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23 APRIL 2014: SHAKESPEARE'S 450TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY.

THE ROLE OF THE BARD AS PHILOSOPHICAL POET AND PROMOTER OF THE EUROPEAN PROJECT.

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FOREWORD

In the list of the top 100 most significant figures in History Shakespeare ranks 4th, just behind Jesus, Napoleon and Muhammad (1).

Shakespeare was born in 1564, on 23rd April (day of Saint George, Patron Saint of England) and died on the same day and month in 1616, which is rightly deemed to represent a well-wishing, clear sign for his fate and to herald his future legacy.

His influence extends from theater and literature to present-day movies. He is the most quoted writer in the history of the western world after the Bible: many of his quotations and neologisms have passed into everyday usage in English and other languages.

His plays exhibited power, love, greed, discrimination, hatred, despair, violence, and plotting. His language was always vital thanks to the humanism and contact with popular thinking. He united the three main stems of literature: verse, poetry, and drama. He influenced many writers: among them Herman Melville, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, William Faulkner, James Joyce.

With extraordinary wit, humor, and humanity Shakespeare has created characters, alive today as 400 years ago, who represent the drama of human politics and history; at the same time his plays have been at the heart of the European culture, reflecting Europe's artistic, social and political transformation.

THE ELIZABETHAN AGE

In 1580, when Shakespeare was 16, Francis Drake circumnavigated the globe: the world could thus be mapped and plotted. Shakespeare's generation had, consequently, to reconsider, sometimes with uncertainty and shock, their life not only geographically but also in religious and scientific terms.

The reformation with the schism from Rome and the subsequent establishment of the Anglican Church had caused a religious earthquake in England while scientific discoveries and the Copernican revolution had marked a major shift in worldview. Such events are well received and interpreted by Shakespeare and introduced in his plays. In 1588 England defeated the Spanish Armada with Francis Drake second-in-command of the English fleet and a large map of Drake's circumnavigation went on display at Elizabeth I's palace in Whitewall. England was then the only ruler of the oceans and her citizens could proudly boast Albion supremacy on the entire globe to such an extent that in "A midsummer night's dream" Oberon and Puck do maintain to be able to "compass the globe swifter than the wandering moon" and to "put a girdle around the earth in forty minutes".

The first book of maps was called "The Theater of the Lands of the World": so the idea of "All the world's a stage" (As you like it) was already there. And when Shakespeare in 1590 had to choose the name for his brand new theater it was natural and spontaneous for the Bard to name it The Globe.

And as reliable public timekeeping was a must for The Globe's audience to get there in time, clocks with two hands appeared in London. Time was money (to pay the admission and buy refreshments) but, first and foremost, time is a key element of human life: as such the passage of time, its employment and its effects are constantly present in his plays as in Macbeth: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow/ Creeps in this petty pace from day to day/ To the last syllable of recorded time/ And all our yesterdays have lighted fools/ The way to dusty death/ Out, out brief candle!/ Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/ And then is heard no more/ It's a tale told by an idiot/ Full of sound and fury/ Signifying nothing".

It is amazing to realize how these powerful and desperate words (which burst from the heart of the protagonist when he knows that his wife, Lady Macbeth, has died) were written more than 400 years ago: due to their strength, passion, enlightenment and modernity they could be written today or, may be.....tomorrow.

SHAKESPEARE'S INFLUENCE AND POPULARITY

His modern influence ranges from the evolution of modern dramas and plays, to the use of modern prose, to his mastering of English with such a fluidity of thought, word, rhythm, and sound that also a complex work is intelligible for the inexperienced reader: but you may need to read the text twice. A masterpiece of his talent is a passage of Richard III where the characters seem worried about the poor health of the King (2), but in reality:

- Lord Rivers doesn't care for the King health and wants only to comfort the Queen (to achieve a higher position);
- Lord Grey doesn't realize the gravity of the situation and honestly believes the King will recover;
- the Queen is just concerned with her future once the King is dead.

Shakespeare created his own grammar and vocabulary, much of which has since become common use (with words such as: dislocate, amazement, premeditated, lackluster). No modern writer has such skill to create new words (around 2000) or to write in such a way that these words remain common usage centuries later.

As a matter of fact, when he began writing his plays, English was absorbing words from other languages due to wars, exploration and colonization. By the age of Elizabeth I, English had become widely used with the expansion of philosophy, theology and physical sciences, but many writers lacked the vocabulary to express such ideas: he invented, borrowed or adopted a word or a phrase from another language, a practice known as neologizing. Once Shakespeare plays became popular,

they standardized English.

By using the right combination of words, he wrote passages and entire plays so powerful that many are still being routinely memorized and performed today, nearly four centuries later by successfully representing power, love, greed, discrimination, hatred and despair.

He expanded expectations about what could be achieved through characterization, plot, language, and genre. He mixed tragedy and comedy to create a new romantic tragedy genre. Through his soliloquies he showed how plays could explore a character's inner motivations, convey information or reveal plans.

To sum it up, the reasons behind Shakespeare's influence and popularity are essentially: his ability to summarize human emotions in simple yet deeply eloquent verses; his capacity to transcend time and culture; his great and complex characters; his ability to turn a phrase (3).

SHAKESPEARE'S NEW APPROACH

His work derives from his effort to paint objectively the life process, by separating the fundamental from the accidental, the permanent from the transitory, and to interpret this process in the light of a changed world perspective in which the new morality, the new philosophy and ideology are replacing those of the effete and decadent feudalism. His morality consists of broad rules of conduct: the moral aspects of each problem and situation are so riveting that the reader can't wait to draw his own conclusions. He expounds the problems of the individual: his rights, his relations to the family, the state and society, and the race issue by stressing the social roots of every problem. His conception of society is based on a sincere and profound respect for the individual.

He explored human suffering and stressed ethical and social values. He rejected the medieval notion of human "predestination" and "mission on earth" recognizing only one destiny: to resort to all human creative possibilities in accordance with the needs and demands of society, so as to achieve both happiness and social perfection. He does not accept the supernatural: religion is seldom mentioned and although England was torn by religious dissension, there is no evidence as to whether he was Catholic or Protestant. He accepts only two forces: nature and man, the latter being the most complex manifestation of the former.

He was the humanist ideologist of the bourgeoisie: but he denounced the rapacity, greed, cruelty, egoism and philistinism so typical of the English bourgeoisie embodied in Shylock, Malvolio and Iago.

SHAKESPEARE AND EUROPE

His plays have impressively characterized the European culture (reflecting Europe's artistic, social and political transformation) by developing theatrical and cultural patterns and stimulating historical changes so as to shape a sense of common European identity.

In the period between the 1st and 2nd World War, Shakespeare was performed in the context of social and political transformations, as new models of government and new political systems formed on the continent, thus reflecting the political tensions and innovative tendencies in the interwar Europe. After WW II Shakespeare was identified as a healing force, a cultural model, and a universal genius who transcended political conflicts and opened up the possibility of a shared European identity. But the end of the war did not coincide with the end of totalitarian regimes in Europe, and the works of Shakespeare were appropriated on both sides of the Iron Curtain (4).

When communist regime faltered and disintegrated in Europe, Shakespeare was performed to reflect the contemporary stage and the changes in the political and economic arena (5).

More and more scholars are recently investigating how Shakespeare contributed to the constitution

of the Europe's sense of identity: the past two decades have witnessed a steadily growing interest to study the position of Shakespeare in the European culture from the earliest times to the present and his role as an important factor of European identity. In order to define this role and the sense of European selfhood at various moment in the European history, scholars have tried to blaze the cultural and political trail which started with the Greeks and the Romans and, through 400 years of Shakespearean appropriations, permeated the Old Continent: all against the objectives for a European federation based, in addition to economic and political goals, on explicit cultural ideals and objectives.

Seeing the success of such enterprise, in 1998 the original steering group decided to create an association to further the "European Shakespeare" initiative and to successively found the "European Shakespeare Research Association" (ESRA) (6).

SHAKESPEARE AND POLITICS

Shakespeare was ahead of time in coping with issues surfacing centuries later. In Julius Caesar he is a master of mass politics and demagoguery when Antony (perfectly understanding public relations) manipulates the crowd to such an extent that no television campaign could today compete with the effectiveness of his speech, equaled by the pre-battle speech of King Henry V before his great victory at Agincourt (7).

He anticipated racism (Othello), antisemitism (The Merchant of Venice), indecision (Hamlet), leadership (Henry V), love affairs (Antony and Cleopatra), power precariousness (King Lear), reckless ambition (Macbeth).

He was also politically sophisticated to survive in an age of clashing factions and Protestant-Catholic battles. Shakespeare plays criticize sharply any form of social injustice through the invention and employment of a language revealing both his sensitivity to poverty and his awareness of the political realities and causes behind it.

Shakespeare plays are gold mines of advice for politicians: "Listen before speaking; Stick to the facts; Keep calm and carry on" (Hamlet). "Keep it simple" (Richard III). "Don't be a know-it-all" (As you like it). "Get to the point" (Measure for Measure).

Shakespeare was an observer of permanent political issues and dealt consistently and profoundly with politics where political issues are the very substance of a fair amount of his plays and crucial matters of state are remarkably dealt with. Hamlet is a political actor responding to a political act; inheritance in "King Lear" is political, being the kingdom itself at stake; even "Romeo and Juliet" has political implications given the power vacuum left by impotent political entities. In "The Tempest" and "As You like It" the issue is the theft and abuse of political power.

Shakespeare political vision is wide-ranging, compelling, and relevant to modern audiences. But if we compare Shakespeare to Machiavelli in the realm of political morality and conflict between ambition and justice, we discover that he absorbed the lessons of Machiavelli but without going over to his cynical realism.

Current political affairs find more than scope within Shakespeare's vast landscape, serving as a matrix for decoding the machinations of human politics that continue to drive the action of world events.

CONSIDERATIONS

Over the past four centuries Shakespeare has played an important role within the "European context" being often resorted to in political propaganda in times of war and peace, as well as in more subtle manner in which ideologies have permeated readings, performances, adaptations,

translations, and other appropriations of his plays.

Later generations have understood Shakespeare through the prism of their contemporary experience of culture and politics: the history and the issue of the Jewish people in “The Merchant of Venice” is a case in point. In recent times Shakespeare's Shylock has been “translated” into a banker, a soldier, a Palestinian refugee, with diversified settings such as a Nazi concentration camp, the Sinai desert or a corporate office.

The fall of the Berlin Wall combined with the ensuing increased physical and intellectual mobility have created a perfect breeding ground for a “hybrid” Shakespeare in which spatial, temporal, cultural, linguistic, and stylistic heterogeneity thrive.

Europe is not only the geographical and imaginative space where these and other developments have taken place but it is also the project of a political integration. Shakespeare can therefore be regarded as a “European” author who contributed to create a European literary identity out of linguistic and cultural diversity.

Performances of Shakespeare in the last decades have tended to continue the tradition of political interpretation. What is new in approaches to staging Shakespeare in Europe in recent decades is an increased interest in non-English productions, with an increasing appreciation of foreign productions of Shakespeare, with artists, audiences and academics traveling around the globe on an unprecedented scale to participate in international festivals and conferences. We can no longer ignore the fact that his plays are not exclusively English since for four centuries they have been adapted and adopted into different cultures, becoming German, Italian, Romanian, Spanish, Polish etc. (or, on a global scale, European, Asian, American, African, and more), thus allowing us to better understand Shakespeare's interpretative potential.

CONCLUSIONS

For hundreds of years people have found in Shakespeare the words to express their dreams and their own deepest feelings of hope, love and fear. Shakespeare's works traveled out of the theater and into the world. In 2012, the brand new state of South Sudan celebrated its independence from Sudan, after two civil wars, by featuring Cymbeline (8) in Arabic.

Shakespeare was also on Robben Island, the South African prison where in the 1970s many leaders of the African National Congress (ANC), opposing apartheid, were imprisoned. His “Complete Works” was clandestinely introduced in Robben Island and each jailed ANC member was asked to select a line or a passage that appealed to him. Nelson Mandela chose a passage on courage and death from Julius Caesar: “Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once”. The “Robben Island Bible” is now a historical element of the struggle against apartheid.

His contemporary Ben Jonson, outstanding dramatist and poet, author of “Volpone” and “The Alchemist”, second only to Shakespeare's genius, reflecting upon the achievements of his peer, wrote of Shakespeare “He is not of an age, but for all time”.

In every culture and age, Shakespeare seems to speak to the present as, although being the soul of his age, at the same time he never confined himself to the particularities of his historical moment but he continuously answered the key questions on man and mankind.

On April 23rd 2016 the 400th anniversary of the death of Shakespeare will be celebrated by the European Parliament and the Bard will be adopted as its “European laureate”, thus representing the “European shared cultural heritage”. The words of Shakespeare have been translated into hundreds of languages, from German to Japanese, Hebrew to Hindi, Maori to Yoruba. The “Complete Works” has inspired more plays, films, paintings, music, ballets, operas, overtures and orations than any other works of literature. In this age of moral relativism, logical positivism and the equality of all

religions and beliefs, Christianity is no longer able to constitute the soul of Europe. So it is up to Shakespeare, the soul of every age, to act as the only available means to promote Europe's cultural tradition, with an awareness that his extraordinary writing skills to create accurate portrayals of human truth have not been rivaled or replicated since his death.

In the middle of the 19th century, it was proposed to build a 100 foot tall Shakespeare monument in London, made of cast iron and resting on a pedestal. Inside there would be a winding staircase leading up to the statue's eyes so as to look through Shakespeare's eyes and have a view of London, Europe and the entire world. The monument has not been erected, so far: but never say never again!

- (1) Time Magazine, December 2013: each candidate was evaluated by aggregating millions of traces of opinions into a computational data-centric analysis and by integrating a diverse set of measurements about his reputation into a single consensus value.
- (2) Lord Rivers: "Have patience, madam; there's no doubt his Majesty will soon recover his accustomed health".
Lord Grey: "In that thou brook it ill, it makes him worse. Therefore for God's sake entertain good comfort and cheer his Grace with quick and merry eyes."
Queen Elizabeth: "If the King were dead, what would betide on me?"
Lord Grey: "No other harm but loss of such a lord."
Queen Elizabeth: "The loss of such a lord includes all harms."
(Richard III 1.3 1-8)
- (3) Many common expressions now thought to be clichés were his creations, such as: "neither here nor there", "the short and the long of it", "it is Greek to me", "to act more in sorrow than in anger", "to make a virtue of necessity", "to bid somebody good riddance" or "to wish somebody to be dead as a door-nail".
- (4) The Merchant of Venice was performed in Munich in 1978 and in Weimar in 1995 to stress the post-nazi guilt and the war trauma. In Eastern Europe Shakespeare was appropriated by the official propaganda as a class-conscious writer (even though in the end the hidden message backfired and undermined the oppressive communist system).
- (5) Hamlet was performed in 1990 as a striking commentary on the political transitions in Europe and as a farewell to the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe.
- (6) The European Shakespeare Research Association (ESRA) is not the factual account of events occurred once upon a time in Europe, but a vital site of cultural exchange. In 2013 the ESRA held its biennial conference in Montpellier (France).
- (7) Shakespeare's language delights and excites the mind to such an extent that, once tasted, the appetite for it grows with his breathtaking capacity for meanings.
- (8) Cymbeline is a "pastiche" in which the aging Shakespeare revisits various elements of his earlier plays: King Lear, Othello, Romeo and Juliet, with tragedy looming but never striking while, instead, as Cymbeline, King of Britain, declares: "Pardon is the word to all".