

Marcela Kostihová: *Shakespeare in Transition: Political Appropriations in the Postcommunist Czech Republic*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

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Shakespeare in Transition argues that translations and performances of Shakespeare's plays produced in the Czech Republic between the end of the communist regime in 1989 and the country's accession to the European Union in 2004 have a strong and distinct political edge. Kostihová seeks to refute the prevalent opinion that postcommunist Czech Shakespeare on page and stage has had little relevance to the country's current political situation, in contrast to the previous three hundred years, when Shakespeare was used as a vehicle of both political propaganda and dissent. Though we might expect that political uses of Shakespeare would have lost their impetus following the disintegration of the totalitarian Soviet-backed regime, Kostihová demonstrates that this has not been the case. She proposes instead that the larger socio-economic pressures attendant on the major political changes and later the specific demands imposed on the Czech Republic as part of the accession requirements by the EU have inspired a rich array of politically motivated translations and performances.

The book presents convincing evidence through a series of thematically grouped case studies. The first of these sections contends that the proliferation of new Shakespeare translations after 1989, and the so-called translation wars that ensued, expresses an anxiety over the country's cultural future vis-à-vis the rapidly changing political and economic situation. The conflict pitted those who believed that Shakespeare should be translated into contemporary colloquial Czech accessible to all against those supporting more formal renditions into older varieties of the language only accessible to an erudite elite. As the heated debate unfolded on the front pages of major national newspapers, the participants did not hesitate to label the translations they opposed as acts of high treason against the Czech state and its people. Kostihová shows how this passionate investment in different translation styles is deeply political. For both camps the continued viability of Shakespeare as a central component of Czech cultural capital depends on a particular relationship of the texts (and by extension performances using them) to the changing socio-economic and socio-political realities of the country.

The next cluster of case studies focuses on issues of gender identity and sets out to show that the EU's demands for legislation safeguarding gender equality, gay and lesbian rights, and prevention of domestic violence reminded many Czechs of the communist regime's earlier

suspect attempts at implementing gender equality. As a result, Kostihová argues, a sense of normative masculinity became a central part of Czech postcommunist subjectivity. The book analyses this phenomenon through a series of detailed studies of Czech productions of Shakespeare's plays from the 1990s and early 2000s. Kostihová argues that in their overwhelming reaffirmation of normative masculinity these productions display a form of political dissent against the patronising, globalising, and sometimes outright exploitative pressures exerted on the country by the EU and the West in general. She provides several accounts of productions of *The Taming of the Shrew* that condoned the forced transformation (the taming) of the main female protagonist from an independent feisty woman into a meek submissive wife. The rare productions which went against this grain, such as a dramatization of Shakespeare's sonnets set in a post-industrial garbage dump and enacted by two male actors openly engaging in a homosexual relationship, were received poorly by both critics and audiences. Considered all together, the case studies show how the reception of Czech performances of Shakespeare was played out against the wider struggles to define a sense of national identity after the collapse of the communist regime.

The book is successful thanks to Kostihová's ability to combine a highly informed and lively analysis of Czech Shakespeare (in the form of both performances and translations) with a complex understanding of the political, economic, and social developments happening in the Czech Republic and Europe at large. The book also draws on an impressive range of sources, rarely seen together in a single volume of literary scholarship: personal interviews with translators and theatre professionals, performance reviews, photographs from productions, statistics about socio-economic conditions in the country, official EU documents, sociological studies of Czech attitudes to gender issues, as well as relevant literary scholarship and theory. All these sources are carefully selected, presented, and organised to draw in literary and theatre scholars familiar with Shakespeare but likely less familiar with the nuances of recent Czech history. The book also provides a general history of Czech Shakespeare translations and productions from the preceding eras, which in its quality surpasses existing scholarship focused specifically on these earlier periods. For this reason, Kostihova's book is the current definitive reference on Czech Shakespeare. Although the author herself never explicitly includes this among her goals, because of its rigorously interdisciplinary multimodal methodology and its refusal to simplify complex cultural phenomena, *Shakespeare in Transition* can at the same time serve as a model for all scholars working on foreign appropriations and political uses of Shakespeare.