

Edited by
Chiara Conterno
Gilberta Golinelli

Exchanges,
Intersections and
Gender Issues
between Eighteenth
and Nineteenth
Century Europe:
The Anglo-German Case

Kulturtransfer,
Verschränkungen
und Gender-Fragen
in Europa zwischen
dem 18. und dem 19.
Jahrhundert:
Der deutsch-britische Fall



RIZOMATICA

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Collana del Dipartimento di Lingue,
Letterature e Culture Moderne

diretta da

Keir Elam e Giovanni Gentile G. Marchetti

Rizomatica

Il *rizoma*, dal greco *rhízōma*, “complesso di radici” (derivato da *rhiza*, “radice”), indica, in realtà, un fusto perenne, generalmente sotterraneo, che ha uno sviluppo orizzontale.

Nel pensiero di Deleuze e Guattari esso diviene un concetto cardine, in opposizione ad *albero* e a *radice*, che rappresentano la fissità, l’unicità e la verticalità (vocazione gerarchica) del potere.

Il *rizoma*, allora, rappresenta ogni sviluppo libero e imprevedibile, implica *molteplicità* – che si oppone a *unicità* –, *eterogeneità*, *coniunzione*. Può essere interrotto, o spezzato in un punto qualsiasi, ma, in questo caso, subito riprende a seguire qualcuna delle proprie linee, oppure si collega ad altre.

Édouard Glissant si serve della categoria definita da Deleuze e Guattari per sostanziare la sua idea di *creolization*. Risalendo all’etimologia della parola, la definisce come “radice che si estende verso l’incontro con altre radici”, in opposizione alla *radice unica*, “che uccide tutto intorno a sé”. La *creolizzazione*, processo necessario e inevitabile, si fonda, allora, su un *rizoma* di culture composte, base della sua “poetica della relazione”.

Rizomatica, dunque, intende annodare e promuovere le diverse linee di ricerca del Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture Moderne in una libera molteplicità di creative intersezioni, in un incessante processo di scoperta.

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Edited by / Herausgegeben von
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Reading Shakespeare in 18th Century English Literary Criticism: the English and the German Case*

Gilberta Golinelli

I.

The growth of interest in Shakespeare and his engendering as a national poet and transnational genius started in the Eighteenth century thanks to a process that was marked by a multi-layered transmission made of editions, literary criticism, and translations of Shakespeare's plays. Although, as Jack Lynch states, "at the time of the Restoration, it would not have been easy to identify such a thing as 'criticism of Shakespeare'",¹ it is difficult to deny that by the second half of the eighteenth century the English literary canon with its ancient poets and with Shakespeare to be celebrated was clearly shaped. "Our English poets may I think be disposed in four different classes and degrees. In the first class, I would place first our only sublime and pathetic poets, Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton",² wrote Joseph Warton in *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope*, confirming that in England the existence of a national canon was undoubtedly about to be established.³

* This essay is an extended and modified version of my essay "The Genius of Shakespeare in Eighteenth Century Europe," in *Revista de Filologia* 23 (2005), 139–154.

¹ Jack Lynch, "Criticism of Shakespeare," in *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Fiona Richtie and Peter Sabor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 41–59, here: 41.

² Joseph Warton, *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope* (London: 1756), XI.

³ On this specific respect, see: Jonathan Brody Kramnick, *Making the English Canon. Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700-1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Nowadays, the study of the mechanisms underpinning the formation of the English literary canon has convincingly shown how, apart from the adaptations of Shakespeare's plays that were performed on the English stage since the re-opening of the theatre in 1660, Shakespeare's plays, together with their reviews and comments, reached a wide public of readers who did not necessarily go to the theatre to see his plays, thereby experiencing the passions, doubts and uncertainties of Shakespeare's characters. Indeed, Michael Dobson reminds us that by 1769, the year of the Shakespeare's jubilee organized by David Garrick at Stratford upon Avon, "Readers of Shakespeare might have consulted collected editions not only by Rowe but by an illustrious succession of prestigious writers including Alexander Pope, Sir Thomas Hanmer, and Samuel Johnson [...]. Moreover, readers in the 1760s might also have consulted dictionaries of Shakespearean quotations, poems on Shakespeare, even a Shakespearean novel".⁴ This process did not only generate a change in Shakespeare's status, from a dramatist of the Elizabethan age to be adapted for the Augustan stage and taste to a figure of literary authority but inaugurated a vivid literary debate that turned the works by and on Shakespeare, and Shakespeare himself, into literary and cultural products that were theorized as representative of a particular national taste.⁵ Although it is from the second half of the eighteenth century that the first complete translations of the plays of Shakespeare into various languages started to be published, critics agree that the transformation of Shakespeare into a cult figure by nations other than England was much more determined by the English essays of the eighteenth century that were translated into other languages, and therewith exported across the continent, than through the actual translation or even adaptations and performances of his plays abroad.

⁴ Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet. Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 2.

⁵ See Kramnick, *Making the English Canon. Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700-1770* and Trevor Ross, *The Making of the English Literary Canon. From the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998).

Moving from these debates, I intend to explore the way in which Shakespeare's plays were read by some emergent English literary critics and presented to a public of specialists that from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards was not only merely English but certainly international and in particular German. I will focus on some examples from those English essays that were translated into German or reviewed by German critics, since it is mainly from these sources that the image of Shakespeare was re-elaborated for the German public and appropriated by the German critics to respond to specific ideological and aesthetic values.⁶

II.

From the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, adaptations of the Shakespearean plays lost their critical importance since an increasing number of emergent English critics turned to Shakespeare not as a writer whose plays needed to be purged to accomplish the neoclassical taste but as an author of the past whose works, in order to be fully understood, deserved an analysis based on a more philological as well as historical approach. In the essays on Shakespeare published between the first and the second half of the eighteenth century, Shakespeare's works, once defined as full of irregularities that sometimes obfuscated their beauties and therefore remodelled "to make of him both a modern and a highbrow",⁷ were more and more re-interpreted in their true

⁶ As L. M. Price in one of the first studies on the *Kulturtransfer* between England and Germany demonstrated, there were three distinct groups of English authors that arrived in Germany in the eighteenth century: "The first group included such men as Addison, Pope and Thompson, who had certain French affiliations. Clear thinking and clear writing were the highest ideals for them. By the second group, including Milton and Young, man's religious and emotional nature was emphasized, while the literature of the third group, the dramas of Shakespeare, the songs of Macperson's Ossian and the popular poetry of Percy's collection had the effect of setting in full light the justification and value of genius, originality, and spontaneity in man". Lawrence Marsden Price, *The Reception of English Literature in Germany* (New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1968), 156.

⁷ Trevor Ross, *The Making of the English Literary Canon*, 231.

historical context to recover their possible sources or lost meanings and therefore elucidated for a more modern culture. John Upton in his *Critical Observations of Shakespeare* (1748) declared that so far as “everything unless of French extraction, appears awkward and antiquated [...], scarcely any one pays a regard to what Shakespeare does write, but are always guessing at what he should write”.⁸ Indeed, the English critics intended to recuperate the English past, language, and tradition through the institution of a national canon that “had to be secured by a group of specialist critics”.⁹ They thus abandoned debates on the irregularity of the plot, the action and the language employed by Shakespeare, and focused instead on the originality of the characters he had invented. “What is new in the last quarter of the eighteenth century”, Vickers argues, “is that essays and whole books are devoted to individual characters, and those alone.”¹⁰

The novelty of Shakespeare’s characters had already been at the core of some of the most significant essays of the first half of the eighteenth century that, while condemning Shakespeare for its irregularities, also highlighted his extraordinary ability to give voice to human passions and to revive them in the mind of the public. Emblematic, also for the fact that these pages were translated into German, are Addison’s observations on the Faery Way of Writing published in the *Spectator* in 1714 and John Hughes’s analysis on Othello’s jealousy published in *The Guardian* in the same year.¹¹

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Shakespeare’s great originality is seen in the representation of human passions and in their incredible effect on the public. It is also found in Shakespeare’s ability to have inaugurated a new way of displaying the multifaceted aspects of human nature. “All that we see in Hamlet is a well-meaning, sensible,

⁸ John Upton, *Critical Observations of Shakespeare* (London: G. Hawkins, 1748), 8.

⁹ Kramnick, *Making the English Canon. Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700-1770*, 102.

¹⁰ Brian Vickers, *Returning to Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1989), 197.

¹¹ On this specific respect see Gilberta Golinelli, *La formazione del canone shakespeariano tra identità nazionale ed estetica. Inghilterra e Germania 1700–1770* (Bologna: Patron, 2003), 76–78.

young man, but full of doubts and perplexities even after his resolution is fixed. In this character there is nothing but what is common with the rest of mankind”,¹² wrote William Guthrie in his *An Essay Upon English Tragedy* (1747), inaugurating that undeniable link between Hamlet’s sensibility and Shakespeare’s “invention of the human”, as Harold Bloom would say more than two and a half centuries later.¹³

One of the first remarkable examples of this new reading of Shakespeare’s characters is evident in some essays written by Joseph Warton that were published between 1753 and 1754 in the *Adventurer*.

Particularly pioneering is the study of *King Lear* in which Warton not only questions the nature of Lear’s madness but shows how the evolution of this human passion is the actual ‘action’ around which the entire tragedy unfolds. Against the neoclassical notion of tragedy according to which the representation of heroic actions is dictated solely by amorous passions, Warton states in a clear anti-French tenor that:

Shakespeare has shewn us, by Hamlet, Macbeth and Caesar and above all by his Lear, that very interesting tragedies may be written, that are not founded on gallantry and love, and that Boileau was mistaken, when he affirmed: “de l’amour la sensible peinture/Est pour aller au cœur la route la plus sûre.” The distresses in this tragedy are of a very uncommon nature, and are not touched upon by any other dramatic author.¹⁴

The real plot of *King Lear* thus becomes the progression of the old King’s madness, the representation and at the same time examination of the development of a human passion. “I shall confine myself at present to consider singly the judgement and art of the poet, in describing the origin and progress of the distraction of Lear, in which, I think, He has succeeded better than any other writer”,¹⁵ declares Warton in his article.

¹² William Guthrie, *An Essay upon English Tragedy with Remarks upon the Abbe de Blanc’s Observations on the English Stage* (London: T. Waller, 1747), 26.

¹³ Harold Bloom, *The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).

¹⁴ Joseph Warton, *The Adventurer*, n. 113, 4 December 1753, London, 59.

¹⁵ Joseph Warton, *The Adventurer*, n. 113, 59.

It is to reach this specific aim, “to describe the origin” and progression of Lear’s distraction, that Shakespeare also includes in his play a thorough characterization of two minor characters - the fool and the beggar -, who, once again according to the rules of poetical justice, should not have been included in the tragedy. For Warton, their actions and words neither produce laughter nor subvert the real aim of the tragedy but serve instead to intensify Lear’s dramatic position and to involve the audience in Lear’s progressive madness and despair. It is thus emblematic how Warton re-reads the dialogue between Lear and Edgar who, disguised as a beggar, pretends to be mad only to heighten the tragedy of the mad king:

The assumed madness of Edgar and the real distraction of Lear, form a judicious contrast. [...] Shakespeare has nowhere exhibited more inimitable strokes of his art, than in this uncommon scene; where he has so well conducted even the natural jargon of the beggar, and the jesting of the fool, which in other hands must have sunk into burlesque, that they contribute to heighten the pathetic to a very high degree¹⁶.

Edward Young in *Conjectures on Original Compositions* offers another significant example of Shakespeare’s ability to shape real characters and not mere copies of static and immutable models. In trying to elaborate a new definition of genius, Young chooses Shakespeare as the real poet who possesses that creative ability which only nature, that does not imitate but creates, possesses:

An imitator shares his crown, if he has one, with the chosen object; an original enjoys an undivided applause. An original may be said of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it grows it is not made. [...] An adult genius comes out of nature’s hand. [...] Shakespeare’s genius was of this kind. [...] Learning we thank, genius we revere, that gives us pleasure, this gives us rapture, that informs, this inspires; and is itself inspired; for genius is from heaven, learning is from man. [...] The wide field of Nature also lies open before it, where it

¹⁶ Joseph Warton, *The Adventurer*, n. 116, 15 December 1753, London, 90-91.

may range unconfined, make what discoveries it can, and sport with its infinite objects uncontrolled, as far as visible Nature extends, painting them as wantonly as it will.¹⁷

Shakespeare is not only endowed with supernatural powers in his ability to completely capture the reader's attention and govern his/her imagination, but he is able to grasp and display human passions, to give us "rapture".

His ability to give voice to human passions and to create convincing characters is also at the very core of Henry Home Lord Kames's essay *Elements of Criticism* (1761 and 1762) in which the Scottish critic explores the aesthetic categories underpinning the formation of a new taste. In perfect line with Hume's view and in general with English empiricism, Kames's pragmatic method is "to ascend gradually to principles, from facts and experiments, instead of beginning with the former, handled abstractly and descending to the latter".¹⁸

It is indeed to Shakespeare that Lord Kames turns to demonstrate the reliability of his analysis on the many-sided features that compose nature and that influence and shape the human mind. The new individuals represented by Shakespeare, completely different from those empty characters produced by the rules of poetical justice, are the most successful representation of the human subject to whom Kames turns to elaborate new consistent principles of judgment and taste. They also prove Shakespeare's genius and his capacity to generate, like nature itself, human beings. A passage taken from *The Merchant of Venice* is not by chance chosen to exemplify the different associations of thoughts overlapping in the mind of real individuals; while references from *Henry IV* are used to exemplify and explain how confusion and difficulty of discernment are engendered by:

¹⁷ Edward Young, "Conjectures on Original Composition," in *English Critical Essays XVI-XVIII*, ed. Edmund D. Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947), 270-311, here 281-283.

¹⁸ Henry Home Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*. Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Printed for A. Millar London and A. Kinkaid and J. Bell Edinburgh, 1762), 17.

thoughts and circumstances crowd upon each other by the slightest connections. [...] Such a person must necessarily have a great command of ideas, because they are introduced by any relation indifferently; and the slighter relations, being without number, must furnish ideas without end.

This doctrine is, in a lively manner, illustrated by Shakespeare [...] in *Henry IV*, second part, act II, sce. II.¹⁹

Kames also focuses on the analysis of passions and emotions, which he carries out by referring to the peculiar characterization of Shakespeare's characters. For him Shakespeare's talent lies in his ability to transform the simple and empty description of human passions and feelings into something real. He is thus able to make the spectator's mind experience the flow of sensations and thoughts which overlap in the mind of the characters that he himself has created. It is difficult to deny that Kames does not only see the Shakespearean plays as rich and inexhaustible sources through which the dramatist and then the critic explore human passions, but considers them as a container of ideas and different languages to be used to explain the 'nature' of human passions themselves. This is how Kames uses passages from *King Lear* and from *Othello* to describe and therewith define the passions that the same King Lear and Othello feel:

I shall borrow my instances from Shakespear and Corneille, who for genius in dramatic composition stand uppermost in the rolls of fame. Shakespeare shall furnish the first instance, being of sentiments dictated by a violent and perturbed passion. [...] *King Lear* act. 3 sc. 5 [...] To illustrate the foregoing doctrine, one other instance of the same kind may suffice expressing sentiments arising from remorse and despair. [...] *Othello* act. 5, sc. 9 [...] The sentiments here display'd flow so naturally from the passions represented, and are such genuine expressions of these passions, that is not possible to conceive any imitation more perfect.²⁰

¹⁹ Kames, *Elements of Criticism*. Vol. 1, 26.

²⁰ Kames, *Elements of Criticism*. Vol. 2, 152, 155-159.

The representation of human nature that, according to Kames, can be read in Lear's anger or in Othello's remorse for killing Desdemona, offers a true exemplification of the same kind of passions - anger and remorse - which Shakespeare brings to the scene, and which is used by Kames to empirically clarify the different facets of human nature and how human nature itself works. This reading of Shakespeare is inevitably underpinned by a strong ideological imprint, aimed at consolidating an aesthetic and a literary canon which should be profoundly national, as emerges from the differences between Shakespeare's characters and those of Corneille:

With regards to the French author, truth obliges me to acknowledge, that he describes in the style of a spectator, instead of expressing passion like one who feels it; and also that he is thereby betray'd into the other faults above mentioned, a tiresome monotony, and a pompous declamatory style. It is scarce necessary to produce particular instances, for he never varies from this tone.²¹

For Kames, as it would be a few years later for Samuel Johnson - nowadays considered the first Shakespearean critic - the multidimensionality of the Shakespearean characters and their ability to overwhelm the emotions of the public become the actual presuppositions on which a new (English) poetics must be instituted. Shakespeare's greatest skill, the same that would be defended by German critics and, as we will see by Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg in particular, was in depicting characters of convincing complexity, in whom, as Jack Lynch states, "good and evil were not clearly demarcated, as in fiction" and, I would also add, as in the empty and pompous declamatory style of French theater, but assorted, mixed and overlapped, as "in real life."²²

²¹ Kames, *Elements of Criticism*. Vol. 2, 159-160.

²² Jack Lynch, "Criticism of Shakespeare," in *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Richtie and Sabor, 41-59, here: 42.

III.

Both English and German critics agree that it is in 1740 that Shakespeare officially appears in Germany. “Mann kannte Shakespeare bestenfalls vom Hörensagen, man wußte nicht von ihm. Dieser Zustand änderte sich etwa um das Jahr 1740, als Shakespeare in den Kreisen der bürgerlichen Intelligenz in Deutschland mehr und mehr bekannt wurde”,²³ argues Wolfgang Stellmacher in one of the first studies on the reception of Shakespeare in Germany published in 1978, after the well-known *Shakespeare und der Deutsche Geist* written by Friedrich Gundolf in 1911.²⁴ And Roger Paulin reminds us more recently that Shakespeare was a name to be quoted, where “notions of creativity, inventiveness, imagination or fulness are to the fore”.²⁵ At the time, in Germany, there was in fact “little knowledge of the texts of his plays and even less desire to feel their full impact” until the translation of *Julius Caesar* in 1741 by Caspar Wilhelm von Borck, “the first sustained version of a Shakespeare play in German and the first full Shakespeare translation (and not adaptation) into a foreign language of any kind”.²⁶

The English essays on Shakespeare, like the Shakespearean plays that began to be translated from 1762 by Christoph Martin Wieland, are also involved in the important process of the formation of the German canon and in those debates that the *Sturmer und Dranger* held on some key concepts of Eighteenth century literary criticism, such as the idea of nation and national identity, the reading of past and history, the *querelle*

²³ Wolfgang Stellmacher, *Herders Shakespeare-Bild. Shakespeare-Rezeption im Sturm und Drang dynamisches Weltbild und bürgerliches Nationaldrama* (Berlin: Rötten & Loening Berlin, 1978), 6.

²⁴ *Shakespeare und der Deutsche Geist* was the extended version of Gundolf's postdoctoral habilitation thesis. See Andreas Höfele, *No Hamlets. German Shakespeare from Nietzsche to Carl Schmitz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 73.

²⁵ Roger Paulin, “Shakespeare and Germany,” in *Shakespeare and the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Fiona Ritchie and Peter Sabor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 314-330, here: 315.

²⁶ Roger Paulin, “Shakespeare and Germany,” in *Shakespeare and the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Ritchie and Sabor, 314-330, here: 315.

between ancient and modern poets, the notion of originality and in particular that of genius.²⁷

In 1741, Elias Schlegel was one of the first critics who had recognized how the original characterization of Shakespearean characters could be a significant source of inspiration for German dramatists looking for new models that could substitute the French theatre and taste as well as stimulate the creation of a more genuine national theatre. In *Vergleichung Shakespeare und Gruphius* Schlegel exalts Shakespeare's ability to know and faithfully depict human behaviours, showing how in the Shakespearean plays the imitation of action was superseded by a more important imitation of characters.²⁸

However, it is in the writings of Lessing and Gerstenberg that the originality of Shakespeare's works starts to be accentuated and theorized for the new generations. While Lessing's works on Shakespeare have, so far, been investigated,²⁹ Gerstenberg's reading of Shakespeare and his role within the rise of the Shakespeare cult in Germany have been sporadically questioned after the publication of Maria Joachimi-Dege's *Deutsche Shakespeare-Probleme im 18. Jahrhundert und im Zeitalter der Romantik* in 1907 and its new edition in 1976, and only few articles have focused on the role of Gerstenberg within the rise of Shakespearean criticism in Germany.³⁰

²⁷ On this specific topic, see Hans-Jürgen Blinn (Ed.), *Shakespeare-Rezeption. Die Diskussion um Shakespeare in Deutschland*. Vol. 1: *Ausgewählte Texte von 1741 bis 1788* (Berlin: Schmidt, 1982); Roger Bauer, Jürgen Wertheimer and Michael de Graat (Eds.), *Das Shakespeare-Bild in Europa zwischen Aufklärung und Romantik*, (Bern: Peter Lang, 1988). Gilberta Golinelli, *La formazione del canone shakespeariano tra identità nazionale ed estetica*.

²⁸ On this specific issue, see Johann Elias Schlegel, "Vergleichung Shakespears und Andreas Gryphs bey Gelegenheit des Versuchs einer gebundenen Übersetzung von dem Tode des Julius Cäsar, aus dem Englischen Werken des Shakespears," in *Beyträgen zur Critischen Historie der Deutschen Sprache, Poesie und Beredsamkeit, "Nachricht von neuen hieher gehörigen Sachen"*. Vol. 7 (Leipzig: Bey Bernhard Christoph Breitkopf, 1741), 550.

²⁹ F. W. Meisnest, "Lessing and Shakespeare," in *PMLA* 19/2 (1904); Roy Pascal, *Shakespeare in Germany, 1740-1815* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1937); Roger Bauer, Jürgen Wertheimer J. (Ed.), *Das Ende des Stefreispiels-Die Geburt des Nationaltheaters* (München: Fink, 1983); Roger Paulin, "Shakespeare and Germany," in *Shakespeare and the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Ritchie and Sabor, 314-330.

³⁰ Marie Joachimi-Dege, *Deutsche Shakespeare-Probleme im 18. Jahrhundert und im Zeitalter der Romantik* (Hildesheim: H. A. Gerstenberg Verlag, 1976, Second Edition).

Gerstenberg's essays, especially those that are entirely dedicated to Shakespeare, not only represent the beginning of a critical reading of Shakespeare's works and of his genius in the German language but are also evidence of the numerous contacts between German and English criticism during these same years. Gerstenberg was indeed the first German critic who: "die Shakespearefrage auch in Deutschland mit der Geniefrage identifizierte und somit den Sturm und Drang in der Shakespeareliteratur einläutete".³¹ Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* and Lord Kames's *Elements of Criticism* were in fact translated into German a few months after their first publication in England, generating an interesting process of *Kulturtransfer* within which the boundaries linked to the different national identities, English and German, become more and more unstable. Young's work, as appears in the sixth volume of the *Bibliothek der Schöne Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* (1760), "ist unter uns schon zu bekannt",³² while the work of Kames, which was published in England in 1762, was significantly reviewed in the same *Bibliothek* by Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg himself in 1763.³³

A first remarkable reference to Shakespeare's plays, which Gerstenberg reads in English and through the lens of contemporary English criticism, appears in the preface to his own translation of *The Maid's Tragedy* by Beaumont and Fletcher. Shakespeare's works are not only the creation of that kind of 'genius' theorized by Edward Young a few years earlier, but are plays that cannot be judged by the rigid distinction of the theatrical rules imposed by a neoclassical canon that still condemns Shakespeare's uncontrolled hybridization of the comic and the tragic and his violation of decorum and taste. The three unities of the Greek drama cannot be employed to fully appreciate Shakespeare since, according to Gerstenberg, Shakespeare, and, like him, those who would

³¹ Joachimi-Dege, *Deutsche Shakespeare-Probleme im 18. Jahrhundert*, 103.

³² *Bibliothek der Schöne Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste*. Vol. 6, (Leipzig: Johann Gottfried Dyck, 1760), 180-183, here: 180.

³³ *Bibliothek der Schöne Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste*. Vol. 9 (Leipzig: Johann Gottfried Dyck, 1763), 189-209.

choose him as their model, did not imitate life but rendered it in its naturalistic form, without any particular interest in the moralistic effect on the observer:

Ich bin der Meinung, daß man Shakespear selbst in seinem historischen Drama den Mengel der Illusion keinesweges vorwerfen könne. Er hatte andre Aussichten, nach denen wir ihn beurtheilen müssen, und es ist lächerlich, wenn wir die Beobachtung unserer Regeln von ihm fordern wollen. Er kannte das menschliche Leben, die Abwechslungen desselbigen, die mannigfaltigen Scenen von Weisheit und Torheit, Glück und Elend, Freude und Kummer, Größe und Kleinfügigkeit; er wußte, daß die Schaubühne nach ihrer vornehmsten Beziehung ein Bild des menschlichen Lebens seyn sollte, und dieses Bild ward also im eigentlichen Verstande sein Drama. Wer andere Absichten hat, kann sich einen anderen Plan machen: Shakespeare hatte mit diesem seinen Zweck erreicht.³⁴

It is in the *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Literatur* (1766-1767) that Gerstenberg takes up an overt dialogue with contemporary English criticism, becoming himself a true mediator and interpreter of Shakespeare's works and genius even for those who did not read English and did not yet know the works of the English playwright.

In line with the new way of re-reading literary texts of the past ages that had been recently inaugurated amongst the English critics, Gerstenberg criticizes Wieland's translation, which he considers unreasonably deprived of those parts that the neoclassical taste had judged as too vulgar and incomprehensible for the public of the time.

Moving from what the English critics of the second half of the Eighteenth century wrote on the first editions of Shakespeare's works, those of Nicholas Rowe and Alexander Pope, Gerstenberg upbraids the German translator – and the English critics of the first half of the

³⁴ H. W. von Gerstenberg, "Schreiben an der Herrn Weisse," in *Die Braut eine Tragödie von Beaumont und Fletcher. Nebst critischen und biographischen Abhandlungen über die vier größten Dichter des älteren brittischen Theaters. Und einem Schreiben an den Herrn Kreis-Steuer-Einnehmer Weiß* (Kopenhagen und Leipzig: 1765), 9-10.

Eighteenth century - for not having attributed a specific purpose to his translation and, above all, for not having been able to read the works of Shakespeare in their original version and not modified by neoclassical taste.

Under attack is Wieland's language, which reproduces the mitigated version of Alexander Pope's adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. According to Gerstenberg, Pope himself is guilty of having expurgated the language of Shakespeare, without understanding that it is in the original language, particularly in puns, that aspects of the Elizabethan age can be revealed. Thus, Shakespeare's language and irregularities should not be condemned or modified but need to be deeply investigated as possible historical sources bearing witness to the coeval audience's taste and expectations. Shakespeare and his theatre must be re-considered in their historical time because they were inevitably the product of its expectations, limits and characteristics.

Wie aber, wenn ich Ihnen einen klaren Beweis beybringe, daß Shakespears Lebens-Jahre gerade das güldene Alter der Wortspiele waren, und daß König Jakob, der affektirteste Sprecher von der Welt, nicht nur seinem Hofe, sondern sogar der Kanzel den Ton gab? Werden Sie Popen oder Wielanden noch immer glauben, daß Stellen dieser Art nur für den untersten Pöbel da stehn?³⁵

Gerstenberg is also critical of the general reading of the works of Shakespeare in the name of French neoclassical criticism and of the principles of poetical justice. In Shakespeare's works Gerstenberg reads an intent that goes far beyond the ethical purpose underlying Aristotle's *Poetics*. For him, Shakespearean characters, and their passions, offer a complex and dynamic image of the human condition. And this, though multifaceted and various, is shown by the English dramatist in its entirety, as a condensed reality. It is difficult to deny that Gerstenberg is both in dialogue with the German readers of his time and with the English

³⁵ H. W. von Gerstenberg, "16. Brief," in *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Literatur* (Stuttgart: G. S. Göschen'sche Verlagshandlung, 1890), 125-136, here: 128.

readings of the recent years, which he wants to convey to and share with the German critics of the age. Gerstenberg's analysis indeed shows his knowledge of Joseph Warton's pages on *King Lear* as well as Kames's study and use of Shakespeare's theatre and its complex characters to investigate the human nature and mind.

Remarkable in this respect are Gerstenberg's comments on the fool in *King Lear*. The fool is no longer an element of comedy but becomes fundamental to underline the tragic nature of Lear, the discomfort, the decline, and the failure of a king now old and abandoned by all. Shakespeare uses elements of the comic genre to achieve an effect that is instead tragic, and which is aimed at bringing the analysis of Lear's madness to the fore. While playing a liminal role, the fool provides an important key to understanding the whole story and, with it, the slow process that leads Lear to madness:

Man muß Schakespeare folgen können, um ihn zu beurtheilen. – Wer im König Lear nichts sieht, als den Narren, dem sey es erlaubt, mit einem *sneer* abzufertigen, was ihm drolligt scheint. Ich für meine Person bewundere den Dichter, der uns den schwachen Verstand dieses Königs durch den Umgang mit einem der elendesten Menschen so meisterhaft abzubilden weiß, und es befremdet mich nicht mehr, daß die Engländer diese Scenen, anstatt eines dummen Gelächters, mit mitleidigem Schauer über den Verfall und die Zerstörung des menschlichen Geistes betrachten. Voltaire mag immerhin über das Komische spotten, das er in den Liedern der Todtengräber bey Hamlet wahrnimt. Ich finde hier nichts Komisches. Der Umstand, daß diese Leute unter lauter Todten-Köpfen und Schedeln singen können, erhöht in mir das Tragische des Anblicks.³⁶

Shakespeare is also, for Gerstenberg, the playwright of human passions. He is the creator of a new sensibility who should become the model to follow for a new and truer representation of characters and of the progression of their passions. This is a talent that should remind

³⁶ H. W. von Gerstenberg, "18. Brief," in *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Literatur*, 159-167, here: 163.

the critics, Gerstenberg continues, that Shakespeare must be interpreted in a new way, as it is necessary to be able to follow his plays to understand and judge them properly. This statement does not have an exclusively aesthetic value but is coloured by an inevitable ideological connotation because Shakespeare's uniqueness is reinforced through a comparison with Voltaire's theatre and his comments on Shakespeare. Gerstenberg's praise of Shakespeare is thus to be read within the anti-French polemic that in those years was shared by both British and German critics.

Similar in this respect is the tenor that Gerstenberg uses in his analysis of human passions. Influenced by the comments on *Othello* that he reads in the words of John Hughes that appeared in an article of the *Guardian* in 1714, in which Shakespeare's *Othello* was compared to Edward Young's *The Revenge*, Gerstenberg demonstrates that Shakespeare, unlike Young, was not driven by a moral purpose, but wanted to depict and explore the complexity of a human passion. He was not interested in the mere representation of Othello's pain and jealousy but in the nature of the passion that provoked it.

Young betrachtete die Natur des Eifersüchtigen von einer Seite, von der sie dem Herzen Schauer, Entsetzen und Mitleiden abdringen sollte. – Schakespear bemühte sich, ihre feinsten Nuancen zu entwickeln, und ihre verborgenste Mechanik aufzudecken. – Young concentrirte die aus seiner Materie hervorspringenden Situationen zu der abgezielten Wirkung auf das Gemüth des Zuschauers. – Schakespear zeichnete seinen Plan nach dem Effecte, den er auf das Gemüth des Othello machen sollte. – Mit zwey Worten: Young schilderte Leidenschaften; Schakespear das mit Leidenschaften verbundene Sentiment. Wollen wir nicht bey diesen beiden trefflichen Stücken noch ein wenig stehen bleiben? Vielleicht finden wir manche kleine Erläuterung darinn, die uns im Folgenden zu statten kommen kann. Was an Youngs Trauerspielen durchgängig sichtbar ist, die schwache Kenntniß des Menschen, die er nur von Herfordshire aus übersehen zu haben scheint, erhellet am deutlichsten in dem genannten. Alles ist hier die schale Abbildung neuerer Helden nach französischem Zuschnitte, die von großen Empfindungen, über die gemeine Menschheit erhabnen Enthusiastereyen daher

tönen, und dabey so süßlich von Liebe zu schwatzen wissen! Ein solches *air doux*, womit die Handlung gleich in den ersten Scenen eingeleitet wird, könnte man in Schakespears fehlerhaftesten Stücken vergebens suchen.³⁷

To demonstrate Shakespeare's knowledge of man's nature and of how it works, Gerstenberg overtly evokes what Lord Kames proved in *Elements of Criticism* attributing to Shakespeare the ability to penetrate the complexity of the human mind and grasp its different facets:

Mir ist kein Schriftsteller bekannt, der diese Leidenschaft tiefer überdacht, und frappanter gemalt hätte, als Schakespear. Wenn ich hieby die Weisheit erwäge, mit der er nach dem Charakter des Othello, eines sehr festen und gehärteten Geistes, kleine Ausnahmen von der vorgelegten Regel macht, die er dem ungeachtet wie mit einem zarten Fingerdrucke andeutet: ein Talent, das ihn beständig von allen übrigen Dichtern unterscheidet, und welches gerade das nämliche Talent ist, was Lord Kames die Geschicklichkeit nennt, »jede Leidenschaft nach dem Eigenthümlichen des Charakters zu bilden, die Sentiments zu treffen, die aus den verschiedenen Tönen der Leidenschaften entspringen, und jedes Sentiment in den ihm eignen Ausdruck zu kleiden« – wenn ich dieß und noch so vieles unter Einen Sehepunkt bringe; so kann ich Ihnen schwerlich ganz beschreiben, wie sehr ich dieses Lieblings-Genie der mütterlichen Natur bewundere, liebe, mit Entzücken liebe.³⁸

As already anticipated in his preface to his translation of the *Maid's Tragedy*, Gerstenberg condemns those critics who pretend to judge the Shakespearean plays according to the rules of the Greek drama and to their rigorous interpretation and appropriation over time. "Eine der vornehmsten Ursachen, warum Shakespear selten, vielleicht niemals,

³⁷ H. W. von Gerstenberg, "15. Brief," in *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Literatur*, 114-125, here: 115.

³⁸ H. W. von Gerstenberg, "15. Brief," in *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Literatur*, 114-125, here: 120-121.

aus der rechten Gesichtspunkte beurtheilt worden, ist ohne Zweifel der übel angewandte Begriff, den wir vom Drama der Griechen haben”,³⁹ contends Gerstenberg in his 14. *Brief*, proving to his peers the need to re-consider the same principles underpinning Aristotle’s *Poetics* from a new and more coherent historical perspective.

Along with a notion of reading that should take into consideration the historical position of the writer and of the observer to fully understand the originality of Shakespeare’s works, it is difficult to deny that the German critic also develops a cult of Shakespeare that is even stronger than the iconic image of the national poet that he reads in the English essays of the second half of the eighteenth century. As a faithful representation of nature in its most intimate and profound uniformity, Shakespeare’s works are more than a perfect reproduction because Shakespeare, like the genius elaborated by E. Young, and like nature itself, creates and, in so doing, generates human beings:

Ich glaube also nicht zu irren, wenn ich meinen obigen Grundsatz wiederhole, daß die Schakespearschen Werke nicht aus dem Gesichtspunkte der Tragödie, sondern als Abbildungen der sittlichen Natur zu beurtheilen sind. [...] Und eben dieß ist es, was ich, wenn ich einen Commentar über Schakespears Genie schreiben sollte, am meisten bewundern würde, daß nämlich jede einzelne Fähigkeit des menschlichen Geistes, die schon insbesondre Genie des Dichters heissen kann, bey ihm mit allen übrigen in gleichem Grade vermischt, und in Ein großes Ganze zusammengewachsen sey. Er hat Alles – den bilderreichen Geist der Natur in Ruhe und der Natur in Bewegung, den lyrischen Geist der Oper, den Geist der komischen Situation, sogar den Geist der Groteske – und das Sonderbarste ist, daß Niemand sagen kann, diesen hat er mehr, und jenen hat er weniger.⁴⁰

³⁹ H. W. von Gerstenberg, “14. Brief,” in *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Literatur*, 109-114, here: 112. On this specific respect, see: Kristin Gjesdal, “Reading Shakespeare-Reading Modernity”, *Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies* 1 (2014), 57-81: here 70-73.

⁴⁰ H. W. von Gerstenberg, “15. Brief,” in *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Literatur*, 114-125, here: 124-125.

According to Gerstenberg, Shakespeare's originality does not lie in his ability to reproduce what he sees but in the way in which nature itself speaks through his creativity. Moving from his reading of English criticism, Gerstenberg's writings on Shakespeare not only contributed to identify Shakespeare's genius as a supernatural and divine force but transformed Shakespeare himself into a real genius, into that inimitable and transnational poet that in the following decades would be passionately celebrated as the voice and the spirit of the German people as well.

