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'All the world's a stage and I'm a genius in it': Creative Benefits of Writers' Identification with the Figure of Artistic Genius

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the romantic notion of artistic genius and its operations as a kind of theatrical script functionally guiding many writers' lives and approaches to their creations. In recent years, the concept has been justly deconstructed as heavily gendered and providing an inadequate representation of actual creative processes. Nevertheless, what these studies of genius have often overlooked are the manifold functions the genius ideology has traditionally fulfilled for artists and society at large. To illustrate this, the article focuses specifically on the complex and often beneficial interaction arising from authors' self-identification with the genius role and their negotiation of the creative process. A plea will be made for taking seriously the limitations of the genius script while at the same time trying to save-guard its valuable influence on creative writers' artistic performance.

Introduction

Over the past decades the notion of artistic genius, referring to 'an exceptionally intelligent or able person' (Pearsall) usually in possession of 'exceptional intellectual or creative power or other natural ability' (Pearsall), has come under heavy scrutiny. While previously the romantic concept had done much to inform analyses and celebrations of human creativity (Galton; Young; Kant), it has become the focus of rigid deconstructions from numerous fields, including feminist aesthetics and creativity studies, to name only a few.

As to the former, scholars such as Christine Battersby and Carol Korsmeyer in their respective works *Gender and Genius - Towards a Feminist Aesthetic* and *Gender and Aesthetics* have made it clear that the seemingly neutral concept of genius is, in fact, deeply gendered. Ever since the term's first usage in ancient Rome in order to refer to a spirit of masculinity and the male seed (Nitzsche 20), up to notorious treatises like *Sex and Character* by Otto Weininger who considers genius an exclusively masculine property (115), the concept's has been skewed towards connotations of maleness. As a result, it is not surprising that, with the exception of a few token female 'geniuses' like Virginia Woolf or George Eliot, the accolade has been applied almost exclusively to men.

With regard to creativity studies, the works by scholars such as Margaret Boden, Robert Weisberg, Michael Howe and Susan Kolodny (among others) have done much to deconstruct traditional views of creativity as related to some mysterious, innate gifts. Rather, several areas of creativity studies have tended towards highlighting a profound interconnection between creative achievement and training (Howe, Gladwell), as well as learnable skills. Among these - for reasons detailed elsewhere (Chibici-Revneanu) - the features of tolerance of regression (Kolodny 39), self-efficacy (Bandura), internal motivation (Amabile) and persistence (Lerner 35) appear to be of particular relevance to the development of creative writers.

These deconstructions may be considered potentially enabling to male and female creators discouraged by the fatalistic implications of an ideology that celebrates only a few individuals supposed to have been born with a special ability. Nevertheless, this article will argue that one has to be careful not to simply wipe the genius script from our thinking about creativity before analysing the multiple functions it has often fulfilled for society in general and artists in particular.

In order to understand these operations, it will be helpful to turn towards some basic concepts of performance studies to illustrate how the notion of genius has acted as a kind of implicit theatrical script inspiring and guiding the professional part many artists choose to play. It will be argued that the genius role has often acted as a source of self-identification, thus - somewhat paradoxically - enhancing the very elements of tolerance of regression, self-efficacy, internal motivation and persistence previously mentioned as playing a key role in creative development. Consequently, it seems crucial to deal with the genius script carefully - safe-guarding what has worked for many artists and discarding its potentially negative elements.

As implied, the present inquiry will limit its focus to the effect of genius on creative writers, as it strikes me of particular interest to see how those involved in the creation of stories and reliant on empathy with fictional characters also often cling to stories and their protagonists in order to explain themselves and their profession. Also, given that the phenomenon of genius has been dealt with from within many different fields, the approach to the matter at hand will be interdisciplinary, drawing from such diverse fields as performance studies, aesthetics, creativity studies and creative writing studies. Throughout this article, reference will also be made to observations by historical and contemporary writers. To complement these, I will also draw on a series of qualitative interviews about the genius notion and the creative process I conducted with writers from varied nationalities in 2008. I will only quote those observations relevant to an illustration of this article's primary concerns. As the writers questioned chose to remain anonymous, I will refer to them by their initials.

To stress the heterogeneous nature of writer's role-playing relationship with the genius part I have furthermore decided to use the terminology of performing,

acting, identification etc. with deliberate vagueness. I do not believe that such an individualised relationship to the genius script can or indeed should be described with more precision.

There are evident limits to the present discussion. First of all, due to the brief extent of this article, the presentation and analysis of all elements illustrating the complex interaction with the creative process of writers will be rather general and concise. Also, whereas the genius notion and its related idea of innate talent continue to play a crucial role in many writers' lives, it would be absurd to suppose that every literary creator bases his or her sense of identity on the concept of genius. Not only may they rely on no such fictional part at all; one may also argue that there are other, powerful scripts which seem to guide many role performances within the art world. Without being able to presently discuss the matter in detail, the common story-pattern of writers who, J.K. Rowling-like achieve immense riches through market-success, for instance, also appears to have a significant hold over many writers' imagination.

Also, it is important to highlight that an author's identification with the genius role may only be regarded as beneficial if it is of a limited kind. In other words, and as we shall return to, its effective interaction with the creative process seems to rely on the writer playing the part of genius, believing his or her role, yet at the same time being able to distance him or herself from it.

The subsequent discussion, then, does not strive to be exhaustive. Above all, it wants to demonstrate the overall power genius has on writers' 'performance' – understanding the latter both as self-affirming creative interventions that make-up the literary process and creative achievement.

2. Casting: Protagonist needed for 'The Genius: From Suffering to Fame.'

Reviewing some of the main trends of the field of performance studies, Richard Schechner exposes the theatrical nature of every-day life and the way much of our sense of identity and many of our social interactions rely on role identification and performance (Pos 1287-1292). At the same time, he also points to the multiple functions performances tend to have in our social and individual lives, summing these up as 'to entertain, to create beauty, to mark or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach or persuade, to deal with the sacred and the demonic.' (Pos 1852-1857)

Looking closely at the concept of genius, it becomes evident that this romantic ideology has, in fact, been tied up with all of the functions Schechner outlines. Nonetheless, this cannot be made fully explicit until we have not exposed the profoundly narrative nature of the genius idea. Arising, as mentioned, in ancient Rome; becoming a male allegorical figure often associated with (pro-) creation in medieval literature (Nitzsche 24, 25); and eventually taking on its notions of outstanding talent and acts of innovation during (early) Romanticism

(Young; Kant), the idea appears to have gradually evolved into a fully formed story pattern or script, with its starring hero of outstanding cultural achievement.

The plot seems to be structured around a path from tragedy to triumph. A lonely creator figure fights many obstacles such as poverty and artistic rejection (among others), to be finally rewarded with a kind of secular immortality in the form of fame. To cite Arthur Schopenhauer, a crucial influence on genius: 'The most excellent works...must always remain sealed books to the dull majority of men' (*World as Will*²³⁴). Hence, the artist: 'comes to think more about posterity than about contemporaries; because...time will gradually bring the discerning few who can appreciate him' (*Art of Literature*).

As to the protagonist of this plot, one may – on the whole – describe 'him' as outstandingly talented, often mysteriously inspired and mentally unstable, as well as deeply driven not by hopes of market success but (to refer to Immanuel Kant, one of the most significant writers on genius) the creation of art 'without ulterior regard to any other end, and yet with a feeling of satisfaction and stimulation (independent of reward)' (185).

There is, unfortunately, no space to provide a detailed analysis of this narrative pattern's multiple operations among artists and the art world in general. Still, its adherence to Schechner's functions may be pointed out very superficially, at the very least in order to stress the need for further research on the matter.

There may be little doubt, then, that artists historically regarded as geniuses such as Mozart, Shakespeare or Tyāgarāja have been celebrated for providing the world with beauty, entertainment, and teaching. 'Geniuses', so often cited (like Goethe for Germany, Cervantes for Spain, etc.) as national heroes, clearly also serve to enhance community cohesion. They may not directly heal, but scholars have associated the genius figure with a means of escaping modernity's growing feeling of alienation (Curie 108). Moreover, in the frequent association of genius with divine inspiration, as well as the historical belief that some artists (like Paganini or Liszt) obtained their gift by selling their soul to the devil, we can also observe how the genius concept has been tied up with matters of the sacred and demonic. (In fact, for a long time the word 'genius' was also connected with both angelical and demonic beings influenced by the Greek concept of 'daimon', Nietzsche 24, 25). Most significantly for our present purpose, however, is the operation of the genius script as a form of marking and changing artists' identity.

In the following discussion, we shall come across numerous examples of authors using elements of the genius script's main character and plot as a form of self-identification, an overall guide to what to expect from and how to perform one's authorial role. As implied, this does neither mean that all writers demonstrate such a self-identification nor that they all display it in the same manner. The existence of a vast array of differences, while impossible to be fully teased out here, needs to be perpetually born in mind.

3. The importance of being 'a genius'

Once, during the previously mentioned interviews, a young, male writer explained to me how, as a young adolescent 'At the back of one's mind, the "great writer" is born, and from now on you'll see yourself in this way and you'll try to write on and get better' (Interview M.Z.). Similarly, the novelist Truman Capote recounts how, as a pre-adolescent boy he had his I.Q. tested and

came home a genius, so proclaimed by science. ...I was exceedingly pleased – went around staring at myself in mirrors and sucking in my cheeks and thinking over in my mind, my lad, you and Flaubert...I began writing in fearful earnest' (22).

In both cases, we can observe how two men, in their early youth, cast themselves for the role of 'eminent' writer or genius and how this helped to push them towards a more active engagement with their writing ('in fearful earnest') and career.

What I aim to illustrate during this section is precisely the extent to which such a positive identification with the genius part may be seen as having a beneficial effect on creation, through an interaction with creativity-enhancing elements such as acceptance of regression, self-efficacy, internal motivation and persistence. Still, before looking at all these possible advantages, it is crucial to turn towards some significant reservations.

Above all, one needs to bear in mind the previously outlined fact that the genius script has been profoundly gendered and thus tended towards casting men for its leading role. While this, as we shall see, has not kept women from identifying with this part, it has surely made the role interpretation and performance far more complicated for females. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere (Chibici-Revneanu), the genius script may have been implicated in the very oppression of many female artists. Therefore, if I am nevertheless arguing for a consideration of its manifold functions, it is evidently *not* to perpetuate its potentially sexist operations. Rather, as stated, I am pleading for a complex cultural engagement with what has worked about the genius script while at the same time taking very seriously what has been shown to be harmful and misleading about it.

In addition to these 'gender reservations', some scholars have also addressed other potential risks of authors' self-identification with the genius figure. One example of this is the theorist on writing Eviatar Zerubavel who advises in his book *The Clockwork Muse* that it is fundamental for authors to let go of all romantic ideas about the creative process which the notion of genius, of course, epitomizes (Zerubavel 310). For the scholar, this admonition is principally related to beliefs of mysterious inspiration so central to the genius ideology. According to him:

the common Romantic image of the bohemian writer who forgoes structure in order to accommodate essentially unscheduled outbursts of creative energy...is a rather dangerous myth, since it might lead you to willingly relinquish much of the control you can have over your writing by opting to rely on some mysterious and rather capricious 'muse'. (Zerubavel 311)

In other words, instead of working hard at their craft, authors may start relying on irregular out-bursts which may hinder steady creative development.

From a different angle, the psycho-analyst Susan Kolodny also warns against too strong an identification with the genius-figures and the association with mental instability this, sometimes, implies. As she observes in her work *The Captive Muse*, writers need to realise that leaving their psychological issues untreated because they consider these an integral part of their artistic gift is a serious error, as psychological problems often severely interfere with (rather than enhance) writers' ability to work (102).

Both Zerubavel's and Kolodny's observations need to be taken seriously; they crucially emphasise the previously implied fact that in order for a performance of the genius role to be beneficial, it needs to be of a limited kind. At the same time, however, it is also of paramount importance to become fully aware of the significant advantages to be derived from a writer's decision to act the starring role in an enactment of society's traditional performance of the 'genius play'.

To illustrate this, let us stick for a moment longer to the work by Susan Kolodny. In her exploration of helps and hindrances of the creative process, Kolodny also highlights that much creative work, especially writing, involves experiences of psychological regression. Authors may experience these as a loss of conscious control, hence 'find frightening, and so avoid' (39). Now, this may already point towards one advantage of an author's identification with the genius role. For the romantic script's emphasis on inexplicable inspiration (arguably the very reliance on a 'capricious "muse"' Zerubavel warns against) can be seen as preparing some authors for an acceptance and tolerance of these regressive states.

This may be manifested through a successful female novelist, D.A., who – despite the male gendering of the genius part – identifies herself very strongly with this role. Interestingly, in her case, this also leads to what may be called her 'proud tolerance' of regressive states involved in creative writing. As she explained during an interview:

When I sit down to write I write. I don't need an idea. I don't need a synopsis, a plan of characters. I just need a plot and to start. The story happens as I start to write. Quite weird...Usually I know where to end. But I don't have a clue about the path I got to walk in between those points. And that's the fun of it all. Characters present themselves to me in the middle of

the way, like they always meant to be there: 'Hey, don't you forget to mention me. I'll be useful.' (Interview D.A.).

Here then, we already have an instance of how an identification with the role of the mysteriously inspired creator may assist rather than block the creative process. Instead of being scared away by the occurrence of regressive states, this writer comes to interpret them as 'the fun of it all'.

Let us now turn towards the interconnection between an adoption of the genius role, creativity and self-efficacy. Defining the latter as 'people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance'(1), Albert Bandura explains how people's strong belief in their ability tends to have a dramatic effect on their capacity to handle challenges, maintain an intrinsic commitment and stick to their goals even in the face of 'failures and setbacks' (1). Interestingly, Bandura even goes so far as to regard idealised visions of one's self as potentially beneficial, for: 'If efficacy beliefs always reflected only what people can do routinely they would rarely fail but they would not set aspirations beyond their immediate reach nor mount the extra effort needed to surpass their ordinary performances' (5).

This becomes relevant to our present discussion in numerous ways. Firstly, given the fact that writing, for instance, a novel may be deemed an extremely challenging and strenuous task, we can see how profoundly authors may benefit from a high-level of self-efficacy. Secondly, for several writers, a strong self-belief can be directly correlated to a positive identification with the genius role. After all, regarding oneself as a possible genius implies precisely the kind of self-overestimation that may actually mobilise (as we have seen in the case of Capote and the young writer M.Z.) hitherto untapped energies. As the young writer M.Z. further explained, without 'this image of yourself as a great author at the back of your mind...you are unlikely to write novels containing hundreds of pages' (Interview M.Z.). Acting the role of genius, then, seems to potentially enable some authors to 'surpass their ordinary' life and writing 'performance'.

Let us look in somewhat more detail at the features of internal motivation and persistence. As to the former, the creativity scholar Teresa Amabile outlines the positive correlation between internal motivation - the wish to engage in artistic work because of one's love and profound interest in it - and creative success. Although she also presents some exceptions to this rule, she stresses how motivation of an intrinsic kind tends to be highly conducive to increased levels of creativity. At the same time, a focus on external aspects is supposed to lead to a decrease in creativity and hence - implicitly - also the quality of works produced (31).

With regard to persistence, numerous voices have begun to emphasise the important role of this psychological feature for creative success and development. As the editor-gone-agent Betsey Lerner observes in her book *The Forest for the*

Trees – An Editor’s Advice for Writers: ‘I won’t say there is no such thing as a natural talent, but after working with many authors over the years, I can offer a few observations...the degree of one’s perseverance is the best predictor of success’ (35). Hence, sheer resilience and ‘staying power’ seems to be one of the most decisive factors between a writer ‘making it’ or not.

If we have already seen how a potentially genius-promoted self-efficacy may positively interact with both authors’ internal motivation and sense of persistence, it is now crucial to show how the power of the genius ideology goes still further than this. To do so, let us briefly remember Kant’s declaration that the kind of art produced by geniuses must be created ‘with a feeling of satisfaction and stimulation (independent of reward)’ (185). Here, the philosopher actually appears to provide a kind of ‘declaration of internal motivation’ worth considering as a creativity-enhancing bonus for all those interested in the genius-self-identification package.

To provide an example of this, let us cite novelist Orhan Pamuk’s decision to ‘dedicate myself to art without expecting anything in return,’ which seemed to have helped him when he ‘lacked confidence and had doubts about my future as a writer’ and ‘to bolster my resolve’ (ix). Here, then, we may again suspect the potential benefits of an identification with a protagonist at work whose life is supposed to involve around ‘his’ perpetual engagement with ‘his’ art, without the expectation of external rewards.

This also leads us to the specific interaction of the genius role and plot with the feature of persistence. It has been briefly mentioned that there appears to be a common ‘rival’ script available for writers – an alternative plot focusing on a story of hard-work and market success. Yet, quite apart from the fact that one evidently stresses an internal the other an external form of motivation, what can be said for both ideologies’ interaction with persistence?

Whereas a self-identification with the story-line of achieving immediate fame and riches through writing may provide a strong pull for potential creators to begin with, it also strikes one as particularly fragile and difficult to sustain. For, ultimately, only very few authors get anywhere close to J.K. Rowling’s legendary success. Rather, as Dag Björkegren explains in his work, *The Culture Business*: ‘The odds are almost a hundred to one against the publication of unsolicited manuscripts, with which the major publishing houses are inundated’ (52). Thus, not only the achievement of great financial success, even the mere publication of a written work is a highly difficult and even - to an extent - unlikely event. As a result, writers aligned with this script may easily become discouraged and give up.

The effects of a personal endorsement of the genius script may be regarded as remarkably different. We have already seen that a ‘true’ artist is supposed to create without any hope of external rewards (at least, during his or her lifetime). Rather, the genius plot promises nothing more than the somewhat dreary prospect of a creator living in potential poverty, possibly bombarded with rejection and

plagued by mental instability, to be rewarded with immortality through fame after his or her death. Now - as bizarre as this claim may at first sound - a partial or full adoption of this ideology may work wonders for authors' creative staying power. As Mexican writer Rosario Castellano emphasises in her novel *Album de familia*: 'There is one defense against failure; the certainty that it is unjust and that posterity will rectify the error' (48, my translation).

Of course, one may object that eventual genius status is even more difficult to achieve than vast financial success, and that the genius script therefore helps to perpetuate a system of self-deception and exploitation. While this may be partly true, it also misses the main point that the kind of stamina and ability to deal with rejections a personal alignment with the genius role may facilitate might well become the decisive factor for an author's eventual success. Furthermore, while many artists would agree that their career choice often involves sacrifices of a financial kind, there tend to be enormous advantages to be gained from performing in a social play that grants a potentially metaphysical meaning to one's work and existence.

In fact, at this stage we may return to our previous observations about Schnechner's multiple functions of performances in society and the way the genius script can be related to all of these. Acting the genius role, authors may benefit from following a life-path characterised by spirituality, a potential psychological defense against alienation, and a profound sense of doing something special, with meaning.

In his work on C.G. Jung, psychoanalyst Anthony Storr writes about Jung's conclusion that everyone possesses their own 'delusional system,' although he did not use this terminology. He would rather have said that every man needs a myth by which to live, and that if he does not appear to possess one, he is either unconscious of it, or else sadly alienated from the roots of his being.' (34).

I consider this is one of the key gifts performing the genius part may provide for many creative writers: they obtain 'permission' to rehearse, act and create within a 'delusional system', a make-belief world which allows them to thrive.

4. Conclusion

In the course of this article, we have thus looked at the notion of genius and shown how it operates as a powerful cultural script interfering with many writers' performance - both their level of achievement and the way they engage with the creative process. By necessity, the discussion of many profound and complex issues has been confined to rather general observations. I nonetheless hope that I have drawn attention to the risk of simply throwing out the genius story from our stock of cultural scripts, removing this plot and role pattern from those available for writers and other artists.

It has been illustrated that the interaction of the genius idea with reality is highly complex. On the one hand, the concept of genius misrepresents the creative process and perpetuates some profoundly gendered ideas. On the other, it has been manifested as potentially interacting very positively with a number of elements (such as tolerance of regression, self-efficacy, internal motivation and persistence) associated with a successful engagement with creative writing.

Personally, I believe it is time to promote a re-working of the genius script to become more inclusive, not only in terms of gender, but also class and 'race'. After all, genius has not only been predominantly associated with men, but also with the European, white, upper and middle classes. Also, to stick to this article's overall theatre metaphor, I feel that many advantages of the genius script can be preserved by promoting writers' engagement with it in a Brechtian, rather than a Stanislavskian manner. Instead of letting themselves fully fall into their part, it strikes me as healthier and more effective for writers to access the genius role and plot as a significant act of distanced make-belief. Alternatively, I call for writers and other actors of the art-world to create new scripts for self-identification; narratives that may capture and promote highly positive elements of genius, yet allow for both men and women, blacks and whites, to stand an equal chance of casting themselves or being cast for their lead roles.

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