”I AM REGARDED AS A KIND OF ENGLISHMAN” – A TRANSLITERARY HISTORY OF KIERKEGAARD

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Abstract
Although the Danish Golden Age is celebrated as a period of autochthonous genius, the success of a Danish author during the reign of critic Johan Ludvig Heiberg depended on his or her ability to appropriate the literary modes of Europe's geographic center, i.e., France and, above all, Germany, the Goethean notion of *Bildung* being especially important here. Eager to ingratiate himself to Heiberg, the young Kierkegaard, in his review *From the Papers of One Still Living* and the second volume of his novel *Either/Or*, strove to prove himself a proficient critic and practitioner of the *Bildungsroman*. After Heiberg's dismissive criticism of *Either/Or*, however, Kierkegaard (as Joakim Garff argues) abandoned the *Bildung* paradigm. Instead of depicting characters who become integrated with their social milieu like Goethe's Wilhelm Meister and Kierkegaard's own Judge Wilhelm, Kierkegaard now turned his attention to exceptional isolates such as Abraham and Job, who appear in *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*, respectively. Among these radical outsiders, one might also include Shakespeare's Gloucester (Richard III), who is cited as an example of the Bard's mastery in *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard's sudden enthusiasm for Shakespeare—which first arose with *Fear and Trembling* and would persist throughout his pseudonymous authorship—is hardly coincidental; rather, I argue, it was part of a concerted effort to both rebuff Heiberg and to distinguish himself from him, since the professor had written disparagingly about English literature in general and Shakespeare in particular in his *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*. Furthermore, I claim that Kierkegaard turned to Britain not merely as a geographic periphery but also, in the case of authors such as Byron, Defoe, Ossian, Percy Shelley, Swift, and Young, as a psychological periphery running counter to the Apollonian concept of *Bildung* propagated by Heiberg.

Keywords
Danish Golden Age; British literature; comparative literature; philosophy

Introduction

Although the Danish Golden Age is celebrated as a period of autochthonous genius, Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791-1860), Denmark's supreme arbiter of taste in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, defined an author's success according to his or her ability to appropriate the literary modes of Europe's geographical center, namely, France and, above all, Germany, the Goethean notion of *Bildung* being of especial importance to him. Eager to ingratiate himself to the powerful Heiberg, the young Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) held Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875) to the standards of the Bildungsroman in his review of the novel *Only a Fiddler*

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(1837), entitled *From the Papers of One Still Living* (1838) (Garff, 2006, 89). What is more, Kierkegaard strove to prove himself a proficient – though somewhat idiosyncratic – practitioner of the Bildungsroman in his *Either/Or* (1843). In the introduction to *Either/Or*, the editorial pseudonym Victor Eremita implicitly encourages the reader to interpret the book as a Bildungsroman when he suggests that the aesthete A and the ethical pseudonym, Judge Wilhelm, may be one and the same person at two stages of his development (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 1, 13). As Joakim Garff has argued, Kierkegaard abandoned the Bildungsroman paradigm after Heiberg's dismissive criticism of *Either/Or*. Instead of creating characters who become integrated with their social milieu like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) Wilhelm Meister and Kierkegaard's own Judge Wilhelm, Kierkegaard now turned his attention to exceptional isolates such as Abraham and Job, who appear in *Fear and Trembling* (1843) and *Repetition* (1843), respectively (2006, 96-97).

Among these radical outsiders, one might also include William Shakespeare's (1564-1616) Gloucester, otherwise known as Richard III, who is cited as an example of the Bard's mastery in *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard's sudden enthusiasm for Shakespeare, which first arose in earnest with *Fear and Trembling* and would persist throughout his pseudonymous authorship, is hardly coincidental. Rather, I argue, it was part of a concerted effort both to rebuff Heiberg and to distinguish himself from him, since the professor had written disparagingly about English literature in general and Shakespeare in particular in his treatise *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age* (1833). After showering the Spanish playwright Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681) with praise as "a didactic poet", who offers his reader philosophy *qua* literature, Heiberg writes,

> Certain critics have in our time regarded Shakespeare as a similar poetic representative of humanity. It would be odd if England, which has never been rooted in anything but finite undertakings and whose literary history does not have a single speculative mind to its name, should in a single individual have been raised so high above itself. But this is not the case: Shakespeare was all too national not to be a realist insofar as a great poet can be. Interesting character portrayals, remarkable events which awaken wonder and fear, psychological and historical memorabilia are the objects in which he loses himself. . . . Our wonder of Shakespeare is certainly justified, but it can be exaggerated; and to make his works the Bible of poetry is both laughable and inexcusable in an age which possesses a much greater poet. (Heiberg, 2005, 111)

Here Heiberg is probably referring to Goethe, whom he ranks with G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) as "undoubtedly the two greatest men the modern age has produced" (Heiberg, 2005, 107). After having his *Either/Or* so rudely dismissed, Kierkegaard would come to disagree with Heiberg about the supposed superiority of Goethe over Shakespeare. Seconding Garff, Jon Stewart and Katalin Nun have also pointed out how Kierkegaard openly attacks Goethe in the pseudonymous works subsequent to *Either/Or* (2006, 96-97; 2008, 58). But rather than dwelling on how Heiberg's review provoked a negative reaction from Kierkegaard, I propose instead to investigate the way in which it positively oriented Kierkegaard towards Anglophone literature. Although Kierkegaard could not read these texts in the original English and most

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often resorted to German translations, this body of literature nonetheless exerted a considerable influence on his mature authorship, as the following transliterary history will demonstrate. Being a geographical periphery, Britain offered an alternative to the mainstream Continental models propagated by Heiberg, that is, the French and the German. But what made certain Anglophone authors, such as George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824), Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), James Macpherson (Ossian) (1736-1796), Shakespeare, Percy Shelley (1792-1822), Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), and Edward Young (1683-1765), especially attractive to Kierkegaard was their ability to delineate a psychological periphery, one which ran counter to the Apollonian concept of *Bildung* so beloved by Heiberg.

Shakespeare

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that Kierkegaard considered England (and the English themselves) as a psychological periphery. After being caricatured in the pages of *The Corsair*, a Copenhagen satirical newspaper, Kierkegaard found himself being ridiculed on the streets during the once-beloved walks he habitually took through his native city. When the mockery persisted, Kierkegaard wrote in his journal, "This is actually how I am treated in Copenhagen. I am regarded as a kind of Englishman, a half-mad eccentric, whom every damned one of us, from the most aristocratic to guttersnipes, imagines he can have a bit of fun with" (as cited in Garff, 2005, 570).

As the *ne plus ultra* of English poetry, Shakespeare offers a prime example of how English poets engage with the psychological extremities supposedly endemic to their country. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes de Silentio writes of the demonic,

> In that kind of thing, Shakespeare is and remains a hero. The horrible demoniac, the most demonic figure Shakespeare has depicted but also depicted in a matchless way – Gloucester (later Richard III) – what made him into a demoniac? Apparently his inability to bear the sympathy heaped upon him from childhood. His monologue in the first act of *Richard III* [1597] has more value than all the systems of morality, which have no intimation of the nightmares of existence or of their explanation (Kierkegaard, 1983, 105).

Whereas Heiberg criticized Shakespeare for focusing on the psychological, the particular, and the concrete, for Kierkegaard's Johannes de Silentio, it is precisely this accent on multifarious existence – and not speculative ideality – that earns Shakespeare this unreserved praise. For instance, when Kierkegaard's Frater Taciturnus of *Stages on Life's Way* (1845) reflects on the infamous wooing scene in *Richard III*, in which Gloucester seduces the wife of his murdered brother, the pseudonym rejects the possibility that the duke is motivated by rational, political concerns. Taciturnus argues instead that Gloucester is acting out of sheer demonical defiance against the ideality of social and linguistic systems. He writes that he, Gloucester, "the injured one, he, the cripple, he, the desperate one, he, the devil, wanted to demonstrate despite language and all the laws of life, that he could be loved" (Kierkegaard, 1988, 352). Thus, the *Fear and Trembling* pseudonym Johannes de Silentio stresses, "Natures such as Gloucester's cannot be saved by mediating them into an idea of society" (Kierkegaard, 1983, 106). In other words, the

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supreme rationality of the Hegelian system is unable to account for or remedy the radical evil of a Richard III, who enigmatically resolves in his opening monologue,

> And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover
> To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
> I am determined to prove a villain
> And hate the idle pleasures of these days (Shakespeare, 2009, 136).

Hegel himself, therefore, misinterprets this historical tragedy when he in his *Aesthetics* erroneously groups Gloucester with Macbeth, Goneril, and Regan as "individuals [who] are shipwrecked on a power confronting them which they had deliberately defied in the pursuit of their own private ends" (Hegel, 1975, 1230). While Hegel is right to assert that Macbeth, Goneril, and Regan all fall to worldly ambition, he is wrong to claim the same for Gloucester. As Johannes de Silentio attests, a moral systematician cannot elucidate the duke's notorious opening monologue. To suggest, as Hegel does, that Gloucester is rationally motivated by the superficiality of finite goods – and not irrationally pledged to infinite evil in a pact with the demonic – is to offer up a banal misreading of the play.

Throughout his authorship, Kierkegaard would turn again and again to Shakespeare as an author who depicted – but did not define – existence in all of its complexity, a complexity that precludes any sort of manmade system. As the Kierkegaardian pseudonym Johannes Climacus famously writes in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), "A system of existence [*Tilværelsens System*] cannot be given. Is there, then, not such a system? That is not at all the case. Neither is this implied in what has been said. Existence itself is a system – for God, but it cannot be a system for any existing [*existerende*] spirit" (Kierkegaard, 1992, 118). This skepticism towards systematic thought is, of course, a hallmark of what would become known as existentialism. In this sense, I argue that Kierkegaard found in Shakespeare and other Anglophone authors the robust existential orientation that he had sought for in vain in other literatures. This body of texts provided a formidable counterweight to the wispy ideality of German romanticism.

In the secondary literature on Kierkegaard's reading of Anglophone authors, scholars have devoted the most pages to Shakespeare, unsurprisingly. First, the Dane Johannes Sløk published his (1972). In the United States, Gene Fendt and Michael G. Bielmeier have each published a book (1998; 2000). The two comprehensive articles on this subject, James E. Ruoff's (1968) and Joel D. S. Rasmussen's (2009) both advert to the following passage from Kierkegaard's journals of 1844:

> Danish philosophy – should there ever be talk of such a thing – will differ from German philosophy in that in no wise will it begin with nothing or without any presupposition, or explain everything by mediating, since it begins, on the contrary, with the proposition that there are many things between heaven and earth which no philosophy has explained (as cited in Rasmussen, 2009, 187).

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Both Ruoff and Rasmussen correctly identify the end of this passage as a paraphrase of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), one that serves as a refutation of "German philosophy", namely that of Hegel (1968, 347-348; 2009, 187). However, neither scholar rigorously pursues the broader implications of the fact that Kierkegaard built his program for a domestic philosophy on an English fundament. I plan to return to this point in the conclusion of my paper, but first I will survey the vital connection between Kierkegaard and another major British poet, Lord Byron.

Byron

To my knowledge, there are at least four articles devoted to Kierkegaard and Byron: Frederick Shilstone's (1989) and Bartholomew Ryan's (2009), as well as my two articles (2014; 2015). This latter article is based on a chapter of my master's thesis (2015). The article and the chapter claim that Kierkegaard emulated the narrator of *Don Juan* in a number of respects: first of all, the Climacus of the *Postscript*, like the narrator, is skeptical of philosophical systems (Kierkegaard, 1992, 13; Byron, 1996, 471); secondly, Climacus prefers the existential philosophy of Socrates to the systematic philosophy of Plato, as does the narrator (Kierkegaard, 1992, 205; Byron, 1996, 75); and thirdly, the narrator exhibits what Kierkegaard praises in his dissertation (in the context of Socrates and Shakespeare) as "controlled irony" (Kierkegaard, 1989, 324-329), an element which, he argues, is lacking in the German romantics, namely, Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853), and K. W. F. Solger (1780-1819). Kierkegaard even subtly reveals that he associates Byron with controlled irony in a passage of his dissertation. He writes, "The ironist is the vampire who has sucked the blood of the lover and while doing so has fanned him cool, lulled him to sleep, and tormented him with troubled dreams" (Kierkegaard, 1989, 49). Byron became associated with the figure of the vampire throughout Europe after his personal physician, John William Polidori (1795-1821), published a tale entitled *The Vampyre* (1819), since the titular character possessed the Byronic qualities of nobility, mobility, and seductiveness (Macdonald & Scherf, 2008, 11-15). Polidori's text was based on a fragment that Byron had started for the famous ghost story competition at the Villa Diodati in the summer of 1816. In fact, when it was published in England, *The Vampyre* was actually attributed to Byron (Macdonald & Scherf, 2008, 10-11). In spite of this misattribution, Kierkegaard's edition of *Lord Byron's sämmtliche Werke* does not contain a translation of Polidori's *The Vampyre*, but instead includes a German rendering of Byron's fragment (Byron, 1839), the very one which inspired Polidori's tale. Based on this archival evidence, it follows that Kierkegaard could indeed be invoking the ironist Byron with his ironist vampire.

There is yet another affinity between the narrator of Byron's *Don Juan* and the Climacus of the *Postscript* which has not been addressed. Whereas the romanticist Schlegel earns Kierkegaard's ire in the dissertation for seeking eternal youth through a series of self-willed metamorphoses, the narrator and Climacus, on the other hand, evince a proper existential orientation towards death in that, at a mere thirty years of age, they both sense their imminent senescence (Byron, 1996, 99; Kierkegaard, 1992, 186). Kierkegaard, who believed that he would die before his thirty-fourth birthday, would have considered this orientation to be Anglophone literature's infinite merit, whereas Heiberg, conversely, found it morbidly perverse. In his review of Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, which appeared in the literary yearbook *Urania*,

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Heiberg somewhat obtusely takes issue with the author's concept of repetition, which he compares unfavorably to that of Goethe. He writes,

> As one works nature's repetitions into something new and different, this sympathy with nature is one of the primary clues to the true wisdom of life; it is the foundation for all admonishments to enjoy life and to keep young despite the toll of years.
> No one has felt this more deeply than Goethe (as cited in Hong & Hong, 1983, 382).

According to Heiberg, in Goethe's *Aus meinem Leben, Dichtung, und Wahrheit* (1811-1833), the German titan contrasts his own salubrious understanding of repetition with

> the hypochondria he described, namely, the acquaintance Germany had just made with melancholy English literature, and he mentions in this connection Young ("Night Thoughts"), Gray, Milton, and Ossian, the last of whom played such a significant role in *Werther*.
> Those golden words embrace the whole dialectic of repetition (as cited in Hong & Hong, 1983, 383).

As he was eager to distance himself from Heiberg, Kierkegaard turned to this "melancholy" Anglophone literature in translation. Not only did these texts share his looming concern with death; they also represented a domain of literature that had not been co-opted by the Heibergian literati. Kierkegaard would repeatedly revisit the unfashionable English pantheon as a place where he could rejoice in his status as, in the words of his pseudonym Climacus, "an outsider in literature" (Kierkegaard, 1992, 185).

Conclusion

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of the paraphrase of *Hamlet* from the journals of 1844, in which Kierkegaard first imagines a distinctly Danish philosophy. Anticipating Kierkegaard's assault on German intellectual hegemony in the form of the *Postscript*, this entry is indeed portentous. In his Shakespearean epistemological skepticism, Kierkegaard adopts a philosophical agnosticism that is at odds with the positive systematicians, Hegel, foremost of all. For Heiberg, Shakespeare's unsystematic depiction of existence was a demerit; indeed, it barred him from being considered a "speculative poet", i.e. a philosopher. For Kierkegaard, on the other hand, it was precisely this philosophical agnosticism that made Shakespeare a thinker worthy of his attention. One need only read the description of Socrates (470-399 BC) in Kierkegaard's magister dissertation to learn that negativity – the infinite negativity of irony – is a defensible philosophical position for him, and, in fact, Kierkegaard approvingly cites Shakespeare as an example of "controlled irony" in his final chapter (Kierkegaard, 1989, 324). Thus, Kierkegaard employs Hamlet's lines "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (Shakespeare, 2006, 225) not merely to theorize what Danish philosophy ought to be but to project his own future authorship onto the Bard's verses. As a hybrid somewhere between a fictional memoir and a philosophical tome, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is the realization of Kierkegaard's Shakespearean vision of a Danish

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philosophy. It remains an open question as to what shape this book would have taken without the promptings of Hamlet, but, as this transliterary history suggests, geographically peripheral Anglophone literature undoubtedly had a profound influence on Kierkegaard, this latter-day "melancholy Dane".

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