

International Shakespeare: The Tragedies, ed. by Patricia Kennan and Mariangela Tempera. Bologna: CLUEB, 1996. Pp. 11-16.

Shakespeare's Passports

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The name is 'Shakespeare, William', in a spelling though that has only become standardised in the twentieth century. The date of birth is April 23, 1564 (which happens to be St. George's Day) or thereabouts, 1564; but it could also be argued that he was born at some date in the eighteenth century (even his birthday on St. George's Day was invented then). Height: Towering. Eyes: Keen, yet kind. Special characteristics: Immortal. What is the colour of his passport, the nationality of its owner? Is it an UK (or even an EU) passport? This is a difficult question. We have it on the authority of Prince Charles that 'Shakespeare [...] is not just our poet, but the world's. Yet his roots are ours, his language is ours, his culture ours.'¹

To whom does Shakespeare belong? In the following I am going to address this question, which is raised especially by the study of Shakespeare productions in an international context; I shall call this 'International Shakespeare'. Recent interest in this problematic is documented by Mariangela Tempera's initiative to have it discussed at the ESSE conferences in Bordeaux and Glasgow, by the Stratford Shakespeare conference in August 1994, where Inga-Stina Ewbank spoke on the transigrations of Shakespeare, by the meeting of the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft in April 1994, where Dennis Kennedy and Peter Holland gave papers on the topic, to name just a few examples, and then we have Simon Williams's *Shakespeare in Germany*, and Dennis Kennedy's *Looking at Shakespeare*.²

Can Shakespeare belong to anybody? The notion of belonging presupposes something that can be owned, that can also be lost, even a commodity that can be bought and sold (Shakespeare would then need a consignment note rather than a passport.) The answers need not be as simple as the one implied in the opinion of Ludwig Fulda, a <12>> German journalist. During the First World War he demanded that if Germany should prove victorious, England should formally have to make Shakespeare over to Germany.³ We rightly find such a demand ridiculous, and we laugh because it seems to confirm our worst anti-German clichés.⁴ We should however pay attention to the general ideological implications of the claim that authors can actually belong to a nation. With Shakespeare this claim is still frequently made in England, as the words of His Royal Highness illustrate (together with an imperial claim to universality).

The interest in International Shakespeare obviously questions such nationalist limitations. But it also raises much larger issues concerning authorship and textuality, issues that place it beside the shift from literary to theatrical Shakespeare criticism, and the recent resurgence of interest in textual matters. All three phenomena suggest developments progressively moving in the same direction, developments which, however, have been held back by traditional conceptions of literary study.

The move from literary to performance criticism in Shakespeare studies may be said to have started in the 1920s with Harley Granville Barker's *Prefaces to Shakespeare*. Lately, it has become as much of an orthodoxy as the literary study of his texts may have been earlier. This criticism has been instrumental in establishing the theatre as co-creative beside the author and thus limiting the authority of the text. But it must also be said that critics, who often come from a background in literary studies, have tended to describe the theatrical process as one of transposing a text on stage, and have thus upheld the priority of the text. They rarely begin by asking why the theatre chooses some texts rather than others for certain purposes. This preference for the text has also led to accounts of the theatre in terms of various types of text—the dramatic text and the performance text. The event/character of performance, on the other hand, has been paid little attention.

The resurgence of interest in Shakespeare editing is one of the striking features of the last decade. The new textual studies have not meant a return to and further refinement of the concerns of somebody like W.W. Greg.⁵ Rather, important presuppositions on which Greg's work had rested have been questioned. In particular, it is no longer assumed that there must be a single original version, the one <13>> that left Shakespeare's desk for the rehearsal room, and that it is the task of the editor to reconstruct this version. Two developments in particular have followed from this: The influence of the theatrical process on the texts is no longer simply viewed as debasing; and it has become accepted that there may be more than one single version of a play. The case of the *History* and the *Tragedy of King Lear* may be the most prominent example of this, but it is by no means the only one.⁶

But again the traditions of literary studies have set limits. Even the one-volume Oxford Shakespeare,⁷ which has drawn attention to the implications of the new textual studies, always takes the ultimate authority of the author for granted. The versions of the text it reconstructs may have been partly shaped by theatrical practice, but they are always assumed to have been at least approved by Shakespeare. They still have the authority of the author, even though a more precarious one.

International Shakespeare changes the situation yet again; in the study of Shakespeare productions all over the world language loses its primary function, even though the role of translation must not be neglected. Given the limitations of space, I want to make only two points: First, the translated text is no longer viewed as being entirely derived from the original, or, in Romantic terms, as recreating the (Platonic) ideal of the original in the target language. Instead translators accept that the historical contexts of both the source and the target cultures, and their relationships with each other, will affect the versions produced. Secondly, we should be aware that translations in most situations, but especially in the theatre, are used as the single true text, as what we might call the originals (if we were able to discount the notion of origin in the word). Only translators and translation critics, after all, put themselves in the odd situation of comparing the texts in the source and target languages; and only they judge a text on the basis of such a comparison.

The shift away from language in International Shakespeare has consequences. The non-linguistic, and thus also the non-literary signs used in a theatrical production, move to the centre of interest: tone, facial mime, gesture, movement, make-up, hair style, costume, props, decor, lighting, music and sound effects.⁸

This is precisely the kind of material that Marvin Rosenberg uses <14>> in his studies of Shakespeare's tragedies,⁹ but he does so in a way that I emphatically do not favour, as should become clear in a moment. He abstracts from the language problem and analyses very many Shakespeare productions (the masks) with the aim of finding the true face of the play behind them. Each creative production, independent of its place and time, is seen as a contribution towards understanding the ideal entity, created by the great dramatist William Shakespeare, which guides the work of the directors and actors, and reveals itself in their productions. Rosenberg neglects theatrical traditions, political conditions, the role of the theatre among cultural institutions (e.g. with respect to literature), etc. He neglects precisely those factors that have made the study of International Shakespeare so stimulating.

The conflicts and incongruities between the theatrical traditions, political conditions, and the role of the theatre among cultural institutions in various countries, along with the incompatibility of languages, draw attention to the fact that the original text (no matter how definitive it is) is by no means the crucial factor in shaping the traditions of Shakespearean practice. We should note, for example, that a single production like Peter Brook's *Midsummer Night's Dream* has influenced the understanding of Shakespeare more strongly than all the attempts to change the canonised texts in recent years.

In the light of International Shakespeare the situation then presents itself as follows: The plays exist in versions that are different from each other in many respects, these versions come into existence as adaptations to the circumstances in which they are used. Add that these versions are produced whenever a play is staged. In other words, they may be compared to what we know about the traditional ballad. We may go one step further: as with the traditional ballad, these versions can do without the authority of an author.

This last point may be controversial. But we should remind ourselves—I have hinted at this at the beginning—that Shakespeare, the author we know, is largely a product of the eighteenth century. It was only then, as Margreta deGrazia has shown,¹⁰ that the notion of the author as genius, as the quasi-divine creator, and of his creation, the original text, came into existence. It was then that Shakespeare was simultaneously mythologized and authenticated.

<15>> I am mentioning this, not because I feel that this should never have happened. I do so because it reminds us that the notion of authorship has a history. And this history did not end, of course, as deGrazia seems to suggest, with the publication of Malone's 1790 edition. It has continued since then, as indicated by the shifts from literary to performance criticism, by the new textual studies, and--especially--by the interest in productions of Shakespearean plays all over the world.

This brings me back to Shakespeare's passport. A passport is a written 'document issued by competent authority, granting permission to the person specified in it to travel, and authenticating his right to protection' (SOED). Shakespeare obviously no longer needs such a permission to travel. Shakespeare does not need either the protection of a particular sovereign. Nor is Shakespeare simply universal. Shakespeare, if we insist on the metaphor, has many passports, which do not always list the same special features. Shakespeare is a somewhat ghostly presence. But ultimately Shakespeare does not need to show any written document (or documents) when crossing the borders, because Shakespeare's face is familiar in most places.

NOTES

¹ As quoted on the cover of a leaflet for the London Globe Corporate Club.

² Simon Williams, *Shakespeare on the German Stage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990; Dennis Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

³ Ludwig Fulda, *Deutsche Kultur und Ausländerei*, Berlin, Max Kühn, 1914, p.13.

⁴ There were also attempts in Germany, especially in the Shakespeare-Gesellschaft to keep Shakespeare out of the nationalist fray, something difficult to find in England.

⁵ Cf. W.W. Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio: Its Bibliographical and Textual History*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1955.

⁶ Cf. Gary Taylor and Michael Warren, *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of 'King Lear'*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986. For an early claim of this kind see my essay 'How Shakespeare Revised *Othello*', *English Studies* 57, 1976, 515-21.

⁷ Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, eds., William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986.

⁸ See Tadeusz Kowzan, 'The Sign in the Theatre' in Diogenes, 61 (1968), pp. 52-80, cit. in Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, London, Methuen, 1980.

⁹ Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1961; *The Masks of King Lear*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972; *The Masks of Macbeth*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978; *The Masks of Hamlet*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1992.

¹⁰ deGrazia, Margreta, *Shakespeare Verbatim*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991.