



Michael Dobson and Estelle Rivier-Arnaud, Rewriting Shakespeare's Plays For and By the Contemporary Stage

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Recensions

Michael Dobson and Estelle Rivier-Arnaud, *Rewriting Shakespeare's Plays For and By the Contemporary Stage*

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The central concern of Michael Dobson and Estelle Rivier-Arnaud's book is the re-writings that Shakespeare's plays inspired, or as Gérard Genette – referred to in the introduction – would have put it, on the various palimpsests that continue to enrich our bookshelves. Indeed, this volume is about literary works – the word 'rewriting' gestures toward the literary field – and the editors acknowledge that a comprehensive account of Shakespeare-inspired creations would have been "an anthology in itself" (5). The word 'rewriting' is analysed in the introduction and it is presented as including such processes as translation, allusion, rehearsal, repetition and even interpretation. All in all, the introductory demonstration aims to remind the readers that Shakespeare's plays are the source of inextinguishable and variegated inspiration. It would have been interesting to remind them from the outset – rather than in the conclusion (161) – that some of Shakespeare's plays are palimpsests too – for example, he used extensively Robert Greene's *Pandosto* to write *The Winter's Tale*, not to mention Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde* that, in turns, owed much to the anonymous *Tale of Gamelyn* – and that the Shakespeare-centred process under scrutiny may be regarded as reaching both forward and backward in time.

The first part of this book, entitled "The Rewriting Process under Scrutiny and its Stakes," consists of three articles. The first one, "Unlearning Tradition: William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Jane Smiley's and Jocelyn Moorhouse's *A Thousand Acres*," studies the 'palimpsestuous' (11) relationship between the Elizabethan tragedy, the Pulitzer prize-winning novel and its film adaptation. Anne-Kathrin Marquardt makes it clear that adapters may be 'interpreters' that reveal hitherto undervalued aspects of the original work. She highlights the discrepancies that set each work apart from the other and refers to the whole string of echoes as a "struggle." (21) Her demonstration leads her to propose a mind-teasing definition of rewriting: that is "imposing one's version of a story as the truth." (21)

The second article deals with *Macbeth*: "Rewriting *Macbeth*: New Witches for a New Audience" by Allene Nichols who is also the author of the interventionist – as opposed to reflectionist – rewriting at issue, namely a play entitled *Second Witch*. As its title indicates, her adaptation is focused on the viewpoint of one of the Weird Sisters who happens to be in love with Lady Macbeth. Allene Nichols demonstrates that each original story is kaleidoscopic and that rewriters decide to shed light on one of the many plots the hypotext decided to suppress. Her paper, that combines first-hand accounts

and theoretical approaches, dwells on the importance of myths and presents the various forces that contributed to determining her choices as a playwright.

In Dana Monah's article ("Rewriting Through Addition: Contemporary Walks in Shakespeare's Woods") that gives pride of place to *Richard III*, the adaptor is interestingly compared to an archaeologist taking a walk through the streets of "a ghostly city, reduced to ruins." (43) Her approach as a commentator consists in "considering the dramatic fragments which complete the gaps of a fictional universe as instances of rewriting" (44) and revealing to the readers or spectators what Shakespeare "forgot" to tell. (45) She demonstrates very convincingly that rewriter's works are fuelled and filled by the blanks in Shakespeare's plays. Hypertexts are haunted manors, so to speak.

The rewriting process as it is portrayed in these three studies could be compared to the scenes and stories a dreamer would go through after reading a Shakespeare play far into the night.

The second chapter is entitled "Global Shakespeare: Adaptations and Performance" and it falls into three parts. The starting point of the article by Indian Preti Taneja, "Fiction and the Possibility of the Ethical: Rewriting Shakespeare and the Intertextuality of Gayatri Spivak," is Gayatri Spivak's 2002 essay, *Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and certain scenes of Teaching*. The critic proposes an analysis of some hybrid fictional works (Edward Bond's *Lear*, Tagore's *Apoman*, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*) that call into question contemporary forms of inequalities and that may be related to Shakespeare's *King Lear* and its ethics of dislocation. (64) Her paper which discusses the concept of Post (-) coloniality (as Thomas Cartelli spells it) encompasses the idea of identity in contemporary India and promotes the idea of a practice-based approach to literary criticism. Her concern at the end of her essay is the way to appropriate *King Lear* in contemporary Indian novels so that it breaks loose from a chain of preconceived alternatives and points 'feelingly' toward "a more ethical future" (81) free from crippling influences.

The next article in this section, "*Shakespeare's Mas: Performance and Recontextualisation of Julius Caesar on the Caribbean Carnival Stage*" by Giselle Rampaul, deals with a unique ritual practice that takes place in Carriacou, on a Caribbean island off the coast of Granada, and that owes much to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. As a matter of fact, it is the participants' eloquence during rehearsals and their knowledge of the Elizabethan play that preside over their election. Though the blows are essentially verbal, the Carriacouan festivity may be viewed as a distant echo of English colonisation that has turned Shakespearean only recently. It stands as an appropriation, as a combination of admiration for the bard and a denunciation of English domination that led to the creation of a festival that has very little to do with drama and the stage since the spoken words are disconnected from Shakespeare's play.

Estelle Rivier's article, "Kop's *Hamlet*: To-be-or-not-to-be a Contemporary Hero? A Critical Reading of *The Hamlet of Stepney Green*," is an analysis of Bernard Kops's drama (1959) – made into a musical in 1958 – that investigates the connections between the 20th century playwright's creation and Shakespeare's tragedy. Kops's plot follows unmistakably the pattern of the Elizabethan play, as its title might have suggested right away, yet the Stepney Green Hamlet – David, a would-be singer and a Jew – is treated as a suburban character in a play that is haunted by the memory of the Holocaust and studded with Yiddish words. Estelle Rivier demonstrates that Kops's somewhat light-

hearted play is several steps removed from the tragic mood of the original drama. The postmodernist writers use Shakespeare's colours but the lines are their own, as it were.

Part three of this book is entitled: "European Shakespeares: Challenging Contemporaneity." The first article in this section is "The Bard does not Want to Die (Behind bars): Rewriting Shakespeare within Volterra Maximum-Security Prison." Mariacristina Cavecchi's study is about the mushrooming of Shakespeare performances in Italian prisons and about the now internationally acclaimed Volterra Experience, initiated in 1988 by Armando Punzo, in particular. Punzo decided to rewrite Shakespeare's plays as a collaborative improvisation-based work with the inmates who picked up ideas and phrasings from their own eventful lives. *Hamlice* – a combination of *Hamlet* and Carroll's *Alice* – turned deconstruction into an open form of construction; as for the rewritings of *Romeo and Juliet* (*Mercuzio non vuole morire*, 2011 and 2012), they place centre stage – or should one say 'centre town?' – a minor character who rebels against and re-writes from within the play in which he operates. Shakespeare's plays worked their way into a prison, grew there and finally burst out, contaminating the entire city.

Margaret Rose's "A Contemporary Appropriation of *The Tempest* Called 'Caliban's Castle: If Pigs Could Fly'" investigates the character of Caliban in the light of her own 2009 sequel to Shakespeare's play entitled *Caliban's Castle*. It is mind-teasing that the author should be Milan-based... In this sequel, Caliban goes back to Milan with Prospero and as Ferdinand dies on the ship, the 'migrant' takes possession of the Sforza Castel from where Miranda and he take between their hands the future of the city they intend to clean up. In 2011 Margaret Rose proceeded to turn her play into an illustrated short story. The writer's project was to bridge the gap that separated Shakespeare's London from our urban societies and to use the Elizabethan play to promote the development of Shakespearean teaching gardens.

The last article was co-written by Anne Étienne and Estelle Rivier. "Topsy-Turvyng *The Merchant of Venice*: Shylock as Wesker's Response to the Renaissance Jew" is introduced by a quote from Wesker's *Shakespeare's - 400 Years* that sets its tone: it says that the unnerving shadow of the bard should be banned from the theatre. After shedding precious light on the image of the Jew in late 16th century Europe, and in England in particular, the authors draw the readers' attention to the fact that Shylock might have stood for any 'stranger' in Elizabethan England. Wesker aims at "a contemporary corrective distancing," they say. (149) Interestingly, in Wesker's text, the pound of flesh is nothing but a way for two friends (Shylock and Antonio) to denounce the inhumanity of the law. The authors make it clear that the Holocaust is a watershed line in the depiction of the Jew in literature and that Wesker's *Merchant* investigates "the continuous exploration of the pressures of society upon the individual." (159)

This compilation of articles accounts preciously for the proliferation and the diversity of the rewritings of Shakespeare's plays. It demonstrates that our post-modernist, post-colonialist, post-Holocaust world still needs the Elizabethan bard. It is difficult to determine very precisely whether we need his stories, his poetry, his musicality, the intensity of the emotions he arouses or his capacity to call certainties into question – probably a combination of all these aspects – but this book highlights the permanence of his haunting – irresistible? – shadow at the core of our literary productions. This phenomenon may be explained by the fact that Shakespeare's plays constitute 'a parallel reality,' as Peter Brook put it, and that our world, which is

constantly 'becoming', needs a model and positions itself alternatively close to and far from it. The articles compiled by Michael Dobson and Estelle Rivier-Arnaud show very convincingly that the Elizabethan playwright's work still 'holds the mirror up to our natures.' Shakespeare is part of us and his 'organic' work continues to fuel our imaginations. His plays are a treasure from which we borrow gems and the act of borrowing is part of the treasure. As Igor Stravinsky once said: "Artists are borrowers. We, geniuses, are robbers."

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Du meme auteur

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Publié dans *E-rea*.