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Herder, National Identity, and the Hungarian Cult of Shakespeare

The third point concerning this “author function” is that it is not formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual. It results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct a rational entity we call author. [...] these aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as an author), are projections, in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts, in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice.¹

One of the most eloquent and, undoubtedly, most exuberantly Romantic appraisals of Shakespeare can be found in a little monograph written by the German philosopher of history Johann Gottfried von Herder, originally included in *Von deutscher Art und Kunst*.² Herder praised the playwright as the true Aristotelian dramatist, but certainly not because “the man would not imitate the ancients and follow the precepts of Aristotle,”³ but because he proved to be the most faithful to the Greek ideal of writing out of history and about history:

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!⁴

Students and scholars of Shakespeare are of course equally aware today of the ideological stakes invested in the socially constructed image of Shakespeare as the highest and almost transcendental peak of human cultural achievement. From the early nineteenth

century on, the Shakespeare name and brand have been disseminated and deployed as the standard against which the cultural maturity of a nation was to be measured in a world which was witnessing a growing dominance of Anglo-Saxon powers. Several poststructuralist critical orientations have mapped out the interrelationships and antagonisms of cultural imperialism, canonization and ideological technologies of authorship, including the formation and the use of the cult of Shakespeare. However, the two names, Herder and Shakespeare, coin a very special couple in the history of Hungary under the suppressive reign of the Habsburg Empire at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I would like to elaborate on this peculiar pair and their influence on the emergent Hungarian national identity, which repeatedly had to define and defend itself in opposition to the higher Austrian powers. I will rely on the approach that Péter Dávidházi introduced as *anthropological holism* in order to survey the complexities of the socio-cultural context in which the influence of the philosopher and the playwright so intricately intertwined in Hungary. Dávidházi argues that three main aspects have to be considered in the study of literary cults (attitude, ritual, language), and for this “a holistic approach is required whereby seemingly disconnected or hitherto neglected phenomena can be treated as parts within the same system.”⁵ My contention is that the history of Shakespeare’s reception in Hungary is demonstrative of the agency of the name of the author, and we can throw new light on this specific Foucauldian author function if we approach it through the presence and impact of Herder on the cultural attempts at self-definition in Hungary. This method will help us arrive at a more complete understanding of the cultural logic of the cult of Shakespeare in Hungary, and literary cults in general.

Count István Széchenyi, who came to be canonized in national historiography as the greatest of all Hungarians, wrote in June 1829 amidst the great political, cultural and economic upheavals of the Hungarian Reform Age: “Day by day it is becoming more and

more obvious to me that Herder was right: the Hungarian nation will soon disappear.”⁶ One might be puzzled to read this statement by one of the great leaders of the Hungarian reforms and cultural Enlightenment at a time when our country was going through its period of the most profound and forward-looking changes, especially since Herder said nothing about the extinction of the nation itself – he only concerned himself with the future of European languages. In order to understand the weight and the historical motivations of this outcry, we have to be aware of the long-lasting and quite controversial impact of Herder’s philosophy of history on the emergent Hungarian national identity and reform politics in an age when Romanticism, Enlightenment and reformism were simultaneously at work throughout East-Central Europe. The contemporary discourses on sovereignty, reform, literary taste and cultural advancement indicate that there are several connections between the important roles Herder and Shakespeare played in the forging of this Hungarian national identity in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Shakespeare and Herder entered the canon of highly influential and almost religiously revered names roughly in the same period in Hungary, but the Shakespearean scholar may find a number of contradictory implications of Herder’s presence in Hungarian literary history. Few philosophers exerted an influence as powerful, long-lasting and ambivalent in Hungarian history as Herder. In his *Outline of a Philosophical History of Humanity (Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit, 1789-91)* he argued in 1791 that within a few decades one would look in vain for the Hungarian language since it would be assimilated by the surrounding Slavonic languages. “As for the Hungarians or Magyars, squeezed between Slavs, Germans, Vlachs and other peoples, they are now the smallest part of their country’s population, and in centuries to come even their language will probably be lost.”⁷ Herder’s comments on the Hungarian language were misinterpreted as a prediction applying to the entire nation which, for want of power, virility and sufficient Volksgeist, would vanish from

the face of the earth. The “prophesy” exerted an apocalyptic and characteristically Romantic influence on the emerging Hungarian identity at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and informed many of the attempts that were systematically aiming at the legitimization or production of a national consciousness. Although the single comment on the Hungarian language is just one part of a sentence in a four-volume work, it imprinted a mark, or much rather a wound, on the spirit of the nation that was difficult to heal during the decades that were to come. The effect of this prediction was further intensified by the fact that Herder included the songs of the Eskimos and even Shakespeare and Goethe in his famous collection of folk poetry and songs (*Volkslieder*), but for some reason he failed to include any Hungarian examples.

The “negative mythology” of the death of the nation and the dissolution of national identity had long been a powerful constituent of Hungarian historiography and literature already long before Herder. The image of the death of the nation had always loomed deep in national consciousness, but his prediction fuelled these sentiments that were, mainly for political reasons, in the forefront of the attention of the country’s literati and politicians in the first half of the nineteenth century. The country was under a very strict political surveillance supported by an elaborate network of Habsburg secret spies. The Emperors Joseph II, Leopold II and Francis II exercised an often brutal politics of suppression, the tragic example of which was the bloody crushing of the Martinovics secret society in 1794, followed by the executions of the leaders and the imprisonment of the followers, among them several outstanding Hungarian figures of contemporary intellectual and literary life. The Hungarian intelligentsia was taught a sad lesson about the possible outcomes of any organized opposition to the Habsburg rule.

Herder’s prediction, of course, was well grounded in social and demographical observations, more precisely in the fact that Hungary’s population in the late eighteenth

century was extremely multi-ethnic, Hungarians represented a maximum of 40% of the entire population, administration was in Latin or German, and the language generally used in the streets of Budapest was not Hungarian until the 1890s.

Hungary was starting to recover from the shock of the Martinovics case in the middle of the first half of the nineteenth century. As a general characteristic of European and Hungarian Romanticism, and perhaps even more particularly as a result of Herder's prediction, a national legitimizing activity was started to find, restore, establish or at least to write those grand narratives, the "national epic" included, which would testify to the valid and historically – culturally well-rooted place of the Hungarian nation in Europe. At this point, the Herderian upheaval and the national movement of course are closely interrelated, but Shakespeare occupies a peculiar position here. Herderian philosophy dictated the observance and maintenance of national and folk traditions, the listing of national epics, but, alas, there was no grand national epic and no inventory or fixed canon of folk poetry in Hungarian literature to rely on. Consequently, perhaps even more than in other Central and East-Central European countries, the Shakespeare-machine started to function in Hungary as a process of nostrification and appropriation in order to prove the cultural maturity and European status of the nation, to show that, even if he does not hear us, we are certainly capable of hearing Shakespeare. The cult started to emerge already when there was hardly any knowledge of the original Shakespeare in Hungary, and by the 1820s Shakespearean drama and the Shakespeare name were elevated to a position where it became obvious to the literate Hungarian groups that the most irrefutable evidence of the grandeur of our language and the power of our language is perhaps not only, and not primarily, in our folk songs and ancient poetry, but in the fact that we are capable of translating, studying and disseminating Shakespeare in the Hungarian language. Herder argued in his philosophy of language that there is nothing more dear to a people than their own language. We used Shakespeare to falsify the Herderian

prediction about our language, which was, by the middle of the nineteenth century, generally misrepresented and expanded to apply to the approaching general and divinely predestined catastrophe of the entire nation.

The emergence and flourishing of Shakespeare's cult in Hungary went through several stages, as Péter Dávidházi explains in his originative study.⁸ The first stage of initiation is followed by the national activity of mythicizing Shakespeare in transcendental, and then straightforwardly religious terms. The elevation of the Bard to divine realms is then followed by a scholarly and academic phase of institutionalization, which leads to iconoclasm and then secularization, and finally, a revival of the grand Shakespeare in a form which is still not devoid of cultic reverence, but more digestible for critical taste and scholarly pluralism. Out of these stages, applicable to the worldwide reception of Shakespeare, perhaps the initial phase is the most intriguing: Shakespeare started to be religiously revered and ritualistically adored even before his texts were really known to the public or even to the larger community of intellectuals. We have only a few Shakespearean dramas translated into Hungarian in the 1830s – 40s, when the most influential personalities of Hungarian literature and high culture already praise him as “God's second born” or “half of the entire creation.” Dávidházi quotes Sándor Petőfi, one of the leading figures of Hungarian Romantic poetry and a prominent member of the circle of young intellectuals who ignited the uprising against the Habsburg rule in 1848, who straightforwardly pointed out that “The world used to be imperfect before Shakespeare, so God, when creating him, said: here you are, folks, if you doubted my existence and greatness, don't doubt them any longer!,” and that “Shakespeare himself is half the created world.”⁹ These were the decades when the solidification of the Shakespearean cult in England was already past the stage of mythicization, and started to get materialized in the monuments of institutionalization.¹⁰ In Hungary, repeated efforts were made in the Reform Age, which coincides with the beginnings of Romanticism in Hungary, to prove that the

Hungarian nation was also mature, knowledgeable and strong enough to independently understand, endorse and disseminate Shakespeare and cultivate his cult, which is a touchstone of European and universal historical standards. Hungarian intellectuals all wanted “to have a hand in that.”

However, it is interesting to observe that even the greatest translators and commentators of Shakespeare first got to know his dramas in German, or sometimes in French translations, which were usually prose and very liberal adaptations of the original Shakespearean plays. In the age of initiation in the 1780s – 1790s, exactly when Herder’s prophesy started to influence the shaping of national identity in Hungary, and when the receiving nation had to “learn to revere before getting to know,”¹¹ it was the name and the fame of Shakespeare, much rather than his actual works, that exerted an influence almost as great as that of Herder on the erudite ranks of the Hungarian lower nobility. “Reverential behavior” was acquired well before any authentic translation or performance of Shakespeare in Hungary, and the Hungarian periodical *Mindenek Gyűjtemény* (Miscellanea) praised England as the very example and highest peak of civilization as early as in 1789. As Dávidházi observes: “As the emphasis was on learning an imported ritual and verbal system of reverence rather than on acquiring reliable knowledge of Shakespeare’s original texts, translations were neither expected nor meant to provide a faithful rendering of the original, whatever faithfulness meant or may mean today.”¹² Articles and pamphlets about the education and bettering of the Hungarian general population regularly relied on the ritualistic reverence of Shakespeare in England as an example to follow in order to polish and upkeep the national language. Upon careful scrutiny the reader of these publications will inevitably observe that the idea of the perishing of the nation informs this programmatic rhetoric, according to which the refinement of taste and the advancement of the nation must be based on the systematic cultivation of our language, primarily through the elevation of our national

literature. The utmost example to follow in this agenda was the enthusiastic and latently religious adoration of Shakespeare in England. Mihály Vörösmarty, the visionary Romantic poet remarked in 1841 that “It must be declared unhesitatingly that a good translation of Shakespeare is worth at least one half of the richest national literature.”¹³ Should we fail to adapt this program, argued so many new apostles of the national cause, the grave of history will swallow Hungary so that in a few generations’ time no trace of the great deeds of our forefathers and no record of our country will be found in the world. We encounter repeated outcries by the foremost Hungarian poets and scholars at the turn of the century, voicing their doubts whether Hungary would ever become like Albion, the home of divine Shakespeare, where even fisher wives browse the newspapers every morning, hundreds of copies of the complete edition of Shakespeare’s works are purchased in advance before publication, the aristocracy of the entire nation gathers in tents around Stratford to celebrate the jubilee of Shakespeare organized by Garrick, and even the Prince of Wales excels in giving donations for new editions and celebrations. “That famous comedian Garrick who is respected all over England so much that even lords and princes talk to him, devoted a public Jubilee or celebration to the memory of Shakespeare in 1769 , in summer at Stratford where this immortal poet had been born.” – a Hungarian article reported in 1790.¹⁴ By the time of the dawn of the Reform Period, with the first Reform Diet in Budapest, there was general knowledge and worship of Shakespeare without any direct knowledge of his works, and there was still general concern caused by Herder’s comment, to which the national movement of Hungarian literature found an answer in the bettering of the national language.

I am not contending that there is anything special or surprising in the fact that Shakespeare was imported into Hungarian culture in indirect, modified or truncated translations, and that the process of his elevation to the level of almost religious adoration was practically completed before authentic translations could be available. This is a truism in

literary and cultural history, and the phenomenon is characteristic of the workings of cultural imperialism, on the one hand, and national literary and political aspirations, on the other. As has been argued in critical literature, the Shakespeare name was operational in Hungarian culture before the widespread and scholarly knowledge of his plays. What I tried to explicate in the above investigation, applying the perspective of anthropological holism, is that this agency of the name of the author was working, at least to a considerable extent, in tandem with the name of another author. Contemporary periodicals, newspapers and pamphlets disseminated the idea that being without Shakespeare was a condition equal to the fall of the nation which had been prophesized by Herder earlier, so our language had to be brought to a level that could accommodate the revered dramas. Shakespeare and Herder covertly intertwine in the lines of these programmatic reform treatises, and by the 1830s, when the long-term translation projects were launched, the Hungarian Shakespeare was already the foremost antidote against the malady that the nation was suffering from as an effect of the “Herderian curse.” Returning to my initial quote from Foucault, the way Hungarian historiography (mis)interpreted Herder, and the process of institutionalization through which we imported, translated, disseminated and canonized Shakespeare are jointly demonstrative of how the author function is always constituted on the basis of “projections, in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts.”

Notes

¹ Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” in *Critical Theory since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press), 143.

² Paolo Frisi et al. *Von deutscher Art und Kunst : Einige fliegende blätter (1773)* (BiblioBazaar, BiblioLife Reproduction Series, 2009), 51-76.

³ Frank E. Halliday, *The Cult of Shakespeare* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1957), 3.

⁴ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 1.

⁵ Péter Dávidházi, *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare. Literary Reception in Anthropological Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 21.

⁶ Quoted in Johann Weidlein, “Madjarisierung und Minderwertigkeitskomplexe,” *Südostdeutsche Vierteljahresschrift* 21 (1972): 238. English translation mine, AK.

⁷ “Das einzige Volk, das aus diesem Stamm sic hunter die Eroberer gedrängt hat, sind die Ungarn oder Madscharen. [...] Da sind sie jetzt unter Slaven, Deutschen, Wlachen und andern Völkern der geringere Theil der Landeinwohner und noch Jahrhunderten wird man vielleicht ihre Sprache kaum finden.” Johann Gottfried Herder. *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Part IV. Book XVI. Riga – Leipzig, 1791), vol. 14 of *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin, 1909), 268-269. English translation quoted from Susan Gal, “Linguistic Theories and National Images in 19th Century Hungary,” *Pragmatics* 5:2: 155.

⁸ Péter Dávidházi, *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare*, 108-163. See also: Péter Dávidházi, “*Isten másodszülettje.*” *A magyar Shakespeare-kultusz természetrajza* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1989), 71-77.

⁹ Dávidházi, *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare*, 133.

¹⁰ “In the year of Mrs Hornby’s expulsion from the Birthplace, or, to be more precise, on December 19th, 1820, a general meeting of the inhabitants of Stratford and neighbourhood was held at the Town Hall to consider the erection of a National Memorial, in the form of a theatre, to the Immortal Memory of Shakespeare, Mr Mathews observed, at considerable length, that the town had no token of national respect and gratitude to its immortal genius, and pledged himself to do all that he could in aid of this important undertaking, even to lay the scheme at the foot of the Throne. It should, he concluded, be the proud boast of every man to say in after times when passing this monument, ‘Aye, I had a hand in that.’” Halliday, *The Cult of Shakespeare*, 135.

¹¹ Dávidházi, *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare*, 110.

¹² Dávidházi, *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare*, 119.

¹³ Dávidházi, *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare*, 134.

¹⁴ Dávidházi, *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare*, 114.

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