

Robert Gillett*

***King John* in the “Vormärz”: Worrying Politics and Pathos**

Abstract: This article picks up on a tendency of recent criticism to look to Shakespeare for insights into contemporary politics, and extends it backwards to the period of German history known as the “Vormärz”—the period between 1815 and 1848. It establishes parallels between that period and the current debates about Brexit, and shows how equivalent issues are reflected in the accounts of *King John* given by three leading German critics of the “Vormärz” period—which also successively demonstrate the deleterious rise of German nationalism. These issues include: the weaknesses, mistakes and crimes of the powerful, and their effect both on the nation directly afflicted with them, and on others; the issue of national sovereignty and its relationship to the fellowship of nations; the struggle against arguably alien ways of thinking; the dividing line between necessary compromise and rank betrayal; the dilemma of choice; and the poisoned chalice of democratic freedom. And the parallels they establish between Shakespeare, the “Vormärz” and us are as instructive as they are unsettling.

Keywords: Brexit; Europe; Reception; Germany; Politics; Nationalism.

I

On 6 February 2017 Gary Watt, Professor of Law at the University of Warwick, published an article about Brexit in the *Journal of International Dispute Settlement*. There is nothing very surprising about that, you might think. After all, the most obvious unintended consequence of Brexit is that disputes which are in most cases purely local in origin are taken for settlement onto the international stage. Yet there was something unexpected, even disconcerting about Watt’s intervention. For it was concerned not with statutes and cases, not with treaties and trade agreements, but with Shakespeare. And not just any Shakespeare, either, but with a play which is arguably the least well known single-authored play in the entire canon: with *King John*.

Watt’s thesis is that “when we seek to illuminate our present politics with the insights of drama, we will find that *King John* [...] casts the longest and

* Queen Mary University of London.

perhaps the strongest light” (Watt 60). In the rhetorically charged dispute of the first scene Watt (62) sees “Shakespeare [...] speaking directly to the same passions that have arisen in the Brexit dispute.” In the conflict between England and France, Watt finds parallels with the various contentious issues dividing Britain and its former EU partners in a divorce process, which, at the time Watt was writing, had barely begun. The dire warnings which continue to be issued as to the consequences of Brexit have an echo, for Watt, in the threat of excommunication pronounced by the Papal legate against the recalcitrant King of England. The use of the same means to intimidate England’s (temporary) ally France matches, according to Watt, the strong-arm tactics employed by the EU to stop member countries concluding individual trade deals with Britain. Indeed, Watt even goes so far as to identify Shakespeare’s Pandulph with Jean-Claude Juncker in this regard. The logical corollary, then, would be to see in John’s willing sacrifice of his sovereignty to Pandulph and his accepting it back at the latter’s hands a paradigm for what might happen if Britain decided to make substantial concessions in order to remain within the single market. This would of course be anathema to those for whom the Brexit vote was above all about self-determination. For Watt, this too is prefigured in the history of King John. “John’s reign,” he writes “is as good a candidate as any to represent the resurgence of English nationhood [...]” (Watt 71).

In this resurgence, with its obvious links to Brexit, Watt detects a clear reference to the events of Shakespeare’s own lifetime. There it was inextricably bound up with the question of religion. When John briefly defies the authority of the Pope, and does so moreover on his own, he behaves for all the world like a Protestant nation defying a predominantly catholic Europe. In seizing on the connection, Watt is moved to ask questions like: “Could it be that a predominantly Roman Catholic EU is still modelled along essentially Papal lines or still espouses the same federal, even feudal ambitions? Was the Roman Catholic communion of nations the template for the European Community?” (Watt 67). And while he is more than prepared to countenance the possibility that the answer to these questions will be negative, he still insists that the perceived difference in confession between the United Kingdom and its Southern neighbours is one of the factors that marks the former out as distinct and not belonging. Another such factor has to do with the matter of migration. Here Watt uses the autograph passages by Shakespeare in *Sir Thomas More* to remind his readers of that author’s sense of solidarity with the displaced and the dispossessed. And he cites Victor Hugo and others in order to sketch a picture of Shakespeare as a good European¹—a tactic emphasized when he extends Shakespearean condemnation equally to nationalism, National Socialism and the murder by a right-wing extremist of the British Labour MP Jo Cox (Watt 80).

¹ “A little more, and Shakespeare would be European”—Victor Hugo, quoted in Watt, 78.

In addition to these narrowly political parallels, Watt identifies psychological similarities that help to explain the Brexit vote and its aftermath. As he puts it in his abstract: “the dynamics of human motivation which Shakespeare attributed to individuals living four hundred years before he wrote, apply as well four centuries on, in the year of ‘Brexit’” (Watt 58. See Watt 60). Of particular importance here is John’s notorious vacillation, which would apply very neatly, but by no means exclusively, to Theresa May’s attempts to reconcile the conflicting camps within her own party. The disunity of the country as a whole is summed up, for Watt, in the Bastard’s report to the King about the state of his kingdom (4:2:143-146). Identifying the citizens of Angiers, who are called upon to arbitrate between the English and the French, with the voters called upon to decide the future of the United Kingdom, he pinpoints both their unwillingness to fulfil a potentially dangerous role which properly belongs to others, and the sense of unexpected power which may have contributed to the knowing cussedness of the result. He also sees a parallel between these citizens and theatre-goers, and is thus able to posit the whole Brexit scenario, and the negotiations that followed, as a form of theatre, imbued with some uncertainty about the relative roles of actors and onlookers. He lays considerable stress, too, on the fire imagery in Shakespeare’s play, applying the successive stages of kindling flames, fanning them, and being unable to contain them to the referendum process itself.

In order to characterize and classify such parallels, Watt uses a kind of shorthand, whereby the word “sovereign” stands for politics, “sterling” for economics, and “bastards” for “illegitimate reasons” such as racism and xenophobia. One of the corollaries of the first term, in this scenario, is, precisely, nationalism—“reclaiming sovereignty”, as a rallying cry, being exactly equivalent to “make Britain great again”. In order to make his argument about economics, Watt insists that the term “commodity”, used in one of the play’s most famous speeches to mean dishonourable political expediency, is often associated in Shakespeare with profit in the financial sense. He also makes much of the linguistic connection between “tread” and “trade”, and takes the view that the accommodation between France and England is intimately bound up with the latter. In his discussion of “bastards” he is careful to distinguish between the real villains and those of whom he says that they “have a certain innate nobility of purpose despite formal imperfections of status” (Watt 76). Among these, he includes not only King John himself, but also the people he calls the ““common folk”” of England, “who, if not lacking legal legitimacy, generally lack the formal imprimatur of gentility or nobility and, in many cases, those educational and financial advantages that tend to improve one’s social status” (Watt 76). By this sleight of hand he effectively doffs his apostate hat to those who voted for Brexit. After all, there is general consensus that the Brexit vote was in part a reaction to a situation whereby a self-serving elite had for too long ignored the

needs and concerns of the underprivileged. By endorsing Shakespeare as the champion of the latter, Watt is doing penance for that unconcern. In an equivalent move, he also equivocates in his repudiation of nationalism. “This is not to say”, he says,

that the idea of a nation cannot be a beautiful thing. A nation is a construct of communal human invention. As such, it can be a beautiful work of culture. Shakespeare frequently portrayed the well-ordered state in terms of a well-managed garden that holds nature in harmony with human art. (Watt 80)

In this context it is significant that he quotes with approval the unashamedly jingoistic final speech of the play, in which the arch-bastard makes the ringing claim that, for as long as it stands united, England will never be defeated.

II

It is here that Watt brings in “the Germans”. “German authors”, he says, “have long been appreciative and insightful critics of Shakespeare” (Watt 80). And he goes on to quote a German critic called Franz Horn, who, in a translation presumably by Henry Reed, said of *King John*: “The hero of this play stands not in the list of personages, and could not stand with them, but the idea should be clear without personification. The hero is England” (Watt 80. See Reed 153). The dates given for the publication from which this quotation is taken are 1823-1831. And this puts them firmly in the period which is known as the “Vormärz”. For those working in German studies, the word “Vormärz” is convenient shorthand to designate the period between 1815 and 1848, between the restoration that followed the defeat of Napoleon and the revolution that demonstrated how uncontainable the energies were which Napoleon had set in train. With the “Vormärz”, the history of German literature enters a distinct new phase, reflecting both in form and content the socio-political conditions of its production: the rise of the middle classes at a time dominated by a tussle with the legacy of the eighteenth century which was ultimately resolved in favour of values that are perhaps best described as Victorian. Almost exactly in the middle of it, in March 1832, falls the death of Goethe, symbolically sealing a generational shift that had been apparent for some time but raising old anxieties about the nature of German literature and its place on the world stage. Around the same time we see the appearance of the famous translation of Shakespeare’s complete plays by August Wilhelm Schlegel, Dorothea Tieck and Wolf Graf Baudissin—the unfairly misnamed “Schlegel/Tieck” translation (Schabert 841). Yet although this was the translation that eventually triumphed and took on canonical status, it had numerous rivals in the period, which are no

longer considered current (Roger 367-380). This translation work is preceded and accompanied by an enormous wealth of German scholarship on Shakespeare—some of it admittedly more in the fragmentary and enthusiastic Romantic mode, and some more traditionally philological (Roger 55-69). As a result of this activity, virtually all the major writers of the period engaged publicly and in print with the work of the English dramatist. Arguably, these acts of homage are most significant in the case of the period’s playwrights, such as Georg Büchner (Dedner); but they were by no means restricted to them. Relatively early on, the universal veneration of Shakespeare came to be viewed negatively as idolatry. It is no accident that two influential texts on the subject have in their title the word “Shakespearomanie”, “Shakespeare Mania” (Grabbe, Benedix). And one of the manifestations of this cult was the acclaim given to actors and actresses who excelled in playing Shakespearean roles (Schabert 746). Naturally, this kind of attention also extended to the visual arts and music—there are numerous depictions both of celebrated actors in Shakespearean roles and of Shakespearean characters as imagined by artists; and Mendelssohn’s famous incidental music to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is merely the tip of an iceberg (Schabert 768-9). It is thus no exaggeration to say that this period between restoration and revolution was saturated with Shakespeare—albeit, arguably, in every sphere of intellectual life except the repertoires of most theatres.

This high-water mark in the history of German Shakespeare reception occurs, not accidentally, at a crucial point in the history of Europe and the European ideal. In a way that is no less ideologically significant than the confessional differences of which Watt makes so much, the crucial distinction between Britain and continental Europe is bound up with the fact that Britain never actually became part of Napoleon’s European project. That was why Britain took so long to abandon its arcane and archaic system of weights and measures—and never did so completely. This also explains why the legal system in this country is so markedly different from those that apply elsewhere in Europe. And the most visible sign of this continuous division is that the British do not drive on the same side of the road as the rest of the continent. In one sense, then, the defeat of Napoleon, which the British helped to bring about, was a defeat of the European ideal, and could be presented specifically as a triumph of the individual nation over the levelling and regimenting forces of unification. The echoes of this in the rhetoric of Brexit are unmistakable. At the same time the forces of reaction, in their unremitting efforts to turn the clock back to a former age, had the effect, in the “Vormärz”, as in parts of the current European Union, and, I suspect, as in the future United Kingdom, of increasing mobility and migration as political dissidents and disaffected citizens tried their luck in places regarded as less oppressive. On the other hand, it can be argued

that the very defeat of Napoleon made possible the realization of precisely that ideal which he is alleged to have pursued—the ideal of a United States of Europe, of a “Europe thus divided into nationalities freely formed and free internally” (Ingram 49). Without the hegemonic presence of a single power, without the constant bloodshed attendant on resistance to that presence, without occupation, attrition and actual battles, the “Common folk” of Europe were able to get on with their lives in a Europe made recognizably more homogenous by the departing armies and the system they served. And by one of those ironies in which history delights, that very increased homogeneity helped lead to the formation of precisely the sort of nation with which emotional identification became possible.

In the “Vormärz”, such nationalism was aligned rather differently than it is now. At the time, of course, there was no such nation as “Germany”. Instead, there was a confederation known as the “Deutscher Bund”. Like the United Kingdom after Brexit, the states that made up the German confederation were by no means of one mind as to the direction to be taken after the defeat of the French emperor and the failure of his European project. Indeed, as in the Brexit scenario, the states themselves were deeply divided between the old elite, who were desperate to return to the status quo ante, and the young radicals, who hoped for a loosening of the repressive structures that prevented their development. For these last, though, who called themselves “Junges Deutschland”, “Young Germany” and who were quickly suppressed because of the threat of subversion that they posed, the promise of freedom was vested not in the communion of nations, but in a form of national democracy. It was only after the failure of the revolutions of 1848 that the nation was achieved by specifically military means and thus became associated with the forces of conservatism, specifically Prussian conservatism. In this context, then, to posit England as the hero of Shakespeare’s play is neither politically nor psychologically neutral. On the contrary, it smacks more than a little of nation envy.

It is not insignificant, though, that this envy should be expressed in a reference to *King John*. For that play occupies a special place in the history of German theatre. *King John* was the first Shakespeare play with which Goethe inaugurated his intendency of the theatre at Weimar in 1792—as Roger Paulin explains:

It was with Eschenburg’s *King John*, not *Hamlet*, that he ushered in his Shakespearean productions, a play representing historical and political forces as they clash and recede and collide again, depicting human impotence in the face of inscrutable powers, human ignobility and cynicism, with moments of Senecan horror. It is the Shakespearean world which Goethe excluded from his own practice of tragedy, but whose validity and potency [...] he nevertheless recognized as essential and right (Paulin 226).

And he goes on to say of this influential staging: “Arthur’s later death on stage, the great actress Christiane Becker’s untimely death, the poet’s meditation on the fragility of human existence, the starkness of tragedy—all these, too, emerge from the recollection of one electrifying moment [...] of Shakespearean production.” (Paulin 226-7) In this view, what attracted the impresario to Shakespeare’s play was on the one hand its thoroughly disillusioned view of history and politics, its “commodity”, and on the other its ability to awaken high passion, its pathos. And if these two facets contributed to the play’s popularity in the period between the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror, how much more strongly did they apply twenty-five years later, after Napoleon had seduced various German princes into behaving in ways that uncannily resembled those depicted in the play. Nor should it be forgotten that the position of the “Vormärz” between Romanticism and Victorianism, between Wordsworth and Dickens, coincided not only with what is widely regarded as the invention of childhood, but also with a period in the history of the theatre when histrionics still met with approval (Austin, Gubar, Bate and Rasmussen 127-128). So it would not be out of character for people of the period to feel drawn to a play in which significant roles are played by a young child, who pleads successfully for his life but then, alas, loses it anyway, and his mother, whose maternal feelings find expression in some of the most uncompromising rhetoric Shakespeare ever wrote.

That the play was highly regarded in the period can be concluded from various pieces of evidence, both positive and negative. Heinrich Heine, who, even while ostensibly writing about the play, ignores it almost completely, does nonetheless take pains to include it in its rightful place in his chronological overview of the tragedies. And he mentions by name three different actresses whom he had seen in the role of Constance (Heine 64). Ludwig Tieck, father of Dorothea and moving spirit behind the joint translation project, records his puzzlement at the fact that critics regularly rate *Richard II* less highly than *King John*, thus attesting to the fact that the latter must have had, if not a pre-eminent, then at least a respectable position in the canon at the time (Tieck 103). August Wilhelm Schlegel, the other half of the binomial translator team, chose *King John* as the place to begin a demonstration of philological superiority over Tieck, whose alterations to his translations he deeply resented (Schlegel, “Anmerkungen” 292). Christian Dietrich Grabbe, widely regarded as one of the most important dramatists of the time, who, precisely because of his awareness of his own debt to Shakespeare, distances himself from his model by attacking what he calls “Shakespeareo-manie”, even while decrying the bombast of the play, praises the bastard as one of Shakespeare’s most magnificent creations (Grabbe 432). Elsewhere, he names the play in one breath with *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* as one of Shakespeare’s “größeren Stücken”, major or greater plays (Grabbe 544). Karl Gutzkow, who, though today he is rarely performed and

known only to specialists, enjoyed a very high reputation in the period, modestly says of his production of the play that it was unparalleled for its precision (Gutzkow 400-401). Karl Immermann, who, in addition to his day job as a lawyer and his side-line as a playwright and prose-writer, was briefly the director of the theatre in Düsseldorf, records in his diary not only how he adapted the play in four acts, but also insisted on maintaining it in the repertoire at a time when members of his theatre wished to remove it. And perhaps most tellingly of all, Anna Jameson, the English-language writer whose work on Shakespeare's heroines was so influential in Germany that it was appended to no fewer than two sets of Shakespeare's collected plays, gives undisputed pride of place to *King John*. In the section of her book devoted to figures from the History plays, and hence from European history, three of the six genuinely historical figures come from this play (Jameson II, 190-238). Here it is the aptly named Constance of Brittany who is given special prominence and pole position—a woman who, in Shakespeare, is left with literally nothing but affectionate maternal ambition and the powerful rhetoric it inspires, but whose historical counterpart, when not being buffeted as the pawn of conflicted male egos, was able to rule much more wisely and well than her macho adversaries.

III

It has been established, then, that the “Vormärz” is known for the breadth and depth of its engagement with Shakespeare, and that, in the period, *King John* enjoyed a much higher reputation than it does now. Following the lead of Gary Watt it has been possible to suggest parallels between the “Vormärz” and Brexit, and to see these reflected in various comparable ways in Shakespeare's text. In this connection we have noted that one of the German critics of the “Vormärz” was quoted by a British critic of the Victorian age and quoted again by Watt in the aftermath of Brexit. Together, these considerations would seem to suggest that there might be good grounds for taking a careful look at what important critics of the period have to say about the play. If nothing else, this will shed light on a critical tradition which is acknowledged to be important, but which cannot easily be grasped in its entirety.

The doyen of Shakespeare scholarship, in this regard, is August Wilhelm Schlegel. In the spring of 1808, Schlegel gave a course of lectures in Vienna under the title “Über dramatische Kunst und Literatur” (“On Dramatic Art and Literature”). These lectures appeared in print in 1810; but while this technically puts them before the “Vormärz”, their influence continued to be felt for a long time after that original publication, with a second, revised edition appearing in 1816. Indeed, by a nice coincidence the first English translation appeared at the very beginning of our period, in 1815, while at the end of it, in

1846-47, the lectures were re-published as part of the posthumous *Sämtliche Werke* (*Collected Works*) edited by Eduard Böcking. There are thirty-seven lectures altogether, and they cover the theory and history of Western drama from the Greeks to the followers of Goethe and Schiller, with a brief speculation as to the future of the genre. Schlegel divides his subject matter into three periods, which he calls respectively the classics (“die Alten” Schlegel, *Vorlesung* I 9), neo-classical plays (“ihre Nachahmer” Schlegel, *Vorlesung* I 9) and Romantic ones (“die romantischen Dichter”, Schlegel *Vorlesung* I 9). As befits one of the founders of the discipline of comparative literature, Schlegel’s lectures are European in scope, covering not only the Greeks and the Romans, but also the Italians, the French and the Spanish, before concluding with the Germans. The English theatre features in lectures 25 to 34, between the French and the Spanish, and clearly under the aegis of what Schlegel calls the spirit of the romantic drama (“der Geist des romantischen Schauspiels” Schlegel, *Vorlesung* II 5). After an introduction in which Schlegel characterizes this spirit and compares the Bard with Spanish playwrights, notably Calderon, Shakespeare takes up some ninety pages in a work which in Lohner’s edition is almost exactly 520 pages long. One of the reasons for the disproportion—apart from the fact that, by Schlegel’s own admission, he expanded the Shakespeare sections between the lectures and their publication (Schlegel, *Vorlesung* I 13)—is that he feels the need to write individually about each play.

King John, then, is discussed in lecture 31, which is devoted to the history plays and the *Merry Wives*, and is followed, in the printed text, with an appendix concerned with plays attributed to Shakespeare. This creates the slight impression that these plays are in a sense bringing up the rear, that they fall outside the main event. And yet Schlegel bestows very high praise on them, hailing them as “one of the most valuable of Shakespeare’s works” (Schlegel, *Lectures* 419). The singular is deliberate, for Schlegel regards especially the cycle of plays from *Richard II* to *Richard III* as a single entity, taking the view that: “offenbar hat sie der Dichter alle zu einem großen Ganzen zusammengeordnet, es ist gleichsam ein historisches Heldenedicht in dramatischer Form, wovon die einzelnen Schauspiele die Rhapsodien ausmachen” (Schlegel, *Vorlesung* II 184).²

Together, these plays constitute a lesson in historical verisimilitude and political reality. From them young princes can learn important truths about

die innere Würde ihres angestammten Berufs [...] aber auch die Schwierigkeiten ihrer Lage, die Gefahren der Usurpation, den unvermeidlichen

² Black (419) translates: “the poet evidently intended them to form one great whole. It is, as it were, an historical heroic poem in the dramatic form, of which the separate plays constitute the rhapsodies.”

Fall der Tyrannei, die sich selbst untergräbt, indem sie sich fester gründen will; endlich die verderblichen Folgen von Schwächen, Fehlritten und Verbrechen der Könige für ganze Nationen und auf mehrere Menschenalter hinaus. (Schlegel II 184)³

The political appropriation of these plays is evident here—though whether it is applied to the puppet kings installed by Napoleon, the German princelings who struck deals with him, or the implacable behaviour of the rulers of the German Federation, is a matter for the reader. And although *King John* is not strictly a part of the cycle, being set substantially earlier, the play is presented by Schlegel as a forerunner and epitome. “Im *König Johann*”, he writes, “sind schon alle die politischen und nationalen Motive angegeben, die in den folgenden Stücken eine so große Rolle spielen: Kriege und Friedensschlüsse mit Frankreich; eine Usurpation und die tyrannischen Taten, die sie nach sich zieht; der Einfluß der Geistlichkeit, die Parteiungen der Großen” (Schlegel, *Vorlesung* II 187).⁴ Again, the resonance of this vocabulary—beginning with the zeugma of “political” and “national”—for the times in which Schlegel was writing and being read is unmistakable. Beyond this, it is the cynicism and “commodity” of the Bastard and his ilk which catches Schlegel’s eye. It is as a contrast to this that the scenes with Arthur and Constance are seen as standing out: “Mitten unter so vielen Verkleidungen der wirklichen Gesinnungen und nicht gefühlten Äußerungen macht es einen desto tieferen Eindruck, wenn uns der Dichter die menschliche Natur ohne Hülle zeigt und tiefe Blicke in das Innre der Gemüter werfen läßt” (Schlegel, *Vorlesung* II 188).⁵ And even though John is scarcely a paragon among monarchs, his last moments are presented as metaphysically uplifting: “die letzten Augenblicke Johanns, eines ungerechten und schwachen Fürsten, [...] sind so geschildert, daß sie den Unwillen gegen ihn auslöschen und mit ernsthaften Betrachtungen über die willkürlichen

³ Black (420) translates: “the intrinsic dignity of their hereditary vocation, but [...] also [...] the difficulties of their situation, the dangers of usurpation, the inevitable fall of tyranny, which buries itself under its attempts to obtain a firmer foundation; lastly the ruinous consequences of the weaknesses, errors and crimes of kings, for whole nations, and many subsequent generations.”

⁴ Black (422) translates: “In *King John* all the political and national motives which play so great a part in the following pieces are already indicated: wars and treaties with France; a usurpation, and the tyrannical actions which it draws after it; the influence of the clergy, the fractions of the nobles.”

⁵ Black (423) translates: “When, amidst so many disguises of real sentiments and so much insincerity of expression, the poet shows us human nature without a veil, and allows us to take deep views of the inmost recesses of the mind, the impression produced is only the more deep and powerful.”

Vergehungen und das unvermeidliche Los der Sterblichen erfüllen“ (Schlegel, *Vorlesung* II 188).⁶

With these words, which closely echo Paulin’s summary of Goethe’s response to the play, Schlegel ends his remarks about *King John*. There is a brief postlude, though, when, in an appendix devoted to the doubtful works, Schlegel takes an inclusive view of the Shakespeare canon, opining that works should only be excluded from it on the basis of sound circumstantial evidence. In the light of this, he regards *The Troublesome Reign* as an early work of Shakespeare’s, which he then revisited in his maturity. And with that we get an insight into the philological aspect of Shakespeare criticism which is otherwise not massively present in the lectures.

It is hard to overestimate the influence exerted by Schlegel and his lectures. The speed with which they were translated into English gives some indication of this. And Roger Paulin, in his biography of Schlegel, quotes Böcking to the effect that they were read from “Cadiz to Edinburgh, Stockholm and St Petersburg” (Paulin, *Schlegel* 3). For Heine (19) it would be unjust not to recognize the importance of these lectures. Anna Jameson (I, 68) uses the English translation to launch a feminist diatribe against those who would belittle Shakespeare’s heroines with their faint praise. And in a review of a production of the play under Immermann’s direction in Düsseldorf on 16 April 1835, Grabbe not only makes explicit reference to this lecture, but takes over Schlegel’s view of *King John* as the prologue to the cycle of the histories (Grabbe, “*König Johann*” 542). Moreover his account of Arthur as the “purest [...] pearl of the whole” clearly echoes Schlegel’s view of the character.

Elsewhere, though, Grabbe’s remarks seems to reflect the account of the play by another critic of the time—by that same Franz Horn whose views have also been seen to influence Henry Reed and Gary Watt. Grabbe does not mention Horn; but everything he says about the play—about the number of times John has himself crowned, about the Bastard as a kind of chorus, about the death of the King, even about the relationship between long and short words, was already there in Horn. Heine too relies relatively heavily on his predecessor—and partly for that reason admits in the introduction that he cannot be passed over in silence, and that some of his observations are just (Heine 21-2). Even in the absence of a published translation, then, it can be concluded that Horn was widely read and influential.

Horn too is writing after, and in full knowledge of Schlegel. (He references the lectures in his introduction (Horn, I 33), and later (Horn, 2 198) picks up Schlegel’s phrase about the “innere Würde” of princes). His work is

⁶ Black (423-424) translates: “even the last moments of John—an unjust and feeble prince [...] are yet so portrayed as to extinguish our displeasure with him and fill us with serious considerations on the arbitrary deeds and the inevitable fate of mortals.”

a great deal more expansive than that of his predecessor, running to some 1,500 pages ostensibly on the bard alone. Like Schlegel, Horn focuses his remarks on individual plays, and looks at the history plays chronologically, starting with *King John* and finishing with *Henry VIII*. He does not, however, leave them until last, but starts the sequence in his second part and finishes it in his third—by which time there are still thirteen plays to go. He takes over Schlegel's view of the relationship between *King John* and the *Troublesome Reign*. Like Schlegel, he works comparatively, including equivalent discussions of European theatre. And he follows Schlegel too in making a distinction between the neo-classical and the Romantic. Indeed, it is commensurate with his post-Romantic sensibility that he should lay considerable stress on Shakespeare's genius; that he should refer to Richard the Lionheart as a romantic hero (Horn, 2 191-2); that he should conjure the image of ordinary English sailors enjoying *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*; and that he should ask himself and us what it was in the material of the play that should attract Shakespeare's heart (Horn, 2 193).

The avowed aim of his study, though, is rather different. He devotes the first thirty-five pages to the subject of Shakespeare in Germany, offering an interesting early account of that reception from Johann Elias Schlegel to the translations by the Vosses. In answer to his own rhetorical question about the purpose of his book he indicates that his primary intention had been gently and joyfully to indicate "wie weit wir sind" (Horn, I 40)—whereby the "we" is the Germans and the question of how far they have come refers to Shakespeare studies. There is some ambivalence here about the nature of the metaphor. On the one hand it can refer simply to the idea of a field of knowledge that has to be worked over; but on the other there is more than a hint of the notion of gaining ground in an act of acquisition. Accordingly, a little later, Horn (I 44) writes: "wir wollen streben, daß Shakespeare ganz der unsrige werde"—but in case this striving to ensure that Shakespeare belongs entirely to the Germans should sound too jingoistic, Horn is keen to open the race to all nations, who should all do likewise. The nature of the competition becomes abundantly clear when Horn justifies including an encomium of Goethe's own history play *Götz von Berlichingen* as follows: "denn wenn an uns Deutsche die Frage ergeht: 'was habt ihr durch Shakspeare und mit ihm erreicht?' so zeigen wir mit fröhlichem Stolz zuerst auf diesen Götz und sehen dann wohl mit einigem Muthe umher, hinzusetzend: 'Was habt ihr lieben anderen Europäer zu bieten gegen dieses?'" (Horn, I 19).⁷ From this it also becomes easy to see why the second half of Horn's introduction is devoted to the non-German reception of Shakespeare,

⁷ If the question is asked of us Germans: "What have you achieved through and with Shakespeare?", we will first of all point with glad pride to this Götz, and then, looking round not without courage, will add: "What have you other dear Europeans to offer in comparison?" (My translation)

"Shakspeare im Auslande" (Horn, I 35). What is at stake is the elaboration of a national literature, to be achieved through critical engagement with, and creative responses to, the British national poet.

For this to be possible it is necessary both to establish Shakespeare's credentials *as* a national poet—something Horn does by reminding us of the unschooled love of the English people ("Volk" Horn, I 39) for their bard—and to prize him away from the sphere of narrow nationalism, making him a poet not for a single country, but for the entire earth—or at least that part of it which is receptive to the art of poetry. The equivocation this necessitates is one that is typical for—and indeed may be constitutive of—the entire Brexit discourse. It wishes to be national without being nationalistic; it equivocates fatefully between the global and the national, between the rights of others and its own rights; it muddles the political and the ideological; and it uses the word "we" in a variety of ways that obscure the extent to which it is an instrument of parochial exclusion.

In his account of the play itself, Horn adopts a broad deductive approach whereby the points he wishes to make about *King John* are embedded in a very wide-ranging general discussion. Thus in seeking to reinforce Schlegel's point about the relationship between our play and *The Troublesome Reign*, Horn begins with a section about imperfect works produced by geniuses, and expatiates upon *Titus Andronicus*, Goethe's *Werther*, *The Yorkshire Tragedy*, *The London Prodigal*, and *King Leir* before putting forward the argument that in *King John* Shakespeare was able to correct the defects of his own amazing but imperfect juvenilium. He then embarks on a quasi-comprehensive account of history and historiography, which culminates in an encomium of Shakespeare as someone who was able not only analytically to untangle the knotted skein of history, but also to bring it convincingly to life. In the process he uses the history plays to scotch any suggestion that Shakespeare might have been wild or untamed. But he also presents his own very particular view of the way history works and uses this to reinforce his project of adumbrating a national literature.

Horn's take on the subject is a notably protestant one. He has grudging praise for the extent to which Pandulph has been able to divest himself of his human feelings in the service of the papal idea, but he is in no doubt about how misguided that idea is. His view of the unusually prominent role played in post-classical history by religion, love and women—or to be more precise, by fanaticism, clerical ambition, wantonness and feminine intrigue—is probably rather truer of German drama—notably Goethe's *Götz*, Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* and Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe*—than it is either of history itself or Shakespeare's take on it. Indeed, the link to Schiller is almost audible when Horn (2, 187) actually complements "Liebe" with "weibliche Cabale". In thinking about the relationship between the colossal capital letters of history and the tiny lower case of the individual, Horn is not only addressing one of the

central problems of history plays more generally, but doing so in a way that touches specifically on the fraught issue of the relationship between the personal and the political. And the way he distributes brickbats and awkward plaudits seems specifically designed to set up Shakespeare's history plays (of which *King John*, of course is the first) as a model for a specifically national historiography.

Thus Horn gives half-grudging credit to those who seek to make sources accessible and those who chronicle the events of their times. But he is so dismissive of those who seek to hang history on the cross of their fixed ideas that he loses control of his metaphors. Indeed, he expresses a marked preference for the views of simple English sailors over the quibbling purists of literary criticism or the monomaniacal theoreticians of history. Crucially, and tellingly, he insists on the indispensable necessity of the study of history for all those who do not wish to be "Unfreie", "unfree men" (Horn, 2 189). He notices (2 192) that it is "das freie England" that John submits to the Pope, and insists that the whole point of the play—the "Idee des Ganzen" (Horn, 2 196) is that such subjugation can only ever be temporary: "edle Selbständigkeit eines tüchtigen Volks und rein gesetzliche Freiheit desselben kann nur angetastet, auch wohl für eine Zeit lang erschüttert, nicht aber zertrümmert werden."⁸ It is in this context that he elevates England to the status of the one character in the play that survives unscathed. And it is in this context that he expresses unabashed envy of the English for having such an unexcelled teacher to draw out for them the lessons of their national history. Yet even here, even while quoting Faulconbridge's jingoistic last words, Horn equivocates. "Aber Shakspeare", he writes, "ist unendlich mehr als Faulconbridge, und die Leser und Zuschauer sollen es auch seyn;—sie sollen nicht stehen bleiben bei England zu Anfange des vierzehnten Jahrhunderts oder bei England überhaupt, sondern sich erheben zur reinen Ansicht eines Staats, eines Volks" (Horn, 2 197).⁹ Especially given the existence of Watt's xenophobic and small-minded "Bastards", it is tempting to argue that the whole Brexit debate turns on the delicate question of what might be meant here by a "pure view" of a nation state. By the same token, in noting the discrepancy between word and deed, between ideal and reality, Horn touches on an aspect of politics that was particularly in evidence in his own time as it is in ours. And in his insistence that the nation, provided it remains united, will ultimately survive the vicissitudes of the political process, he is expressing a hope that applies

⁸ Horn 2, 196. "The noble sovereignty of a diligent nation and the purely judicial freedom of the same can only be infringed, even, I daresay, temporarily undone, but never utterly destroyed." (My translation)

⁹ "But Shakespeare is infinitely more than Faulconbridge, and the readers and spectators should be too; they should not get hung up on England at the start of the fourteenth century, or even England at all, but raise themselves up to the pure view of a state, a people." (My translation)

equally to a state that has yet to be formed as to one which will have to refashion itself after the crisis of Brexit.

Having thus elucidated what it was in the story of King John that appealed to Shakespeare’s intellect, he turns his attention to matters of the heart. And he builds up to his discussion of Arthur and Constance by claiming, persuasively but not quite accurately,¹⁰ that, Shakespeare never repeated himself, either in his characterization or in his depiction of what Horn (2 203) calls “die heiligsten Gemüths- und Lebensverhältnisse”, the holiest relations of affection and circumstance. The remark is used as a stick with which to beat some very distinguished writers, both German and English, of whom there are so many that Horn needs cite only Byron and Scott (Horn, 2 203). In a similar way he deprecates the depiction of “die meisten Mütter in unseren Romanen und Dramen” (most mothers in our novels and dramas) (2 205) who have a besetting tendency to protest too much. And he reserves some of his richest rhetoric for the condemnation of the way young people are portrayed in German novels and plays. Shakespeare’s Arthur, by contrast, miraculously manages to avoid being embarrassing—not least because the first words he is given to utter ring so true. Thus is it not only in the inferences that he draws from the messiness of politics that Shakespeare can teach German writers how to build a national literature—but also in the way he manages pathos.

In his volume in the *Critical Tradition* series, Joseph Candido includes only one German author, apart from Schlegel, from the period between 1815 and 1848—and that is a man called Hermann Ulrici. The date Candido gives is 1846—which is the date on which Ulrici’s first book on Shakespeare—or the first version of his book on Shakespeare—was translated into English. That book was called *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Art and His Relation to Calderon and Goethe* and was a version by A.J.W. Morrison of a book that had appeared in German in 1839. Shortly after the appearance of that translation, though, a new version appeared in German. From this Calderon has been excized, though Goethe is retained. A third edition appeared in 1868, and a fourth in 1874, all under the title *Shakespeare’s dramatische Kunst. Geschichte und Charakteristik des Shakspeareschen Dramas*. A new English translation, from the third edition, by Dora L. Schmitz, appeared in 1876 and was reprinted in 1889 and 1909, all under the title *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Art. History and Character of Shakespeare’s Plays*.¹¹ From this plethora of publication details four important

¹⁰ For me, one of the most intriguing things about the play is the way in which it anticipates famous moments from elsewhere in Shakespeare, such as the blinding of Gloucester, the murder of Macduff’s children and the attempted murder of Fleance, or the notorious asides of Richard of Gloucester.

¹¹ It will be from this translation that I quote here, with the aim of looking beyond the “Vormärz”—though the original belongs firmly to that period.

facts can be deduced: that this work, even in its first version, belongs to the period after Victoria actually ascended the throne; that it outlives the “Vormärz” and lives on into the period of German unification; that it was influential both in Britain and in Germany; and that, having begun as a comparison between three literatures and hence a European project, it then becomes merely bi-lateral: an instrument of the co-operation and rivalry between the Britain and Germany that characterized the period before, and ultimately led to, the First World War.

As with Schlegel and Horn, Ulrici’s is an ambitious and compendious work. It begins with an overview of the history of the English theatre up to Shakespeare’s time. This is succeeded by a consideration of Shakespeare’s life and his age, and of his style as compared with the art of his time. There follows, in the Schlegel manner, a discussion of the individual plays, divided, as is now customary, into tragedies, comedies, and histories, whereby the Roman plays are included under the latter category. After that comes a discussion of the apocryphal plays—including *The Troublesome Reign*, which Ulrici is inclined to regard as not by Shakespeare, though certain scenes seem to him to be in Shakespeare’s manner. And that in turn is followed, as in Schlegel, by a consideration of the history of Shakespearean drama in England and Germany and a special account of the relationship between Shakespeare and the two authors who in the meanwhile have attained pre-eminent status in the German theatrical pantheon: Goethe and Schiller.

Ulrici follows Schlegel too, in seeing the English history plays as a cycle inaugurated by *King John*. The fact that he includes the Roman plays in a broader cycle, though, enables him to mark a decided shift of emphasis. Placing *Titus Andronicus* at the end of the first part of the cycle allows him to conclude: “So the cycle closes in a truly historical spirit by gently pointing to the new glory of European humanity, which was to be developed within the sphere of the Germanic family of nations” (Ulrici, *Shakspeare’s dramatische Kunst* 184). His remarks on the English cycle are infused by the same spirit: “From the important reign of King John—to which England owes her Magna Charta, the fundamental law of her whole constitution—English history is carried down to the days of Henry III, in whose reign we have the regeneration of the nation and the beginning of a more definite development in the spirit of modern political life” (Ulrici, *Shakspeare’s dramatische Kunst* 184). As in Horn, the nation is actually England, but not exclusively so: “Here too accordingly the whole cycle shows us the principal moments of the political life and progressive history of England, in which are reflected the fundamental features of the historical development of the European nations down to Shakespeare’s own day” (Ulrici, *Shakspeare’s dramatische Kunst* 184). In this scenario, *King John* represents the Middle Ages, and the medieval state is characterized by two conflicting principles, represented by the feudal system and the Catholic Church respectively: “It developed partly out of the deeply-rooted tendency of the

Germanic mind towards *unlimited personal* freedom, partly upon the basis of ethical ideas and of the general view of life entertained by *Christianity* as conceived by the spirit of the Age." For Ulrici, this battle between the Church and State is the essence of John's vacillation: "The Relation between Church and State is the pulse of the whole historical action; John's dilemmas, his degradation and his death are its work" (Ulrici, *Shakspeare's dramatische Kunst* 216). And the result is a victory for the former, a defeat of the typically nefarious combination of the French and the Pope: "The result of the disturbances and struggles is the freedom of the English people; it is established inwardly by the overthrow of John's despotic government, outwardly by the victory over France and over the pretensions of the Church. [...] The rivalry of the Church against the State, and its endeavour to obtain external power and dominion proves its own ruin" (Ulrici, *Shakspeare's dramatische Kunst* 218). Yet Ulrici does not leave it there, but provides a kind of coda couched in manifestly Hegelian vocabulary: "Both [Church and State] are rather forms of the moral ethico-religious spirit, and [...] therefore neither Church nor State can accomplish anything *without*, much less *against* the moral force, let the latter appear externally ever so powerless" (Ulrici, *Shakspeare's dramatische Kunst* 218). Just how far this moral spirit is a foul emanation of heteropatriarchy then becomes clear when Ulrici, in a clearly Victorian riposte to Anna Jameson, detects its workings in the fate of Constance and Arthur too: "Their story may be said to form a pendant to the more fundamental moral of the play: that nothing is more disavowed by history than passionateness and want of self-control, the hereditary failings of woman's nature. Women ought not to interfere with history, as history demands action, for which they are essentially unfit" (Ulrici, *Shakspeare's dramatische Kunst* 219).

IV

The moral of the play, of course, is nothing of the kind; and one can only imagine what it must have been like for L. Dora Schmitz to have to render this farrago of offensive nonsense into English. Nor I think is it an accident that the person who wrote this also envisaged a bright future for a European humanity developed within the Germanic family of nations. Ulrici, then, is, in Watt's terms, irredeemably a bastard—a bastard, moreover, who demonstrated with chilling clarity where such bastardy comes from and where it leads. Yet some of his arguments are simply an extension of those put forward by Horn. On the other hand, reading Horn, even with the sharpened sensibilities of hindsight, it is hard not to agree that many of his perceptive observations are indeed worthy of imitation—and to agree with the broad thrust of his remarks not only about Shakespeare as a national poet—but also about the shortcomings of his

compatriots. This striving for betterment in the company and following the example of others has something of a saving grace about it. Schlegel, though, the foolishly inclusive Schlegel, who opened the door of the Shakespeare canon to anyone with a halfway valid reason for entry, at least deserves our respect for seeing Shakespeare in a properly European perspective. For the loss of that perspective is precisely one of the corollaries of Ulrici's descent into Bastardy. At the same time, the issues addressed by all three authors—the weaknesses, mistakes and crimes of the powerful, and their effect both on the nation directly afflicted with them, and on others; the issue of national sovereignty and its relationship to the fellowship of nations; the struggle against arguably alien ways of thinking; the dividing line between necessary compromise and rank betrayal; the dilemma of choice and the poisoned chalice of democratic freedom; the teaching and the teachings of history and their relation to politics and ideology; even sexism, sentimentality and the cult of the child: all these issues are as pertinent in the age of Trump and Brexit as they were when first addressed in regard to *King John* in the “Vormärz”.

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