

The Reception of A. W. Schlegel in British Romanticism

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Two general observations on A. W. Schlegel's British reception in the early nineteenth century are worth making at the outset. First, although August Wilhelm (1767–1845) has long languished in the shadow of his younger brother Friedrich, whose essays and aphorisms of 1797–1800 helped defined the literary and philosophical programme of early German Romanticism, in his lifetime the older brother was better known and more celebrated, owing chiefly to the wide circulation of his Vienna lectures on drama. Delivered in 1808, published in 1809–11, and widely translated, the lectures were read, Schlegel boasted justly, from 'Cadiz to Edinburgh, Stockholm and St Petersburg'.¹ Particularly in Britain, where he was the only German literary critic generally known to the reading public, he was regarded as a representative of and ambassador for contemporary German aesthetic theory. In this role he acted as an 'entscheidender Anreger' of British literary criticism.² In 1817 the poet and critic Leigh Hunt (a friend of Percy Shelley, John Keats, and Lord Byron) asserted that Schlegel 'had hitherto been the only writer who seemed truly to *understand* [Shakespeare] as well as feel him', and in 1838 Schlegel reported that his friend Sir James Mackintosh (a Scottish jurist and historian) had described him as Britain's 'National Critic', for no book was 'so generally read and followed or opposed, as [his] Lectures on Dramatic Poetry'.³ Yet anglophone Romanticists have paid relatively little attention to the extent and variedness of Schlegel's impact. Fortunately in recent years there have been hopeful signs of renewed interest in the remarkable extent of Anglo-German cultural exchange in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with particular attention to periodical publications, informal networks, and correspondence.⁴ Within *Germanistik* Schlegel himself is receiving increasing

¹ Quoted in R. Paulin, *The Life of August Wilhelm Schlegel: Cosmopolitan of Art and Science* (Cambridge 2016), 3.

² E. Lohner, 'August Wilhelm Schlegel', in: B. von Wiese (ed.), *Deutsche Dichter der Romantik*, 2nd ed. (Berlin 1983), 139–67, here 139.

³ Hunt, 'Theatrical Examiner, No. 289', *Examiner*, 499 (20 July 1817), 457–85; Schlegel to G. A. Reimer, 29–31 December 1838, *Digitale Edition der Korrespondenz August Wilhelm Schlegels*, ed. J. Strobel and C. Bamberg, Version 4-20 <<https://august-wilhelm-schlegel.de/version-04-20/letters/view/4825>> (accessed 13 April 2020).

⁴ Examples include *Angermion: Yearbook for Anglo-German Literary Criticism, Intellectual History and Cultural Transfers* (founded 2010), M. Class's *Coleridge and Kantian Ideas in England, 1796–1817* (London 2012), M. van Woudenberg's *Coleridge and Cosmopolitan Intellectualism 1794–1804: The Legacy of Göttingen University* (London 2017), M. Oergel's *Zeitgeist—How Ideas Travel* (Berlin 2019), and the present authors' publications on the

attention, as demonstrated by the recent resumption of the *Kritische Ausgabe* of the *Vorlesungen* (inaugurated by Ernst Behler in 1989), the online publication of his letters (from 2014), and the publication of Roger Paulin's authoritative biography, the first in any language.⁵

The second general observation is that the substance of Schlegel's Vienna lectures was transmitted to Britain in multiple ways, both direct and indirect. Thus the reception of these lectures serves as an interesting test-case for the study of Anglo-German *Kulturtransfer*, reminding us of the necessity to attend not only to the published books and their translations but to other forms of communication, including personal contacts and networks. Indeed, the fact that the lectures took place at all was an indirect result of an earlier, triangular exchange. By 1808 Schlegel was an established member of the retinue of Germaine de Staël, as tutor to her children and her primary informant about German literature and philosophy, and it was her connections in Viennese high society and interventions on Schlegel's behalf that made the lectures possible. But she had had been advised to make Schlegel's acquaintance in the first place, four years earlier, by Goethe and a multilingual Englishman then resident in Jena, Henry Crabb Robinson, who had been enlisted to provide de Staël with information about German philosophy during her two-month sojourn in Weimar. The surviving manuscript of Robinson's account of the Schlegel brothers for her supports his later claim that he was the first to bring August Wilhelm, whom he described as 'most advantageously known by the public as the Translator of Shakespear', to her attention.⁶

De Staël's celebrated *De l'Allemagne*, proscribed by Napoleon in 1810 and finally published three years later in London by John Murray, Lord Byron's publisher, in the original French and an English translation, not only mentioned Schlegel's Vienna lectures, extolling

connections between Goethe and Byron: S. Dumke, 'Neither Healthy nor Sick: Goethe's Classical-Romantic Distinction Revisited', *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 85 (2016), 1–13; N. Halmi, 'Byron and *Weltliteratur*', in: N. Lennartz (ed.), *Byron and Marginality* (Edinburgh 2018), 19–29.

⁵ Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe der Vorlesungen*, ed. E. Behler and G. Braungart (Paderborn 1989–). The present article originated in a paper presented by Stephanie Dumke (†2018) in German at the conference *August Wilhelm Schlegels Korrespondenzen: Epistolarität und Interkulturalität*, Philipps-Universität Marburg, 20 February 2015. A revised English version was presented by Nicholas Halmi at the conference *Exchanges, Intersections and Gender Issues in Eighteenth Century Europe: The Anglo-German Case* at the Università di Bologna, 6 May 2019. He wishes to express his thanks to Gilberta Golinelli, Rüdiger Görner, and Kaltërina Latifi.

⁶ Robinson, *Essays on Kant, Schelling, and German Aesthetics*, ed. J. Vigus (London 2010), 23, 137–38; *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers*, ed. E. J. Morley (London 1938), I 298 (diary, 10 November 1823).

their ‘depth of philosophy’, but assimilated their fundamental distinction, simultaneously historical and typological, between classical and romantic literature, which is to say between Western literature from before and that from after the establishment of Christianity. Both the distinction itself and its normative import, evident in Schlegel’s critique of French neoclassical drama as anachronistic and ill-adapted to its content, found its way, somewhat softened in tone, into *De l’Allemagne*: ‘ces poésies d’après l’antique, quelque parfaites qu’elles soient’, de Staël wrote in part 2, chapter 11, ‘sont rarement populaires, parce qu’elles ne tiennent, dans le temps actuel, à rien de national. [...] Nos poètes français sont admirés par tout ce qu’il y a d’esprits cultivés chez nous et dans le reste de l’Europe; mais ils sont tout à fait inconnus aux gens du peuple et aux bourgeois même dans des villes, parce que les arts en France ne sont pas, comme ailleurs, natifs du pays même où leurs beautés se développent.’⁷ To an extent, then, *De l’Allemagne* and the *Vorlesungen* themselves, the latter soon translated into French and English, were mutually supportive in disseminating what became one of the best known and most influential literary-critical distinctions of the nineteenth century. Within six weeks of publication, some 3500 copies of de Staël’s work had been sold, and by 1814 a dozen reviews of it had been published, some of which mentioned by Schlegel by name.⁸ In April–May 1814 Schlegel, then performing diplomatic services for the Swedish crown prince, joined de Staël in a visit to England, where he met Lord Liverpool, the Tory prime minister, and Sir James Mackintosh, then a Whig parliamentarian, who had reviewed *De l’Allemagne* in the *Edinburgh Review*. (Schlegel and Mackintosh, who shared an interest in Indological matters, were to remain in regular contact thereafter.)

The British reception of Schlegel’s *Vorlesungen* begins, however, not with the publication of *De l’Allemagne*, still less with that of the lectures’ English translation in 1815, but with Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s inadequately acknowledged or unacknowledged incorporation of some of Schlegel’s concepts and phraseology into his own literary lectures of the winter of 1811–12. On 6 November 1811 he had written to Crabb Robinson that he was ‘very anxious to see Schlegel’s *Werke* before the lectures commence’, implying that he suspected they might be useful to him.⁹ In the event it was only shortly before the ninth lecture of 16 December 1811, on the dramatic unities and Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, that his

⁷ De Staël, *De l’Allemagne*, ed. S. Balayé (Paris 1968) I 213–14.

⁸ Thomas Sauer, *A. W. Schlegel’s Shakespearean Criticism in England, 1811–1846* (Bonn 1981), 58.

⁹ Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs (Oxford 1956–61), III 343.

wish was fulfilled. According to the transcript of that lecture, Coleridge informed his audience that he had been given a copy of the German edition the day before, and ‘he should praise the book much more highly were it not that in truth it would be praising himself, as the sentiments contained in it were so coincident with those Coleridge had expressed’ in his earlier lectures.¹⁰ Certainly it is true that Coleridge had been arguing from his first lectures on Shakespeare in 1808 that the playwright was a conscious artist and not, as a commonplace of eighteenth-century criticism held, an instinctive and untutored genius. But it is also true that from this ninth lecture onwards Coleridge helped himself both to contextual material and to particular formulations from the *Vorlesungen*: his lecture of 16 December, for example, appropriated Schlegel’s contrast between Greek drama as sculptural and Shakespearean drama as picturesque as well as the contrast between mechanical and organic form, and it even repeated (as hearsay) Schlegel’s claim that Calderón had equalled Shakespeare.

Coleridge’s plagiarisms have been endlessly discussed, and we shall not dwell on them here except to suggest that the usual defence of his criticism—namely that his specific analyses of the language and characterization in Shakespeare’s plays are both distinct from and independent of Schlegel’s more generalized concerns—rather misses the point. Being empirical and circumstantial, Coleridge’s ‘practical criticism’, to use his own term for it, did not require the conceptual framing he appropriated from Schlegel: in other words, there was a division between his theoretical and practical criticism. Yet Coleridge’s conviction of the value of what he called ‘desynonymization’, achieving conceptual clarity through definitional distinction, must have attracted him powerfully to Schlegel’s lectures, which interpret individual plays by means of fixed pairs of opposed general categories: classical/romantic, plastic/picturesque, harmony/disharmony, fulfilment/longing, concentration/disparity, organic/mechanical form (most of which, as Roger Paulin has noted, were not themselves original to Schlegel).¹¹ When he was introduced to de Stäel in London in October 1813, Coleridge expressed—according to her report back to Schlegel—his admiration of the German critic.¹²

¹⁰ Coleridge, *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes (Princeton 1987), I 353–54.

¹¹ On Coleridge and ‘desynonymy’ see S. Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford 1999), 12–14; on his appropriations from Schlegel’s *Vorlesungen*, see Foakes’s introduction to *Lectures 1808–1818*, I lix–lxiv; and his ‘Samuel Taylor Coleridge’, in: R. Paulin (ed.), *Great Shakespearians, III: Voltaire, Goethe, Schlegel, Coleridge* (London 2010), 128–72, here 143–48.

¹² De Stäel to Schlegel, 8 October 1813, quoted in Sauer, 167 n. 27.

Of the distinctions that Coleridge encountered in the *Vorlesungen*, the most intellectually productive for him proved to be that between symbol and allegory, not indeed for the purposes of literary criticism—where it scarcely features—but for interpreting the Bible typologically on the one hand and theorizing the meaningfulness of nature on the other. From the 1790s onward Coleridge had spoken of nature as a divinely ordained symbolic language, ‘every Feature [...] the Symbol and all its Parts the written Language of infinite Goodness and all powerful Intelligence’.¹³ But only after reading Schlegel’s *Vorlesungen* did he begin to contrast the symbol with allegory. In his fourth lecture, on Aeschylus, Schlegel (himself repeating a distinction articulated earlier by F. W. J. Schelling) had argued that classical mythology is symbolic, by virtue of possessing an ontological content distinct from its representational content, as opposed to allegorical, or merely personifying ideas. In his treatise *The Statesman’s Manual* (1816), intended to demonstrate the relevance of the Bible to statecraft, Coleridge appropriated this distinction to emphasize the inherence of meaning in the symbol: Old Testament prophecies are symbolic rather than allegorical because they refer to events in Jewish history while anticipating events in Christian history; nature is symbolic because its phenomena, though real in themselves, represent the divine reason that created them.¹⁴

While Coleridge’s dependence on Schlegel for the symbol/allegory distinction passed unnoticed among contemporaries, the similarities between his and Schlegel’s Shakespearean criticism did not, and he was publicly challenged in December 1818—after asserting, in another lecture series, his priority in defending Shakespeare’s literary judgement—to prove that he had developed his view before Schlegel had.¹⁵ The vexed relationship between the two culminated rather farcically, however, in their first meeting, together with William Wordsworth and Wordsworth’s daughter Dora, in 1828 in Bonn, where the German was now a professor and one of Europe’s most eminent Indologists. According to a later report of the encounter by an eyewitness, the actor Charles Mayne Young, Wordsworth sat silently while Schlegel and Coleridge conversed in English, complimenting each other’s translations

¹³ Coleridge, *Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion*, ed. L. Patton and P. Mann (Princeton 1971), 158.

¹⁴ Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur*, ed. S. Knödler, *Kritische Ausgabe*, IV/1 66; Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual*, ed. R. J. White (Princeton 1972), 32, 72, 79. See further N. Halmi, ‘Coleridge’s Most Unfortunate Borrowing from A. W. Schlegel’, in: C. Bode and S. Domsch (eds.), *British and European Romanticisms* (Trier 2007), 131–42.

¹⁵ See Foakes’s introduction to Coleridge, *Lectures 1808–1819*, I lxi and n. 70.

(Coleridge's of Schiller and Schlegel's of Shakespeare) and expressing opposed opinions about the works of Walter Scott and Lord Byron.¹⁶

Because Coleridge's lectures remained unpublished till 1856, and the lecturer apparently never named Schlegel in them, their role as a public medium for the diffusion of Schlegelian critical concepts was limited. One of the first *explicit* engagements with the *Vorlesungen* appeared in a review of their French translation, *Cours de littérature dramatique*, by de Staël's cousin Albertine Necker de Saussure, published in 1814. Writing anonymously in John Murray's *Quarterly Review* in October of that year, Francis Hare-Naylor enclosed some thirty pages of paraphrase of Schlegel's lectures between expressions of praise: 'This is a work of extraordinary merit', the review began. Emphasizing the distinction between the classical and the romantic, Hare-Naylor endorsed Schlegel's astringent critique of neoclassical criticism and his vigorous defence of Shakespeare's purportedly 'incongruous species of drama'. The review concluded by pronouncing the lectures 'worthy of that individual whom Germany venerates as the second [after Goethe], and Europe has classed among the most illustrious of her literary characters'.¹⁷

In November 1815 John Black's two-volume English translation, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, was published by Baldwin, Braddock, and Joy in London together with William Blackwood in Edinburgh and John Cummin in Dublin—the names of all three publishers appearing on the title-pages. Thomas Sauer has estimated that the edition consisted of a thousand copies—a standard print run for the time.¹⁸ But whatever the number, the edition was nearly exhausted by April 1819, as Baldwin reported to Schlegel. The lecturer, however, declined Baldwin's requests (in 1819 and 1824) to provide supplementary material for a second edition, and none accordingly appeared until 1840, although a pirated American edition was published in Philadelphia in 1833. In 1846 a new edition, revised by A. J. W. Morrison to take account of the revisions and additions made by Schlegel to the third German edition, was published in one volume by Henry Bohn in London.

Of the eight substantive reviews of Black's translation, the most significant was surely that by the translator's friend William Hazlitt, published anonymously in the *Edinburgh Review* in February 1816. Beginning with generalizations about the Germans as

¹⁶ Young, *Memoir* (London 1871), 111–12. For his part Young was pleased to affirm that he had read neither Schlegel's nor Coleridge's lectures (p. 59).

¹⁷ Hare-Naylor, *Quarterly Review*, 12.23 (October 1814), 112–46, here 112, 132, 146.

¹⁸ Sauer, 68, 171.

‘universal undertakers, and complete encyclopedists’ who ‘are always straining at a grand systematic conclusion’, Hazlitt praised Schlegel as an ‘absolute exception’ to the national stereotype, even if he ‘sometimes carries the love of theory, and the spirit of partisanship, farther than is at all allowable’. Quoting long extracts from the lectures, Hazlitt approved Schlegel’s censure of the French neoclassical dramatists, but rejected that of the English Restoration comedians; he dissented from Schlegel’s admiration of the Spanish Golden Age dramatists, but vindicated the *German* dramatists for their ‘production of effect’, which is ‘the very thing that their fastidious countryman most despises and abhors’. Though judging Schlegel occasionally too admiring of Shakespeare, Hazlitt conceded that the lectures offer ‘by far the best account which has been given of the plays of that great genius by any writer, either among ourselves’—an implicit but obvious affront to Coleridge—‘or abroad’.¹⁹

In 1817, confessing a wounded national pride that ‘no writer among ourselves has shewn either the same enthusiastic admiration of [Shakespeare’s] genius, or the same philosophical acuteness in pointing out his characteristic excellences’—and remarking how grudging by contrast Samuel Johnson’s praise of the playwright had been—Hazlitt presented his own volume *Characters in Shakespeare’s Plays* as a kind of supplement to Schlegel’s lectures, ‘bringing illustrations from particular passages of the plays themselves, of which Schlegel’s work, from the extensiveness of his plan, did not admit’.²⁰ Unlike Coleridge, Hazlitt acknowledged the value of Schlegel’s Shakespeare criticism openly and generously, if by no means wholly uncritically. Later, as Roy Park notes, Hazlitt, who in his twenties had pursued a career as a portrait painter, availed himself in his own *Lectures on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth* (1820) of Schlegel’s distinction between the ‘plastic spirit’ of ancient and the ‘picturesque spirit’ of romantic literature; and he followed the German critic in contrasting sculpture (as an abstract art) unfavourably with painting (as an individualized art).²¹ Hazlitt’s wish, expressed in the 1816 review, that the commentary in a future edition of Shakespeare’s works include Schlegel’s observations was to be fulfilled within a decade, in editions by William Harness (1825) and S. W. Singer (1826), followed by those of Edward Moxon (1838), Charles Knight (1839–43), and John Ogden (1843).²²

¹⁹ Hazlitt, *Collected Works*, ed. P. P. Howe (London 1930–34), XVI 58–59, 98.

²⁰ Hazlitt, *Collected Works*, IV 172.

²¹ Park, *Hazlitt and the Spirit of the Age: Abstraction and Critical Theory* (Oxford 1971), 119–20.

²² See Sauer, 140–42.

Hazlitt and Wordsworth were by 1815 bitter antagonists, but the latter seems to have shared with the former a high estimate of Schlegel's lectures, for these are almost certainly what Wordsworth (whose knowledge of German was very limited) had in mind when he wrote, in the 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' of his 1815 collection of *Poems*, 'The Germans, only, of foreign nations, are approaching towards a knowledge and feeling of what [Shakespeare] is. In some respects they have acquired a superiority over the fellow countrymen of the Poet [...]. How long may it be before [...] it becomes universally acknowledged that the judgement of Shakespeare in the selection of his materials, and in the manner in which he has made them [...] constitute a unity of their own, and contribute to one great end, is not less admirable than his imagination, his invention, and his intuitive knowledge of human Nature?'²³ Wordsworth thus endorsed a criticism which emphasized the principle of organic unity and which, by recognizing the conscious artistry involved in Shakespeare's attainment of such unity, had liberated itself from eighteenth-century condescension towards the playwright. Although he specified no German critic, and when he wrote this essay he would not have read Schlegel's lectures themselves—certainly not in Black's translation—he could not have missed Hare-Naylor's extensive paraphrase in the *Quarterly*, since it immediately followed one of the few complimentary reviews (written by his friend Charles Lamb) of his own poem *The Excursion*. For his part Coleridge is likely to have assumed that Wordsworth was praising Schlegel, and he resented the praise as a slight upon his own Shakespearean criticism. Transforming Wordsworth's plural Germans into a singular German, he complained to a correspondent, 'Plutarch tells us, that Egotism is a venial fault in the unfortunate, and justifiable in the calumniated—yet I should not have done this violence to me but that Mr Wordsworth for whose fame I had felt and fought with an ardour that amounted to absolute Self-oblivion [...] has affirmed *in print* that a German Critic *first* taught us to think correctly concerning Shakespear.'²⁴

Between December 1818 and February 1821, John Payne Collier, who had been one of the transcribers of Coleridge's 1811–12 lectures, published ten articles on English playwrights in the *Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany*. Astonishingly, Collier had so fully assimilated the identification of Shakespeare with romantic drama that he presented it as a commonplace of English criticism, notwithstanding the fact that it was precisely Schlegel who, mediated in the first instance through de Staël's *De l'Allemagne*, had

²³ Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser (Oxford 1974), III 69.

²⁴ Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, IV 839 (to William Mudford, 18 February 1818).

introduced the systematic use of this concept of the romantic within a comparative critical framework. (The English word *romantic* was still predominantly used at the time as a synonym for *medieval* or in connection with chivalric romance.) Mixing faint praise with harsh criticism, Collier began his second article by observing that Schlegel ‘has given us several instances of his want of knowledge on the subject on which he has displayed so much wisdom’.²⁵ The German critic’s ignorance of the work of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, Collier argued, had led him mistakenly to attribute to Shakespeare a play, *The History of Sir John Oldcastle*, that had been established to be by Michael Drayton and others, and to credit Shakespeare with having created romantic drama in England. The latter issue particularly exercised Collier: after insisting in May 1819 that it was not easy to determine which playwright had been the first romantic dramatist, except that it was *not* Shakespeare, he returned to the question in December. Here Collier sought to impugn Schlegel on the grounds of derivativeness as well as of inaccuracy: he was merely repeating an error made by English critics, notably Thomas Warton in his *History of English Poetry* (1774–81). Thus ‘we need not wonder that Schlegel, a foreigner [...] should take it for granted that what he saw asserted by many native commentators as a mere matter of fact, was established on sufficient authority’.²⁶ Collier here misrepresented Warton—who had claimed only that ‘Shakespeare was above the bondage of the classics’ inasmuch as the principal sources of his plays were ‘modern fiction’ (i.e., romances) and English history—but evidently national pride dictated that English critics should have priority over Germany’s most prominent critic even in their errors.²⁷ Repeating in 1831 his definition of romantic drama from May 1819 (‘it disregards the unities of time and place; it sets at nought both the probable and the possible’), Collier omitted all reference to Schlegel.²⁸

Of the British reception of Schlegel’s *Lectures* in the Victorian period, which was assisted by the publication of fifty-three pages of extracts in Nathan Lane’s anthology of Shakespeare criticism, *Memoirs of Shakespeare* (1828), it will suffice to quote Walter Schirmer’s assessment from what remains the most philologically thorough treatment of the

²⁵ Collier, ‘On the English Dramatic Writers Who Preceded Shakespeare. No. II’, *The Edinburgh Magazine, and Literary Miscellany*, n.s. 4 (February 1819), 127–31, here 127.

²⁶ Collier, ‘On the English Dramatic Writers Who Preceded Shakespeare. No. VI’, *The Edinburgh Magazine, and Literary Miscellany*, n.s. 5 (December 1819), 522–7, here 522–3.

²⁷ Cf. Warton, *The History of English Poetry, from the Close of the Eleventh to the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1774–81), III 393.

²⁸ Collier, *The History of English Dramatic Poetry to the Time of Shakespeare* (London 1831), III 366.

subject: ‘Im Laufe der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts verliert Schlegel allmählich seine lebendige Wirkung, aber sein Name bleibt.’²⁹ Yet we would be remiss not to consider, by way of conclusion, the intensive but divergent engagements of two Romantic poets, Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, with Schlegel’s dramatic criticism.

Shelley referred to ‘the learned critic’ Schlegel by name only twice, in a notebook entry of 26 July 1818 on Euripides and a letter of 20 January 1820, and specific evidence of his approval of the *Lectures* is circumstantial: Mary Shelley’s favourable comparison of Schlegel’s views on tragedy to those of J. J. Barthélemy, whose *Voyage du jeune Anacharsis en Grèce vers le milieu du quatrième siècle avant l’ère vulgaire* (1817) she and Percy read in June–July 1818, and an anonymous report (likely by Percy’s cousin Thomas Medwin, a member of the Shelleys’ Pisan circle in 1820–22) of the poet’s recommendation of ‘that most excellent critic Schlegel’ to Byron in connection with Calderón.³⁰ Yet on no other English poet of the period did the German critic have a more profound impact. René Wellek argued that the most original insights of Shelley’s essay ‘A Defence of Poetry’, composed in 1820 (though published only two decades later), are historical; and it is likely that Shelley’s sense of the necessary connection between literary works and their historical circumstances was sharpened by Schlegel’s lectures, Black’s translation of which he read aloud en route to Italy in March 1818, as Mary Shelley’s journal informs us.³¹ For Schlegel it was axiomatic that, as he wrote in his second lecture, ‘die Poesie, als der innigste Ausdruck unsers ganzen Wesens, sich in verschiedenen Zeitaltern auch von neuem eigenthümlichen *gestalten* muß’ (or in Black’s rendering: ‘poetry, as the fervid expression of our whole being, must assume a new

²⁹ W. F. Schirmer, ‘August Wilhelm Schlegel und England’, *Shakespeare-Jahrbuch*, 75 (1939), 77–107, here 104.

³⁰ Shelley, *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts: A Facsimile Edition, with Full Transcriptions and Scholarly Apparatus*, gen. ed. D. H. Reiman (New York 1986–2002), V 140–1; Shelley to Charles Ollier, 20 January 1820, *Letters*, ed. F. L. Jones (Oxford 1964), II 256; Mary Shelley to Maria Gisborne, 26 July 1818, *Letters*, ed. B. T. Bennett (Baltimore 1980–88) I 76; ‘Byron and Shelley on the Character of Hamlet’, *New Monthly Magazine* n.s. 29 (1830), 327–36, here 334. The letter to Ollier concerned his publication, in the first and only issue of *Ollier’s Literary Miscellany* (1820), of ‘A. W. Schlegel on Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*; with remarks upon the character of German Criticism’—a commented translation by J. C. Hare of Schlegel’s ‘Über Shakespeare’s *Romeo und Julia*’, originally published in Schiller’s periodical *Die Horen* in 1797.

³¹ Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism 1750–1950* (New Haven 1955–92) II 124; *The Journals of Mary Shelley*, ed. P. R. Feldman and D. Scott-Kilvert (Oxford 1987) I 198–99 (16–21 March 1818).

and peculiar form in different ages’).³² Though he conceded an adoration (‘eine begeisterte Verehrung’) of the Greeks—an attitude Shelley shared—Schlegel rejected the transhistorical normativity of the classical generic categories, and he characterized the mixing of tragedy and comedy as characteristically and legitimately modern, which is to say romantic. In the ‘Defence of Poetry’ Shelley, who shared Schlegel’s aversion to French neoclassical drama, described ‘the modern practice of blending comedy with tragedy’ as ‘undoubtedly an extension of the dramatic circle’—beyond that drawn by the Greeks. Like Coleridge and Hazlitt, Shelley adopted certain of Schlegel’s formulations from the *Lectures*: poetry’s ‘power of creating what is beautiful’ became, in the ‘Defence’, the ‘source of whatever of beautiful or generous or true can have place in an evil time’; and the distinction (related to organic form) between ‘internal excellence’ and ‘external appearance’ was closely echoed in that between ‘internal nature’ and ‘accidental vesture’.³³

Not only, however, did Schlegel offer Shelley ‘a model of how to engage critically with Greek tragedy from a self-consciously modern but nonetheless sympathetic perspective’, as Michael Rossington has argued, but he inspired the poet both to learn Spanish specifically to read Calderón’s plays—some thirty eventually—and to compose his own dramas.³⁴ Applying the lessons that Shelley had learned from Schlegel, these self-consciously ‘romantic’ works were to reject the two dominant models represented on the contemporary English stage, namely neoclassical tragedy and moralistic melodrama: ‘Tragedy becomes a cold imitation of the form of the great masterpieces of antiquity’, Shelley wrote in the ‘Defence’, ‘or a weak attempt to teach certain doctrines, which the writer considers as moral truths’ (p. 520). As an example of the former he named Joseph Addison’s *Cato* (1712), much admired in the eighteenth century but condemned by Schlegel too as ‘ein schwaches und frostiges Stück’.³⁵ After reading Schlegel’s *Lectures*, Shelley completed no fewer than four dramas (*Prometheus Unbound*, *The Cenci*, *Swellfoot the Tyrant*, and *Hellas*), began three

³² Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe*, IV/1 35–36; *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans. J. Black (London 1815), I 49.

³³ ‘A Defence of Poetry’, *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. D. H. Reiman and N. Fraistat (New York 2001), 509–35, here 519, 522, 516 (hereafter cited parenthetically); cf. Schlegel, *Lectures*, I 3, 7, 44 (*Kritische Ausgabe*, IV/1 10, 12, 33).

³⁴ Rossington, ‘Tragedy: *The Cenci*, *Swellfoot the Tyrant*’, in: M. O’Neill and A. Howe (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Oxford 2012), 299–308, here 304. The full extent of Shelley’s engagement with Calderón’s drama is demonstrated in S. Dumke’s PhD thesis, ‘The Influence of Calderón and Goethe on Shelley in the Context of A. W. Schlegel’s Conception of Romantic Drama’ (Durham University, 2013), which is currently being prepared for publication.

³⁵ Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe*, IV/1 402 (*Lectures*, II 318).

more, drafted plans for others, and translated extracts from Calderón's *El mágico prodigioso* and Goethe's *Faust*.

Convinced that the English stage was in crisis and needed renewal, Shelley would have been particularly interested in Schlegel's promotion, in his final lecture, of romantic drama as the model for contemporary German theatre to follow. Lamenting in the 'Defence' that tragedy as currently performed was 'without religion and solemnity', Shelley praised Calderón, Schlegel's exemplar of romantic drama, for having 'attempted to fulfil some of the high conditions of dramatic representation neglected by Shakespeare; such as the establishing a relation between the drama and religion' (pp. 518–19). Though far from endorsing Christian or any other religious doctrines—on the contrary—Shelley was fascinated by the role of religion in society, and his dramas *The Cenci* and the unfinished *Charles the First*, as well his translations from *El mágico prodigioso* and *Faust*, 'may be broadly characterized as historically-minded investigations into the nature of Christian belief in early modern Europe'.³⁶ While *The Cenci* represents how patriarchal religion was 'interwoven with the whole fabric of life' in sixteenth-century Rome, as Shelley's preface put it, the Philhellenist drama *Hellas* explores more generally the tension between a longing to transcend earthly existence and a simultaneous enchantment with the sensuous and mutable. Contrasting the Greek ideal of 'perfect concord and proportion between all the powers' in humanity with the 'modern consciousness of the internal discord which renders such an ideal impossible', Schlegel characterized modern poetry in terms that must have resonated profoundly for Shelley, and indeed (as Stuart Curran declared) 'could stand as an epigraph for Shelley's life work': 'the endeavour [...] is to reconcile these two worlds between which we find ourselves divided, and to melt them indissolubly into one another. The impressions of the senses are consecrated, as it were, from their mysterious connexion with higher feelings; and the soul, on the other hand, embodies its forebodings, or nameless visions of infinity, in the phenomena of the senses.'³⁷

As Shelley's attention turned increasingly to drama, so too did Lord Byron's. Both poets sought to create alternatives to the popular theatre of the day, but Shelley did not approve of Byron's plans, as he confided to his friend Horace Smith on 14 September 1821:

³⁶ M. Rossington, 'Beyond Nation: Shelley's European Dramas', in: L. M. Crisafulli and C. Pietropoli (eds.), *The Language of Performance in British Romanticism* (Bern 2008), 83–95, here 83.

³⁷ Schlegel, *Lectures*, I 16–17 (*Kritische Ausgabe*, IV/1 17); Curran, *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision* (San Marino 1975), 33–34.

‘he is occupied in forming a new drama [...] in which he will follow the French tragedians and Alfieri, rather than those of England and Spain, and produce something new, at least to England. This seems to me the wrong road [...].’³⁸ Admiring neoclassical drama and personally disliking Schlegel, whom he met at de Staël’s villa in Coppet, near Geneva, in July 1816, the English lord was scarcely likely to regard the German critic’s lectures, of which de Staël probably lent him the French translation, as suggesting possibilities for a renewed British drama.³⁹ And indeed, in the preface to the volume of three tragedies that he published in 1821—*Sardanapalus*, *The Two Foscari*, and *Cain*—Byron defended the three dramatic unities prescribed by Corneille in his *Discours sur le poème dramatique* (1660): ‘The Author’, wrote Byron, ‘has in one instance attempted to preserve, and in the other to approach the “unities;” conceiving that with any very distant departure from them, there may be poetry, but can be no drama. He is aware of the unpopularity of this notion in present English literature; but it is not a system of his own, being merely an opinion, which, not very long ago, was the law of literature throughout the world, and is still so in the more civilized parts of it.’⁴⁰

But Byron’s devotion to neoclassical precepts was not so straightforward as this preface, or for that matter his defence of Alexander Pope in his published *Letter to John Murray* (1821), implies. For one thing, his first drama, *Manfred* of 1817—which the author described as ‘mental theatre’ and ‘metaphysical drama’—was manifestly influenced by a work that both Schlegel and Shelley recognized as an example of romantic drama, *Faust*, from which the Gothic novelist Matthew Gregory Lewis had translated sections for Byron during his Genevan summer of 1816. And after 1821 Byron returned to the ‘metaphysical’, semi-Gothic mode in a play that, unlike *Manfred*, he acknowledged to have been ‘founded partly on’ *Faust*, the unfinished *Deformed Transformed*.⁴¹ The character of the Stranger in that play seems have been inspired not only by Goethe’s Mephistopheles, however, but also by the motif of the devil as a second self in *El magico prodigioso* and by an episode of

³⁸ Shelley, *Letters*, II 349.

³⁹ Byron referred to meeting Schlegel in letters of 29 July 1816 and 2, 4, and 7 August 1821; and he acknowledged receiving ‘the work of Mr. Schlegel’ from Germaine de Staël on 25 August 1816: *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. L. Marchand (London 1974–94), V 86, 88, VIII 164–65, 167, 172–73. In August 1821 Byron was informed by his friend Thomas Moore that Schlegel was contemplating ‘a fierce book against’ him (VIII 166–67, 172–73), but nothing came of it (if indeed the report was accurate).

⁴⁰ Byron, *Complete Poetical Works*, ed. J. J. McGann and B. Weller (Oxford 1980–93), VI 16.

⁴¹ Byron, *Complete Poetical Works*, VI 517.

doubled selfhood in *El purgatorio di San Patricio*—Shelley having drawn Byron’s attention to Calderón’s plays when they were living near one another in Pisa in 1821.⁴² Indirectly, then, and quite ironically, Schlegel may have said to have assisted in the realization of Shelley’s shrewd prediction to Horace Smith, referring to Byron’s professed neoclassicism, that ‘[h]e will shake off his shackles as he finds they cramp him’.⁴³

It is striking in this regard that Byron consistently objected to the reductiveness of Schlegel’s distinction between the classical and the romantic. In the dedication of the fourth canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1819), he noted that ‘the question of Romantic or Classical as they call it’ was hotly debated in Italy, and he repeated this observation in the rejected dedication, written in October 1820, of his (neoclassical) Venetian play *Marino Faliero* to Goethe: ‘I perceive that in Germany as well as in Italy there is a great struggle about what they call ‘*Classical and Romantic*’ terms which were not subjects of Classification in England—at least when I left it four or five years ago’ (in 1816). ‘Perhaps’, Byron added, ‘there may be something of the sort sprung up lately—but I have not heard much about it,—and it would be such bad taste that I should be very sorry to believe it.’⁴⁴ The following year, in the footnote to the third edition of his *Letter to John Murray*, Byron complained, ‘Schlegel and Madame de Stael have endeavoured also to reduce poetry to *two systems*, classical and romantic.’⁴⁵

What Byron could not accept, finally, was Schlegel’s insistence on the mutual exclusivity of these two fundamental types of drama, an exclusivity deriving in his view from their distinct religious and historical contexts. If for Schlegel the modern dramatist was free to mix tragedy and comedy, which the ancient dramatists had strictly differentiated, then for Byron the modern dramatist should be free to mix the classical and the romantic, which Schlegel had strictly differentiated—or at least to choose equally between them. In Byron’s view the renovation of modern drama demanded the possibility of returning, in however qualified a manner, to the old ways.

⁴² See the commentary on *The Deformed Transformed* in *Complete Poetical Works*, VI 730–32.

⁴³ Shelley, *Letters*, II 349.

⁴⁴ Byron, *Complete Poetical Works*, II 124, VI 546–47. The manuscript of Byron’s dedication was sent to Goethe in 1830 (it is now displayed in the Goethe-Nationalmuseum in Weimar), the same year that an expurgated version of it was published in Thomas Moore’s *Life and Journals of Lord Byron*.

⁴⁵ Byron, *Letter to John Murray Esqre.*, *Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. A. Nicholson (Oxford 1991), 140–60, here 142.