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# A. W. Schlegel on Romanticism in Lectures on Dramatic Art

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#### Abstract

This paper aims at analysing the perspectives of A. W. Schlegel's famous work *Lectures on Dramatic Art*. With the advent of science, literary artists and professors began to write the principles of writing and an urgency to work it out in an objective and scientific manner. Schlegel aims at tracing the way poetic styles shifted from classicism to Romanticism during the 19th century. European writing came under the influence of the Greeks and Latin works, later took influences from Christianised writings of various nations in Europe, inspired by Shakespeare's writings that broke away from the Greek and Latin model and again met with the Sanskrit texts from India. A great transformation took place amalgamating all these varied influences into a new type of writing, later termed as 'romantic' in nature.

Keywords: A. W. Schlegel, Lectures on Dramatic Art, Shakespeare, Romanticism.

August Wilhelm von Schlegel (1767-1845) was a German "translator, philosopher, and poet" who is "considered to be one of the founders of the German Romantic Movement" which was conceived by him "as a European movement" and also he was "one of the most prominent disseminators of its philosophical foundational ideas" in Europe, "most notably in Britain" with his "outstanding knowledge of art, history, literature, architecture, anthropology, and foreign languages" that contributed to the "development of comparative literature and modern linguistics;" he launched "the journal *Indische Bibliothek*" and thus "inaugurated the domain of Sanskrit studies in Germany". He was a critic and was famous for "his brilliant translations into German of Shakespeare, which are still used today" (Hay).

"Friedrich Schlegel and his circle" hearkened "back to the old use of *romauns* as a term distinct from "Latin," for one of the emergent meanings in contrast with "classic," that is, Greek and Latin literature" and Friedrich Schlegel recognised classicism in contemporary writers and found qualities of romanticism in Shakespeare, Cervantes and in Italian poetry; in his circle, "*romantisch*" came to be "identified with modern or Christian"; there were occasions when "it was narrowed to a sense connected to *Roman* as novel and meant *novelish* or *novelic*, the novel being a characteristically modern genre" (Ferber 2).

"We owe some of the best Shakespearean criticism ever written to the Romantics. Between 1808 and 1818, August Wilhelm von Schlegel, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Hazlitt" brought in "character criticism" into the analysis of Shakespearean plays and thus the Romantics ushered in "practical criticism;" they introduced "close reading of texts" and aimed at understanding "textual structures as organic wholes, centred and unified in a germ that had only to be laid open to give meaning to the entire work of art;" these essays and lectures initiated "modern criticism and the emergence of a new hermeneutics" that "became almost identical with the history of Shakespeare interpretation through Romanticism" (Grundmann 29).

In 1771 Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832) wrote an essay "*Zum Shakespeares Tag*" (On Shakespeare Day). Dickson quotes Goethe:

The first page of his I read put me in his debt for a lifetime, and once I had read an entire play, I stood there like a blind man, given the gift of sight by some miraculous healing touch. I sensed my own existence multiplied in a prism – everything was new to me, unfamiliar, and the unwonted light hurt my eyes. (Goethe as quoted by Dickson)

Romantic writers, especially, Goethe's friend Friedrich Schiller (1759 - 1805) "exalted" Shakespeare; by 1860s, "the *Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft* (German Shakespeare-Company Society) was founded in Weimar;" in 1864, Friedrich Max Muller (1823 - 1900) celebrated Shakespeare as a poet on par with "Goethe and Schiller" (Dickson).

The Germans welcomed Shakespearean plays; they felt "the belatedness and lack of a great national literature of their own;" it "induced in German writers an enthusiastic Shakespeare cult, which exceeded the bardolatry of the other countries on the continent and from the start combined admiration with identification and appropriation;" the nineteenth century "Germans regarded

Shakespeare as exemplary of the democratic and progressive liberal cultural life of England and tried to incorporate him as a third 'German classic' into their own culture' (Grundmann 34).

Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813) translated 22 plays of Shakespeare which "appeared between 1762 and 1766" and from this period "Shakespeare became the common property of all educated Germans;" slowly Shakespeare's evocative power began to be appreciated by "a new generation" of writers and academics called as "*Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress), comprising Gerstenberg, Klinger, Lenz, Herder, Goethe, and Schiller" who "worshipped" him; Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) wrote his famous essay "Shakespeare in 1773; in this essay Herder argued that Greek drama is a product of the "geographical position of Greece and its national culture and tradition, while Shakespeare is the product of the north and of entirely different cultural conditions" (Grundmann 35).

Herder can be located within "the periods of Enlightenment... and Weimar Classicism;" in 1773 he wrote "*Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Ossian und die Lieder alter Völker* (Voices of the People in their Songs; Extract from a Correspondence about Ossian and the Songs of Ancient Peoples);" he believed that "a poet is the creator of the nation around him... he gives them a world to see and has their souls in his hand to lead them to that world;" he laid a lot of emphasis on "Germanic origins" of contemporary literary works "as against the then still current dominance of Classical Greek culture" and "inspired Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in their collection of German folk tales;" Herder went in search of stories from "mediaeval European traditions" comprising "folk literature, fairy tales, mediaeval epics and poetry, and non-Christian texts" like "Scottish Ossian, the Icelandic Edda, Chanson de Roland, the Middle High German Nibelungen, the Old Russian Igor;" his interest in native literatures resembled the interests of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) (Witzel 13).

Herder put Shakespeare on a high pedestal and created an image of him as a great writer and genius who was a product of his country, its geographical and political circumstances and argued how the Greeks wrote their literature and literary laws reflecting their topography and traditions, and claimed that these Greek laws need not become a compulsory framework and stylesheet for the other writers from other parts of Europe. He located literary works as products of time and space. If any man brings to mind that tremendous image of one "seated high atop some craggy eminence, whirlwinds, tempest, and the roaring sea at his feet, but with the flashing skies about his head," that man is Shakespeare! Only we might add that below him, at the very base of his rocky throne, there murmur the multitudes who explain, defend, condemn, excuse, worship, slander, translate, and traduce him—and all of whom he cannot hear! (Herder 1)

If a nation chooses to write its drama, it need not follow the principles of writing as decided by another country. Seminal questions to ask in this perspective are: "When? Where? Under what conditions? Out of which materials should it do so?" If a drama of a particular country has not evolved from chorus and dithyramb, then it need not add these features. A country's "history, tradition, and domestic, political, and religious relations" have complex mechanisms to be operated, and art will be drawn "out of its history, out of the spirit of the age, manners, opinions, language, national prejudices, traditions, and pastimes, even out of carnival plays and puppet plays (just as the noble Greeks did from the chorus);" art, produced in this manner, responding to the qualities of the people, "achieves its dramatic purpose" amidst the concerned people, as it is created by them and for them. A famous example of art and its genesis out of the nation's needs and expectations is "the *toto divisis ab orbe* (completely separated from the world) *Britannis* and their great Shakespeare" (Herder 24-25).

Shakespeare had completely liberated himself from the grammar of playwriting established by the classical theorists and Herder celebrated Shakespeare's originality and the ability to be different from other styles of writings that duplicated classical models.

Historical background to art is an emphatic argument put forward by Herder. In 1774, he wrote his treatise on "the philosophy of history, *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* (1774);" another important work longer in size was "the *Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity* (1784–91);" interpretation has to take the historical background into consideration; Sophoclean tragedy has to be interpreted in a different manner from a Shakespearean tragedy; literary works are guided by certain linguistic and social rules of the lands that produce them; books have to be interpreted as a whole and not in parts. In his "Essays *On the Ode* (1764) and *Attempt at a History of Lyric Poetry* (1765) he argued that early Greek poetry, especially Homer, communicates a very different set of moral values," different from Christianised European values (Forster).

Language in India <u>www.languageinindia.com</u> ISSN 1930-2940 23:6 June 2023 Dr. S. Sridevi A. W. Schlegel on Romanticism in *Lectures on Dramatic Art*  "A. W. Schlegel fought for productions of Shakespeare" and his 17 translations of Shakespeare's plays "between 1797 and 1810" which "broke new ground in attempting to reproduce Shakespeare's blank verse and idiom in a German close to the English original as possible;" these translations "met with some opposition at the time," but "have attained canonical status" in Germany, and "most people still read, know and perform" these German translations even now (Grundmann 37).

Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich owns the Shakespeare Research Library that holds the first edition of A. W. Schlegel's translations. Schlegel collaborated with the writer Ludwig Tieck and his daughters.

As early as 1789, August Wilhelm Schlegel had begun translating Shakespeare. The first play he turned to was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. By 1810, Schlegel had translated seventeen of Shakespeare's plays and had begun publishing the plays in German to great acclaim. In 1819, under pressure to complete and publish further translations, Schlegel contacted the poet and writer Ludwig Tieck and asked him to undertake the translation of the remaining Shakespeare plays. Tieck agreed and shared this task with his eldest daughter Dorothea and the diplomat and writer Wolf Heinrich von Baudissin. The Schlegel-Tieck translation thus became a collaborative effort with four different translators involved in the project. During the 1820s, Ludwig Tieck also began to make changes and revisions to Schlegel's existing translations. (Shakespeare Research Library)

Later, Schlegel wrote to the publisher Georg Andreas Reimer "that he had not been aware of the changes and revisions Tieck had made to his translations." Hence, Reimer "removed many of Tieck's revisions from subsequent print-runs of the work." Therefore, "literary critics trace and assess the complex textual and editorial history of the work" as "the first edition held at the LMU Shakespeare Research Library is of particular value;" scholars agree that "it is the only edition that contains Tieck's alterations in full." (Shakespeare Research Library)

The German translations of Shakespeare's plays brought forth a new tradition of writing referred to as Romanticism. It was "often presented in terms of the ideals of its spokesmen, such as the brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, emphasising its coherence, strengths, positive contributions, and importance" (Soros 12).

The term Romantic was first popularised and disseminated through the scholar, translator, and critic August Wilhelm Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Literature* from 1808. August Wilhelm and his brother the philosopher Friedrich Schlegel were among the primary founders of the Romantic movement, first at Jena and later Berlin. They and other Romantic theorists were partly reacting against the predominance of French culture, artistic theory, and language, including at the court of the Prussian King Frederick the Great... The German Romantics partly turned against the French and toward their own Germanic and other mediaeval traditions, including Dante and Shakespeare, dismissed in the neoclassical period, yet the Romantics were also inevitable heirs of the Enlightenment, and in some regards its further unfolding. This ambiguity played an important part in the uncomfortable relation to Romanticism of both Goethe and Heine, as adherents of many Enlightenment ideals. (Soros 12)

Kant argued in his *Critique of Judgment*, to evaluate and be inspired by beauty in art and life, one applies the cognitive and the rational ability. Romanticism is intertwined with Classicism at this colliding point.

A. W. Schlegel interpreted classical literary works as products of "neoclassical period and the enlightenment" as these works laid an emphasis on "harmony, symmetry, totality, and perfection of ancient art;" he defines the "Romantic ideal" as an expression of humanity that possesses an "yearning for the invisible, extremes, the incomplete and sublime, as irrational, imperfect, and ugly;" Schlegel opined "that Shakespeare far surpassed ancient as well as modern French tragedy in originality and represented the true counterpart of the ancient tragic poets" which can be considered to be "a revolutionary judgement;" the age also witnessed "the aesthetics of the philosopher Immanuel Kant, who had discussed the sublime as opposed to the beautiful, elaborating on prior essays by David Hume and Edmund Burke." (Soros 13)

The principle of aesthetics or assessing the beauty of a literary work requires the ability to judge, according to Kant. It requires cognitive abilities and we tend to apply the schema of reason in judging the beauty of a literary text. Beauty of a work has to be assessed based on a cognitive yardstick. It is different from the sublimity of a work or the seriousness of a work. Romanticism falls under the category of beauty as it involves the principle of aesthetics. An instinctive understanding and appreciation or *priori* plays a major role in appreciation of a text.

This perplexity about a principle (whether it is subjective or objective) presents itself mainly in those judgments that we call aesthetical, which concern the beautiful and the sublime of nature or of art. And, nevertheless, the critical investigation of a principle of judgement in these is the most important part in a critique of this faculty. For although they do not by themselves contribute to the knowledge of things, yet they belong to the cognitive faculty alone, and point to an immediate reference of this faculty to the feeling of pleasure or pain according to some principle *a priori*; without confusing this with what may be the determining ground of the faculty of desire, which has its principles *a priori* in concepts of Reason. (Kant)

Burke refers to beauty as a social quality as it inspires us in social relationships and he gets into an explanation of how we are inspired by beauty in real life.

I call beauty a social quality; for where women and men, and not only they, but when other animals give us a sense of joy and pleasure in beholding them (and there are many that do so), they inspire us with sentiments of tenderness and affection towards their persons; we like to have them near us, and we enter willingly into a kind of relation with them, unless we should have strong reasons to the contrary. (Burke)

A utility product like a piece of furniture also can be presented as a work of art as the beauty in it can be captured by the artist and can be expressed in an aesthetic manner, Hume says.

A machine, a piece of furniture, a vestment, a house well contrived for use and convenience, is so far beautiful, and is contemplated with pleasure and approbation. An experienced eye is here sensible to many excellencies, which escape persons ignorant and uninstructed... A ship appears more beautiful to an artist, or one moderately skilled in navigation, where its prow is wide and swelling beyond its poop, than if it were framed with a precise geometrical regularity, in contradiction to all the laws of mechanics. (Hume)

The nineteenth century witnessed these thinkers who gave a lot of importance to the concept of beauty which had its echoes in creative writing and other areas of art. As a historical critic, A. W. Schlegel explores how classicism slipped into romanticism.

During the fifteenth century "the new European stage sprung up." Europe created "allegorical and religious pieces called Moralities and Mysteries" which were original in themes and "uninfluenced by the ancient dramatists" that "lay the germ of the romantic drama as a peculiar invention" (A. W. Schlegel).

> The attempts at romantic drama have always failed in Italy; whereas in Spain, on the contrary, all endeavours to model the theatre according to the rules of the ancients, and latterly of the French, have from the difference of national taste uniformly been abortive ... The romantic poets take the liberty even of changing the scene during the course of an act...In all Art and Poetry, but more especially in the romantic, the Fancy lays claims to be considered as an independent mental power governed according to its own laws. (A. W. Schlegel)

The nineteenth century philosophers and thinkers viewed art as an element that went above mere representation of life or imitation of reality. Accordingly, art had "the power to elevate" people "above" their "ordinary encounters with the world, above the sorrows and daily troubles of life;" Schlegel argued "that the purpose of art could not be a mere imitation" and opined that "the best works of art would be the ones that deceive the most" and would involve human fantasy and creativity; art's purpose is not only "to replicate nature (understood as an object rather than a subject)" as "the aesthetic objects would evoke no particular interest beyond mere ornamentation;" the contemplating and designing part of art and its actual "production" have to be "seen as the result of creative activity" (Hay).

Art has its laws that govern its production. After the advent of science into academia, thinkers began to investigate the principles of art too in a scientific manner. "Every art... has its own special theory, designed to teach the limits, the difficulties, and the means by which it must be regulated" and hence "scientific investigations are indispensable to the artist" and a "man of thought and speculation" understands the importance of such a study (A. W. Schlegel).

A. W. Schlegel recommends reading literary works of various lands to open minds and break away from the fetters of conventions. We have to train our minds to appreciate art from other countries and cultivate our minds and avoid discrimination.

"No man can be a true critic or connoisseur without universality of mind" and "renouncing all personal predilections and blind habits." A critic has to "adapt himself to the peculiarities of other ages and nations" and try to assimilate other cultures and values. Poetry cannot be claimed only by certain languages and cultures. "Despotism in taste" would end up as "a vain and empty pretension." For A. W. Schlegel "poetry ... is a universal gift of Heaven." Thoughts spring up from the roots of human nature and every such creative work is invaluable (A. W. Schlegel).

The culture and civilisation of Greece created a strong impact on European art and culture after the renaissance. The establishment of universities across the continent solidified the prestige of classical languages and their languages. After colonialism, Europe came across Asian languages and literary works, and in a way this has facilitated a new way of writing incorporating various genres of writing.

Also, the printing press revived Greek literature and "this powerfully excited the human mind, and formed a decided epoch in the history of human civilisation." Scholars possessed knowledge of classical languages and literature and "claimed for the ancients an unlimited authority." These men of letters "valued what resembled...those of the ancients. Everything else they rejected as barbarous and unnatural." On the contrary, poets "were compelled by their independence and originality of mind, to strike out a path of their own, and to impress upon their productions the stamp of their own genius." An example of this originality was "Dante among the Italians, the father of modern poetry" who acknowledged "Virgil for his master" but "produced a work" that was different from "Aeneid" and Dante's Divine Comedy excelled "in power, truth, compass, and profundity." In art, one has to be original under all circumstances. "In the fine arts, mere imitation is always fruitless." Art can be influenced by other forms of art but still if it has to acquire a "true poetical shape" it has to "be born again within us." A. W. Schlegel perceives classical art as a foreign agency and asks: "Of what avail is all foreign imitation?" Art has to be born from one's own experiences and it "cannot exist without nature, and man can give nothing to his fellow-men but himself." Ancient art gave a lot of importance to metre as it produced melody. "Rousseau" was a modern writer who "acknowledged the contrast in music, and showed that rhythm and melody were the prevailing principles of ancient, as harmony is that of modern music."

A. W. Schlegel concludes: "the spirit of ancient art and poetry is *plastic*, but that of the moderns' *picturesque*." (A. W. Schlegel)

The second half of the eighteenth century in England, and also largely in Germany and France, has long been a victim of a tug-of-war between the classical and the Romantic, between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. English letters has had no "Storm and Stress" period, no established name to give to a long transition between periods that appear so different in nature. As a result, there has been a tendency for Romanticism – already so voluminous and variable that the term can hardly bear its own weight – to swallow half of the eighteenth century as well, through the term "PreRomantic," a term that stems from observations made in the 1930s of conspicuous parallels between European music and literature of the 1740s to the 1790s. (Brodey 10-11)

The stress between the classical and the new romantic or spontaneous writing was very volatile in Germany. Schlegel and Herder recommended Shakespeare's original type of writing reflecting local needs and philosophies. They welcomed Germanic art to classical art.

The old German architecture ought to have been called so instead of 'Gothic.' After the revival of Greek art and architecture, old German architecture which sprung responding to the climatic needs of the land came to be condemned, and called "tasteless, gloomy, and barbarous." From hindsight "the Gothic architecture displays not only an extraordinary degree of mechanical skill, but also a marvellous power of invention" and one recognizes "its profound significance", and its "complete and finished system." A. W.Schlegel doesn't want to "quarrel" with any man "for his predilection either for the Grecian or the Gothic" as the "world is wide, and affords room for a great diversity of objects" and "narrow and blindly adopted prepossessions will never constitute a genuine critic or connoisseur, who ought... to possess the power of dwelling with liberal impartiality on the most discrepant views, renouncing the while all personal inclinations." The Greeks' "religion was the deification of the powers of nature and of earthly life" which brought forth "a mild, grand, and a dignified form." The Greeks gave free play to superstition and it "cherished the arts by which it was adorned, and its idols became the models of ideal beauty." Their civilization was "of a refined and ennobled sensuality." Exceptions are there to this general structure in the form of "a few philosophers, and the irradiations of poetical inspiration." Art is controlled by "religion" which "is the root of human existence." Religion carries the unconsciousness of man and one cannot disturb this system of thought in human minds. Christianity has dominated the unconsciousness of Europe and "this sublime and beneficent religion has regenerated the ancient world from its state of exhaustion and debasement" and "it is the guiding principle in the history of modern nations." People may not be aware of the power of Christianity that has thoroughly influenced their perceptions and attitudes. (A. W. Schlegel)

Christianity emerged as a very strong social institution that influenced European thinking and approaches to life. It became the main theme of art at unconscious and conscious levels. Motifs and symbols of texts came to be drawn from Christianity.

The Teutonic tribes of Europe "who infused new life and vigour into a degenerated people" welcomed Christianity" with "honest cordiality" and "it penetrated more deeply into the inner man, displayed more powerful effects, or become more interwoven with all human feelings and sensibilities." The mixture of the "honest heroism of the northern conquerors" with "the sentiments of Christianity, gave rise to chivalry." Assimilation of the tribal roughness "with the virtues of chivalry was associated a new and purer spirit of love" as "Christianity did not, like the heathen worship, rest satisfied with certain external acts, but claimed an authority over the whole inward man and the most hidden movement of the heart." This social change introduced "chivalry, love, and honour, together with religion itself" which became "the subjects of that poetry of nature which poured itself out in the Middle Ages with incredible fullness, and preceded the more artistic cultivation of the romantic spirit." People began to weave tales "consisting of chivalrous tales and legends; but its wonders and its heroism were the very reverse of those of ancient mythology." The Greeks conceived nature as "all-sufficient" and did not see any "defects, and aspired to no higher perfection." Christianity trained people "by superior wisdom that man, through a grievous transgression, forfeited the place for which he was originally destined." The purpose of mankind, accordingly, is to "struggle to regain" the "lost position" which it cannot accomplish on its own. The old Greek religion was a religion "of the senses" which "sought no higher possession than outward and perishable blessings." (A. W. Schlegel)

The very reverse of all this is the case with the Christian view: everything finite and mortal is lost in the contemplation of infinity; life has become shadow and darkness, and the first day of our real existence dawns in the world beyond the grave. Such a religion must waken the vague foreboding, which slumbers in every feeling heart, into a distinct consciousness that the happiness after which we are here striving is

unattainable; that no external object can ever entirely fill our souls; and that all earthly enjoyment is but a fleeting and momentary illusion. (A. W. Schlegel)

Europe amalgamated multiple influences into its thinking processes. It took up Greek, Roman, Christian, Shakespeare's English, and Sanskrit ideologies and writing styles and a new kind of approaching life began to be reflected in its art that was spontaneous in nature.

There was a harmonious relationship with "human nature" and all the "powers" of nature; the Europeans "have arrived at the consciousness of an internal discord which renders such an ideal impossible"; the poetry of modern Europeans attempts to "reconcile these two worlds between which" they "find ourselves divided, and to blend them indissolubly together." (A. W. Schlegel).

In like manner the battles of the human mind, if I may use the expression, have been won by a few intellectual heroes. The history of the development of art and its various forms may be therefore exhibited in the characters of a number, by no means considerable, of elevated and creative minds. (A. W. Schlegel)

Romantic writings gave freeplay to emotions and creativity, enjoying the freedom from rigid metric expectations of the reading public. They blended various emotions and styles of writing, creating works of art closer to the people and their traditions.

European writers after Roman writings began to be delighted "in indissoluble mixtures; all contrarieties: nature and art, poetry and prose, seriousness and mirth, recollection and anticipation, spirituality and sensuality, terrestrial and celestial, life and death"; and these elements are "blended together in the most intimate combination" (A. W. Schlegel).

Romantic poetry...is the expression of the secret attraction to a chaos which lies concealed in the very bosom of the ordered universe, and is perpetually striving after new and marvellous births; the life-giving spirit of primal love broods here anew on the face of the waters. (A. W. Schlegel)

The universe is a place of multiplicities and texts romantic in nature, reflected varieties and diverse cultures - ranging from folk tales to works with Christian themes- and celebrated human nature breaking away from the rigidities of metre and formal structures.

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