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Jean-Christophe Mayer

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Shakespeare and the Origins of European Culture Wars

Jean-Christophe Mayer, CNRS and Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3

As both national and European politics have come under increasing criticism in the aftermath of the major 2008 financial crisis, which continues to affect most European economies, politicians have been tempted to divert their peoples' attention by focusing less on practical policy building and more on culture wars. Thus, issues such as sexual freedom, ethnic diversity, migrancy, or individuals' relationship to the state have come to the fore and are dividing Europe, as they become subjects of bitter wrangles, not only between politicians of various nations, but also between Europeans themselves.

The idea of culture wars is not new. In the late 1970s political expert Ronald Inglehart argued that in western societies what he called "postmaterialist" values were becoming more important than traditional "materialist values" (such as the state's role in a market economy) (Inglehart, 1977). In other words, and according to Inglehart, as differences between major parties were less marked, societies tended to be structured by cultural feuds and oppositions. More recently, political scholar and columnist Michael Behrent pointed out that public issues in Europe at the moment were shaped and influenced by culture war notions.¹ Sociologists, such as Irene Taviss Thomson, remarked, however, that "there is, of course, an intuitive appeal – a surface plausibility – to the culture war idea", but that cultural wars were more a means of diverting people's attention from unresolved economic and political problems (Thomson, 2012: 12). The cultural war idea has in fact been used in public debates although no serious study has proved its actual sociological reality.

Be that as it may, cultural wars have affected and are affecting every corner of society including literary studies. As the world's most popular playwright, Shakespeare and his works

have been the site of much cultural – and sometimes bitter – argument.² Shakespeare and literature in general may seem far remote from European cultural and political issues, but in fact, Shakespeare, like other authors with strong societal auras, can be seen as particularly useful cultural tools. As Douglas Lanier noted, Shakespeare is now “a resource for doing certain kinds of cultural work” (Lanier, 2002: 14).

This was not always the case. In what follows, I shall argue that – from a historical point of view – Shakespeare became engulfed in cultural wars in the eighteenth century, precisely at a time when the public sphere was expanding greatly. As we shall see, like other cultural figures, Shakespeare was used to express various agendas and as a means of broaching political and even European issues. By focusing on the beginning of Shakespearean culture wars in the eighteenth century between the two super-powers of the time (France and England), I hope to raise our awareness of how cultural forms, and literature in particular, can structure public and diplomatic discourse and be appropriated, manipulated, and become instruments in a covert and at times overt race for political hegemony.

So, let us first concentrate on where the story began: the first half of the eighteenth century, when the question of cultural and political dominance between European nations, and more specifically between England and France, really affirmed itself in the field of literature.

François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire, was a French eighteenth-century man of letters, philosopher and also, to some extent, cultural ambassador of neo-classical values. In exile in England for almost three years from 1726 to 1728, Voltaire went to the theatre at a time when England was gaining ground politically and internationally, but when Shakespeare was almost an unknown entity in France and on the continent. Voltaire, who was at times very critical of the political system in his own country saw England’s constitutional monarchy as more progressive than France’s absolutist system, but his views of the arts and of Shakespeare

in particular were more mitigated. Voltaire admired Shakespeare for being “natural and sublime”, naturalness being a quality arguably lacking in French theatre of the period, but there was much in Shakespeare that disagreed with the neo-classical aesthetics which were dominating so much of Europe at the time, under the aegis of France. In his *Lettres philosophiques*, composed about 1729 and first printed in English in 1733 under the title *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, he wrote:

The shining Monsters of *Shakespear*, give infinite more Delight than the judicious Images of the Moderns. Hitherto the poetical Genius of the *English* resembles a tufted Tree planted by the Hand of Nature, that throws out a thousand Branches at random, and spreads unequally, but with great Vigour. It dies if you attempt to force its Nature, and to lop and dress it in the same Manner as the Trees of the Garden of *Marli*. (Besterman (ed.), 1967: 50)

Marly was a castle built under the reign of Louis XIV whose gardens were famous for being pristine. While the description is a touch condescending, the horticultural metaphor also underlines in passing the potential for growth of the arts in England and perhaps already their potential for growing wildly and for invading other gardens and well-kept neo-classical territories such as France. During the first half of the eighteenth century, Voltaire continued nevertheless to see Britain as more advanced than France, politically speaking, and confessed his admiration for English philosophy and science to his friend, the British merchant and later diplomat Sir Everard Fawkener in the dedication of his play *Zaire* in 1736:

You have to submit yourselves to the rules of our theatre, as we have to embrace your philosophy. We have made as good investigations of the human heart as you have in physics. The art of giving pleasure seems to belong to the French, while yours appears to be the art of thinking.

[Vous devez vous soumettre au règles de notre théâtre, comme nous devons embrasser votre philosophie. Nous avons fait d'aussi bonnes experiences sur le coeur humain que vous sur la physique. L'art de plaire semble l'art des Français, et l'art de penser paraît le vôtre] (Voltaire, 1877: vol. 2, 554)

Voltaire's attitude changed gradually during the second half of the eighteenth century, as both the cultural and political terrain shifted. The Seven Years' War, which was in effect a world war involving several European nations from 1756 to 1763, but which also set Great Britain against the Bourbon dynasty (France and Spain) over trade and colonial dominion, no doubt precipitated these changes. The cultural balance was also shifting – Shakespeare's fame began to grow in Europe as Britain sought to establish its cultural and political authority and the playwright was appropriated increasingly to serve English nationalist agendas.

On the cultural terrain, a few significant salvos were fired, as a couple of articles translated from the English and comparing Shakespeare to Corneille and Otway to Racine appeared respectively in October and November 1760 in the French *Journal encyclopédique*. Both articles underlined the English authors' superiority. Not long after, in December 1760, Voltaire shared his displeasure in a letter to Marie de Vichy de Chamrond. Interestingly, the letter refers simultaneously to the loss of the city of Pondicherry on the Indian subcontinent (one of France's colonial outposts besieged by the English in 1760) and to the claim of Shakespeare's alleged superiority:

(...) and, for that matter, I'm angry at the English. Not only is it my belief that they've taken our Pondicherry, but they've just printed that their Shakespeare is far superior to Corneille.

[(...) D'ailleurs je suis fâché contre les Anglais. Non seulement ils m'ont pris Pondicheri à ce que je crois, mais ils viennent d'imprimer que leur Shakespear est infiniment supérieur à Corneille] (Besterman (ed.), 1967: 62)

Voltaire also aired his views publicly in 1761 in his “Appeal to all nations of Europe regarding the judgement of an English writer” (“Appel à toutes les nations de l’Europe des jugements d’un écrivain anglais”). In this work, Voltaire pointed out that Shakespeare, unlike Racine for instance, was hardly known outside Britain and called upon all nations “from Saint Petersburg to Naples” to decide whether he was right and – implicitly – to support French cultural supremacy.³ As the Seven Years’ War was still not over, Voltaire began working on an edition of Corneille in 1762. That same year, Henry Home, Lord Kames, brought out his *Elements of Criticism*, in which he wrote rather disparaging words on Corneille and Racine – even ridiculing passages in some of their work – and sang the praises of Shakespeare. Voltaire reviewed Kames’s book in the *Gazette Littéraire* in April 1764 in a tone that was part angry, part ironical, as Voltaire wondered obliquely how a Scottish judge like Kames who wrote on literature as well as gardening could pretend to become an arbiter of taste (Besterman (ed.), 1967: 88).

That same year, in a letter to the Count and Countess of Argental, Voltaire talked about his review of Kames’s *Elements*, and made the following extraordinary statement:

As long as the British have been content to take our vessels and seize Canada and Pondicherry, I have been content to maintain a noble silence. But now that they push barbarity to the point of finding Racine and Corneille ridiculous, I have to take up arms.

[Tant que les Anglais se sont contentés de prendre nos vaisseaux et de s’emparer du Canada et de Pondicheri, j’ai gardé un noble silence. Mais à présent qu’ils poussent la barbarie jusqu’à trouver Racine et Corneille ridicules, je dois prendre les armes] (Voltaire, 1953-65, liv, 42).

Voltaire ceased to be diplomatic as soon as he perceived that literature, and Shakespeare in particular, was employed for nationalistic reasons by the British. This may

explain why he had chosen to treat warfare and literature separately until then, but now employed a military vocabulary as a form of resistance to what he considered as attempts on the part of the British to establish their cultural as well as military dominance. Of course, losing battles in the two main theatres of the Seven Years' War, North America and India, was no mere detail and while Voltaire could be intellectually dismissive about these losses, they would nonetheless lead ultimately to Britain's linguistic and cultural dominance in those parts of the world. In other words, French cultural dominance was on its way out.

More than a decade later, with the war of American independence serving as a backdrop this time, the cultural battle around Shakespeare continued to rage between the British and the French. In 1776, the first complete translation into French of Shakespeare's works by Pierre Le Tourneur was published. The twenty volumes, in which Le Tourneur praised Shakespeare with an enthusiasm that was also self-serving, were sold by subscription. Voltaire was horrified to discover that King Louis XVI was at the top of the list of subscribers, as well as other persons from all over Europe. The writer and philosopher Denis Diderot had also ordered six copies, which, for Voltaire, was the equivalent of high treason. What upset Voltaire particularly was that he himself had been partly responsible for this situation and had let the enemy inside the walls through his early-mitigated praise of Shakespeare at a time when hardly anyone had heard of him. Voltaire's words were blunt as he wrote again to the Count of Argental in 1776:

It was I who was the first to speak of this Shakespeare at an earlier time; it was I who was the first to show the French people some pearls that I found in his huge heap of dung.

[C'est moi qui autrefois parlai le premier de ce Shakespear; c'est moi qui le premier montrai au Français quelques perles que j'avais trouvées dans son énorme fumier] (Besterman (ed.), 1967: 175)

Voltaire was exaggerating his distaste for Shakespeare of course. What annoyed him most was the wave of Anglomania that was threatening to submerge France at a time when the British seemed still in a position to crush the hopes of the American revolutionaries whom Voltaire supported. To counter what he perceived as an assault also on French culture and values, he asked his friend Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, who was secretary of the *Académie française*, to read out a letter of protest. The letter, in which Voltaire underlined Shakespeare's shortcomings and criticized Kames's disrespectful treatment of Racine in his *Elements of Criticism*, was read out on 25 August 1776 at the *Académie* in the presence of the British ambassador and Elizabeth Montagu, who had specifically attacked Voltaire in her *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare* (1769). Revealingly, Voltaire's correspondence in those months is full of military vocabulary, as he saw himself waging war and conducting battles under "General" D'Alembert, as he calls him in one of his letters (Besterman (ed.), 1967, pp. 182-3).

D'Alembert himself had fully embraced Voltaire's project and delivering his friend's speech to the *Académie* was like accomplishing a warlike mission. In a letter written a few days before the speech was aired, D'Alembert hoped that French men of letters would accomplish a better mission on the terrain of cultural warfare than French generals and soldiers did on the battlefield. He also had vowed to punish all traitors:

At last, my dear master, the battle has begun and the signal has been given. Either Shakespear or Racine will be left standing; we have to show these sad and insolent English that our men of letters can fight them better than our soldiers and our generals. Unfortunately, there are quite a few deserters and false brothers among those men of letters. But the deserters will be caught and hanged; what annoys me is that the fat of these hanged men will be good for nothing; for they are quite dry and lean. Adieu, my

dear and illustrious friend. As I mount the charge on Sunday, I shall cry ‘Long live Saint Denis and Voltaire, and death to George Shakespear!’

[Enfin, mon cher maître, voilà la bataille engagée et le signal donné. Il faut que Shakespear ou Racine demeurent sur la place; il faut faire voir à ces tristes & insolens Anglois, que nos gens de lettres savent mieux se battre contre eux que nos soldats & nos généraux. Malheureusement il y a parmi ces gens de lettres bien des déserteurs et des faux frères. Mais les déserteurs seront pris & pendus; ce qui me fâche, c’est que la graisse de ces pendus ne sera bonne à rien; car ils sont bien secs et bien maigres. Adieu, mon cher et illustre ami. Je crierai dimanche en allant à la charge, Vive s^t Denis Voltaire & meure George Shakespear!]⁴

Clearly, Shakespeare’s reputation was at the centre of a war of words, but also of deeds. While, in the past, Voltaire had had a measure of admiration for some aspects of Shakespeare’s works, as well as for the English constitutional system, he was now forced to fight against what he no doubt considered as a form of “regressive nationalism” (Prince, 2012: 282), which mobilized Shakespeare as an instrument in a war of propaganda.

The British had in fact also been using warlike language to defend Shakespeare against Voltaire’s attacks for quite a while. In his review of Samuel Johnson’s edition of Shakespeare in 1765, William Guthrie accused Johnson of pandering to French taste too much and of judging Shakespeare by “the rules of the French academy”, whereas, according to Guthrie:

[Shakespeare] proceeds by storm. He knows nothing of regular approaches to the fort of the human heart. He effects his breach by the weight of his metal, and makes his lodgement though the enemy’s artillery is thundering round him from every battery of criticism, learning, and even probability (*apud* Rhodes, 2004: 220)

Shakespeare had been used in England as a counter-establishment writer in the first half of the eighteenth century. Indeed, in the words of Michael Dobson, “Shakespeare became

national poet in the 1730s as an Opposition playwright rather than an Establishment one” (Dobson, 1992: 136). Shakespeare’s defenders in those days were part of the Patriots, an anti-Walpole faction within the Whig party, which often used Shakespeare criticism and quotations to criticize the government, particularly in *The Craftsman*, a newspaper that was an important Patriot mouthpiece. Yet, in the second half of the eighteenth century, Shakespeare was appropriated by the agents of a more conservative British nationalism, to which progressive men like Voltaire could react violently.

In his correspondence with D’Alembert, Voltaire expressed his disappointment at seeing the American Revolution apparently failing. However, the former encouraged him to carry on the fight against bardolatry in France, because, as D’Alembert put it, “since philosophy and reason have been conquered in New York, they must at least prevail in their own small domain” (*apud* Prince, 2012: 288). That, in Voltaire’s mind, Shakespeare’s rise to prominence was allied with British imperialism, and its concurrent desire to crush American liberties, is made extremely evident in his letter of October 1776 to French statesman Jacques Necker:

You are a great man, Sir, yourself, but I will never let Shakespeare become a fearful figure for France, one for whom Corneille and Racine could be burnt at the stake. I tend to be on the same side as those we call the American insurgents – I do not wish to be a slave to the English.

[Grand homme vous même, Monsieur; mais je ne consentirai jamais que Shakespear en soit un si redoutable pour la France, et qu’on lui immole Corneille et Racine. Je suis assez comme ceux qu’on appelle les insurgens d’Amérique, je ne veux point être l’esclave des Anglais] (Besterman, 1967 : 215)

Conclusion

As we know, Voltaire was wrong about the fate of the American Revolution, but his nightmare of British cultural dominance through Shakespeare turned out to be true in some regards.

Shakespeare entered the sphere of respected printed literature first through his folios and in the ensuing series of eighteenth-century editions. Despite their still controversial nature and the multiple wrangles between editors, eighteenth-century textual studies made great strides thanks to Shakespeare and to the dual enterprise of establishing his text and developing reliable philological tools – Samuel Johnson’s mutually dependent projects of a *Dictionary* (1755) and of an edition of Shakespeare’s works (1765) being good examples.

While early eighteenth-century critics had sought excuses for what could be considered as wild extravagances in the works of Shakespeare, when compared to French neo-classical norms in particular, the various conflicts which set the British nation against its neighbours and particularly France changed the way the national corpus of literature came to be regarded by the end of the century. A number of Shakespearean plays, where the theme of international relations was prominent, and which lent themselves well to topical interpretations, were of course popular: *Henry V*, *Coriolanus* or *Cymbeline* especially, served such purposes (Prince, 2012: 277).

By the end of the eighteenth century, Shakespeare was on safer textual ground and was being exported to other lands and to the confines of the British colonial empire. This was partly the Shakespeare that Voltaire disliked so much – one whose works, especially after the French Revolution – ceased to be regarded as a disordered garden, but became synonymous with “notions of order, self-restraint and authority” (Prince, 2012: 291) and were in fact set against Republican disorder. Thus, Edmund Burke would use Shakespeare to try to “impose order on the chaos of the French Revolution” (*ibidem*). Yet Voltaire’s pessimism was, of course, largely blind to the fact that Shakespeare would be repeatedly transformed, appropriated by other countries and could again become an instrument of cultural and political negotiation between nations other than the British and the French. As the British had liberated themselves from the

yoke of French neoclassicism, they themselves had to resist the rise of German Romanticism in the early nineteenth century, the German Romantics famously seeing Shakespeare as theirs: “ganz unser” (completely ours), as August Wilhelm Schlegel called him) (Paulin, 2012: 323), thus opening the way for further national appropriations of Shakespeare worldwide.

Shakespeare’s works, like other important art forms, continue to be at the heart of culture wars today. That art forms are exploited in this way poses an important problem for any society. Crucial art will always be appropriated, and this is a normal process – it is its manipulation by political or market forces that threatens societies. Indeed, a society or a group of nations such as the European union suffers from those who claim that culture wars exist and that they are tied to that other great fantasy: the clash of civilizations. If this were true, as sociologist Irene Taviss Thomson points out again,

A society experiencing a culture war would face grave difficulties. It would lack common standards and assumptions, and as a result, the ability to make public policy decisions would be severely compromised. Indeed, a society without such common ground could barely function. (Thomson, 2010: 12)

Fortunately, not everyone buys into the fantasy of the superiority of certain values in the current so-called culture war, in which famous European artists can be manipulated in order to stand for alleged decent values. Even a quick look at Shakespearean academic criticism or at current theatrical productions would be enough to dispel these illusions. However appealing and politically convenient the idea of culture wars in Europe might be, it relies on a misconception touching the notion of culture itself. Since the end of the twentieth century, the concept of culture has come under scrutiny in academic circles. How could culture wars be a social reality, when social reality itself is devoid of concrete structures, coherence and stability?

Those of us who study Shakespearean adaptation, for instance, know full well that culture is more akin to a “toolkit”, or a “repertoire of skills and styles”, with which artists create mediations and pastiches (Thomson, 2010, 13). It is my hope that this brief exploration of the origins of and reasons for the exploitation of Shakespeare’s works for nationalistic and ideological reasons has gone some way towards throwing light on these issues.

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¹ For Behrent’s views, see Dujin (2019: 3).

² For an example of these debates at the height of the influence of New Historicism in literary studies see Kamps, 1991.



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³ *Appel à toutes les nations de l'Europe des jugements d'un écrivain anglais*, in *Voltaire on Shakespeare*, in Besterman (ed.), 1967: pp. 63-80.

⁴ D'Alembert, *Letter to Voltaire* (20 August 1776), in Besterman (ed.), 1967: note 6, pp. 180-182.