

Herder and Shakespeare: Negotiating with Nationalism

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Abstract

This paper aims at studying how Shakespeare impacted on Herder, and how Herder uses Shakespeare's works as an illustration to form his opinions on nationalism. Shakespeare reflected the ideology, geo-politics of his age. His plays show the rise of the individual showing the signs of the rise of nationalism and the independent ideology of political freedom. Herder views them as a break from Greek drama having its regional features. Shakespeare becomes a symbol of Herder's nationalism and cultural diversity. The romanticism of Herder provided elements for the building of the idea of nation in Germany, and Shakespeare's plays helped him to arrive at a focused understanding of the changing processes and trends of European political history.

Keywords: Johann Gottfried von Herder, Shakespeare, nationalism.

Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) wrote his essay "Shakespeare" in 1773 followed by Samuel Johnson's (1709 – 1784) "Preface to Shakespeare" in 1765. The period signifies the historical rise of distinct nations, ethnicity, language and cultural heritage as important features of the process of being more civilised. Johnson recognised the creative and original contributions of Shakespeare; Herder interpreted Shakespearean writing as an expression of English nationalism and establishment of England's individualism as different from Greece.

Herder gave a "romantic accent" to the idea of nation and valued the "popular spirit" as "national spirit." He was "the first European who, remaining a cosmopolitan, in the

Enlightenment sense, interpreted Europe as a symphony of several different voices, of the national voices, knowing how to distinguish them and characterize them” and was one of those voices who “demanded the development of a democratic Germany.” Along with this trend “the great romantic poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) and the group called “leftist Hegelians,” of which both Marx (1818-1883) and Engels (1820-1895) participated, were emblematic of that trend.” These thinkers and ideologues, esp. The “romanticism of Herder” and the “idealism of Fichte” supported and “provided elements for the building of the idea of nation in Germany” (Paula).

Hegel’s philosophy turns out to be largely a sort of elaborate systematic development of Herder’s ideas (especially concerning language, the mind, history, and God); so too does Schleiermacher’s (concerning language, interpretation, translation, the mind, art, and God); Nietzsche is deeply influenced by Herder as well (concerning language, the mind, history, and values); so too is Dilthey (especially concerning history); even John Stuart Mill has important debts to Herder (in political philosophy); and beyond philosophy, Goethe was transformed from being merely a clever but rather conventional poet into the great artist he eventually became largely through the early impact on him of Herder’s ideas. (Forster)

Herder identifies literary works as an “especially rich source of insights into the unconscious.” He has analysed how Shakespeare has delved into the structure of regional culture for his play. This approach “has had a strong influence on subsequent thinkers in “the philosophy of mind and in hermeneutics” Herder gradually paved the way for the establishment of new “disciplines that we now take for granted” like the “modern philosophy of language.” Herder recognised the “deep variations in thought and language across historical periods and cultures” and perceived the “fundamental role of grammar in language and of grammar’s deep variation between languages” and approached languages in an “empirical manner.” He “inspired Friedrich Schlegel, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and others to found modern linguistics” (Forster).

Herder understood the different culture Shakespeare represented in his plays, and argued that northern European dramas was culturally different from the southern parts of ancient times.

For example, Shakespeare's Henry IV captures the Christianised England, its ideology, the interconnect England had with all Christian countries, and their purpose of protecting the land on which the feet of Jesus walked:

The edge of war, like an ill-sheathèd knife, / No more shall cut his master.
Therefore, friends, / As far as to the sepulcher of Christ—/ Whose soldier now,
under whose blessèd cross / We are impressèd and engaged to fight—/Forthwith a
power of English shall we levy, / Whose arms were molded in their mothers'
womb /To chase these pagans in those holy fields / Over whose acres walked
those blessèd feet / Which fourteen hundred years ago were nailed /For our
advantage on the bitter cross. / But this our purpose now is twelve-month-old, /
And bootless 'tis to tell you we will go. (Shakespeare, Henry IV)

The nation of England has been Christianised and this common ideology and collective consciousness has given the people a purpose, and hence they stand united for the cause of Christ. Shakespeare is writing a different story from Greeks, as now the people have acquired an organised religion that has institutionlised prayer system. Europe has acquired a new system, has diversified itself with the birth of new languages, has met with the growth of science and the establishment of universities and at the time of Shakespeare trade had begun at global level, even the trade of slaves expanded. Scenes shifting and time covering a larger number of years would not have really mattered to people. They accepted one scene in Egypt and the next scene in Rome. "Our holy purpose to Jerusalem" (Henry IV Part I), as the King puts it, religion that is institutionalised has shaped the people in a different manner from Greeks. Falstaff puts the social reality succinctly: "I'll be damned for never a king's son in Christendom" (Henry IV Part I) This sentence explains how the English tongue slowly shaped itself, how the people have identified themselves belonging to one nation and one ideology going beyond borders.

When Shakespeare arrived in London at some point in the late 1580s or early 1590s, the capital was expanding faster...: from 50,000 inhabitants in 1500, it had swelled to some 200,000 people, four times that number, a century later...London was pre-eminently a city of immigrants, both first- and second-generation... London was... a city of conspicuous contrasts – between ... different racial groups. On the one hand inhabitants of different ethnicities and beliefs were accepted, and ...on the other, the line of acceptance was thin. (Dickson)

Protestant “French Huguenots and other religious refugees from continental Europe” arrived in England. Perhaps fifteen thousand of these people settled in England “during the 1590s,” and they “assimilated” the local culture quickly and “found work, many in the textile or fashion industries, and formed close-knit communities.” Apart from them Jewish populations were also living in London and Bristol. England gave the space for Jews to practice their “faith undisturbed, despite tough legislation to the contrary.” They practiced their religious practices in secret just like “Catholics...lest they become scapegoats and be forced to convert” to Protestantism... This “inflected Shakespeare’s writing.” Shakespeare set his scenes in cities outside England like Venice, Verona, Padua, Sicily (Dickson).

Shakespeare describes all aspects of his country’s religious beliefs, apart from the state religion Christianity. Edgar describes the demons that afflict him:

This is the foul <fiend> Flibbertigibbet. He begins / at curfew and walks <till the>
first cock. He / gives the web and the pin, squints the eye, and / makes the harelip,
mildews the white wheat, and / hurts the poor creature of earth. / Swithold footed
thrice the ’old, / He met the nightmare and her ninefold, / Bid her alight, / And
her troth plight, / And aroint thee, witch, aroint thee.../ Beware my follower.
Peace Smulkin, peace, thou fiend...

The prince of darkness is a gentleman. Modo / he’s called, and Mahu.
(King Lear Act III, Scene 4)

...

The foul fiend haunts Poor Tom in the voice of a / nightingale. Hoppedance cries in Tom's belly for two / white herring. Croak not, black angel, I have no food for thee. (King Lear Act III, Scene 6)

Edgar provides the comedy in the scene and his dialogues have become the illustrations for cultural diversity in protestant England during the reign of Elizabeth. To him the demons are real, and he depicts the life of poverty and homelessness.

Exorcisms were “practiced by the Jesuit priests” which were “devised for gullible and unlearned lower-class people.” King Lear emphasizes on the “performative nature of Edgar/Tom's monstrosity” that is a reflection of the “cultural discourses of the time.” Exorcist practices were “popular when Shakespeare wrote King Lear.” Edgar's “speech also intercepts and redeploys fresh memories of monstrosities committed in the name of fervent religious faith in post-Reformation England such as persecutions and executions” (Compagnoni).

‘Poor Toms’, ‘Toms of Bedlam’, or ‘Abraham men’ as they were also known, these individuals were escaped or released inmates from Bedlam Hospital in London... They appeared in many contemporary accounts as mad and pitiful vagrants who wandered the lanes begging, ‘supposedly singing Bedlamite Ballads that told mad tales and perpetuated the Bedlam myth.’ They were regarded as disgusting figures confined to the margins of society, whose naked and self-mutilated bodies, rolling eyes, and clanking chains constituted the palpable signs of their abasement and penury (Compagnoni).

Shakespeare's Shylock expresses how Jews were treated in England, as inferior citizens:

Signior Antonio, many a time and oft / In the Rialto you have rated me / About my moneys and my usances. / Still have I borne it with a patient shrug / (For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe). You call me misbeliever, cutthroat dog, / And spet upon my Jewish gaberdine, / **And** all for use of that which is mine own.

Well then, it now appears you need my help. / Go to, then. You come to me and you say / “Shylock, we would have moneys”—you say so, / You, that did void your rheum upon my beard, / And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur / Over your threshold. Moneys is your suit. / What should I say to you? Should I not say “Hath a dog money? Is it possible / A cur can lend three thousand ducats?” Or Shall I bend low, and in a bondman’s key, / With bated breath and whisp’ring humbleness, / Say this: “Fair sir, you spet on me on Wednesday last; / You spurned me such a day; another time / You called me ‘dog’; and for these courtesies / I’ll lend you thus much moneys”? (Merchant of Venice, Act I, Scene 3).

Shakespeare is telling stories about his people who were living in a heterogeneous society that permitted other religious practices only in secrecy. Interpreting Shakespeare in a socio-economic perspective would explain the cultural diversity in his plays.

The “Moroccan ambassador, Al-Annuri” visited London in 1600, and scholars say that he has “similarities” to Shakespeare’s Othello. He came with “16-man Moroccan delegation of merchants, translators and holy men to conclude a military alliance between the Protestant Tudors and Muslim Morocco against their common enemy, Catholic Spain.” England had 50 years of trade with Morocco in “Moroccan saltpetre, used to make gunpowder, and sugar...for English cloth and munitions.” Soon, London’s Barbary Company was established “in 1585, which was soon shipping hundreds of tones of merchandise back and forth” (Brotton).

Al-Annuri was not the only person with whom Elizabeth was fostering relations. In the 1560s she wrote to the Persian Shi’a ruler, Shah Tahmasp, offering a commercial alliance between him and her newly formed Muscovy Company. Once Pope Pius V formally excommunicated her in 1570, Elizabeth was free to ignore the papal edicts forbidding Christian trade with Muslims, and by 1581 she had lodged an English ambassador in Constantinople, signed formal commercial treaties with the Ottomans and founded the Turkey Company. She pursued

extensive correspondence with Sultan Murad III and his mother over three decades, exchanging diplomatic gifts that included cloth, cosmetics, horse-drawn carriages and a clockwork organ... Elizabeth allowed lead stripped from deconsecrated Catholic churches to be shipped to Constantinople to make munitions (Brotton).

Elizabethan dramatists exploited the “ambiguities and contradictions of such alliances.” Playwrights began writing about Islamic characters “defined by terms such as “Moors”, “Saracens”, “Turks” and “Persians.” There were “40 plays performed in the 1590s.” Shakespeare presented the “evil Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* in 1594,” and wrote “*The Merchant of Venice*” which introduces the Prince of Morocco (1596). Shakespeare’s *Othello* has a “Moor as its central character.” Othello narrates his past: “Of being taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence / And portance in my traveller’s history” (Act I, Scene 3). As the play ends with Desdemona dead, Othello reminds the horrified Venetians: “... that in Aleppo once, / Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk / Beat a Venetian and traduced the state, / I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog / And smote him – thus!” (Act V, Scene 2). Othello is presented with an ambiguity that England had for Islam, and “the play’s final reference to Moroccans, Turks and Christians” has become a “tragic symbol of the destruction of cosmopolitan multiculturalism” (Brotton).

Shakespeare’s cosmopolitan representation of London life with a complete overview of all classes has bewildered generations of scholars as to its interpretation.

Herder introduced a “principle of generic interpretation” as different cultures encourage different “genres vary from age to age, culture to culture, and even individual to individual.” He distinguishes “Shakespearean tragedy” differently from “Sophoclean “tragedy” (Forster). He interpreted literary works, written or oral, as the expressions of a people of a particular region, and he spent invaluable time in translating folk songs from various languages into German. His “*Volkslieder*” (1778-79), collections of folk song, although differ from subsequent similar collections in the “absence of musical scores,” tell us that songs, especially the “folk or popular”

ones, are the “most classical” and, at the same time, representative case of the “intangible culture.” (Yoshida)

Samuel Johnson (1709 – 1784) viewed Shakespeare as a poet of nature, an original writer who wrote to please his people. Samuel Johnson wrote “Preface to Shakespeare” in 1765 which, scholars say, has created a huge impact on Shakespearean criticism. Herder’s essay was written in 1773 reflecting Johnson’s ideas. Shakespeare, according to Dr. Johnson, presented foreign lands in his theatre, and his characters spoke English as spoken by English men, customising stories to the taste of his people. He did not follow the Greek precepts of writing, and devised his own structure of writing plays. Aristotle’s philosophy and poetic principles had shaped Renaissance thinking and conceptions of culture, the civilising process and society, and scholars had reservations about the genius of Shakespeare and his intellectual context. Shakespeare’s penetrating insights into human character was underestimated. Later criticism began interpreting this aspect of Shakespeare’s writing as the reflection of the rise of nationalism, as Herder is suggesting, and as the rise of capitalism as suggested by Marx.

Shakespeare is above all writers... the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world ...they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species. (Johnson)

Shakespeare was criticised by fellow writers and academics for devising different strategies for writing, differing from the academically established criteria for playwriting. His Romans on the stage spoke more like English men. “Voltaire censures his kings as not completely royal.” Shakespeare represented life in various forms and in his plays “nature

predominates over accident.” His stories are on “Romans or kings, but he thinks only on men.” He portrayed men from Rome, and he knew that “like every other city” Rome “had men of all dispositions.” A poet like Shakespeare “overlooks the casual distinction of country.” The Shakespearean audience knew “that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players.” The scenes may take place in different places “very remote from each other,” but the space in which the action takes place, the audience knew, was “a modern theatre” (Johnson).

Every nation will have a certain style which will “never becomes obsolete, a certain mode of phraseology so consonant and congenial to the analogy and principles of its respective language.” This will be “the common intercourse of life,” the language of the common men “who speak only to be understood, without ambition of elegance.” People in higher social order speak with “modish innovations.” The learned men try to break “from established forms of speech, in hope of finding or making better.” Men of distinction “forsake the vulgar.” There is a “conversation above grossness and below refinement” and Shakespeare “seems to have gathered his comick dialogue” from this space. He is “more agreeable to the ears of the present age than any other author” of his period, and “among his other excellencies deserves to be studied as one of the original masters of our language” (Johnson).

The English nation, in the time of Shakespeare, was yet struggling to emerge from barbarity. The philology of Italy had been transplanted hither in the reign of Henry the Eighth; and the learned languages had been successfully cultivated by Lilly and More; by Pole, Cheke, and Gardiner; and afterwards by Smith, Clerk, Haddon, and Ascham. Greek was now taught to boys in the principal schools; and those who united elegance with learning, read, with great diligence, the Italian and Spanish poets. But literature was yet confined to professed scholars, or to men and women of high rank. The publick was gross and dark; and to be able to read and write, was an accomplishment still valued for its rarity...Nations, like individuals, have their infancy. A people newly awakened to literary curiosity, being yet unacquainted with the true state of things, knows not how to judge of that which is proposed as its resemblance. (Johnson)

Greek became the academic language, and its literature was available only to scholars. A young nation like England could not make everyone become proficient in Greek and equip its people in its literary rules and regulations. In its infancy, England chose to write its own stories, in its own style, unaffected by Greek parameters for writing. European nations had to negotiate with an advanced civilisation like Greece, and had to constantly check themselves with the benchmark Greece had set in front of them.

It is from Greece that we have inherited the words drama, tragedy, and comedy; and just as the lettered culture of the human race has, on a narrow strip of the earth's surface, made its way only through tradition, so a certain stock of rules, which seemed inseparable from its teaching, has naturally accompanied it everywhere in its womb and its language. Since a child cannot be and is not educated by means of reason but by means of authority, impression, and the divinity of example and of habit, so entire nations are to an even greater extent children in everything that they learn. The kernel would not grow without the husk, and they will never get the kernel without the husk, even if they could find no use for the latter. That is the case with Greek and northern drama. (Herder)

Shakespeare's drama is northern European in nature, while Greek drama is a product of Southern European drama. Geographical location and climate too play a major role in shaping human characteristics, and writers end up writing within this framework of regional culture, reflecting its ideologies and perspectives. Another region's values and principles might not succeed in duplicating its styles of writing. European nations slowly carved their political and literary identities, especially, through literary works.

The Greek rules may sound artificial to a northerner. But it was a natural development of the region. The "unity of the action" in plays of the Greeks was the result of "circumstances of their time, country, religion, and manners could be nothing but this oneness." similarly "unity of place" was a requirement as the "solemn action occurred only in a single locality, in the temple, in the palace, as it were in the market square of the nation." Initially the Greeks were miming and

narrating stories. Slowly writers introduced characters. Later scenes were added - “but of course it was all still but one scene, where the chorus bound everything together.” when we look at Greek dram from this perspective “even a child could see that unity of time now ensued from and naturally accompanied all this. In those days all these things lay in Nature, so that the poet, for all his art, could achieve nothing without them”. (Herder)

And what was this purpose? Aristotle has declared it to be...no more nor less than a certain convulsion of the heart, the agitation of the soul to a certain degree and in certain aspects... a species of illusion that surely no French play has ever achieved or ever will achieve. And consequently... it is not Greek drama. It is not Sophoclean tragedy. It is an effigy outwardly resembling Greek drama; but the effigy lacks spirit, life, nature, truth... all the elements that move us... the tragic purpose and the accomplishment of that purpose. So can it still be the same thing? (Herder)

Nations can imitate other regions’ criteria for writing. Such writings will end up as mere imitation, without carrying the soul of that particular region. Texts must carry the soul of a people, their experiences, philosophy of life and culture. That is the essential principle of literary works. Writers respond to their people and there is a negotiation between the author and the reader or viewer. Ultimately, there is something that is ‘folk’ about writing that carries the hearts of people in their essence.

I shall leave it to the reader to determine for himself whether a half-truthful copying of foreign ages, manners, and actions, with the exquisite aim of adapting it to a two-hour performance on our stage, can be thought the equal or indeed the superior of an imitation that in a certain respect was the highest expression of a people’s national character. (Herder)

The nation state model influences writing, directing its purpose, giving certain identities to people and helping them create imaginary works that reflect their national character. Writing

is framed by the socio-political nature of a nation or region. An imitation cannot be considered superior.

So let us now suppose a nation, which due to particular circumstances that will not detain us here, did not care to ape the Greeks and settle for the mere walnut shell, but preferred instead to invent its own drama. Then, it seems to me, our first questions must once again be: When? Where? Under what conditions? Out of which materials should it do so? And no proof is needed that this invention can and will be the result of these questions. If this people does not develop its drama out of the chorus and dithyramb, then it can have no choral or dithyrambic parts. If its history, tradition, and domestic, political, and religious relations have no such simple character, then naturally its drama cannot partake of this quality either. Where possible, it will create its drama 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). And what it creates will be drama if it achieves its dramatic purpose among this people. As the reader will see, we have arrived among the *toto divisis ab orbe Britannis* and their great Shakespeare. (Herder)

Britain was different from the rest of Europe - an original thinker and great writer like Shakespeare created a drama that carried the history, tradition, and politics of his people without imitating the Greeks has established his nation's superiority. He has created a very strong national character of his people depicting not only his people but also how Rome and other cities handled their democracy and government. He has captured the spirit of his age, even if it is found in the folk traditions of his country. He has emerged as a genius. He made use of all the available literary and historical resources and weaved dramas that carried his original interpretations that added a natural flavour to their descriptions.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 – 1882) in his celebrated essays "The American Scholar" written in 1837 and "Self Reliance" written in 1844 continues this line of thought of Dr. Johnson and Herder. He not only wanted his nation to break from the boundaries set by Greek cultural

format, but to shatter the cultural bondage of Europe itself. Young men have to write about their land and create innovative styles of writing.

We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe... The scholar is decent, indolent, complaisant...The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself... Young men of the fairest promise, who begin life upon our shores, inflated by the mountain winds... are hindered from action ... and turn drudges... What is the remedy? ...We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. The study of letters shall be no longer a name for pity, for doubt, and for sensual indulgence... A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men. (Emerson in “American Scholar”)

America wanted to carve its own cultural identity during the nineteenth century when Europe had established its political and cultural hegemony all over the world, and Emerson invited the young men of his country to create their specific writings rooted in the American experience. A new country like America needed its peculiar and unique philosophy of life and expressions, he felt. He wanted people to stop imitating and create fresh thought and style.

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. (Emerson in “Self Reliance”)

Democratic nations continued to establish their identity in art and culture, as they were newly formed out of monarchies or other types of hierarchies. Emerson spoke to his young men, inspiring to create original texts reflecting the American experience. He is now comparing

himself with Shakespeare's originality and demands such original writings from his countrymen. We hear the same note in another transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau.

Some are dinning in our ears that we Americans, and moderns generally, are intellectual dwarfs compared with the ancients, or even the Elizabethan men. But what is that to the purpose? A living dog is better than a dead lion... Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away. It is not important that he should mature as soon as an apple-tree or an oak. (Thoreau)

David Hume in 1748 "argued that the character of a nation depended solely upon socio-political and moral factors" (Jensen). Hume questioned the world view of the ancients, and argued countries would slowly acquire cultural identity in course of time.

The Greeks and Romans, who called all other nations barbarians, confined genius and a fine understanding to the more southern climates and pronounced the northern nations incapable of all knowledge and civility. But our island has produced as great men, either for action or learning, as Greece or Italy has to boast of...Who can doubt, but the English are at present a more polite and knowing people than the Greeks were for several ages after the siege of Troy? Yet is there no comparison between the language of Milton and that of Homer. Nay, the greater are the alterations and improvements, which happen in the manners of a people, the less can be expected in their language. A few eminent and refined geniuses will communicate their taste and knowledge to a whole people, and produce the greatest improvements; but they fix the tongue by their writings, and prevent, in some degree, its farther changes. (Hume 208)

Herder "regarded the nation as the basic unit of humanity." He argued that "the identity of the individual is largely dependent upon his or her culture." His philosophy is "historically important insofar as it offers the first sustained discussion of national and cultural diversity." He

rose against the popular ideology of “Enlightenment universalism” and “emphasizes the absolute importance of a sense of belonging and allegiance to a particular community” (White).

Shakespeare wrote down the spoken language of England that had a mix of tongues. He recorded the heterogeneity of his language and represented his nation’s cultural diversity. Herder celebrated this aspect of Shakespeare’s writing as nation building, heterogeneous in nature.

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