

TÓTH TIBOR

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S RECEPTION IN FRANCE AND GERMANY

Lisez Milton, Shakespeare, Young et vous Verrez, comment la raison Humaine peut devenir a la fois majesteuse et terrible ...."

(Bessenyei György, 1777)

The first important step towards a Hungarian translation of the works of Shakespeare was taken by a session of the Hungarian Academy of Science held on the 16th May 1831, when the "Shakespeare Committee" elaborated a list of twenty-two Shakespearean dramas to be translated.

The project was met with enthusiasm and resulted in a number of translations having real artistic merit. Arany, Petőfi and Vörösmarty decided to translate the complete works of William Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup>

We must not forget, though, the long list of previous attempts to introduce the works of William Shakespeare to the Hungarian public: Most of them were translations or adaptations from German or French translations or adaptations.<sup>2</sup> The importance of these translations, adaptations and critical views paved the way for later genuinely artistic translations.

Since French and German literature and literary criticism acted as intermediaries for the Hungarian reception of William Shakespeare's dramas it seems necessary to make a short survey of the French and German reception of the Shakespearean heritage.

The first important step in the French reception of Shakespeare's works was De la Roche's Dissertation<sup>3</sup> on English poetry.

The faults De la Roche finds with Shakespeare are in fact his best characteristics. Comparing French drama to the Shakespearean, De la Roche condemns Shakespeare's "lack of taste" (to be identified with his choice of themes). De la Roche states scornfully that Shakespeare does not respect the "sacred measure", dilutes tragedy with comedy and fails to assure the unity of place and time so strictly required by classicist rules and taste. On the other hand De la Roche admires Shakespeare for something that cannot be said about him: "He never imitated anyone, all his works sprang from his own imagination,"<sup>4</sup> writes the obviously misinformed critic.

De la Roche's ideas are perpetuated over by Voltaire. Voltaire's aesthetic position can be easily understood considering his classicist taste and orientation: "How can an eminent nation appreciate such monstrosities?!" exclaims Voltaire in an essay following a French adaptation of Julius Caesar in 1764. Here are two lines in which Voltaire's attitude in this matter is fully revealed: "He had a genius full of power and a fertility natural and sublime, without the less sparkle of good taste and lacking knowledge of the rules."<sup>5</sup>

So Voltaire attacks Shakespeare in the name of "*La beauté régulière*" and his position in the "Shakespeare battle" is mainly based on this concept, as the following quotation shows: "... and had he attached to this quality (viz. to the fine action) a simple style, order and decency, the English may have surpassed the Greeks and the French."<sup>6</sup>

Voltaire's ideas influenced Abbé Prévost, who continued the attacks against the English dramatist. In his *Mémoires*,<sup>7</sup> he reproaches Shakespeare his ignorance and not obeying the rules set forth by the classicist school.

Not only was Shakespeare accused of disregarding the classicist concept of drama, but later French criticism blamed him for "not reflecting the truth" and for the fact that he "creates a chaos which does not reflect the soul of the English nation."<sup>8</sup>

If we take a closer look at the reasons given by these critics, we can easily draw the conclusion that their arguments stem from certain important misinterpretations.

Prévost and Riccoboni invoke the lack of "truthfulness", a statement based on the fact that Shakespeare does not use, accept and follow the classicist rules.

But the debate goes on, and as early as 1756 Le Blanc makes the first step towards a new interpretation of Shakespeare in France, Le Blanc admires the blending of grace and frustrated sensuality in Shakespeare's dramas.

His contribution was later used by the romantic school of writers as an effective weapon in defending the new concept concerning Shakespeare's originality.

A few years later Delaplace's enthusiastic declaration in this matter resulted in the French translation of a number of Shakespearean dramas.

The diligent translator of Fielding and Shakespeare remarked: "All those who want to force these dramas into French patterns are definitely wrong, Shakespeare is the creator of dramatic art in Britain."<sup>9</sup>

If Delaplace called attention to Shakespeares's genuine and original technique and the psychological approach, Baulard d'Arnoud stressed the excellent scenic effect stemming from the Shakespearean dramatic vision. By then Shakespeare's works had come to be well known to the French public through Letouneur's and Delaplace's translations and the adaptations of Ducis.

Although the above mentioned translations resulted from a sincere and somewhat more comprehensive evaluation of Shakespeare, the translators could not easily free themselves from the classicist rules and thus clearly presented, showed the tendency to attribute to the translated drama the characteristics of the classicist French drama, altering the Shakespearean work at times.

Nevertheless, we must consider the fact that Ducis for instance, was a preromantic whose aesthetic conception, besides being reminiscent of the classicist aesthetics, demonstrated new ideas as well. Thus, the great influence of English literature on his ideas determined Ducis to handle his material with utmost accuracy.

Delaplace's translation of Shakespeare published in *Le Théâtre Anglais*<sup>10</sup> did not represent a better achievement than Ducis' adaptations, but Delaplace published in the preface<sup>11</sup> a series of considerations of great importance regarding the Shakespeare image. From among the ideas formulated in this preface two are of major importance, namely that "he was as great a philosopher as a poet" and "'Dedicated his work to the nation."<sup>12</sup>

Delaplace, as one of the leaders of the anti-absolutistic movement, found a great help in Shakespeare in contradicting some of the basic concepts of absolutism: By stressing the popular character of the Shakespearean drama, Delaplace, in fact, announced the advent of a new trend in literature: the blending of art and literature with social matters. This idea led to the conception that literature and art were to play a definite role in preparing the way for social transformations.

The Shakespearean dramas in their translation and interpretation assumed a positive character: French literary criticism of the time deliberately attached to Shakespeare an anti-absolutistic character.

This French approach was taken over by Hungarian literary criticism, and the translation of Shakespearean dramas came to be considered an integral part of the progressive movements aiming toward Hungarian independence:

Another important contribution to the Hungarian reception of the works of William Shakespeare. Has the development of German literary criticism and its conception on art in the 18th and 19th centuries. Thus a short survey of Shakespeare's German reception seems compulsory if we want to have a sufficiently complex image of the premises created on the Continent for the Hungarian reception of his works.

British companies began to perform different plays in Germany as early as 1417: In the second half of the 16th century their tours in Germany became more numerous. The German stage of the time was dominated by the dramas of Gryphius and Lohenstein and the plays of William Shakespeare.

When the triumph of absolutism began to be imposed on literature through the French models, there was a stagnation in the representation of the Shakespearean drama in Germany.

Still, in 1741, Gheimart Kaspar Wilhelm Von Bork translated Julius Caesar using German alexandrines: Bork's translation generated in a Germany a series of critical attitudes similar to those of the French criticism of the time:

Gottsched criticised Shakespeare's "untruthfulness" and not respecting the "sacred rules"<sup>13</sup> required by classicist aesthetics and taste.

In the same year, Elias Schlegel set forth a new approach: Schlegel quoted Shakespeare in the original, and his investigation marked a new evaluation of literary translation as well, since he remarked, noted and criticized Bork's deviations from the Shakespearean formula. Comparing Shakespeare to Andreas Gryphius, Schlegel ranked the former's Julius Caesar above Gryphius' Leo Armanius. Schlegel observed that Shakespeare creates a "free space, a free space for new dimensions of the hero's thoughts" after every emotional climax. Thus Schlegel touched upon the complexity of emotional involvement created by Shakespeare and condemned Gryphius for his incapacity in this regard.<sup>14</sup>

Schlegel in one of his later works<sup>15</sup> proceeds from the comparison between English and French drama to give a fine opinion of the Shakespearean: Schlegel favours English drama, stressing the idea that the complexity of Shakespearean drama offers more than the single-character plays of the French dramatists.

Schlegel views his material as an integral part of the historical development of drama as genre: In his opinion Shakespeare's plays marked an important step towards realism.

Schlegel also favoured the idea that every nation should create its own theatre. Schlegel considered that in creating a new national dramatic literature Shakespeare could be a great help, since: "Shakespeare is closer to the German soul than the classicist French drama."<sup>16</sup>

Bessenyei expressed much the same ideas in 1777, hoping to create a "new literature and a suitable style" by translating Shakespeare.<sup>17</sup>

Lessing accepted this idea later, in 1759, in his letter on new literature (*Briefe die neueste Literatur betreffend*, 1759). Lessing considered that translating Shakespeare would have better served the development of German dramatic literature than presenting Racine and Corneille to the German audience: 'The Genius can be set on fire only with the help of another Genius, and through one indebted to nature, through one who does not accept the awkward ways of art.'<sup>18</sup>

In another work, Schlegel, comparing the ghost scenes in Hamlet and Voltaire's Semiramis, noticed the artificiality of the latter and praised the tragic power of the first.<sup>19</sup>

The same was his verdict when comparing the image of jealousy offered by Voltaire's Orosman in Zaire and Shakespeare's Othello: "We listen in Orosman to a jealous man. We see him accomplish his deed; but we do not find out anything more about jealousy than we have known before. Othello on the other hand is the complete treatise (Lehrbuch) on this sad foolishness, about what precedes it, how it is awakened and how it could be avoided."<sup>20</sup>

The documents showing how the attractive force of Shakespearean drama came to replace the idolatry of French classicist drama in the German public taste are numerous. Shakespeare became the real standard around which the adepts of a new, national - popular art gathered as a result of dissociation from artistic formulae imposed by the aesthetic rules of the period.

One of the German writers who was successful in this respect was M. Wieland. When he decided to study and translate Shakespeare, his translations in prose (1762-1766) had an overwhelming importance for the growth of the popularity of Shakespearean drama in Germany. The translations were accompanied by Wieland's comments and notes regarding the Shakespeare material in different publications. Wieland stated that Shakespeare did not lose in artistic power by ignoring the "sacred rules", but on the contrary he gained in originality and force.

Wieland concluded by stating that those who questioned Shakespeare's greatness started from a superficial analysis of the problems involved.

Another adept of the Shakespearean drama was Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder studied Shakespeare minutely as shown in a letter addressed to his fiancée: "I haven't read Shakespeare, but studied it; I underline the word."<sup>21</sup>

Herder's enthusiasm is touching. He exclaims: "Who could imagine a more sublime poet of the Northern Nature."<sup>22</sup>

Herder in his theoretical works stressed the idea of the primary importance of the genius. Remembering Lessing's formula of the mutual interference in the case of "giant talents", Herder's conception of "Naturpoesie" and "Volkpoesie", both Homer and Shakespeare are "Naturdichter": if we add to these Herder's progressive conception of "Volkpoesie", and his stressing the "cosmic" character of Shakespeare's creation (as opposed to that of the divine character of the genius), the image of his attitude in this matter is nearly complete.<sup>23</sup>

Herder's greatest impact was his influence on Goethe which helped the creator of the concept of "Weltliteratur" understand the genius of Shakespeare. The young poet decided to destroy the citadel of classicism and in Shakespeare he found a good mate in this enterprise. By placing Shakespeare at the top of the hierarchy of artistic values, Goethe forced the adepts of classicist criticism to retire from the field. What Goethe admired most in Shakespeare was his natural power, a creative power "resembling the power of Prometheus."<sup>24</sup>

Goethe's speech on Shakespeare (Frankfurt, 1771) proved to be a major step towards ensuring the continued success of the English dramatist on German soil.

Goethe's popularity, his leading position among the poets and critics of his age, encouraged a swifter acceptance and revaluation of the Shakespearean drama and its assessment as an inestimable treasure of universal literature. From this date on, the translation of the complete works of William Shakespeare played an integral part in the development of national literatures in Europe and subsequently of a national Hungarian literature.

## NOTES

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