

Lukas Erne and Kareen Seidler, eds. *Early Modern German Shakespeare: Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet: Der Bestrafte Brudermord and Romio und Julieta in Translation*. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Bloomsbury, 2020. Pp 366. Hardcover £100. ISBN: 9781350084049. Paperback £21.99. ISBN: 9781350283114.

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The present volume, wonderfully edited by Lukas Erne and Kareen Seidler, brings two of the German plays adapted from Shakespeare: *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*, translated as *Fratricide Punished*, a fast-paced adaptation of *Hamlet*, and *Romio und Julieta*, a remarkable version (ca 1688) of Shakespeare's tragedy. Both texts received the care common to Arden series: from meticulous textual commentary, historical contexts, origins of the texts and performance histories, to fully annotated scripts and helpful appendices that include possible doubling charts for casting. Seidler devoted almost two decades to her study of the German *Romio und Julieta*, and the edition benefits from her sustained textual, translatorial, and performative explorations. This volume breaks new ground for Arden by including early modern plays in translation. Both the plays are well known to Shakespeare scholars, since Albert Cohn's 1865 book included them in an English translation with the German originals.<sup>1</sup> *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* has been retranslated into English (and other languages since) and published widely, while *Romio und Julieta* has remained largely unnoticed. As part of a major research project at the University of Geneva,<sup>2</sup> Erne and Seidler went back to the earliest available German texts, edited and translated them for this new Arden sub-series named after their project: Early Modern German Shakespeare.

Erne and Seidler rightly stress that Shakespeare's plays were performed in mainland Europe without any reference to Shakespeare. His name did not register until well into the eighteenth century. But here's the rub: this project, this edition, and the series as a whole centre on Shakespeare ('Our edition is particularly concerned with the relationship between the German adaptations and the Shakespearean originals', 113), and while the editors take precautions to avoid the wishful thinking of discovering Shakespeare in early modern Germany, I am not entirely convinced that their effort always succeeds methodologically — especially when it comes to *Hamlet*. 'Deutschland ist Hamlet' proclaimed Ferdinand Freiligrath famously in his 1844 poem and indeed much German nationalist Shakespeare scholarship tried to find evidence of Shakespeare and his (for them)

greatest tragedy in Germany. That cult is almost as strong as the Bardolatry has been in the Anglophone sphere. (True, the latter cult no longer centres on Shakespeare the Bard but on ‘the Works’: a near-scriptural authority of cultural heritage.) This Arden edition of *Bestrafte Brudermord* in many ways still tries to fulfil the cultural pipe dream. ‘*Hamlet* was taken to the Continent by travelling English players during Shakespeare’s lifetime and adapted for performance in front of foreign-language audiences. Later it was translated into German and further reworked’ (1) states the third and fourth sentences of the introduction. But no evidence exists for this assertion. The editors carefully acknowledge as much soon after, but the reader has been primed. In the end, we are reading this book because of Shakespeare the cultural icon; no other non-Shakespearean play of the English comedy in German is likely to receive comparable critical attention. The editors follow the problematic opening with a corrective: ‘the only manuscript of [*Bestrafte Brudermord*] known to have existed — it is now lost — was dated 1710, and the play did not itself reach print until 1781’ (1). The *only* reference to *Hamlet* performed on the continent between Shakespeare’s lifetime and the 1720s comes from a repertory list of plays logged (but not necessarily performed) in Dresden in June 1626. The document itself, published by the Dresdner musician and theatre historian Moritz Fürstenau in 1861–62, is now lost. To reformulate: apart from one brief, now-lost mention from 1626 Dresden, the first mention of *Hamlet* in Germany comes from the 1720s. The earliest surviving play was published in 1781, allegedly based on a (lost) manuscript of 1710. The rest is speculation — or the ‘Deutschland ist Hamlet’ sentiment?

Of course, English plays — and Shakespeare’s among them — were very popular on the continent but again — as we have argued elsewhere — the implicit perspective of London as the centre and of the continent as the periphery (or cultural colony) is misleading.<sup>3</sup> Most English plays that gained popularity originated from continental, transnational, or pan-European sources — such as the two greatest hits of the German theatre, *Dr Faustus* and *St Dorothea*. The German *Faust* combined the English play by Marlowe et al. (based on the German *Faustbuch*) with popular magician plays (some of them Jesuit) and trickster stories collected in the *Daemonologia Rubenzalii Silezii* (1662–65) or *Satyrus etymologicus* (1672) by the Leipzig scholar Paul Johannes Praetorius. The many versions of *St Dorothea* blended Thomas Dekker and Philip Massinger’s English play *The Virgin Martyr* (ca 1620) with popular hagiography and vernal folk rituals. Johann Georg Gettner (or Göttner, ca 1650–96) was also the likely figure behind *Romio und Julieta* and both plays were played by his company of Eggenberg Comedians.<sup>4</sup> Other English plays surpassed the popularity of Shakespeare’s — perhaps with the exception of

*Romeo and Juliet* (itself based on Italian novellas) and maybe *King Lear* (a variant of a widespread folk tale). Among the big hits were *The Spanish Tragedy*, Dekker's *Fortunatus* (itself a German folktale), or the moral tales of the prodigal son and of *Jemand und Niemand* (*Somebody and Nobody*). What is particularly interesting is that these popular plays reworked continental material rather than depended on London theatre as a creative forge.

The English comedians brought their style, not necessarily new material. This information is important for the current volume too: in order to appreciate what *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* and *Romio und Julieta* are as plays, we must abandon the inherited Shakespearean perspective and take the two scripts for what they are: a 1781 text probably associated with an unidentified early eighteenth-century German theatre company probably in Northern Germany, and a 1680s text of a German troupe belonging to the House of Eggenberg in Český Krumlov in South Bohemia. Understanding the respective theatrical cultures will help us grasp the two plays better than their relationship with Shakespeare. Erne and Seidler state that late seventeenth-century audiences 'preferred French plays' (xvii), but that is relative: period anthologies in German included Molière alongside English, Spanish, Italian, and Dutch plays, and it was this transnational dramaturgy that shaped the Shakespearean plays in question. Theatre companies also had their performance styles (narrative patterns, routines, commonplaces, comedic numbers, theatergrams, not to mention scenography) in the stage language they spoke and presented their plays. One of the fascinating accounts mentioned in the 'Modern Stage History' chapter of the introduction discusses Seidler's German adaptation of *Romio und Julieta* performed by five student actors in Bern, Switzerland, in 2011 and in Germany in 2012. I would be curious to see and compare their production version with both the 1688 script and with Shakespeare. What was the stage language that made the Swiss performances of 2011 work?

Erne and Seidler are up against a prejudiced view of the Shakespearean adaptations — not unlike the view of their Restoration counterparts. Their edition is unnecessarily apologetic about the reputedly farcical versions. On the contrary the editors' exquisite translations show how serious, solemn, and focused both the plays are — compared to other scripts of early modern English comedy in German. While the editors open their introduction somewhat submissively — 'Imagine a *Hamlet* reduced to its action and deprived of its philosophy' (1) — this fails to do justice to their achievement: an excellent edition of two remarkable early modern German plays in modern English translation that warrant tight-knit theatrical action, unburdened of 'Shakespeare as literary dramatist' (to borrow Erne's own expression). There are plays that read well but are dead on stage.

Others are dreary on the page but come to life in performance. The travelling actors' plays were in the latter category. If (and probably only if) we can forget about Shakespeare, then *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* and *Romio und Julieta* can also prove their theatrical merit. But that may be our pipe dream: Shakespeare as a cultural trauma looms large.

## Notes

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- 1 Albert Cohn, *Shakespeare in Germany in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: An Account of English Actors in Germany and the Netherlands and of the Plays Performed by them During the Same Period* (London and Berlin, 1865).
- 2 Early Modern German Shakespeare, The University of Geneva, <https://www.unige.ch/emgs/>.
- 3 Pavel Drábek, “‘Why, sir, are there other heuens in other countries?’: The English Comedy as Transnational Style”, in *Transnational Connections in Early Modern Theatre*, ed. M.A. Katritzky and Pavel Drábek (Manchester, 2020), 139–61, <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526139184.00015>; Pavel Drábek and M.A. Katritzky, ‘Shakespearean Players in Early Modern Europe’, in *The Cambridge Guide to the Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Bruce R. Smith, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 2016), 1527–33, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.209>.
- 4 For a commented English translation see Anna Mikyšková, ‘*Massinger and Dekker’s “The Virgin Martyr” in the Hands of German “Comedianten”*’. Unpublished Master’s thesis. (Masaryk University, 2018), <https://is.muni.cz/th/anotc/>.