

Ángeles de la Concha, ed. 2004: *Shakespeare en la imaginación contemporánea. Revisiones y reescrituras de su obra*. Madrid: UNED Ediciones 2004. 261 pp.

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Shakespeare ain't what he used to be. Or, perhaps, we should say that Shakespeare is again, at last, what he once was. Romantic originality, genius and universality have ceased to be catchwords of Shakespearean criticism, even if popular culture, while largely responsible for bringing the bard down from his high pedestal, has managed to retain such terminology in its contemporary repackaging of his figure. As the title of a recent book on (more or less) the English playwright cleverly suggests, "Shakespeare remains", or, in graffiti-speech, "Shakespeare rules O.K." (Lehman 2002). But what remains is little more than 'remains', vestiges, or, as the manipulated still from the film *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (Baz Luhrmann, 1996) selected for the front cover of the volume illustrates, ruins of his former glory. At the same time, however, his glory has not been seriously threatened. It has simply been transformed. In recent and not so recent critical studies of his figure, his erstwhile untouchable works have become the subject of endless intertextuality, cultural negotiations and ideological struggle. As Mireia Aragay argues in her introduction to a recent study of adaptation, the name of the game is now "the transformation and transmission of texts and meanings in and across cultures" (2005: 30). Shakespeare's poetic language, the complex dramatic structures of his plays and the endless resonance of his poetry, its rhythms and musicality, may have lost some ground but, instead, his name has become an inexhaustible buzzword for cultural production, exchange and consumption. Shakespeare has been turned into the quintessential postmodern author. We never stopped talking and writing about Shakespeare. We have just learned to talk and write about him in a different way. Rewriting the bard may be, in the words of the editor of this volume, "a daring enterprise" (207) but ever since David Garrick's *Shakespeare Jubilee* (1769), the playwright has been a tourist attraction and a privileged channel for the propagation of Englishness; films have been made of his plays for more than a century now; and all sorts of literary works have taken their inspiration from the lines and the plots of his stories, but it is only recently that these dimensions of his figure have taken centre stage in academic criticism. To the dismay of the increasingly unhappy few, 'Shakespeare' has been replaced by many, sometimes hardly recognisable, Shakespeares.

The collection of essays gathered by Ángeles de la Concha in this volume attests to these changes and, therefore, inscribes itself within this critical trend, once again demonstrating the receptiveness of Spanish scholarship to recent developments in literary theory and critical practice. Its publication is, in fact, timely because it addresses mainly, although not exclusively, an area of the ever-expanding corpus of Shakespearean scholarship which has not yet received a lot of attention: rewritings of Shakespeare within the field of more or less canonical literature as opposed to popular culture's appropriations of his works and figure. Although the first two chapters deal with the presence of Shakespeare in popular culture and filmic adaptations of his plays,

and the closing article suddenly shifts attention from rewritings of Shakespeare to the playwright as rewriter of earlier texts, the main focus of the book is on literary genres and, very particularly, on written narratives that have used his dramatic works as starting points or sources of inspiration. Unlike what is suggested in the title of Lynda Boose and Richard Burt's article, in this book Shakespeare most definitely does not go Hollywood (1997: 8). Not for the authors of this study to speculate about the cultural importance of the fact that Cher knows *Hamlet* through Mel Gibson in *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995), but, given the recent proliferation of scholarship of Shakespeare in popular culture, de la Concha and her collaborators are wise to identify a dimension of the impact of the English dramatist in contemporary culture that has definitely gone largely unnoticed. Within these parameters, the book abandons from the beginning any claim to exhaustiveness and yet the various chapters cover a very wide and rich spectrum and reveal the wealth and variety of critical and cultural perspectives from which literary works in general and Shakespeare in particular are approached nowadays. Nevertheless, certain patterns emerge, with *King Lear* and *The Tempest* as unrivalled protagonists, and colonialism and, especially, parent-children relationships as topics that are returned to once and again. In this respect, two of the most representative essays of the collection analyse two novelistic rewritings of those two plays and tease out relevant meanings within the book's two favourite topics.

Angela Carter, in her last novel, *Wise Children*, managed to strike a perfect balance between high and low culture by seamlessly bringing together Shakespeare and the tradition of the music hall, rescuing both from centuries-long cultural prejudices and linking them via the irresistible power of, again, high and low forms of comedy. Clara Calvo, in her brilliant study of the novel, takes her inspiration from the British novelist in a chapter which is as entertaining as it is intellectually stimulating. Calvo has a firm grasp of current critical debates, which she brings to fruition by moving effortlessly between the two authors and throwing in bits of Jane Austen for good measure. The novel is much more than a rewriting of *King Lear* and can be seen as a novelistic 'abridged complete works of William Shakespeare' but, beyond that, it is a contemporary reconstruction of the bard as a bridge between the two banks of the river Thames, between high and low culture, between the popular and the legitimate stage, or, to put it in other words, as a return of popular culture which, like the return of the repressed, comes back to reappropriate what was once expropriated (165). In addition to all this, Carter explicitly brings Jane Austen into the picture at the beginning of chapter four of her novel as if to seduce the attentive reader to consider the novelist as the missing link between Shakespeare and contemporary culture. Calvo takes up the challenge and notices the importance of this strategic move: Austen becomes one more bullet in Carter's rich and miscellaneous bag of ammunition to turn *Lear* into a comedy. Yet, in spite of all the parodies, in-jokes and references to other plays, *Wise Children* remains a *Lear* story, and as such it is read by the author of this chapter: a novel, like many of Austen's novels, about mean fathers and absent mothers, about wise children who know who their father is and foolish fathers who do not know their children. Thus is *Lear* brought down to earth in the novel. Calvo is aware of the resonances that this gesture has for our deep understanding of what Shakespeare has become in recent years. She is amused by it but, at the same time, convinced that this

amusement represents as valid an avenue for the evolution of Shakespearean (and Austenian) scholarship as any other.

Marina Warner's *Indigo* is a more earnest rewriting of a Shakespeare play, in this case *The Tempest*, and one which, as Ángeles de la Concha asserts in her complex and nuanced analysis of the novel, openly inscribes itself within feminist and post-colonial debates. De la Concha takes full advantage of the candidly acknowledged feeling that the novel is less interesting in itself than in its relationship with *The Tempest* (210) and this makes it into the ideal object of analysis for a project of this kind. *Indigo* is a story about history and about other stories, an intertextual exercise which rewrites the Shakespearean past by, specifically, rewriting each of the main characters of *The Tempest*. De la Concha pays special attention to the reconceptualisations of Sycorax and Miranda and cogently uses the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari on the subject, history and desire in order to tease out multiple dimensions of the novel as a restructuring of the spaces and discourses of the play. In this chapter, the author insists on the impossibility of textual autonomy and on the inevitability of intertextuality, thus bringing home the importance of Warner's take on Shakespeare. Beyond narrow traditional concepts of authorship, *Indigo*, like all the other texts visited in this volume, is also Shakespeare, and our understanding of his cultural and historical importance can no longer be limited to more or less canonical readings of his plays and poetry. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope provides the theoretical perspective for the editor's other chapter in the volume, an analysis of Robert Nye's novel *Falstaff* within the context of the new historical novel. As *Indigo* does with *The Tempest*, this novel engages in a productive dialogue with Shakespeare's Plantagenet tetralogy in order to produce yet another rewriting of history. The fact that the dramatist himself already initiates the process of rewriting his own 'official' history through the tavern scenes of the two *Henry IV*'s provides the starting point for a chain of revisions to which Nye's novel is one more addition, an addition which exists at the same level as contemporary critical perspectives on the history plays. Therefore, for de la Concha, who in this article establishes an excellent historical context from which to approach the plays and the novel, critical discourses and artistic revisitations of the plays exist within the same cultural universe and partake of the same 'contemporary imagination'.

A central concern of the book is the exploration of the postcolonial subject through contemporary rewritings of Shakespeare, a concern already evident in the editor's study of *Indigo*. *The Tempest* is the obvious starting point here although this line of enquiry is inaugurated in the book by Graham Huggan's account of the contemporary Holocaust novel and his analysis of Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* and its intertext, *Othello*. This trend is continued later on in the book in two ambitious chapters, Pilar Hidalgo's original juxtaposition of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* with contemporary novelistic rewritings of *The Tempest* in which postcolonial and feminist perspectives often enter into conflict, and Isabel Carrera's overview of West Indian postcolonial appropriations of the same play. Hidalgo argues that historical changes in the West, particularly the consequences of World War II, separate Huxley's novel from recent feminist takes on Shakespeare's play, but what *Brave New World* has in common with, for example, Rachel Ingalls's short story 'Mrs Caliban' is their use of Shakespeare as a measure of the depth and sincerity of human affects pitted against the various deficiencies of contemporary society. For Carrera, the postcolonial context has turned

The Tempest into a mythical text, which is as routinely appropriated by the postcolonial subject as the English language. West Indian writers turn the play around and present its stories from the point of view of the 'other'. More specifically, while Miranda has been described as the most solitary character of Renaissance drama, postcolonial versions of the play have gradually populated the stage with female figures, with sisters, mothers and daughters who have joined Caliban as new subjects of desire and are filling the islands with their words.

Like de la Concha, Carrera pays equal attention to critical discourses and artistic texts based on the play. Her account not only encompasses narrative but also poetry, although drama is only marginally mentioned. It is down to another two authors to look at dramatic texts. Pilar Zozaya focuses on Edward Bond's two nineteen seventies plays on the subject of Shakespeare, *Lear* and *Bingo* which she sees, in the light of contemporary poststructuralist and cultural materialist conceptions, as excessively manipulative. The plays are very much artistic endeavours of their own time and appear to have dated badly in view of the crucial cultural developments of the following decades. The author rhetorically asks Bond to allow us to read Shakespeare in our own way instead of dictating what we should think. Ana Zamorano continues with the book's general interest in *King Lear* and looks at recent attempts on the part of contemporary theatre to understand the roles played by the female characters in the original play. Taking her cue from the fictional figure of Will's sister, Judith Shakespeare, created by Virginia Woolf, the author questions, like the female dramatists she studies, the universality of the author from a feminist perspective. It is crucial both for female dramatists and female critics to approach the bard's plays with a new look that may reconcile the mixture of love and resistance that women feel towards him. Zamorano concludes on a more optimistic note that it is not so much Shakespeare but the tendency to universalise his figure that should be critically explored and scrutinised, as contemporary female dramatists have done with *King Lear*.

Given the general thrust of *Shakespeare en la imaginación contemporánea*, it is not so easy to place the two opening chapters within its overall structure, yet they manage to suggest the vastness of the critical territory tapped by the volume. Sofia Muñoz Valdivieso provides a useful, very general account of the ever-increasing presence of Shakespeare in popular culture, swiftly moving from television to police novels, from pop psychology to rock, from Broadway musicals to computer games. An idea of the Olympian view taken in this chapter may be given by the fact that the author disposes of the whole of Shakespeare on film in three pages. Still, the chapter works well as an introduction, even though the topics she introduces are not often followed up in the rest of the book. In the second chapter José Ramón Díaz provides a thorough, entertaining and well-documented analysis of three more or less filmic versions of *Henry V* (Bogdanov's *Wars of the Roses* is, at the most, glorified filmed theatre), although there is little in this essay that the reader can connect with the thematic concerns of the rest of the book, not even with those expressed in de la Concha's study of *Falstaff*.

If the book may be said to start at the end, with Muñoz Valdivieso's overview of Shakespeare in popular culture, then we can equally surmise that it ends at the beginning, with Marta Cerezo's interesting and rigorous analysis of a Shakespeare play, *As you Like It*, as a game of revisions and rewritings of earlier texts. Cerezo's take on the

play does not share the rest of the book's approach to intertextuality and history from an unashamed postmodern and poststructuralist perspective while contradicting Calvo's (and Carter's) sophisticated defence of comedy as equal to tragedy. Yet, her useful thematic comparison between the play and its sources does tie in with concerns expressed earlier by other contributors, and, more importantly, its position in the volume reveals the editor's shrewdness in linking Shakespeare as a rewriter, revisionist and performer of brazen intertextuality with his successors. Which brings us back to the beginning: Cerezo shows some of the reasons why the English dramatist needed, a few decades ago, to be rescued from originality and brought back to the intertextual world which he had inhabited during his lifetime and in the context of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. That this operation of rescue has been largely successful, both in popular culture and in academic writing, is once again demonstrated by a book which, thankfully, not once regrets the gradual but relentless loss of a pure Shakespeare, an ideologically specific construct which, as the final chapter of *Shakespeare en la imaginación contemporánea* once again proves, never existed outside literary criticism.

Works Cited

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