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VOLTAIRE'S *LA MORT DE CÉSAR*

A PLAY "ENTIRELY IN THE ENGLISH TASTE"?



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Introduction

In the late 1720's, during his exile in England, Voltaire attended the performance of a play that was to leave a deep imprint in his memory and that he would, years later, nostalgically recall both in his published texts and in his private correspondence: Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Upon his return to France, Voltaire imparted his enthusiasm to his friends who, he claims, asked him to translate Shakespeare's play. Judging the gap between this English text and contemporary French tragedy to be unbridgeable, Voltaire declared that such a task was impossible. *Julius Caesar* was, despite occasional outstanding excerpts, the monstrous offspring of a savage mind and, therefore, untranslatable. Yet, since Voltaire allegedly wished to share with his friends and countrymen the newly discovered dramatic taste of France's overseas neighbours, he determined to write "a *Julius Caesar* that, without resembling Shakespeare's, would nevertheless be *entirely in the English taste*".¹ To begin with, Voltaire's explicit dismissal of Shakespeare as a model has gone unnoticed in post-eighteenth-century criticism on *La Mort de César* to the point where Voltaire's tragedy came to be unanimously considered by literary scholars as a cornerstone in the reception of Shakespeare on the Continent. Furthermore, the claim that *La Mort de César* is "entirely in the English taste" has been overlooked by scholars from all fields of literary studies. This claim is, however, momentous and the myriad of questions it raises forms the backbone of this book.

It is important to start by stressing that this book is not about "English taste" as an essentialist concept, but about a cultural construct of "otherness" as formulated in a particular (geographical, chronological, sociological and political) context that will become clear further on. In short, I shall not be concerned with the French notion of "English taste" insofar as it is senseless to postulate that the whole nation partook in this construct and/or adopted it as true. Thus, when referring to "the French notion of English taste" I shall be doing so for the purpose of rhetorical simplification, and the reader is asked to interpret it at all times as "the notion of English taste shared by a Parisian elite of highly educated men of letters". Since I shall be dealing, not with a verifiable assertion but

¹ "Il se détermina, pour satisfaire ses amis, à faire un *Jules César* qui, sans ressembler à celui de Shakespeare, fût pourtant tout entier dans le goût anglais" (preface to the 1736 authorised edition of *La Mort de César*). Unless indicated otherwise, all translations in this book are my own.

rather with a construct that took on the form of a stereotype,² this book may be considered a study in Imagology, a discipline whose aim is "to study scientifically the origin and function of the images of a foreign nation".³ "English taste" being a hetero-image that singles out England as being, at least in one respect, 'typical' and, as we shall see, as conflicting to a very large extent with the auto-image of "French taste", it shall become obvious that this stereotype arose out of a process of "selective perception" that singled out dissimilarity and was, therefore, ethnocentric. By "ethnocentrism" I mean "measuring other cultures by the standards and patterns of one's own culture", which means that "the value of normalcy is predicated on one's domestic experiences, while other cultures are seen in their deviance from that domestic norm".⁴

I have engaged in my research into the origins and semantic charge of the construct of "English taste" bearing in mind two hypotheses: either this expression was used by Voltaire to refer to a reality with which he had recently been acquainted but which was totally unknown to his contemporaries, or its meaning was a shared assumption amongst contemporary educated Frenchmen. The first hypothesis is implicitly supported by the author of *Shakespeare Goes to Paris*, the latest monograph on the reception of Shakespeare in France authored by John Pemble (2005):

The French did not discover Shakespeare until they discovered England; and they did not discover England until Voltaire, the Abbé Prévost, and the baron de Montesquieu crossed the Channel at various times in the 1720's. These were the men who made the English familiar in France, and in doing so they made Britain great. Hitherto the English had been known to the French only as free-ranging denizens of the wider world.⁵

The extent to which English culture was known in France in the early decades of the eighteenth century has been the object of scholarly publications that demonstrate the inaccuracy of Pemble's assertion, namely by Gabriel Bonno, Georges Ascoli, Charles Bastide, Joseph Texte and F.C. Green – but unfortunately none of these authors has devoted the slightest attention to French remarks concerning "English

² "The number of definitions of 'stereotype' is as great as the number of specialisms dealing with it; equally diverse is the debate around its methodological usefulness" notes Manfred Beller in *Imagology, the Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters*, p. 432. My working definition of 'stereotype' is that of "relatively fixed and oversimplified generalisations about groups or classes of people", in *The Social Encyclopaedia*, 1996.

³ In Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen (eds.), *Imagology, the Cultural Construction of Literary Representation of National Characters: A Critical Survey*, p. 13.

⁴ *Idem*, p. 323.

⁵ *Shakespeare Goes to Paris*, p. 1.

taste". I shall, therefore, try to complete extant scholarly work through an analysis of primary sources such as, for instance, French periodicals published in the decades immediately following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes – an era when English texts began to cross the Channel southbound at an increasingly swift pace, and when, for that reason, observations on or assessments of English taste were frequently made.

Thus, in the first chapter of this book, I shall look into the emergence of this particular notion of "English taste" through an analysis of non-fictional writings conveying information (albeit from an ethnocentric point of view) on various aspects of a foreign culture that France became increasingly acquainted with after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. These are (at least part of) the texts with which *La Mort de César* may be said to engage in a dialogue, insofar as Voltaire's play echoed the images constructed and conveyed by preceding authors and journalists. Care will be taken, in the first section of this chapter, to differentiate the sources of information on English culture so as to avoid undue generalisations – a protestant periodical, for instance, is informed by principles by which a Jesuit author naturally failed to abide.

Despite the enormous impact of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, it is a well-known fact that England was not unknown territory for Frenchmen until the end of the seventeenth century. In 1639, for instance, La Mesnardière wrote in his *Poétique*: "J'ai vu par la fréquentation que les anglais sont infidèles, paresseux, vaillants, cruels, amateurs de la propreté, ennemis des étrangers, altiers et intéressés".⁶ This sequence of stereotypes is offered by this theorist of French classicism with a view to the depiction of English characters in French drama, and it is an example of the images of "Englishness" in France in the first half of the seventeenth century. Writing two decades before the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, Samuel de Sorbière offered his countrymen an account of his voyage to England that may, despite its relative superficiality, be considered the precursor of Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques*.⁷ However, since I am concerned with the emergence of the French stereotype of "English taste", I have considered that I was more likely to apprehend its meaning through authors writing in an era that witnessed a systematic import of English texts that were summarized, discussed and often translated in France – which is the reason why I have set as general chronological limits to my research into primary sources the years 1685 (the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes) and 1735 (the year in which *La Mort de César* was published for the first time). After all, as

⁶ *Poétique*, p. 123.

⁷ *Relation d'un voyage en Angleterre où sont touchées plusieurs choses qui regardent l'état des sciences et de la religion, et autres matières curieuses*, written in 1664 and published in 1666.

Joep Leerssen argues, it is in the late seventeenth century and in the course of the following one that "a quasi-system lifted from the realm of stereotype and fictional characterisation" gains in systematisation.⁸

Because the scope of Imagology is intertextual, the corpus of primary sources that I have used for this first chapter has taken into account texts that appertain to domains such as theology (e.g. French monographs on the particularities of the Anglican faith), philosophy (e.g. Coste's preface to his translations of Locke's works) and history (e.g. French accounts of English "revolutions" and of English politics, both past and contemporary). The texts that I have analysed include appraisals (whether explicit or implicit) of the "otherness" of the English character, i.e., of the mismatch between French expectations and English "reality" in the above-mentioned realms. Thus, my purpose in the three first sections of the first chapter is to identify the fundamental traits that an educated Frenchman perceived as being "in the English taste" in the domains of religion, politics and philosophy.

In section 1.5, I shall move into the realm of literature and offer a chronological overview of the reception of English literature in France. This survey is not intended as exhaustive: it will sacrifice inclusiveness to the benefit of a more substantial analysis of what I have identified as the landmarks of the growing French awareness of English literary productions, be they translations – particularly their prefaces – or panoramic essays such as the 1717 *Dissertation sur la poésie anglaise*. The appraisals of critics and the observations of translators on the difficulties of their task offer invaluable insight into the clash between French premises – construed, more often than not, as having universal value – and English literary practices. I shall, therefore, attempt to pinpoint the particularities of "English taste" in literature as perceived by French critics and authors.

Since Voltaire's claim regarding the alleged representation of "English taste" in *La Mort de César* was not challenged in coeval writings, one may presuppose that this image of "Englishness"⁹ was shared by his

⁸ In *National Thought in Europe: a Cultural History*, p. 62.

⁹ I am aware of the anachronism involved in using the term "Englishness", coined, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in 1804 on the basis of the term "Deutschtum". Furthermore, as Paul Langford notes in *Englishness Identified: Manners and Character 1650-1850*, "interest in the physical evidence of the English heritage among the English themselves was not always very marked before the late nineteenth century" (p. 4). In this book, the use of the term "Englishness" is strictly a reference to a set of features ascribed to English culture by late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century French men of letters who drew generalisations on "national character" based on the limited information they had of the country, its inhabitants, its political system, or its literature. I shall use the word devoid of any of the connotations it later acquired in the work of historians of English nationalism. I must also

contemporary educated countrymen. “Englishness”, as we shall see, emerged as an image with clearer contours at the onset of the eighteenth century and seems to have soon become a stereotype, which allowed Voltaire to make use of the expression “English taste” without feeling that he ought to explain what he meant by it to his readers. The import of English texts was crucial in the formation of this stereotype, and the result of this encounter of two literary, religious, philosophical, scientific and political traditions created what Maryon McDonald designates as a “categorical mismatch”:

We might say that the cultural worlds in which we live are all in some sense category-based and that when different category systems meet, they do not match up; the resultant experience is one of indeterminacy, of unpredictability perhaps, of wavering and uncertainty, and of riot or splendour, at the boundaries of our categories which do not match those we encounter.¹⁰

The translational consequences of this “categorical mismatch” will be the main object of my second chapter. However, after having attempted to determine the particularities of “English taste” and after having identified the sources that might underlie the formation of this stereotype, I shall open the second chapter with a brief account of the notion of taste in early eighteenth-century France. This section serves the purpose of contextualising the often derogatory remarks concerning English taste on the part of French men of letters by drawing attention to the fact that, in the aesthetic geography of eighteenth-century France, the image of national taste occupied a central position, being, as it was, consistently equated with the “good taste” that other nations might only in vain aspire to possess. In this section, I shall focus on the ideological foundations of such an assumption by interrogating contemporary primary sources, which does not mean that I have overlooked the relevant work of eminent scholars such as Rémy Saisselin (*Taste in XVIIIth Century France*), Théodore Litman (*Le sublime en France: 1660-1714*), Jean-Bertrand Barrère (*L’idée de goût: de Pascal à Valéry*) or the more narrowly focused analysis of Raymond Naves (*Le goût de Voltaire*), authors to whom I refer for further information on this topic.

I shall then establish the link between taste and an activity that is more than just marginally linked with my main topic of research: translation. My purpose is to provide a theoretical frame of reference for the claim, made by Voltaire in the preface to the authorised edition of *La*

explain why I chose to use the term “Englishness” instead of “Britishness”. As Paul Langford notes in the book mentioned above, “most foreigners used ‘English’ as the principal way of referring to the British people as a whole” (p. 12). This observation is in complete harmony with my findings.

¹⁰ “The Construction of Difference: an Anthropological Approach to Stereotypes”, p. 222.

Mort de César, that *Julius Caesar* was "untranslatable". The alleged untranslatability of Shakespeare's play for an eighteenth-century author such as Voltaire is based not only on the gap between French and English tastes, but also on premises and precepts that guided the rewriting of foreign texts and which have been examined by scholars such as Lieven D'hulst (*Cent ans de théorie française de la traduction*), Michel Ballard (*De Cicéron à Benjamin: traducteurs, traductions, réflexions*), Roger Zuber (*Les "Belles infidèles" et la formation du goût classique: Perrot d'Ablancourt et Guez de Balzac*) and Frederick Rener (*Interpretatio: Language and Translation from Cicero to Tytler*¹¹). Since my aim is not to engage in an extensive analysis of the theory of translation in the eighteenth century but merely to provide a theoretical context for Voltaire's remarks about his activity as a translator in the 1730's, I have selected, among the extant scholarly texts on eighteenth-century translation theory, those that provided insights into the first half of the century.

Given the fact that *La Mort de César* is presented by Voltaire himself as owing its existence to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, this book also hopes to feed into the "European Shakespeare Movement", carried out by scholars such as those who have presented the results of their research in the last two decades in the framework of the activities of the European Shakespeare Research Association.¹² I propose to participate in the debate regarding the foreign appropriation of Shakespearean drama by analysing Voltaire's indebtedness to the English playwright in a play that has been studied by scholars as the first French adaptation of a Shakespearean play and a turning point in the European reception of Shakespeare's drama. One of my aims with this analysis is to try to determine to what extent *La Mort de César* may be regarded as a rewriting of *Julius Caesar* and how Voltaire's avowed indebtedness to Shakespeare served purposes that stretched beyond the merely literary realm.

As far as Translation Studies are concerned, this study is an exercise in historical translation research that will lead me more specifically to consider the impact of the canon of taste on the practices of cross-language rewritings. I shall be interested in the traits considered by French authors, critics and translators to be characteristic of literary "Englishness" and in the arguments – mostly expounded in prefaces to translated texts – used to justify different degrees of adaptation.

The examination of primary sources, such as contemporary prefaces to French translations of English texts and theoretical writings on trans-

¹¹ Even though Rener's book does not focus specifically on eighteenth-century translation theory, its analysis of the "profound and enduring influence of the classical world on European thought through the 18th century" (p. 325) and its examination of the ideological foundations of translation have proven useful in my study.

¹² See <http://www.um.es/shakespeare/esra/>.

lation by French men of letters, has proved invaluable in bringing to light concrete remarks concerning the production of French translations of English texts. My focus, therefore, reflects the specificity of my topic, which is the reason why a comprehensive analysis of early eighteenth century theory of translation – with its understandable emphasis on the rewriting of Latin and Greek texts – falls outside of the scope of this book. The distinguishing traits of a “tasteful” translation will be identified, and my remarks will be illustrated with the analysis of two contemporary rewritings of English drama: Boyer’s 1713 translation of Addison’s *Cato* and Voltaire’s 1734 translation of an excerpt from *Hamlet*.

After having examined the semantic charge of the image of English taste and its derogatory implications, and after having delved into the postulates that disciplined the translation of English texts in early eighteenth-century France, it will finally be possible to try to determine the reasons why Voltaire described his play in 1736 as a new play inspired by an untranslatable original and the motives that underlie his presentation of this text as a tragedy written “entirely in the English taste”. Furthermore, after having analysed French assumptions regarding English literary taste, it seems reasonable that one should ask oneself to what extent *La Mort de César* conformed and/or was perceived to conform to such a stereotype.

In chapter 3, I shall enter the core of this study and offer an analysis, not only of *La Mort de César*, but also of its paratext, by which I mean both the different introductory texts with which it was published in the 1730’s and the correspondence of Voltaire with contemporary men of letters. I shall begin with a sequential survey of extant critical works on *La Mort de César*, to which I shall refer individually in an attempt to exact the information and elements of exegesis relevant to my analysis and to highlight the issues where I feel that further research would be welcome.

La Mort de César has been the object of various scholarly discussions published from 1799 to the present day. In section 3.1, I shall offer a critical overview of such scholarly work, indicate to what extent it has been of value to me and point out the scope of my own contribution. Suffice it to say in these introductory remarks that, from my vantage point, the most valuable and complete of the extant scholarly publications on *La Mort de César* is Dennis Fletcher’s introduction to this play for *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, published by the Voltaire Foundation.¹³ The specific topic that concerns me has, however, not been granted enough attention by this scholar, and understandably so, since it falls

¹³ Besterman *et al.*, *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, vol. VIII.

out of the scope of an introductory text to Voltaire's tragedy. The alleged "Englishness" of Voltaire's play is mentioned but not examined, the paratext to *La Mort de César* is not sufficiently explored, and Voltaire's epistolary exchanges with some of his contemporaries between 1731 (the year in which the play was finished) and 1743 (the year in which it was finally staged) have been largely neglected. As a result, Fletcher's otherwise thorough introduction to the play leaves room for further analysis, namely into the genesis of *La Mort de César*, into Voltaire's motivations for presenting it as being "entirely in the English taste", into its reception in France and into the author's difficulties in having it staged at the Comédie Française. These are the main gaps in the current scholarship on *La Mort de César* that I propose to fill with this book.

I shall then embark on a chronological inquiry into the genesis of *La Mort de César*, beginning, in section 3.2, with an analysis of the first text by Voltaire where *Julius Caesar* is examined and where a partial translation of this play is presented¹⁴ – the "Discours sur la tragédie à Milord Bolingbroke", published as a preface to the tragedy *Brutus* in 1731. I shall pay particular attention to Voltaire's comments on the "beautés" of Shakespeare's play and to his critical remarks regarding the discrepancy between English and French tastes in tragedy. My purpose is to understand to what extent this prefatory text might have been designed to pave the way for the publication of Voltaire's rewriting of *Julius Caesar*, which had already been written but not yet published.

In section 3.3, the spotlight will fall on the unauthorised edition of *La Mort de César*, published in 1735 after a private performance of the play at the Harcourt College. The debate between Voltaire and the critic Desfontaines that immediately followed this publication will be under special scrutiny: I shall analyse the review published in Desfontaine's *Observations sur les écrits modernes* in September 1735 as well as the ensuing epistolary exchange between the tragic author and his critic. The analysis of this review and of this correspondence (to which existing scholarly texts on *La Mort de César* devote insufficient attention) was of particular value to my research, given the fact that it is in these texts that a discussion regarding the alleged "Englishness" of Voltaire's play takes place. My main objective is to try to establish at which point in time, under which circumstances, by whom and for what reasons *La Mort de César* was first mentioned as being a play "entirely in the English taste". After having interrogated the genesis of the aura of "Englishness" surrounding Voltaire's play, I shall provide a comparative reading of the two versions of what Voltaire came to call "Shake-

¹⁴ Brutus' funeral speech in act III.

spere's scene", as published in the pirated edition and in a revised version printed three months later in the French periodical *Mercure de France*. The justifications used to uphold the censors' refusal to grant *La Mort de César* the "royal privilege" for printing will also be examined.

In section 3.4, I shall move to Voltaire's authorised editions of *La Mort de César*, published in Amsterdam, Paris, and London in 1736, and I shall analyse their prefatory texts to investigate how this play was presented by its author and by the men of letters whom he entrusted with the task of introducing it to his readership. The claim, made in La Mare's foreword to the Paris and London editions, that *La Mort de César* had been "written entirely in the English taste" while not resembling *Julius Caesar* will understandably retain my attention, as will the claim (made by Voltaire in the foreword to the Amsterdam edition) that he was the first to introduce "the English muses in France". I shall be especially interested in interrogating the avowed motivations of Voltaire's exercise in literary cosmopolitanism, i.e., the extent of his acknowledged indebtedness to Shakespeare and to English drama, as well as the motivations underlying his alleged intention of introducing innovative elements into French tragedy.

Section 3.5 is, to some extent, a short excursus designed to sketch the ideological context for the analysis of *La Mort de César* that follows immediately. Given the ideological import of Voltaire's play and the accusations of political subversion directed against its author, an investigation into the images of the historical figures of Caesar and Brutus in early eighteenth-century France seemed quite necessary. My research drew mainly on primary textual sources such as the writings of Saint-Evremond, Fénelon, Bayle and Montesquieu, since I believe that only an examination of authoritative and, for the most part, commonly accepted views on the assassination of Caesar might lead to an understanding, on the one hand, of the singularity of Voltaire's outlook on this episode of Roman history and, on the other hand, of the political implications of the performance of this tragedy in old Regime France.

An analysis of *La Mort de César* will be carried out in section 3.6 which will confront this play with preceding dramatic treatments of the same topic, such as Grévin's *César*, Scudéry's *La Mort de César*, Barbier's homonymous play and Conti's *Il Cesare*. I shall also refer to Corneille's *Cinna*, which, as diverse scholars have noted, was one of Voltaire's possible sources of inspiration for *La Mort de César*. My purpose in this section is to verify Voltaire's claim regarding the "Englishness" of his tragedy by examining each of its features – both formal and thematic – in the light of the French tragic tradition so as to identify elements both of continuity and of disruption. I shall be especially

interested in trying to determine whether any perceived dissimilarities between *La Mort de César* and previously published French tragedies on the assassination of Caesar may be ascribable to an English influence. In other words, I shall ask myself whether specific aspects of Voltaire's play may rightfully be considered "in the English taste" merely due to the fact that they diverge from the particularities of early eighteenth-century French tragedy. I shall also investigate the possible English origin of the allegedly innovative elements introduced by Voltaire in this play, such as, for instance, a chorus, the absence of a love plot, the display of a corpse on stage and the emphasis on visual effects. Finally, I shall devote considerable attention to the depiction of the figures of Caesar and Brutus in Voltaire's tragedy in order to try to determine both the measure of its conventionality in relation to contemporary writings (studied in the previous section) and the extent of the possible subversive impact of *La Mort de César* in early eighteenth-century France.

This last point will be crucial in the final section of this chapter, since I shall be concerned with the views of institutional censorship on Voltaire's play. I shall examine the reasons underlying the ban on the play in June 1743. In this section, I shall analyse the alterations to *La Mort de César* that were proposed by the censor Crébillon and by the French Minister of War, Maurepas. My purpose will be to bring to the fore the official objections to the play that seem to have determined its belated performance at the Comédie Française at the end of August 1743. Finally, I shall examine the content of the reviews of this performance that were published in the contemporary French press and in which allusions to Shakespeare were made. I shall be particularly interested in the motivations underlying the references to the English playwright in these reviews: was Shakespeare mentioned because his name (if not his works) had, in the meantime and through the writings of Voltaire and others, become familiar to French men of letters and, consequently, the public acknowledgement of Voltaire's indebtedness had become necessary? Or was he roughly as unknown in France as he had been a few decades before? In this case, was he merely mentioned in reviews on *La Mort de César* as a representative of a taste to which the French one was infinitely superior?

After having looked into the French reception of Voltaire's play, it is important to cast our eyes across the Channel and to examine its reception in England, the country whose taste *La Mort de César* purportedly represented. The clash between auto-image and hetero-image becomes evident in the reaction of Voltaire's English translator to *La Mort de César*. Aaron Hill, a playwright who had translated Voltaire's *Zaïre* and *Alzire* and had them staged with considerable success in London, lashed

out in indignation against the French author's (mis)representation of "English taste". Curiously enough, Aaron Hill considered *La Mort de César* a barbaric play – the same indictment brought to bear against *Julius Caesar* by Voltaire. It is obvious that I cannot claim that Aaron Hill voiced his nation's opinion, just as it is inaccurate to claim that Voltaire's image of "English taste" coincided fully with that of France. As hetero-images, auto-images are discursive constructs mostly devoid of referential support. However, at least two theatre directors to whom Aaron Hill turned in an attempt at having "his Caesar" staged implied, as we shall see, that the play was not "in the English taste".

The protagonist of chapter 4 is, then, an English writer of considerable renown in his day but forgotten by posterity to the point where, as Calhoun Winton observes in his brief introduction to his plays, it is only as the translator of Voltaire that his name "still finds a footnote in literary history".¹⁵ Scholarly writings on Aaron Hill's dramatic production are, indeed, scarce, and those that have been published focus on his rewritings of Voltaire's *Zaïre*, *Alzire* and *Mérope* – tragedies that were staged in London with success¹⁶ – virtually disregarding *The Roman Revenge*, a tragedy that was staged only once,¹⁷ three years after Hill's death, and then fell into oblivion. Indeed, the extant bibliography on *The Roman Revenge* is scarce to the point where one may conclude that the play has been virtually ignored by scholars. In the two available biographies of Aaron Hill – Dorothy Brewster's *Aaron Hill, Poet, Dramatist, Projector* (1913) and Christine Gerrard's *Aaron Hill: the Muses' Projector, 1685-1750* (2003) – a few references to *The Roman Revenge* are to be found, but neither publication offers more than a brief presentation of this tragedy. In the chapter devoted to the reception of Voltaire's work in England in the third volume of the *Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*,¹⁸ *La Mort de César* is not mentioned, and the emphasis falls on Hill's translation of *Zaïre*, even though references are made to *Alzire* and *Mérope*. To my knowledge, the only text that assigns a few paragraphs to Hill's rewriting of *La Mort de César* is Thomas Davies' *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick*, published in 1780,¹⁹ and even this book contains no more than sparse notes towards a comparative analysis of Voltaire's play and *The Roman Revenge*, a superficial account of Hill's struggle to have his adaptation staged in London and

¹⁵ In *The Plays of Aaron Hill*, p. xix.

¹⁶ As we shall see, *Alzire* was less of a triumph than *Zaïre*. Since Hill's adaptation of *Mérope* was staged in 1749, hence after the time span I propose to cover, I shall not refer to it in this book.

¹⁷ In Bath in 1753.

¹⁸ Chapter 6.8, by Peter France.

¹⁹ See chapter XIII.

the reproduction of a letter to the author written by Lord Bolingbroke, one of Hill's literary correspondents – in all, little more than four quarto pages.²⁰ More recently, Sandro Jung published a facsimile edition of the works of Aaron Hill in four volumes containing the correspondence of the English author, his poetry and his *Essay on the Art of Acting*.²¹

With this play, Hill explicitly attempts to counter the legitimacy of Voltaire's stereotype regarding English dramatic taste. One of the main reasons why this text is worthy of attention is the fact that its author makes evident use of French dramatic models and paradigms while claiming, albeit implicitly, to represent English taste. I shall investigate the genesis of Hill's play as a reaction against Voltaire's image of English taste by providing an analysis of primary sources largely neglected by scholars, such as Aaron Hill's correspondence with eminent figures like Pope, Lord Bolingbroke, John Rich (the manager of the Covent Garden Theatre) and David Garrick, as well as by offering an analysis of *The Roman Revenge*. This analysis is not intended as exhaustive but focuses on the play's indebtedness both to Voltaire and to Shakespeare and on Hill's claim that it aims at countering the French author's notion of English taste.

This aspect of the reception of Voltaire's *La Mort de César* has been neglected by recent scholars, who devote, if any, little more than passing references to it. In order to contextualise Hill's adaptation of *La Mort de César*, I shall begin, in section 4.1, by offering a survey of the English translations/adaptations of Voltaire's dramatic works from William Duncombe's rewriting of *Brutus*, performed in London in 1734, to the middle of the century, i.e., the period of about two decades dominated largely by Aaron Hill's rewritings. I shall be especially concerned with the debate around matters of national taste in which Duncombe, Hill and Voltaire engaged in the 1730's. An analysis of the remarks made by Voltaire's translators on their work – expressed in prefaces and, in the case of Aaron Hill, also in his private correspondence – will be the cornerstone of this section, where I shall try not only to gauge the rate of success of Voltaire's plays on the London stages, but also to offer insights into the (occasionally forceful) contentions uttered on both sides of the Channel concerning the genuine attributes of national drama. I propose to retrace the steps that led from the initial unconditional appraisal of Voltairean drama on the part of Aaron Hill – the epitome of which was the remark that the French playwright thought "with the heart of an Englishman" – to the realisation that, after all, Britain only borrowed from France with a view to amendment. The contrasts between

²⁰ *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick*, vol. 1, p. 148-152.

²¹ *The Works of Aaron Hill, 1685-1750*, Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005.

the two authors in terms of dramatic taste will be brought to the fore, as well as the mutual attempts at aesthetic miscegenation as put forth in the prefatory texts to Voltaire's *Zaïre* and *Alzire* and to their rewritings by Aaron Hill. I shall also highlight particular alterations to Voltaire's plays in their English versions that might be indicative of trends in the translation and adaptation of French texts into English and that might foreshadow ulterior procedures of adjustment in the case of *La Mort de César*.

Section 4.2 was designed as the English counterpart of section 3.5 insofar as it addresses the literary and political representations of Brutus and Caesar in Augustan England. I shall be concerned with the ideological implications of topical references to these two historical figures coming from both sides of the English political spectrum (i.e., Whigs and Tories) so as to offer an ideological frame of reference to Hill's politically charged adaptation of Voltaire's play. Pope and Bolingbroke's outlook on the figures of Caesar and Brutus will be under special scrutiny given the active role that these two men turned out to play in the composition of the final text of *The Roman Revenge*. My main purpose is to try to determine whether the rejection of Hill's play by contemporary theatre managers may be ascribable to a depiction of Caesar and Brutus that ran counter-current to the political taste of the English nation or whether it was a hypothetical "Frenchness" of the rewriting that proved to be an obstacle to the reception of this adaptation of *La Mort de César*. In other words, if *La Mort de César* was not, as Hill claimed, "in the English taste", was this the case of *The Roman Revenge*?

Before analysing Hill's play, I shall present, in section 4.3, the results of my research into the correspondence of this playwright with the prominent men of letters and theatre managers that I have already mentioned, so as to reconstruct the genesis of *The Roman Revenge*. These letters are comprised in the last two of four volumes entitled *The Works of the Late Aaron Hill, Consisting of Letters on Various Subjects and of Original Poems, Moral and Facetious*, published posthumously in 1753. An attentive reading of Hill's correspondence is revealing, not only of his motivations in rewriting this specific play and of the programmatic quality of *The Roman Revenge* – asserted in the essay *An Inquiry into the Merits of Assassination* – but also of the different stages in a rather long and painstaking process of revision to which his correspondents have to different degrees contributed. I shall naturally focus on Hill's contention that *La Mort de César* is not representative of English taste, since this is crucial to my topic, but I shall also pay considerable attention to the tug of war in which Hill, on one side, and Pope and Lord Bolingbroke, on the other, engaged in an effort to make *The*

Roman Revenge serve political agendas, a factor which, I hypothesize, might help to explain why this play was not staged during the author's lifetime, despite his tenacious endeavours.

The last section of this dissertation offers a comparative analysis of Voltaire's play and of *The Roman Revenge*. Given the difficult accessibility of *The Roman Revenge* and the intricacy of its plot, a detailed summary of the play will be offered along with my remarks. Even though, to my knowledge, no analysis of Hill's play has ever been published, the one I shall present has no claims to exhaustiveness. In keeping with my main topic, I shall aim at discerning the features (both formal and thematic) of *La Mort de César* that have been maintained in this rewriting and those that have been altered, and I shall, whenever pertinent, refer back to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. My purpose is to try to understand Hill's contention that *La Mort de César* had no affinities with English taste, and to try to determine the degree to which *The Roman Revenge* strove to conform to a dramatic model that was implicitly presented as being typically English.

Thus, at the end of this book, I shall have moved from the rather general question of what English taste was perceived to be in early eighteenth-century France to the more precise matter of how Aaron Hill attempted to contradict Voltaire in his claims regarding the "Englishness" of *La Mort de César*. I shall have followed a path that started with late seventeenth-century remarks on English taste on the part of French men of letters and ended with a denunciation of the inaccuracy of this stereotype on the part of an English dramatist. I have attempted, in this introduction, to present the most crucial questions to which the following pages will attempt to provide an answer. The time has come now to scrutinise the sources that I have selected for analysis and to see which answers they might provide.