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# Recensioni

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## Shakespeare's histories in a worldwide perspective

TON HOENSELAARS (ED.), *SHAKESPEARE'S HISTORY PLAYS. PERFORMANCE, TRANSLATION AND ADAPTATION IN BRITAIN AND ABROAD*, WITH A FOREWORD BY DENNIS KENNEDY, CAMBRIDGE, CAMBRIDGE UP, 2004. PP. XIV + 287.

Reading a volume as complex and rich as *Shakespeare's History Plays. Performance, Translation and Adaptation in Britain and Abroad*, edited by Ton Hoenselaars, is a truly rewarding experience. Yet, due to the miscellaneous quality and the impressive bulk of this collection of essays, any attempt to 'summarise it' – or otherwise 'account for it' – in the space of few pages is doomed to disaster. I will thus abstain from the temptation to map the whole volume in order to explore it selectively, following one of the many critical paths readers may trace in this luscious literary territory.

"In the beginning there were four nations." (p. 1) Dennis Kennedy's "Foreword" to the book begins with a powerful quasi-Biblical assertiveness, but the following sentences reveal this to be a tongue-in-cheek statement, a parody of cosmogony. After being led into a bombastic universe of aggressiveness and glory, where concepts like enmity, victory and nation are darkly associated, we discover what all this ado is about none other than the game of rugby! For Kennedy is actually describing The Six Nations Rugby Tournament. By turning sport into an ironic metaphor for war, Kennedy sets his readers at the very heart of the field of energies Shakespeare's historical plays still capture and reshape.

Predictably, Kennedy regards Shakespeare's History Plays as a signal contribution to the formation of the English national identity: "What is a nation? What is a national history? In Shakespeare's chronicles these questions are intensely localized to England and England's provinces." (p. 2) However,

Kennedy deftly points out that the local quality of Shakespeare's "histories" – far from being a drawback in terms of global reception – enables them to function as a 'case study', inviting foreign playwrights, translators, directors and audiences to appropriate them for their own ends. In her witty and well documented essay, Mariangela Tempera claims that Shakespeare's history plays were pressed into service by foreign intellectuals who needed to "rent a past" (p. 116), so as to project their own history on to that of another people, for example in order to escape censorship. Thus generations of poets and audiences have mirrored themselves in these murky political waters.

Ton Hoenselaars's insightful introduction analyses some touching instances of this phenomenon, reminding us of the experience Ian McKellen had when he performed *Richard II* in Czechoslovakia in 1969, during the Soviet occupation:

"I have never heard it since;" – McKellen wrote – "an audience crying. They were grieving, I understood, fool that I had been, because Richard's words could have been their own, when their land was invaded recently, when sticks and stones had been pelted at armoured cars and tanks." (p. 24)

Twenty years later, while playing *Richard III* in Romania, McKellen was again struck by the unexpected reaction of the audience, for when Richard was slain the people in the theatre started to cheer, celebrating their freedom from the Ceausescu regime.

As these examples show, the histories still have a powerful appeal, since they address the major issue of power. Shakespeare's historical plays are not, though, simply a reservoir of bloody despots, murderous plots and Machiavelian politicians, ready for use. As Hoenselaars claims, Shakespeare was also "a 'national' playwright ideologically implicated [...] in a nation-building project inextricably linked to the ambitions of (British) empire" (p. 17). Various chapters of *Shakespeare's History Plays* explore this dimension, notably Andrew Murphy's "Ireland as foreign and familiar in Shakespeare's histories" and Lisa Hopkins's "Welshness in Shakespeare's English histories".

Another facet of this phenomenon is analysed by Jean-Michel Déprats in "A French History of *Henry V*". Although it may seem surprising, the first French production of *Henry V* took place only in 1999, for on French soil the play was long seen as "a painful reminder of the nation's military defeat" (p. 17) at Agincourt. Instead of deconstructing the mythology of power, as in most history plays, here Shakespeare chose a heroic tone and made his muse subservient to a jingoistic view of politics. As Déprats writes, "The idea of Shakespeare's disillusioned outlook on the violence of history is indeed questioned in his most idealized and patriotic play, one which can be judged as less dialectic and ambiguous than the eight history plays that

preceded it.” (p. 75) Still in 1944 Laurence Olivier’s famous film version of the play – which was financed by the British government as a piece of war-time propaganda – emphasised mainly the English military success. Only in 1989 did Kenneth Branagh’s film explore the dark side of the piece, stressing scenes that Olivier’s script had downplayed and alerting his audience to the ambiguity of the play.

As these two examples show, we should always be aware of the complex act of refashioning that each staging and film version of these plays entails, but other problems are likewise involved in the act of performing *Henry V* in France – and in French – notably due to the presence of the so-called French scenes (the English lesson between Katharine and Alice, the scene between Pistol, Monsieur Le Fer and the Boy, and the wooing scene between King Harry and Catherine). Another set of problems concerns the regional variants of English that are spoken by characters such as Captain Fluellen, who is a Welshman, or Captain Macmorris, who is an Irishman, in the dialectal scene (III.iii). Since “all vernacular languages are specific and cannot be transported or transposed” (p. 88), as Déprats rightly claims, this polyphonic effect is lost on French readers.

Déprats – who actually translated *Henry V* for the dubbed version of Branagh’s film – manages to analyse both the ideological and the linguistic dimensions of the play, claiming that

While the French king speaks in English, Shakespeare has the three other French characters, Alice, Katherine and Monsieur Le Fer, speak a half-authentic, half-fanciful French. But it is not irrelevant that these three characters are two women and a prisoner: the defeated speak French, the conquerors speak English. (p. 79)

Having emphasised the political implications of the opposition between English and French in the play, Déprats analyses the translator’s options: first, “retain the original French,” (p. 79) with a certain chaos, for the other characters will speak a modern French; secondly, “to ‘translate’ Shakespeare’s French into twentieth-century French” (79), thus losing its colour; thirdly, “to translate the whole play into sixteenth-century French” (p. 79), still erasing however the bilingual character of the text. The critic finally acknowledges the impossibility of translating a bilingual text and claims that “intersemiotic translation (from word to gesture, from speech to acting)” should take up where interlinguistic translation leaves off (p. 89). In other words, characters should be particularised by actors in the various stage versions, while translators would do better to maintain a more neutral register.

This essay raises two fundamental issues that recur throughout the whole volume. On the one hand it underlines the ordeal of translation. On the other, it invites us to appreciate the role stage adaptations inevitably play in bringing the histories alive for foreign audiences and in bridging the gap between cultures.

This subject is dealt with in the third part of *Shakespeare's History Plays*, where some important adaptations are analysed, such as the 1997 production of *Ten Oorlog* – ‘To War’ – in Belgium and The Netherlands, which is described by Ton Hoenselaars as “typical of the combined process of translation and adaptation which the history plays may undergo”. *Ten Oorlog* presents two tetralogies which are combined into a trilogy in order to address matters of contemporary concern to Belgium – from the Dutroux affair to the death of King Baudouin – all this “in a range of languages and variants appropriate to the nation’s bilingual composition.” (p. 244) Lack of space prevents me from expanding on the fortune of this play, which was soon translated into German and went on a foreign tour, although German reviewers – perhaps inevitably – appreciated the deconstruction of Shakespeare’s text rather than the playwrights’ political commitment.

*Ten Oorlog* also enables me to make brief mention of the peculiar cyclical nature of Shakespeare’s history plays, a feature that is repeatedly discussed in this collection of essays, notably by Edward Burns (“Shakespeare’s histories in cycles”). Although the first decision to group the histories together dates back to the 1623 Folio text, it was the nineteenth century European reception of these plays as a cycle that helped trigger a similar response in Britain. Manfred Draudt reminds us that already in April 1875 the complete cycle of the histories was presented by Franz von Dingelstedt at the Burgtheater in Vienna, while in the same period – as Kennedy points out – Wagner’s *Ring* cycle, first seen in Bayreuth in 1876, was part of the trend to “marathon performance” of Shakespeare’s history plays (p. 4). The construction of the Bayreuth theatre was also conducive to that of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford.

In conclusion, what this book proves is that far from being artifacts of purely national interest, Shakespeare’s history plays are at the heart of a complex European network of cultural relations. As Ton Hoenselaars writes, “It is true that the international cultural history of Shakespeare’s histories still needs to be written, but the collection presented here may convince colleagues worldwide of the pertinence of such an endeavour” (p. 27).

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## Was medieval drama an effect of feudalism?

LEONARD GOLDSTEIN, *THE ORIGIN OF MEDIEVAL DRAMA*, MADISON, TEANECK, FARLEIGH DICKINSON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2004. pp. 278.

When reading Leonard Goldstein's volume, scholars of medieval drama may be taken aback since Goldstein devotes most of his pages to history tout court rather than to the history of the drama. But there is more than a good reason for that: the author is not concerned with drama as a literary genre, neither is he in search of the theatricality of the surviving texts. What he wants to highlight is a "social analysis of the origin of medieval religious drama" (p. 9). By means of these words in the "Preface", therefore, the main concerns of his works become clearer than through the simple title of the volume. The more so when, later in the introduction, Goldstein states that he is not interested, in this book at least, in saints plays and mystery cycles, because his research will be based on the analysis of social relations arising out of a Marxist approach applied to the early Middle Ages up to those centuries which saw the birth of liturgical drama, in the form of the *Quem quaeritis* trope. The author clearly affirms that "[t]he theory of the origin of the drama offered here cannot be proved" and that it "must account for real relations as they emerge in history" (p. 10), maintaining, nevertheless, that if "a theory of the origin of medieval drama cannot be proved [it] does not mean that it is not true" (p. 11). The principal focus of the book is made explicit later when Goldstein introduces feudalism as the main feature to be investigated together with the relations between religious and secular power, in order to see "why with the integration of feudalism whose culture was rapidly maturing, imitation became objectified in the form of impersonation" ("Preface", p. 12).

Consistently with the general basis of his research, Goldstein reads and comments upon twentieth-century major historians of medieval drama in the first chapter entitled "The Received View, Its Critics, and Its Alternatives", from E.K. Chambers and Karl Young, to O.B. Hardison and Johann Drumbl, including also scholars of early music and liturgy. While examining the individual contributions to the study of the origins of medieval drama, Goldstein always highlights the lack of historicizing in most of them, concluding that "[o]n the whole, liturgiologists and academics who deal with this early drama regard the liturgy as self-developing, so that the drama is a creation of the Church, a great cultural development that has little organic connection with secular externalities like the working peasants in the parishes, the Church as feudal landholder, and a power in the state, or culture generally." (p. 69).

Using his ample sociological and historical knowledge, Goldstein then proceeds to analyse the "Social Origin of Ancient Greek Drama", in order to

prove a strict relationship between that cultural form and the socio-political environment which saw (and determined) its birth, favoured, as he states, by “the emergence of new forms of property, that which came with trade and artisan manufacture” (p. 86) in the sixth and fifth centuries BC. In his Marxist vision, Goldstein sees class struggle in those centuries as the main factor contributing to the birth of drama, the latter being identified as “the presentation of an action with impersonation and dialogue [...] a representation of the competition of private property owners” (p. 91).

The third chapter (the longest in the book) is devoted to “The Historical Basis for the Origin of Medieval Drama”. In it, following his premises outlined in the chapter devoted to Greek drama, Goldstein studies the “historical material conditions within which the drama emerged” in the latter part of the tenth century, with Christ’s Resurrection as its first subject, and also the factors working on religious sentiment as a “social product” (p. 96). The chapter analyses the emergence and growth of feudalism, a social and political system inside which the Church itself played a very relevant role in the power struggle and in the domination of the peasants, contributing, furthermore, to the consolidation of the rising monarchies. At the same time, though, the Church, especially through the Benedictines, was the institution inside which there originated movements of protection and defence of the peasants and, especially, religious and liturgical reforms. Actually, Goldstein maintains that “the creation of the drama seems to be connected to these cultural/religious activities” (p. 142), which aims at guiding the religious sentiment towards a new sense of community, after the oppressing consequences of feudalism. In this light, also the rise of new social classes, i.e. merchants and traders, is seen as a relevant change in social relations and, consequently, in forms of piety. Milleniarism itself (“the utopian hope of the exploited”, p. 209) and the related phenomena are interpreted as a form of reaction to feudal power relations (and often paralleled to twentieth-century Liberation Theology, cf. p. 162).

In the last but one chapter (“The Social Relations of Concept Formation”) the author stretches his argumentations forward towards the later Middle Ages, nevertheless it is important in its analysis of the formation of the idea of medieval “types”, so relevant in dramatic terms for early modern theatre, well before the Renaissance idea of the individual self. This phenomenon, too, is convincingly linked by Goldstein to the rise of social classes, identified by new divisions of labour (cf. p. 197).

The last, short, chapter (“A Theory of the Origin of Medieval Drama”) unifies the sometimes apparently disconnected lines of the previous investigation and summarizes the author’s thesis about the origin of medieval drama. Therefore the transformations due to the feudal system are brought to bear on social classes, the struggle for power and identity is seen reflected in the new

forms of piety introduced by the Church, the new rites – including the drama – are interpreted as an effort, on the side of the “devout both lay and priest to recapture the lost spirituality” (p. 216). The inner contradiction of the birth of medieval drama is, according to Goldstein, that the Church, co-partner of the laity in the feudal system of private property, invented some means (the drama of Christ’s resurrection) fit to recoup religious emotions and the idea of community, imperiled by feudalism itself (“because the development of private possession negated the fundamental communalism of the Eucharist”, p. 227).

The whole thesis offered by Leonard Goldstein is fascinating in itself and deeply thought provoking, especially so since the author is able to discuss and connect all the major lines of research in the various fields connected to medieval drama and to apply his firm social and historical tools to the subject with consistence. Sometimes, in his will to stress links and possible contradictions in received interpretations, Goldstein tends to repetition, a flaw possibly due also to too quick editing procedures. The same reason can be found for the omission of some bibliographical entries (mentioned in the text) in the final list of references, even if this – of course – does not subtract value to this study. Also those who do not agree with Goldstein’s results or with his methodology will have to take his analysis into thoughtful consideration when considering the origins of medieval drama.

Roberta Mullini

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## An Elizabethan art

MASSIMILIANO MORINI, *TUDOR TRANSLATION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE*, ALDERSHOT, ASHGATE, 2006. PP.151

When in 1817 John Keats first read an Elizabethan translation of Homer, he was so taken by it that he wrote a sonnet in its honour entitled “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”, in which he confessed that the work had made him feel like “some watcher of the skies/When a new planet swims into his ken”. What was the quality, one wonders, that made English sixteenth-century translation reach such heights and justify the conviction that it was, in F.O. Matthiessen’s words “An Elizabethan Art”?

An exhaustive answer to this question can be found in Massimiliano Morini’s *Tudor Translation in Theory and Practice*, which aims at uncovering both the common features of secular Tudor translation and the principles that



guided the sixteenth-century translator. These, the author maintains, have not found a clear and definitive theoretical description as yet.

The first part of the work is devoted to translation theory. The task is not an easy one, considering the paradoxical absence of theoretical treatises at a time of dramatic proliferation of translated texts. Professor Morini's way out of this impasse is a fascinating exploration of the figurative language employed in the discourse on translation not only in the prefaces and dedicatory poems but also in the translations themselves.

The development of the recurrent metaphor of clothing is quite revealing. Up to 1575 it is used to indicate the low status of translation, which is seen as changing the original elegant dress for new plain clothes. At the same time the metaphor stresses a lack of prestige of the English language. If compared not only to Latin and Greek, but also to Italian and French, English is regarded as "poor, rude, plain, barren, barbarous" (p. 39). When at the turn century, due to England's new position in Europe, this feeling of inadequacy starts to be reversed, the metaphor signals the new attitude and "foreign apparel" becomes something to be avoided: "The English, proud of their manners and their language, have turned plainness into a thing of great value, not to be lightly swapped with the fickle, effeminate elegance of foreigners" (p. 41).

Metaphors of light, of conquest (and submission), and of troubled streams are not uncommon in describing the translation act. Other intriguing figures explored are those of the semantic field of money, or of something precious (such as a medicine or a jewel) transferred into a rough casket without losing its value. Still others cast translation as a process of digestion, fecundation, or childbirth. The overall picture that emerges is that of a Tudor period which, far from being a shapeless jumble of contradictory ideas and practices, fulfils the function of a period of transition from mediaeval to modern translation.

The second part of the book deals with translation practice. Himself an experienced translator and author of several studies on translation, Professor Morini analyses Tudor translations of humanistic and classical prose and poetry with great expertise and precision. For instance, the comparison between two English translations of the Spanish play *Celestina* published one a century after the other discloses two different ways in which the translators freely dealt with a text considered intractable for its treatment of the controversial topics of sex and religion. Further analyses of prose works offer revealing insights into Hoby's translation of Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, Florio's translation of Montaigne and Holland's Livy.

The last chapter of the book is devoted to the translation of poetry. From a study of Surrey's Petrarch, five different versions of passages from the *Aeneid*, and various translations of *Orlando Furioso* and *Gerusalemme Liberata*, it

emerges that, if translation was initially confused with imitation, a transformation soon took place by which translation next came to be seen as rhetorical reproduction, and ultimately as “domestication”, that is, a modern adaptation to the habits of the target reading public. Morini’s conclusion is that “at the end of the sixteenth century a theory of translation was in existence” (p. 101).

*Tudor Translation in Theory and Practice* is the fruit of painstaking research and competent handling of analytical tools. The author is at ease with a wealth of both primary and secondary sources, and the book provides a stimulating, detailed, well-grounded exploration of secular Tudor translation with deep insights into translation theory and practice, literature and the history of the English language.

Anna Maria Ricci

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## Wer rettet Benn aus der rechten Gefangenschaft?

HELMUT LETHEN, *DER SOUND DER VÄTER. GOTTFRIED BENN UND SEINE ZEIT*, BERLIN, ROWOHLT BERLIN 2006. 318 SEITEN

Es wäre nicht nur das gute Recht der deutschen Germanistik, alles und jeden, der nur irgendwie im Verdacht steht, dem Dunstkreis der Nazis angehört zu haben, weiterhin mit höchstem Misstrauen zu begegnen, es ist sogar ihre Pflicht. Dass in der Auslandsgermanistik manches anders akzentuiert werden kann, ist naheliegend und mag deutsche Kollegen bisweilen befremden. Wenn in der intellektuellen, sogar “linken” Welt Frankreichs und Italiens Personen wie Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt und Heidegger weiterhin grosse Wertschätzung finden (auch wenn neuerdings der Franzose Emmanuel Faye in aller Deutlichkeit auf das Völkische, Faschistische in Heideggers *Denken* verwiesen hat), dürfte eine Rehabilitierung solcher Namen in Deutschland eigentlich unter keinen Umständen hingenommen werden. Dies geschieht aber gerade, wenn etwa vor Kurzem ein Botho Strauß in der FAZ politische Irrtümer grosser Denker angesichts der Grösse ihrer Werke für geringfügig hält und dabei auch den Namen Carl Schmitt nennt. Nun ist es vollkommen richtig, ein Werk völlig losgelöst von der Person seines Autors zu betrachten. Ein wüster Antisemit wie Céline kann durchaus ein grosses Werk schaffen, das in keiner Weise durch irgendein Verhalten seines Schöpfers diskreditiert würde, wenn es denn, wie in Falle des Franzosen, tatsächlich ein grosses Werk ist. Wenn aber besag-

ter Carl Schmitt als grosser Staatsrechtler, gar “Denker” gewürdigt wird, oder wenn durchaus ernst zu nehmende Zeitgenossen Jünger für einen grossen Dichter halten, dann sollten die Alarmglocken läuten, denn dann steht zu befürchten, dass es eben vielleicht nicht um den Versuch geht, etwa das Werk zu retten, sondern allein darum, die Person zu “entnazifizieren”.

Neben all diesen Namen kann im Falle Benns nicht der geringste Zweifel an der Bedeutsamkeit und Integrität zumindest seines poetischen Werks bestehen (sein essayistisches wäre genauer unter die Lupe zu nehmen), und doch wird er immer im gleichen Atemzug mit Jünger und Schmitt genannt, durchaus auch bei Lethen, dessen schönes Buch natürlich an keiner Stelle den Verdacht nährt, relativieren zu wollen. Lethen will weder eine Biographie noch einen literaturwissenschaftlichen Beitrag zur Benn-Forschung liefern, sondern die Person und das Werk im zeit- und geistesgeschichtlichen Kontext der Moderne in zwölf Kapiteln nachzeichnen und dabei das politische Lagerdenken mit seinen festen ideologischen Grenzen hinter sich lassen. Nur so liesse sich vor allem die Zeit zwischen den Kriegen in all ihren intellektuellen Wegen und Seitenwegen erfassen, in der sich ästhetisch-moralische Überzeugungen nur selten über ein starres rechts-links-Schema begreifen lassen. Es geht ihm darum, “Assonanzen von Denkmotiven, Topoi und Verhaltensregeln Benns mit anderen Stimmen”, Brecht etwa, aufzuspüren, und es geht natürlich besonders darum, “die unheimlichen Nachbarschaften aufzuzeigen”, in denen Benns Essays und nach Lethen auch manche seiner Gedichte stehen.

Lethen nähert sich Benn mit grosser Distanz, aber nach der Einleitung könnte man doch den Eindruck gewinnen, es ginge ihm um die Rettung von Benns Werk aus solchen Nachbarschaften, wie sie sich Benn noch nach dem Krieg in der Person Jüngers und Schmitts aufdrängten. Erst am Ende merkt man, dass dies nie beabsichtigt war. Weder das Werk, noch die Integrität der Person wird gerettet. Dass dies bei der Person vielleicht nicht möglich sein könnte, leuchtete ein, aber auch das Werk wird, bei aller Faszination, die ihm der Autor oft bescheinigt, letztlich preisgegeben, und mit ihm die Zeit, vielleicht die ganze Moderne, an der es hängt. Mehr und mehr dominiert am Ende Illusionslosigkeit den Diskurs, und darauf scheint auch der Titel zu deuten, dessen Sinn nie wirklich klar wird.

Lethen geht chronologisch Leben und Werk Benns ab, von der frühen Rönneprosa und den Morgue-Gedichten, über Benns Verbrechen am Anfang des dritten Reichs, als er sich den Nazis anbot, über die publizierten furchtbaren Essays und die in der Nazizeit nicht publizierten, die ihm den Kopf hätten kosten können, bis zu seinem Lebensende, als ihm einige Jahre lang breite Anerkennung entgegenschlug. Das Buch ist, wie man zu sagen verführt wäre, aus einem Guss, man folgt ihm gerne auch dort, wo sich Widerspruch regt. Benns Rolle als Arzt bei der Hinrichtung von Miss Cavell und

seine eigene Darstellung etwa, erscheint ohne einen überzeugenden Versuch, den Sachverhalt anders zu sehen, als es nach Veröffentlichung von Benns Aufsatz, der einen intellektuellen Skandal verursacht hatte, seine Kritiker wollten. Widerspruch aber regt sich vor allem da, wo es ums dichterische Werk und seine Bewertung geht. Dort hätte sich der Leser eine vertiefte Auseinandersetzung erhofft, sieht sich aber dann, wenn es um die Thematik des modernen Ich beispielsweise geht oder um die Autonomie der Kunst, mit eher billigen Hinweisen auf die vermeintliche (und, wie man vermuten darf, das Werk in Lethens Sicht diskreditierende) Unverständlichkeit der Lyrik Benns konfrontiert und abgespeist. Dass es auch andere Nachbarschaften gibt, klingt zwar bisweilen an, wird aber, etwa im Falle der Berührungspunkte mit dem Denken Adornos, eher polemisch erledigt. Ebenso hätte man sich eine klarere Unterscheidung von Werk und Biographie Benns gewünscht. Dass beide fast immer vermischt werden, verunklärt am Ende zu oft den Gehalt des einzelnen Gedichts, auch wenn diese Unsitte offenbar Publikumserwartungen entgegen kommt. Auch wenn Lethens Buch, das gleichwohl überzeugt, am Ende das Werk nicht rettet, so sagt es doch auch nicht, das es nicht zu retten wäre. Die Diskussion fängt vielleicht erst an.

Michael Dallapiazza

