

Symington, Rodney. *The Nazi Appropriation of Shakespeare*. Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005 (pp 332). ISBN 0773460144.

What is a “Nazi”? Was Oskar Schindler a Nazi? Yes, but he rescued the lives of a thousand Jews. Was Wilm Hosenfeld a Nazi? Yes, an ardent one, in fact, but he rescued the great Jewish pianist Wladislaw Szpielman. It is a slippery question. The term “Nazi” itself is an acronym for the National Socialist German Workers Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* or *NSDAP*), a tangled web of contradictions and conflicting interests. (Hollywood has always known what a Nazi is, yet Hollywood is about melodrama, myths and stereotypes while reality is more complex.) But what did the Nazis see in Shakespeare? The straightforward title of Rodney Symington’s *The Nazi Appropriation of Shakespeare* (my underlining) suggests a straightforward answer. His book proves, however, that this is not the case. Symington is a professor of German and the author of the most complete study, in either English or German, on Brecht and Shakespeare (1970). He brings together for the first time in a book length study in English a broad range of material available primarily in German to locate the Nazi reception of Shakespeare within its political and historical context.

The appeal of National Socialism lay (and still lies) in its depiction of history as myth and in politics as performance. The choreography of the paramilitary party rallies in Nuremberg, the orchestration of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, and Hitler’s histrionics exercised (and continue to exercise) a fascination not only on the German imagination, as Susan Sontag notes in her essay on Leni Riefenstahl. Reichspropagandaminister Joseph Goebbels wrote: “politics is the highest form of art” (qtd. in Symington 31). He quickly set out to transform the well over two hundred German theaters into a tool for educating the nation, “a forum where the *Volksgemeinschaft* would become tangible” (163). Accordingly, the lion’s share of the Propaganda Ministry’s budget—26.4%—went to the theaters. Between 1934 and 1942 state subsidies to theaters, including free tickets, increased by 500% and attendance actually doubled (47). After modern German drama as well as all foreign-born playwrights, except select European classics, such as Moliere and Ibsen, were banned, directors were left with Schiller (the Nazi favourite), Keist, Grabbe, Shaw (ever a critic of the English government) and Shakespeare, whose characters were thought to exemplify “Germanic” or “Nordic” virtues. (Goethe’s characters were not considered “heroic” enough.) Between 1933 and 1944, when Goebbels ordered all theaters closed, nearly all of Shake-

spere's 37 plays were produced, most frequently the comedies. Interestingly, the number of productions of *The Merchant of Venice* actually declined by two-thirds between 1933 and 1944, because, Symington concludes, directors simply refused, or were unable, to stage the play as an anti-Semitic tract (245).

Those who sought to appropriate Shakespeare for the Nazi cause, however, were less than fascinating: long-forgotten party hacks, second-rate scholars, third-rate translators. They succeeded, nevertheless, in canonizing the Schlegel-Tieck translations and banishing all attempts at "modernizing," most notably the translations of Hans Rothe. In this scenario the German Shakespeare Society played a lacklustre role. Wolfgang Keller, an ultra-nationalistic, anti-Semitic adherent of Hitler, even before the latter came to power, was sole editor of the *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* from 1919 to 1943 and president of the Society from 1939 to 1943. Hans Hecht, a Jewish member of the Board of the Society resigned in 1936; Levin Schücking had already resigned in 1929. Following Ruth Freifrau von Ledebur, Symington argues that the history of the Shakespeare Society was "a balancing act between the pressures of conformity and the ever-weakening endeavour to retain a measure of scholarly independence" (117). This balancing act carried over after 1945 and may explain why no member of the German Shakespeare Society had devoted a book-length study to the topic before Ledebur.

The book falls into three parts: the rise of Shakespeare as a classical German author (chaps. 1-2), the attempt to appropriate this heritage for National Socialist cultural policy (chaps. 3-5), and "the stage as political battleground" (chap. 6). Considering the control Goebbels and his Reichsdramaturg Rainer Schlösser exercised over German stages, it is surprising that any "subversive" elements at all could find their way into a performance. That this did occasionally happen was due to the rivalry between Goebbels and Hermann Göring for the best theater in Berlin. Goebbels, who wrote his dissertation with Friedrich Gundolf, the Jewish author of *Shakespeare und der deutsche Geist* (1911), had wrested control over all of the theaters in the Reich, except for the Prussian State theaters, which were under the control of Göring, the Prussian Minister of the Interior. Göring appointed Gustaf Gründgens as superintendent of the Prussian State Theater in Berlin, and Gründgens, in turn, employed Jürgen Fehling as a director. Those performances cited today as "subversive" were usually directed by Fehling at the Prussian State Theater: *Richard the Third* (1937), in which similarities to Goebbels club foot and SA and SS uniforms seem obvious in retrospect, *Richard II* (1939), and *Julius Caesar* (1940). But did the general audience

at the time see this as subversive? Probably not. After November 27, 1936 Goebbels forbade criticism in favor of “appreciation.” Also, had the general audience viewed these performances as subversive, Fehling’s career would have been terminated immediately. But there were others in the audience.

In a 1936 production directed by Lothar Mühel, Gründgens portrayed what Nazi critics saw as a “new” Hamlet—active, decisive and “Nordic”—an antidote to the dreamy, indecisive Hamlets that had occupied the German stage since Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795). But was his production particularly “Nordic” or in line with Nazi ideology? Marcel Reich-Ranicki, Jewish don of postwar German literary criticism, was in the audience in 1936, but he read Gründgens’s performance as “a political manifesto, as a protest against the tyranny in Germany” (qtd. in Symington, *The Nazi Appropriation* 193). One year later, a blond-haired Laurence Olivier in his first season at London’s Old Vic, also played an active and decisive Hamlet intent on getting rid of Claudius. Was this not also a “Nordic” Hamlet? Symington concludes that any ambiguity in signification of the dramatic speech act was “inevitably determined by the mind of the viewer” (198). Likewise, what constitutes “Nazi” or “subversive Shakespeare” is likely to have been determined by the mind of the viewer.

Whether they realized it or not, some of the greatest German actors of the twentieth century—Gründgens, Marianne Hoppe, Heinrich George, Emil Jannings, and Werner Krauss—were an integral part of the Nazi’s murderous system. Sadly, some even supported it, at least in the early years. Symington’s verdict, however, is too harsh: “entertaining the audience with *Twelfth Night* was a significant contribution to the Nazi’s ultimate mission of an expansionist war and the elimination of the Jews” (264). Using the same logic we must likewise pass judgement on all the musicians who entertained audiences with Bach between 1933 and 1945.

This was not an easy book to write, and it is not an easy book to read, but it is a necessary book. Symington has taken it upon himself to tell a dreary tale about faceless ideologues, back bending functionaries, misguided actors, and murderous egomaniacs. The only true hero is Shakespeare himself. The “bifold authority” (Weimann) at the base of his dramas resists appropriation for any ideology. As Symington correctly concludes: “The Nazis lost the ideological war before they lost the real one” (270).

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