

## *Selected Publications in Shakespeare Studies*

**Bigliuzzi, Silvia, ed., *Shakespeare and Crisis. One Hundred Years of Italian Narratives*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 2020, 282 pp.**

**Ciliberto, Michele, *Shakespeare. Il male, il potere, la magia*, Incipit, Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, 2022, 256 pp.**

“The time is out of joint”, Shakespeare’s Hamlet famously exclaims in I.v, “O cursed spite! / That ever I was born to set it right!” (189-90). Shocked by the horrific news of Claudius’ crime, Hamlet perceives the task that the ghost of his father has laid upon him – at the same time a private duty (to avenge the murder) and political obligation (to set his time right) – as both inevitable and intolerable. To act or not to act is his plight. Hamlet’s inner conflict was rooted in the religious, political, and cultural ‘earthquake’ that shook early modern Europe, leading to what Alessandro Serpieri aptly put as “the great structural and epistemological *crisis* that occurred between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, a *crisis* that can be summarized as the conflict between a symbolic model of the world (a classical-medieval-Renaissance heritage) and a syntagmatic one, inaugurating the relativism of the modern age” (1985, p. 125, emphasis mine).

‘Crisis’ is a revealing word. This term, although somewhat abused in contemporary discourse, carries a profound significance rooted in its Greek etymology, evoking the idea of a judgement, or a decision to be made at a particular point in time when conflicts arise to threaten “a given structure of relations” (Berghaus 1996, p. 44). The early modern age was undoubtedly one of such “particular point[s]

in time". No wonder then that an author such as Shakespeare would give voice to the manifold crises of his age. In this regard, recent contributions to Shakespearean Studies, such as Michele Ciliberto's *Shakespeare. Il male, il potere, la magia* (2022) and Silvia Bigliuzzi's *Shakespeare and Crisis. One Hundred Years of Italian Narratives* (2020), share a ground-breaking reflection on Shakespeare and 'crisis'. If the former aims at shedding light on the multifaceted ways in which Shakespeare responded to a phase of transition and conflict, the latter focuses on how the various translations, adaptations, and appropriations of Shakespeare have been exploited to respond to similar moments in more recent years.

In his *Shakespeare. Il male, il potere, la magia*, Michele Ciliberto discusses some of Shakespeare's major dramatic works from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, and highlights the playwright's acknowledgement of the universal crisis already exploited by illustrious intellectuals of Italian Humanism, ranging from Leon Battista Alberti to Giordano Bruno, from Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini to Pietro Pomponazzi and Tommaso Campanella. All of them, as recently pinpointed in Massimo Cacciari's *La mente inquieta* (2019), were far from being enthusiastic supporters of the Neoplatonic celebration of anthropocentrism. In fact, living through the religious and political turmoil that characterised early modern Europe, they highlighted the servile and beastly nature of men and women, mere 'toys' in the hands of gods, and subject to a destiny which, in most cases, escaped their control. According to Ciliberto, it is on this 'tragic' ground that Shakespeare engaged with these agents of the Italian Renaissance culture: "Quello che accomuna Shakespeare ai grandi esponenti dell'Umanesimo italiano è la persuasione di vivere un'epoca di crisi del mondo, nella quale [...] è venuto meno ogni principio di ordine, di gerarchia e di responsabilità individuale, e con essi tutti i vincoli di ordine etico e anche religioso [...]" (p. 26). [Shakespeare shares with the great protagonists of Italian Humanism the conviction of living in a time of world crisis, wherein [...] every principle of order, hierarchy, and individual responsibility has dissolved, along with all ethical and even religious bonds"].

In eight chapters Ciliberto's volume focuses on a cluster of concepts crucial to the above-mentioned Italian humanists, and highlights Shakespeare's engagement with the same ideas in plays as di-

verse as *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, or *The Tempest*. Besides the three topics featured in the title – “evil”, “power”, and “magic” – Ciliberto touches upon seminal topics as “justice”, “memory”, “revenge”, or “*ludus deorum*”, among others. In so doing, he considers the universal crisis endorsed by the humanists of Quattrocento and Cinquecento Italy from a variety of points of view; a crisis that Shakespeare seems to have handled, somewhat directly, and then refashioned, more or less explicitly.

An exploration of Shakespeare in the light of the six eminent Italians who constitute the core of Ciliberto’s research interests is indeed among the merits of the volume, which confirms the fruitful circulation of ideas between Italy and England in the Renaissance. While the presence of Machiavelli and Bruno in early modern English culture has been variously investigated in several contexts, *Shakespeare. Il male, il potere, la magia* offers a novel perspective and invites readers to approach Anglo-Italian relations with fresh eyes. However, there is much yet to uncover when it comes to authors such as Campanella or Pomponazzi, suggesting that a more in-depth analysis of their ideas may contribute to broadening our understanding of the English poets and playwrights that addressed the same issues. In this regard, the attention that Ciliberto pays to Leon Battista Alberti is particularly relevant, revealing the resonance of his ideas in *Hamlet* (Chapter 1) and *Othello* (Chapter 2). For instance, in Hamlet’s poignant speech in II.ii, where he celebrates “man” as a “piece of work” (305), only to conclude that he is nothing but “quintessence of dust” (310), Ciliberto detects Alberti’s doubts on the fact that the creature he had defined in Book II of his *Theogenius* as “umbra d’un sogno” (Alberti 1966, p. 89) and considered subject to “perpetua servitù” (p. 90) could indeed represent the centre of the cosmos. Moreover, in his discussion of *Othello*, Ciliberto puts forward evidence of the similarities between Iago and Alberti’s Momus. He argues that both characters believe they have suffered some injustice and therefore use similar forms of ‘chameleonic’ dissimulation to seek revenge, although ultimately to no avail, and in ways that rather confirm the meaninglessness of the world in which they live: “La dimensione camaleontica si manifesta nell’uno e nell’altro come capacità di mascherarsi per ottenere vendetta: motivo [...] presente anche nell’ultimo capitolo del *Momus*, nel quale

diventa chiara l'ontologia alla base del discorso di Alberti, e il confluire di essa, come quella di Shakespeare, nella morte, nel nulla" (p. 68). ["This chameleonic dimension reveals itself in both characters as the ability to disguise oneself in order to seek revenge, a motif also resonating in the final chapter of *Momus*, where Alberti's underlying ontology emerges from and merges with Shakespeare's perspective on the themes of death and nothingness"].

While underlining how this 'sense' of a universal crisis is dealt with by the Italian humanists and Shakespeare along similar lines, Ciliberto also highlights one significant difference. The humanist idea that crises can be overcome by means of well-targeted actions, implying moral and political reforms ("la funzione salvifica della prassi" "the salvific function of praxis"; p. 15), seems absent from Shakespeare's tragedies. It is only in his romances, such as *The Winter's Tale* and, most of all, *The Tempest*, Ciliberto argues, that an alternative perspective is envisaged. In these plays, what Shakespeare presents is a highly peculiar kind of *praxis*, one that requires the acceptance of a 'leap of faith' on the part of his audience. It is indeed the recourse to magic that glimpses the exceptional possibility to enter a parallel universe, a dream-like world, in which humankind can eventually enjoy their life and try to be happy... until magic lasts. Of course, this cannot but be a temporary situation: "La magia è una *chance*, per una volta, non per sempre [...]" (p. 188) ["Magic is a chance, for once, not forever"]. The truth is – Ciliberto concludes – that in Shakespeare's plays both the real world and the fundamentally tragic destiny of humankind are impossible to escape.

In the light of Shakespeare's influence on European culture at large, it is no surprise that his engagement in the theme of crisis both at individual and collective levels ended up providing other countries with useful narrative threads. Focusing on the Italian context between 1916 and 2016, Shakespeare's third and fourth centenary of his death respectively, Bigliuzzi's *Shakespeare and Crisis. One Hundred Years of Italian Narratives* explores "the cultural discourses that, through Shakespeare, supplied responses to periods of cultural and political crisis in the course of a century, and [...] how those narrative events were forged, used, and endowed with cultural and political agency" (p. 2). Bigliuzzi and the other contributors to this intelligent collection of essays approach such narratives from a variety of crit-

ical standpoints, which allow them to show the multifaceted commitment to Shakespeare by people as diverse as writers, directors, intellectuals, and critics, as well as the relevance of his work during critical moments in Italian history.

The seven chapters of this book are organised chronologically, tracing how Shakespeare either provided or joined different types of discourse at times of crisis for Italy, including the aftermath of World War One and the multi-level crises of the 1970s and the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Significantly titled “Identity crises”, Part 1 is made up of three chapters investigating the reasons why Shakespeare was both included in and excluded from Italian public debates on his 1916 Tercentenary and especially during the years of Mussolini’s Fascist regime, with analyses considering the propagandistic uses of *Julius Caesar*. If Shakespeare’s Tercentenary, which followed Italy’s controversial entry into WW1, occurred at a time of fierce opposition between nationalist and internationalist factions that contributed to Italy’s apparent “forgetfulness” (p. 29) of the event, the ways in which Shakespeare was later absorbed into Fascist propaganda demonstrates instead that Mussolini and his *entourage* capitalised on Shakespeare’s work when it suited them, turning his Julius Caesar, for example, into “the champion of nationalist law-and-order Caesarism in a State of exception requiring the rule of the strong man” (p. 139). Right before the invasion of Ethiopia, two events such as the productions of *Julius Caesar* at the Basilica of Maxentius (1935) and Gian Francesco Malipiero’s opera drawn from the same play (1936) did indeed prove, as Bigliuzzi argues, “how the Fascist regime, in the short span of time between 1 August 1935 and 7 February 1936, could use Shakespeare to pave the way towards the Empire and, once proclaimed, provide its apologia” (p. 139).

Part 2 (“Power games and the crisis of history”) leads readers to the 1970s, the so-called ‘Anni di Piombo’ [leaden years], and examines how Italian adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays in those years became a means for a new generation of directors and actors to confront the anxieties originated in their country’s troubled past, as well as to reflect on what was perceived as a crisis of the very category of history. Such crucial issues are tackled through fresh insights into Giorgio Strehler’s and Carmelo Bene’s engagement with Shakespeare. As Lucia Nigri explains in Chapter 4, the encounter

with Shakespeare offered Strehler the possibility to answer “his own painful questions about the recent past as well as the contemporary generational crisis” (p. 165), and to make sense, albeit pessimistically, of “the narrative of the game of the powerful as a circle in history that man could not escape” (p. 166). In Chapter 5, Bigliuzzi instead underscores how Carmelo Bene’s ‘minoritising’ (sic) approach to Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, by means of subversive alterations of the seduction scene and prosthetic transformations, not only allowed him to “evade [the] allegories of authoritarian power” which were common at the time, but also to probe “into the nature of political action as seduction, displaying the falsity of official history as opposed to lived history” (p. 177).

The last section of the volume analyses how Shakespeare provided material to inquire into the crisis of representation, entailing a crisis of the subject, which characterised the period comprised between the 1980s and 2016. In this regard, Bigliuzzi’s Chapter 6 explores various uses of Shakespeare, by considering “strategies of intermedial appropriation as critiques of a culture of simulacra” as well as “allegorical forms of ‘hyperreal’ adaptations that by recuperating ideas of ‘transparent representation’ sidestep preoccupations about the hyperreal” (p. 216). Finally, Maria Elisa Montironi’s Chapter 7 shows how Shakespeare has often been used to thematise the manifold crises plaguing contemporary Italy, including issues of political and social identity against the backdrop of migratory phenomena and the new generations’ disenchantment with history and politics. At the same time, in this context of socio-political discontent, Montironi concludes on a more positive note in reminding readers that Shakespeare has nonetheless become a precious ‘cultural capital’; “a powerful marketing tool”, as she writes, which has helped several Italian companies “to cope with the ongoing economic and also cultural crisis” (p. 249).

In their exploration of how ideas of crisis have been interpreted by and through Shakespeare, Ciliberto’s and Bigliuzzi’s scholarly contributions set themselves at the crossroads between European Shakespeare Studies and studies of Shakespeare and Italy. These areas of research have witnessed a significant growth over the years by providing evidence of the “[profitable] exchange”, to put it in Enza De Francisci and Chris Stamatakis’ words, “between languages and

literary cultures" (2017, p. 2), which is to be understood "in the sense of both a reciprocal transaction (a mercantile trade, an exchange *between* equivalents) and a displacement (a substitution, an exchange of one thing *for* another)" (p. 3, emphasis in the original). Building on this wide-ranging wealth of scholarship, both books reviewed here are welcome additions to our understanding of Shakespeare and his legacy. Particularly, they offer insights into the ways in which the uncertainty as well as the necessity to make decisions when 'crisis' is the issue permeate Shakespeare's works, together with the 'Shakespearean discourses' subsequently developed in the context of specific critical moments.

CRISTIANO RAGNI, *University of Verona*

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**Boitani, Piero, *In cerca di Amleto*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2022, 180 pp.**

The book by Piero Boitani emerges as an almost unattainable dream, a question that already implies a negative answer, yet it preserves its allure: is it possible to “grasp Hamlet and hold him firm in one’s hands” (p. 13)? All the characters in *Hamlet*, with the possible exception of Horatio, attempt to seize the elusive prince using various means, compelling him to respond with defiance to those trying to pluck out the heart of his mystery. Despite the seemingly programmatic impossibility of fulfilling this desire, Boitani, with his characteristic blend of intellectual acumen and the pleasure of writing, deeply explores some ways for capturing at least the textual specter of Hamlet.

“In Search of Hamlet” is structured as a dialogue between two ostensibly distinct parts: “In Search of Hamlet with the Greats”, where the great readers of this work from the past succeed one another in showing how the very elusiveness of the Prince forces us to embrace, if not Hamlet himself, the allure of this endless escape; and “In Search of Hamlet with Hamlet”, where Boitani, inspired by the return of these shadows from the past, re-examines the most mysterious and elusive knots of the tragedy. It concludes with an appendix, a brief essay by Pietro Citati titled “The Angels of Hamlet”, where the numerous real and fictional ghosts that haunt the work are contrasted with the authentic voice of the heart.

The two components of the book are two complementary fields: the first part is a look at Hamlet and its interpretation, “a survey [...] of the most creative philosophical and exegetical peaks” (p. 16), while the second is a scene-by-scene analysis that focuses mainly on those excessive elements that are not strictly necessary for the plot, or on the “ ‘gaps’ that the play’s plot does not bother to fill” (p. 16). A survey that observes how many eagles have attempted to look at this literary peak, followed by an apparent denial of the very possibility of fully reading this work, showing the interruptions due at times to gaps, at others to excesses, an irregular contrivance that inexplicably continues to function. The union of the two parts is the (in its own way Hamletian) faith that Hamlet can be, if not grasped, at least embraced for a moment, when it is observed both when it works too well (allowing other authors to see in it a reflection of their own ar-

tistic theory and sometimes of their own selves) and when it seems not to work at all (amidst the verbose or lacunary folds of the text).

Boitani plays, in his own inimitable way, with the apparent impossibility of the task. In fact, the more it appears to be a mission impossible, the greater the fascination of the results. Significantly, Boitani quotes a passage of the *Poetics* where Aristotle almost seems to anticipate the plot of *Hamlet* as an example of a dramatic situation that cannot function, lacking the final resolution of every good tragedy: a “structural flaw”, Boitani observes, since for Aristotle the worst of all dramatic cases is “to ponder while knowing, but then not to act”; to present, that is, “a detestable situation, and not a tragic one, because there is no catastrophe” (p. 49). The negation of the Aristotelian passage is so complete that, if it were not for the fact that the *Poetics* was not translated in Shakespearean times, one would almost interpret *Hamlet* as a deliberate challenge to such authority. With a profusion of interlocked examples of the never-ending dialogue between Shakespeare and the great authors and readers of the past, Boitani rightly observes that it is a deliberate form of incompleteness. The task of grasping *Hamlet* is itself an Hamletian, indecisive, unsolvable task: however, knowing that one reasons within a framework of deliberate incompleteness (of revenge, language, action, deliberation) paradoxically allows for a complete view of this imperfection. As Frank Kermode explains in *The Genesis of Secrecy*, it is precisely the awareness that there are voids and excesses in the original narrative that need to be filled or explained, which motivates the impossible completion by rewriters and interpreters.

The common thread of the first part is reflection, another effect of the immense, infinite self-reflexivity that characterises this play. *Hamlet* is the guiding deity of countless other literary geniuses, from Romanticism to T. S. Eliot, in a sort of eternal return that, as Borges notes, continually resurrects *Hamlet*. A sign of this reflexivity is the constant recurrence in the text of images of shadow, mirror, ghost, and double. Several great readers, especially the Romantics, find in *Hamlet* themselves, or what they think they are or would like to be. It is *Hamlet* who brings out the theatrical vocation of Wilhelm Meister, allowing Goethe to synthesise the effect that Shakespeare has in perhaps the most beautiful page ever written about the Bard. The weakness of *Hamlet*'s will, which often never achieves its effect and at

the same time follows oblique paths forced by necessity, similarly strikes August Wilhelm Schlegel; in *Hamlet*, the Romantics, especially Coleridge, starting from Samuel Johnson's intuition as an opera with an unsafe conduct, find the idea of a character who gets lost in an enigmatic and irresolvable labyrinth of thoughts. The reflections also turn to other classics, such as the tragedy of Orestes, with which Hegel finds a difference, the change of the ethos of revenge, which has become an infamous crime. The reflection also concerns an entire nation, as shown by the well-known phrase of a Dostoevskyan character, according to which the other nations have their Hamlets, while Russia must be content only with the Karamazovs so far (the Russian sensitivity towards *Hamlet* is particularly evident, from Pasternak's appreciation of the drama of duty and self-oblivion, to the reflections coming from other characters, notably Ophelia, re-read in her feminine fragility by Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva). *Hamlet* becomes even transnational, representing Europe for Valéry.

This reflection captures the modern condition of doubt: as Turgeniev admirably observes, the denial of *Hamlet* puts the good in doubt, but does not doubt evil, and engages in a relentless struggle with it. We thus arrive at the edge of the twentieth century, where the events of *Hamlet* seem to represent, according to Nietzsche, how knowledge kills action, and how action requires being enveloped in illusion, another incarnation of the Dionysian man who has known the true essence of things and feels nausea in the face of acting. *Hamlet* becomes for Freud the most perfect incarnation of this impossibility, if not of acting in general, of accomplishing the only action that would make sense in the world of the father, revenge, repressed by inhibition. A doubt that, in Greenblatt's suggestive re-reading, also derives from the eclipse of the ancient purgatorial and Catholic system and the reflection, so to speak, between this visible world and the true invisible world.

A sense of reflection is also present in the negative, when writers hasten to profess their Freudianly suspect denial of any resemblance. We see it in the noted negative sentence of T.S. Eliot, who brands *Hamlet* as a failure because it does not fit with his theory of the objective correlative, proof of the foundational power of the work for every theoretical system, or in Tolstoy's irresistible aversion to that work marked by exaggeration in actions and characters, and by the

lack of character for its protagonist. There is “something structurally and historically, ideally disturbing in the tragedy of Hamlet” (p. 49), Boitani observes, that allows this excess of theory and inspiration instead of paralysing it, almost reproducing the excess of thought that the impossibility of action, and the consciousness that distinguishes between good and evil, causes in the work itself. As a keen reader like Lev Semenovich Vygotsky observes, the tragedy moves in the unexplored, carefully demarcating the invisible boundary that divides the world of visible action from that other world in which everything is decided. Error as a creative phase, therefore, error as a portal of discovery, as Joyce says.

The second part (“In cerca di Amleto con l’Amleto”), focusing on the structure of the work, questions precisely where these reflections seem to jam, where thought becomes obsessive and duplicates itself. Between thought and action, a very long interim has been inserted, which is entirely occupied by Hamlet: “the interim is mine” (*Hamlet*, V.ii.73). The second part focuses on the many excesses, which are another form of reflection, this time within the text. Precisely because Hamlet, as interpreted by Bloom, is a character who creates himself by speaking and listening to himself, unfathomable depths result. Boitani ingeniously and with the joint pleasure of acumen and eloquence (a vicarious pleasure that his readers experience) probes into the excess of precision that characterises “To be or not to be”, the excess of duplications of characters, scene, lines, and themes, as if the imperfect world required this duplication to be filled. If Hamlet is a “drama that tends toward totality” (p. 100), Boitani explores how this totality is intuited precisely thanks to imperfection, which arises from the lack of a conclusion, an end, a purpose: “Hamlet knows and believes in the Beginning, but seems to know nothing of the end” (p. 114). From this failure, a “new awareness” follows, “the acceptance of what is and what will be”, a secular “providential plan” (p. 130).

Thus, in the end, we return to the imperfect transcendence of perhaps the most colossal human work ever conceived, an almost divine game of observation in which we can see our reflections: “I believe that Shakespeare intended with Hamlet to stage the representation of the infinite possibilities that life and the fate of man unfold and then close or leave suspended: the play of chance and necessity, of thought and paralysis in which it forces action, of the transformations that man un-

dergoes in living” (p. 132). For our and his good fortune, we will continue to be unable to embrace Hamlet, aware that the action to be taken is precisely this seemingly impossible task: “sketching the boundaries of the soul” (p. 137) – Hamlet’s and our own, if they can be told apart.

ROCCO CORONATO, *University of Padova*

**Sokolova, Boika and Valls-Russell, Janice, eds, *Shakespeare’s Others in 21st-century European Performance: The Merchant of Venice and Othello*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Bloomsbury, 2022, xii+395pp.**

*Shakespeare’s Others in 21st-century European Performance*, a collection of essays edited by Boika Sokolova and Janice Valls-Russell, delves deeply into the adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, showcasing how the staging of these plays is intricately entwined with Europe’s colonial, anti-Semitic, and racist history. This anthology confronts the tumultuous societal landscape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century marked by nationalisms, migrations, racial violence, and various forms of oppression through nuanced exploration of stagings of *Othello* and *Shylock*. However, as the volume demonstrates, there are many ‘others’ in these plays, and they have different ethical, racial, gendered and cultural features across Bulgaria, Romania, Italy, Hungary, France, the Netherlands, Serbia, Germany, France, Portugal and Poland.

Originating from papers presented at The European Shakespeare Research Association (ESRA) in 2017, this collection’s purpose and form are born from a need to respond to historical crises, offering insightful considerations about how Shakespeare can be a tool for identifying and/or dismantling persistent racism across various societal fronts. Aligned with the Global Inverted Series of The Arden Shakespeare, this publication endeavors to revise conventional notions of centre and periphery, challenging biased geographical perspectives in relation to Shakespeare’s works. It particularly focuses on the manifestations of ‘others’ within the context of *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, delving into the essential question: ‘other to what’?

From the vantage point of Europe’s long colonial history, the collection sheds light on the challenge of defining the centre to which

'others' are relegated. It brings attention to the ambiguity surrounding the restructured dichotomy between the 'other' and what is perceived as the centre, with a pointed question about whether European culture still constitutes this centre. Within the context of Global Shakespeare studies, pondering the shifts in power dynamics and violence within this discourse, these essays carefully navigate the ethical considerations in adapting Shakespeare's works, emphasising the need for a decolonising approach. At its core, the anthology serves as a testament to the prevalent themes of violence, fear, and aversion towards the Other in European discourse. It scrutinises the essence of identity, actions, and values when confronted with the unfamiliar, the stranger, and the outsider, contemplating the pervasive European practice of *othering*, and prompting reflection on the role and responsibilities of theatres in confronting these issues. It probes the contours of 21st-century European performance trends and the very definition of 'European', while rejecting a simplistic 'black' versus 'white' racial oppression narrative by highlighting the multifaceted forms of violence in a continent that should not be confined to a binary racial paradigm. Moreover, the volume seeks to reposition Shakespeare within European theatre, using his works as cultural capital to reflect the struggle of European societies with their civilised self-image. It prompts critical engagement with the challenges of living alongside 'Strangers' and navigating the often invisible line between civilised and uncivilised behaviour.

The volume takes a dual perspective: while considering audience response, performance analysis and critical reception of productions in their cultural contexts, it focuses on political issues. The collection's balanced selection of essays offers diverse portrayals of Shakespeare's *others*, with the first part focussing on 'relocating' otherness, and the second part exploring instances when productions failed to address the vulnerability of the Other or where the cultural capital of Shakespeare seems to be exploited. The book's structure, encircled by Lawrence Guntner's introductions to the three parts, contains essays, interviews, and a reflective coda. The use of ethical frameworks by thinkers such as Levinas, Todorov, and Maffesoli offers a rich philosophical basis for examining 'otherness', the ways society treats the 'other', and restoring a sense of 'civilisation' by accepting the humanity of others. While the volume does not explicitly question if

some productions perpetuate symbolic violence, it emphasises the importance of acknowledging and respecting 'otherness' in its own right, rather than merely defining it in contrast to something else.

However, the cover design raises a question. The image of a human being embracing multiple paper dolls serves as a metaphor, possibly indicating the complexities of embracing the multifaceted 'otherness' of another human.

*Facing the other in 21<sup>st</sup>-century European productions of Othello and The Merchant of Venice*

The first part of the book opens with Anna Maria Cimitile's essay, *Venice' is elsewhere: The Stranger's locality, or Italian 'blackness' in twenty-first-century stagings of 'Othello'*. Cimitile explores how the residual subaltern vision of Southern Italy becomes a principle of 'othering', using dialect in representing Othello, whether Neapolitan or Sicilian, as a perpetual stranger. She examines two Italian productions that resist cultural homogenisation through linguistic diversity, while addressing issues of femicide and the local *versus* global dynamics within Italian culture.

In *Refracting the racial Other into the Other-within in two Bulgarian adaptations of 'Othello'*, Sokolova and Stavreva analyse two intriguing productions. Liliya Abadjieva's 2005 all-male cast performance delves into strong physical theatre, emphasising toxic masculinity contrasted with an erased and victimised femininity. Ivan Mladenov's 2008 documentary, set in a prison, loosely adopts *Othello's* characters, embodied by individuals serving sentences for lesser crimes compared to the political elite of Bulgaria's post-communist transition. These narratives offer powerful insights into human stories, highlighted by cinematic storytelling. The essay introduces two critical ideological frameworks within the collection: the recognition of humanity in individuals deemed *barbarians* by seemingly civilised society, and the complexities of recognising the humanity of the 'Other' amid economic, political, and cultural identity crises of post-communism. However, it seems to overlook the *barbarity* perpetuated by capitalism, structurally sustaining adverse conditions for individuals.

Another significant exploration of Shakespeare's work is found in Polish theatre, renowned for its bold reinterpretations of classic texts.

Aleksandra Sakowska's essay, *Estranged strangers: Krzysztof Warlikowski's Shylock and Othello in 'African Tales after Shakespeare' (2011)*, encapsulates Warlikowski's aesthetically and politically daring approach. The analysis highlights his incorporation of theatrical collage and intermediality, creating a fragmented spectator experience. Warlikowski's focus appears to revolve around the impossibility of completely embodying the identity of the Other. He aims to connect with his spectators, whom he perceives as *desensitised individuals*:

My aim is to wake them [the audience] up from a nap, and sensitize them anew. I do not know if this is a provocation, maybe just [a way of] loosening up, arousing, activating and raising awareness. *The Merchant of Venice* is familiar [...] Shakespeare is familiar. [...] I want to say [to the audience] that they are much mistaken. (p. 28)

In Zorica Bečanović Nikolić's analysis, *Drags, dyes and death in Venice: 'The Merchant of Venice' (2004) and 'Othello' (2012) in Belgrade, Serbia*, Serbian productions are explored as opportunities for audiences to empathise with and understand the pain of the Other. The discussion offers hermeneutical considerations, shedding light on the subjective experience of being the Other and the various possibilities of engaging with them. It delves into the disillusionment with political systems within Balkan and post-Yugoslav societies, where individuals from various backgrounds find themselves labelled as the 'Other', both among themselves and from a more western European perspective. The essay suggests that both productions demonstrate a need for an integration of European values, revealing the complexities of racism towards non-European 'Others' and the pursuit to adopt European identity, both potentially being profoundly violent and (self) destructive processes.

In *'The Merchant of Venice' in France (2001 and 2017): Deconstructing a malaise* by Janice Valls-Russell, the focus is on the perpetuation of archaic anti-Semitism and the exploration of themes relating to neotribalism and the relationship with 'otherness' seen through the lens of Maffesoli and Levinas. The essay delves deeper into the post-Holocaust ethical debate on staging *The Merchant of Venice* and explores broader forms of 'othering' and the complexities of French society's crisis, examining Andrei Șerban's production *Étrangers en France* (2001) and Jacques Vincey's production *Business in Venice*

(2017). Şerban's production accentuates the erasure of individuality through stereotypical representation, hinting that anyone in the audience members, could embody these stereotypes. Vincey's work, in particular, focuses on the creation of the 'Other', portraying how anti-Semitism results in perpetuation of hatred. The essay concludes with a symptomatic metatheatrical moment in the 2017 production, where the audience is subtly accused of acting in ways stereotypically associated with Jews. Overall, Valls-Russell concludes that the productions confront the unanswered questions that often remain unanswerable in their complex and multi-layered nature.

In the second part of the volume, titled *New nationalisms, migrants: Imperfect resolutions*, the papers share a common sentiment of missed opportunities to grapple with the question of the 'Other', both on and off the stage. Nicoleta Cinpoş's essay, 'Barbarous temper', 'hideous violence' and 'mountainish inhumanity': Stage encounters with *The Merchant of Venice* in Romania, navigates the issues of Romanian identity within the European context. It touches upon xenophobia, homophobia, and gender-based racism, amidst the backdrop of rising nationalisms and conflicts between Romanians and Hungarians. The discussion reflects the coexistence of democratic enthusiasm with extremism and intolerance, as depicted in Laszlo Bocsárdi's 2010 production of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Natália Pikli's study on *Staging The Merchant of Venice in Hungary* notes the avoidance of complicated themes and responsibilities in Hungarian productions, particularly concerning the country's involvement in the Holocaust. The rise of intolerant attitudes influenced directorial choices, making even the 'Others' within the narratives intolerant. Bagó's rendition of *The Merchant of Venice* in Hungary is highlighted as a theatrical performance that, while commendable, somewhat diluted potentially contentious issues about Jews and anti-Semitism. The essay touches upon the need for a more significant and visible presence of the Stranger on stage, criticising the superficial approach and colonial undertones in these productions, and asserting the need for deeper engagement with the Other.

*Dutch negotiations with otherness in times of crisis: Othello (2006) and The Arab of Amsterdam (2008)*, by Coen Heijes, scrutinises these performances' reluctance to confront Dutch colonial past, institutionalised racism, and societal hostilities between Muslims and Jews. The

analysis criticises the tendency to make generalised and banal statements, hiding behind a facade of universal pain and vulnerability, equating the *other* with everybody. While reflecting on the limitations of these contemporary Shakespeare performances in addressing societal and political issues, the essay observes that *Othello* (2006) largely adheres to the status quo, failing to enact significant change. Additionally, it contrasts this approach with *The Arab of Amsterdam*'s more direct and confrontational one in portraying the position of Muslim immigrants, asking to what extent Shakespeare can effectively convey the complexities of tumultuous societal moments and engage in contemporary discourse.

Francesca Rayner's exploration, '*Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago*': Radical empathy in two Portuguese performances of '*Othello*', inspects the deployment of empathy in the performances, emphasising the complexity and nuances that power dynamics introduce into the concept of empathy. It also criticises the productions' failure to challenge gender and racial stereotypes, pointing out how they refrained from unsettling societal expectations in their rendition of Shakespeare at national theatres. Lulling strategies of individual identifications could be overturned by a radical empathy based on collective struggles for equality and justice. In the performance of these Shakespeare plays, Rayner suggests that radical empathy could be a strategy of disidentification with stereotypes (both racial and gender) in order for an "artistic political transformation" (p. 193) to occur.

In *A tragedy? Othello and The Merchant of Venice in Germany during the 2015–16 refugee crisis* Bettina Boecker dissects the theatrical capacity to engage with societal and political relevance. It examines the cultural and societal responses during the refugee crisis of 2015–2016 in Germany, especially the 'culture of welcome'. The essay questions whether Christian Weise's *Othello*, directed for the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin, and Nicolas Stemann's *Merchant of Venice* at the Munich Kammerspiele indeed address or exploit the themes of otherness they ostensibly tackle. Her conclusion is that both productions other everyone, just in different ways. While Weise's *Othello* moves to the centre from the periphery, while all others are othered, Stemann completely disavows the idea of a centre identical with 'us', doing away with all reference points to even construct the other.

However, maybe the most important and crucial problem when it comes to European productions is the following:

[...] On the one hand, these colleagues curry favour with the *Zeitgeist*; on the other, they ignore the actual tasks of the theatre. Behind all of this is a big lie. Nobody is being helped – everyone is only pretending. And then the theatres fall in love with these social projects, which are nothing but vain posturing. [...] This is the way for theatre to abolish itself. [...] Theatre must remember its archetypical task. It must remember text, ensemble, the art of acting. ('Michael Thalheimer über Anbiederung, Posen und Gegenwartsdramatik' [Michael Thalheimer on currying favour with the public, posing and today's theatre], interview by Martin Eich, Wiesbadener Kurier, 28 November 2015; np; quoted in p. 222)

It seems that Thalheimer's provocative and direct comment is a much needed reflective point and a question one should have in mind before choosing to stage Shakespeare today. *Performative propositions*, a collection of conversations with directors Karin Coonrod, Arnaud Churin and Plamen Markov discusses their different theatrical practices and styles, comments on their inspiring readings and stagings of *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*. All these directors urge the need for hospitality, while also warning not to reduce Shakespeare's text to topics of racism and issues of othering. Nevertheless, this volume encapsulates the urgency and relevance of reevaluating Shakespeare's others within the context of contemporary crises, in Europe and beyond. Today's catastrophes are on a larger scale than they were in the time of conceiving the papers for the ESRA conference, and I would stress the need for a more daring, intellectually robust, and ethically provocative engagement with Shakespeare's others on European stages. Without a bold engagement, there is a risk of Shakespeare's legacy becoming complicit in problematic power dynamics or detached from the pressing issues of our time.

Additionally, the dangerous 'business as usual' attitude prevails in some theatres, as noted by Heijes. It is a feature of many institutions, academic environments and cultural venues that is desensitising us from ourselves and others, subsequently. More than ever, Edward Said's credo that the responsibility of an intellectual to *speak truth to power* resonates with issues raised in this volume, highlighting the necessity for introspection and a departure from conventional

practices, urging a move away from solely relying on Shakespeare as a cultural capital or a universal language. As expressed in Péter Dávidházi's *Coda: Staging Shakespeare's Others and their biblical archetype*, the hostile othering is not only a *tertium comparationis* for main characteristic of the analysed stagings, but also a biblical archetype of Western civilisation. In civilisational crisis, the other is needed and violated as a scapegoat to resolve it. In light of these archaic mechanisms, Dávidházi warns about how we collectively "cannot afford to alienate the Other much longer" (p. 277).

*Shakespeare's Others in 21st-century European Performance* urges us towards a more involved, relevant, and ethical dialogue with Shakespeare that remains attuned to the socio-political realities of our world. Otherwise, why stage Shakespeare at all? One would only be *othering* it from one of the main essences of theatre – to be relevant in present time.

PETRA BJELICA, *University of Verona*

**Squeo, Alessandra, *Print and Digital Remediations of the Shakespearean Text: A Hermeneutics of Reading from the First Folio to the Web*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2022, 350 pp.**

The publication of this useful and thorough study is well timed, coinciding closely with the quatercentenary celebration of the publication of Shakespeare's First Folio in 1623. Once a treasure seen by only a few privileged scholars, the fact that copies of this iconic publication can now be viewed in high quality facsimiles on many websites points to the value of a study that outlines and examines the changing forms, fashions, and multimedia representations of Shakespeare's work. Alessandra Squeo opens with a witty exploration of Shakespeare as a multimedia experience. In the first of many examples of insightful close readings, she examines the way that Peter Greenaway's film *Prospero's Books* inventively juxtaposes the media of film, of books, especially the First Folio, and of the visual representation of text. Turning to a very different medium, she deconstructs an irreverent poster, created for a recent conference, that features an image of Shakespeare triumphantly breaking free of the bondage of the book. The title Squeo has chosen immediately makes clear that this is a book for

the specialist. It is divided into two sections; the first chapters analyse “how different material forms of textual transmission affect the reader’s understanding of the playwright’s words” (p. 19), the second section, after “the digital turn” (p. 24), looks at Shakespeare on the Web and at other digital applications that enable exploration of the linguistic and social contexts of his work.

The discussion of Shakespeare in print covers familiar ground, but the study is made worthwhile through its comprehensive range and meticulous documentation. This section examines the materiality and evolving technology of the printed text and documents the changing attitudes and ideologies that have influenced the long tradition of editors: the cheerful confidence of Pope’s willingness to improve Shakespeare, the accumulating depth of annotation in the nineteenth century, the aspiration of the New Bibliographers to apply what they considered to be rigorous scientific principles to the process of editing, and something close to the rejection of the editorial process itself in the late twentieth century in the concept of “unedited” Shakespeare. Squeo is keenly aware of recent studies that explore the various ways that social and historical contexts have influenced the assumptions editors of Shakespeare have brought to their editions, shaping their values of interpretation; throughout she maintains a “main focus on the hermeneutics of reading” (p. 19). Appropriately, her concept of “reading” includes the impact on its audiences of media other than those based on print: the stage, film, and the history of interpreting the plays through extensive print illustrations.

It is a strength of Squeo’s study that she highlights the positive contributions over time that editors have made to the study of Shakespeare, notably defending the overall achievements of the New Bibliographers in “foregrounding the pre-eminent role of the printed book as an agent of remediation of Shakespeare’s texts” (p. 123). In discussing the memorable phrase of Fredson Bowers, that the role of the editor is “to pierce the veil of the printing process”, Squeo remarks, with wry restraint, that “The metaphorical association between the form imposed by print and a covering to be lifted has curiously attracted criticism”, quoting the suggestion of more recent critics that Bowers eroticised the process of editing, transforming editors into rapists (p. 123). Though her practice of using extensive short quotation from those she is discussing is effective,

there are times (as in this example) that I would have enjoyed hearing her own voice more clearly.

The second section of the book, “the digital turn” (p. 139), covers a fraction of the chronological history of the reception of Shakespeare’s works, but it justifiably takes up slightly more than half of the book. A major strength of Squeo’s approach lies in her appreciative and detailed case studies of experimental projects. She makes extensive use of graphics to communicate some sense of the impact of the screen; in the process, however, the necessarily static images tend also to demonstrate the inadequacy of print in explicating the nature of the digital experience. Individual chapters deal with digital editions, the remarkable expansion of archival sites, and an extensive discussion of future possibilities.

Squeo begins her exploration of digital Shakespeares by outlining early experiments that use the screen to represent the instability, the “distinctive fluidity” (p. 150), of the text. Taking a well-known textual crux, Hamlet’s “too, too sallid/sullied/solid” flesh, Alan Galey wittily renders its uncertainty through animation (*Visualizing Variation*); David Small, with the assistance of IBM and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, creates a dynamic “textual landscape” (p. 160) where the entire text of a play can be manipulated or viewed in multiple scales (*Virtual Shakespeare*); and a team led by Jennifer Roberts-Smith exploits some of the tools of a video game in *SET (Simulated Environment for Theatre)*, where students, actors, or directors can create multiple “lines of action” (p. 169), animating avatars on a stage and manipulating the spaces between them.

In its aim of exhaustive documentation, the variorum edition has always been difficult to manage in print because of its demand for multiple views: the text itself, its variants in editions over time, and the commentary that has accumulated around it. In the digital medium, however, these layers of data lend themselves readily, even elegantly, to the structure, functionality and searchability of a relational database. Early work, again by Alan Galey, demonstrates how this technology can unpack the “thicket of scholarly conventions that limit accessibility of the [*New Variorum Shakespeare*] to the larger public” (p. 183, quoting Paul Werstine). As well as recording the value of publicly available archives of prestigious and well-known organisations like the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and the Folger Shake-

speare Library, Squeo discusses a range of projects from around the world that provide digital galleries including “not only illustrations, but also photographs, audio and video recordings of stage and film performances” (p. 212).

The medium of the Web lends itself readily to the hypertext edition, where a clean, uncluttered display of the text can link intuitively to additional information, extending the interface according to the needs of the reader/user. Through her detailed case study of *King Lear* edited by this reviewer on the scholarly open access site, *Internet Shakespeare Editions (ISE)*, Squeo examines ways in which the Web can facilitate and extend the experience of the reader within the dramatically increased spaces it makes available. Performance editions in particular can take advantage of what is effectively unlimited server capacity to deliver multimedia artefacts. Squeo outlines different experimental approaches to the relationship between text and performance on the *ISE*, the *Queen’s Men Editions*, and *Richard Brome Online*, culminating in a sympathetic case study of *Hamlet on the Ramparts*, created by Peter Donaldson in collaboration with the Folger Shakespeare Library (p. 227 ff.). The limitations of a print study of digital resources becomes especially clear in the discussion of MIT’s exceptional database of *Shakespeare Around the Globe* curated by Peter Donaldson and Alexa Alice Joubin, because the static page can communicate very little of the content or impact of the original videos. It is typical of Squeo’s balanced approach that in her discussion of the growing use of video clips in digital editions she asks important questions about the way that video may “insinuate into the reading experience” (pp. 231-32).

Humanists have traditionally conducted their research in splendid isolation, as individuals rather than as teams. Digital projects, however, provide an opportunity not only for amassing extensive archives of text and multimedia, but for creating networks that reach beyond the individual and situate Shakespeare in a far broader context. In her discussion of the direction future digital projects may take (p. 235 ff.), Squeo takes the example of the published aims of *LEMDO (Linked Early Modern Drama Online)* project at the University of Victoria headed by Janelle Jenstad and Brett Greatly-Hirsch. *LEMDO* situates the next generation of the *ISE* within a structure that can potentially “host scholarly editions of all known early modern dramatic texts” (p. 238,

quoting Jenstad). By providing access to extensive archives of contemporary documents, digital editions will have the opportunity to facilitate the “hermeneutics of recovery” (p. 260), and be able to take advantage of the wide and growing range of powerful tools for “computer-assisted language and text analysis” (p. 236), and “machine-assisted reading” (p. 244) she outlines and discusses in some detail. Squeo concludes this section with an extended case study of a possible structure for an edition of *The Merchant of Venice* (pp. 255-84) in which she demonstrates “how currently available digital resources and tools may expand hermeneutic horizons in Shakespeare textual studies” (p. 256) using currently available web-based tools as part of an intensive and detailed close reading of the text. Through a generous selection of screen shots of the tools she is discussing she illustrates the power they can potentially offer the user, providing particularly helpful examples of the use of a “key resource in the field” (p. 245) based at the University of Toronto, Ian Lancashire’s innovative and extensive online dictionary *LEME* (*Lexicons of Early Modern English*) (p. 262 ff.). While arguing persuasively for the usefulness of these resources, the complexity of the screen shots she provides illustrates the continuing challenge of making sophisticated linguistic tools accessible for Humanities scholars, who may have relatively basic digital skills.

Although Squeo’s vision of the future of digital editions is very positive, she is careful to point out the challenges that editors face as they adapt to the still-new medium. If scholars have a steep learning curve in navigating advanced applications, researchers creating the tools also face additional challenges. Browsers and operating systems are continually being updated, with the result that many of the websites and applications she describes are already no longer being maintained or are dependent on outdated technology; a number of these have already become inaccessible, and those that are maintained are often led by deeply committed individuals rather than enjoying the more stable support of institutions or libraries. The admirable *Endings* project at the University of Victoria (p. 242) provides guidance and tools for ensuring that digital projects can be preserved in a sustainable way, but, as Squeo observes, the “inherently unstable nature of digital resources requires expensive maintenance and constant updating” (p. 241). Open access sites rely on granting agencies whose aim is to foster innovation rather than to provide continuing funding for

maintaining the viability of work substantially completed. In addition, they are unable to link to commercial sites and experience difficulty in any attempt to access data (text, image, video) protected by copyright restrictions (p. 218). It may be that we have reached a stage where the digital medium is becoming more accepted as a scholarly platform, but Squeo notes that there is still an academic research culture that at times remains reluctant to embrace publication on open access sites (p. 242).

As a first step in facing these challenges, Squeo stresses the importance of ensuring that Digital Humanities projects support each other by seeking ways in which they can work together to ensure interoperability, accessibility, and reusability. Very much aware of the difficulty of this aim, she details the challenges and limitations of the most widely accepted framework for encoding Humanities texts, the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI), but leaves open the question of the degree to which the guarantee of standardisation may of necessity limit freedom of experimentation (pp. 242-43). Editors who undertake the task of encoding their own work will be taking on the demanding task of learning the equivalent of another language; the nature of editing is changing, as is the sense of editorial responsibility (pp. 282-83). In a time of ready access to online dictionaries and other previously inaccessible resources, some commentators have suggested that the role of the editor has been diminished; Squeo's study demonstrates the contrary, that the process of encoding online texts requires high level editorial decisions, that the editor's presence remains essential in the creation of a base text with its linked explanatory notes, and that their scholarly expertise is essential in selecting the format and content of supporting materials and links to related resources.

Although Squeo makes "no aim of exhaustiveness" (p. 100), a principal value of her study is that it is meticulously documented, comprehensive, and wide-ranging. The still-evolving area of digital Shakespeares is exciting and complex; at a moment when Shakespeareans are celebrating the publication of the first collection of Shakespeare's plays, *Print and Digital Remediations of the Shakespearean Text* is a timely reminder of the continuing evolution of the reception of his work, and a valuable study of the influence of digital and multimedia tools on current research in the field.

MICHAEL BEST, *University of Victoria*

**Stagg, Robert, *Shakespeare's Blank Verse: An Alternative History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, x + 227 pp.**

It is easy to forget that several terms which we normally use to talk about metres and prosody are relatively recent. The very phrase 'iambic pentameter' seems to have been quite rarely used in reference to English poetry and drama before the late eighteenth century; the word 'fourteener' began to designate a metre only from the beginning of the nineteenth century, and even 'enjambment' seems to have entered the English language in the Victorian period. The case of 'blank verse' is different: the phrase was already in use in the 1580s and 1590s with, for example, Thomas Nashe denouncing, with alliterative gusto, the "swelling bumbast of bragging blanke verse" (1589) and Robert Greene/Henry Chettle mocking that "upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that [...] supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you" (1592). And yet, as Robert Stagg demonstrates in his scintillating monograph, the histories behind not just Shakespeare's blank verse, but blank verse in general, are multiple and marked by an idiosyncratic process of reinvention.

"By the time Shakespeare was working on 3 *Henry 6*, blank verse was newly old" (p. 19) – a metre first devised in the late 1530s or early 1540s by Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey, for his translation of Books 2 and 4 of *The Aeneid*, probably prompted by the Italian *versi sciolti* he had become familiar with in France. So much for blank verse being "like a lane / In the deep rural regions" of merry England, as sung by the Pre-Raphaelite James Smetham (in his 1893 poem, *Blank Verse*), or its being the original "national metre", according to John Addington Symonds. Stagg quite rightly defines the history of Shakespearean and pre-Shakespearean blank verse "as much a matter of 'confluence' (Bruce Smith's word) as of 'influence'" (p. 12) and it should be remembered that when Book 4 of Surrey's translation of Virgil's masterpiece was published in 1554 it was advertised on the title page as follows: "drawne into a straunge metre" (and Stagg stresses that the adjective is to be read meaning more 'alien' and 'foreign' rather than 'unfamiliar' or 'odd', p. 28). Blank verse was then used for other genres, and, as is well known, was experimentally introduced into English drama by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville with their *Gorboduc* (1561); the metre was rather slowly and hesitantly popularised in the professional

playhouses later in the century. Blank verse became 'again' the metre of epic with Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but its origin and function were contested already in the seventeenth century – as can be seen by considering Dryden's 1664 claim that Shakespeare invented it, a peculiar assertion that Stagg tries to understand by reflecting on what 'invention' meant in the period, foregrounding the "januarial quality" of the word, "its facing both forward and back" (p. 156 – think of *inventio* in rhetoric). But what constitutes the blankness of blank verse has proved a more complex question than one may superficially think: blankness does not simply equate with rhymelessness, and this book delves into the field with insightful acumen and scholarly understanding.

From the start, Stagg proceeds to question long-established notions about blank verse and versification in general which are revealed to be little more than platitudes or simply wrong. In the introduction, he debunks what he funnily labels the "de-dum-de-dumbing down of verse" (p. 1) and explodes notions such as iambic pentameter being written imitating the rhythms of the human heart ("Contemporary physicians disputed whether the heartbeat and pulse were synchronous or alternating [...] the heart was conceived of less as a pump than as a 'fountain' [...] [which] promises something more various than a two-tone, de-dum prosody", p. 2) or the idea that iambic pentameter is the most manageable metre to accommodate human breathing (the French alexandrine is its equivalent, so to speak, and it would be ridiculous to imagine that the French have larger lungs than the British, p. 3).

Stagg is aware that this subject matter is difficult: in the "Note on Metrical Conventions", he warns his readers that "[t]here is certainly no point pretending that [...] the systematic elements of prosodic study can simply be pushed aside" (p. x), but he successfully manages to demonstrate how vital and important a heightened appreciation of versification can prove when it comes to Shakespeare's blank verse, especially when one historicises what was happening in Tudor England. Prosody had a political dimension, "questions of 'form' proving central to the Re-form-ation" (p. 10). This does not entail a falling back to the naïve idea condemned by scholars including Caroline Levine and Derek Attridge (in varying degrees, see Attridge 2021, p. 8) whereby "[c]ritics [...] have often assumed that prosody is political insofar as it mirrors rhythms in the world" (Levine 2015, p.

79), but a recognition that metres do not develop in a vacuum and that “prosodic theorization [is embedded] in the socio-political environment of the time” (Attridge 2019, p. 153).

This is a book that shows that Benedick may well describe the quality of blank verse as an “even road” (*Much Ado About Nothing*, V.ii.33-34), but it is actually a route which has many byways and spiralling courses – blank verse “being a tradition more than a creation” (p. 10). And this passage nicely encapsulates the author’s position on Shakespeare’s uses of the metre:

[...] Shakespeare’s blank verse is itself a form for or of alternatives. It tugs away from the end-stops that nevertheless sustain and structure it. It absorbs and increasingly composes itself by alternative forms of versification, from the seven-syllable line to the fourteeners. It is unrhymed yet is often timed by rhyme, preferring to make rhyme its complementary alternative rather than (as quantitative verse had done) its detested opponent. (p. 170)

In order to explain these characteristics of Shakespeare’s versification, the book has a dual approach to his blank verse, “attend[ing] to the double quality of [Shakespeare’s] ‘theatrical and literary art’” (p. 12), considering also, as can be garnered by the previous quotation, how it operates alongside different metres and rhyme. Just as it cannot be a coincidence that Time as Chorus in 4.1 of *The Winter’s Tale* delivers a speech of 16 rhymed couplets to cover the 16 years’ gap between the first and the second part of the play (a feature that Shakespeare’s readers, hardly the spectators, can realise), so too does Stagg pay close attention to the effects of the metre on the stage. And it may be helpful to remember how important prosody was in the early modern period, as well illuminated by Coburn Freer:

The *close listening habits* of Renaissance audiences seem much more understandable when we recall the *aural bias* of their early education. With emphasis upon verse as one of the chief means of instruction, no matter what the subject, it follows that even modestly educated persons could hear the meters of poetry as they would occur, on the stage or in everyday speech. Vendors with their street cries, ballad mongers and pitchmen, all thought, spoke, and sang in poetry [...] (1981, p.38, italics mine)

It was “a rhyming age” where “verses swarm / At every stall”, as Ben Jonson put in *An Elegy* (posthumously published in 1640), where

“rhyming” refers to versification, not necessarily rhymed, but sometimes certainly badly made. The blankness of blank verse, and particularly Shakespeare’s, that is a blankness “of rhyme, of other acoustic resources, of the verse itself” “is always open to be filled, hence the absorptive tendency of blank verse to what might otherwise be thought its acoustic alternatives” (p. 174). This is a particularly valuable observation, as it helps to situate contemporary critiques: “For Nashe and Greene, blank verse was empty because it was full of acoustic nothing. It was a prosodically phatic utterance” (p. 177).

The book is articulated as follows. The first chapter explores why Shakespeare’s early blank verse was critiqued by his contemporaries as “bombast” and how Shakespeare worked throughout his career in reaction to such criticism, by introducing innovations such as feminine endings and late caesurae, but maintaining a stressed tenth syllable. Chapter 2 deals with the ways in which Shakespeare deployed, absorbed, and transformed the forms and metres of the popular metrical culture of the sixteenth century (Stagg’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s seven-syllable lines, esp. as far as *Macbeth* is concerned, as a way of expressing deformity is of particular note). In the next chapter, the author considers in depth Shakespeare’s use of rhyme but also, perhaps surprisingly, what he calls “Shakespeare’s oblique, acoustically glancing engagement with” the (failed) revival of quantitative versification (p. 115): Shakespeare is “able to hear a sort of duration, narrative, and timeliness in rhyme, which may have been cued by a syncretic grammar-school understanding of the unrhymed, and often anti-rhyme, quantitative verse” (p. 147). The final chapter is devoted to the histories behind editing Shakespeare’s blank verse, from the First Folio to Alexander Pope through Dryden. Pope’s procrustean method in revising Shakespeare’s verses is interestingly compared to that of “an archaeologist” “removing Shakespeare’s lines [...] from the rubble and dross of their textual burial in the quartos and folios, then buffing them back to something like their original condition” (p. 157).

Stagg is very perceptive in his discussions of how versification modifies our perception of Shakespearean passages. Consider, for example, his contrastive analysis of the quarto and the folio readings of Othello’s accusation in IV.ii: “O *Desdemona*, away, away, away” (Q) vs. “Ah *Desdemon*, away, away, away”. In the quarto, “[t]he ‘a’ at the

end of Desdemona's name [...] provokes a tremor in Othello's verse before an iambic rhythm continues through the second syllable of 'away' (which if every 'away' is unelided, helps tip the line into eleven syllables)" (p. 162). The folio's "Desdemon" "sooth[es] the quarto's metrical disturbace" (ibid.), but while "[i]n the quarto, Othello sounds the full length of Desdemona's name so that we hear a prolonged moan within *Desdemo[a]na*" (dynamically contrasted with the O's of Othello's name, "sonically bounded by the sounds of woe", p. 163), the folio "robs Desdemona of her proper name and with it her propriety", "giv[ing] her a bad name" (p. 164). Stagg's perception of "moan" at the centre of that name might derive from what Scott L. Newstok has called "[Kenneth] Burke's characteristically suggestive but erratic derivation" of Desdemona from "moan-death" (2007, n1 to Chapter 6, n.n.), but he is aware of its origin in Cinthio's novella, *Desdemona*, from Greek *des* + *daimon*, the ill-fated one, and Stagg signals that the Folio's "Desdemon" "reduces Shakespeare's character to her etymological and literary reading" following the editors' "relatively uncompromising quest for metrical tidiness" (p. 164).

Robert Stagg's book is an important contribution to the study of Shakespeare's versification. It builds on the scholarly works of metrists and prosodists including Derek Attridge, O. B. Hardison, Marina Tarlinskaja, Eric Weiskott, and George T. Wright, but it can stand on its own *con scioltezza* (free from any bondage), providing readers with innovative and illuminating ways to approach Shakespeare's blank verse.

EMANUEL STELZER, *University of Verona*

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**Zamparo, Martina, *Alchemy, Paracelsianism, and Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale"*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 377 + xxi.**

From a twenty-first-century perspective, it seems incredible that anyone could have deprioritised the rendering of Plato's long-lost works into the learned language of fifteenth-century scholarship, let alone Marsilio Ficino. Yet this is precisely what occurred in 1463 when he presented his patron Cosimo de' Medici with a dilemma. Which would the uncrowned ruler of Florence prefer to have rendered from ancient Greek into neo-Latin first? The miraculously rediscovered dialogues of Plato or the *Corpus Hermeticum* of the "thrice-great" magus Hermes Trismegistus? Cosimo had acquired fourteen Greek manuscripts that Ficino believed were the works of Hermes himself. The aged magnifico, who would die the next year and be known posthumously as *Pater patriae*, insisted that Plato could wait upon the translation of the works of this magician, alchemist, hermeticist, and medical expert – which were later exposed as spurious, as was the man himself, unknown to Ficino. He was thus only too happy to comply in undertaking the enterprise, and used it to help spearhead the study of hermeticism in early modern Europe. Like his contemporaries, he believed that Hermes lived in the time of Moses and wrote in an Egyptian language, which a helpful intermediary had transformed into Greek. The *Corpus*, then, provided the ancient *prisca theologia* that Orpheus studied, Pythagoras read, and that Plato depended upon as foundational to his thought. This alleged philosophical inheritance might have influenced Cosimo's thinking that the *Republic* and other dialogues could find their audiences at a later date. Clearly, the Thrice-Great came first.

In her study *Alchemy, Paracelsianism, and Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale"*, Martina Zamparo discusses such hermetic matters and fol-

lows fascinating related pathways as they meet in Shakespeare's late play. She notes that James I interested himself in the study of alchemy to complement his notorious fixation on witchcraft, and pursued the comprehension of Paracelsian medicine and, of course, the legendary Hermes. She uses language and incidents from *The Winter's Tale* to support her claim that the play operates at times as alchemical allegory and that its action demonstrates a complete turn of the *rota alchemica* itself. She argues that once Leontes and his queen Hermione, whom he has treated so disgracefully, have been "dissevered", Paulina, herself a kind of magus, reunites them. Shakespeare's audience might well have recognized that this "sad tale [...] best for winter" (*WT* II.ii.34) comprises "an alchemical allegory expressing deep truths about man, art, nature, and death" (p. 2). Its crazed king represents *rex chymicus*, rusted metal that must be refined and purified into perfection. Accordingly, his fiercest critic and ultimate savior becomes a "healing woman" who cures him and restores his wife to him, perhaps undeservedly, by her knowledge of alchemy and Paracelsian medicine (p. 29).

The author notes that Shakespeare mentions Paracelsus by name only once in his works, but the manner of reference helps validate the theme of her book. When Lafew ecstatically praises Helena's skill in her mysterious cure of the king in *All's Well That Ends Well* (II.iii), he suggests that she is equal to the acclaimed physician as well as to Galen. Though the old courtier can be forgiven for his hyperbole, the foolish Parolles cannot be excused for his derision at Lafew's comparison. That such a gadfly would discount the heroine's Paracelsian-Galenic medical feat by mocking her elderly herald suggests that Shakespeare believes the opposite of Parolles's scornful asides – that the efficacy of this practical ancient art proves that "miracles", as Lafew says, are not "past". They are, in fact, precisely the means by which Paulina effects her magic in her play, as Zamparò shows us. The exchange itself between Lafew and Parolles symbolizes that age-old sacred wisdom is designed to trump the folly that would discount it.

In the first section of this study's tripartite structure, the introduction chronicles the development of alchemical thought in late medieval and early modern Europe excellently and concisely (pp. 1-30). The next two chapters offer a history of alchemy in Elizabethan and Jacobean England (pp. 31-106). They account for the practise of the art as

essential to the cult of Elizabeth and a chronicle of those who championed it during her reign. This background matter also explores the continuation and development of this pseudo-science, along with Paracelsianism and hermeticism in James's court. His circle of courtiers utilized this occult knowledge and indulged the king's interest in natural magic as he had manifested in his *Daemonologie* (1597).

The second section of *Alchemy, Paracelsianism* offers a thorough analysis of how this topic informs *The Winter's Tale* at its most celebrated junctures: the "rebirth" of Perdita, the sheep-shearing festivities, the presence of Florizell, and the art and nature debate between Perdita and Polixenes that reveals her precocity regarding alchemical art and knowledge. Hermeticism also influences the play's conclusion featuring the "statue" of Hermione and the work of Paulina in her role, according to the study, as Lady Alchymia (pp. 107-312). The third section discusses the play in terms of the *prisca sapientia* attributed to Hermes and its relation to Jacobean politics and the king's dabbling in magic (pp. 313-32). A continual theme, especially in the book's middle and end, is that alchemy, magic, hermeticism, and drama were all closely related, and that one can see this at work elsewhere in Shakespeare when considering Prospero from *The Tempest* as a kind of magus, the opposite of the type of the evil magician exemplified by Cornelius Agrippa (p. 81). Or, as Zamparo puts it, "the transformative art of alchemy and that of drama coalesce and their healing effects are actualised by Paulina" (p. 311).

The study's most eloquent and incisive observations are devoted to Perdita, with whom the author identifies. Of the sixteen-year-old's debate with her future father-in-law about the legitimacy of gillyvors, Zamparo writes: "although objecting to the artificial intervention into the natural world, the girl herself is, rather surprisingly, a personification of that synthesis of art and nature that Polixenes supports and that is at the core of the alchemical philosophy" (p. 249). In this way, Shakespeare identifies her "with the perfective role performed by art with regards to nature," and she as a result personifies a "refined synthesis" of the two entities. Since Polixenes essentially subscribes to a Paracelsian definition of art that, in its ideal form, can actually improve nature, "everyone who leads nature to perfection is an alchemist. Therefore, Florizel's assertion that Perdita 'betters what is done' (*WT* IV.iv.136) suggests that the girl's role in the romance is

to ‘perfect’ what has been left ‘imperfect’”. She ultimately “leads the redemptive, and obliquely alchemical, cycle of the play to its right completion” (p. 254).

Zamparo contributes to scholarship on the topics she analyzes. She informs *Alchemy, Paracelsianism* with the work of her predecessors, such as Lyndy Abraham’s *Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (2011); Meredith Ray’s *Daughters of Alchemy* (2013); and Mary Floyd-Wilson’s *Occult Knowledge, Science and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage* (2013). There is considerably more than this in the book, however, that utilizes innumerable sources on alchemy, hermeticism, magic, and *The Winter’s Tale*. An especially valuable feature of the text as an e-book is the twenty-eight high-resolution images from manuscripts and printed sources, most of them in color, which helps the reader visualize the materials that early moderns used. Though it is wonderful to behold the diversity of current cultural studies devoted to Shakespeare, inevitably such approaches seem less focused on his time than on our own, more concerned with the subjectivity of the critics offering their conclusions. In contrast, the author of the book under review is to be commended for demonstrating how deeply dyed a Shakespeare text can be in its pan-European, transhistorical intellectual milieu, in ways that would be invisible to most twenty-first century readers without a guide as learned and as well-written as this.

M. L. STAPLETON, *Purdue University Fort Wayne*