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Shakespeare and National Mythologizing in Czech Nineteenth Century Drama

Abstract: The paper will discuss the ways in which Shakespeare's tragedies (*King Lear*) and histories (*1* and *2 Henry IV*), translated in the period of the Czech cultural renaissance (known also as the Czech National Revival) at the end of the 18th and in the first half of the 19th century, challenge and transform the nationalist concept of history based on "primordialism" (Anthony Smith), deriving from an invented account of remote past (the forged *Manuscripts of Dvur Kralove* and *Zelena Hora*) and emphasizing its absolute value for the present and future of the Czech nation. While for nationalist leaders Shakespeare's dramas served as models for "boldly painted heroic characters" of the Czech past, translators, dramatists and poets had to deal with the aspects of Shakespeare's tragedies and histories which were disrupting the nationalist visions of the past and future. Contrasting the appropriations of *King Lear* and both parts of *Henry IV* in the translations and historical plays by the leading Czech dramatist Josef Kajetán Tyl (1808-1852) and the notebooks and dramatic fragments of the major romantic poet Karel Hynek Mácha (1810-1836), the paper will attempt to specify the role of Shakespeare in shaping the historical consciousness of emerging modern Czech culture.

Keywords: nationalism, mythologizing, history, William Shakespeare, tragedy, *King Lear*, *Henry IV*, Karel Hynek Mácha, Josef Kajetán Tyl.

The birth of modern Czech culture can be traced back to the period of the National Revival (or Renaissance). This movement of cultural and political emancipation from Austrian domination started in the 1780s with the efforts of antiquarians and philologists and was gaining momentum in the first half of the 19th century under the influence of Romantic historicism. As in other European countries, Romantic historicism in the Czech lands was characterized by "primordialism" (Smith 5). The effort of the nationalists to appropriate Shakespeare as the artist who "would paint for us the heroes of the ancient times" (Chmelenský 383) is confronted with another approach to the past depicting the life of the ancient Slavs as a glorious origin of national culture. In the forged medieval manuscripts *Rukopis královédvorský* (The Manuscript of Dvůr Králové, 1817) and *Rukopis*

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zelenohorský (The Manuscript of Zelená Hora, 1818) the medieval past is the absolute value establishing the “eternity” of Czech culture.

Although *The Manuscripts* refer to specific events in the history of the Czech lands, the evocation of these events is not their main purpose. The events are represented in an eschatological manner, as the moments of revelation of the eternal truth. For instance, in the opening poem of *The Manuscript of Dvůr Králové*, entitled “Oldřich and Boleslav,” the liberation of Prague from the Polish sway is depicted as the final battle in Armageddon. *The Manuscripts* thus stress the analogy between the mythical events of the Apocalypse or the Resurrection and the historicism of the national emancipation movement. This feature can be described as a kind of ideologization of historical time, the invention of historical narratives in accordance with the demands of the emancipation movement. These narratives are frequently repeated (for instance in the frescoes and statues decorating the building of the National Theatre in Prague), and thus formalized and ritualized (Hobsbawm 4).

As a result, in *The Manuscripts* there is no trace of a careful construction of the value system of the imaginary cultural epoch, as we can see in James Macpherson’s and Hugh Blair’s Dissertations introducing *The Poems of Ossian* (1765). All stages of historical development are evaluated only with regard to the present needs of the movement. Historical time is reduced into a linear sequence of events, all marked either + or – (Otruba 239). The subjectivity inventing the culture is deliberately diluted in an abstract, objectified totality of language. *The Manuscripts* are conceived as products of collective oral tradition and, at the same time, as demonstrations of the creative nature of an imaginary, ancient Czech language constructed out of disjointed elements of all Slavonic languages. This patchwork representing the wholeness of language serves as a substitute for the totality of cultural epoch (“the era of Ossian”) in Macpherson’s and Blair’s Dissertations.

With the wholeness of language, the territorial integrity of the Czech state becomes an important issue. This is mainly evident from the longer fragment (“Libussa’s Judgement”) included in *The Manuscript of Zelená Hora* which names the lands and seats of some chieftains attending a session of the diet. In this way the imaginary territory of the ancient state of Bohemia is delimited, including even the parts settled by German colonists during the later Middle Ages. This effort to appropriate a historical space by a linguistic activity is frequent in the literature of the Czech nationalist movement.

The representation of history in Shakespeare’s *2 Henry IV* is based on completely different principles, which do not have anything common with the nationalist primordialism. It can be described, again in Anthony Smith’s terms, as “perennialism” (3: 27ff). History is present continuously “in all men’s lives.” It figures “the natures of the times deceas’d” as future potentialities of historical development. (*2 Henry IV* 3:1:75-79) Shakespeare’s approach to history follows

the Renaissance typology, where the past events prefigure the future ones, but at the same time, it abstracts from the metaphysical framework of this typology, the Divine Providence. The history in *2 Henry IV* links the past with the present and the future not only on the basis of necessary cause-and-effect relations, but also in the representations and reflection of the decay of language as a means of social communication.

In a crumbling society with dysfunctional communication (Howard and Rackin 182) the rhetorical power of “new languages” (Macdonald 33, Mullaney 76-80) can be determined only in a negative way: by means of historical and even cosmic irony. There is no chance of stepping out of history, reading “the book of fate” and seeing “the revolution of the times” as King Henry desires (*2 Henry IV*, 3:1:44-45). The changes appear to have global, random and cataclysmic dimensions: “Make mountains level, and the continent / [...] melt itself / Into the sea” (3:1:46-48). The traditional model of the world and its unity—“the book”¹—has dissolved into a chaotic and intoxicating “cup of alterations” filled “[with] divers liquors” (51-52). As it is evident from the King’s reference to *Richard II* (5:1:55-68) about the corruption resulting from the power struggle, under these circumstances history decays into meaningless repetitions of violent acts turning allies into antagonists and vice versa: Henry IV may be dethroned like Richard II by the same Northumberland, who helped him to the throne.

The only way out of this absurdity seems to be the anthropomorphic interpretation of “history in all men’s lives / Figuring the natures of times deceased” (*2 Henry IV*, 3:1:75-76), based on guessing—as Warwick attempts to indicate—the probable trends of future development from the potentialities of not yet manifest motives and events (“prophesy / With a near aim, of the main chance of things / As not yet come to life, who in their seeds / And weak beginnings lie intreasurèd” 3.1.77-80) and calling these constructs “necessities” (87).² Similar pragmatism is also evident in the enemy camp: “We are time’s subjects, and time bids be gone” (*2 Henry IV*, 1:3:110) says Hastings, constructing “time” as a substitute of royal authority against the “brawl” of “times” (70) and desecration of divine authority by the crowd, criticized by the Archbishop of York: “Oh thou fond many, with what loud applause / Didst thou beat heaven with blessing Bolingbroke” (91-92).

In contrast to the allegorical and ideological perspective of Czech Romantic nationalists stressing the apocalyptic nature and metaphysical purpose

¹ On the book as a model of the world and meaning see Jacques Derrida, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) 93-94.

² On the criticism of causality and concepts as products of rhetorical operations see Nietzsche (87): “But we produce all these representations from ourselves with the same necessity with which the spider spins.”

of history, Shakespeare's drama emphasizes the historicity of individual lives, which may not at all be a positive, let alone an ideal, value. The entirely new moment in Shakespeare's approach is the focus on the potentiality of rhetoric in representing this 'pragmatic' historicity. Theoretically this issue was recognized much later, in Giambattista Vico's *New Science* (1722) developing the notion of "poetic history," namely the historicity founded on the parallelism of social forms and institutions and the condition of poetic language (White 197-216).

The tension between the understanding of history typical of Czech Romantic nationalism and Shakespeare's plays can also be interpreted as an outcome of the change in understanding signs which cease to be transparent representations of ideas and become symbols referring to the "limits of representation," namely "freedom, desire and will" (Foucault 219). While the authors and critics of Classicism have difficulties with Shakespeare's works, because of their divergence from ideal norms, Romantics discover in it a dynamics of history, envisaged by Foucault as a key feature of the "modern episteme." Seen in this perspective, Czech Romantic nationalists oscillate between the idealization of history as a predetermined process of the renewal of sovereignty and cultural identity and attempt to grasp the dynamic of history as a force shaping individual lives.

This situation is characteristic of one of the most interesting encounters in the history of early Czech Shakespeare reception, Josef Kajetán Tyl's (1808-52) translation of *King Lear* (1834) and the influence of Shakespeare's tragedy on Tyl's early dramatic work. The discussed author was both the leading Czech dramatist of the 1830s and 1840s and an influential leader of the Czech nationalist movement. It is most likely that Tyl's translation was made directly from English (the earlier translations of Shakespeare were from German). According to Bohuslav Mánek, Tyl had cut almost half of the play, leaving out pessimistic passages, critical references to political circumstances which would provoke Austrian censorship, as well as erotic and mythological allusions (Mánek 346).

An important evidence of the conditions of the reception of Tyl's translation of *King Lear* may be Tyl's early dramatic work, staged almost simultaneously with his translations of Shakespeare, including not only *King Lear* but also a selection of scenes from *1 and 2 Henry IV*. The plays written by Tyl at that time include a tragedy *Čestmír* (1835), based on the legends in the forged *Manuscripts*, a romantic drama *Slepý mládenec* (A Blind Youth, 1836), a dramatic sketch *Jeden za všechny* (One for All, 1836) and a later historical drama *Brunsvik nebo Meč a lev* (Bunsvik, or, The Sword and the Lion, 1843) based on a legend of Czech kingship explaining the royal arms.

Although *Čestmír* still lacks specific references to *King Lear*, it reworks one of the important themes of the tragedy, namely the problematization of love as the supreme value. Whereas *King Lear* focuses on the loss of the meaning of love and connects it with the crisis of divine kingship, authority and moral values in

general, *Čestmír* expresses the crisis as a division of Romantic personality, torn between pain and desire. Nonetheless, the protagonist's inner conflict is ideologically framed by the requirement of national unity and the denouement of the tragedy consists in the Romantic hero's sacrifice for this 'higher' purpose. The death of the protagonist is conceived as a resumption of supreme authority sanctified in the epilogue spoken by a female soothsayer Bohuše (a clear analogue of the legendary female ruler Libussa, known from the forged *Manuscripts*). Tyl's historical optimism is clearly supported by nationalist ideology, in an effort to deal with the impact of one of the major thematic features of *King Lear*, the division of the kingdom. In contrast to the mythological material in Tyl's play, *King Lear* represents a world in which old myths and ideologies (for instance, those of the sacred kingship and of James I as the successor of King Arthur and the unifier of Britain) disintegrate and the new are not yet invented.

As *The Blind Youth*, another play by Tyl influenced by *King Lear*, shows, the prerequisite for this renewal of national sovereignty and political authority is the folk wisdom and its ideas of limits and measure valid both in the macrocosm and in the microcosm. The character expressing this lore is a servant called Záruba and modelled after Kent. In the play, the initial dramatic situation of *King Lear* is entirely changed. Instead of the father and the daughter, there are the father and the son; Lear's misunderstanding of Cordelia's love is substituted with the father's blind and unrequited love of his profligate son. Although the servant partially shares Kent's fortitude and devotion to Lear, his role in the play is reduced to the *vox populi* pronouncing infallible moral judgements.

The blinding of the protagonist in Tyl's drama is not an act of brutality, as in the case of Cornwall, but of calculated revenge. The suffering of the hero is overcome not only by his prophetic gift but also by his ability to redeem grievances and renew relations he previously destroyed. In this way, the hero can redress the mistakes of his father, whose character combines Lear's and Gloucester's features. The play can be interpreted as a rather forceful attempt to rewrite the pessimistic vision of history in Shakespeare's tragedy, where the assumed purpose of suffering of the "poor naked wretches" (*King Lear*, 3:4:30) depends, in Kent's words on the unpredictable influence of "[t]he stars above us" (4:4:32). A later play by Tyl, entitled *Brunsvík*, attempts to come to terms with Lear's madness. In contrast to Shakespeare's tragedy, Tyl's drama appeals both to universal moral values, the compassion of the people with the temporary derangement of the prince and also with the assertion of national identity against the threat of a foreign invasion.

The above examples show that Tyl was substantially rewriting the major themes of Shakespeare's play, whose tragic vision of history was unacceptable neither for his understanding of justice nor for the ideology of the nationalist movement. The only dramatic work by Tyl where Shakespeare is directly quoted is a sketch *One for All*, which is a parody of Tyl's literary rival, the leading Czech

Romantic poet, Karel Hynek Mácha (1810-36) who also attempted to write historical dramas based on Shakespeare. In the dramatic scene, the protagonist quotes a line from *Macbeth*: “Is this a dagger which I see before me?” (2:1:34) and continues by references to the contemporary bombastic way of acting Shakespeare, thus pointing out the priority of the thematic aspects of Shakespeare’s plays before their stage productions based on cheap theatrical effects. From the sketch it becomes clear that Tyl was criticizing Mácha for his failure to understand the ‘serious’ message of Shakespeare’s tragedy. However, from Tyl’s own plays it is evident, that this ‘message’ was inaccessible to Tyl himself, who, under the influence of nationalist ideology, refused to accept Shakespeare’s tragic views of history.

In contrast to Tyl, Mácha, who was also inspired by *King Lear* in drafting his historical play *Bratři* (The Brothers, 1832), did not rewrite basic themes of Shakespeare’s tragedy. On the other hand, he concentrated on representing the futility and frustrations of the power struggles of the 11th century Czech princes and the illusory nature of their notions of justice and truth. The theme of power struggle connects Mácha’s attempt at historical tragedy with Shakespeare’s second historical tetralogy, and especially with 2 *Henry IV*. As the excerpts in Mácha’s Notebook show, the poet focused on King Henry’s monologue “O God, that one might read the book of fate / And see the revolution of the times” (3:1:44-74) and also on the dialogue between the King suspecting Hal of snatching the crown away from him (4:3). The main difference between Shakespeare’s and Mácha’s approaches to the topic of royal power and its legitimization consists in the understanding of the sacred kingship as the *mancipatio*, the acceptance of royal power as a gift from God (Mauß 49-52). In 2 *Henry IV* the act of *mancipatio* is phrased in the lines echoing the older play (*The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*; Shakespeare 1989 166n and 234), thus marking the renewal of the traditional feudal value pattern: “To thee it [the crown] shall descend with better quiet, / Better opinion, better confirmation” (2 *Henry IV*, 4.3.315-16). Contrary to this, in Mácha’s fragments the *mancipatio* becomes impossible due to the continuing deadly strife between the two sons of the ruler. The only power which could legitimize the new monarch would have to come directly from the “eternity.”

However, Mácha, who in his major poem called *Máj* (May, 1836) identified eternity with nothingness, had serious problems in constructing this providential agency. Evidently, the traditional topology linking—in a single symbolic place, the chamber called Jerusalem where Henry IV expires³—the immutable divine order of the universe with the forgiveness granted by divine

³ The analogues of this model, or *topos*, in Mácha’s work are symbolic images of ancestral halls. In one of them, in the verse tale fragment *Mnich* (The Monk, 1833), the ancestral hall is identified with a tomb dominated with a crucifix, where the figure of Christ has a face covered with black veil signifying death.

mercy, did no longer work in the pre-1848 Europe recently shattered by the revolutionary events of the year 1830. It is quite likely that in these circumstances, Mácha was prompted to read the final scenes of the play ironically and understand “the book of fate” speech of the old king (2 *Henry IV*, 3:1:44-78) surprisingly, as an *emancipatory* act. The problem of his reading, which found the origin of the legitimizing power in an abstractly conceived historical necessity, was that neither the inherent notion of historical change (“the revolution of the times”) nor “chance’s mocks / And changes” (3:1:50-51) could morally justify the ascension of the new ruler. Therefore, in contrast to Shakespeare’s play, the ascension of Břetislav was not represented directly in terms of feudal lineage, but in a utopian way.

This utopian mode differs from the tendencies in earlier nationalist writings because it does not project popular desires and current ideological strategies onto historical material. Mácha’s utopian gesture consists in supplanting the randomness of historical events by the ethical concept of justice as historical necessity (“Nemesis”) establishing the new *telos* of national existence.⁴ Here one may speculate about the influence of Canto IV of Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* where the figure of Nemesis is used to establish a link between the speaker’s individual life and universal history.

This interpretation is supported by the evidence of Mácha’s effort to emphasize the ethical message of the play by an ironical strategy recasting the pair of Shakespeare’s main heroes in a strange and even perverse way. In a deliberate opposition to Tyl (who translated and staged his own selection of the comic scenes with Falstaff and Hal) Mácha almost completely ignored humorous and popular aspects of the play,⁵ understanding them (fully in keeping with many nineteenth century representations of Falstaff) as a mere condescension to vulgar taste. Unwilling to acknowledge his potential public of artisans and servant maids, he created an ironic counterpart of the pair of Shakespeare’s heroes: Herouš, a youth with a powerful romantic imagination and elevated ideals, is cleverly manipulated by his father Kochán to usurp the throne of Bohemia. The aspects of irresponsibility in Hal’s character are amplified and hyperbolized in Mácha’s young hero. In addition to this and in contrast to Shakespeare’s character, Herouš also represents the fictitiousness of the Romantic dreams of the Czech nationalists and the absence of any moral

⁴ On the problem of this position see (Derrida 27): “And what if disadjustment were on the contrary the condition of justice?” See also Procházka (409-422).

⁵ The exception is a short parodic passage from 2 *Henry IV* 3.2.33-45, where Justice Shallow preaches to Silence about the certainty of death: “Death, as the Psalmist saith, is certain to all; all shall die” and then resumes: “How a good yoke of bullocks at Stamford fair?” The passage is quoted in A.W. Schlegel’s translation (Mácha 3: 125). Even here, however, there is a serious theme, the inevitability of death, which became central in Mácha’s mature work.

stance. The high-flown rhetoric of Herouš's desire for princely power and his manipulation by Kochán ironize the irresponsibility of the nationalist programme of political emancipation by means of developing language-based culture in a multilingual environment. In his grappling with Shakespeare, as well as feudal histories and traditions, Mácha articulated his repudiation of the nationalist ideas of *mancipatio* formulated under the surveillance of the police and censorship of the Metternich regime. According to the Czech revivalists, the national cause, as the outcome of God's gift of language, was safely removed from the realm of history and politics to the divine sphere and incorporated in the providential agenda.

Another and directly related aspect of Mácha's use of Shakespeare can be defined—in relation to Jerome McGann's notion of "Romantic ideology" (McGann 1983)—as an individual aesthetic gesture whose political implications are inherent in the clash between the artist's need of self-assertion and the "public," moral and ideological determinants of his situation. Moreover, it can also be stated in terms of *mancipatio*: great works of literature may be understood "as unasked for and perhaps unwanted obligations" and "an offer we cannot refuse." The individual dimension of this relationship consists in the artist's struggle to escape "from the ministerial relationship to their predecessors and to achieve a magisterial position" (Bristol 41).⁶ However, to rise to this position involves redefining the whole political agenda and is virtually impossible without subscription to socially acceptable values and ideology, which Mácha was unwilling to do. As a result, Mácha's emancipatory use of Shakespeare is in fact contained within the general ideological articulation of *mancipatio*, in terms of justice, responsibility and moral authority.

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⁶ Bristol draws on Bloom (1976).

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