced Hungarian intellectuals in the Nineteenth century, who spoke of a 'Germanised' Shakespeare in order to define their own Europeanism, as opposed to the models from the East of Europe, and went beyond—as recently underlined by Markus Zoltan—the anxiety of belonging to a «longed for» centre distant from the furthest outskirts.

In generale, Shakespeare fu preso a misura e ad espressione dell'europeismo ungherese. Determinante nelle appropriazioni ungheresi di Shakespeare fu, infatti, l'ansia di appartenenza ad un vagheggiato centro da parte della periferia. Insieme all'intenso desiderio d'Europa, o forse proprio a causa di questo, lo Shakespeare «ungherese» definì la propria identità in opposizione ai suoi vicini orientali, tanto che il discorso della ricezione shakespeariana in Ungheria assunse, in qualche occasione, toni sciovinisti nei confronti dei paesi non centrali dell'Est europeo più lontano. (Zoltan, 2002: 69)⁴.

³ It is with these words that Franco MORETTI introduces the birth of modern tragedy and naturally the modernity of the theatre of Shakespeare, compared to classic theatre (1993: 845).

⁴ With reference to the role of the works of Shakespeare in Eastern Europe see also: Peter DÁVIDHAZI (1998: 109-209) and M. GIBIŃSKA and J. LIMON (eds., 1998).

I would like to begin with a brief analysis of the term *genius*, which was once used to describe a divinity but later indicated the presence of such a divinity in a subject, thus undergoing a process of abstraction or depersonalisation. As Ernst Robert Curtius has also documented in *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948) the word *genius* belonged to a divinity connected to nature, or a god of human nature; a being therefore completely separate from the subject and gifted with a specific physiognomy. The same word *genius*, which derives from the Latin *gniu* (m), originally meant the divinity who generates or guardian angel of every person; later it took on the abstract meanings of spirit-talent and *ingenium*⁵, the equivalent of the English *wit*, of the German *Witz*, or of the French *esprit*, which in the course of the eighteenth century underwent a great deal of theorisation⁶. In this sense, genius is no longer a divinity or an entity separated from the subject, but represents the presence of the divine or of a supernatural force within the subject and exemplifies that particular quality which renders the possessor unique and inimitable with respect to his peers.

In fact, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, when the first comments on Shakespeare's work began to appear in England, you can see that the term *genius* was meant to imply *wit*, and *talent-genius* cultivated through study, as well as an innate quality connected to supernatural or divine powers and a historical-ideological definition which transformed *genius* from an abstract entity —belonging to an individual and therefore different from subject to subject— to a symbol for an entire nation.

A first example is found in John Dennis' 1711 essay, *On the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare*, in which the author claims that Shakespeare 'the genius' was unfamiliar with the rules of classicism, and defends him against those who accused him of having ignored the models of the past:

Shakespeare was one of the greatest Genius's that the World e'er saw for the Tragick Stage. [...] His Master-Passion was Terror which he has often mov'd so powerfully and so wonderfully, that may justly conclude, that if he had had Advantage of Art and Learning, he wou'd have surpass'd the very best and suggest of the Ancients. [...] Therefore he who allows that Shakespear had Learning and a familiar Acquaintance with the Ancients, ought to be look'd upon as a Detractor from his extraordinary Merit, and from the Glory of Great Britain. (Dennis [1711], 1903: 24-25)

⁵ With regard to this, it is worth underlining that the term *ingegno* from the Latin *ingeniu*(m) changed from the original meaning of innate talent and/or creative inclination-capacity to that of disposition cultivated by study. The same meaning, above all in the eighteenth century, was inherent in the English *wit*, the German *Witz* and the French *esprit*. For the etymological evolution of the words *genius* and *ingegno*, see *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*, vol. II and III (Manlio CORTELAZZO and Paolo ZOLLI eds., 1980-1983: 483-484, 593).

⁶ For a major study of these three terms, see: Elio FRANZINI (1995) and Luigi RUSSO (ed. 2000).



Viewed from a wider European perspective, Dennis' observations not only recall *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* and therefore the problem of imitating French models and their interpretations of the classics, but also that which was happening in the same period at a historical-political level: the 1707 Act of Union which saw the coronation of Great Britain, a new nation in a Europe dominated by France and her political-cultural models. In this sense, Shakespeare is for Dennis both the original English genius, who unlike the French models has no awareness of the classics, and the symbolic genius of the new 'Great Britain', a figure of which every new British citizen must be proud. In other words, genius is an individual aesthetic category which also exemplifies a precise historical-cultural identity, oscillating between a sense of *wit*, sharpness and genius (belonging to the 'category' connected to divine or supernatural powers, which in the course of the eighteenth century became known as the *sublime*), and the political-ideological definition which Dennis offered, by identifying Shakespeare as an icon of the new Great Britain.

Also in *The Spectator* (1711-1714), a magazine with one of the widest readerships and the first to be exported to the continent⁷, the genius of Shakespeare possessed original and inimitable gifts derived from genius in the philosophical sense of innate talent, but he is also the poet who, more than all others, represents a use of the imagination which is for Joseph Addison a trait peculiar to the English. This notion reminds us of *Pleasures of Imagination* (1712) and particularly of the parts dedicated to the *Fairy Way of Writing*:

There is a Kind of Writing, [defined by Addison as the Fairy Way of Writing], wherein the Poet quite loses sight of Nature, and entertains his Reader's Imagination with the Characters and Actions of such Persons as have many of them no Existence [...] These Descriptions raise a pleasing kind of Horrour in the Mind of the Reader. [...] The Ancients have not much of this Poetry among them. [...] Among all the Poets of this Kind our English are much the best. [...] For the English are naturally Fanciful, and very often disposed by that Gloominess and Melancholy of Temper, which is so frequent in our Nation. [...] Among the English, Shakespear has incomparably excelled all others. (Addison [1712], 1958: 300-301)

In this sense, the *Fairy Way of Writing* is a product of the imagination of a particular genius, which in its originality expresses the characteristics of a precise historical-cultural tradition. According to Addison, the talent which gave rise to the *Fairy Way of Writing* became a talent which separated the English tradition from that of the classics, signalling a kind of watershed between the Nordic and Greco-Latin cultures. Shakespeare has therefore an individual genius, which takes him beyond the genius of others, but Shakespeare is also the genius most capable of expressing the peculiarities of Nordic culture. It is clear then from the words of Addison that the genius of Shakespeare is subject to a twofold process: that of the

⁷ With reference to the translation of *The Spectator* in Germany, see E. BLACKALL (1959: 49-101).

personification of genius—in the sense of innate talent—and that of its abstraction, becoming a symbol of an entire nation.

In 1759, following on from Addison, Edward Young provided a key example on the multiple meanings of the term *genius*, and of the genius of Shakespeare. In his essay *Conjectures on Original Composition*, Genius is seen as a magician who enchants the Reader, with an inimitable creative power capable of completely ruling the senses and as the new English national hero, through whose originality one can discover the spirit of the entire nation:

But if an original, by being as excellent as new, adds admiration to surprise, then are we at the writer's mercy; on the strong wing of his imagination, we are snatched from Britain to Italy, from climate to climate, from pleasure to pleasure; we have no home, no thought, of our own; till the magician drops his pen. And then falling down into ourselves, we awake to flat realities, lamenting the change, like the beggar who dreamt himself a prince. [...] Bacon, Boyle, Newton, Shakespeare, Milton, have showed us, that all the winds cannot blow the British flag farther, than an original spirit can convey the British fame; their names go round the world; and what foreign genius strikes not as they pass? Why should not their posterity embark in the same bold bottom of new enterprise, and hope the same success? (Young [1759], 1947: 274-298)

Within a wider European perspective (Young's work was translated into German in 1760 and appeared in various foreign magazines)⁸, Shakespeare becomes a flag raised in a continent characterised by the formation of new different nations and the consolidation of Britain⁹.

One last example is Elizabeth Montagu's *An essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare, compared with the Greek and French dramatic Poets with some remarks upon the misrepresentations of Mons. De Voltaire* (1769). This text circulated during the colonial war between France and England and was published in 1769, when Garrick paid tribute to Shakespeare by organising the Jubilee in Stratford. This was seen as a popular celebration of the English genius of Shakespeare, and also as commercial product to be exported to the continent along with the translations of the critical essays¹⁰.

In Montagu's essay—which enjoyed real international success since it was translated into German in 1770 by Eschenburg and taken up by Baretti in his essay *Discours sur Shakespeare et sur Monsieur de Voltaire* (1777-78)—the defence of Shakespeare's genius from the accusations of Voltaire reveals more epistemological meanings. Shakespeare is the national hero in whose works are celebrated the enterprises

⁸ References to the translation of YOUNG's essay, *Gedanken über die Originalwerke*, 1760, appear in a review in the magazine *Bibliothek der Schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* (1760: 180).

⁹ These were the years in which England and France fought the Seven Year War for possession of the colonies.

¹⁰ With reference to this first example of the commercialisation of Shakespeare, see DÁVIDHÁZI (1998: 1-107).

of the past; he is the bard-depository of folklore and sagas; and he is also the original great poet, who gave his work a historical-cultural diversity, interpreted by Montagu as a product of the different climatic-natural conditions of the Germanic, as opposed to the Latin peoples.

The Grecian tragedies are so much founded on their mythology as to be very improper on our stage. [...] Shakespeare saw, that in the historical play he could represent the manners of the whole people, give the general temper of the times, and bring in view the incidents that affected the common fate of his country. [...] At the time he wrote, the wars of the Houses of York and Lancaster were fresh in men's minds. [...] In our northern climates heroic adventures pleased more than the gallant dialogue, where love and honour dispute with all the sophistry of the schools, and one knows not when the contest would end. [...] Ghosts, fairies, goblins, elves, were as propitious, were as assistant to Shakespeare, and gave as much of the sublime, and of the marvellous, to his fictions, as nymphs, satyrs, fawns. (Montagu [1769], 1810: 36, 44, 50, 119)

The word *genius* acquires then many different aspects. An aesthetic one, which connects the talents of genius to the category of the 'sublime', a political ideological meaning, which sees Shakespeare as a representative of the history of England, and a historical anthropological connotation: through his plays he bore testimony to a climatic-natural condition different to that in which the classics were written.

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The idea of genius as a 'flexible' and 'metamorphic' category, and therefore open to further interpretations is confirmed by the role of the English texts which circulated in Germany in the later half of the eighteenth century. Germany at that point was an as-yet-unformed nation, in terms of language and culture, as well as politics. It was also deeply needful of symbolic figures. German writers read English essays, emphasising the ideological aspect and choosing it as the starting point for the process of the Germanisation of Shakespeare, and for a spiritual transformation of the German language in which Shakespeare became the poet of the German people. The German writers found in the multiple meanings implicit in the word *genius* when used with reference to Shakespeare, a term to express the necessity of a Germany which was linguistically united and, above all, liberated from French cultural and linguistic models, and not only the absolutism of the court. The process of the appropriation of Shakespeare's genius and of his symbolic-cultural significance by German critics began with their reading, not of the works themselves, but of the English critics. By the time the plays were translated by Christoph Martin Wieland¹¹, Shakespeare was already defined as an inimitable genius and symbol of

¹¹ Apart from Caspar W. von BORCK's translation of *Julius Caesar* in 1741, early translations of Shakespeare were carried out by WIELAND between 1762 and 1766. For a major study

the linguistic and national identity of a population. Indeed, between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the Nineteenth¹², we are no longer talking only of the genius of Shakespeare, but also of the spirit-genius of Hamlet, Shakespeare's creation which became, as illustrated in Freiligrath's poem *Hamlet ist Deutschland* (1844)¹³, a metaphor of the existential-political condition which characterised a nation still searching for its own political unity. It was Friedrich Schlegel who in 1812 in *Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur*, admitted the fundamental role of the introduction of Shakespeare into Germany when he affirmed that the translations of his works contributed not only to a transformation of the German language, but also to casting the foundations for a national 'conscience'¹⁴.

The appropriation of the myth of Shakespeare began, therefore, in the second half of the eighteenth century and can be seen both in German literature and the cultural imagination, at least until the first decades of the 1900s, and gradually became a dangerous weapon which a totalitarian regime such as the Nazis would have no difficulty using to support their ideology¹⁵.

This reminds us of Friedrich Gundolf who, using the image of Shakespeare which was circulating in critical German texts at the turn of the eighteenth century, defined Shakespeare's works as places in which the German spirit and Shakespeare himself were expressed toward a common goal, and the language of Shakespeare became the real German language. At the historical-cultural moment when Germany came out of the First World War and began the slow descent into Nazism, Gundolf consolidates the strong link which was created throughout the centuries between the 'spirit' of Shakespeare's genius and the German language:

So war die Möglichkeit einer deutscher Shakespeare-übertragung verwirklicht worin der deutsche Geist und die Seele Shakespeares durch ein gemeinsames Medium sich ausdrückten, worin Shakespeare wirklich deutsche Sprache geworden war. (Gundolf, 1927: 351)

of Shakespeare's reception in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century, see Gilberta GOLINELLI (2003).

¹² During this period the works of Shakespeare were not only translated into second editions by the Schlegel brothers and Ludwig Tieck, but were also performed in various court theatres.

¹³ Freiligrath's, *Hamlet ist Deutschland* gave rise to the important essay by Manfred PFISTER (1986, vol. 2).

¹⁴ See George STEINER (1992) in which the critic, analysing the various interpretations of Shakespeare in Germany affirms that according to Schlegel, the German translations of Shakespeare have transformed the native language and the national conscience.

¹⁵ According to Ian BURUMA: «Shakespeare was performed more often during Hitler's Third Reich than Goethe or Schiller. Goethe was too humanistic and Schiller too revolutionary for Nazi taste. But Shakespeare remained the Nordic genius, and Hitler, who had always hoped for a Nordic alliance with Britain, was proud that German theaters paid more tribute to Shakespeare's Nordic spirit than the British did themselves. In September 1939, the Reichsdramaturg Reiner Schlösser officially declared that Shakespeare, in German translation, was to be regarded as a German classic» (1999: 66-67).

Shakespearian genius was sought behind the cover of the English language, for, as in the words of Gundolf, the realisation of the full historical-spiritual presence of Shakespeare was found only in German (see Steiner, 1992: 453-454).

If from a linguistic-cultural point of view, Gundolf offers important reflections on the problem of translating the genius of Shakespeare into German (incidentally, he was also interested in the translation of Shakespeare, particularly the sonnets)¹⁶, from a historical-political point of view he confirms that it is necessary to look again and attempt a historical recontextualisation of the different meanings surrounding the 'myth' of Shakespearean genius in the years of its formation and diffusion throughout the continent¹⁷. Further to this, one of the first testimonials in which the meaning of Shakespeare's genius also expressed the meaning of national identity and of opposition to cultural models which were inadequate in expressing the peculiarity of the German people, was Lessing's seventeenth letter, which appeared in *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend* (1759). In this letter the German author criticises Johann Christoph Gottsched for having established a «national theatre» inspired by French models, and laments the absence of a real genius such as Shakespeare amongst German writers. Furthermore, he hopes to generate the birth of a new German genius, who would come to represent that which Shakespeare represents for the English theatre:

Denn ein Genie kann nur von einem Genie entzündet werden; und am leichtesten von so einem, das alles bloß der Natur zu danken zu haben scheint und durch die mühsamen Vollkommenheiten der Kunst nicht abschreckt. (Lessing [1759], 1959: 52-53)

Lessing uses the word *genius* in one of its original senses, that of «the divinity who generates». If on the one hand he confers upon Shakespeare the power to generate talent in other poets, on the other hand he also associates his name and his role as a human being with divine powers, in a specific historical-political situation, because together with the original meaning of the term, Lessing also infers the ideological-political meaning he had deduced from a reading of the English essayists. In these, Lessing's first reflections, Shakespeare becomes the genius *par excellence*, because his originality resides both in the fact of his being opposed to a system of rules which had produced an unnatural emotion, and in having created a new theatre which brought to the stage the culture and history of England.

¹⁶ With reference to GUNDOLF's translation of Shakespeare's sonnets, one remembers how often it was said in the *Shakespeare-Handbuch*: «In Gundolfs Revision kündigte sich zugleich eine neue Übersetzer-Haltung an, die sich auf den neuen Dicht-geist des Georg-Kreises berief. Angestrebt wurde eine Wiedergeburt Shakespeares aus der ganzen deutschen Sprachfülle, die den dürftigen Wortschatz des Alltagslesers nicht mehr zur Rischnur nehmen wollte» (hrsg. von I. SCHABERT, 1978: 709).

¹⁷ During the second half of the eighteenth century, Germany was still divided into many small states dominated by the language and culture of France (see Nicolao MERKER, 1989: 45-71).





Moreover, as Giampiero Moretti underlines in his study of genius (1998), it is in the middle of the eighteenth century that the term *genius* made its first appearance in Germany, both in the translations of essays of aesthetics written during the eighteenth century, and in various texts where the idea of genius is linked with that of race, such as *Examen de ingenios para las ciencias* by Huarte de San Juan (1575), which was translated by Lessing in 1752¹⁸.

Indeed the German language, not possessing the word *genius* nor the etymological root *gen*, used *Geist* (spirit), which represents only one of the definitions given to the term: that which implied talent and divine inspiration, completely different to the idea of 'genius' as a real person, as consolidated by the English critics during the eighteenth century. In this sense, German writers, and in this particular case Lessing, appropriated a new term which entered into their language already carrying strong aesthetic-philosophical and political-ideological connotations. The 'genius' of Shakespeare represents genius as an entity or creative spirit gifted with an inimitable originality, and thus the abstract meaning which the German word *Geist*¹⁹ also carries and the 'individual' genius as symbol of a specific nation with its linguistic-cultural identity.

Also Hamann's *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten* (1759), which defines 'genius' both as the quality which most questions the rationality of the Enlightenment and that which allows the artist-poet to 'create' despite his unawareness of the Aristotelean rules, is an open challenge to neo-classical French-derived tastes. Concentrating on the 'genius' of Socrates (and his *daemon*), Hamann confirms that there is a link between genius and the natural emotion, and genius and its opposition to rules or any type of artistic restrictions: the same connection which prompted Lessing to criticise the neo-classical aesthetic imposed upon Germany by French models. And, like Lessing, Hamann also evokes Shakespeare, the great poet who was able to substitute his lack of awareness of the rules with his genius:

Was ersetzt bei Homer die Unwissenheit der Kunstregeln, die ein Aristoteles nach ihm erdacht, und was bei einem Shakespeare die Unwissenheit oder Übertretung jeder kritischen Gesetze? Das Genie, ist die einmütige Antwort. (Hamann [1759], 1944: 78)

With reference to this, it seems useful to remember that, next to the aesthetic reflections on the true nature of genius, there were also other essays published in England and translated into German in which genius was exemplified through the exaltation of poets who, in possessing a particular talent became recognised as such. I am thinking of works dedicated to Shakespeare, but also of those

¹⁸ With reference to HUARTE de San Juan, see G. GLIOZZI's useful anthology *Le teorie della razza nell'età moderna* (1986).

¹⁹ In a certain sense this is the definition given also by SULZER in his two studies on genius dating back to 1757 and 1771, in which the author intends genius with a human attitude, as affirmed by G. MORETTI (1998: 60).

which celebrate Spenser, Milton and Pope²⁰, as well as exemplary figures such as Newton, Bacon and David Garrick, the new genius of the art of acting. In *Paradoxe sur le comedien* (1770, 1777-1778), for example, the French writer Diderot gives a close psycho-physical analysis of the actor-genius, tacitly taking as example the performance of Garrick, whose fame for interpreting Shakespeare's characters and his connection with the great and inimitable bard had spread to the continent. The term 'genius' is studied as an innate talent cultivated through study, a divine or supernatural force radically opposed to awareness of the rules, a trait specific to a particular nation and its cultural identity, and also a subject whose physiognomic characteristics are exactly those of a poet. In some of the studies of genius which appeared during these years, there is also a serious analysis of the psycho-physical traits, of the humour and temperament which characterised genius, as in the description by Diderot of the personality of the actor David Garrick, and naturally in various English and German essays which spoke of genius²¹.

Nevertheless, it is from the youthful reflections of Herder and in particular *Fragmente über die neuere deutsche Literatur* (1766-7), that German critics attempt to solve the differences between the different definitions of genius in general and Shakespeare's genius. In this essay, Shakespeare, being the genius that most expresses the English language and national identity, as opposed to the aesthetics of French neo-classicism, is chosen by Herder as the best example of the inseparable connection between genius, language and the cultural tradition of a nation, and between genius and specific climatic-natural conditions:

Der Genius der Sprache ist also der Genius von der Literatur einer Nation. [...] Woher lieben die Briten so sehr das Launische in ihrer Schreibart? Weil diese Laune unübersetzbar und ein heiliger Idiotisme ist. Warum verteidigen die Engländer ihren Shakespeare, selbst wenn er sich unter die Concetti und Wortspiele verirrt? Eben diese Concetti, die er mit Wortspielen vermählt, sind Früchte, die nicht in ein anderes Klima entführt werden können. (Herder, 1766-1767)

Shakespeare continually undergoes a process of abstraction and personification, also by German writers who use this new symbol to lament their weak cultural and linguistic identity and to inspire a new production of texts written in German. From the links between genius and language, Herder recognises in genius not only the

²⁰ See also John DENNIS, *On the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare* (1711), *The Ground of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) in which there is a close analysis of the genius of Milton; Thomas WARTON, *Observations on the Faery Queen of Spenser* (1751, 1762); Joseph WARTON, *An Essay on the Genius of Alexander Pope* (1756); E. MONTAGU, *An essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare, compared with the Greek and French dramatic Poets with some remarks upon the misrepresentations of Mons. De Voltaire* (1769).

²¹ See particularly William DUFF, *Essay on Original Genius; and its Various Modes of Exertion in Philosophy and the Fine Arts, particularly in Poetry* (1767), and LAVATER, who in *Physiognomische Fragmente*, dedicates a 'fragment' to the definition and the study of genius and temperament. For a more profound study see J. SCHMIDT (1985: 98- 120).



quality of a precise idiom, but, in the wake of the reflections on translation which were published in this period, and above all with reference to the studies into the formation of a specific language and national identity, the element which always renders the translation incomplete from one language to another. Genius is thus, for Herder, that linguistic peculiarity which cannot be translated, precisely because it carries the imprint of a determined/defined national character: it is the poetic part of a defined idiom and not that which emerges when the language is considered as a mere means of communication. And Herder, in *Fragmente*, as Steiner points out, emphasises the meaning of linguistic genius as a basis of the literature of a nation, exalting the importance of the health of a language as a basis for the health of the people, and saying that a language would have benefited from refraining from every translation (see Steiner, 1992: 453). And it is interesting to reflect also on the role played by the translation of Shakespeare's theatre in this period, not only in the evolution of the German language, but also for the formation of the canon of national theatre and a new poetic language (see Golinelli, 2003). Like Herder, other German writers realised that in translating complex Shakespearean language into German, they were forced to meditate on the possibility of German being able to render the greatness and universality of Shakespeare's characters and also to re-examine the use of Alexandrian rhyme, imposed by French models which still reigned in German courts, and naturally not present in the blank verse used by Shakespeare. If, on one hand, translation put two different cultures and languages into contact with one another, triggering linguistic changes and innovations, on the other it reinforced the idea of the existing untranslatable aspects of language, defined by Herder and other writers of the period as *poetical or lyrical genius* (*Lyrisches Genie*)²². In reality, the meaning of Shakespeare's genius in the youthful essays of Herder underwent not only a process of abstraction, but also a real process of personification which transformed Shakespeare from an English national hero, a rebel figure similar to Prometheus, into hero and bard of the Nordic peoples and therefore of the German population as well.

In this sense, the meaning of genius as related to Shakespeare contemporaneously defines the spirit of the German people, the individual talent of the artist

²² See Heinrich W. von GERSTENBERG's reflections on Shakespeare in *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Litteratur*, 1767-71 (1888: 160-161); and also that which GOETHE wrote on the subject some years later, as highlighted by LEPSCHY with «Traduzione»: «Anche Goethe, nel suo scritto in memoria di Wieland, parlava dei due principi della traduzione: uno richiede che l'autore di una nazione straniera venga portato a noi in modo che possiamo considerarlo nostro, l'altro richiede a noi di passare dalla parte dello straniero, e di metterci nelle sue condizioni, nel suo modo di parlare, nelle sue particolarità [1813, ed. 1949 p.705]. In una celebre nota al West-östlicher Divan Goethe distingue la traduzione «semplicemente prosaica» che ci rende familiare, nel nostro senso, ciò che è straniero, ma per appropriarselo e risporlo in termini propri, e conclude che la traduzione ideale è quella che cerca di identificarsi con l'originale, di poter valere non «invece» di esso ma «al suo posto»: «una traduzione che tenda ad identificarsi con l'originale, si avvicina alla fine alla versione interlineare e facilita molto la comprensione del testo; da essa veniamo quindi condotti, anzi spinti verso di questo [1819, trad. it.: 687]», (1981: 447).

and a national figure who, through his untranslatable originality, confirms the specificity of his own historical-cultural tradition. As it is clear in Herder's *Von Ähnlichkeit der mittlern englischen und deutschen Dichtung* (1777), when he, turning to the German people, declares: «Grosses Reich, Reich von zehn Völkern, Deutschland! Du hast kein Shakespeare» (Herder [1777], 1949: 680).

And particularly in his essay dedicated to Shakespeare in 1773 in which you see the way in which Herder and the writers of this period in general, model and adapt Shakespeare's genius to their own aesthetic-ideological requirements. In this essay Shakespeare is exalted in his double nature of spirit and individual, therefore he is the genius who possesses individual and inimitable gifts and also the spirit of the Nordic people. Shakespeare is for Herder both a model to imitate in the German courts, and the national and historical hero who with his work has united the language and the character of the various Nordic peoples:

Shakespeare fand keinen Chor vor sich; aber wohl Staats- und Marionettenspiele! Er bildete also aus diesen Staats- und Marionettenspielen, dem so schlechten Leim! das herrliche Geschöpf, das da vor uns steht und lebt! Er fand keinen so einfachen Volks und Vaterlandscharakter, sondern ein Vielfaches von Ständen, Lebensarten, Gesinnungen, Völkern und Spracharten-; er dichtete also Stände und Menschen, Völker und Spracharten, König und Narren, Narren und König zu dem herrlichen Ganzen [...] so lehrt, rührt und bildet Shakespeare nordische Menschen. (Herder [1773], 1949: 566-567)

It is in this way therefore that Shakespeare also loses his Englishness and assumes for Herder and for many German writers semblance of the great bard²³, a model of reference for the production of German works and the figure of national poet to whom one would turn to rediscover a real historical-cultural identity²⁴. In Herder's words, Shakespeare was already an incarnation of great romantic genius, the national hero, the patriot and the poet-prophet, a kind of prophet against whom future generations would measure themselves, attempting to equal or overtake originality. He possessed the characteristics which even Goethe in *Zum Shakespeare-Tag* a few years earlier had pointed out, recognising in Shakespeare both a Prometheus fighting against whatever form of constriction and absolute power, and the fire of the artist, the *daemon* which confers upon the poet an original creativity:

²³ Regarding this, it is interesting to underline how the idea of Shakespeare as representative of the Nordic tradition came up again in F. SCHLEGEL's important lesson held in Vienna in 1812. In this lesson Schlegel took up the idea of Shakespeare as bard of the Nordic peoples, and also the idea of a strong link between Shakespeare's poetry and the German spirit: «Im Innersten seiner Gefühls- und Behandlungsweise ist Shakespeare mehr ein alter, wenn auch gerade kein griechischer, sondern vielmehr ein altnordischer Dichter, als ein christlicher. [...] Shakespeares Poesie ist dem deutschen Geiste sehr verwandt, und er wird von den Deutschen mehr als jeder andere fremde und ganz wie ein einheimischer Dicht empfunden» (Friedrich SCHLEGEL [1812] hrsg von W. REASCH, 1964: 616, 621).

²⁴ With reference to this one returns to the role of Shakespeare amongst the writers of *Sturm und Drang*.



Die erste Seite, die ich in ihm las, machte mich auf zeitlebens ihm eigen, und wie ich mit dem ersten Stücke fertig war, stund ich wie ein Blindgeborner, dem eine Wunderhand das Gesicht in einem Augenblicke schenkt. Ich erkannte, ich fühlte auf's lebhafteste meine Existenz um eine Unendlichkeit erweitert, alles war mir neu, unbekannt, und das ungewohnte Licht machte mir Augenschmerzen. (Goethe [1771], 1949: 695-696)

The appropriation of the genius of Shakespeare by German writers²⁵ was therefore the result of a constant process of abstraction and personification of the meaning of genius, a process which stratifies itself in an idealistic and still strongly elitist German literature at the end of the eighteenth century. Even taking into account the active participation of writers, this was a literature which, as noted by Lukaçs (1978: 5-8) when compared to the other national literatures, was incapable of forming public opinion and of concretely intervening on reality. This resulted in the risk of becoming, over the centuries —as has happened for many texts taken out of their historical-cultural context— support and legitimisation for terrible totalitarian regimes. Further to this, Bloom's definition of genius, in which a necessary historical-cultural contextualisation of the term seems to be negated and only the aesthetic-philosophical dimension accepted, can not help but be reductive.



²⁵ This appropriation would give rise to the incorporation of Shakespeare into the German culture, his diffusion in Europe and the East, as well as to the birth of a real philology of Shakespeare. In this sense, A.W. Schlegel's study of Shakespeare's sonnets is relevant. Regarding this, see PFISTER's useful essay (1999: 174-194).

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