



Ústav anglofonních literatur a kultur

Oponentský posudek / Opponent's Report

David Livingstone, *In Our Own Image: Fictional Representations of William Shakespeare*
(Olomouc: Palacký University, 2019)

The monograph presents a comprehensive survey of representations of William Shakespeare in Anglophone literature, film, television and comics from early twentieth century to the present day. David Livingstone's central thesis is that fictional depictions of Shakespeare are really close to a form of autobiography, since rather than finding out much that is new about the Bard we learn more about the author of the fictional representation. This he persuasively documents on a wealth of material. Given the enormous frequency with which Shakespeare has made an appearance in literature and popular culture, the discussion has to be selective, necessarily. Livingstone states his preference for "playful works" (13) over dry writing, glorifications by admirers or ideologically driven works of poor aesthetic quality – this is a reasonable criterion, certainly as regards both scholarship on the one hand and readability of the book on the other; regardless, he still finds space for at least a brief discussion of several dozen works from the latter categories. The principal methodology of the book is to trace individual motifs, ideas or images from their first occurrence in the analysed corpus of works to their repeated emergence in later works. This requires meticulous, systematic work, and constitutes one of the main contributions of the monograph to existing research.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 is dedicated to major early twentieth-century writers, with a particular focus on G.B. Shaw and Rudyard Kipling, but also Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Chapter 2 is dedicated to a witty, neglected novel by Caryl Brahms and S.J. Simon, *No Bed for Bacon*; Livingstone here proffers a persuasive argument that this work – rather than others suggested by earlier commentators – should be regarded as the principal source for *Shakespeare in Love*, the celebrated 1998 film co-scripted by Tom Stoppard. Chapter 3 focuses on the late modernist English author and composer Anthony Burgess, who dedicated much space to Shakespeare in his work. Chapter 4 discusses the provocative political drama *Bingo* by Edward Bond, in which the distinguished playwright accuses Shakespeare of a lack of social consciousness, using him largely as a means of commenting on the contemporary British arts scene. Chapter 5 focuses on Robert Nye's recent Shakespearean novels (one of which comes across as a veritable encyclopaedia of speculations about Shakespeare's life – appropriately presented by an unreliable narrator), and is followed by a long chapter surveying the most contemporary literary treatments of Shakespeare in British, US and other Anglophone literatures. Finally, Chapter 7 discusses major



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cinematic treatments of Shakespeare over the period of about eighty years, starting with a 1935 film and including *Shakespeare in Love* or the rather gratuitous film *Anonymous* directed by Roland Emmerich (2011), as well as some of the most interesting appearances of the Bard on British television (including an intriguing episode of *Doctor Who*, *Black Adder*, and the very recent series *Upstart Crow*); the chapter concludes with a discussion of Neil Gaiman's comics and TV series and a passage about the *Kill Shakespeare* comics.

The analysis of individual works results in some important general observations. Livingstone repeatedly points out that the line between fictional representations and scholarly biographies of Shakespeare is often blurred, in that the latter have also tended to fill the gaps in the historical record by blatant fantasies and speculations. Furthermore, in the lucid and well-structured Conclusion to the book, the author highlights that despite the sheer quantity of literary representations, only Christopher Rush's *Will* features Shakespeare as a first-person narrator, and that very few works actually show Shakespeare at work as a writer. On the other hand, some of the artistically most successful treatments feature hands-on – and often entertaining – depictions of theatre making: for instance, *The Rehearsal* (1911), a one-act play by the Chekhov translator Maurice Baring, Brahms and Simon's novel *No Bed for Bacon*, as well as the recent comedy sketch from *Black Adder*, to name a few. Livingstone's commentaries on individual works often feature poignant observations concerning detail as well: for example, he laudably treats Stephen Dedalus's theories about Shakespeare in Joyce's *Ulysses* for what they are: a half-mocking performance for an audience – or in Livingstone's words, Stephen is “milking the audience for all it is worth” (79) – rather than an innovative hypothesis to be seriously discussed by scholars (which the latter have frequently done).

The central thesis of the book concerning the projections of the authors' lives, politics and interests into their representations of Shakespeare is well documented overall. The methodology utilised in the monograph necessitates extensive use of quotations as well as detailed plot summaries of the analysed material – this might appear to obscure the overall argument somewhat; however, it is crucial if the argument is to be properly evidenced. Moreover, it should be noted that the book is based on extensive knowledge of Shakespearean scholarship; this may not be immediately apparent from references but Livingstone wears his knowledge of existing research, so to speak, on his sleeve, and eschews annotating every fact or theory about Shakespeare's life in order to prioritise the clarity of his own text.



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The book would benefit from another round of copy editing and proofreading which would eradicate minor deficiencies in the formatting of footnotes or titles of works, as well as the occasional abruptness in the phrasing of partial conclusions within the individual chapters.

Despite these minor deficiencies, *In Our Own Image* is a solid work of cultural history and fully meets the criteria for habilitation in English and American Literature at Palacký University. I am happy to recommend it for further proceedings.

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