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SHAKESPEARE AND HERO IN THE ROMANTIC AGE

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ABSTRACT: *This paper is an attempt to answer this question through looking at the English Romantic period which is often credited with the return of Shakespeare to the stage. Within this paper, I suggest that Romantic Shakespearean criticism was conceived in opposition to that of its predecessor, not only because of changes in cultural and literary meaning of a poet, but also because of contemporary political conflicts which allowed the Romantic poets to create and celebrate an image of Napoleon in order to help to unite and, in the process, to define their conception of a hero and a poet.*

KEYWORDS: Romantic Shakespeare, Napoleon, Coleridge, Hazlitt, the French Revolution

INTRODUCTION

As the late eighteenth century developed, the interest in Shakespeare shifted from Shakespeare as a classical English writer to a national poet (Prince 277-94). Shakespeare permeated the plays of this age to an extent not seen before. Naturally Samuel Johnson, in the preface of his edition of Shakespeare's plays (1765), abandoned the earlier practice of criticizing Shakespeare for not adhering to the neoclassical tragic theory, claiming that he is "above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life" (Johnson iii). As Jonathan Bate notes, for Johnson, Shakespeare was "the great exception, the genius who snatched a grace beyond the reach of art" (Bate 8). Nevertheless, for Johnson, like his predecessors, Shakespeare was not set up as an ideal, because he still had much "faults sufficient to obscure and overwhelm any other merit" (Johnson xix).

In the age of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, and William Hazlitt, unlike Johnson who saw Shakespeare as a genius unconscious of his powers, Shakespeare began to be regarded as a conscious artist who worked according to an organic principle that was deeper than consciousness. For example, to Coleridge, who wrote that Shakespeare "studied patiently, meditated deeply, understood minutely, till knowledge become habitual and intuitive, wedding itself to his habitual feelings, and at length gave birth to that stupendous power, by which he [stood] alone, with no equal or second in his class," Shakespeare was a conscious artist (Taylor 19-20). To Lamb, who argued that Shakespeare's tragedies could not be contained in a theatre, because they were beyond human grasp, the plays suffered when they were presented on the stage (Lamb, *On the Tragedies of Shakespeare* (1811)). Hazlitt, on the contrary, realised that appreciation of Shakespeare on the stage depended simply on the quality of the actors and their representation of the text. However, he was on the same side as Coleridge for Shakespeare was "thoroughly a master of the mixed motives of human character" and his tragedies were "the most impassioned species" of poetry (Hazlitt 5: 5). Naturally, for the later Romantics, Shakespeare's works were believed as "the phenomena of nature…which [were] to be studied with entire submission of [their] own faculties" (Quincey 430-4). Scholars have recognised that this shift from classic to Romantic represents

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difference between their emphases on Shakespeare from the child of nature to the conscious artist.

The most important Shakespearean criticism of the Romantic period was, likewise, written for manifesting Shakespeare's genius as a poet and the imaginative power requisite for a great dramatist. This shift is bound with a changing conception of nature and with the movement, discerned by M. H. Abraham, from mimetic to expressive models of art, from "mirror to lamp" (Bate 8). For example, while Johnson praised Shakespeare for his drama was "the mirrour of life," Thomas Carlyle wrote that Shakespeare was "an eye to us all; a blessed heaven-sent Bringer of Light" (Carlyle 111-2). Furthermore, Carlyle, noting that Shakespeare's plays ranked high in general repute amongst the dramatic productions of his day, asserted that "this Shakespeare is ours; we produced him, we speak and think by him; we are of one blood and kind with him" (114).

Whereas the late eighteenth-century Shakespearean criticism was thought to be derived by French rationalist criticism, especially Voltaire's, most Romantic critics' reception of Shakespeare as a conscious artist at first grew out of German Romanticism. In fact, anti-French neo-classicism and German ideals were already dominant amongst English men of letters and intellectuals by the late eighteenth century. There is much truth to this account of the shift in Shakespearean criticism. However, it is incomplete, unless we consider the contemporary political events which considerably influenced the minds of English Romantic poets. For example, Percy Bysshe Shelley, who asserted in his succinct statement that the 1789 French Revolution was "the master theme of the epoch," recommended the Revolution as a "theme involving pictures of all that is best suited to interest and to instruct mankind," and made it as the master theme of his own epic poem (Shelly 504; 508). In this sense, it is not surprising that critical studies have been made to explain how their critical and poetical practices responded to the contemporary political events like the French Revolution. Despite this, it seems strange that whereas scholarly attention has been given to explain how Shakespeare and his language affected the Romantic poets' critical and poetic practices, relatively little critical attention have been focused on the ways in which their critical and poetical practices, which stressed the centrality of the current political events, influenced their Shakespeare criticism.

When Shakespeare likewise became the object not only of intense literary criticism, but also of political caricature, topical paintings in the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, it was because of Shakespeare could not be separated from eighteenth-century English politics. In what follows, I will examine the connections between the appropriation of Shakespeare and eighteenth-century politics. More specifically, my paper will argue that change perceptions of Napoleon reflected the contemporaries' contradictory attitudes towards Shakespeare as the universal genius and the national hero.

Coleridge's outlook

R. A. Foakes's and Jonathan Bate's works provide for a useful insight into our reading of the English Romantic Shakespearean criticism in the context of politics (Foakes 140-51; Bate, "The Politics of Romantic Shakespearean Criticism" 357-82). As Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Hazlitt were heavily affected by contemporary political conflicts, without political reading of Romantic Shakespearean criticism, our understanding of the English Romantic Shakespearean criticism is inconclusive.

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We cannot tell how critics' stated political views in poems related to the implied views in their Shakespearean criticism. Nevertheless, if we consider how the Romantic poets' political views were formed and changed, then we can understand how contemporary politics and Shakespearean criticism interacted. In this regard, it is no coincidence that Napoleon found his place in Shakespearean criticism by the Romantic critics, at a time when the Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Hazlitt, were all obsessed by the historical figure of Napoleon. It is during this period that Napoleon, what Hazlitt calls "the fearful and imposing reality," was (re)presented through newspapers, anecdotes, essays, and other public and private writings, just as Shakespeare was liberally quoted (Bainbridge 8). Therefore, it seems reasonable to argue that this attempt to read representations of Napoleon Bonaparte by the English Romantic critics, especially by Coleridge and Hazlitt, can illustrate the extent to which contemporary political debates—triggered by the French Revolution—affected the English Romantic critics' reading of Shakespeare.

When the war against France was resumed in the summer of 1803, Wordsworth expressed his political and patriotic sentiment in his poem, borrowing Shakespeare's name:

> Must we be free or die, who speak the tongue
>
> Which SHAKESPEARE spake; the faith and moral hold
>
> Which MILTON held. In every thing we are sprung
>
> Of earth's first blood, have titles manifold (Wordsworth 30).

Unlike his earlier poetical works in which he condemned "dark satanic mills" of the first industrial Revolution and celebrated the countryside and rural life, in this poem we see that Wordsworth was inspired by the conflicts with Napoleon rather than his Nature (Blake 94). If such political events were so overwhelming that Wordsworth had to write a series of patriotic poems, he must have had traces of his encounter with political pressure in his Shakespearean criticism. In this sense, it is important to see that previously, as seen in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), Wordsworth sought to keep poetical writings free from political contamination or other literary fashion of the age:

> [To] endeavour to produce or enlarge this capability [being excited without the application of grow and violent stimulation] is one of the best services in which, at any period, a Writer can be engaged; but this service, excellent at all times, is especially so at the present day. For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the encreasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves. The invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse (Wordsworth xv-xvi).

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However, in practice, Wordsworth seems not to have been free from "the national great events" of the age (Wordsworth xv). In a similar way, Coleridge cited Wordsworth's poem in his criticism on Shakespeare's poem. Although his focus is entirely drawn to Shakespeare's poetical imagination, we can see that Coleridge's quotation of Wordsworth is derived from political sentiments of the post-Waterloo years, given that he writes that Shakespeare's "creative power, and the intellectual energy wrestle as in a war embrace," and "O what great men hast thou produced, England! my country" (Coleridge 2:19-20)! Although the anti-French Shakespeare did not appear uniformly during this period, Shakespeare, Frans De Bruyn notes, "greatly outnumbers other writers as a sources of citations in the Anti-Jacobin" Bruyn 310). It is hardly surprising that the frequent use of decontextualized quotations from Shakespearean words were familiar to the contemporaries. For example, during the same year as Wordsworth wrote the poem, the magazine *London and Paris* printed a parody with the title "Buonaparte's Soliloquy at Calais," using Shakespeare's words:

> To go, or not to go? That is the question;
>
> —Whether 'tis better for my views to suffer
>
> The ease and quiet of yon hated rival
>
> Or to take arms against the haughty people,
>
> And by invading and them (Bate, *Shakespearean Constitution* 106).

Quoting Shakespeare, especially *Hamlet*, was not uncommon during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when it was a common practice to quote Shakespeare on all manner of occasions, including personal letters, eulogies, dedications, and biographies (Young 23). Given the examples of quoting Shakespeare liberally in a political context, it is difficult not to think that contemporary poet's political views should contribute to the establishment of Romantic reading of Shakespeare.

Of contemporary political and military events the central event was, indeed, the French Revolution. In the process of the revolution and imperialism, Napoleon stood out as a central figure. It is hardly difficult to find that the British Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Hazlitt, either from their political allegiance of the revolution or support of count-revolutionary reaction, referred to Napoleon in their critical and poetical works. For example, the English Romantic writers, according to their fascination or disillusionment with Napoleon, saw him as a "heroic of romance," a "fugitive and a usurper," or a "popular Dictator, full of enterprise, genius and military experience" (Bainbridge 23). This changed view is also well reflected in Coleridge. Coleridge at first acknowledged Napoleon's genius, his power as a conqueror like Alexander the Great, and his enormous ability, and, therefore, defined him as "the splendour of a hero in romance" (Coleridge, *Essays* 1; 717). As Napoleon swept through Europe, and turned himself into an emperor, Coleridge's view changed. In his day-to-day perception of the career of Napoleon, he attacked Napoleon as a mere criminal or wicked monster (Coleridge, *Collected Notebooks* 3845). At the worst, Coleridge used Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* as a means of embodying Napoleon's wickedness, and regarded him as an enemy of the human race (Bainbridge 112-3).

On the other hand, as R. A. Foakes's edition of Coleridge on Shakespeare, which includes Coleridge's works chronologically, shows, Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare also shifted gradually from rejection of the image of Shakespeare as an uneducated child of nature,

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working purely by inspiration in an age "struggling to emerge from barbarity," as Johnson put it, to analysis of Shakespeare's tragic hero (Foakes 113). For example, in lecture on *Othello* (1813), Coleridge began his account of Act II by challenging Johnson: "Dr Johnson has remarked that little or nothing is wanting to render the *Othello* a regular tragedy but to opened the play with the arrival of Othello un Cyprus" (113). For Coleridge rules were a means to an end. Therefore, for him *Othello* was a clear example of "a certain species of drama, proposing to itself the accomplishment of certain ends," and the opening in Act II, therefore, exemplified what Coleridge said "the end must be determined before it can be known what the rules ought to be" (114). However, in 1822, Coleridge simply asserted that "Othello must not be conceived as a negro, but a high and chivalrous Morrish chief" (115). In his later criticism on Shakespeare, likewise, Coleridge focused on Shakespeare's character, saying that "in…many instances I have ripen into a perception of beauties where I had before descried faults" (148). Behind Coleridge's comments there was a belief that Shakespeare was an ideal in opposition to Napoleon, and his characters were a very example of "perfect dominion, often domination, over the whole world of language," wielding a "'stupendous power' from the top of the 'the poetic mountain'" (148).

As for the shift in Coleridge's emphasis in Shakespeare, it is worth noting that Coleridge's Shakespeare criticism moved uneasily between pro-revolutionary and counter-revolutionary reactions. Coleridge claimed that Shakespeare had no politics, saying that in Shakespeare there was "nothing sectarian in Religion or Politics," despite the fact that the plays were written in "an age of religious and political Heats" (Bate, "The Politics of Romantic Shakespearean Criticism" 369). Nevertheless, as Bate points out, Coleridge used Shakespearean criticism as a means to express his political positions. For example, some part in the same lecture concerned "Caliban's revolutionary Freedom," and it was reported that "The character of Caliban, as an original and caricature of Jacobinism, so fully illustrated at Paris during the French revolution, he described in a vigorous and lively manner, exciting repeated bursts of applause" (370).

Hazlitt's outlook

Hazlitt's reply to this report also discloses that Coleridge's lectures were permeated by his own political positions. In this, Hazlitt reminded Coleridge of his early pro-Jacobin lecture, the *Conciones ad Populum* (1795), recollecting an occasion on which a Scottish gentlemen stood up in one of his lectures and called out "But you once praised that Revolution, Mr Coleridge!" and proposed a counter-reading of *The Tempest* in which Caliban had "natural sovereignty over the island" (370). In fact, Coleridge earlier said that Napoleon was one "of all those great Men, who in the states or the mind of man had produced great revolutions, the effect of which still remain, and are, more or less distant, causes of the present state of the World" (Coleridge, *Collected Letters* 818). In this context, it is hardly surprising that Coleridge's lecture was challenged by a radical English Jacobin, John Thelwall:

> Alas! Poor Coleridge!—a seraph! And a worm! At least, a seraph he would have been, had there been so much of the nerve of any one concentrating principle whatever, in his composition, as might have given consistency to the splendid but disjointed materials of his mind. This, only this, was wanting to his fame (276)!

In his interpretation of a Shakespearean character, Coleridge showed a similar inconsistency. For example, in 1808, Coleridge, according to R. A. Foakes, read Napoleon through Macbeth.

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Like Napoleon, Macbeth was seen as a "Commanding Genius," meeting with "an active & combining intellect, and an Imagination of just that degree of vividness which disquiets and impels the Soul to try to realize its Images" (Coleridge, *Lectures on Literature* 1:137). In contrast, according to the *Bristol Gazette*, Coleridge's 1813 lectures on Hamlet began with considering Macbeth and Napoleon together:

> Mr. Coleridge at the commencement of this lecture drew a comparison between the characters of Macbeth and Bonaparte—both tyrants, both indifferent to means, however, barbarous, to attain their ends; and he hoped the fate of the latter would be like the former" (1:545).

Coleridge's ambiguous representation of Napoleon is again found in his 1819 lecture on Edmund in *King Lear*:

> He [Coleridge] had read Nature too heedfully not to know that Courage, Intellect, and strength of Character were the most impressive forms of Power; and that to Power in itself, without reference to any moral end, an inevitable Admiration and Complacency appertains, whether it be displayed in the conquests of a Napoleon or Tamurlane, or in the foam and thunder of a Cataract (2:328).

Coleridge's comparison of Edmund to Napoleon has been often thought an account of the complexity of Edmund's character, as he wrote: "Edmund is what, under certain circumstances, any man of powerful intellectual might be…Hamlet is, inclusively, an Edmund" (Foakes, *Coleridge's Criticism of Shakespeare* 103). However, it is significant to see that Coleridge, not only refusing to extend his moral judgement to Edmund, but also associating Edmund with Napoleon and biblical image of Jesus Christ in the book of Revelation ("his voice as the sound of many waters"), converted Napoleon into a tragic hero that Shakespeare made use of as a vehicle "for expressing opinions and conjectures of a nature too hazardous for a wise man to put forth directly as his own, or form any sustained character" (Foakes, "Coleridge, Napoleon and Nationalism" 145). Therefore, as Foakes argues, it is evident that "through Shakespeare's great characterizations of figures with the commanding genius…Coleridge was able to find his richest was of interpreting Napoleon" (146). However, it is also true that through interpreting Napoleon, Shakespeare criticism was politicised.

Hazlitt was the most explicit example in this respect. Hazlitt was much concerned with the ruling passion in characters, and had no interest in what was central for Coleridge: the way Shakespeare's plays achieve organic growth and unity. His political reading of Shakespeare was almost in direct opposition to Coleridge. For example, while Coleridge wrote of *Coriolanus* in sceptical tone: "The wonderful philosophic impartiality in Shakespeare's politics," Hazlitt read contemporary political debates through *Coriolanus*, saying the play is "a store house of political commonplaces. Anyone who studies it may save himself the trouble of reading Burke's Reflections, or Pain's Rights of Man, or the debates in both Houses of Parliament since the French Revolution or our own" (Hazlitt 56). Given that the parallel between Coriolanus and Napoleon is so obvious, such opposite views on *Coriolanus* between Coleridge and Hazlitt were derived from their different interpretation and appreciation of Napoleon. Unlike Coleridge's mixed representation of Napoleon, Hazlitt was "the historian's classical example of the English Jacobin turned Buonapartist" (Kinnaird 83). In his Shakespearean criticism, Hazlitt revealed his pro-Napoleonic position, responding to

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William Gifford's review of his *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* in the *Quarterly Review* in 1818, Hazlitt asked,

> Do you then really admire those plague spots of history, and scourges of human nature, Richard II, Richard III, King John, and Henry VIII? Do you with Mr Coleridge, in his late lectures, contend that not to fall down in prostration of soul before the abstract majesty of kings as it is seen in the diminished perspective of centuries, argues an inherent littleness of soul (Hazlitt, *Completed Works* 35)?

Here Hazlitt attacked Coleridge, recollecting his reading of *Richard II* in 1811 and 1813 in which Coleridge saw the play as an epic of English history, interpreting John of Gaunt's famous "This England" speech as a motive to patriotism in the face of the threat of Napoleon (Foakes, "Coleridge, Napoleon and Nationalism" 148). In fact, Hazlitt, in 1817, when Napoleon was ailing in exile on St Helena, denounced Gaunt's speech in *Richard II*, claiming that it merely fed "the pampered egotism of our countrymen" (148). Hazlitt's representation of Napoleon and expression of his political positions were not always reactionary. For example, in 1817 in the lecture on *Coriolanus*, Hazlitt praised heroic qualities of Coriolanus, stressing his individuality:

> There is nothing heroical in a multitude of miserable rogues not wishing to be starved, or complaining that they are like to be so: but when a single man comes forward to brave their cries and to make them submit to the last indignities, from mere pride and self-will, our admiration of his prowess is immediately converted into contempt for their pusillanimity (Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* 58).

Hazlitt's stress on Coriolanus as "a single man," as Simon Bainbridge notes, echoes in his *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*: "He who did this for me, and for the rest of world, and who alone could do it, was Buonaparte…He, one man, did this" (Hazlitt, *Completed Works* 14: 10-11). It is hardly surprising, then, that whereas John Philip Kemble presented Coriolanus's charismatic authority as the cornerstone of a stable political society, Hazlitt through Coriolanus read the legitimacy of oppression (Moody 49). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that just as Hazlitt's championing or defending of Napoleon in his earlier works made him find a figure who could converted unto a hero in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, his reading of the play made Napoleon represent his hero in the historical writing on Napoleon.

CONCLUSION

Coleridge's discussion of Shakespeare as the literary model of organic form represents the essentials of the Romantic ideals. However, as we have seen above, it has also political points as Coleridge's version of Shakespeare was linked to either his own disappointment on Napoleon or to a need for patriotism and a burgeoning nationalism as a response to French domination (Foakes, "Coleridge, Napoleon and Nationalism" 148). On the other hand, Napoleon, what Hazlitt calls "the fearful and imposing reality," also had a profound impact on his thinking and writings. For him, Napoleon was an important figure not only as an embodiment of his political and personal hopes, but also as a literary figure who could seize the heart of people and their imagination (Bainbridge 9). Under these circumstances, London performances of Shakespeare, like *Hamlet, Macbeth, and Coriolanus*, in the 1790s offered

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Coleridge, Hazlitt, and others, a cause to win support for or condemnation of Napoleon and the French Revolution. It is no coincidence, as Kathryn Prince has pointed out, "the French Revolution and its aftermath conclusively liberate English dram from the tyranny of French neoclassicism" (Prince 291).

Taken together, Romantic Shakespearean criticism represents contemporary discussion of Shakespeare's ability to create representations of human beings who displayed a remarkably convincing resemblance to individual persons whom contemporaries might actually encounter in everyday life. Moreover, it is also true that Romantic Shakespearean criticism was used to as a means of justifying an ungraspable man whom contemporaries actually saw in their political life.

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