

Shakespeare and National Cultural History-Writing

Cultural nationalists in England also used the “renaissance” as a metaphor of cultural rebirth. In the wake of Arnold’s ideas about national culture, dramatists, literary historians, and many others in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries felt England’s cultural reputation was declining, especially in comparison with Germany and other nations on the Continent. Like the modernist historians, nationalist writers created allegorical and typological histories as they idealized an earlier era—the Elizabethan Age—and called for a transformation of culture in their own day. Yet while such national cultures might seem dramatically different from the modernist cultures being promoted at the same time, the two types of movements have much in common. Both imitate the structures of history inherited from classical cultural history texts; both narrate culture as having spiritual functions as it replaces Christianity in discourses about national life; both reject modernity and long for a premodern past; and both seem elitist and popular at the same time. Additionally, just as some of the modernist art historians had nationalist concerns, so some nationalists had modernist ideas. In fact, several people we would label “modernist” were also involved in national culture movements. Both modernist and nationalist movements emerged in the same general atmosphere of writers exploring history to help theorize the ways art and culture could improve the nation and restore English society.

Part III narrates the long story of the recovery of the Elizabethan Age and Shakespeare in various nationalist endeavors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In these decades, as England increasingly competed with Germany for ownership of Shakespeare, real politics shaped the formation of culture: political nationalism and cultural nationalism merged. Drawing on archival and periodical documents, these chapters show in detail how national culture

typologically replaces religion at the real, material level of discourse and practice as it acquires spiritual functions for English society and eventually, during the Great War, for the Empire as a whole.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there were no such clear-cut categories as Victorian and Modernist, or Professional and Amateur.¹ Scholars who were once independent and amateur were becoming the first university professors of literature. University professors of literature were intimately involved in theater movements, public debates, and public education initiatives while actor-managers lectured at universities. A Shakespearean critic could be an aesthetic idealist who used scientific methods. Realist dramatists reacted to Victorian spectacular theater conventions but were themselves challenged by more avant-garde directors. Nonetheless, all borrowed from each other. In addition to those involved in universities and theaters, a wide variety of social types were involved in Shakespearean public activities such as the national theater (NT) movement, reading clubs and societies, fundraisers, and celebrations. These included royalty, government officials, members of Parliament, clergymen, popular novelists, amateur historians, literary critics, newspapermen, socialite ladies, schoolchildren, and all the classes of society who attended such events.

Although what we have labeled anti-Victorianism, antimodernization, anti-amateurism, antirealism, and anti-spectacularism are all elements of the various strands of Shakespearean activity during this time, anti-German, pro-English sentiment is the central element undergirding such activity. From the late nineteenth century through the Great War, Shakespeare was a national and imperial icon for whom the English saw themselves competing with the Germans. At the same time, Shakespeare as cultural hero began to fulfill a religious function within English society, becoming a “Christ-like” figure or type who could teach the common Englishman about citizenship and proper living in the present. Shakespeare becomes in the popular imagination a spiritual and patriotic type who inspires action in the present, and the Elizabethan Age becomes a model for what present England could become.

The idea of Shakespeare as national icon was certainly not a new phenomenon; to some extent he had always been seen as the national poet.² For most of the nineteenth century, however, Germany and England were in amiable relationship and Shakespeare’s “Anglo-Saxon” or Germanic nature was an easily accepted notion in both countries. Since the Romantic age, German theaters regularly performed Shakespeare and studied Shakespearean texts in great detail. Throughout the nineteenth century, English literary critics, from

Romantics such as Coleridge to amateur Shakespeare scholars such as F. J. Furnivall, made use of German philological methods, were influenced by German Shakespeare critics, most notably G. G. Gervinus, and often collaborated with Germans on Shakespeare scholarship. Furnivall's New Shakspeare Society, which existed from 1873 to 1894, worked to establish a Shakespearean canon of authorship and chronology through the use of German methods such as scientific historical and biographical treatment and statistical versification tests.³ The New Shakspeare Society and German Shakespeare societies were mutually appreciative of each other and stayed in close contact. In addition, a nineteenth-century group of English historians known as the Anglo-Saxon school traced Germanic influences on England's constitutional and legal development and lauded England and Germany's common roots.⁴

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, however, in response to heightened debate between German and English scholars over Shakespeare's national and racial nature, a wide variety of cultural figures attempted to raise Shakespeare's iconicity to new levels. Such competition over Shakespeare increased as England's political relationship with Germany slowly disintegrated and paralleled the race for increased naval power in both countries. By the time of the Great War, Shakespeare had become the highest representative of all things English, virtually replacing religion as society's moral resource and erasing German influence. Shakespeare was used to promote new versions of English literary history, the English language, English culture, English drama, the English nation, the British Empire, Anglo-American unity, and Englishness in general.

The elevation of Shakespeare as national icon culminated in wartime, especially in 1916, the year of worldwide celebrations of the 300th anniversary of Shakespeare's life. In England the tercentenary and other Shakespeare-related wartime events drew together factions of Shakespearians who were previously at odds with each other. In fact, during the war Shakespeare as the icon of Englishness was used repeatedly in attempts to unify society against Germany. While critics typically narrate things such as the rise of English studies, educational reforms, and popular theater in these decades in negative terms of middle-class hegemony (and continue to use class as the most important factor in many analyses),⁵ these chapters complicate that idea by showing how during the Great War members of all classes—including some modernists—through many different groups and organizations, coalesced around nationalist sentiment, in particular around the icon of Shakespeare as English patriot and spiritual hero.