ES Review
SPANISH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH STUDIES

Ed UVa EDICIONES Universidad Valladolid

Eusebio de Lorenzo Gómez and Jorge Braga Riera, editors. *Shakespeare and the Representation of Political Power: Readings for the Twenty-First Century*. Kassel, Edition Reichenberger (Europäische Profile 75), 2026. Pp. 166. ISBN: 9783967280647.

Open access article under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.24197/amkmcp52

This essay collection joins an ever-lengthening list of "Political Shakespeare" studies, a field given particular impetus by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield's influential volume of that title published in 1985 (with a second edition following in 1994). Over the four decades since, several overlapping factors have contributed to its longevity—not least the "real world" situation, as the editors of this contribution contend. In the theatre the "modern dress" tradition (stretching back a century now) has demonstrated the adaptability of Shakespeare to the contemporary world, how plays might be mapped onto the present, and vice versa. Kenneth Branagh's "Falklands" *Henry V* film ushered in a trend so successful that today theatre audiences are more likely to see King Harry et al. in combat fatigues than in the "medieval" garb popularised in Laurence Olivier's 1944 film (itself nevertheless moulded to fit the times, dedicated unironically to the allied forces landing on the Normandy beaches). In the academy the value of the stage as a site of reinterpretation has been borne out perhaps most significantly in the rise of "Global Shakespeares," a field that in part recuperates historical performance but is concerned principally with the local adaptation (and appropriation) of Shakespeare, rather than—or in addition to—a more traditional, deferential acceptance of the "soft power" Shakespeare has so often represented, not least in Britain's former colonies. Thus stage-focused scholarship has benefitted from the rise of performance studies as an academic discipline, which in turn has fed back into materialist-inflected approaches to Shakespearean drama more broadly.

This modern "reinvention" of Shakespeare (which, as Gary Taylor demonstrated, goes back all the way to the later seventeenth century)

means that Shakespeare has long been "our contemporary," in Jan Kott's famous formulation, cited in the volume under discussion. Consequently, however (re)imagined Shakespeare remains *sui generis*, central to the culture in ways that distinguish him from his long-marginalised contemporary playwrights—or, indeed, any other cultural figure. Ironically, inevitably, attempts to re-read, reinterpret, reorientate Shakespeare—to whichever "political" end (which includes of course avowedly "apolitical" approaches or productions)—contribute to bolstering that status. Recognising that "[t]he problem, of course, is *Shakespeare*—the whole aura of elusive genius and institutionalized profundity." Alan Sinfield famously suggested that since "[t]he underlying pressure is towards deference and inertia" even a radical reworking of Shakespeare by writers such as Bertolt Brecht, Arnold Wesker, or Edward Bond may "still, by its self-conscious irreverence, point back towards Shakespeare as the profound and inclusive originator in whose margins we can doodle only parasitic follies" (178–79). Sinfield was writing in an environment where Shakespeare was either considered to be "above" politics or (as in the oft-quoted words of a leading UK politician at the time, Conservative member of parliament Nigel Lawson) it was simply assumed that "Shakespeare was a Tory" (qtd. in Heinemann 203). The question that arises, then, forty years on, is whether we are in a different place today. Might decades of academic and theatrical endeavours have rescued Shakespeare from the institutional co-optation (in the university, school, and theatre) that Sinfield feared, and the political nature and potentiality of the corpus become available for fresh examination? Have years of "Political Shakespeare" altered the environment in which these initial critical engagements—urgent as they were perceived to be then—emerged? In other words, has the academy's "Political Shakespeare" placed Shakespeare at a different kind of centre, "rescuing" the plays from a cultural zombification against which the cultural materialists of the 1980s railed?

With *Shakespeare and the Representation of Political Power: Readings for the Twenty-First Century*, which appears in the Europäische Profile series published by Edition Reichenberger, the editors, Eusebio de Lorenzo Gómez and Jorge Braga Riera, are in little doubt that Shakespeare speaks in particularly resonant ways to today's world. The present situation, de Lorenzo's introduction reminds us, is one of "persistent

challenges of internal and external threats"—"domestic populism and external geopolitical aggression" respectively (viii). In a lengthy introduction he makes a case for "Shakespeare's role as a foundational figure in Western political thought" (ix), and sets out a framework for what follows.

Shakespeare and the Representation of Political Power brings together six essays, each of which offers a reading of one or more Shakespeare plays. The collection opens with a wide-ranging discussion of Shakespeare's history plays set alongside the textualizing of the New World, most notably in Hakluyt's famous compendium of narratives published in 1589 and (significantly expanded) 1598–1600. In "Tropes for a Renewed Nation: William Shakespeare's History Plays and England's New World Promotion Literature" Francisco J. Borge associates both categories of representation as being concerned with legitimacy, each in complementary ways promoting English nationhood. The second essay, "Winters of Our Discontent: Political Readings of *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar*" by Antonio Ballesteros González, surveys these plays' performance histories from the 1590s to the present. Here the objective is to demonstrate these plays' historical and continuing relevance to the political environments in which these various productions appeared. Following this is an essay by Dámaso López García focusing on *The Tempest*: "*Raison D'État* and Politics in Prospero's Island." Continuing one of the volume's recurring themes, legitimacy, in this reading the play offers "a complete introductory course in Political Theory" (76). The fourth contribution, by Eduardo Valls, "'More of Your Conversation Would Infect My Brain:' Populism and the (Un)Political in *Coriolanus*," approaches this, arguably Shakespeare's most overtly political play, in terms of the rise of populism in the twenty-first century. Consideration of that play's oft-noted political concerns continues with Ana Contreras Elvira's "Reflejos de nuestras miserias: *Hamlet*, *Lear* y *Coriolano* en la escena contemporánea," though here the focus is diffused further, the essay also taking in *Richard II*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest*. Although the last of these titles is included in the First Folio among its comedies, it is a helpful reminder that political readings need not be confined to the "usual suspects" among the histories and tragedies. John S. Sanderson brings the volume to a close with "Foreign Location and Political Criticism in Shakespearean Comedy: *Much Ado About*

Nothing and *As You Like It*," where Italian and French settings respectively offer sites of English Elizabethan concerns, which with the opening essay neatly bookends the collection with reminders of the plays' original historical contexts.

The introduction is lengthy and thorough and—on first reading—it feels overdone, since in a series of subsections designated "lessons" Eusebio de Lorenzo sets out in detail how each contribution will fulfil the remit of the subtitle, "Readings for the Twenty-First Century." One wonders about this strategy on the assumption that the essays will make the case for themselves; however, for the most part they do not, rendering the editor's framing of the collection invaluable. Indeed, without it there is a distinct lack of coherence or continuity of purpose. Perhaps the best way to approach this collection, therefore, is to read each essay and its respective section in the introduction together, in sequence.

Certainly, it is for the reader to infer a case for "Shakespeare our contemporary" in the opening essay, which is firmly anchored in early modern England. Drawing on his longstanding work on Richard Hakluyt's role in promoting a national identity, Francisco J. Borge contends that Shakespeare's history plays are doing something rather similar. Reading these plays through six subheadings—legitimacy, corruptibility, language, providentialism, alterity, and religion—he demonstrates a wide knowledge of the canon; inevitably, only so much can be said for each play, and while each of these subheadings is amply illustrated, not all readers would share the view that Shakespeare "advocated a predominantly providentialist view of history which would definitely serve his myth-making enterprise" (7).

Similarly ambitious in scope is Antonio Ballesteros González's performance history of *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar*. The respective accounts of their stage histories are more thorough than would be found in modern editions of the plays, but partly as a consequence it proves difficult to establish a coherent argument. But when Ballesteros asks, rhetorically "Which side is Shakespeare on?" one or two other contributors to the collection might take note of his wholly sensible answer: "We do not know" (46). Here (and in the previous essay) use might be made of the printing history of plays, specifically *Richard III* (*Julius Caesar* only appearing the 1623 First Folio) as one indicator of political significance.

Dámaso López sets out his stall with an excessively long review of Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman's 2019 Norton edition of *The Tempest*, the result rather sapping the essay's narrative momentum. When he does tackle the play's politics, he ably demonstrates how "Shakespeare points out scenarios in which political actions always take place following a pre-established model" (75). Personally, I am not keen on modernising that licences scholars to label Ariel as "chief of police on the island" (73), but much better for this reviewer is how López traces the successive transfers of power, from the pre-play scenario to the denouement, and the play's exploration of perhaps its central concern, legitimacy.

Eduardo Valls's reading of *Coriolanus* is the most sophisticated and densely argued essay of the six, and it is here that its overarching remit is most directly addressed. Approached in the light of early twenty-first-century populism, he argues, the play "reveals the *theatrical* construction of modern populist subjectivity" (88, italics added). He is surely right in remarking that "[t]he play arguably speaks across the political spectrum I would say, indifferently" (88), for that word safely exonerates Shakespeare from any putative endorsement of any one "faction"—even if such a position were possible. (Lawson [qtd. in Heinemann 203] had opined that this play is "written from a Tory [Conservative] point of view.") Valls finds that *Coriolanus* is not only (as is conventionally accepted) a play about politics as performance (*Julius Caesar* and *Richard II*, among other plays, invite similar approaches), but also portrays "the performance of the 'unpolitical'" (102)—that is, of populism. In the currency of our time, all forms of politics are performative.

The title notwithstanding, Ana Contreras's contribution ranges far and wide, doubling the number of stated plays she considers in what is, for this reviewer, a rather eccentric piece whose bold claims undermine its scholarship. Identifying allusions to contemporary persons or events carries with it the risk of overstating the case, where speculation hardens into fact. In this essay the plays are taken to speak for and to particular political ends, which Contreras therefore traces back to the playwright; but there is no evidence to support the claim that, for example, *King Lear* is Shakespeare's expression of his own views about King James's plan to unite the kingdoms (and not only the crowns) of Scotland and England (114–15). Seeking precise historical coordinates for plays, so that text fits neatly into context, is reductive and unsupportable: allusions to real events

and people are sometimes plausible but no more than that. The methodology here, which might be glossed as the quest for a key to unlock the play, is flawed. This is a pity, because when the essay shifts gear in the final section to discuss a 2018 production of *Coriolano* in Craiova directed by the author herself we read of an interesting, theatrically-innovative street performance that deployed a medley of Shakespearean material in the form of a spoken manifesto. In alluding to the 15M movement of fifteen years ago, Contreras offers a telling contemporary analogy for a political Shakespeare today.

Finally, John D. Sanderson's shows how foreign locales are underlaid with recognizably English contexts in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *As You Like It*, the function of which is to resolve problems in Italy and France respectively. In *As You Like It* (c.1598–1600) Shakespeare adds a contemporary dimension to pastoral by evoking the practice of enclosure—the seizing and collectivising of land, and the removal of tenants, to maximise economic yield through sheep farming; Sanderson cites a Richard Wilson essay in support of the view that here the play glances at the Enclosure Riots in Oxfordshire in 1596. While historically the land-owning aristocracy caused the socio-economic problem, Sanderson remarks that in the play "Shakespeare avoided this issue and blamed everything on the change of the evoked Elizabethan order" (140). While at times one feels there is a faultline running through these essays, where the distinction between dramatist and text is blurred, in the case of enclosure in *As You Like It* a biographical detail is perhaps not irrelevant. Surviving documents indicate that Shakespeare himself became caught up in a controversy over enclosure in Stratford. His apparent acquiescence in, or lack of resistance to, a plan hatched by Stratford neighbours to enclose land is the subject of Edward Bond's play *Bingo*. That these traces of Shakespeare's behaviour yield only ambiguity and uncertainty about what actually occurred is not inappropriate, given the multifarious ways the texts he produced can be reinterpreted to serve quite distinctive turns.

In the 1980s the question/statement "Political Shakespeare" posited a starting point into exploring the ideology at work in the teaching and staging and writing about Shakespeare. Fast forward forty years and the "political" in the equation in this collection would seem to mean something much narrower, namely modern neo-liberal democracy (Valls' use of Althusser and Gramsci apart). There is a lack of interrogation of

wider questions precisely because the parameters have been established at the outset, and the interest is in "the Representation of Political Power" rather than its origins and legitimacy (notwithstanding the significance of the latter in the Borge, Ballesteros, and López pieces). That is a pity, not only for readers who might hope for a more open remit, or even the airing of the possibility of alternatives to a (Western) system whose failings are obvious, but because such an approach would be in the spirit of enquiry, rather than solution. Modern appropriations such as "Shakespeare for Business" or "Shakespeare and Leadership" mine the plays for useful, applicable scenarios; at times one feels that the volume runs the risk of presenting readers with "Shakespeare for Politics."

Nevertheless, Shakespeare scholars and postgraduates will find much of interest here, with coverage of a significant number of plays providing variety; in the spirit of debate, readers will find a good deal to wrangle with. Essay collections are typically uneven, and while several essays are rigorous in terms of structure and argument, a little more quality control would improve the form of one or two others. There is a marked gender imbalance, which is surprising—not least in a volume foregrounding political matter—and it is a little odd that one essay appears in Spanish while the rest are in English: it would seem logical to have undertaken to have Ana Contreras's contribution translated. A minor quibble is the frequency with which a new paragraph is signalled immediately following an offset quotation, even where this material is then discussed, but this may be house style. The index seems to be confined to titles, events, and proper names, so there is no entry for a key word such as "legitimacy," though we can find the current incumbent of the White House in the company of Richard III and Julius Caesar.

References

Bond, Edward. "Bingo: Scenes of Money and Death." *Edward Bond: Plays 3*. Methuen, 1987.

Dollimore, Jonathan, and Alan Sinfield, eds. *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism.* Manchester UP, 1985.

Heinemann, Margot. "How Brecht Read Shakespeare." *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, Manchester UP, 1985, pp. 202–30.

Sinfield, Alan. "Royal Shakespeare: Theatre and the Making of Ideology," *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, Manchester UP, 1985, pp. 158–81.

Taylor, Gary. *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* [1990]. Vintage, 1991.

Wilson, Richard. "'Like the Old Robin Hood': *As You like* It and the Enclosure Riots." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 1, 1992, pp. 1–19, doi: 10.2307/2870900.

MARK PETER VAUGHAN HUTCHINGS
University of Valladolid
mark.hutchings@uva.es