

The Cultic Debt

Péter Dávidházi, *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare: Literary Reception in Anthropological Perspective*
London: MacMillan Press;
New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Péter Dávidházi ends the "Preface" of his recently published book with a statement that, read retrospectively, is too modest. He writes that "it was there [Trinity College, Cambridge], in the college of such admired authors of my youth as Frazer, Whitehead, Russel and Wittgenstein that I realised the utter hopelessness, yet the unquestionable obligation of trying to repay at least a fraction of what we receive" (p. XIII). The modesty seems exaggerated, for the quality of Dávidházi's book demonstrates that it is hardly a doomed endeavour to make up for what one has received.

The ambition of the book is to employ religion or cult as an analogy for the reception of Shakespeare during the Romantic era and for the cultural ramifications of this reception up to the present. The analogy between religious behaviour and literary reception has long been applied in Shakespeare criticism, but until now it has generally

been used with either humorous or pejorative connotations. Dávidházi, however, treats Shakespeare's Romantic reception as a bona-fide cult, tracing its emergence, clarifying its underlying Romantic concepts (e.g. genius), and charting its evolution in Germany, France, Hungary, Poland and Russia. He also deciphers the significance of the Romantic reception in terms of its influence on the cultural developments of the countries under investigation.

The meticulous description of how the Romantics appropriated Shakespeare begins with a rigorous discussion of the concepts and methodological principles of an interdisciplinary theoretical framework for an anthropology of literature. After establishing the limitations of the cult analogy and introducing it only as a heuristic device, Dávidházi goes on to define the three aspects of a literary cult; which are an attitude of unconditional reverence, verbal and non-verbal rituals, and a quasi-religious use of language where claims are regarded as unquestionable truths. The survey of the three main aspects of the cult is carried out according to three methodological principles. The first is an anthropological holism which claims that, by focusing on all significant

manifestations of literary cults, "an amazingly elaborate system emerges out of phenomena that used to be taken as nothing but incoherent ... pieces from the periphery of intellectual life" (p. 23). This is the principle that makes it possible to include details considered so far to be meaningless. The second principle is the suspension of judgements, especially value judgements, which follows from the first principle, since it is precisely the premature judgement that excludes a large body of data that bears upon Shakespeare's reception in the Romantic era. The third principle comes into play when the agnosticism of the second principle is abandoned after the "historical functions" (p. 30) have been analysed to assess "the indirect cultural productivity" (p. 31) of the cult.

The cult itself is the topic of the two subsequent chapters. Chapter two deals with the cult in English Romanticism, from the first Shakespeare Jubilee of 1769 at Stratford to the tercentenary festival held in 1864. The Shakespeare cult during Romanticism began with David Garrick's Jubilee at Stratford, which established the ritual archetype of the literary cult. The ritual included a pattern of religious associations ranging from the experience of symbolic

communitas ("the abolition of the temporary differences of a worldly hierarchy for the sake of restoring the ultimate unity of an other-worldly order" [p. 36]) culminating in a communion-like drinking to the memory of the Bard. Even the absence of any performance of a Shakespearean play is integrated into the general pattern as the sign of mystification or of quasi-deification. Furthermore, the mixture of the farcical with the solemn is convincingly made to follow half-consciously the atmosphere of an archaic religious festival. Once Shakespeare had become a cultic figure to be worshipped in a secularised manner, it is not surprising that critical language turned away from Dryden's balanced critical approach to a secular theodicy inferring from the assumed perfection and complexity of the plays the super-human qualities of the author. Stratford slowly turned into a cultic place where pilgrims collected relics and sought illumination at Shakespeare's shrine.

The nineteenth century witnessed the social integration of the literary cult. The first significant step was taken when April 23 (St. George's Day) was adopted as the day of Shakespeare's birth and death; indeed, from 1824 it was the figure of St. George who led the

jubilee procession. The success of the symbolic unification of the literary saint and patriot paved the way for a further step. Some years later, George IV adopted April 23 as his own birthday and began to patronise the Shakespeare Club, which in turn became the Royal Shakespeare Club. As a consequence, the motto of the 1864 jubilee was "The King, the Poet, and the Patron Saint." The unity of monarchist, literary and religious loyalties meant the full institutionalisation of the cult as well as the replacement of the charismatic founder (Garrick) with official committees and of *communitas* with separation according to social hierarchy. Moreover, the transcendental commitment was backed up by the pillars of Victorian society so as to reinforce "the moral structure of Victorian ideology" (p. 101). The jubilee of 1864 thus meant the end of the English quasi-religious Romantic attitude to Shakespeare. The cult, however, was not confined to England but also appeared in other European countries such as Hungary.

The birth and development of the Shakespeare cult in Hungary follows a different pattern from the English. Dávidházi distinguishes five stages in its life. The first is the period of "initiation" from the 1770s to the 1830s;

the second is the period of "mysthicizing" from the 1840s to the 1860s; the third the period of "institutionalization" from the 1860s to the 1920s; the fourth the period of "iconoclasm" from the 1920s to the 1950s; and the fifth the period of "secularization and revival" from the 1960s onwards. Chapter three traces the evolution of the cult from its initiation to its institutionalisation. The initiation of the Shakespeare cult in Hungary meant the process of learning to revere Shakespeare without reading his works. The analysis of the earliest documents reveals that the function of these pronouncements extended beyond Shakespeare in that they "fostered the growth of Hungarian culture" (p. 111) through teaching "how to publish and buy, how to bury and how to worship an author" (p. 118). During this first period of the cult, translations were either not required at all or, when attempted, did not aim at textual fidelity. However, appraisals of Shakespeare at this period did not draw their metaphors from the realm of religion.

The 1840s, in contrast, brought about changes in attitude and signalled a new epoch in the Hungarian Shakespeare cult. The age of "mysthicizing" formulated a coherent and consis-

tent rhetoric of deification. This quasi-theology was advanced by at least fifteen authors ranging from Bertalan Szemere and Károly Szász to Sándor Petőfi and Ferenc Toldy. It consisted of ideas claiming that Shakespeare, like God, could create *ex nihilo*; that he could resurrect the dead; that his work was similar to divine revelation; that his birthplace should be venerated like the birthplace of Jesus; and that his coming had cosmological and eschatological significance (see p. 137).

The quasi-religious language of Shakespeare's reception during this period was fostered by the aesthetic ideals and the historical needs of Hungarian intellectuals. Dávidházi's analysis demonstrates that there was a melding of the psychological functions of art and religion in the works of critics in the period. There was also insistent reference to the Poet in nurturing patriotism: he was seen to convey divine orders to his community. What was also characteristic of the Hungarian cult was a desired uniformity of attitude, language and behaviour. The assumptions of critics who tried to teach the ignorant audience were twofold. They believed that there was only one appropriate response to a work of art and that the theatre-going audience

should be educated to behave in a manner that would conceal their ignorance and lack of refinement.

The next stage in the development of the cult was the period of "institutionalization," which saw the foundation of a Shakespeare Committee and the publication of the first complete edition of Shakespeare in Hungarian. This phase paved the way for a new principle of translating Shakespeare. The Shakespeare Committee had to convince the literary public that Shakespeare's plays were to be translated as they were. The new standard that no substantial cuts were allowed brought about a new apologetic genre of criticism. The task of the advocates of textual fidelity was to explain that the plays, understood properly, did not lead to the moral corruption of the audience.

To prepare the way for a proper evaluation of the Shakespeare cult, Dávidházi devotes the next chapter (Chapter four) to the establishment of a typology for its evolution. After clarifying the distinctions between church, sect and cult, Dávidházi locates the manifestations of the Shakespeare cult in its similarities to and differences from church and sect. To describe the cult more fully and to point out its

permutations in different countries, Dávidházi applies three models of cult formation. These are the “the old psychopathology model, the ... entrepreneur model and the subculture model” (p. 170). The psychopathology and entrepreneur models are both triggered by an individual, in the former case as a response to a personal and social crisis, and in the latter as a business-like enterprise resulting in wealth, power, glory and entertainment. The subculture model differs from the other two in that it emerges as the product of a group of equals to compensate for their common failure to seize rare and non-existing goods. The English emergence of the cult resembles the entrepreneur or business-like model in having David Garrick as its founder, with his yearning for profit and fame. The Hungarian formation of the cult reveals similarities with the subculture model (or rather with a modification of it that Dávidházi calls the “community model because it is assimilated into the mainstream culture too easily to be called *subculture*” [p. 173]). Dávidházi goes on to analyse the formation of the cultic behaviour in countries such as Germany, France, Poland, Russia and Hungary. After having described the differences, Dávidházi claims that there

were two basic types that the Shakespeare cult took on the Continent. The first type is the French one, which is characterised by aesthetic and patriotic resistance, and which can be deciphered in the Polish and Russian Romantic reception of Shakespeare. The second is the German type, which is reverential, and which “after a brief hesitation gave up the idea of open, whole-scale and programmatic resistance” (p. 193). The Hungarian Romantic attitude is closer to the latter model.

Once Dávidházi has provided the reader with a typology for the Shakespeare cult that is founded upon a wide range of Romantic verbal and non-verbal cultic behaviour, we are prepared for an informed evaluation of the Shakespeare cult. Dávidházi explains its Janus-faced impact on criticism and its contribution to the ritualization of culture, the formation of *communitas*, the foundation of theatres, and the formation of audiences. All these largely positive influences substantiate his sober judgement that “the cult was the mid-wife at the birth of many cultural values and it fostered their growth more significantly than it ever hindered the development of others” (p. 208).

The positive value-judgement concluding the book leads the reader

back to the "Preface." The profundity of thought and range of scholarship that this book reveals makes us doubt "the utter hopelessness [of repaying] at least a fraction of what we receive." A book that can make sense of details that have been dismissed as irrelevant up till now and that can re-position phenomena deemed marginal has not only "repaid"

what has been given, but has re-created something of similar value. Indebtedness has thus been handed down to the reader: "feeling the utter hopelessness, yet the unquestionable obligation, of trying to repay at least a fraction of what we receive."

ZSOLT ALMÁSI

The Author Resurrected

Richard Holmes, *Early Visions*
(London: Harper Collins, 1998).

Richard Holmes, *Darker Reflections*
(London: Harper Collins, 1998).

"For in this bleak World of Mutabilities, & where what is not changed, is chilled, and this winter-time of my own Being, I resemble a Bottle of Brandy in Spitzbergen – a Dream of alcoholic Fire in the centre of a Cake of Ice" (*D* p. 550)¹ – wrote Coleridge at the age of fifty-four, and his self-portrait may well indicate not only the reasons why Wordsworth deemed him a "rotten drunkard" and "an absolute nuisance in the Family" (*D* p. 214), but also why he

declared that he was "the most wonderful man" he had ever known (*E* p. xiii).

Since Coleridge has indeed been accused of misdeeds such as habitual drunkenness, opium addiction, neglect of parental duties and, above all, plagiarism (let us accept this term for the moment), Richard Holmes feels the need to present an interpretation that opposes to the "hostile" (*E* p. 376) ones of Hazlitt, Fruman or Lefebure through attempting to answer the "one vital question: what made Coleridge [...] such an extraordinary man, such an extraordinary mind?" (*E* p. xiii)

Even if the reader might think that Coleridge has no need for defence given the huge amount of texts written by and on him (e.g. the less "hostile" J. L. Lowes, J. Beer, W. J. Bate or R. Ashton), they would have good reasons for taking his own mocking phrase

¹ References in the text are to pages of *Early Visions* (*E*) and *Darker Reflections* (*D*).