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TILGHERGENOVA

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The Fluctuating Shape of Authority: Some Reflections on Pizarro, from Kotzebue's Original Text to Sheridan's Great National Drama

No Congress props our Drama's falling state,
The modern ultimatum is, "Translate."
Thence sprout the morals of the German school;
The Christian sinks, the Jacobin bears rule:
No virtue shines, but in the peasant's mien,
No vice, but in patrician robes, is seen;
Through four dull acts the Drama drags, and draws,
The fifth is stage trick, and the curtain falls.

Thomas James Mathias

The aim of this paper is to focus on what happened on stage during a play adapted from a foreign language (in this case Sheridan's version of Kotzebue's *Die Spanier in Peru*) to investigate more closely the idea of the authority of the original play in relation to its reception in the target culture. My main concern will be with the kind of authority emerging from *Pizarro*: what Sheridan's aim was when staging his play, whether it was possible to perceive Kotzebue's textual authority in the adaptation for the British stage or whether only thematic authority was present in the English text, in order to demonstrate that the great impact of this work on British audience was chiefly due to the spectacular interplay of multiple codes, including music, scene design, costumes and machinery.

When Sheridan's *Pizarro* was first staged at Drury Lane in 1799,

the "Korzebue craze" reached its peak. In a new look at British drama between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which appears to be one of the most recent literary and cultural critical trends, any investigation must take into account not only the climax of Bardolatury but also, and inevitably, the fashion for German drama in England, commonly referred to as "the rage" in contemporary accounts of the stage. The introduction of German plays into the British theatre in the last decade of the eighteenth century created such a cultural shock that reactions, both by audiences and critics, ranged from great enthusiasm to indignant rejection. In the context of the cultural and ideological invasion of writing from the continent, which ran parallel to the real fear of an actual French invasion in 1797, a number of reviewers and *literati* appealed to the growing idea of Britishness and condemned German drama as politically, socially and morally subversive. The most respectable periodicals of the day saw the imported plays first of all as trash supplanting superior home-grown favourites. It was remarked, for instance, that "German Spectres have almost driven Shakespeare and Congreve from the stage" (Anon., *Monthly Review* 1798: 66), and in *The Gentleman's Magazine* an *Ode on the Prevalence of the German Drama* began as follows:

Say, from what cause proceeds the modern rage
Of German dramas on the English stage?
Must British tears for ever cease to flow
Save through the fount which streams from German woe?
And Laughter lose its empire o'er the pit
Except when forced from heavy German wit?
[...] Immortal Shakespeare! How shall we appease
Thy shade, indignant now at wrongs like these?
(Anon., *The Gentleman's Magazine* 1800: 1084)

But they invariably went further still, regarding them not only as aesthetically inferior but as morally vicious:

In short, such a scene of corruption as Germany now exhibits, the English mind shudders to contemplate. The young women, even of rank [...] sacrifice their virtue to the first candidate for their favour, who has the means either of captivating their fancy, or gratifying

their avarice; while the dreadful number of abortions serves to proclaim the frequency and the extent of their crime. [...] to *immoralize* a nation is the surest way to *revolutionize* it. (Anon., *AntiJacobin Review* 1799: xii-xiii)

Literary journals in both England and Germany¹ revealed a London completely captivated by German writing, as well as the extent of British vulnerability. The German dominance of the stage was seen, indeed, "as a sign of British national weakness foreboding not only the breakdown of moral and social structures but also accompanying usurpations by seductive and hostile forces on the Continent" (Gamer 2000: 149). This is why a number of reviewers were so hostile to the imported plays and tried to strongly influence their readers' minds.

This abnormally high level of interest in contemporary German drama on the part of theatre managers was due largely to the dwindling domestic product and the subsequent need for borrowing the novelties that might help fill the pits of the newly enlarged theatres from other countries. English theatrical efforts in the last decade of the eighteenth century had been of low quality, mainly consisting of pantomime and shows with high emotional content. The German works combined a certain novelty with the already familiar intense emotionalism of the years, in part heightened by the French Revolution and in part by the recent rise of sentimentality. The novelty consisted primarily of piquant moral situations filtered through English prudishness and accepted more readily because of their foreign origins. The audience's demand for emotionalism on the stage

¹ The popularity of German drama in England was a topic frequently discussed in the German periodical *London und Paris* by J.C. Hüttnet, who was its London correspondent at the time. His articles ranged from detailed reports on single performances on the London stage to the listing of the latest translations from his native language and general observations on the prejudices against his fellow-countrymen. As for England, praise and blame tended to assume stereotyped forms but, on the whole, the blame overwhelmed the positive reactions to German products. Despite the ever-recurring reproach of immorality we find also extravagance, sentimentality and absurdity. The *Monthly Review* up to 1802 seemed well disposed towards German literature (probably under William Taylor's guidance because of his persistent admiration of the Germans) but towards 1802 its tone changed and became antagonistic as a consequence of the change in management (see Stokoe 1926: 36-44).

was promptly satisfied: "they held up their hands, opened their mouth, and gazed in stupid astonishment at the superb pageant that shone before their imagination" (Price 1973: 636).

The 1790s saw the peak of popular interest in German drama as well as of so-called "Europhobia" as a response to involvement with foreign literature (Morriensen 2004: 9). German texts were being translated into English on an unprecedented scale and there was such keen competition to translate the latest arrivals from Germany that more than one version of the same play could appear in a few months.² Between 1790 and 1810 half of the entire number of translations published in Britain were plays by the German dramatist August von Kotzebue; and of the thirty-six plays of his that were translated, twenty-two were performed.

Although usually derided as the champion of trivial literature in histories of German Romantic drama (that is to say, when he is not simply omitted from them), August von Kotzebue (1761-1819) deserves a prominent role in the history of Romantic drama because no other German playwright ever exerted such a great influence on European literatures as Kotzebue did at the turn of the eighteenth century. The "Kotzebue craze" lasted from about 1796 to about 1830 in the British Isles. In 1796 A. Thompson's translation of *Die Indianer in England* (*The Indians in England*) and the anonymous *The Negro Slaves* (*Die Negerklaven*) acquainted the English reading public with Kotzebue for the first time, but it was not until 1798-1799 that enthusiasm for his major works in Sheridan's adaptations, *The Stranger* (*Menschenhaß und Rache*) and *Pizarro, or Rolla's Death* (*Die Spanier in Peru*), reached its maniacal climax. *The Stranger* opened the Drury Lane theatrical season in 1798 while *Pizarro* opened its successor in 1799 and remained in the repertory for some

² As far as foreign literatures were concerned, the German language was mostly ignored in England in the second half of the eighteenth century. The translations before the 1790s were very bad but even long after 1790 bad translations far outnumbered good ones (see Stockley 1929: 4). The interpreters of German literature with real understanding of the subject were very few, the first translations of many a German work being made not from the originals but from French translations and the textual authority of the originals was lost in this double metamorphosis. It is important to stress the fact that critical attacks on the German drama were also encouraged by weak translations.

35 years. *Pizarro* was the most popular play of the 1790s in London and the second most popular play in the entire eighteenth century in England, so that Sheridan's adaptation was retranslated into German by Constantine Geisweiler in 1800 (*Pizarro. Ein Trauerspiel*). If in Germany it was maintained that Kotzebue was the chief cause of the decline of the German stage, we could say that he was the saviour of the British drama of the time which was suffering from a lack of vivacity and spectacle. Two articles in the *Edinburgh Magazine* for 1799 stated the arguments for and against him in a comprehensible form, far from those more extreme ones which, as we have seen, appeared in most English periodicals. In the eyes of the writer of the first article, the German dramatist

[...] delights in scenes of domestic life, which no person regards with admiration; and he presents them under the influence of the common passions which regulate the affairs of men, and exposed to those embarrassments which unavoidably result from the perplexing opposition of individual interest, and the manners and forms of established society. Kotzebue, while he exhibits the common scenes of life [...] powerfully engages the heart and the affections [...] In exciting the softer emotions, the feelings connected with pity, compassion and humanity, he is seldom equalled [...]. But, it cannot be denied, that by interesting our sympathetic, and benevolent feelings, he often attempts, in the most insidious manner, to rouse our hearts against the useful forms and coercions of society. (cit. in Lindsay 1963: 56)

Few other reviewers were so mild in their observations, but while providing their readers with reports of the first nights of Kotzebue's plays they had to admit that the performances were welcomed by the audiences. Considering the focus of this paper it must never be forgotten that Kotzebue wrote for the stage and not for the closet.³ His plays were meant to be acted; he introduced new attractions, sensations, amusements, and the piquant situations demanded by the audiences, featuring spectacles of emotions exceeding those of sentimental drama previously seen in England. Kotzebue addressed

³ Despite the success of Kotzebue's plays, most German dramatic works in translation and adaptation were intended for the closet. Both Coleridge and Scott, who were the chief mediators between English and German literature, produced translations intended only for private reading.

a large public and knew perfectly how to attract and entertain them. His reliance on sensational subjects combined with striking spectacle and humanitarian sentiments anticipated melodrama. All the action in Kotzebue's plays took place on stage and the ending was always a happy one; virtue was rewarded and villainy defeated and punished;⁴ music was woven in through songs and dancing, and underscored emotional scenes. His plays were particularly apt to suit the female members of his audiences because of the prominence given in them to women characters and the warm humanity with which they are endowed by him, or through the introduction of children and a fundamental general appeal to the heart rather than the head. Kotzebue was a cosmopolitan man who started his career as a rationalist, in the end coming under the influence of Rousseau. Everybody could understand his simple, strong stories. This is why his plays were suitable for reworking and found ready acceptance.

For the first time since the Renaissance theatre was serving a very large enthusiastic audience, Sheridan was perfectly aware of this when he decided to stage *Pizarro*. He did not have any German and made use of the two English translations existing at the time to write his own theatrical adaptation. He referred to the translations in the Advertisement of his play. He did not mention the authors but stressed their works as texts so generally read that the public were "in possession of all the materials necessary to form a judgement on the merits and defects of the play performed at Drury Lane" (*Pizarro*, Advertisement).⁵ Sheridan, who was Britain's best-known living

⁴ Kotzebue had no didactic designs upon his audience. He thoroughly accepted their need for entertainment and amusement, and thus differed substantially from Goethe and Schiller.

⁵ All quotations from *Pizarro* are taken from Compton Rhodes 1928. There is sufficient evidence to establish that Sheridan relied on M.G. Lewis' *Rolla, or the Peruvian Hero* and Anne Plumptre's *The Spaniards in Peru; or, the Death of Rolla*, although there are four other translations (including Plumptre's second edition entitled *Pizarro. The Spaniards in Peru; or the Death of Rolla*) which go back to 1799 (see Stockley 1929; Matlaw 1955; Jacob 1964; and Price 1973). Lewis knew German well and his *Rolla* was the best English version. He retained the *dramatis personae*, the original act and scene divisions. Plumptre's translation is not as good as Lewis' because she made occasional mistakes and often reworked Kotzebue's sentimentality in ways that undermine the integrity and authority of his texts.

playwright, counted on this material to fill the vast galleries of his theatre. He had a keen eye for evaluating current fashions and his aim was essentially that of creating a commercial success in order to alleviate his chronic financial troubles, after the rebuilding of his theatre in 1794. The patent theatres "were multimedia enterprises employing visual artists, scene designers, mechanics, musicians, and dancers, as well as actors and dramatists" (Mortensen 2004: 135); Goethe and Schiller were still too weighty and forbidding for the British public whereas Kotzebue was just "the sort of man England needed at that time" (Sinko 1950: 8). Sheridan assembled an all-star cast composed of the day's best (and best-known) actors, such as John Philip Kemble as Rolla, Sarah Siddons as Elvira and Dorothy Jordan as Cora, added operatic music and dramatically increased their inherent violence and pathos.

Kotzebue's thematic authority is chiefly maintained in *Pizarro* but only as a framework. The English dramatist preserved the original plot, which is very thin: it deals with the Spanish invasion of Peru led by Pizarro and the resistance of the Peruvians whose heroic leader is Rolla. The triangle Rolla-Cora-Alonso is the other main theme of both Kotzebue's and Sheridan's plays, and the two subjects are closely intertwined because Cora's child is first kidnapped by the Spaniards, then rescued by Rolla, who is wounded to death by the invaders towards the end of the story. Popular acceptance of the two early translations, the great haste which accompanied the writing of Sheridan's adaptation, as well as the stress on the set itself as distinct from the play, allow us to conclude that the translation process was his least concern. The cosmopolitan and spectacular elements already present in Kotzebue's work⁶ put Sheridan on the path to success, but some significant situations which emblematically revealed true German sensibility were underplayed in *Pizarro*. This is the case with the Rolla-Cora-Alonso relationship, whose deep meaning is only to be found in the typically German ethics of *Empfindsamkeit*: the Peruvian leader loves Cora but after her rejection of him in fa-

⁶ Kotzebue's Rousseauism may be considered a cosmopolitan element at the time. However, its prominence in the English version is greatly diminished.

bue's original but drew on Sheridan's oratory in Parliament during his tenure as Governor General of Bengal, was heartily applauded and even printed separately before being distributed around town.

Never was a speech better calculated to entrap applause than Rolla's address to the soldiers – its primary object was evidently to reprobate the principles of the French Revolution, yet nothing is said that might not be addressed to the Peruvians with propriety. (Genest 1832: 421)

The address of Rolla to the Peruvian soldiers, in which [...] the proceedings of the French Republic are unveiled to mankind in striking and glowing colours – his exhortations to them to turn with indignation from the *destruction* that comes with fair professions, is a most elegant and impressive composition. (Anon., *Kelso Mail*, cit. in Lindsay 1963: 64)

In line with the general hostility towards imported plays, charged either with Jacobinism or licentiousness, adaptations of Kotzebue came under repeated attack from Tory writers up until 1805, but this did not apply in the present instance because the first audience for *Pizarro*, Tories as well as Whigs, were undoubtedly favourable.

The morals of the German drama give us serious reason for alarm – we have seen the wife who violates the sacred vows of marriage, restored to the arms of a relenting husband.⁸ [...] In *Pizarro*, however, Kotzebue appears to me to shine with added lustre. I see nothing in this tragedy subversive of social order; nothing that militates against received morality. Virtue is here supported by the hand of genius. The cruelties of the Spanish towards the innocent and unfortunate Peruvians, is an excellent subject for tragedy. It affords a field for the display of its leading passions, terror and pity. The characters are serious and contrasted. The rival generals afford the real light and shade which must ever be delightful. The different effects of courage in the hearts of Rolla and Pizarro, held out a glorious lesson [...]. Though this play may not be without its defects, yet, compared with modern performances, the British critics must allow that they are indebted to him for a work of taste, interest and ingenuity. ("Verax", *Herald and Chronicle*, cit. in Lindsay 1963: 66)

⁸ This is a reference to Kotzebue's *Menschenhaß und Reue* trans. into English by Thompson (*The Stranger*) and staged by Sheridan successfully in 1798.

Such favourable testimony is corroborated by two very significant factors: on the one hand by the Royal Family, who never attended plays at the patent theatres, except for yearly official visits, whereas they attended particularly popular and safe performances, such as *Pizarro*; on the other hand by the continued popularity of the play, which went through twenty editions in one year, was staged for sixty-seven nights at Drury Lane in the first two seasons, afterwards in the other London theatres as well, soon in the provinces, and was performed at different times in London till 1862. Anyway, it was through a significant increase in the spectacular element that Sheridan, with the help of John Philip Kemble, was able to arouse the frantic emotional responses of his audience to the chief themes of the play and warrant *Pizarro* a place in the history of British drama. Even before the first night at Drury Lane, the public's expectations were sky-high: "expectation was on tip-toe!" (Kelly 1826: 143).

Never was there so much curiosity, so ardent a desire to see a dramatic performance. The doors were besieged at three o'clock, and when they opened, the crowding and confusion were dreadful. The whole boxes were taken, and yet great numbers went who had no places. The moment the doors were opened, it was announced there was "no room, and no money returned". This made those who had no places turn back; and the conflict between those wishing to retire, was extremely distressing. Ladies of the first fashion, in full dress, were fainting; some lost a shoe, others a hat; the staircase windows were broken; the door-keepers could not resist the torrent; and many went in without paying. (Anon., *Kelso Mail*, cit. in Lindsay 1963: 62)

This elegant house never possessed a more splendid and numerous audience than on Wednesday night [...]. The Royal family were much delighted with the play. The King wept in the second act, and the Queen and Princesses were much affected. (Anon., *Scots Chronicle*, cit. in Lindsay 1963: 62)

Sheridan's choice of *Die Spanier in Peru* for adaptation, in addition to its appeal to the reader's most vivid emotional responses, was an excellent starting point for the fullest exploitation of the resources of the recently rebuilt Drury Lane as a vehicle for stage spectacles. Besides the increase in lively action and bombastic language, he de-

voted himself to the visual dimension of his work as a major vehicle for reinforcement of dialogue. As far as the text is concerned, the enrichment of Kotzebue's simple stage-directions gives us an idea of what the audience saw on stage and clearly indicates Sheridan's tendency towards "showy scenes" (Sinko 1950: 13): the pavillion near Pizarro's tent, the altar in the middle of the Peruvian camp and a mound with a tree at its top in the background, a bank surrounded by wild scenery, the temple of the sun, all share in Sheridan's aim to enchant the eyes of his audience with spectacular images. The *True Briton* reported, on 25 May 1799, that the scenery was "highly magnificent. The tent of Pizarro, the temple of the Sun, various views of a romantic country, the forest illuminated by the fiery element and the subterranean retreat, are admirable achievements of the pencil" (cit. in Loftis 1975: 468-469); "The scenery was very striking. The tent of Pizarro, which covers the whole stage, is novel and certainly a very fine scene. The Temple of the Sun was sublime and beautiful" (Anon., *Scots Chronicle*, cit. in Lindsay 1963: 66).

The newspapers' entries for this play were so numerous that it would be possible to reconstruct a detailed list of the stage effects just by selecting some of them. The advertisements of the first Scottish performance of *Pizarro*, too, give evidence about that:

In Act I Pizarro's Tent and the Spanish Camp. In Act II, a splendid Representation of the Temple of The Sun; With the original music, a Solemn Procession of Peruvian Priests and Warriors, with Trophies and Banners, representing the Magnificence of Peruvian Idolatry. In Act III a Wild Retreat among Stupendous Rocks. In Act IV a Dungeon in the Rocks, near the Spanish Camp. In Act V a Romantic View, Wild and Rocky, With a Torrent falling down a Precipice, over it a Bridge, formed by a fallen tree, by means of which Rolla escapes with the Child of Cora. To conclude with a Solemn March and Procession of Peruvian soldiers bearing Rolla's body on a bier, surrounded by Military Trophies in honour of their fallen hero. (cit. in Lindsay 1963: 65)

Sheridan made use of company musicians; the play included songs and it was accompanied by interludes of instrumental music; in V.1. Cora sang an air with motives based upon Kotzebue's pro-

saic monody; Rolla's funeral in act V.4., with armies marching across the stage seemed to be more like an opera than a tragedy. The magnificence of the enormous new Drury Lane Theatre certainly aided Sheridan to fulfil his aim of staging startling effects. It is true that its large size made it more difficult to hear the actors, encouraging a declamatory style of acting, but, nonetheless, the oratorical style was suitable for Kemble/Rolla, who was thus able to exploit all the dramatic potentialities of his character. Kemble was the manager of Sheridan's Drury Lane at the time and he had acted the main part in Sheridan's version of Kotzebue's *Menschenhaß und Reue* (*The Stranger*) in 1798. Therefore, it is quite easy to claim that Sheridan was already thinking of the strength of Kemble's voice and his statuesque gestures when he wrote Rolla's speech.

Some important changes were made in scene-design which no longer relied only on painted scenery but also on the construction of buildings with towers, bartlements, bridges, and archways, under the supervision of the scene designer, William Capon, who insisted upon archaeological details (see Hogan 1968: xliii-xliv). The *Times* reports that "Pizarro's Pavillion, and the Temple of the Sun are equal in point of brilliant effect to the best scenes of any of our Theatres; and the machinery, decorations, and dresses were marked with appropriate taste and splendour" (cit. in Loftis 1975: 469). The peculiar machinery the reviewer referred to was a movable part necessary for Rolla to run over the suspended bridge but it was so complicated that it was difficult to handle it during the *première*. We find in the *Kelso Mail* that "the success of this play depended on the united efforts of the actor, the painter, the machinist, and even the scene-shifter" (cit. in Lindsay 1963: 67). This statement well supports the feeling that for a correct understanding of *Pizarro* it is more rewarding for us to think of it in terms of the cinema instead of drama.

In explaining Kotzebue's popularity in England, literary historians have collected together a number of factors: they have usually resorted to a lack of new, high-quality British products, or to the lack of good taste in British audiences, but few have given prominence to the fundamental part played by Sheridan's understanding

of contemporary taste. If Kotzebue provided some of the passions subservient to the requirements of the audience's standard of physical and mental comfort, Sheridan's managerial qualities found in the authority of spectacular motives the right path to appeal to people's hearts, as well as satisfying their interest in action.

To a certain extent, the latest revisionist claims that British Romanticism owed much more to continental literatures than is traditionally assumed, thus being the result of complex cosmopolitan cultural interconnections among different nations, cultures and discursive practices, which go far beyond national boundaries (see Mortensen 2004: 6), have a *raison d'être* only as far as this re-mapping regards the many intersections as feed-backs, which first dislocated and then re-located their reworked contents in the single national cultures as mere instruments to exalt the peculiarities of that country. This is particularly evident in the case of Sheridan's spectacular anglicization of *Die Spanier in Peru*. At a time when public opinion considered the vogue for foreign literary products injurious to the shaping of a national consciousness, Sheridan looked beyond Britain's Romantic Europhobia: perfectly aware of espousing the cause of the largest possible audience, he was able to de-contextualize and re-contextualize Kotzebue's play, transforming Britain's embrace of continental imports into highly effective patriotic appeal. It was no accident that a newspaper advertisement for a performance in 1830 referred to *Pizarro* as "the grand national drama" (Anon., *Times*, 11 October 1830).

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