Rodney Symington.
*The Nazi Appropriation of Shakespeare. Cultural Politics in the Third Reich.*

Reviewed by Richard Utz

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In the sixty years since the end of the Nazi regime, German-speaking scholars have produced a vast amount of information on the reception of William Shakespeare between 1933 and 1945. However, only very little of this information has been available to those English-speaking scholars without a solid working knowledge of German. Rodney Symington’s study is the first book-length attempt to bridge this gap and offer an English survey of the results of Nazi cultural policy and its effects on Shakespeare as a cultural signifier during the Nazi era.

Symington begins his narrative by illuminating his English-speaking readers about some of the general but astonishing facts in the reception of Shakespeare in Germany, namely that Shakespeare may well be called Germany’s greatest dramatist:

> The evidence over two centuries is, indeed, overwhelming: For a century Shakespeare’s plays have been performed more often in Germany than those of any other playwright, and they are performed more often in Germany than in any other country on earth – including Shakespeare’s homeland, England. It would, of course, be more accurate to state that Shakespeare is the greatest dramatist on the German stage, but […] in Germany in the nineteenth century Shakespeare came to be regarded as belonging to German culture, more than he belonged to English culture, and this view persisted even in the period 1933 to 1945. (p. 7)

After delineating Shakespeare’s popularity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Germany, Symington quickly moves on through the First World War, a war which challenged the English writer’s status as a German cultural icon, and the Weimar Republic, a politically and culturally more diverse period during which the number of Shakespeare performances reached a peak in the history of the German stage. The latter period, during which cultural conservatives of all kinds and the growing Nazi movement criticized various attempts to subject the Shakespearean “classics” to modernist or individualist views, prepared the way for the wholesale “campaign of control and coercion to ensure that the [German] theatre henceforth projected the ‘correct’ image and conveyed acceptable ideas” (p. 26).

Chapter 3, “Stealing the Heritage,” delves into the actual period of Nazi rule in Germany and Austria and demonstrates how Shakespeare (as well as a host of German classical writers: Goethe, Schiller, Kleist, etc.) were reread to fit the new ideology. Shakespeare, specifically, was defined as a Nordic/Germanic artist whose texts were thought to celebrate the Nazi ideals of leadership, community, and heroism.
Chapter 4, “Translation as a Sacred Text,” reveals the Nazis’ predilection for and canonization of the monumental “Schlegel/Tieck” translation of Shakespeare’s œuvre (as the translation that had “seen the Age of Napoleon and of German Freedom”) and their simultaneous cleansing of modernist translations and performances deemed to exalt the individual over the ideal of the community. Thus, for example, Hans Rothe’s popular and generally accessible translations were rejected both by many members and certainly the leadership of the German Shakespeare Society and Nazi spokespersons writing for Das Schwarze Corps or Bausteine zum deutschen Nationaltheater. In 1936, Goebbels himself was involved in banning Rothe’s twenty-two versions of Shakespeare’s plays, a clear indication of Shakespeare’s cultural capital.

Chapter 5, “The Sins of the Scholars,” deepens the analysis of the role German Shakespeare scholars played in the cultural transformation of the playwright into a proponent of Germanic values. The author paints the by now fairly well established picture of German academics during the period: A few courageously rejected the party line in their teaching and publications and others resignedly sought the reassuring realm of inner emigration and self-censorship. Many others were enticed to collaborate at least to some degree by the national exuberance about a revitalized Germany. A good number of mediocre scholars jumped at the opportunity of gaining positions by giving at least nominal support to the party line in their publications; and some (Symington focuses on the famous case of Hans F. K. Günther, or “Rassegünther”) fully and wholeheartedly engaged in turning their specialty subject into a weapon to win the war. Appropriately, the chapter centers on the activities of the leadership of the German Shakespeare Society who were clearly “committed to the regime” and “typical of the conservative intelligentsia not just of the Nazi-era but also in the decades before 1933” (p. 150). In addition to the Society’s journal, the Shakespeare Jahrbuch, Symington also makes rather general statements about the political activities of other journals. In the absence of an in-depth investigation into all the articles published in the Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte between 1933 and 1945, for example, no universal “Persilschein” should perhaps be issued. Symington also claims that, out of over 200 articles published in Anglia during the Nazi period, only a single one “contains even a hint of the tendentious language that we have seen in the Shakespeare Yearbook” (p. 154). How does this statement square with Christoph Bode’s article, “Anglia 1933-45,” published in Stephan Kohl’s essay collection, Anglistik. Research Paradigms and Institutional Policies 1930-2000 (Trier, 2005), pp. 113-33? Max Deutschbein’s adding a final (political) paragraph to his otherwise scholarly speech for the annual meeting of the Shakespeare Society in 1933, is presented as something acceptable, i.e., “a common feature of addresses in articles in the early days of the Third Reich” (p. 120). While this characterization of this specific speech may be appropriate, choosing Deutschbein (nomen est omen!) is quite a faux pas when one considers that this very scholar had actually enthusiastically welcomed the New Regime in the same year with a fully programmatic article, in which he spoke of Goethe, Shakespeare, and Milton as “representatives of the German spirit” and welcomed the opportunities the new policies would afford language and literature study (“Die Aufgaben der deutschen Philologie in Neuen Staat,” Die Neueren Sprachen, 41 (1933), 323). Already in 1928, in his essay, “Englisches Volkstum und englische Sprache,” for P. Hartig and W. Schellberg’s Handbuch der

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Englandkunde, he had opined that, "Naturally, the curiosity and education of the individual German [...] is connected with the desire for culture and education of the entire nation. The Englishman, however, has a much easier time to remain aloof in this respect, because he often lacks intellectual agility," and his psychological "nationalpsychologische Methode," very much in tune with Nazi theories, provides additional material for revealing his political leanings. Symington’s problematic judgments on Anglia and Deutschbein indicate that this chapter, which tackles the notoriously difficult question of scholarly involvement with the Third Reich, protests too much on too little space and with too little in-depth research. The general outline is correct and helpful, but each journal, each speech or essay, and certainly each scholar will need to be given proper individual attention before it may be included as valid evidence in the mosaic of such an outline. Frank-Rutger Hausmann’s recent work on the role of the subject of English between 1933 and 1945, Anglistik und Amerikanistik im Dritten Reich (2003) is an example of such individuating scholarship. However, Hausmann’s excellent investigation may have appeared in print too late to be included in this study.

Symington’s discussion in chapter 6, “The Stage as Battleground,” is a fascinating account of the Nazi regime’s exploitation of Shakespeare’s works in its efforts to manipulate the public. Since the public stage was much more important to the party ideologues than the few scholars and their specialty publications, the Goebbels’s Propaganda Ministry invested more than one fourth of its budget in the realm of theatre, more than in any other branch of public culture. Reactions to this attempt at wholesale instrumentalization of the theater ranged from directors/managers’ production of so-called “safe plays” (Shakespeare’s comedies) through one single act of open resistance, Jürgen Fehling’s 1937 production of Richard the Third as an “anti-Nazi play” (p. 205) at the Staatstheater in Berlin. In this chapter, Symington wisely selects individual cities, theaters, and plays for discussion, thus avoiding the problem of overly general judgments. His conclusion, that the Nazis’ attempt to abuse the stage and Shakespeare’s plays was only partially successful, becomes believable. Even in the capital, Berlin,

where the best theatrical talents were concentrated, the failure of the cultural hegemony was [...] apparent. The brilliant array of abilities that were attracted to the Prussian State Theatre and the Deutsches Theater was simply not amenable to being manipulated in the manner the regime wished. [...] It is true that the theatres did include in their programmes a certain number of fascist plays – as an act of appeasement – but where the major and most serious artistic efforts of the theatres were concerned, the regime found itself thwarted time and time again by the artists’ assertion of their aesthetic independence.” (p. 258-59).

If the German stage in general, “fundamentally seditious” like all drama, resisted the Nazi attempts at assimilation, Shakespeare’s plays, “fundamentally antithetical to the Nazi view of society,” were even better protected against the “straightjacket of Nazi propaganda” (p. 270):

Whereas the Nazis emphasized and promoted the virtues of Volk and collective, Shakespeare’s works concentrate on the individual and on the problems of the individual. Where the “people” appear in Shakespeare’s serious plays [...] they are depicted as fickle and unreliable. Thus in attempting to appropriate the

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content of Shakespeare's plays for their own ends, the Nazis were dealing with an essentially recalcitrant entity and were doomed to fail. The Nazis lost the ideological war before they lost the real one. (p. 270)

Symington's conclusion and his explanations for the partial immunity of Shakespeare’s texts and the German stage against Nazi appropriation make sense, and the study as a whole is a welcome addition to the study of Their Reich culture in the English-speaking world. It is all the more deplorable that the formal qualities of the study leave much to be desired. The author followed no clear guidelines as to leaving German titles in German or translating them (see the penultimate citation from the book in this review which offers “Prussian State Theatre” in English translation but leaves “Deutsches Theater” in German within the same sentence). This confusing habit becomes especially annoying in the case of the Shakespeare Jahrbuch (which often appears simply as “Yearbook”) and the footnotes on p. 162, where the titles representing “objective and valuable” Third Reich Shakespeare scholarship all appear in English, giving the incorrect impression that they were perhaps originally written and published in that language. The “Bibliography,” finally, contains such a large number of typos, inconsistencies and downright mistakes, that I cannot with good conscience recommend it to any reader as a reliable source of information. In addition, poor printing quality in the review copy I received makes hundreds of diacritical signs disappear, a pesky problem when one considers the significance of the “Umlaut” in reading German. All these unfortunate problems compromise the value of this otherwise deserving volume.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare reception in Germany, Third Reich cultural politics and literary study, history of theatre, ideology and literature

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1 Examples of typos: Leop[a]ld, Verlags-Anst[alt], Gesellsc[h]aft, politische[n], Ny[m]phenburger, Front[t]heater, Auseinanders[t]ezung, Geisteswissenschafte[n]; examples of inconsistencies: dozens of titles appear without editor or publisher; there are at least three ways of citing the same city of Frankfurt-on-Maine, and we find both Munich and München, Hoffman & Campe/Kampe, some titles are capitalized whereas others are not; at least three different citation styles are used for essays and monographs; examples of downright mistakes: the specific title cited under the name Curt Riess [Gustaf Gründgens: die klassische Biographie des grossen Künstlers] was not published in Hamburg and with Hoffmann & [K]ampe in 1965, but in Freiburg i. B, Basel, and Vienna, with Herder publishers, and in 1988 (the correct 1965 title is: Gustaf Gründgens. Eine Biographie. Unter Verwendung bisher unveröffentlichter Dokumente aus dem Nachlaß); Carl Niessen’s Das deutsche Theater bürgert Shakespeare ein was published by Lechte publishers in Emsdetten, not in Cologne; and William Shakespeare’s Ausgewählte Werke in einem Band (Berlin: Henius, 1934) was not compiled and introduced by “Dr. Ricia”, but “Dr. Kicia.”