



University of HUDDERSFIELD

University of Huddersfield Repository

Borlik, Todd Andrew

Stellifying Shakespeare: Celestial Imperialism and the Advent of Universal Genius

Original Citation

Borlik, Todd Andrew (2014) Stellifying Shakespeare: Celestial Imperialism and the Advent of Universal Genius. *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, 26. pp. 1-12. ISSN 1011-582X

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/29306/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

Stellifying Shakespeare: Celestial Imperialism and the Advent of Universal Genius

TODD A. BORLIK

And as the Heathen – Jupiter and Mars,
His Deities, enthroned among the stars;
Why should not Christian England thus award
The self-same glory to her godlike Bard?
Seek out for him in undiscovered space
Some central system, as a resting place;
'Til her Astronomers' enlarge their fame
And star the Heav'ns with SHAKESPEARE'S deathless NAME.¹

As astounding as it may sound, the classic 1956 sci-fi film *Forbidden Planet*, which teleports *The Tempest* to outer space, did not mark the first time Shakespeare left Earth's orbit. In 1852, four years after the publication of *The Apotheosis of Shakespeare* – a high-water mark of Victorian Bardolatry – Frank Feather Dally's grandiose vision of Shakespeare's ascension to the heavens would come true. As if cued by Dally's poem, John Herschel – the son of William Herschel, the famed discoverer of Uranus – proposed naming the four Uranian satellites then known after characters from the works of William Shakespeare and Alexander Pope: Titania, Oberon, Ariel and Umbriel. Since Pope, however, lifted the name Ariel from the ethereal fairy-servant in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, arguably three of the four are Shakespearean. The tradition would be formally ratified by the International Astronomical Union in 1948, when the Dutch astronomer Gerard Kuiper discovered a fifth moon and elected to name it Miranda after the heroine of *The Tempest*. Over the past few decades, thanks to the 1986 Voyager 2 mission and the celestial vistas unveiled by the Hubble Telescope, Shakespeare's Uranian progeny have continued to grow. To date, 22 additional Uranian satellites have been discovered; of these, only one (Belinda) has been dubbed after a character in Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, while the remaining 21 have been christened after the dramatis personae of Shakespeare. And thereby hangs a tale.

While this tale might seem material fit only for an arcane piece of scientific journalism, I would like to probe it further to expose the unappreciated connections between Shakespeare, astronomy, and colonialism. Specifically, this article argues that Shakespeare's triumph in a controversy over astronomical nomenclature represents an extension of Britain's imperial reach into outer space. John Herschel, the man who established the precedent of naming the Uranian moons after Shakespearean characters, was himself a major player in the imperialistic science of early Victorian Britain. Moreover, this peculiar incident represents an overlooked but significant moment in the history of Shakespeare's reception. First, Herschel's proposal could be taken as symbolic of Shakespeare eclipsing (as it were) Milton, hitherto regarded as England's preeminent cosmological poet.² Secondly, the acceptance of Herschel's nomenclature by the international astronomical community marks a turning point in Shakespeare's status on the European Continent.

1. Frank Fether Dally, "The Apotheosis of Shakespeare" in *The Apotheosis of Shakespeare and Other Poems* (London: J. Brown, 1848), 12.

2. More recently, the evident preference of twentieth-century astronomers for names derived from Shakespeare rather than Pope attests to the obvious fact that Shakespeare had come to outshine all other authors in the literary pantheon by several orders of magnitude.

Between the early-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, Shakespeare's reputation in Europe was in flux. French critics in particular, regarded by many as the arbiters of literary taste, had at first blasted Shakespeare as an untutored barbarian for his violation of the Aristotelian strictures on drama. To be presentable on the French stage, Shakespeare's plays had to be adapted into the neo-classical mold of Corneille's tragedies. By the 1860s, however, French writers such as Stendhal and Hugo had embraced Shakespeare and defiantly rejected the neo-classical aesthetic of Racine and Voltaire. If Anglo-French hostilities nurtured this initial disrelish for Shakespeare, Anglo-Deutsch sympathies may have contributed to the special status Shakespeare enjoyed in Germany.³ Murmurs of "*Unser Shakespeare*" can be heard even before Herschel dubbed the moons Oberon and Titania. Lessing, Goethe and Herder all conscripted Shakespeare as their champion against the arid classicism of the French. Still, Shakespeare's naturalisation in Germany did not happen overnight. Ken Larson points to Georg Gottfried Gervinus's study on Shakespeare published in 1849, three years before Herschel's proposal, as the moment in which the Bard's genius was enshrined beyond dispute in Germany. The tipping point for Shakespeare's conquest of Italy could perhaps be dated to around 1820, when the novelist Alessandro Manzoni proclaimed Shakespeare's *Othello* far superior to Voltaire's *Zaire*.⁴ The rare eighteenth-century performances of Shakespeare in Italy had been staged in a neo-classical style and played to small houses for short runs; by 1856 Ernesto Rossi's Hamlet and Tomasso Salvini's Othello were packing theatres in Milan, Venice and Rome.⁵ Around the same time, Shakespeare was also winning converts among the Russian intelligentsia. Even Tolstoy's notorious screed against him can be best understood as a backlash against the adulation Shakespeare received from Pushkin, Dostoevsky and Turgenev. In sum, the triumph of Romanticism by the mid-nineteenth century had elevated Shakespeare to a pan-European sensation.⁶

3. Frederick the Great sniffed at Shakespearean drama as "laughable farces, worthy only of being played in the wilds of Canada" (in Anthony Dawson, "International Shakespeare" in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, ed. Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 184). Despite his admiration for Shakespeare's poetic faculties, Johann Gottfried Herder found the plays creaky, outdated affairs when acted on stage. He believed future generations would find them puzzling, "the fragments of a Colossus, an Egyptian pyramid which everyone gazes at in amazement and no one understands" (in Jonathan Bate, ed. *The Romantics on Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 1992), 48). In his later years, even Lessing "tended to retrogress to a position closer to Voltaire's" (in Oswald LeWinter, ed. *Shakespeare in Europe* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1963), 19). On Shakespeare and Germany, see Ken Larson, "'The Classical German Shakespeare' as Emblem of Germany as 'geistige Weltmacht': Validating National Power through Cultural Prefiguration" in *Ken Larson – Papers on Shakespeare's Reception*, 1991, n.p. and Frederick Burwick, "Shakespeare and Germany" in *Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 314-31.

4. See Marvin Carlson, *The Italian Shakespearians* (Washington: Folger, 1985), 17-18.

5. On Shakespeare in Italy, see Carlson. A letter by Manzoni defending Shakespeare's violation of the Unities is reprinted in LeWinter (130-35). On the reception of Shakespeare in nineteenth-century Russia, see Yuri D. Levin, "Shakespeare and Russian Attitudes" in *Russian Essays on Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, ed. Alexandr Parfenov and Joseph G. Price (London: Associated University Press, 1998).

6. Overviews of Shakespeare's soaring reputation in nineteenth-century Europe can be found in Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), Dirk Delabastita and Lieven d'Hulst, *European Shakespeares: Translating Shakespeare in the Romantic Age* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1993), Peter Dăvidhăzi, *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare: Literary Reception in Anthropological Perspective* (New York: St. Martins, 1998), Joseph Ortiz, *Shakespeare and the Culture of Romanticism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), Heike Grundmann, "Shakespeare and European Romanticism" in *A Companion to European Romanticism*, ed. Michael Ferber (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) and John Stokes, "Shakespeare in Europe" in *Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Notable anthologies of Shakespearean criticism by European Romantics include those of LeWinter, *Shakespeare in Europe* and Bate, *The Romantics on Shakespeare*.

Given the obvious inter-play between literature and politics, it is tempting to attribute the growing international veneration of Shakespeare to the increasing might of the British empire. In a landmark study of Shakespeare's reception, Michael Dobson contends that the Bard's apotheosis "constitutes one of the central cultural expressions of England's own transition from the aristocratic regime of the Stuarts to the commercial empire presided over by the Hanoverians".⁷ While Dobson is, I think, correct to insinuate that the political and cultural authority of Britain helped inflate Shakespeare's reputation, the stellifying of Shakespeare was also contingent upon his appropriation as a proto-Romantic rather than a quintessentially English genius. The acceptance of Shakespearean namesakes for the Uranian moons in the nineteenth century signals his exaltation by European critics to a (literally) universal poet of humanity. It amounts to a recognition that his works have attained the status of a secular mythology. In other words, while John Herschel's proposal could be perceived as a plot to Anglicise outer space, at the same time it threatened to de-Anglicise Shakespeare, sublimating geo-political conflict into the Platonic heavens. Stellifying Shakespeare both reflects and confirms his growing reputation as a literary figure that transcends cultural-political boundaries. At the same time, however, English pride in Shakespeare as "the national poet" remained undimmed. Naming the Uranian moons after his characters thus managed to conflate universality and Englishness.

*

Before recounting the just-so story of how the Uranian moons got their Shakespearean names, it is crucial to establish the circumstances surrounding the discovery and naming of the planet we now know as Uranus. William Herschel's discovery of Uranus in 1781 stands as an event unprecedented in human history. The five planets (excluding Earth) that comprised the pre-1781 solar system – Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn – are easily observable to the naked eye. They had been identified by all the ancient civilizations, from the Sumerians to the Aztecs, that studied the heavens. Uranus, however, with its 6.0 magnitude flickers just at the cusp of the visible. Although it can be perceived with the naked eye under dark skies by a seasoned stargazer, the recognition of its status as a planet required a technological leap in the manufacturing of telescopic lenses. Remarkably, its discoverer, William Herschel, started his life as an oboist rather than an astronomer. After deserting from the Hanoverian army at the age of twenty-one, Herschel immigrated to England, settling in Bath, where he established himself as a music teacher. Herschel's fascination with Pythagorean theories regarding the cosmological origins of musical harmony inspired him to take up astronomy as a hobby. In short time, this hobby developed into a consuming obsession. An autodidact, Herschel tutored himself in the science of optics and progressed so rapidly that he was soon crafting the most powerful telescopes in all of England. In March 1781, Herschel observed an object, which he mistook at first for a comet, moving swiftly through the constellation Gemini. It would prove to be the first new planet discovered in recorded history. Herschel's discovery would make him a household name in eighteenth-century Europe – earning him a knighthood, a £2,000 stipend from King George III, and even a cameo in Keats's poem "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer."⁸ Herschel would (thanks in no small part to the tireless devotion of his sister Caroline) go on to make some equally universe-shaking discoveries, cataloguing hundreds of comets, nebulae, and other deep-space objects. He would remain most famous, however, for the discovery of the

7. Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation, and Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 8.

8. This background on the discovery of Uranus is indebted to Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), Michael Lemonick, *The Georgian Star: How William and Caroline Herschel Revolutionized our Understanding of the Cosmos* (New York: Norton, 2009) and Ellis Miner, *Uranus: The Planet, Rings, and Satellites* (New York: Ellis Horwood, 1990). Holmes unveils how Herschel supplied the prototype for "the watcher of the skies/ When a new planet swims into his ken" in Keats's poem (206-08).

seventh planet which we now know as Uranus but which Herschel (at the prompting of his friends) originally christened *Georgium Sidus*, King George's Star. Herschel remained proud of his Hanoverian heritage, so his choice of name seemed not only an irrefusable bid for royal patronage but also a fitting tribute from a fellow countryman.

Nevertheless, Herschel's decision was a bold one; some might even call it inflammatory. The French dominated astronomy in the eighteenth century (as, arguably, they did literature), and reacted to Herschel's proposal with predictable rancor. In Herschel's defense, the custom of naming newly discovered or colonised territory after the reigning monarch was hardly unprecedented. In the Elizabethan period, English settlers blithely christened a swathe of the mid-Atlantic seaboard after the Virgin Queen. More recently, in December 2012, Elizabeth II received a similar honor when a 169,000 square-mile chunk of Antarctica was officially renamed "Queen Elizabeth Land". In a stinging article in *The Guardian*, Jerry Brotton referred to this proclamation as a "retro act of neo-imperialism".⁹ The French astronomers appear to have viewed Herschel's gesture in a similar light. While Uranus, like Antarctica, is a remote and postively frosty ice-scape, unlikely to be inhabited by humans any time in the near future, the royal moniker advertises the might of the Empire and its boundless aspirations. Herschel's proposal to call the seventh planet after King George and his use of the Latin possessive form implying ownership would have rankled the international scientific community as an act of imperial aggrandisement, expanding the British Empire into outer space. The dispute over planetary nomenclature was in effect a continuation of the Anglo-French rivalry in empire-building.

To appreciate the thrust of naming the new planet *Georgium Sidus*, it is vital to recall the geo-political context of the early 1780s. Six months after Herschel reported to the Royal Society that he had found some new kind of tail-less comet, England would lose the decisive Battle of Yorktown. Confirmation that the new celestial object was actually a planet took almost two years. When Herschel formally proclaimed the discovery of a new planet and announced his intent to name it King George's Star in 1783, England was negotiating The Treaty of Paris that would recognise American independence. Resentment of France's military support of the American war effort continued to simmer in the national consciousness. Dubbing the new planet after the British monarch would be a blow to the French and a compensatory gesture for the loss of the American colonies. Herschel's motives for choosing the name George's Star were not only professional and personal, but also patriotic.

The scientific community, however, took umbrage with *Georgium Sidus* and alternative proposals were soon put forward. The French astronomer Jérôme Lalande declared that the new planet should be named after its discoverer, Herschel, not the English king. A Swedish astronomer named Erik Prosperin suggested Neptune in accordance with the established pattern of naming the planets after the pantheon of Roman deities. Some British astronomers took up the proposal, arguing that it would pay respect to the might of the British Royal Navy, whose fleet featured an HMS *Neptune*. Some even proposed ungainly compromises such as "Neptune George III" or "Neptune Great Britain." It was the German astronomer, Johann Bode, who argued that Uranus would be the most logical choice. Just as Saturn was Jupiter's father, Uranus was Saturn's father; so the planet after Saturn in the solar system should be Uranus: *QED*. Bode's proposal gathered momentum after the German chemist Martin Klaproth named the new element he discovered in 1789 "Uranium." It would garner widespread acceptance following the 1801 publication of Bode's popular astronomical atlas, *Uranographia*. Unsurprisingly, the British were the final holdout. The HM Nautical Almanac Office continued to identify the seventh planet as *Georgium Sidus* until 1850, when it finally conceded and changed the name to Uranus. The universal acceptance of Uranus in 1850 dealt a setback to British astronomers' ambition to leave their imprimatur on the solar system. The setback, however, would prove temporary. As luck would have it, Uranus was conveniently outfitted with a system of satellites that had yet to receive official names from the astronomical community. Enter Shakespeare.

9. Jerry Brotton, "A Retro Piece of Neo-Imperialism for Her Majesty" in *The Guardian*, 19th December 2012.

The moons of Uranus never set on the British Empire

It was William Herschel himself who spotted the first two moons orbiting Uranus on January 11, 1787, six years after his discovery of the planet. When an astronomer from Liverpool named William Lassell spied two more in 1851 John Herschel (William Herschel's son and a distinguished astronomer in his own right) published an account of the discovery in which he proposed calling the first two moons found by his father Titania and Oberon and the recently detected second pair Ariel and Umbriel. Although John Herschel does not spell out the motives behind his decision, it is not difficult to imagine why he chose Shakespearean names. His father's proposal to name the planet after the English monarch had been quashed just one year before. Continental astronomers would not allow England to extend its empire out to the stars. In consolation, John Herschel devised an ingenious sleight of hand: name the Uranian satellites after the English national poet par excellence.

In 1851, the idea of naming a moon "Oberon" would still have been shocking to many astronomers. No other planet or satellite had ever been named after a historical figure or literary character. Galileo had tried to christen the four moons of Jupiter he discovered in 1610 *Cosmica sidera* (Cosimo's stars) after his patron, Cosimo de Medici, but – like Herschel's tribute to King George – his scheme would founder amid disapproval from astronomers outside his homeland. Such disputes over nomenclature would eventually lead to the founding of the International Astronomical Union in 1919. But when John Herschel floated his proposal to call the Uranian moons after supernatural beings in Shakespeare no international body existed to arbitrate such a claim. The fact that the Shakespearean names would gain de facto acceptance from the international astronomical community, whereas previous efforts to pin the names of political leaders on celestial bodies had failed to stick, testifies both to the authority of the British empire at the time and to Shakespeare's reputation as a universal artist.

While Garrick's Shakespeare Jubilee in 1769 is often cited as the *terminus a quo* for the Bard's apotheosis in England, his reputation on the Continent at this time was far from divine. The French in particular deemed his work uncouth for its failure to conform to the Aristotelian Unities. Perhaps the most vociferous critic was Voltaire, who likened the occasional beauties in Shakespeare's verse to "pearls ... in an enormous dunghill".¹⁰ The divergence in the French and English estimation of Shakespeare in this period is vividly outlined in Horace Walpole's preface to the second edition (1766) of his gothic novella *The Castle of Otranto*, in which he invokes Shakespeare as the literary godfather of the Gothic novel and blasts French drama as insipid by comparison.¹¹ If the elder Herschel had suggested Shakespearean names for the Uranian moons when he discovered them in 1787, less than a decade after the death of Voltaire, it is unlikely they would have found favour on the Continent. While some of his early French translators such as Jean-François Ducis and Pierre Letourneur had championed Shakespeare's works in France, they also cavalierly altered them to suit audiences accustomed to Racine and Corneille. Not until the Romantic generation of Stendhal, Alexandre Dumas, Alfred de Musset, Gérard de Nerval, Victor Hugo and Hector Berlioz did Shakespeare win over the French literati.¹² According to

10. Thomas Lounsbury, *Shakespeare and Voltaire* (London: D. Nutt, 1902), 360. For more on Shakespeare and Voltaire, see Eliane Cuvelier, "Shakespeare, Voltaire, and French Taste" in *Shakespeare Yearbook* 5 (1994): 25-47, Alice Clark, "Shakespeare as the French Would Have Him: Voltaire and Nerval" in *Shakespeare Yearbook* 5 (1994): 49-65 and Haydn Mason, "Voltaire versus Shakespeare: *Lettre A L'Academie Francaise (1776)*" in *Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies* 18.2 (1995): 173-84.

11. For recent studies on Shakespeare, Walpole, and the Gothic, see Sue Chaplin, "The Scene of a Crime: Fictions of Authority in Walpole's 'Gothic Shakespeare'" in *Gothic Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis and Dale Townshend (London: Routledge, 2008), 98-110 and Christy Desmet and Anne Williams, eds, *The Shakespearean Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010).

12. The change in Shakespeare's reception by the French is chronicled by Grundmann, "Shakespeare and European Romanticism", Raymond Giraud, "Stendhal's 'Greatest Bard'" in *Yale French Studies* 33 (1964): 46-52 and John Pemble, *Shakespeare Goes to Paris: How the Bard Conquered France* (London: Continuum, 2005).

Alice Clark, the reputation of Shakespeare reached its apex in France between 1830 and 1850.¹³ So when Herschel proposed naming the Uranian moons Titania and Oberon in 1851, the French had hoisted the white flag and embraced Shakespeare as a universal, rather than a strictly English, poet. Thirteen years later, Victor Hugo would compose his effusive hymn to Shakespeare as the embodiment of literary genius – ranking him in the same category as Homer and Aeschylus and crowning him the poet laureate of Europe. What unifies these three literary titans, according to Hugo, is their spontaneous devotion to nature. With his usual bombast, Hugo proclaims the great poet as tantamount to nature itself: “*Shakespeare, c’est la fertilité, la force, l’exubérance ... Le poète, nous l’avons dit, c’est la nature*”.¹⁴ While in exile with his father on the island of Jersey, Hugo’s son, François-Victor, would undertake a translation of Shakespeare’s complete works. Judging by his rabid *Bardomanie*, the apple did not roll far from the paternal tree. In an 1858 preface to his French edition, François-Victor would likewise uphold Shakespeare as proof of the transcendent nature of poetry: “*L’art est impersonnel, cosmopolite, universel; il est de tous les temps, de tous les âges, de tous les climats, de toutes les régions, de tous les mondes*” [Art is impersonal, cosmopolitan, universal; it is of all times, of all ages, of all climes, of all regions, of all worlds].¹⁵ In the context of Herschel’s proposal to name the Uranian moons Titania and Oberon, the younger Hugo’s veneration of Shakespeare as an inter-planetary artist (*de tous les mondes*) has an almost literal application. In brief, the stellification of Shakespeare is both symbolic of and predicated upon the international acceptance of him as a cosmopolitan rather than a quintessentially English author.¹⁶

In retrospect, there is a certain element of irony in Herschel the Younger’s proposal to dub the moons discovered by his father Titania and Oberon. Milton, not Shakespeare, was his father’s favorite poet. A gifted musician, William Herschel even composed an oratorio based on *Paradise Lost*. The elder Herschel’s preference for Milton is not hard to fathom. Prior to the nineteenth century, Milton had long been the poet laureate of stargazers. In Book 7 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton even invokes Urania – the muse of Astronomy. Despite his reluctance to abandon the exploded Ptolemaic universe for theological and poetic reasons, Milton’s knowledge of astronomy was exceptional. During his travels in Tuscany, he had met with Galileo, and alludes to him in *Paradise Lost*, most notoriously in the epic simile likening Satan’s shield to the moon

13. See Alice Clark, “Shakespeare as the French would Have Him: Voltaire and Nerval” in *Shakespeare Yearbook* 5 (1994): 53.

14. Victor Hugo, *William Shakespeare* (1864), ed. Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne (Paris: Flammarion 2003), 545.

15. *Ibid.*, 545. Translations are my own. Revealingly, claims for Shakespeare’s transcendent genius reverberate most loudly in the writings of his foreign translators. After all, translation is predicated upon faith in the power of the poetry to transcend the language barrier. The market for translated Shakespeare on the Continent, then, would both motivate and solidify the Bard’s reputation as a universal genius. An overview of the criticism on Shakespearean translations in Europe can be found in Ken Larson, “The Reception of Shakespeare in Eighteenth-Century France and Germany” in *Michigan Germanic Quarterly* 15.2 (1989): 103-35 and Delabastita and d’Hulst, *European Shakespeares*.

16. Shakespeare’s growing reputation as a universal artist would also have been facilitated by the research of Victorian literary critics establishing the English playwright’s debts to classical and Continental sources. For example, in 1853, James O. Halliwell-Phillipps published *his Illustrations of the Fairy Mythology of Shakespeare* arguing that Shakespeare took the name Oberon from a French romance about Huon of Bordeaux. So Herschel christening the second Uranian moon Oberon just the year before was an even smarter choice than he perhaps realised at the time.

glimpsed through the “optic tube” of the “Tuscan artist”.¹⁷ Pinning Miltonian names on the Uranian moons, however, would have presented a problem. Although not without his admirers, Milton’s reputation on the Continent never rivaled the acclaim Shakespeare received in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Written for the page instead of the stage, Milton’s poetry could not generate the same mass appeal. Even his non-English admirers found Milton’s sensibility to be distinctively English.¹⁸ Conversely, from John Herschel’s perspective, Milton’s character names may not have seemed English enough. Christening the Uranian moons after Eve, Raphael, or Lucifer would have carried religious rather than literary or nationalistic overtones. After the Bard was embraced by the German and then the French Romantics, Shakespearean names, in contrast, could seem both universal and at the same time English.

John Herschel’s preference for Shakespeare over Milton, then, reflects not simply his personal tastes but those of the zeitgeist. The same, however, cannot be said for John Herschel’s fondness for Alexander Pope. By the 1850s, Pope’s reputation had declined dramatically. With the exception of Byron, the Romantics recoiled from his hyper-polished style and urbane subject matter. Even his pastoral poems smelt more of the drawing room than the meadow. In contrast, the eighteenth-century image of Shakespeare as the “Poet of Nature” would earn him the ardent respect of naturalists. Such respect is evident in John Herschel’s own writings on Shakespeare. In a meditation on the sensibility of the scientist, Herschel upholds Duke Senior from *As You Like It* as a specimen of the intellectual vigour of the scientific mind:

A mind which has a taste for scientific inquiry, and has learned the habit of applying its principles readily to the cases which occur, has within itself an inexhaustible source of pure and exciting contemplations. One would think that Shakespeare had such a mind in view when he describes a contemplative man as finding “Tongues in trees, books in running brooks, Sermons in stones, and good in everything.” Accustomed to trace the operations of general causes and the exemplification of general laws, in circumstances where the uninformed and uninquiring eye perceives neither novelty nor beauty, he walks in the midst of wonders; every object which falls in his way elucidates some principle, affords some instruction and impresses him with a sense of harmony and order.¹⁹

The implied message here is that science cultivates the same responsiveness to the natural world found in poetry. Conversely, Shakespeare’s genius as a poet stems from his inherent affinity with the naturalist. Milton was born in London and suffered from blindness in his later years. The sickly, hunchbacked Pope could likewise hardly be depicted as an outdoorsman. Shakespeare’s Warwickshire childhood and his earthy descriptions of flora and fauna made it much easier to portray him as a kind of Poet-Naturalist.²⁰ So while the eighteenth century constructed Shakespeare as the “national poet”, its simultaneous exaltation of him as the “Poet of

17. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667) in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merrit Hughes (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957), 1.288. For a recent stimulating discussion of Milton and astronomy, see Laura Dodds, “Milton’s Other Worlds” in *Uncircumscrib’d Mind: Reading Milton Deeply*, ed. Charles Durham and Kristin A. Pruitt (Newark: Associated University Press, 2008), 164-82.

18. See, for instance, the begrudging praise Voltaire bestows on Milton: “If the difference of genius between nation and nation ever appeared in its full light, ’tis in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*” (in John Shawcross, ed, *Milton: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), 249).

19. John Herschel, “Advantage of a Taste for Science” in *Scientific American* 3.1 (1860): 3.

20. Ironically, it was Milton who first sketched this view of Shakespeare in L’Allegro as an untutored provincial poet “warbl[ing] his native woodnotes wild” (in Hughes, ed, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*).

Nature” facilitated his canonisation as a cosmopolitan or universal genius during the Romantic era. John Herschel’s decision to give the Uranian satellites Shakespearean names rather than Miltonian ones thus can be seen as a watershed for Shakespeare’s surpassing of Milton as the “celestial” poet.²¹

But why did Herschel, from over twelve hundred characters in Shakespeare’s plays, select Titania and Oberon as the namesakes for the Uranian moons? First and foremost, the names of the Fairy-King and Fairy-Queen smack of magic and mystique, and thus seem apt monikers for celestial bodies whose orbits were unlike anything astronomers had ever seen before. In his 1834 *Treatise on Astronomy*, Herschel explains their unique characteristics:

Contrary to the unbroken analogy of the whole planetary system – whether primaries or secondaries – the planes of the orbits are nearly perpendicular to the ecliptic ... and in these orbits their motions are retrograde; that is to say, their positions ... instead of advancing from west to east round the center of their primary, as is the case with every other planet and satellite, move in the opposite direction.²²

Astronomers now know the reason for these unusual orbits: Uranus is tilted on its side at a 95° angle, perhaps the result of a large meteor impact. In calling these satellites after fairy royalty, John Herschel sought to imbue them with a majestic and spritely aura. In the 1980s, astronomers (having exhausted the fairy names) turned to Shakespearean heroines. In order of their proximity to the planet, from nearest to farthest, these moons are Cordelia, Ophelia, Bianca, Cressida, Desdemona, Juliet, Portia, Rosalind, Cupid, Perdita and – returning to the sprites – Puck and Mab. The moons recently detected by the Hubble have instead been christened after characters from *The Tempest*: Francisco, Caliban, Stephano, Trinculo, Sycorax, Margaret, Prospero, Setebos and Ferdinand. While this could be perceived as an homage to the film *Forbidden Planet*, the choice of *The Tempest* also betrays the quasi-imperialist stakes of astronomical nomenclature.

Literary critics have popularised the notion that *The Tempest* represents Shakespeare’s most explicit dramatisation of a cross-cultural encounter between a sophisticated European coloniser and his surly colonial subject. In a now classic piece of New Historicist scholarship, Stephen Greenblatt highlighted the play’s investment in the discourse of “linguistic colonialism”. Focusing on how Prospero and Miranda impose their language on Caliban, he observed that many Renaissance travel narratives similarly imagine the expansion of the English language as

21. Even if John had shared his father’s penchant for *Paradise Lost*, it is unlikely that names derived from Milton would have gained acceptance by the international scientific community. The prospect of angels from Judeo-Christian scriptures orbiting a pagan deity would have offended the devout. To name the Uranian satellites after demons may have been figuratively appropriate, but still would have been deemed impious. Perhaps the enchanter Comus would have been an excellent choice, but the names of the other characters in *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* (Lady, Elder Brother, etc.) sound a tad generic. Most importantly, Milton’s reputation outside of England never rocketed to the heights that Shakespeare’s did in the nineteenth century. While Shakespeare could reach a mass audience through the stage, Milton’s epic could not be so easily disseminated. Moreover, Milton’s strident Puritanism would limit his popularity in much of Catholic Europe. Arguably, despite the intrepid efforts of defenders such as Nigel Smith to insist on his enduring relevance, Milton’s star has gradually dimmed as Western society has grown more secular. Milton’s comparative lack of influence on the Continent, with the exception of France, was long ago noted by J.G. Robinson in *Milton’s Fame on the Continent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908). Erik Gray, in *Milton and the Victorians* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), makes the argument that the decline in explicit allusions to Milton during the late nineteenth century signifies his exaltation to the status of a classic.

22. Herschel, *A Treatise on Astronomy* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea and Blanchard, 1834), 282.

“virtually the goal of the whole enterprise”.²³ From a postcolonial angle, one might argue that a similar objective underlies this bizarre episode in the history of astronomical nomenclature. While neither Uranus nor its satellites are likely home to intelligent life, the ongoing tradition of naming the Uranian moons after Shakesporean characters nonetheless represents a stunning act of Anglo-American cultural imperialism.

Tellingly, well before John Herschel proposed giving Shakesporean names to the Uranian satellites, he himself was personally involved in the race between the European imperial powers to chart and label the cosmos in their own image. In 1833 Herschel sailed from England to South Africa and established, in Cape Town, the first major research observatory in the Southern Hemisphere. He remained in South Africa for four years, and upon his return was hailed as a figurehead for the supremacy of British science. In 1847 he published his *Results of Astronomical Observations Made at the Cape of Good Hope*, cataloguing thousands of previously unknown stars and nebulae. The work stands as a milestone in the history of observational astronomy. It not only cemented Britain’s pre-eminence in the field, but associated Herschel with other figures such as Captain James Cook, Joseph Banks and Charles Darwin (who dropped in on Herschel when HMS Beagle docked at the Cape) whose expeditions conflated scientific discovery with imperialist reconaissance. As Steven Ruskin remarks in his monograph on Herschel’s African sojourn, “science and imperial exploration were inexorably linked in the British imagination.”²⁴ While Herschel financed the trip out of his own pocket, “his voyage to the Cape was seen by many as a project aligned with and beneficial to the colonialist and expansionist ambitions of the British empire.” Incidentally, in his *Cape Results* Herschel proposed naming the seven moons of Saturn after the Titans: Mimas, Enceladus, Tethys, Dione, Rhea, Titan, and Iapetus. But just five years later, after his father’s plan to christen the seventh planet after King George had been abandoned, he chose Shakesporean names for its moons, breaking with the Roman pantheon.

Some might counter that contextualist and postcolonial approaches to the history of science like the one prosecuted in this essay overstate the impact imperialism had on empirical studies of the cosmos. Lewis Pyenson, for instance, contends that the observations conducted by German, Dutch and French astronomers in overseas colonies in the early twentieth century betray no imperialist taint or distortion.²⁵ While much of Herschel’s *Cape Results* could be categorised as what Pyenson calls “exact science” (that is, a compilation of quantitative data), his naming of the Uranian moons after the fairy-royalty of Shakespeare qualifies as “descriptive science”, which Pyenson concedes is not so culturally innocent.

Considering that John Herschel was also involved in attempts to found the first colonial Free Schools in South Africa and advocated the teaching of English literature to acculturate the British expatriate community, as well as the Afrikaner population (a policy eventually applied to the Nguni-speaking peoples), his astronomical work cannot be easily divorced from the “civilising mission” of imperialism.²⁶ Herschel himself wrote that education should serve to “civilise the mass of a community and spread a universal standard of intellectual attainment as well as moral feeling”.²⁷ Since he believed and wished South Africa would – for the foreseeable

23. Stephen Greenblatt, “Learning to Curse: Aspects of linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century” in *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 16-17.

24. Steven Ruskin, *John Herschel’s Cape Voyage: Private Science, Public Imagination, and the Ambitions of Empire* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), xii.

25. See Lewis Pyenson, *Cultural Imperialism and Exact Sciences: German Expansion Overseas, 1900-1930* (New York: Lang, 1985). For a critique of Pyenson’s work, see Paolo Palladino and Michael Worboys, “Science and Imperialism” in *Isis* 84.1 (1993): 91-102.

26. John Herschel’s writings on colonial education are collected in W.T. Ferguson and R.F.M. Immelman (eds), *Sir John Herschel and Education at the Cape 1834-1840* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1961), especially pages 45-48.

27. Quoted in Ferguson and Immelman, *Sir John Herschel*, 46-47.

future – remain a British colony, he concluded a “preference should be given to the English language as the medium of oral communication; and in the choice of Elementary books”.²⁸ Given that Herschel would soon christen the Uranian moons Titania and Oberon, it is not hard to divine what books he would have recommended for the more advanced curriculum. By the time Herschel arrived in South Africa, Shakespeare was already a central figure in the cultural life of the English community. Just four years before, the first major theatre company had been formed in Cape Town. They staged numerous performances of Shakespeare’s plays, which concluded with rousing renditions of “God Save the King”.²⁹ To be fair, Herschel’s proposed policies on education were not so nakedly political as some of his contemporaries. As his remarks on *As You Like It* illustrate, the astronomer believed that literature, like science, should also nurture an aesthetic receptivity to the cosmos. Nevertheless, Saul Dubow observes that Herschel “undoubtedly supported the orderly progress of civilization and viewed astronomy in terms that underlined the need to devise improved forms of imperial governance”.³⁰ Likewise, David Johnson demonstrates how Herschel’s views align with those of other colonial educators who advocated the study of Shakespeare for moral, utilitarian and nationalistic motives.³¹ By naming the Uranian moons after Shakespearean characters Herschel would seem to have validated the imperial rhetoric of the Bard’s universality.

*

The night sky is one aspect of the natural world that apparently transcends political boundaries. While it does look quite different when viewed from Cape Town instead of Greenwich, it invites an aesthetic experience of the cosmos that cuts across time as well as space (at least longitudinally). More broadly, the custom of bestowing human names on celestial objects can be construed as a kind of pathetic fallacy writ large. Since Uranus is roughly 3 billion kilometers away from the sun, its discovery virtually doubled the size of the solar system overnight.³² Pinning Shakespearean names on the Uranian moons, then, works a kind of compensatory magic. It serves to project human-ness into the profoundly inhuman dimensions of space, to reassert human grandeur in the teeth of the earth’s cosmic insignificance.

Of course, choosing Shakespearean names for these moons not only conspires to humanise deep space but also to Anglicise it. Just as the classical names of the 88 official constellations recognised by the IAU reflect the might of the Ancient Roman empire, the stellification of Shakespeare betokens the cultural and imperial authority of Great Britain in the mid-nineteenth century. For scholars interested in the history of Shakespeare’s reception, the story of how the

28. *Ibid.*, 45.

29. See David Johnson, *Shakespeare and South Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 36.

30. Saul Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility, and White South Africa 1820-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 42.

31. See Johnson, *Shakespeare and South Africa*, 25-39. Johnson labels Herschel’s views on education “utilitarian” rather than purely imperialist. Dubow agrees that Herschel’s policies do not have the “overt stress on anglicization that marked the educational initiatives pursued by [Charles] Somerset” (*A Commonwealth of Knowledge*, 43) but does not consider Herschel a utilitarian since he also advocated reading for pleasure rather than improvement. For more on Englishness in colonial South Africa, see Vivian Bickford-Smith, “Writing about Englishness: South Africa’s Forgotten Nationalism” in *Empire and After: Englishness in Postcolonial Perspective*, ed. Graham MacPhee and Prem Poddar (New York: Berghahn, 2010), 57-71.

32. Arguably, more important than the detection of Uranus was Herschel’s calculation that the universe itself is unimaginably vast and ancient: that other galaxies could be over 2 million light years from Earth. In the late-eighteenth century, this bombshell amounted to a second Copernican Revolution, anticipating Lyell’s geological inquest into the antiquity of the earth.

Uranian moons got their names illustrates that claims of Shakespeare's universality are to some extent contingent on Britain's geo-political clout.

But to portray Shakespeare's apotheosis solely as a by-product of imperialism would be too facile and reductive. As this essay has demonstrated, the stellification of Shakespeare also depended on the advent of a pan-European Romantic critical discourse that could untether literary genius from a particular age or nation, and locate it instead in an aesthetic responsiveness to the splendour of the natural world, including – in the famous phrase from Kant's Second Critique – “the starry heavens above”. Although we do not tend to think of astronomical nomenclature as an act of literary criticism, the stellifying of Shakespeare perpetuates the notion of the Bard's universal genius in strikingly literal terms.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bate, Jonathan, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1989.
 ———, ed. *The Romantics on Shakespeare*. London: Penguin, 1992.
- Besterman, Theodore, ed. *Voltaire on Shakespeare*. Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1967.
- Bickford-Smith, Vivian. “Writing about Englishness: South Africa's Forgotten Nationalism”. *Empire and After: Englishness in Postcolonial Perspective*, ed. Graham MacPhee and Prem Poddar. New York: Berghahn, 2010, 57-71.
- Brotton, Jerry. “A Retro Piece of Neo-Imperialism for Her Majesty”. *The Guardian*, 19 December 2012.
- Burwick, Frederick. “Shakespeare and Germany”. *Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Gail Marshall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 314-31.
- Carlson, Marvin. *The Italian Shakespeareans*. Washington: Folger, 1985.
- Chaplin, Sue. “The Scene of a Crime: Fictions of Authority in Walpole's ‘Gothic Shakespeare’”. *Gothic Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis and Dale Townshend. London: Routledge, 2008, 98-110.
- Clark, Alice. “Shakespeare as the French Would Have Him: Voltaire and Nerval”. *Shakespeare Yearbook* 5 (1994): 49-65.
- Cuvelier, Eliane. “Shakespeare, Voltaire, and French Taste”. *Shakespeare Yearbook* 5 (1994): 25-47.
- Dally, Frank Fether. *The Apotheosis of Shakespeare and Other Poems*. London: J. Brown, 1848.
- Dávidházi, Péter. *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare: Literary Reception in Anthropological Perspective*. New York: St. Martins, 1998.
- Dawson, Anthony B. “International Shakespeare.” *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, ed. Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 174-93.
- Delabastita, Dirk and d'Hulst, Lieven. *European Shakespeares: Translating Shakespeare in the Romantic Age*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1993.
- Desmet, Christy and Williams, Anne, eds. *The Shakespearean Gothic*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010.
- Dobson, Michael. *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation, and Authorship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Dodds, Laura. “Milton's Other Worlds”. *Uncircumscrib'd Mind: Reading Milton Deeply*, ed. Charles Durham and Kristin A. Pruit. Newark: Associated University Press, 2008, 164-82.
- Dubow, Saul. *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility, and White South Africa 1820-2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Ferguson W.T. and Immelman, R.F.M., eds. *Sir John Herschel and Education at the Cape 1834-1840*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1961.
- Giraud, Raymond. “Stendhal's ‘Greatest Bard’”. *Yale French Studies* 33 (1964): 46-52.
- Gray, Erik. *Milton and the Victorians*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. “Learning to Curse: Aspects of Linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century” *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1990, 16-39.
- Grundmann, Heike. “Shakespeare and European Romanticism”. *A Companion to European Romanticism*, ed. Michael Ferber. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.
- Herschel, John. *A Treatise on Astronomy*. Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, and Blanchard, 1834.
 ———. “Advantage of a Taste for Science.” *Scientific American* 3 (1860): 1.
- Holmes, Richard. *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*. New York: Pantheon, 2008.
- Hugo, Francoise-Victor. *Introductions Aux Volumes de sa Traduction de Shakespeare*, 1858.

- Hugo, Victor. *William Shakespeare* (1864), ed. Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne. Paris: Flammarion, 2003.
- Johnson, David. *Shakespeare and South Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.
- Larson, Ken, "The Reception of Shakespeare in Eighteenth-Century France and Germany". *Michigan Germanic Quarterly* 15.2 (1989): 103-35.
- . "The Classical German Shakespeare' as Emblem of Germany as 'geistige Weltmacht': Validating National Power through Cultural Prefiguration." *Ken Larson – Papers on Shakespeare's Reception*, 1991. Available online: <http://aurora.wells.edu/~klarson/>
- Lemonick, Michael. *The Georgian Star: How William and Caroline Herschel Revolutionized our Understanding of the Cosmos*. New York: Norton, 2009.
- Levin, Yuri D. "Shakespeare and Russian Attitudes". *Russian Essays on Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, ed. Alexandr Parfenov and Joseph G. Price. London: Associated University Press, 1998.
- LeWinter, Oswald, ed. *Shakespeare in Europe*. Cleveland: Meridian, 1963.
- Lounsbury, Thomas R. *Shakespeare and Voltaire*. London: D. Nutt, 1902.
- Mason, Haydn. "Voltaire versus Shakespeare: *Lettre A L'Academie Francaise (1776)*". *Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies* 18.2 (1995): 173-84.
- Milton, John. *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merrit Hughes. New York: Odyssey Press, 1957.
- Miner, Ellis. *Uranus: The Planet, Rings, and Satellites*. New York: Ellis Horwood, 1990.
- Ortiz, Joseph, ed. *Shakespeare and the Culture of Romanticism*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001.
- Palladino, Paolo and Worboys, Michael. "Science and Imperialism". *Isis* 84.1 (1993): 91-102.
- Pemble, John. *Shakespeare Goes to Paris: How the Bard Conquered France*. London: Continuum, 2005.
- Pyenson, Lewis. *Cultural Imperialism and Exact Sciences: German Expansion Overseas, 1900-1930*. New York: Lang, 1985.
- Robinson, J.G. *Milton's Fame on the Continent*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908.
- Ruskin, Steve. *John Herschel's Cape Voyage: Private Science, Public Imagination, and the Ambitions of Empire*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.
- Shawcross, John, ed. *Milton: The Critical Heritage*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970.
- Stokes, John. 2012. "Shakespeare in Europe". *Shakespeare in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Gail Marshall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 296-31.

Copyright of Shakespeare in Southern Africa is the property of Institute for the Study of English in Africa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.