

Book Reviews

Wolfgang Weiss, *Shakespeare in Bayern und auf Bairisch (Shakespeare in Bavaria and in Bavarian Regional Dialects)*, Passau: Verlag Karl Stutz, 2008, 1st ed. Pp. 201. ISBN: 978-3-88849-090-3.

Reviewed by Sonja Fielitz^a

Among the many books on the reception of Shakespeare in Germany this monograph deserves particular attention because it is the first full-length study of translations and adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in an indigenous language with its various dialects in a cultural region. The author, Professor Emeritus of the University of Munich and former Director of the Munich Shakespeare Research Library, has chosen Bavaria and the Bavarian language not only because it is his native language but also because there is an old and still highly vivid tradition of popular theatre in the Bavarian language regularly performed by professional actors as well as amateurs in many towns and villages. Being one of the most distinguished European scholars in the field of Shakespeare studies, Weiss at the same time draws attention to a much neglected tradition in Shakespeare's German literary and theatrical history, that is, his reception in popular theatre (*Volkstheater*). This tradition has long been overshadowed by the more spectacular 'discovery' of Shakespeare by German poets, dramatists, and critics in the eighteenth century, hailing the Bard as a liberator from French literary hegemony and propagating him as their new literary model. This enthusiastic reception together with numerous translations for the educated classes resulted in Shakespeare's naturalisation and finally in his enthronement as the third German classic poet beside Goethe and Schiller in the early nineteenth century.

Weiss therefore, begins his study with the origin of the Shakespeare reception in popular German theatre of the Early Modern Period, that is, with the travelling English actors who had also adaptations of some of Shakespeare's plays in their repertoire when they performed in market places, inns, and elsewhere in Bavarian towns and princely residences from Shakespeare's lifetime until well into the Thirty Years War. After the war, German travelling players followed in their steps, and they

^a Sonja Fielitz is Professor at Philipps-Universität Marburg, Dean of the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Department of English and American Studies, Marburg, Germany.

also included some versions of Shakespeare's plays in their repertoires, among them the famous German version of *Hamlet*, that is, *Der Bestrafte Brudermord (Fratricide Punished)*.

After a learned discussion of some of the less successful translations of German poets of the eighteenth century who regarded Shakespeare as a popular dramatist rather than as the great literary genius, the author deals with Shakespeare's plays adapted for the Bavarian popular theatres performed by amateurs. He then traces the Bard's influence in many plays written by the so-called *Bauern-Shakespeare (peasants' Shakespeare)* Johann Georg Schmalz (1792/3-1845) for Germany's oldest popular theatre in Kiefersfelden (founded in the seventeenth century) and also diligently analyses the first extant Bavarian version of a Shakespearean play, that is, the anonymous *Hamlet, der Prinz von Denemarkt*, first performed in Seebruck in 1845. The concluding chapter traces modern adaptations in various Bavarian dialects, e.g., adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and a most impressive *Macbeth* translated into the dialect of the Bavarian Forest.

The author also deals with narrative dialectal phrases of Shakespeare's plays, adaptations of Sonnet 18, as well as individual monologues from the plays. Furthermore, lists of plays and sonnets in other dialects in Germany, Austria and Switzerland are included to encourage further research activities. All in all, this learned and extraordinarily original study proves that Shakespeare's plays can highly successfully be adapted for dialectal performances – a fact that has been not only neglected but also despised by many critics and scholars as an inappropriate medium for Shakespeare's work. Weiss' monograph also demonstrates most admirably that in order to stage Shakespeare's plays successfully, they should not be translated literally. From a cultural point of view, it appears advisable to adapt and even to transpose plots, characters and settings into the target culture, because dialects serve as expressions of regional culture to a much greater extent than High German superimposed above the many German indigenous dialects.