

## BOOK REVIEW

*Philip Smith*

*Savannah College of Art and Design*

*Studying Shakespeare Adaptation: From Restoration Theatre to YouTube.* Pamela Bickley and Jenny Stevens. London: Bloomsbury, The Arden Shakespeare, 2020. 272 pp. \$95 (cloth); \$29.95 (paper); \$26.95 (Ebook-PDF); \$26.95 (Ebook-Epub and Mobi). ISBN 978-1-3500-6863-6; ISBN 978-1-3500-6864-3; ISBN 978-1-3500-6866-7; ISBN 978-1-3500-6865-0.

The Arden Shakespeare Handbook series offers surveys of the various fields of Shakespeare studies. The purpose of its recent addition, *Studying Shakespeare Adaptation*, the authors assert, is to “show something of the range of Shakespeare adaptations across time and genre and to discuss current theorizing of adaptation” (viii). Each of the twelve chapters concerns three adaptations of a particular play. These adaptations are either a single work such as Eugène Ionesco’s *Macbett* (1972) or a body of similar texts such as YouTube videos related to *Romeo and Juliet*. I would recommend the volume for reference and to supplement the teaching of particular adaptations as in-class reading.

In keeping with the series’s goals, the text is a survey rather than an intervention. The introduction, accordingly, reads rather like a truncated version of Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier’s introduction to *Adaptations of Shakespeare* (2000) asserting, for example that all performance is adaptation, and that translated Shakespeare provides new ways of looking at familiar texts. These ideas are not revelatory but could be used to introduce students to key ideas in an accessible format.

The book’s subtitle, “From Restoration Theatre to YouTube,” suggests a historical approach, and in some cases a sense of history emerges between the different readings, but the book is intended as a cross section rather than a comprehensive history. As the authors acknowledge, the world of Shakespeare adaptation contains “innumerable examples we have not been able to consider” (viii). The texts seem to have been selected for novelty and breadth; the authors seek to highlight similarities and contrasts between texts from different time periods, in different media, and/or for different audiences.

While one can hardly criticize the authors for offering a less than complete catalogue of Shakespeare adaptations, the book is in danger of presenting a disproportionate sense of critical focus; few would argue that Michael Almereyda’s *Cymbeline* (2014) has had a greater impact, by any metric, than Aimé Césaire’s

*Une Tempête* (1969) and yet the former is explored over five pages and the latter a single sentence. Many of the better-known and better-documented examples of Shakespeare adaptation (*The Woman's Prize* [1647], *West Side Story* [1961], *Hamletmachine* [1977], *The Lion King* [1994], and so forth) are mentioned in passing or are absent. Bickley and Stevens make up for the gaps in the text, in part, by providing extensive citations (the references run to twenty-one pages) and by referencing, albeit not systematically, some of the works that are not subject to individual readings; the Lambs, for example, do not receive their own entry but nonetheless arise frequently. Even so, suggestions of further reading or an annotated bibliography would have been helpful. These gaps do not deter from the usefulness of specific readings, but anyone recommending the volume to students on the “further reading” section of a syllabus may need to supplement the readings with a wider context lest someone new to the field be misled as to a particular work's import.

Within the readings themselves there is sometimes an imbalance of critical and historical material. The meaning of Blackness in Restoration England as it pertains to Edward Ravenscroft's 1678 adaptation of *Titus Andronicus*, for example, is squeezed into just a few sentences and the use of the verb “indigenize” (24) demands, but does not receive, careful glossing. Arden Shakespeare Handbooks are aimed at researchers and graduate students and yet I struggled, at times, to identify the authors' imagined reader; someone who is sufficiently familiar with the critical history of Shakespeare that the term “Kottian” (59) is self-explanatory, but sufficiently ignorant of American history as to need an almost full-page explanation of the Watergate Scandal. This would not preclude the use of the text in teaching, but anyone seeking to use it as in-class reading should be prepared to gloss certain terms and to treat a given reading as a jumping-off point for further discussion rather than a complete critical overview.

The book's greatest strength is that the individual readings are well-researched and current with trends in the field, with references as recent as 2019. Individual entries can be used as supplementary reading in class to help students explore a particular work of adaptation. I would have no hesitation, for example, in directing students to Bickley and Stevens' readings of Howard Jacobson's *Shylock is My Name* (2016) or Bornila Chatterjee's *The Hungry* (2017).



Philip Smith is the author of *Reading Art Spiegelman* (Routledge 2015), *Shakespeare in Singapore* (Routledge 2020), and co-author of *Printing Terror: American Horror Comics as Cold War Commentary and Critique* (Manchester UP, 2021). He served as co-director of the Shakespeare Behind Bars program at The Correctional Facility at Fox Hill, Nassau, Bahamas, fight choreographer for the Shakespeare in Paradise festival, and executive board member for the Comics Studies Society. He is Chair of Liberal Arts and Professor of English at Savannah College of Art and Design. He is editor in chief of *Literature Compass*.