

Book review

Reconstructing Shakespeare in the Nordic Countries
National Revival and Interwar Politics, 1870 – 1940

Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023, 286 pages.

Edited by Nely Keinänen and Per Sivefors

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Exploring the role of Shakespeare's plays in the Nordics before World War II, *Reconstructing Shakespeare in the Nordic Countries: National Revival and Interwar Politics, 1870–1940* (2023), contains seven contributed articles and an overview of the subject by editors Nely Keinänen and Per Sivefors. The collection starts with the birth of the Nordic nationalist movements when Shakespeare held significant cultural capital and three Nordic countries were still on their road to independence. Ending in 1940, the book ushers in the end of an era and a major shift in Europe's cultural and political landscape.

The extensive introduction and accompanying bibliography reflect the editors' expertise and deep knowledge of the wider field. The contextualizing introduction is necessary as some of the chapters in this collection focus on rather narrow topics or emphasize a specific national context, making an introduction embedding the research in the wider Nordic context invaluable.

The book examines the Shakespeare-figure upheld by Nordic linguists, literature researchers, and theatre researchers, and how this image was impacted by modernism and changes happening in contemporary theatre. Nordic interest in Shakespeare was mediated

through the Anglophone world, but it also came to the Nordics through Germany, and even Russia. In the introduction, we are reminded of the importance of Shakespeare when it comes to building national culture and, paradoxically, Shakespeare's role in internationalization. Looking at different Nordic countries concurrently highlights national differences in adopting the Shakespearean canon. For example, the contemporary feminist movement also used Shakespeare's plays in furthering its agendas.

The articles that go furthest back in history evaluate Shakespeare's central role in building a national Finnish culture. Iceland's relationship with Shakespeare followed a similar pattern just a short while later. In the Norwegian context of the 1900s, a unique feature was the overshadowing of Shakespeare by more esteemed national playwrights Ibsen and Björnson, mirroring the tensions between the national and international. In the case of Denmark, the 1916 Shakespeare tricentennial event comes under scrutiny. In the last few chapters, parallels are seen between Norway and Sweden during the shift in European politics of the 1930s.

Icelanders Ástráður Eysteinnsson and Ingibjörg Þórisdóttir write in their article "Early Icelandic translations of Shakespeare" about early translations and the public literary debates that inspired people to explore Iceland's nascent native drama, which borrowed from national history and mythology. The long gap which followed these early translations was broken by stage productions and Indriði Einarsson's new modern translations from 1926 onwards.

Nely Keinänen looks at the first Finnish-language staging of *Romeo and Juliet*, focusing on the Finnish actress Ida Aalberg, who starred as Juliet. Around Aalberg, the idea of a fresh "Finnish Maiden" image became disrupted by the role of Juliet and its connection to contemporary concepts of eroticism, since Aalberg starred almost simultaneously as Nora in Ibsen's *Doll House*. Keinänen brings a new facet to the cultural importance of Ida Aalberg and the role of theatre in the national project. The article stimulates thoughts on a new possible field of research: analyzing the gender of contemporary theatre critics. Most critics were men, which in the context of a gender-sensitive reading, could be enlightening.

Pentti Paavolainen's extensive exploration of "Kaarlo Bergbom and the Finnish-language Shakespeare-tradition" looks at the Finnish Theatre's/Finnish National Theatre's Shakespeare

productions from the 1881 production of *Romeo and Juliet* to the 1902 production of *The Tempest* and contextualizes them in the contemporary political and cultural atmosphere, as well as tracing the formation of Bergbom's concept of theatre. The large number of Finnish Shakespeare productions was possible due to the contemporaneous Shakespeare translation project by Paavo Cajander. Paavolainen's Bergbom chapter is a comprehensive review of early Finnish-language Shakespeare productions.

In her chapter "Shakespeare and the Norwegian National Theatre, 1899–1914", Christina Sandhaug writes about how Shakespeare's drama and poetry were appreciated in opposition to theatre, whose position lay somewhere between art and entertainment. But Shakespeare is also seen as a bolster to national culture, even though it is the star performers who carry the day: important performers elevate Shakespeare's reputation. Especially enlightening is the examination of Shakespeare in the context of adaptations, as Norwegian versions of his plays not only included redactions, but also textual changes angling for audience success. Another interesting facet is the country's domestic language question.

Svenn-Arve Myklebost's chapter "Nynorsk and the Nordic spirit: Henrik Rytter's Shakespeare Translations, 1932–1933" examines Shakespeare's role in the Norwegian cultural landscape where Rytter's translations reflect the country's linguistic and ideological mores as well as the political divide in Europe. The literary Norwegian language rooted in historic Danish was contrasted with Nynorsk and its roots in the Norwegian countryside. Rytter represented the latter: his fervent anti-Nazism and affinity to England instead of Germany were reflected in his linguistic choice. Myklebost also shows how Rytter's linguistic choices deliver his interpretation of Shakespeare.

The Danish Shakespeare legacy is represented by Anne Sophie Refskou's chapter "Commemoration and Conflict at Hamlet's Castle: The 1916 'Shakespeare *Mindedefest*' in Elsinore" which describes a 1916 festival arranged in Denmark as a commemoration of Shakespeare's year of death with an "authentic" production of *Hamlet* in-situ at Elsinore. Performers at the celebration included famous Nordic Shakespearean actors, speeches were given by eminent cultural figures, and the Danish royal family graced the celebration with their

presence. World War I was raging and Denmark, attempting to extricate itself from the conflict, had to balance warring Germany and Britain.

In his article “A great interpreter of modern life”, Per Sivefors looks at Swedish author Eyvind Johnson in the context of Shakespeare, and especially *Hamlet*, throughout Johnson’s career: looking at characters through the lens of the Hamlet-figure, the intertextuality of Hamlet, Hamlet as an allusion, Hamlet in political contexts, and so forth. The chapter reminds us that the Shakespearean Hamlet figure can be realized in different forms and as an idea, can transcend eras and borders.

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Despite the editors voicing their fears of a too narrow focus, this seems an unlikely criticism, as the reader cannot realistically expect a comprehensive review of the entire topic. The book fulfils its promise by showing different ways of reaching its aims. Areas of focus change in function of the country and its context and span from an almost comprehensive review of the Shakespeare productions of a period to the study of an individual play in the context of a nationally renowned writer’s career. The book is a testament to the expansive nature of Shakespeare’s significance and comes together to form an interesting reading experience.

Translated from Finnish by Kayleigh Töyrä.