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Book Reviews

Kinga Földváry, *Cowboy Hamlets and Zombie Romeos. Shakespeare in Genre Film*. Manchester University Press, 2020.

Reviewed by ***Magdalena Cieślak****

The position of Shakespearean films in adaptation and film discourses has always provoked a lot of controversies. Shakespeare has been with cinema since its inception and continues to fuel not only various cinematic narratives but also diverse research approaches. Although deeply rooted in the screen history, Shakespearean films have a complicated relationship with adaptation studies mainly due to the status of Shakespeare in literature and culture. A question often posed is where to situate Shakespeare on screen discourse—within literary studies, culture studies, film studies, adaptation studies, or media studies—and the answer frequently rests on the conclusion that it is a very interdisciplinary field of Shakespeare studies that best accommodates such research paths. Indeed, scholars who deal with screen Shakespeare mostly come from literary studies and tend to identify themselves as Shakespeareans, but are aware of the diversity of discourses that inform the reading of Shakespeare's work, and therefore necessarily search for perspectives and methodologies that would best help them read and understand the prolific field of Shakespearean screen adaptations. Kinga Földváry is among such interdisciplinary researchers and her book, *Cowboy Hamlets and Zombie Romeos. Shakespeare in Genre Film* (Manchester University Press, 2020), inspired by genre studies, offers a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to Shakespeare on screen.

The focus on genre in adaptation studies is a result of acknowledging the importance of medium specificity, and has been explored in various ways. Thomas Leitch (2008), for example, proposes to depart from looking at films in relation to the source texts they are based on, and treat adaptation as a cinematic genre itself. He identifies specific markers that, as he argues, would allow audiences to treat a film as an adaptation even if they do not recognize or know the film's hypotext(s). Földváry's book assumes a different perspective: she

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treats cinematic genre as a point of reference and examines each case as a genre film. Analysing a wide selection of films based on Shakespeare's plays she examines how they locate themselves in the cinematic tradition of the given genre, and how they adapt the Shakespearean elements to the specific film genre conventions. The book is divided into two parts, distinguishing between the understanding of film genre and popularity of particular genres in the classical Hollywood period, and in the contemporary cinematic landscape, beginning from the 1990s. Consequently, in Part I—Classical Hollywood Cinema—Földváry discusses Shakespearean films within the conventions of the western, melodrama and gangster *noir*, while in Part II—Contemporary Blockbusters—the genres in discussion are teen and horror films, as well as the biopic. An important aspect of the choice of material, apart from the genre axis, is the fact that all discussed films are appropriations, derivatives, or spin-offs, however one might wish to call them. These are films that do not use the language of Shakespeare's plays and freely adapt their literary source, which is why they can be seen as genre films just as much as they are Shakespeare films.

Cowboy Hamlets and Zombie Romeos treats the concept of genre film as its focal point, but effectively operates within adaptation discourse and relies on in-depth understanding of the literary background of the discussed films. It is a study that with an interdisciplinary ease shows how various discourses cross paths and allow to look at screen Shakespeare from diverse perspectives without being exclusive or limiting. What serves as a common denominator for the book is naturally the notion, or a phenomenon, as Földváry calls it, of the "Shakespeare film", something that has been investigated, explored, and even challenged by many critics. James Welsh, notably, contributing to the general polemics on what is what is not an adaptation, addresses the question of what a "Shakespeare film" is and, treating it as a genre of a kind, attempts to define the criteria that would qualify the given film as one. Földváry is aware that a "Shakespeare film" is a loaded term that triggers many expectations, and therefore approaches the specific status of such films within adaptation studies systematically and carefully, noting the complexity of genre studies within other related discourses, and avoiding the traps of the genre issue itself.

Cowboy Hamlets and Zombie Romeos is a book that discovers various dynamic patterns of the relationship between Shakespearean hypotext and genre within the context of how the selected Shakespeare genre films are immersed in other intertextual relations (some films being adaptations of novels that are based on Shakespearean plays, thus layering the references even more). Földváry is very sensitive to detect how genre specificity informs the way in which the Shakespearean text, however fragmented sometimes, is used, modified, quoted, or, as she puts it in the conclusion, decontextualized or recontextualized. At the same time, she excellently shows how Shakespeare blends into genre films, feeding the conventions, and comfortably nesting in

mainstream cinema. That is not to say that Földváry is not critical about some of the discussed films, whether as not terribly successful genre films, or as cases of exploitation of Shakespeare, but that kind of criticism is not at the heart of her book. She notes when the incompatibilities between certain plays and the cinematic genres they were adapted to can lead to poor reception or harsh criticism of the film, as in the case of Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, but that does not stop her from appreciating how even an unlikely Shakespeare text may find its way in an unlikely film genre. She specifically looks for ways in which the relationship of Shakespeare and genre works to interesting effects and, doing that, she proves how synergic this relationship is – the effect of the combination is more than the sum of its parts.

A vital strength of the book is that Földváry discovers quite a few films that so far have not received much critical attention as Shakespeare adaptations, appropriations, or derivatives. So even if you think you are genre sensitive, and can trace Shakespearean references in any film you watch, this volume will still surprise you, offering a discussion of films you have not thought about as Shakespearean. Importantly, this is a book that will interest a wide range of reader types—definitely Shakespeare nerds, but also cinema fans, whether those cherishing old-school Hollywood films, or those intrigued by recent zombie apocalypse flicks with the sympathetic undead. With a very well structured content the book works well as a comprehensive study of the importance of genre in Shakespeare films. At the same time, the individual film analysis formula allows to read it in chunks, and to use bits and pieces either for your own research, as I did, or for teaching (as well as studying!), or simply for the enjoyment of another take on the film you thought you saw through. Finally, Földváry's book offers more than academically solid and conceptually innovative insight into the relationship between Shakespeare film and genre. There is also the Author's fascination with the topics she is examining. Her passion for Shakespeare, film, and, genre is tangible, and contagious.

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Alexa Alice Joubin, *Shakespeare and East Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 258).

Reviewed by ***Jessica Chiba***[*]

Alexa Alice Joubin's broad-ranging work offers an overview of Shakespeare in East Asia, post-1950. It will be useful to those who are new to East Asian Shakespeare and to those who wish to have a broader contextual sense of how the different countries and linguistic communities are connected or differ in their approach to Shakespeare's works. While there have been many books on Shakespeare reception, performance, and film in Asia generally, a distinctive feature of Joubin's book is that it eschews "cultural profiling—the tendency to bracket, for example, 'Shakespeare in Japan' in isolation from other cultural influences" (8). The criticism downplays the usefulness of studies of Shakespeare in particular languages and cultures. However, according to Joubin, the critical penchant for isolating Shakespeare reception and performance according to geographical borders in Asia is symptomatic of what she calls "compulsory realpolitik": the way Asian productions are treated as political products that must be read in light of the socio-historical circumstances of that country rather than aesthetic pieces. Studying Shakespeare in a specific country suggests that these productions are specific to their location and culture rather than personal or artistic innovations with global relevance. In Joubin's words, "Anglophone Shakespeares are assumed to have broad theoretical applicability and aesthetic merits, whereas foreign Shakespeares—even when they focus on artistic innovation on a personal rather than an epic level—are compelled to prove their political worth" and are "compulsorily characterized as allegories of geopolitical issues" (8). Though there are exceptions, Joubin is no doubt right that "the critical tendency to prioritize realpolitik in non-Western works leads to blindspots in our understanding of the logic and significance of Asian Shakespeares" (10).

At the heart of Joubin's approach, then, is the aesthetics of performance, and interconnectivity: not just the connection between approaches to Shakespeare in Asia, but also between "Shakespeare" and Asia. The book is entitled *Shakespeare and East Asia* and not *Shakespeare in East Asia* "to signal the interplay between the two condensed cultural signifiers and to emphasize a shift away from the linear, one-way-street model of tracing the transplantation of a British 'giant' into a colonial cultural context" (6). Thus, Joubin reads Shakespeare adaptions and performances in East Asia through a "rhizomatic"

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lens, tracing horizontal relations between adaptations in a "postnational space of exchange" (12). Joubin's interest in connection and boundary-breaking is also evident in her choice to "bring the genres of theatre and film to bear on each other rather than placing them in isolated silos" (13). As ambitious as it is to deal with the whole of East Asia and to tackle both film and theatre, Joubin's case studies highlight some of the artistic cross-pollination that happens across genres as well as across borders.

One feature worth pointing out is that the book is structured around digital recordings available on the pages of *MIT Global Shakespeares* curated by Joubin herself. Scattered throughout the main text (rather than in the endnotes) are links to videos and clips of the productions under discussion. This makes *Shakespeare and East Asia* a valuable resource for teachers, though it may work better in a digital edition with hyperlinks and leaves some concern about the permanence of the links.

Shakespeare and East Asia is split into four sections. The first section is on Japanese adaptations and performances of Shakespeare, especially the works of Akira Kurosawa and Yukio Ninagawa. Joubin analyses how these directors' productions localize Shakespeare's plays, what they do with their western influences and, in turn, the influence they have had on directors around the world. This is, of course, a common approach to assessing Global Shakespeare. However, Joubin's delineation of the difference between productions that are localizations, cultural catalysts or fusions presents a helpful way of looking at the innovations by these directors and situates them in the context of Japanese Shakespeare reception and the work of other Japanese Shakespeareans. One of Joubin's contributions to the study of these famous directors is an extended analysis of sound and music, which proves a useful measure of what visual signifiers alone may not be able to convey, though Joubin does not ignore the visual either. The section ends by situating these directors' plays and films in and outside Japan.

The second section analyses the "remedial function" of art and Shakespeare, or "the notion that performing the Shakespearean canon can improve not only local art forms […] but also personal and social circumstances" (63). Joubin's interest lies in the way "Shakespearean motifs and East Asian aesthetics are deployed as agents to cure each other's perceived deficiencies, sometimes with a straight face, sometimes with parody" (64). Thus, Joubin examines what it means to call art recuperative through the ways Shakespeare has been used politically and personally around the world. Focusing on Sinophone productions, Joubin gives examples that sincerely trust in the remedial power of Shakespeare (and especially *King Lear*), as well as those that take a more cynical, parodic approach. Joubin's first case studies are cinema adaptations of *Hamlet*: Feng Xiaogang's Mandarin *The Banquet* and Sherwood Hu's Tibetan *Prince of the Himalayas*, both of which provide "a redemptive arc

through the Ophelia character" (81). Turning to works that focus on personal healing through spirituality, Joubin analyses Wu Hsing-Kuo's one-person *Lear is Here*, a Taiwanese play that draws on the conflicts between different forms of theatre as well as the personal effects of Japanese colonial rule and the tensions between Taiwan and China. True to her sense of the worldwide currency of Asian influences, Joubin does not ignore the fact that Asian spirituality has influenced Western directors such as Michael Almereyda (91). The book then looks at productions that satirize Shakespeare's supposedly remedial potential through case studies of Anthony Chan's film, *One Husband Too Many*—which revolves around a failed amateur production of *Romeo and Juliet* in backwater Hong Kong—and Lee Kuo-hsiu's Taiwanese *Shamlet*—a parodic play about a fictional theatre troupe's comically inept performance of *Hamlet*. As Joubin is careful to note, these comedic genres show confidence with the material they parody, commenting intertextually on canonical western films while taking part in global metatheatrical currents.

The third section uses the musical concept of "polyphony", noting that "adapting Shakespeare as a practice contains and sustains multiple voices of the directors and critics without subordinating any one perspective" (106). Looking at South Korean productions, Joubin studies how adaptors include different cultural echoes in their productions by incorporating local folklore, what happens when East Asia productions tour the world and where such productions are performed. The first case study looks at Kim Myung-gon's *King Uru*, which fuses the *King Lear* story with "Baridegu", a Korean myth. The second case study is Lee Joon-ik's South Korean blockbuster, *The King and the Clown*, which combines its multiple Shakespearean influences with Korean theatrical tradition. Joubin's focus here is on the presentation of gender nonconformity and the way different audiences pick up on different strains of the polyphonic texture. The final case studies look at Oh Tae-suk's *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Tempest* in relation to Umberto Eco's theory of aberrant decoding—which "becomes a norm in intercultural contexts, where artists and audiences do not share the same cultural heritage" (120)—focusing on the ways audiences and critics responded to the touring productions. The chapter ends with a consideration of "non-western directors' agency and the western media's tendency to read Asian Shakespeares as political allegory" (134).

The final section is a culmination of Joubin's effort to consider Shakespeares in "a postnational space of exchange" (12) centred on multicultural, multilingual and diasporic productions which make use of linguistic diversity and the fusion of different theatrical traditions. Joubin's first case study is the collaborative bilingual *King Lear* by Hong Kong-British director David Tse Ka-shing which featured a diasporic English-speaking Cordelia unable to communicate effectively with her family in Shanghai. The second case study is CheeK's *Chicken Rice War*, a Singaporean film based on

Romeo and Juliet, where the feud is transposed into a fight between two chicken rice stall owners. Joubin analyses the intergenerational differences exacerbated by the linguistic and cultural tensions between the Cantonese-speaking parents, the predominantly Singlish-speaking youth and the early modern English of the play the younger generation are staging. In this section, the final case studies are Ong Ken Sen's *Lear Dreaming*, *Desdemona* and *Search: Hamlet*—multilingual and multicultural plays that combine theatrical traditions and languages from across the world. Joubin shows how Ong's pieces have developed through the years and how they "problematize the assumption that Asian and Anglo-European cultures can be condensed into 'East' and 'West'" (180). Her chapter ends with an overview of multilingual Shakespeares and how they "counter the narratives about universal literary experience that are packaged and consumed at international festivals" (182).

Shakespeare and East Asia testifies to the fact that "neither Asia nor Shakespeare has an intrinsic, unified identity in any meaningful sense without context" (192) and provides a model for the kind of study that situates international performances in their local and global contexts. As Joubin says, "interpreting Shakespeare in a multilingual framework enriches our understanding of words that would have elided attention" (187). Though the case-study-based format of this book does not allow for much close language analysis, Joubin's approach lights the way for future studies that may build on the critical work she has done in tracing these broad networks across borders, cultures and languages.