

Book Reviews

Balz Engler, *Constructing Shakespeares: Essays on the Making of a Great Author* (Dozwil: Edition Signathur, 2019. Pp. 260).

Reviewed by *Silvana Carotenuto**

Constructing Shakespeares by Emeritus Professor Balz Engler offers an important critical contribution to Renaissance studies and, together, to performance studies. Consisting of five essays—“Construction,” “Monumental Shakespeare,” “Occasions: Status and Process,” “*Hamlet*: Passages We Live By” and “Re-Productions,” with an introduction which sets the book’s “Premises” and its final “Coda”—the publication, supported by the Berta Hess-Cohn Foundation and the Max Geilinger Foundation of Zurich, is consistently interested in the Shakespearean *oeuvre* as a performative authority through history via the notion of the deconstruction of the text as a “classic,” and in contemporary times through the “media” apparatus that makes it enjoyable and relevant still today, in the global world, among different and differentiated audiences.

The question of the “audience” is the focus of the “Premises,” which deals with the modalities in which the Shakespearean text (the main reference goes to Prospero’s Epilogue and its final invitation to the audience’s indulgence, that is, its applause) inserts the notion of the “performance as process” (17), the play being “an occasion of which the audience is part” (18). Indeed, Engler’s position is that the audience takes part, plays a central part in the performance, contributes to the success or failure of the play, and represents the oral/social agent of dramatic authority. “Sociality” and “communication,” therefore, are to be considered as essential elements to the “making of a great author,” and particularly to the magnitude of Shakespeare, thus advancing a benevolent criticism of the Romantic notion of his texts as “books to *read*” (the reference goes to Charles Lamb’s appreciation of Shakespeare’s soliloquies). The activity of reading, as Professor Engler maintains, is already and always part of

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Shakespeare's art, supporting his complex views on the status of dramatic texts, if, as an example among many others, Hamlet's appearance on stage "reading a book" realizes the overcoming of the distinction between the reader's isolation and the performance of theatrical reading, the specificity of the skill and its performativity, advocating the vision of reading as a performance that changes, with its own histories and practices, according to its historical authority and the status of the text itself.

Here what is interesting is Engler's reading of the history of criticism that constructed—and keeps constructing—itsself around the historical and cultural changes of the value of literature. The scholars mentioned are, among others, Stephen Orgel, Peter Stallybrass and Roger Chartier, and especially Margreta de Grazia who, along her *Hamlet Without Hamlet* (2007), brings attention to the "modernity" of Shakespeare. In the economy of Engler's critical and performative interpretation, Shakespearean modernity finds its privileged locus in "The Media of *King Lear*," the chapter interested in the dramatic communication of the "book," the "stage" and the "video screen." Engler refers to the reading of the book as what promotes the interest in the psychology of a single figure, to the active participation in the dramatic action as what provokes the interest in social and political conflicts, simultaneously showing his fascination for the video's capacity for intimacy, the importance of the camera, the critical distance and the perspective it creates, the tensions and responses it calls for. If *King Lear* is, indeed, the Shakespearean classic that proves that the dramatic world cannot be reduced to a single perspective, the camera is strongly apt to realize such wisdom: as cinematic proofs, and pausing on the scene of the King's division of the kingdom to his daughters, and, finally, to the dialogue between Edgar and Gloucester, Engler refers to an early American *Lear* of 1916, to the BBC version of the tragedy, to Grigory Kosintsev and Peter Brook's films, both appearing in 1970, and to the Granada version of 1983—they all create the framework in which Shakespeare's power of complexity can be contextualized and communicated. "Context" and "communication": in the chapter devoted to "Construction," Engler is interested in European contextualization in terms of production and re-production (two notions that he distinguishes from *reception*, *influence* and *appropriation*), emphasizing the question of "genealogy" to mean the different European capacities of welcoming Shakespeare geographically and culturally, valuing the social practices that produced, and are still producing, Shakespeare in Europe¹ and also a certain European homogeneity in terms of popular culture, systems of education and lineages of theatrical performances. Here the critical claim goes to the necessity of producing a history of Shakespearean "reproduction" as part of the so-called European common

¹ Engler quotes Pechter's *What was Shakespeare: Renaissance Plays and Changing Critical Practices*, appreciating his approach but somehow critical of its Americanism.

culture, a history that should follow different phases—*beyond the rules* (and its aristocratic and hierarchical poetics of the origin), *beyond criticism* (and its poetics of genius), *beyond the text* (and its uniformity of interpretation)—and be interested in setting Shakespeare in education, popular culture, contemporary media, authorship theories, comparison of cultures, and translation in various languages. Professor Engler claims that, in this area of intervention, still much needs to be done, calling for the necessity of important and urgent projects meant for the sake of Shakespearean studies, for the formation of the European “common culture” and, similarly, for the vitality of cultures in all parts of the world.

This is, indeed, “Shakespeare’s Passport,” which functions not in terms of a national identity but as a “consignment note” that belongs to the arena of international theatre, to its performative process, its theatrical traditions, cultural conditions and institutions, translations, adaptations and dramatic materials—“even without the authority of an author” (80) (which is, especially in the case of Shakespeare, a recent notion, largely, as Margreta de Grazia shows, a product of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that constructed the author as genius, the mythologized and authenticated “quasi-divine creator”). In this sense, the history of the Shakespearean plays evolves, changes, and adapts to new cultural and political situations, always and already in on-going processes. For Professor Engler, this means that Shakespeare’s passport is, indeed, the magnificent license to travel through histories and worlds, the author himself being a ghostly presence that crosses borders and travels free and powerful everywhere. If this is the case, then the suggestion is to engage in “The Unmaking of a National Poet,” producing a different notion of nationhood by considering three critical elements: narratives (and how they have served the aim of establishing “a sense of community with a shared past,” 84), language (which was historically modernized and standardized in view of the adventures of the British Empire like a bond among the different colonies), and poetics (which, here too, served the role of forming a classical tradition tainted by imperial aspirations; Engler also pays attention to the specific context of the German possession of Shakespeare, which especially aimed at the establishment of the *Sturm und Drang* romantic tradition, 87-89). In truth, as Engler clearly states, Shakespeare does not belong to any single country, even if his *oeuvre* can prove, by representing the “free and multifarious spirit of a united Europe” (90), essential in defining a European cultural entity. In order to exploit such an opportunity, what is needed is to deconstruct the “monumentalizing” of Shakespeare, its “canonization” in England. You can follow Engler’s own deconstruction of the question of pilgrimage to and tourism at Stratford-upon-Avon, in a section of the book which provides historical facts, notes from the archive of the town, plans and names of Shakespeare’s sacred and sanctified “Birthplace” (103-117), in the United States (Chapter 9 is devoted to

“Shakespeare, Washington, Lincoln: The Folger Library and the American Appropriation of the Bard,” 118-136), Germany (see the chapter “Weimar: Shakespeare among the German Classics,” 137-154) and Italy (the reference is naturally to Juliet and Verona, 155-167), but what matters is that Professor Engler’s analysis of the destinies of the Shakespearean text expands to cover the debate on the “politics of place” and the “cultural performance of space” 156).

Engler’s deconstruction relies on the opening up of the status of Shakespeare as a public symbol and myth, and on a set of comparative perspectives that *Constructing Shakespeares* adopts in its reading, for example, of the Bard placed between England and Germany during the First World War (“Shakespeare in the Trenches,” 168-181), in Post-Second World War Germany (with a reference to *Coriolanus* in the framework of American occupation after the collapse of the Third Reich and Nazi cultural policies, 182-191) and, especially, in the postcolonial world (a short but important chapter is devoted to “Shakespearean Passages” [192-198], that reads the interconnection of the textual passages and their journeys to the Caribbean world, specifically in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, or in Carriacou, Lesser Antilles, through the Shakespearean Mas, *carnival* or *masquerade*).

These readings are all connected to the digital project *HyperHamlet* that Professor Engler has established at the University of Basel, and which deals with “intertextuality,” “citations,” “metaphors,” “phrases and passages” whose use allows the understanding of how Shakespeare lives on, influences and forms our language, while claiming the importance of the software (the program Tesseract) and the databank structure which selects, compares and contextualizes the collected material (the archive consists of an immense basin of almost 9000 references only for *Hamlet*). In *Constructing Shakespeares*, Engler is interested in how Shakespeare is alive in our minds and how this affects people’s reception and experience of his plays. Stories, figures, the poetic genius, memories of different cultural communities, their perceptions and affections transform and feed the very discourse of the community, possibly, in the case of Shakespeare, of all communities existing in the world. The project *HyperHamlet* is at the core of Professor Engler’s critical attention: Chapter 17 entitled “*HyperHamlet—An Extended Personal Footnote*” testifies the reasons why he devoted his practical, intellectual and critical engagement in the setting up and historical development of his project. Engler explains it as an essential part of his interest in anthropology (especially orality and literacy) and in performance poetry, mentioning the public and academic occasions where he exposed himself to the necessity and complexity of the project (the beginning happening in a conference at the University of Murcia in 1999, then in Timisoara, Romania, in 2002, followed by a seminar with his students at Basel University, the whole project developing through the grant by the Swiss National Research Fund and

the Swiss Academy of the Humanities and Social Sciences, to thank the various institutions and² scholars still working on it).

The book gradually unfolds and gathers its final momentum when dealing with “Re-productions” (consisting of “On Gottfried Keller’s *A Village...*,” 219-230, and “Language and Conflict: A Trilingual *Romeo and Juliet*,” 231-240, two chapters which focus on examples of Shakespearean multilingual productions in multilingual Switzerland). Doing so, it reaches its “Coda. The Relevance of the Inconspicuous,” (241-253), which is a word that Engler associates to grammar: comma, semicolon, colon, question, exclamation mark and ... full stop. Engler’s coda is a happy farewell to the book, to his own writing, to his readers and Shakespeare’s audiences. The final stress is on “punctuation,” which exists in individual and solitary reading but, especially, even more relevantly today than ever, in poetry reading and performance poetry. In accordance with his approach, Engler closes his important contribution to Renaissance studies and performance studies by mentioning the relevance of popular culture, be it in the forms of rapping or poetry slam, in order to re-claim the power of the voice, his own voice, the voice of theatre, the voices of all powerful and extraordinary Shakespeares.

WORKS CITED

Grazia, Margreta de. *Hamlet Without Hamlet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

² See <http://www.hyperhamlet.unibas.ch/>