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National Poets, the Status of the Epic and the Strange Case of Master William Shakespeare

Abstract: This essay contextualises Shakespeare as product of a field of forces encapsulating national identity and relative cultural status. It begins by historicising the production of national poets in Romantic and Nationalist terms. Lefevere's conceptual grid is then used to characterise the system that underpins the production of Shakespeare as British national poet, and his place within the canon of world literature. The article defines this context first before moving onto the figure of Shakespeare, by referring to various high status texts such as the *Kalevala*, the *Aeneid*, *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost*. The position accorded Shakespeare at the apex is therefore contingent upon a series of prior operations on other texts, and their writers. Shakespeare is not conceived as attaining pre-eminence because of his own innate literary qualities. Rather, a process of elimination occurs by which the common ascription of the position of national poet to a writer of epic is shown to be a cultural impossibility for the British. Instead, via Aristotle's privileging of tragedy over epic, the rise of Shakespeare is seen as almost a second choice because of the inappropriateness of Spenser and Milton for the position.

Keywords: Shakespeare, national poets, comparative literature, romanticism, nationalism , conceptual grid, empire.

This is not an essay about Shakespeare, or even about 'Shakespeare,' the cultural construct that emerges well after the death of the man from Stratford. It is, rather, about the space within which that construct evolves, a peculiar pastime seemingly beloved of many cultures: the terrain devoted to the making of national poets. And they are almost always poets, not simply writers or even authors. That in itself tells us something about the assumptions that lie behind the elevation of a particular person to the position of national poet seems, although of course the specific circumstances that manage the process vary widely. Not everyone will agree with a choice, or with the means by which that choice is eventually realised, and the reasons for this will also be many and varied. Supporters and objectors argue endlessly about categories of aesthetic

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value or political utility and partisanship cannot be discounted—in fact, it has to be expected. What is clear, however, is that any attempt to analyse and discuss the phenomenon has to tread very carefully, because no single example can be used as a basis from which to generalise. This is especially important in the case of the British Bard, the Swan of Avon, whose career as a proto-capitalist social climber bears some examination not so much in and of itself, but in the contested meanings given to it well after his death. Indeed, Shakespeare could be taken as an extreme example of the type, because the British seem to have spent so much energy upon his particular canonisation. In terms of comparative literature and, indeed, world literature, his peculiar stature raises important questions about what determines the relative value of different literary traditions.

The Romanian-American writer Virgil Nemoianu (249) is especially well placed to comment on the ways in which national writers attain prominence, particularly in Eastern Europe. He begins his essay on the relationship between national poets and Romanticism with some general comments about the process:

> The institution of the "national poet" appears in its fullness toward the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. In the following essay I will concentrate less on the *how* of these events, important though it is, and try to focus for the moment on the matter of *why* this set of events occurred and gained importance. Why did German-speaking lands need Goethe and Schiller; why did (an absent) Poland need Mickiewicz; why do Petofi and Eminescu still seem indispensable; why do even Shakespeare, Dante, Cervantes grow so considerably in importance? (Obviously the list could be lengthened!).

One response to the question Nemoianu poses would be that the Romantic engagement with nationalism should be seen as part of a wider cultural reaction against the ostensibly excessive rationalist classicism of the Enlightenment. Hence the attraction of an emotional appeal to notions of national identity extending beyond the politically pragmatic, not to mention the more extreme versions that produce a kind of pseudo-mystical sense of folk identity that leads to irrationalism. A more historically precise response, however, would suggest that there are in fact two related operations occurring: the rise of 'newer' national poets and also an increase in the stature of older figures such as "even" Shakespeare, Cervantes and Dante, as Nemoianu puts it. His comments show that Shakespeare's name is almost automatically invoked whenever questions of national stature arise, as part of some sort of involuntary association. These earlier writers complicate the situation, because the rise of their reputations precedes the confluence of romanticism and nationalism, and so crosses the

boundaries between Romanticism and the Enlightenment. In their cases, then, a pre-existing tendency is further accelerated.[1]

Lefevere's Conceptual Grid

Following on from Nemoianu's comments, the question now becomes what is it that the two groups of writers who attain national status have in common. This is not as straightforward a proposition as it might seem, because comparing any of these writers throws up a great deal of disparity, further compounded by uncertain agreement about exactly who has national pre-eminence in the first place. Instead of working from named writers, therefore, it might be more fruitful to think in terms of the context within which they attain their stature, in a manner similar to that employed by Nemoianu in his delineation of the importance of Romanticism and nationalism. Andre Lefevere, one of the major proponents of Comparative Literature in the late twentieth century, insists on the cross-cultural importance of what he calls the "conceptual grid":

> Both textual system and conceptual grids may coincide with a language, or a nation, as is the case with Chinese and Japanese literature. More often than not, though, they pre-date more than one language, more than one nation. One could, in this context, speak of something like a 'Western' grid, whose existence is attested by the existence of the epic, for instance, in Greek, Latin, and a number of other languages, and by the existence of Romanticism, for instance, as a set of conceptual categories transcending various nations. (76-77)

The conceptual grid therefore pre-exists any given language, and thus any particular national literature. It acts as sort of horizon of influence, inflecting tendencies within literary production in terms of a transnational set of assumptions, conceptions and ideologies. One simple way to put this of course is to state the obvious: that no element of national literature exists in pure isolation from a much wider context, and that it is this context into which a text will fit.

However, Lefevere's chosen example (the *Kalevala*) acts as a kind of test case, a limit text that shows in especially acute form just how the conceptual grid operates. The reason for this is that it is explicitly constructed from the outset in relation to the overarching conceptual grid of the epic and its grand status within the Western European literary canon:

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[1] The instance of Shakespeare and the Romantics has been explored by many literary historical critics. Commentators and editors prior to the romantics can be quite critical of his works even as they praise them as quintessentially English. He lacks the essential qualities of neo-classical decorum, and of course this is exactly what endears him to later poets, especially Coleridge. See Jonathan Bate (128-163).

> Analogy is, I submit, the most potent factor in the process of acculturation in which translation plays such an important part. I shall be trying to analyse it for that reason, and I shall do so by using various translations of the *Kalevala*, a collection of Finnish oral poetry, which has been carefully constructed as the Finnish national epic on the analogy of the classical epic and, to some extent, also the Nordic sagas, as my example. (76)

Lefevere carefully places the *Kalevala* in relation to the pre-existing requirements of national and classical epic, as well as the sagas. He goes on to show how a collection of folk tales is deliberately refashioned by its supposed translator in order to accord with these precepts, and so attain its place as an epic and the national poem of Finland. Lefevere is deeply interested in the role played by the "editor" of the *Kalevala*, Elias Lonnrot, in constructing this overdetermined textual product, so much so in fact that Lefevere is able to put in question the usually passive role assigned to the translator. Lonnrot's text may be a particularly problematic example of "translation," but his example also points to the crucial role played by the status that he assumes for the epic even as he rewrites the folk tales. Lonnrot self-consciously refashions his texts into what is already defined as the form needed for national epic affirmation.

Lefevere is accordingly very careful to position Lonnrot's text within the conceptual grid associated with World Literature:

> The main thrust of the argument is that literatures written in languages that are less widely spoken, will only gain access to something that could be called 'world literature,' if they submit to the textual system, the discursive formation, or whatever else one wants to call it, underlying the current concept of 'world literature.' (76)

First published in 1835, the *Kalevala* is a striking example of exactly the confluence between Romanticism and nationalism that Nemoianu identifies as critical to the rise of the idea of national writers. Its compilation parallels the Eastern European emergence of national literary traditions and figures in a process that, however overdetermined it may be, is not historically innocent.

Epic and Empire

Lefevere, then, produces a considered analysis of the relationship between the constructed 'text' of the *Kalevela* and the canonical categories that precede its emergence, especially the epic. The association of the epic with issues of national identity has a very long history indeed. The part-Etruscan *vates* Publius Vergilius Maro, more commonly known to posterity as the Latin poet Virgil, constructs his epic with exactly this association in mind—not, however, just as a

national poem, but as an imperial one. The crucial moment comes with the proleptic prophecies contained in the divinely-wrought shield of Aeneas. Here is David Quint's translation of the central image on this shield, the Battle of Actium:

> In the center were to be seen brazen ships and the fighting at Actium; you would see all Leucate glowing with drawn-up forces of War and the waves glittering with gold. On this side Augustus Caesar is leading the Italians into battle with the fathers of the senate and the people, with the Penates and great gods; as he stands on the high stern, his happy brows pour out twin flames and his father's star appears by his head. In another sector is Agrippa, with the favoring winds and gods; lofty and proud, he leads on his formation; his brows gleam with the naval crown, decorated with ships' beaks, proud insignia of war. (*Aeneid* 8.675-684)

Quint sees this image not simply as the founding moment of the imperial state, although it is all that and more in strictly historical terms. He also notes its absolutely critical importance for the literary imagery and discourse of empire. In other words, Virgil refashions Actium as a kind of metonym for his poem as a whole, and the effect this has on the presentation of imperial ideology, particularly in the epic as a literary form, resonates through the centuries. Quint is extremely careful to show, however, that Virgil manages this operation by means of a rhetorical duplicity, a sophisticated awareness that the success of the imperial project comes at a price. Quint's book, suggestively entitled *Epic and Empire*, goes on to analyse the effects of this forumaltion on Western literature, in so far as it is indebted to the classical inheritance of which the *Aeneid* forms such a crucial part.

The first problematic element is the violence in which empire is born, which Quint recaps with the death of Turnus at the end of the *Aeneid*. It is also, however, present in the description of the action at Actium, and several points need to be made here. The overall tone of the passage is one of triumph in battle, but it should be remembered that Actium was nothing like the straightforward naval battle that Virgil seems to suggest:

> [...] Antony fled, having sacrificed the lives of some of his men to make his escape and leaving the rest to their fate. Worse still, he had run to be with his mistress. Some sources later blamed her for treachery, claiming that the cowardly eastern woman had been willing to abandon even her own lover to escape herself. This was mere propaganda, for it is clear—mot least from the fact that the ships were carrying masts and sails—that the manoeuvre was premeditated. What is less clear is whether the intention was for the entire fleet to escape, or whether they were simply to create a path for Cleopatra and her squadron. The former seems more likely. If the latter was consciously planned,

then Mark Antony had already effectively conceded defeat in the struggle with
Octavian. (Goldsworthy 368)

This passage comes at the end of a long section in which the historian Adrian
Goldsworthy describes the Actium campaign. Antony's large unruly army had
camped at Actium on the western coast of Greece in preparation for invading
Italy, which was controlled by his rival Octavian. The latter, however, was a
superior strategist and statesman, and had the incomparable Agrippa as his
admiral, possibly the greatest sea commander Rome ever produced. Agrippa's
fleet blockaded that of Antony in port, effectively stopping it from ferrying the
army across to Italy. Goldsworthy argues that, with supplies running dangerously
low in Antony's camp, little alternative was left except to break out with as much
of the fleet as possible, while the army would make its own way overland. Some
of Antony's allies and even some of his Roman supporters had in fact already
deserted entirely. In other words, if Goldsworthy is right, Actium was not a
proper sea battle as such, but was always intended to be an escape action.

What this means, in turn, is that the imagery on the shield of Aeneas is a
literary fiction, an obfuscation that seeks to rework the founding moment of
imperial Rome and its representations. If this is indeed the case, then the details
Virgil places on the shield need to be carefully re-examined. For example
(following Quint's translation), when Virgil writes that in the central image
"Augustus Caesar is leading the Italians into battle with the fathers of the senate
and the people, with the Penates and great gods," he is already loading the
imagery with a very specific imperialist interpretation. First of all, this particular
Caesar was not yet Augustus, a title he assumed well after his success at Actium
and the end of this civil war. Secondly, he did not lead the fleet into battle.
Thirdly, there were at least as many Italians fighting for Antony, not to mention
members of the senate and people. And fourthly, the inclusion of the Penates and
great gods in the catalogue of forces on the side of Caesar effaces the third of
these rather uncomfortable historical facts. In other words, an operation of
occlusion is taking place here, as the epic rewrites the historicity of a Roman
civil war. Virgil is making it look as though Caesar is leading a united Italian
people into battle under the auspices of divine favour. Here is how the poem
represents the opposition:

> On the other side, Antony, with barbaric wealth and varied arms, victor from the
> nations of the dawn and the ruddy Indian sea, draws with him Egypt, the powers
> of the East, and utmost Bactria; and (O shameful) his Egyptian wife follows
> him. (*Aeneid* 8.685-688)

Of course there were many allies from the lands east of the Roman dominions in
Antony's army, but given this list, one could be forgiven for thinking there were

no Romans at all on this side of what was in fact a bloody Roman civil war. The *Aeneid* recasts Actium as a conflict between East and West, which lays bare the first major discursive (not to mention ideological) operation that takes place here.

The second aspect is specifically gendered feminine, picking up on the negative associations of Cleopatra that can already be discerned:

> Beholding these sights, Actian Apollo was bending his bow from above: at that terror all Egypt and the Indians, all the Arabs and all the Sabaeans turned their backs in flight. The queen herself was seen to have invoked the winds and spread her sails, and now, even now, to let loose the slackened ropes. (*Aeneid* 8.704-708)

The flight of the eastern enemy begins when Cleopatra sees the signs of divine displeasure, and it is this flight that destroys her cause and that of Antony. As Quint goes on to demonstrate in impressive fashion, the founding moment of the imperial project is predicated upon an easternised and feminised other, so that the memory of internal Roman civil strife can be at least partially erased. The inauguration of the imperial epic in the *Aeneid* sets up the terms of a literary history that is invoked in Lefevere's formulation of the western literary conceptual grid. At the pinnacle of this canon is the national epic poem.[2]

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[2] The displacement of the imperial project onto ethnic and gendered 'others' is shown to be a fundamental structural necessity for the epic in Ursula Le Guin's recent retelling of the *Aeneid* by Lavinia. Her role in the poem as the pivotal woman needed for the generation of a new state in Italy renders her necessarily silent, according to the dictates of the *Aeneid's* underlying patriarchal economy. Instead, Le Guin makes Lavinia the narrator of her novel, acknowledging the extreme importance of gender for imperial state formation. Indeed, Le Guin takes the logic of her gendered inversion a stage further, effectively writing the family of the *Julii* out of the equation entirely. She does this by subjecting Ascanius, Aeneas' son by his first wife Creusa, to the marginalising operation that is usually enacted upon women in the western literary canon. Her novel could be criticised for constructing a relatively negative representation of homosexuality in the figure of Ascanius, but this manoeuvre masks a much more fundamental shift. Ascanius, renamed Iulus on his arrival in Italy, is the supposed progenitor of the family of Julius Caesar and, by extension, the great nephew he adopts as his son who eventually becomes Augustus Caesar. By rendering Ascanius/Iulus childless, Le Guin removes the dynastic prerogative from him as grandson of Venus and places it firmly on Lavinia's son Silvius by Aeneas. She therefore erases the name of the *Julii*, which in literary historical terms is breathtaking in its audacity. Silvius is therefore also a grandson of Venus, but an Italian one.

An English National Poet?

A quick look at any list of national poets will show that many did not write epics—Burns in Scotland, for example. However, the period under scrutiny here, that of the English Renaissance, is firmly situated within the broad parameters identified by Lefevere as constitutive of national literatures and, thus, world literature. In this respect the foregoing comments on the critical importance of the ideology of empire elaborated in the *Aeneid* resonate with Shakespeare's period. The humanist impetus is especially important for this culture, and so one would expect the finest candidates for the position of national poet for the nascent British Empire to be drawn from those who write within the epic tradition inherited from the Greeks and Romans.

Bearing in mind the crucial juncture between gender and ethnicity as the defining feature of epic and empire, it should be possible to draw up a shortlist for the post, but in fact there are only two who come close. Edmund Spenser is the first. His imperialist credentials are impeccable, given his family's colonial holdings in Ireland. The scope of *The Faerie Queene* is quite simply enormous, as it attempts to encompass the matter of Britain in the union of the mythical ancestor figure of Arthur with Gloriana, the figuration of Queen Elizabeth. His work therefore unites the two aspects of ethnic and gender politics that are central to any epic that could claim the top spot. Here is the poem's opening:

> A Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine,
> cladd in mightie armes and siluer shielde,
> Wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remaine,
> The cruell markes of many a bloudy fielde;
> Yet armes till that time did he neuer wield:
> His angry steede did chide his faoming bitt,
> As much disdayning to the curbe to yield:
> Full iolly knight he seemd, and faire did sitt,
> As one for knightly giusts and fierce encounters fitt. (41)

It is relatively easy to produce a close reading of a passage such as this one. We have a Gentle Knight, a *miles Christi*, who bears the well used and bloody armour and shield of the Church. The blazon is not simply that of the crusading knight, it is specifically the coat of arms of St George, the national saint of England. Moreover, this is a virgin knight, a newcomer to the field of battle who has taken up the good fight. The pounding iambic beat of the first line in particular reproduces an auditory accompaniment to the action. This is the stuff of innumerable sets of notes and will be found in countless student essays.

However, as is often the case, deeper significances lie behind the seeming smoothness of the adventure story's facade. Not only is the practical criticism above already veering into the terrain of allegory, but the language

itself is problematic, especially at this remove. Elements of the vocabulary are already archaic by Spenser's time, something that is not now quite so visible: the construction "Y cladd" signifies to the poem's contemporary readers that it is set in a glorious, idealised past that is always already flavoured with conscious medievalism. This is hardly surprising, given that Spenser inherits this particular kind of romance epic from his Italian forebears Boiardo, Ariosto and Tasso. They in turn are treading in the footprints left not only by the *Chanson de Roland*, but also an allegorising tradition that has its Italian roots in the medieval Catholic epic vision of Dante. Spenser's project is to overgo these predecessors, and the means by which he will do so is by wedding the romantic allegory to the priorities of a nascent English protestant nationalism. A good example comes when the Redcrosse Knight we have already met encounters and then battles the horrific serpent Errour in her labyrinthine wooded den:

> Therewith she spewed out of her filthy maw
> A floud of poyson horrible and blacke,
> Full of great lumpes of flesh and gobbets raw,
> Which stunck so vildly, that it forst him slacke
> His grasping hold, and from her turne him backe:
> Her vomit full of bookes and papers was,
> With loathly frogs and toads, which eyes did lacke,
> And creeping sought way in the weddy gras:
> Her filthy parbreake all the place defiled has. (46)

In allegorical terms, this monster (feminised, of course), is the horrific Roman Catholic counterpart of the true protestant church. The latter is signified by the virginal Una ("Truth") who accompanies Redcrosse Knight on his quest. At this point in the poem, Redcrosse Knight has managed to grasp his enemy by the throat, suggesting that the Reformation has the upper hand against the great enemy of Rome. However, she fights back by vomiting forth the printed materials of the Counter-Reformation. Again, all of this is straightforward enough in allegorical terms.

However, Spenser himself is well aware that allegory is in fact always in danger of being anything but straightforward:

> Sir knowing how doubtfully all Allegories may be construed, and this booke of mine, which I haue entituled the Faery Queene, being a continued Allegory, or darke conceit, I haue thought good aswell for auoyding of gealous opinions and misconstructions, as also for your better light in reading therof, (being so by you commanded), to discouer vnto you the general intention & meaning, which in the whole course thereof I haue fashioned, without expressing of any particular purposes or by accidents therein occasioned. (15)

This passage is taken from Spenser's dedicatory letter to Raleigh that prefaces *The Faerie Queene*, and it demonstrates an awareness that allegory might too easily be falsely misconstrued. The vocabulary of darkness and light is especially interesting given the poem's religious underpinnings, but at the same time it draws attention to the fact that meanings that may lie deep underneath the surface adventure stories of the various quests in the poem may remain in the darkness. Furthermore, Spenser goes even further than this when he worries that false meanings could well result in what he calls "misconstructions." He is well aware of what a later age might call the play of signification, the productive multiplication of meanings that goes well beyond those that might ostensibly be authorially sanctioned.[3] The fundamental building block of allegory, so fundamental to the linguistic structure of the poem, could well be its undoing. Spenser's anxiety about the possible multiplicity of meaning is perhaps mirrored in the poem's unfinished state. It proved simply to be too large a project, and the result is an aggressively protestant poem that is nevertheless predicated upon a tradition of Catholic allegory.

The second candidate for England's prime epic poet, of course, is John Milton, who could be considered to be even more radical in his reformist faith than Spenser. His famous representation of Satan as a sort of hero of *Paradise Lost* is often taken not only to invent the modern poetic self, but in fact to inaugurate modern individual identity. The key here is internalised individuation, which is figured forth in Satan's claim to sovereignty:

> "Is this the region, this the soil, the clime,"
> Said then the lost Archangel, "this the seat
> That we must change for heav'n, this mournful gloom
> For that celestial light? Be it so, since he
> Who now is sovran can dispose and bid
> What shall be right: fardest from him is best,
> Whom reason hath equaled, force hath made supreme
> Above his equals. Farewell, happy fields,
> Where joy for ever dwells! Hail, horrors, hail,
> Infernal world, and thou, profoundest hell,
> Receive thy new possessor: one who brings
> A mind not to be changed by place or time.
> The mind is its own place, and in itself
> Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n.
> What matter where, if I be still the same,
> And what I should be, all but less than he
> Whom thunder hath made greater? (1:242-258)

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[3] For a discussion of these elements of the poem in a somewhat different context, see Innes (120-121).

Even if this is taken to be the definitive statement of selfhood, it should not be forgotten that it is being uttered by Satan, which in Christian terms at least should serve as something of a warning as to its veracity. There is, of course, much more than that going on in this passage, and due attention should be paid to Satan's striving for absolute monarchical power. In this respect his use of the royal plural is especially arresting. "We" near the beginning of line 244 could be taken at face value as a reference to the constellation of fallen angels, but it should be remembered that at this point Satan is the only one sufficiently recovered from the fall to be on his feet, and so he could equally be referring to himself only. This sliding, slippery linguistic doubleness is the very essence of Satan's thought and speech, at least in so far as it is presented in *Paradise Lost*, and it circles endlessly around the issue of power. As Satan states, rather slyly, he is here because of the force displayed by his opponent, who "Now is Sovran," as if he previously were not. There is no need to go into the plethora of minor examples of Satan's negative absolutist tendencies, especially in this part of the poem, in which he exercises dominion over hell and the construction of its great city. It is, however, important to pay some attention to the imagery associated with his enthronement:

> High on a Throne of Royal State, which far
> Outshone the wealth of Ormus and of Ind,
> Or where the gorgeous East with richest hand
> Show'rs on her Kings Barbaric Pearl and Gold,
> Satan exalted sat, by merit rais'd
> To that bad eminence; and from despair
> Thus high uplifted beyond hope, aspires
> Beyond thus high, insatiate to pursue
> Vain War with Heav'n, and by success untaught
> His proud imaginations thus display'd. (2:1-10)

The vocabulary Milton uses here in his representation of Satan is drawn directly from the Latin epic tradition inaugurated by the *Aeneid*. Satan's figuration is accomplished by inhabiting the 'orientalist' strand of imperialist discourse, marking him as the enemy because of his equivalence with the eastern potentates familiar from the Actium scene at the centre of Aeneas' shield. Milton is extremely careful to 'overgo' his classical forebear by making Satan the worst of the lot, the ultimate eastern despot, with all the lavish excess that entails.

This is not quite the same religious allegorical manoeuvre that takes place in *The Faerie Queene*, although Milton does go on towards the end of Book II to include explicitly allegorical elements of a similar kind. However, Satan's "bad eminence" operates as a political allegory, as Quint (41-45) convincingly demonstrates. Given Milton's republican politics, not to mention

his religious radicalism, it should come as no surprise that Satan does not simply represent a negative view of despotism; he is instead a mechanism for a grand Miltonic onslaught on the very notion of monarchy itself. It would therefore seem that Milton has to be ruled out as a candidate for national poet. The reason for this is simple: the oligarchic structural organisation near the apex of the political elite in Britain reconstructs what has loosely been termed a 'constitutional monarchy' in the period immediately after Milton's death. A group that welcomes the restored monarchy with such relief and then underscores the relatively anodyne nature of its religious underpinnings with the so-called 'glorious revolution' in 1688 is not one that is going to accept Milton's epic as a national poem, regardless of how highly regarded it might be as a work of art. The rising British Empire will desire someone other than a supporter of regicide as its national poet.

Aristotle and Tragedy

Of course, this creates a problem. Given that it seems sensible to bestow the title of national poet on the writer of an epic poem, this nevertheless becomes impossible in the case of what goes on to become the United Kingdom. The only two serious candidates simply do not fulfil the culturally defined criteria for the job, due to the problematic nature of their respective projects. However, help is at hand for the emerging Empire, because of course the job does not have to be filled by an epic poet, as is indeed the case in many other cultures. Before we turn to the longlist, it is worth exploring the most viable alternative. Here is Aristotle's definition of the relationship between the epic and its great rival, tragedy:

> As for the art of representation in the form of narrative verse, clearly its plots should be dramatically constructed, like those of tragedies; they should centre upon a single action, whole and complete, and having a beginning, a middle and an end, so that like a single complete organism the poem may produce its own special kind of pleasure. (65)

The terms in which Aristotle couches his discussion of the epic are especially interesting. He specifically insists on defining it in relation to drama, a pairing that clearly privileges dramatic form over that of epic verse. After all, why should the epic plotline be "clearly [...] dramatically constructed"? Aristotle places tragedy at a higher artistic level than epic by stating:

> [...] tragedy has everything that epic has, and it can even use the epic measure; and as a not inconsiderable addition, it offers scenic effects and music, the

> source of a distinct feeling of pleasure. The effect is as vivid when a play is read as when it is acted. Moreover, this form of imitation achieves its ends in shorter compass, and what is more compact gives more pleasure than what is extended over a long period. Just imagine the *Oedipus* of Sophocles spread out over as many lines as there are in the *Iliad*. Then there is less unity in the imitation of the epic poets, as is shown by the fact that any one work of this kind contains matter for several tragedies. (75)

Aristotle's emphasis on unity is often picked out as a major defining feature of his theory, as is indeed the case here. For him, the epic is too long and sweeping to provide the kind of aesthetic experience that he values, and thus is inferior to tragedy. However, what is at least as important as the negative terms of the comparison between the two genres is his reference to the fact that it is as easy to read a tragedy as it is to see it performed, unlike the epic. The length of an epic therefore works against it, in Aristotle's formulation, because it is a less satisfyingly literary form. In this, he is demonstrating the cultural bias of his own historical location at the start of the Hellenistic period. It would be tempting to ascribe to him some sort of patrician disdain for the more demotic genre of the epic as opposed to tragedy, rooted as the older form is in oral performance, regardless of its later written manifestations. However, whatever Aristotle's political bias may be, his cultural positioning of tragedy in a hierarchically superior position is firmly predicated on a historically precise predisposition to favour the literary. He sums it up as follows:

> If, therefore, tragedy is superior to epic in all these respects, and also in fulfilling its artistic function—for these forms of art ought to give, not just any kind of pleasure, but the kinds I have described—then obviously, in achieving its ends better than epic, it must be the better form of art. (75)

This provides the nascent British Empire with a way out from its *impasse* regarding the elevation of a national poet. Aristotle's great importance for the later Renaissance as a poetic theorist can be seen in the way that his privileging of tragedy over the epic enables the substitution of a literary conception of dramatic art for a theatrical one.

Wee Willy Shakespeare

Enter William Shakespeare, stage left. It is easy enough to challenge the ways in which Shakespeare has been harnessed to all sorts of causes, including those associated with the rise of the Empire. There is no need to rehearse here the struggle over Shakespearean terrain associated with the so-called 'theory wars'

of the 1980s.[4] It would be quite easy to produce a further critique of the ways in which the imperialist discourse of the British Empire appropriates and then promulgates a particular version of Shakespeare, but that is in fact not the purpose of this present essay—besides, it would be pretty much redundant, because that work has already been done.[5]

However, it must be said at this point that this whole debate has mostly been concentrated on the redefinition of Shakespeare that took place over a long period, culminating eventually in his canonisation as national poet, and on challenging the grounds for that process. What is missing is a sense of the space into which this peculiar construct is placed, leaving aside the specific identity of the poetic persona that has been used to fill it. Since the specific circumstances of English epic poets render either of the main candidates unsuitable for the position, it is most instructive that the fall-back position created for the post of national poet is a literary and dramatic one, based on the precepts of Aristotle. It is therefore no historical coincidence that the rise of Shakespeare to national prominence takes place alongside the ways in which he is rewritten as a literary writer. Margreta de Grazia's well-known book *Shakespeare Verbatim* is an impressive demonstration of how the written *corpus* of Shakespeare's work is produced as the Enlightenment shades into Romanticism, at exactly the time specified by Nemoianu. The performance techniques of Shakespeare's own stage are obscured precisely because of a structured historical forgetting of their existence; the result is ultimately the canonical bard we know so well. This version of Shakespeare could not have come into existence without Aristotle's privileging of tragedy over the epic. It is also important for us to realise just how this process is further inflected by our own cultural location. Three extremely precise points are in discursive collision: the founding myth of empire; the emergence of the British Empire; and now the devolution and possible dissolution of the British state.[6]

What does all of this have to do with Shakespeare? A great deal indeed, since it would not be too fanciful to state that it is this "conceptual grid" (to return to Lefevere's phrase) that forms the matrix into which the Shakespearean mould is poured. In this respect it would be incorrect to say that Shakespeare becomes the national poet because of his greatness as a writer. Instead, it becomes possible to see the delineation of a constructed space that pre-dates the

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[4] For a witty and provocative summary of the British obsession with their bard, see Hawkes (141-153) and Belsey (1-20).

[5] For a defence of the traditional Shakespeare against theorists, see Vickers, who is dead set against modern appropriations of Shakespeare; a response to him would of course be that Shakespeare has always been appropriated on behalf of various positions.

[6] Holderness (73-89) has in a similar way returned to the wider issues surrounding Shakespeare's canonisation.

existence of this "Shakespeare". This explains why this essay, despite its title, is not so much about Shakespeare as about the process that culminates in the felt need for a national poet. It also explains why this essay has adopted a comparative methodology that begins with the wider cultural considerations that go hand in hand with the position. Shakespeare is not great in and of himself—greatness is thrust upon him because he can be refashioned to suit. His case demonstrates conclusively that national writers need not be epic poets, despite the weight of the epic tradition, and many other countries deviate from the epic template in similar ways.

However, even this is not enough to unravel the complex history that lies behind the emergence of such figures. By displacing the energy of the imperialist project onto specially defined categories of ethnic and gendered identity, Virgil sets up a template that can be removed from the epic and applied to other literary forms. Of course this is what happens with Shakespeare, but something is still missing, and that is the gendered part of the equation. Forget wee Willy Shakespeare and his menfriends at the pinnacle: the confluence of masculinity and empire needs much further exploration. After all, there has to be a reason women national writers seem to be very rare.

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