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The Making of a Storyteller: Shakespeare, Hans Christian Andersen and Family

Reading in the Nineteenth-Century

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On December 1, 1873, armed with tailor's scissors, glue, and stacks of illustrated newspapers, Hans Christian Andersen began his last major creative work of art: a big folding screen. Its eight thematic screens (dedicated to Germany-Austria, France, England, the Orient, Childhood, Danes, Denmark, and Sweden-Norway) include portraits of famous personalities, landscapes, buildings, fable characters, and historical and social scenes comprising a vertical and overflowing topography of the author's European and, at the same time, idiosyncratic worldview.

Immobilized by deteriorating health, depressed by his inability to write, and well aware that, as he put it, "the final curtain was about to fall," Andersen's folding screen presents a jumbled auto-biography of visual quotations, which narrates his formation as an author. It is a physical testament situating his life's work in the canon of great authors.

On the screen dedicated to England, several faces of authors jump out at us (Scott, Dickens, Byron), but a special place, it seems, has been given to a reproduction of a portrait said to be of Shakespeare. He is crowned with a laurel wreath, the muse is lifting the lyre up towards him and his likeness is surrounded by cherubs and foliage with a suspicious jester nearby.

This shrine to Shakespeare composed out of the scraps of popular print culture is not only a testament to the Romantic Shakespeare, the genius bard, the master of mass spectacle, but also a reminiscence of Andersen's life-long adoration of his plays – and particularly his

youthful identification with the Romantic figure of Shakespeare. This imagined image of Shakespeare the man became an important mythology to the aspiring writer and a model on which central aspects of Andersen's authorship and authorial practice would be based.

In this paper, I am particularly interested in the ways in which the early Andersen, more than fifty-years before he lost the ability to write, figured Shakespeare as an authorial model – and I shall suggest that Andersen from an early age used a particular Romantic version of Shakespeare's life to forge an authorial persona before he had published any of the tales or novels that would make him – as Shakespeare – one of the ten most translated authors in the world – rubbing shoulders with such literary giants as Agatha Christie, Lenin and Barbara Cartland.

Andersen reading Shakespeare

Andersen tells about his own childhood that he swallowed all the books he could get hold of (“Alle bøger jeg kunde faae blev slugte”). In his first unpublished autobiography from 1832 *Levnedsbogen*, written when he was only 27, he recalls his childhood reading of Shakespeare in Rosenfeldt's translation from the early 1790s, which gave him a pleasure greater than even Holberg could provide, and he proceeded to learn several scenes by heart. In his next autobiography, *The Fairy Tale of My Life*, published in Danish in 1855, he recalled reading Shakespeare in a poor translation yet being enthralled with the bloody events, the witches and ghosts that were according to his own tastes; “I immediately proceeded to enact the Shakespearean tragedies in my puppet theatre, vivid in my mind were the ghost in Hamlet and the mad Lear on the Moor.”

Andersen certainly engages in a carefully crafted authorial self-presentation and mythmaking in his autobiographies, where the poor son of a cobbler, who had his fortune as a future

celebrity author read, is shaped by equal measures of folk culture and a modern canon of world literature.

Though Andersen's early life was marked by poverty and Odense far from the literary and cultural circles of Copenhagen, Odense was the only city outside of Copenhagen that housed a theatre, where touring groups as well as players from the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen would regularly take up residence. In 1796 Heusser's Drama Society performed the first Hamlet play in Denmark in Odense.

When Andersen was later sent to School at Sorø by his benefactors in Copenhagen, with strict orders to abstain from writing verse, his obsession with Shakespeare continued. Here he encountered B.S. Ingemann – a great admirer of Shakespeare himself, who was derided by the Copenhagen intelligentsia for his dramas, written as they were in a recognizable Shakespearean style. The young aspiring poet, according to legend, “would walk from his school to Copenhagen to attend a play at the Royal Theatre, about 50 miles in the snow, while reading Shakespeare's “The Tempest”” (Rossel).

According to Elias Bredsdorff's *Hans Christian Andersen and England* (1954) the author's relationship with the works of Shakespeare appears to be of a deeply personal and continuous nature yet simultaneously a "superficial" one. Andersen recalls in his memoirs how his early awakening to the idea of becoming a Poet coincided with his reading of Shakespeare.

However, according to Bredsdorff, Andersen's works were throughout his life “distant from Shakespeare's 'Spirit and Taste’”.

Alf Henriques's exploration of *Shakespeare in Denmark until 1840* (published in 1941) collaborates this perception mentioning Andersen in the company of those nineteenth-century dramatists, he grouped as "authors distant from Shakespeare" (Shakespearefjerne dramatikere). Despite the fact that Andersen's arrival in Copenhagen coincided with a period

Henriques described as one in which Shakespeare had finally become “the grand master, [and] a natural part” of the Danish dramatic tradition, personified in Oehlenschläger, if not in the traditions of the Theatre, personified in Heiberg”, Andersen himself appears only as a passionate consumer rather than a direct producer of Shakespearean texts – even if, as Henrique’s also says of the period, it was difficult to establish whether authors and dramatists were directly borrowing from Shakespeare or whether we are dealing with imitations of an imitator’s imitations”.

When Shakespeare does appear in Andersen’s early writings it is in his God-like guise as he was figured in the folding screen. In Andersen’s Romantic fantasy “Walking Tour” from 1829, which is essentially a narrative about the formation of an artist delivered in a chaotic flow of scenes, allusions and parodies, not unlike the visual work of the aging writer, there are of course allusions to “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”, a tower can recite all the monologues in Hamlet and in the ninth chapter the narrator, Andersen’s alter ego, pays a visit to the Pantheon of poetry where the princes of poetry, Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Cervantes and Hoffmann are seated. Such recall of the great Masters is, however, a rarity in Andersen’s works.

What might account for this curious superficial and distant relationship with Shakespeare evidenced in Andersen’s works, as it was noted by mid-twentieth century critics? There could be several answers. They could be wrong, of course! Another answer could be that Andersen might have down-played his Shakespeare enthusiasm not to antagonise the powerful Heiberg, who was a known sceptic of the deification of Shakespeare at the time; a third answer could be that Andersen did borrow from Shakespeare in his tales, novels and dramatic texts, though what he did learn from Shakespeare might have been of a more subtle nature.

Shakespeare's name or titles of his plays are if not absent then at least rare in Andersen's vast literary production. He might, if we continue to pursue the biographical line of inquiry, have been scarred by early injunctions against recalling Shakespeare in his writings, as his benefactors found that associating himself with such high-literary company was tantamount to unhealthy megalomania. Henriette Wulff, for instance, wrote to Andersen in 1823: "What you have a talent for is comical narratives in prose ... Don't flatter yourself by thinking you could become an Oehlenschläger, a Walter Scott, a Shakespeare, a Goethe, a Schiller, and never ask again on whom you should model yourself – since you will be none of them."

The reception of Andersen has afforded very little attention to Andersen's appreciation of Shakespeare, and the coincidence of the popularisation of Shakespeare and Andersen's rise to fame in the first half of the nineteenth century has been largely unexplored. While Andersen's plays, poems, novels and fairy tales are only on rare occasions explicitly referencing Shakespeare, his dramatic works far from shakespearean and his tales more explicitly indebted to German Romanticism and Nordic folklore, some paratextual and biographic features would suggest that Shakespeare, and particularly the Romantic Shakespeare held a more profound place in Andersen's construction of his own authorship.

1822, Ungdoms-Forsøg af William Christian Walter

Already as a 17-year-old, Andersen published his first poems and dramas under the pseudonym Villiam Christian Walther, called "Essays of Youth" (Ungdoms-forsøg).

Andersen explained his choice of pseudonym in terms of admiration and love, which must have made several of his contemporaries uncomfortable: "I loved William Shakespeare and Walter Scott, and of course I also loved myself. I took therefore my name Christian, and so I assumed the fictitious name William Christian Walter."

While perhaps the expression of mere youthful naïveté and perhaps even misguided self-flattery, the authorial identities Andersen borrows are nevertheless suggestive for their pointing in the direction of English literature rather than German and continental as the model for Andersen's first literary attempts. In the collection of texts itself there are clear traces of Scott in "Gjenfærdet ved Palnatokes Grav" (The Ghost by Palnatoke's Grave), and Niels Koefoed has suggested that in tying his name to Shakespeare and Scott he wanted to indicate that he was going to become a playwright and novelist himself.

Pseudonyms, as Gerard Genette, reminds us, initiate of course a very conscious dialogue between the author and reader about authenticity, identity and literary influence. What effect Andersen's claim for a seat next to Shakespeare and Scott in the Pantheon of Poets would have had on readers in general is hard to say apart from what we can learn from the fact that very few copies sold in subscription and that most of the printing was inevitably pulped.

It tells us also that Andersen's aim was to have his literary production "consumed" like Shakespeare's and Scott's if not "as" Shakespeare and Scott – as Paul Binding reminds us, Andersen himself took great pleasure in reporting that in Scotland he was perceived as "the Danish Walter Scott"). The names borrowed from Shakespeare and Scott constitute them as central "origins" to Andersen's subsequent work, inserting his production into both high-culture and popular fiction – much in the same way Scott plundered Shakespeare for his epigraphs in his anonymous "Author of Waverly" novels.

Boye's William Shakespeare

Most importantly, however, to Andersen's modelling of his authorship on the Romantic Shakespeare were not the works themselves, but popular narratives and performances of Shakespeare's biography. "Shakespeare the man was novelized and located to Warwickshire, consistently with the biographical mythos that had been rapidly developing since the late

eighteenth century, depicting him as a child of the English soil endowed with divine or magical inspiration.”

Around Christmas in 1825, Andersen writes about a new play he read at the Wulff's: “All the last day [of my visit] I felt so miserable; but in the evening I was presented with a copy of Boye's new play *William Shakespeare* to read aloud to the Wulffs; it made a strange impression on me. It was taken right out of my soul; I thought it was my own story, so while reading it I burst into tears, but I also felt strengthened by it.”

In his diary he writes that he heard Boye's Shakespeare was to be performed for the king's birthday celebration, “I was really galled that it had been Boye and not me who had written it.” Possible a subtle comment on his forced prohibition against writing. Later, he continues, Mrs. Saabye and Adler ‘regaled us with all of William Shakespeare; oh, the idea was entirely like my own, and those sweet fairies, too.” And in another entry: “In the evening I read for the Wulff's Boye's William Shakespeare. The author has described him completely after my own heart. In the first act, William's lines echoed exactly my feelings; he has an intuitive feeling he will become a writer; he decides not to compose poetry. Oh, tears came to my eyes; in bed all my disconsolation was reawakened, but I fell asleep with faith in God and the certainty that I had worked according to my best abilities.”

While Boye's Shakespeare was just one of many such dramatisations or retellings that fashioned a particular Romantic myth around Shakespeare-the-man or Shakespeare-the-super-human (three appeared within a short period in Denmark, several in Germany and Britain), Andersen's as always over-sensitive reaction to it is somewhat curious in his choice of words: “the ideas was entirely like my own” – “it was taken right out of my soul”.

Most people will know how Andersen-the-man became almost indistinguishable from his works to a large extent due to Andersen's own hand in his self-mythologization through three

carefully crafted auto-biographies and tales that were marketed in the popular press as expressing the author's own fairy-tale-like rise to fame from humble origins. It is obvious how this legend, which of course had some ground in reality, corresponded to the narrative he encountered in Boye's Romantic depiction of Shakespeare's childhood and decision to go to London to become a playwright. It produced a deep sense of identification, but also taught Andersen, I surmise, how such a legend could function as a model for his own self-promotion as an author. Interestingly, there is also some connection between the narrative strategies used in Boye's William Shakespeare and in the Hollywood musical Hans Christian Andersen from 1952 featuring Danny Kaye – where tales are employed to illustrate the legend of the author's life and the other way round.

In Boye's Shakespeare, "The young son of a weaver, William Shakespeare, has been in close contact with the fairies since early childhood, which have led him to see a higher nature and given him great Poetic visions."

The play Begins with a ring dance of fairies who summon Oberon and Titania. They speak romantically about the poet as borne out of the woods, whose name and spirit will transcend his death. In the second scene we are in John Shakespeare's house, William enters and sits down to read a book after work. He is reading the legend of King Lear, presumably in Hollinshed's Chronicles. Alternately speaking aloud to the audience and looking into the book engulfed in reading he erupts into a soliloquy arguing that there is something wrong with the legend and continues to give the audience a view into how he transforms in his imagination the material into drama. "Ha," Shakespeare exclaims, "If I dared carve in this block of marble, and transform the figures into the high form of Tragedy and give them life and vigour by the fiery flames of my exhilaration."

“A couple of young actors enter. They want him to go to London and write for the theatre. But when William learns about his father’s looming bankruptcy he resigns and declares that he will become a weaver for the rest of his life, and as a reward he is given Anna as a wife. Later he is of course forced to leave his Stratford and wife to seek out the Temple of Art in London.”

Andersen’s identification with Boye’s portrait of Shakespeare in the first Act pertains to the similarity between the son of a weaver and Andersen, the son of a cobbler; their shared struggle between a sense of duty to the family and a powerful imagination, which draws them to the theatre and the big city. The added touch of fairies, pastoral scenes and premonitions of greatness, was also something Andersen from an early age understood as a powerful way (if you would allow me to be utterly prosaic), to “brand” his own persona and authorship. The tableau of Shakespeare, the forest and fairies, Andersen later used to forge his own shrine for the author on his folding screen, and he borrowed Boye’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* scene with Oberon and Titania in his verbal illustration of Shakespeare in the Pantheon of Poets where the king and queen of fairies take a front row – Yes, Shakespearean influences in Andersen are likely imitations of imitators’ imitations, which, however, does not make them less interesting or significant, I believe.

However, one could also wonder what came first – did Andersen learn to turn his author persona into legend by his adoration for and identification with Shakespeare, in particular the Shakespeare dramatized by Boye; or was Andersen “really galled that it had been Boye and not [himself] who had written William Shakespeare,” because, to a large extent he had.

In the prologue to his “Ungdoms-forsøg” published three years prior to his reading of Boye’s play, Andersen had already inserted himself in the shakespeare-mythology transposed from Stratford to his native Funen. The mythological Dana walks through Funen at Spring-Tim

where she comes upon a nine-year old boy, who is busy making wreaths of flowers for a little boat: “And like a poetic ship from the realm of fantasy, it sailed in liquid crystal” (“Og lig et Digterskib fra Phantasiens rige / Den seilede I flydende krystal). A fairy gives him the kiss of Poetic initiation. The boy who we recognize as Andersen, if not Villiam Christian Walter, talks about being borne in the town of Odin surrounded by nature, and expresses a fear of separation from his home. The prologue ends with an apology and plea to the readers and book buyers to receive him well and to bear with him and his being “so young and weak a singer”.

While auto-biographies are mostly written towards the end of a career, as literary testaments to how an author wishes his works to be remembered, as Michael Millgate reminds us, Andersen’s testamentary acts are upside-down. While he was an obsessive chronicler of his own life as evidenced in his first unpublished autobiography written in 1832 at the age of only 27, before the publication of his first collection of fairy tales and his first novel in 1835, already his first youthful attempts as an author can be seen as attempts at mythologizing his own authorship before it had even started – and the mythology or legend of his own life was clearly modelled on Romantic legends of Shakespeare circulating in the popular culture of the early nineteenth century. With Shakespeare as a model, Andersen was always an Athor first – a writer second.