Eighteenth-Century Swiss Peasant Meets Bard: Ulrich Bräker's A Few Words about William Shakespeare’s Plays (1780)

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Abstract
Assesses Ulrich Bräker's Etwas über William Shakespeare Schauspiele, with attention to how his commentary combines "idolatrous adoration and unashamed irreverence for Shakespeare and his plays" and to its place in the eighteenth-century German reception of Shakespeare.

Reference

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Britain began making Shakespeare her national poet early in the eighteenth century, and Germany followed suit a few decades later, progressively turning ‘unser Shakespeare’ into one of three national poets, with Goethe and Schiller. As early as 1773, Johann Gottfried Herder included his essay on ‘Shakespear’ in a collection entitled *Von Deutscher Art und Kunst*. The drama of the ‘Sturm und Drang’, which Herder’s collection programmatically inaugurated, appropriated what Goethe (Götz von Berlichingen), Schiller (The Robbers) and their contemporaries (mis)understood to be Shakespeare’s dramatic technique. By the end of the century, the assimilation had advanced far enough for August Wilhelm von Schlegel, the famous translator of seventeen of Shakespeare’s plays, to indulge in no slight national chauvinism: ‘I am eager’, he writes in a letter to his co-translator Ludwig Tieck, ‘to have your letters on Shakespeare. . . . I hope you will prove, among other things, that Shakespeare wasn’t English. I wonder how he came to dwell among the frosty, stupid souls on that brutal island? . . . The English critics understand nothing about Shakespeare.4 Even though Tieck failed to prove that Shakespeare was not of English birth, the conviction that Shakespeare was best understood by German rather than by English critics only grew in the course of the nineteenth century. Appropriately, it was in Germany that the first periodical devoted exclusively to Shakespeare, the *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Shakespeare-Gesellschaft*, was founded in 1865. Fifty years later, the German novelist Gerhart Hauptmann could still claim that ‘there is no people, not even the English, that has the same right to claim Shakespeare as the German. Shakespeare’s characters are a part of our world, his soul has become one with ours: and though he was born and buried in England, Germany is the country where he truly lives.2

Only a few years before Shakespeare started changing nationality, he had been all but unknown in Germany. Johann Christoph Gottsched, who undertook to reform the German stage from the 1730s along the lines of French classical drama, castigated Shakespeare for his ‘many blunders and mistakes against the rules of the stage and common sense’, and henceforth treated him alternatively with disdain or silence.4 Johann Elias Schlegel’s comparison between Shakespeare and the German seventeenth-century playwright Gryphius (1741) confined itself to comments on *Julius Caesar*. Apart from a much maligned translation of the same play by Caspar Wilhelm von Borck, the German reception of Shakespeare prior to 1760 consisted of little more than scattered remarks. Even in the following decade, when Shakespeare’s fame rose rapidly, Christoph Martin Wieland, who undertook prose translations of twenty-two of Shakespeare’s plays, Heinrich Wilhelm Gerstenberg (Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Litteratur,
1766-7) and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (Hamburgische Dramaturgie) are the only German critics who dealt with Shakespeare in depth prior to the explosion of interest in the 1770s. Surprisingly, it was not in Germany but in German-speaking Switzerland that the reception of Shakespeare first took roots, more specifically among Bodmer’s circle in Zurich. Johann Jakob Bodmer studied Shakespeare in the 1720s, probably using Rowe’s edition, produced a now lost blank verse tragedy—the first in German—on Antony and Cleopatra in 1724-5, referred to Shakespeare as the ‘English Sophocles’ in the introduction to his prose translation of *Paradise Lost* in 1732, and praised his powerful dramatic language in a poetics of 1740. The artist Johann Heinrich Füssli (Henry Fusely), a student of Bodmer’s who later emigrated to England to become a famous illustrator of Shakespeare, made a drawing of the Ghost in *Hamlet* as early as 1755-6 and went on to undertake a [now lost] translation of *Macbeth*. Even Wieland’s translation, which formed the material basis for the enthusiastic Shakespeare appropriation in the ‘Sturm and Drang’, took its origin during his stay in Switzerland from 1752 to 1759. It was published in Zurich (1762–6), as was the second comprehensive Shakespeare translation, Johann Joachim Eschenburg’s prose rendering of the thirty-six First-Folio plays (1775–7).

A slightly later witness to Shakespeare’s rapidly growing popularity in the German-speaking world was also Swiss. Born of poor farming parents as one of eleven children in a small village in the Toggenburg, a rural area in eastern Switzerland, Ulrich Bräker (1735–98) is no doubt the most improbable eighteenth-century Shakespeare critic. Working for his father as a goat-boy, Bräker spent only a few months at school where he learned no more than elementary reading skills. At twenty, Bräker left his poverty-stricken home to try his fortune abroad only to fall into the hands of a corrupt recruiting officer who fooled him into enrolling in the Prussian army. As an involuntary mercenary, Bräker briefly took part in the Seven-Years’ War (1756–63) opposing Friedrich the Great’s Prussia and the Empress Maria Theresia’s Austria. He deserted at the battle at Lobositz (1756) and returned to his native Toggenburg. He married in 1761, and soon he had to feed not only his fast-growing family but also four young siblings of whom he took care after his father’s early death. Even though he managed to purchase a weaving-mill in 1780, his dealings in yarn and cotton only intermittently allowed him to escape from poverty and debts until his death in 1798.

This looks hardly like the biography of an eighteenth-century Shakespeare critic. Yet in 1780 Bräker wrote a booklet disarmingly entitled, *A Few Words about William Shakespeare’s Plays: By a poor ignorant citizen of the world who had the luck to read him*. The work contains observations about all thirty-six plays in the order in which they appear in Eschenburg’s translation, the edition Bräker used. It comes as a small surprise that Bräker is no Johnson, and a modern critic will come away from a reading of his booklet with few new insights into Shakespeare’s plays. Indeed, it is all too easy to smile at the simple man’s ignorance of dramatic conventions: his objection to *The Comedy of Errors* is that no twins are so alike that their wives would mistake them for each other (51); he hopes that *Richard III*, which he calls ‘the cruellrest and most abominable play’ (72), will never be performed; he conjectures that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet’s* grave-digger scene in a churchyard (103) and imagines him having done field work among flocks of sheep before creating the pastoral atmosphere of *As You Like It* (40). It would be equally possible to denigrate Bräker’s critical discernment for his inability to appreciate the fairy world in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the witches in *Macbeth*, or for his general dislike of *Romeo and Juliet*.

On other occasions, however, Bräker’s observations are far from ridiculous. He rightly points out that Hamlet’s sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their death ‘not shriving-time allow’d’ is extremely harsh considering it does not emerge from the text that they were aware of the contents of the letters they carried (104). He notices that there is an intriguing discrepancy between Brutus’ suspiciousness of Caesar and his trust in Antony (81). He compares Arthur’s threatened to Gloucester’s real blinding, opposing Hubert’s mercy to Cornwall’s cruelty (96). While he warms to Claudio’s
humanity, he blames Isabella for wanting to be ‘more of an angel than a human being’ [34]. Though Bräker spends most time on character criticism, he is not incapable of other dramatic insights. He points out, for example, that Coriolanus is noteworthy for its dramatic construction, especially its manifold scenic changes [77]. He rightly questions Cymbeline’s place (in the First Folio and, correspondingly, in Eschenburg’s translation) among the tragedies; and in his commentary on The Merchant of Venice, he praises the carefully dramatized double plot,
how the play 'succeeds in combining two stories, the Jew’s cruelty and Bassanio’s love affair, as if they were one' (36).

Thanks to itinerant players whose performances Bräker witnessed in the near town of Lichtensteig, he is not unaware of the possibilities and limitations of stage representation. Speed and Lance, Bräker rightly guesses, are far more stageworthy than their masters. Claiming that *Troilus and Cressida* is a play to be read
rather than to be performed (90), he sensed, even though Eschenburg's translation does not feature the Quarto epistle, that what is extant is a reading version not to be 'clapper-clawd with the palmes of the vulgar'. And the Ghost in Hamlet, Bräker thinks, would similarly suffer rather than profit from performance (104), a point which a good part of Hamlet's stage history supports.

Bräker is a naive yet all but stupid reader. What accounts for a good portion of his commentary's undeniable charm is its striking combination of idolatrous adoration and unashamed irreverence for Shakespeare and his plays. On the one hand, Bräker's observations are interspersed with laudatory exclamations (great god of the theatre (43), you miracle worker (40), great maker of men (61), divine poet (85)) as Bräker is time and again amazed by the wonders of Shakespeare's plays. His commentary is preceded by an extensive prostration before great William which constitutes a refreshing variation of the poet's conventional dedicatory self-abasement:

Heavens, what folly! An ignorant dunce, a boorish dolt, a clown who's been hatched out in some wild snowy mountain by two blockheads, who has neither education nor talents—and this idiot has the impudence to lay hands on the greatest of geniuses, to accost the greatest of men and criticize his writings, so admired and adored by the entire learned world. Heaven forbid! No, learned sir, I would quake if any word of criticism were to slip out, if any censorious thought were to arise in my breast. (25)

Having vowed to refrain from all criticism, Bräker candidly proceeds to frank and often incisive objections. He is outraged by the violence of Titus Andronicus and finds it shameful to 'stage such horrors as bring the whole human race into disrepute' (88), just as Samuel Johnson found that 'the barbarity of the spectacles . . . can scarcely be conceived tolerable to any audience'. Troilus and Cressida is another play on which Shakespeare 'squandered [his] talents' (91), while A Midsummer Night's Dream is full of 'wooden verses' (29). On two occasions, Bräker even objects to the plays' titles: Julius Caesar should be called 'Brutus' (79) and for The Merry Wives of Windsor he makes the fine suggestion 'Paunchy Falstaff' (47). Finally, he profoundly dislikes Love's Labour's Lost—unsurprisingly, considering all its 'jokes for the elect'—and accuses Shakespeare of having his characters utter little more than 'endless empty prattle' (42).

While Bräker feels special affinity with 'simple people'—singling out the mechanicals in A Midsummer Night's Dream (29), Speed and Lance in The Two Gentlemen of Verona (31), Launcelot Gobbo and his father in The Merchant of Venice (38), and Dogberry and Verges in Much Ado About Nothing (53)—the powerful are not always to his taste. He dislikes not only Richard III (72-3) but also Prospero, who is 'too good to be true' (28), and Henry V (65-6). In what is perhaps Bräker's single most sustained piece of analysis, he sees in Henry V an unscrupulous hypocrite and empty moralist rather than a reformed hero. The evidence he adduces is not just what he sees as the cold-hearted rejection of his earlier boon companions but also the hasty and premature removal of his father's crown in 2 Henry IV, the exaggerated praise by the corrupt Archbishop of Canterbury, and the disappearance of Falstaff in Henry V which should all contribute to make us suspicious rather than accepting of Henry (64-6). Formulating the case in his characteristically groping idiom, Bräker—by addressing the question of Henry's conversion—hits upon one of the play's central problems and anticipates arguments that have remained prominent in the critical debates of the twentieth century.

Bräker's mixture of reverent adoration and irreverent criticism blends for much of his commentary into an intimate conversation with Shakespeare, who is addressed 'as if he were sitting at the same table with me' (25). 'You've certainly created a fine masterpiece here, great William' (84), he compliments Shakespeare on Antony and Cleopatra. Bräker's criticism comes in the same personal terms as when he sums up his commentary on The Merry Wives of Windsor:

Forgive me, great William, for saying so, but however much your great genius may be in evidence, I can't help feeling you put this play together during a careless spell, when you weren't quite in the right mood, perhaps merely to oblige some merry ladies by entertaining them. (48)
Interestingly, Bräker’s repeated direct address to ‘dear William’ recalls young Goethe who, in his famous essay ‘For Shakespeare’s Day’ (Zum Shakespears Tag) of 1771 addresses the playwright as ‘Shakespeare, my friend’, and wishes him back among the living to figure as Pylades to Shakespeare-as-Orestes.\(^\text{13}\) (Though writing only a few years after his greater contemporary, Bräker did not know Goethe’s essay which remained unpublished until 1854.) Despite the vast gulf that separates Bräker’s background from Goethe’s, their relationship to the playwright is strikingly similar. ‘As yet, I have not thought much about Shakespeare’, Goethe affirms, ‘vague notions and feelings are the most I have been capable of’ \(^\text{[163]}\). Bräker, similarly, professes to write down ‘nothing critical, only feeling, sentiments’ \(^\text{[25]}\). Both Goethe’s and Bräker’s Shakespeare is ‘for all time’ effortlessly crossing temporal, linguistic, cultural, social, and personal boundaries to emerge wholly intact as a friend who talks to their sensibilities.

Bräker treats Shakespeare’s plays with the same familiarity that makes him welcome the playwright at his table, relating their fictive cosmos whenever possible to the world with which he is familiar: Launcelot Gobbo seems to him a faithful replica of young rustics in Switzerland \(^\text{[38]}\); Petruchio is invited to visit his native land and deal with some women he knows \(^\text{[49]}\); Ariel prompts him to reflect on cases of alleged necromancy in his own time \(^\text{[27]}\); and Cade’s rebellion figures angry, boastful rural artisans of the kind he encounters in his daily life \(^\text{[70]}\). Bräker addresses not only Shakespeare but also various characters directly, praising, questioning or accusing them:

\begin{quote}
O Timon, you forgot that you were a man, that your treasures are exhaustible, you forgot that your idolizers, your worshippers are men of a deceitful race who’ve learnt dissimulation only too well. Had you got to know yourself and your treasures and all your neighbours better, you’d never have been changed into a god—nor into a devil. \(^\text{[86]}\)
\end{quote}

Occasionally, all critical distance vanishes as when Bräker immerses himself in King Lear:

\begin{quote}
I read and couldn’t stop, so completely was I carried away; now I was inflamed with anger, now so full of compassion that I could have wept, now full of hope, now indignant and rebellious . . . . I was transported to those times, I went everywhere, following those hypocritical witches, Goneril and Regan, and even at the very beginning I found myself tugging at that egoistic, credulous Lear’s sleeve with all my might. I accompanied kind Cordelia and honest Kent with a thousand blessings. I hotly pursued that devil, Edmund, with curses . . . . I found wretched Lear and his fool out in the storm, and good Kent joined us. We found you, poor Edgar, in a miserable hovel—poor Tom’s a-cold. \(^\text{[95]}\)
\end{quote}

Bräker’s A Few Words about William Shakespeare’s Plays, far from being an attempt at detached, objective criticism, is the fascinating record of a reading experience that mixes puzzlement, excitement, incomprehension, gratitude and, above all, wonder.

In this strange encounter between an eighteenth-century Swiss peasant and Shakespeare, we simultaneously witness another meeting, that of deeply rooted rural pietism with the advent of the Enlightenment which is slowly reaching out into rural areas. In a telling comparison, Bräker says about Julius Caesar, ‘I know it off by heart like the Lord’s Prayer’ \(^\text{[79]}\). In fact, his encounter with Shakespeare is as much of a religious as of a literary kind. A pious and God-fearing man throughout his life, Bräker sees in Shakespeare—as the concluding pages of A Few Words make clear—a prophet who reveals more fully than any theologian the intricate reality of God’s kingdom on earth:

But I’ll say this: if ordinary people only understood your works, you couldn’t help but do more good than millions of garrulous theologians with all their lumber. But they don’t understand, they think you should keep dark and not reveal all the deeds of shame and amorous intrigues that have occurred over the ages in this or that corner of the world. Poor people! \(^\text{[108]}\)

How then did unschooled and penniless Bräker, peasant and trader in yarn, come to read and love Shakespeare’s plays, and proceed to write a commentary about them? Leaving the local village school after a few months, he improved his reading and writing skills at home, occasionally taught by his father. Early on he found gratification in the reading of religious texts, especially the Bible. In the 1770s, with a growing brood of children to care for, his business
went from bad to worse. Crippling debts weighed on Bräker and abject poverty threatened his family. Fired by the reading of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, whose hero he reproaches for having less grounds for suicide than himself, he considered taking action against his sea of troubles, but, contrary to other readers of Goethe's novel, he refrained from the deed. Reading and writing at night provided a welcome escape from the dire reality of his professional life. When he began his diary in 1770, his 'scribbling' met with his wife's scorn and derision, and his friends urged him to spend his energy on work rather than on useless books. In one diary entry (1 July 1784), Bräker confesses that he has given in too often to the temptation of reading *Don Quixote* at night, a confession his wife—to whom Bräker seemed deeply quixotic—would have found deeply ironic.

When he was admitted to the 'Moral Society of Lichtensteig' in 1777, however, he gained access to a great number of books from which he read avidly. Diary entries reveal his familiarity with several other British classics—John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Addison and Steele's *Spectator*, Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*, Oliver Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield*, and Tobias Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker*—though none comes close to rivalling Shakespeare's plays in Bräker's esteem. The latter have so deeply impressed themselves on Bräker that references to the plays keep appearing in his diary: in one entry (22 April 1781), Bräker opposes the perfect beauty of creation to men who are often malcontent or 'angry like Timon', while in another (17 March 1782), after the death of an acquaintance who had been badly treated by her family, he writes that he would like to 'make a funeral oration like Antony for Caesar, if I were an orator'.

Having written *A Few Words* in 1780, Bräker went on to write a play, whose title, *The Night at the Tribunal or What You Will (Die Gerichtsnacht oder Was ihr wollt, 1780)*, leaves no doubt about the source of inspiration. Bräker's *What You Will*, a play in two acts and twenty-two scenes, is no Shakespearian masterpiece. In fact, it is little more than a series of dramatic dialogues which, though vigorously written, make no attempt to form a dramatic whole. Bräker was too conscious of his limitations to choose a dramatic subject or form which would invite a comparison with Shakespeare that could only make himself look ridiculous. In his play, he is content to deal with simple villagers of the kind he was familiar with, peasants and artisans, soldiers and housewives, who gather and talk, quarrel and are reconciled, after a session of the law court which met to settle disputes among the villagers.

Certain dramatic features of Shakespearian comedy such as eavesdropping and cross-dressing find their way into Bräker's play as does the *theatrum mundi* topos to which Jaques' 'All the world's a stage' speech, and many other passages in Shakespeare, give voice:

"Of a thousand million people, each one plays his own part, good and bad and mediocre and another thousand ways in-between—whatever way he's prompted by his spirit. Everyone makes his entrance in this theatre of the world and plays his part, long or short—until he is hit. Down he tumbles, falls asleep. The other comedians dig a hole for him. It's all over—he can't hear when his part is talked about. And a few days later no one remembers him."\(^{14}\)

Although the play's lack of dramatic coherence may seem un-Shakespearian, the last thing Bräker's German-speaking contemporaries would have associated with the English playwright is a tight dramatic construction. Even for Herder, Shakespeare's plays consist of 'nothing but individual leaves from the book of occurrences, of Providence, of the world, fluttering in the storm of time—individual marks of peoples, stations, souls!'\(^{15}\) Similarly, Goethe, finding in Shakespeare the very opposite of the fetters French classicism had imposed upon its drama, makes a point of dividing the action of *Götz von Berlichingen* into more than fifty scenes spread out over a multiplicity of places throughout Germany. By writing a 'Shakespearian' play with a conscious lack of dramatic tightness, Bräker—removed as he was both socially and geographically from the centres of learning—was again in tune with the general spirit of contemporary Shakespeare reception.

After the booklet on Shakespeare and his Shakespearian *What You Will*, Bräker next wrote his autobiography, *The Life Story and Real Adventures of the Poor Man of Toggenburg*.
(Lebensgeschichte und natürliche Ebenteuer des Armen Mannes im Toggenburg), his best-known work. When Bräker circulated it among his literature minded acquaintances, news of the odd scribbling peasant spread and Bräker lived to see the publication of his autobiography in 1789 and a second volume with excerpts from his diary in 1793 (dated 1792). While Bräker’s What You Will only went into print in 1987, A Few Words had first been published in the Shakespeare Jahrbuch of 1877, but it has attracted little attention and has passed unnoticed by Shakespeare scholars despite the existence of an English translation since 1979. On the bicentennial anniversary of Bräker’s death in 1998, however, interest in him soared. The first three of five bulky volumes of a scholarly edition of his complete writings were...
published.\(^1^9\) At the Théâtre Saint-Gervais, Geneva, Bräker’s *A Few Words about William Shakespeare’s Plays* was adapted as a one-man play with Bräker reading, writing about, talking to and being carried away by Shakespeare during the nightly hours in his modest home, Shakespeare’s presence being signalled by the twelve piled-up volumes sitting on a chair opposite Bräker.\(^2^0\) Most extraordinarily, Lichtensteig, where Bräker would have witnessed performances of itinerant players, saw the erection of a replica of ‘Shakespeare’s Globe’ to house a production of Bräker’s *What You Will* (24 July–30 August 1998), an event that was witnessed by over 20,000 spectators and reached nationwide media coverage in Switzerland.\(^2^1\) The fact that the (temporary) Lichtensteig Globe was financed by Switzerland’s most controversial politician, the populist tribune Christoph Blocher, who has hitherto successfully striven to keep Switzerland in isolation outside both the European Union and the United Nations, only added further piquancy to the event.\(^2^2\) Ulrich Bräker—who wrote one of the most curious
chapters in the Shakespeare reception of the eighteenth century as he surreptitiously scribbled away during the nightly hours in Eastern Switzerland—has now reached centre stage in his native land, and the moment may have come for this unsung swain to be remembered elsewhere too.

Notes


5. From our modern vantage point, Gottsched, on the losing side in what was a kind of German ‘querelle des anciens et des modernes’, was proved wrong by history. In his own time, however, he was highly esteemed. His tragedy Sterbender Cato (Dying Cato) of 1732, which consists to a considerable degree of translated passages from Addison’s Cato, was the most successful play in Germany for several decades.

6. For the early Shakespeare reception in Germany and German-speaking Switzerland, see Friedrich Gundolf, Shakespeare und der deutsche Geist (Berlin: Bondi, 1911), Roy Pascal, Shakespeare in Germany 1740–1815 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937) and The German Sturm und Drang (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1953), Blinn, Shakespeare-Rezeption, and Martin Bircher and Heinrich Straumann, Shakespeare und die deutsche Schweiz bis zum Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts:


8. Eric A. Blackall (‘Ulrich Bräker und Eschenburg’, Shakespeare Jahrbuch, 98 (1962), pp. 93–109) has shown that Bräker also read Eschenburg’s critical appendices with care, although he substantially differed from Eschenburg in critical perspective.

9. Quoted from the epistle preceding the text of the first quarto (1609). Compare Richard Dutton’s recent argument that, ‘surely the point of the epistle is that it is announcing a reading version of the play, new to a print readership and superior to what had doubtless been performed in a cut text by the King’s Men at the Globe’ (‘The Birth of the Author’, in Elizabethan Theater: Essays in Honor of S. Schoenbaum [Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996], p. 84).


12. The hypothesis that The Merry Wives is an ‘occasional’ has of course long been elaborated by Leslie Hotson and others and is now generally accepted.


16. Derek Bowman’s translation of Bräker’s autobiography was published by Edinburgh University Press in 1970. The German text is available in several editions and on the World Wide Web on gutenberg.aol.de/bracker/locken/locken.htm.


18. See note 7 above. The one article in English that I am aware of—dealing with the question of how Bräker, as a former goat-boy, responds to the pastoral in Shakespeare—is Werner Brönnimann, ‘Ulrich Bräker: The Goatherd as a Reader of Shakespearean Pastoral’, Compar(a)ison: An International Journal of Comparative Literature, 2 (1993), pp. 313–22.


21. In analogy to ‘Shakespeare’s Globe’, the Lichtensteig theatre was officially named ‘Bräker’s Globe’. The production was directed by Nikolaus Windisch-Spoer and featured one of Switzerland’s most popular actors, Walo Lönd.

22. In the meantime, the Lichtensteig Globe, having fallen into disuse, has been sold by Blocher to the ‘Europapark’ Rust in Southern Germany—the second biggest amusement park in Europe after Euro Disney outside Paris—where, after its reconstruction, it is now serving for dramatic and other entertainments.