

CHAPTER I

OLD TRADITIONS AND NEW BEGINNINGS

'Our' Shakespeare, or: the bard in the rucksack

When the war broke out in August 1914 theatres all over Germany were thrown into disarray. Many men on the technical staffs were called up, as were numbers of younger actors such as Erwin Piscator; others, like Alexander Moissi and Heinrich George volunteered, while scores of actresses went off to work in hospitals and relief organizations. The season opened one to two months later than usual. This was the result not only of a reduction in personnel but also of conflicting notions about the function and role of theatre in time of war. What later on was to be called the 'Kriegstheaterdebatte'¹ began in 1914 with hurried consultations among the heads of the court theatres whether authors from hostile nations should still be performed. Few went so far as the head of the Königliches Schauspielhaus in Dresden who advocated the total exclusion of all foreign dramatists. Most were content with the compromise to retain foreign authors of classical status but to stop performing living authors from enemy countries. There was no overall policy such as was to govern the theatres during the Second World War under the notorious Department T (for Theatre) in Joseph Goebbels's Ministry of Propaganda; at this earlier period theatres were free to decide for themselves on the extent of their contribution to the war effort. As court theatres they were, however, sensitive to the European family connections of the ruling prince and his circle, or – as municipal theatres – to the wishes and temper of the public.

At the beginning, furthermore, it was felt that the spirit of levity informing many of the Comedies did not match the seriousness of the hour. But the counter-argument that people needed relief from present worries gained ground as the war lasted longer than the 'Back by Christmas'-optimists had predicted. Good patriotic plays being few and other ways of directly

¹ See *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch* 54 (1918), 100. Sparked off by a Freiburg town councillor declaring that 'patriotism can do without theatre' the controversy called forth immediate reactions, among others a booklet by Ludwig Seelig, *Krieg und Theater* (Mannheim, 1916), and generally produced more heat than light.

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furthering the German cause limited, many theatres, in the flush of the initial victories, contributed 'patriotic evenings' giving expression to the emotional needs of the time in rousing programmes of texts, music and song. These are not to be confused with the so-called 'Morgenfeiern', high-toned gatherings on Sunday mornings that now found increasing acceptance. Dedicated theatre managements had created this form of moral and aesthetic regeneration long before the war to raise the general tone of their audiences and to demonstrate seriousness of purpose by a combination of readings of poetry and prose, of music and short addresses on subjects of artistic or ethical import. It was a form of structured communication that proved eminently adaptable to changing requirements and moods. As the war dragged on and the demand for ever lighter entertainment from the theatres increased, these 'Morgenfeiern' represented a counter-balance; they justified the theatre's claim to be – in Schiller's phrase – 'the moral academy of the nation', and gave guidance and uplift to many.²

That Shakespeare was to be retained on the programme was an unquestioned tenet of belief. For almost 150 years, certainly since the unique Schlegel translations at the turn of the eighteenth century, Shakespeare had been regarded as a German author. The intense preoccupation with Shakespeare of practically all German writers of the 'Storm and Stress', the Classical and the Romantic movements had turned him into a landmark in German intellectual history. Many memorable phrases from his plays, notably *Hamlet*, had passed into general speech. Büchmann's *Geflügelte Worte* lists more quotations from Shakespeare than any other foreign writer. During the course of the nineteenth century his plays had found increasing acceptance on the German stage and were by now the most frequently performed of all dramatists, German or foreign. Under the challenge of their unclassical structure important theatre reforms had been set in motion ranging from reconsiderations in dramaturgy to alterations in

² Herbert Eulenberg, poet, playwright and dramaturg at the Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf, and Otto Falckenberg at the Kammerspiele in Munich turned the 'Morgenfeiern' into regular institutions. Outside the theatres 'Morgenfeiern' were used to propagate a kind of freethinking, non-denominational religiosity or, during the Nazi period, the then popular blend of heroic vitalism and Germanic idealism. See Richard Hamann and Jost Hermand, *Stilkunst um 1900. Deutsche Kunst und Kultur von der Gründerzeit bis zum Expressionismus* (Berlin, 1967), p. 152, and Stadt Braunschweig (ed.), *300 Jahre Theater in Braunschweig 1690–1900* (Braunschweig, 1990), pp. 416–17. The full story of the 'Morgenfeiern' still remains to be written. It would reveal the cultural and spiritual aspirations of successive generations of theatre practitioners. Many directors thought the 'Morgenfeiern' important enough to include them in their lists of productions.

stage architecture – so that, by the twentieth century, Shakespeare was an established fact in German cultural history and an operative factor on many levels of German cultural life.

It is against this background of Shakespeare's undoubted significance to Germany's cultural identity that the argument about his acceptability for a theatre at war has to be seen. He was regarded as a German author even by the chauvinists whose customary greeting 'Gott strafe England!' ('May God punish the British!') registered the general anger at Albion's perfidy. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's nationality was a problem, and it shows how poisoned the atmosphere was that even a humanist like Gerhart Hauptmann, the great naturalist playwright, felt it necessary to begin his address to the Shakespeare-Gesellschaft in 1915 with the brutal question 'Is the cult of Shakespeare, whom an English mother bore, still permissible in Germany?'³ He spoke of the 'imperishable works of science, art and literature' and said that 'no German of sense would wage war against them'⁴ (little guessing that some of his own works were to be blacklisted twenty years later), and clinched his argument with a claim that was to be made over and over again:

There is no nation, not even the British, which is more entitled to call Shakespeare its own than Germany. Shakespeare's characters have become part of our world, his soul has become one with ours: and though he was born and buried in England it is in Germany that he is truly alive.⁵

The belief in Shakespeare as a German author was shared by many. A professor Hecht, writing from the trenches, declared that 'at a time when we have learnt that Germany has no bitterer foe than the descendants of our poet . . . even amongst us soldiers there is no one who would belittle his glory . . . We believe that we Germans are truer heirs to his genius than his own compatriots who have betrayed their cousins-in-blood for the sake of material gain'.⁶ A year later, a contributor from Vienna investigating 'Shakespeare under the auspices of war' gave a further reason for not relinquishing Shakespeare under the present duress. 'After we have held the crown jewel of another nation firmly in our hands for ages we certainly will not ceremoniously return it on the outbreak of hostilities. We will, on the contrary, guard it all the more scrupulously and enjoy

³ *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch* 51 (1915), vii. ⁴ *Ibid.*, viii. ⁵ *Ibid.*, xii. ⁶ *Ibid.*, vi.

its possession.⁷ Helene Richter's claim was no exception. The dramatist Ludwig Fulda even played with the idea of giving spiritual appropriation, or 'nostrification', the stamp of official sanction. In the eyes of many German Shakespeareans his reasoning appeared perfectly self-evident, though some may have thought his conclusion a little extravagant.

... And above all Shakespeare! He is more frequently performed in Germany during a single year than during a whole decade in his native country. And, what is more important, he is incomparably better performed than over there, incomparably better understood than over there. Our Shakespeare! Thus we may call him, even if he happened to be born in England by mistake. Thus we may call him by right of spiritual conquest. And should we succeed in vanquishing England in the field, we should, I think, insert a clause into the peace treaty stipulating the formal surrender of William Shakespeare to Germany.⁸

Whatever the variations, the arguments point in one direction: possession and ownership. A decade later Brecht and Herbert Ihering were to castigate the fatal German tendency to regard culture as a commodity to be owned, and artistic achievements as exclusive national possessions. German 'Bildungsbürgertum'⁹ according to Ihering had long outlived its original emancipatory task of gaining equality for the bourgeoisie by virtue of education and culture. It had by now reversed the process and transferred its materialist outlook also to cultural matters, as it were annexing culture as a German possession in the true spirit of its imperialist master,

⁷ Helene Richter in *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch* 52 (1916), 160.

⁸ *Deutsche Kultur und Ausländerei* (Leipzig, 1916), pp. 13–14. The question of 'Whose Shakespeare?' also exercised British scholars at the time. See, for example, Balz Engler's summary, 'Shakespeare in the Trenches', *Shakespeare Survey* 1991, 105–11. On the history and the vagaries of the German appropriation of Shakespeare see also Manfred Pfister, 'Germany is Hamlet: The History of a Political Interpretation', *New Comparison* 2 (1986), 106–26 and Werner Habicht, 'Shakespeare and the German Imagination', *International Shakespeare Association, Occasional Paper No. 5* (1994). In view of the powerful international and transcultural influences presently at work in German theatre Habicht concludes 'that "unser Shakespeare" has by now proved to be no more than a "myth" ' (p. 22). It is unlikely to be resurrected, although the grim determination with which every German director hammers out his own version and the number of new translations that keep appearing seems to indicate that the ghost is far from quiet.

⁹ For a sociological analysis of 'Bildungsbürgertum' see Klaus Vondung (ed.), *Das wilhelminische Bildungsbürgertum. Zur Sozialgeschichte seiner Ideen* (Göttingen, 1976). Its ambiguous use of culture as a safeguard against encroachment from below, and the tortuous ideological compromises it accepted in consequence, can best be studied in Hamann and Hermand, *Stilkunst um 1900*, pp. 7–39 et passim.

Wilhelm II.¹⁰ Such a radical critique first bruted in the twenties but soon to be popularized and given a cutting edge by Marxian critics like Georg Lukács, was of course undreamt of when Gerhart Hauptmann and others innocently reclaimed Shakespeare for Germany. What they had in mind had been summed up in 1911 in Friedrich Gundolf's monumental and best-selling study *Shakespeare und der deutsche Geist*.

A more refined appropriation

Gundolf's analysis dissolved the sterile opposition of Classicism and Romanticism in German literary history and explained the ardent struggle for Shakespeare especially during the second half of the eighteenth century as one of the central contests in the history of the German mind. This epoch familiar to all educated Germans had never before been interpreted so convincingly. Goethe, according to Gundolf, realized at a crucial moment that the fruitful development of his own poetic career as well as of German poetry in general depended on overcoming two misconceptions of Shakespeare: that of Shakespeare as an untrammelled and untutored 'Kraftgenie', and the German Romantics' view of poetry as a hieroglyph of reality with Shakespeare as its most ingenious and subtle cryptographer. Goethe himself had been guilty of the first misunderstanding when, during his 'Storm and Stress'-phase, he hailed Shakespeare as the creative power of elemental Nature herself. He soon realized the danger of this position and strove to harness the creative urge to 'principles of inner lawfulness and structured form'.¹¹ In the course of this poetological reversal the ideas of creative fury and Nature as vital chaos which had produced the young Goethe's truculent and rough-hewn tribute to Shakespeare in *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773) were tamed. With *Torquato Tasso* and *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, his plays of the next period less than ten years later, 'culture, indeed cultivated manners and morals, the court, had created their own and proper space: the grove and the garden'.¹² Of course there were losses. During this phase, as Gundolf observed, Goethe either 'did not want to see the pitiless

¹⁰ Ihering even claimed that 'the relationship of the Germans to the classics was Wilhelminian before Wilhelm II existed'. See Reinhardt, *Jessner, Piscator oder Klassikertod?* (Berlin, 1929), p. 6. Bertolt Brecht in 'Gespräch über Klassiker' spoke of the bourgeois 'craze for possessions' which was preventing educators as well as theatre practitioners from making proper use of the classics as 'Material'. *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. xv (*Schriften zum Theater I*) (Frankfurt, 1967), p. 178.

¹¹ Gundolf, *Shakespeare und der deutsche Geist*, 8th edn (Berlin, 1927), p. 310. ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 312.

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power with which Shakespeare hammers out the totality of his characters or, if he saw, did not want to show it'.¹³

Goethe had hardly shifted poetry away from the eruptive unpredictability of the natural genius when an equally insidious danger arose in the shape of the cloudy metaphysics of poetry propagated by the Romantics. Gundolf summed up the resultant struggle in the formula 'Gestalt kontra Bewegung' ('shape versus movement') and explained that for the Romantics who equated life with movement and saw the world with all its realities as the cryptic signature of a mysterious power underneath, the poet's mission consisted in 'liberating the movement of the world imprisoned in the hieroglyphs of reality, redeeming the meaning of the world from the fetters of materiality ...';¹⁴ a task which to their mind Shakespeare fulfilled to a supreme degree. Goethe battled against this mystical Shakespeare of the Romantics in the name of an art in which human history, the moral cosmos and clear meaning mattered, and he strove 'to establish boundaries against the unbounded ... measure against the immoderate and unrestrained'.¹⁵ Shakespeare, as Gundolf observed, spanned and overarched these oppositions. He contained both romantic dream and Goethean reality. He was 'all ordered form and all movement'. The Schlegel translation, it was true, was romantic but of a quality tempered by Goethe's creation of new modes of poetic expression.

'The primal experience of Shakespeare', this is the culmination of Gundolf's argument, could not become a German event – the phrase is his own – 'before a universal soul such as Goethe's had matured German poetic speech to encompass Shakespeare as a whole'.¹⁶ And it was only this timely and happy conjunction of influences and personalities which had allowed, in Schlegel's translation, an absolutely new phenomenon in the history of translation to emerge, namely 'the rebirth of Shakespeare as a German verbal cosmos'.¹⁷ Shakespeare had not merely been inscribed in German mental history, he had become part of the German mind itself, a process of assimilation which finished around 1800. What followed, according to Gundolf, were the efforts of philology and the stage. If anything was lacking in the symbiosis of Shakespeare and the German mind, it was 'the will to reality, Shakespeare's deepest instinct',¹⁸ the conquest of which Gundolf declared to be one of the tasks of the future.

It is easy to see why on such seemingly incontrovertible evidence the Germans felt entitled to claim Shakespeare as their own. Even Goebbels,

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 319. ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 329. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 349. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 354. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

the devil's advocate himself, in decreeing the Schlegel translation as the only legitimate one and banning Rothe's idiosyncratic if racy versions in 1936, must have been under the influence of Gundolf's persuasive and flattering argument.¹⁹ The unnerving German pose as defenders of the true Shakespeare against unwarranted liberties derived directly or indirectly from Gundolf's visionary analysis, in which Shakespeare and the German mind had become indissolubly wedded. It inspired both the condescension with which Germans tended to treat the attempts of other and lesser breeds, the British included, to do justice to Shakespeare as well as their own missionary fervour in matters Shakespearean, for whereas others had Shakespeare only, they had Shakespeare and the German 'Geist'. And 'Geist' as a German prerogative²⁰ was a balm to the German soul even in the hour of defeat until the barbaric 'Ungeist' of Hitler and Himmler razed this bastion for good.

Traditional production styles: Shakespeare on the stage of the Stadttheater

Shakespeare had not only become part of German literary history, he was also well-known to theatre-goers. Between 1900 and 1914 an average of 24 plays was performed by some 200 companies in 1,100 to 1,600 performances each year. *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice* were constant favourites. At the other end of the scale, not unexpectedly, were *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Titus Andronicus*. *As You Like It*, surprisingly, was not performed at all for a number of years until the new

¹⁹ It highlights the oddity of the situation if one remembers that Goebbels was Gundolf's student at Heidelberg and thus imbibed the mystique of the German Shakespeare at a Jewish fount, an irony of fate the Minister of Propaganda apparently was impervious to.

²⁰ The persistent invocation of 'Geist' as superior to 'soulless' French intellectualism and mercantile British pragmatism that can be found in countless books and pamphlets of the period is interpreted by Hamann and Hermand in two ways: on the one hand it is seen as a compensation for real setbacks in foreign affairs by imaginary conquests in the realm of the spirit and by the claim to cultural leadership in Europe; on the other hand elitist 'Geist' was to stem the flood of democratic levelling in a materialist mass society. (*Stilkunst um 1900*, pp. 9ff). The *Jahrbuch für die geistige Bewegung* (1903–12), the influential organ of Stefan George and his disciples, was the most important journal among many short-lived periodicals. As late as 1932 a title like *Deutscher Geist in Gefahr* (i.e. German mind/spirit/imagination in danger), by the humanist scholar Ernst Robert Curtius, could count on exacting an immediate appeal. Defending German 'Geist' against western internationalism and 'cultural bolshevism' was, however, also part of the Nazi programme.

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1 *Julius Caesar* 1874 Berlin. George II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, was producer, director, stage and costume designer in one. The drawing (by Johannes Kleinmichel after a sketch by the Duke) for this widely toured production shows the carefully varied choreography of the crowd scenes and the director's penchant for meticulous historical detail.

text arrangement by Eugen Kilian (1916) stopped the complaints about the unstageability of this comedy and even rocketed it to first place in 1918 and 1920.²¹

The large number of theatrical companies calls for comment. There were thirty-one court theatres, some in important centres of culture such as Munich or Dresden, others in out-of-the-way places like Neustrelitz and Sondershausen. Many of them catered only for the unadventurous tastes of the local aristocracy and the upper crust of the bourgeoisie. There were exceptions, such as the legendary 'Meininger Company' had been (illus. 1), and a few, like the Grandducal Theatre in Darmstadt or the Court and National Theatre of Mannheim even cherished quite remarkable

²¹ Kilian's effort to regain *As You Like It* for the stage was followed between 1916 and 1919 by a sudden outcrop of further stage versions (Hans Olden, Max Martersteig, Alfred Reucker, Otto Falckenberg) all of which tried to re-establish the original sequence of scenes. See Adolf Winds, 'Wie es euch gefällt', *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch* 53 (1917), 181–4.

avant-garde notions and belied the traditional image of the court theatres as places of empty rhetoric, hidebound, prudish, and shallow. The large majority of the theatres were Stadttheater or municipal theatres usually run by actor-managers to whom the municipal playhouse would be leased. The Stadttheater, despite their name, were either totally unsupported by the municipality or received subsidies in the form of partial or total remission of the lease. Salaries in any case had to be covered by box-office takings. Apart from court and municipal theatres there were private ventures such as the Düsseldorf Schauspielhaus, founded in 1905 and designed by its directors Gustav Lindemann and Louise Dumont as a 'Kulturtheater' to raise public taste and standards of acting and performance against the prevailing triteness and lightweight fare of the Düsseldorf municipal theatre, a 'Geschäftstheater' run on purely commercial lines. A similar situation existed in Frankfurt.²² In medium-sized towns the municipal theatre would frequently operate as a 'Dreispartentheater', that is, it would present all three genres, operas/operettas, ballet, and 'Sprechtheater' or 'straight' theatre. Smaller towns often shared companies, fashionable watering places sported summer theatres, provincial areas had to rely on the doubtful blessings of touring companies. Nor was theatre-going a pleasure only within reach of the well-to-do. Prices in the stalls were high, but standing room in the galleries was to be had for a song. Furthermore, the German Labour Movement in 1890 had set up an organization to bring the theatre to the people as part of its plans for the cultural emancipation of the working classes. At first this took the form of collective ticket-buying and the formation of trades union theatre clubs and finally, in 1914, resulted in a Theatre of the People,²³ the Volksbühne am Bülowplatz in Berlin, which was directed for three years (1915–18) by Max Reinhardt.

Although Germany before the First World War was well supplied with theatres, the quality of their productions was another matter. Practically all of them operated on the repertory system and had to provide entertainment and 'Bildung' in a ratio dependent on public taste and the aspirations of the director-manager and his supporters. Pressure of work was high.

²² The Neues Theater founded in 1910 by Arthur Hellmer and Max Reimann as an artistic alternative to the commercial Schauspielhaus was one of the most advanced provincial theatres and especially active in promoting new German playwrights. In 1935 Hellmer had to emigrate and his theatre was merged with the Schauspielhaus. See Thomas Siedhoff, *Das neue Theater in Frankfurt am Main 1911–1935* (Frankfurt, 1985).

²³ See Walter Asmus, *Die moderne Volksbühnenbewegung* (Leipzig, 1909), and C. W. Davies, *Theatre for the People. The Story of the Volksbühne* (Austin, Tex. 1977).

... a provincial theatre such as Nuremberg would have three premières a week: Tuesday the modern problem play, Thursday a comedy and Saturday night the classical play. For the last there was time only for one rehearsal on Saturday morning, during which the director would discuss entrances and exits on a set which was basically the same for all classical plays. Given this manner of production every actor had to have the classical texts of the 'type' for which he was cast by heart.²⁴

Rehearsing under such conditions was often felt to be a farce. Actors would speak their texts monotonously and rely on the atmosphere of the evening for the right personal expression. Soliloquies were not rehearsed at all. According to Eduard von Winterstein describing his own pre-Reinhardt days and the continuing practice at many theatres, 'the presentation of the classics was fixed in rigid conventions'.²⁵ Their meaning, apparently, had once and for all been settled by critics, scholars and schoolteachers, who persistently warned directors not to tamper with hallowed traditions. Many directors chose the line of least resistance: 'In the court and municipal theatres the purple passages were strung together to make a chain of brilliant quotations.'²⁶ Thus the audiences' expectations were fulfilled in a kind of 'ideal' stereotype, that is to say in presentations both determined by and confirming the consensus about the meaning of the play and its characters (illus. 2).

Given such general agreement about the significance of individual scenes and the quality and moral status of the characters, there was little room for directorial interpretation. The director's position was still insecure. A director with creative ambitions was beset on two fronts. He was hampered on the one hand – as the Swiss director Richard Révy still found cause to complain in 1917 – by a 'doctrinaire element of literary idealization' which led spectators brought up on Schiller's definition of the stage as a moral institution to associate classical plays with the propagation of idealistic attitudes and ethical values. On the other hand there was the actor, sure of his craft, in command of his roles, the darling of his public, and little inclined to accept instruction from the director. It was still the heyday of the actor's theatre. The success of a performance depended on embodiment and rendering, not on 'conception'. Révy's claim that the task of the

²⁴ Manfred Beilharz, 'Textüberlegungen zur Inszenierung von Shakespeares *Ein Sommernachtstraum*', in *Anglistentag 1987* (Tübingen, 1987), p. 42.

²⁵ *Mein Leben und meine Zeit. Ein halbes Jahrhundert deutscher Theatergeschichte*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1947), vol. 1, p. 236.

²⁶ Herbert Ihering, *Begegnungen mit Zeit und Menschen* (Berlin, 1963), p. 200.