Shakespeare in Germany: Critical Reception and Translation

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I. Earlier Beginnings in the 18th Century

Shakespeare’s plays were widely received in German Theatre Houses and in school education—in the original language as well as in translations. This rich reception is due to their popularity and to their appreciation by German writers and audiences in the last 300 years. It all began in the 18th century when German critics were more and more influenced by the aesthetic value of these plays and by the attempts of German writers to translate them. From the very beginning of this reception there was a strong relationship between the characters in the plays and the ideals of character-building in German school education. More and more these audiences turned away from other continental models like the French and Italian way of rational and formalistic rules, which followed for example the prescriptions of the three unities of space, time, and action. More and more also we can witness an appropriation of what Shakespeare himself seems to imply when he uses the verb to “translate” and its derivatives like “translation.” He scarcely implies the linguistic rendering of one word into another language, but he goes far beyond this linguistic equation by referring to a state of mind when he talks of translation. So the verb “to transform” or the noun “transformation” would be more appropriate when Shakespeare uses these words. We can see this figurative meaning for instance in the words of the fool Touchstone threatening his rival William, a country fellow, in As You Like It: “to wit, I kill thee, make thee away, translate thy life into death, thy liberty into bondage” (V, 1, 51f.). His translation really instigates a change of mind or of form, which he also uses in Hamlet (II, 2, 4f.). There Claudius welcomes the good old friends of his stepson Hamlet, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, to quiz them about Hamlet’s “transformation.”

Something have you heard
Of Hamlet’s transformation—I call it,
Sith nor th’ exterior nor the inward man
Resembles that it was.

The noun “transformation” indicates the change of mind of young Hamlet, who, under the impression of his father’s sudden death and his mother’s hastened marriage with Claudius, the successor to his father’s throne, suspects this usurper of an illegal action against his father’s life. So this noun as the noun “translation” describes an unintended change of body and soul into a different state. The noun might describe an entry into a minor state of existence, but we should remember that in the Elizabethan age many translations of classical texts occurred such as Ovid’s translation by Golding in 1567 or of Homer’s epic poems by George Chapman in 1614. We might also recall Hoby’s Castiglione, Florio’s Montaigne or of course North’s Plutarch.

This spirit of translation gained ground in the early 18th century, after a long-time when Shakespeare’s plays were represented by “strolling players,” small groups of English actors who were applauded in German courts and play-houses for performing lively and unruly plays which defied the fashionable plays of the French schools. So Shakespeare’s plays, long before being read and/or translated, were widely discussed in Germany as the new model of dramatic art. Also the moralistic weeklies by Addison and Steele made him known as “the man about town” or as the spokesman of a new middle-class society who gained more and more influence in the small German towns. It was a secret revolution against French supremacy and French rhetoric which followed the steps of the great bloody revolution throughout the continent. In Germany, this change initiated a process of self-scrutiny and self-definition which went along with a liberation of the mind and eventually coincided with the birth of a new age of reason and of classical writing named after Goethe and Schiller, whose reception and esteem of the English upstart made him “the third classical writer on German soil.” So the foundations for the Shakespeare-myth in Germany were laid over two hundred and fifty years ago in an age of political unrest and social change. Around the mid-eighteenth century the spark of Shakespeare-mania was ignited by an early translation of Julius Caesar in 1741, when the Prussian Ambassador C. W. von Borck started to translate Shakespeare’s play in iambic pentameters and when Christoph Martin Wieland began his translations of twenty-two Shakespeare’s plays in prose for a broader public,