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Kim C. Sturgess. *Shakespeare and the American Nation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. vi + 234 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-83585-5.

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The Stars and Stripes of Shakespeare

This book gathers together many strange and curious details of how Shakespeare has became part and parcel of the making of America. He became an integral part of the American nation from its beginnings. As Sturgess demonstrates, the American dream and pursuit of happiness are almost intrinsically woven into Shakespeare's popularity in the United States.

Only three years after the American War of Independence ended in 1783, John Adams, accompanied by Thomas Jefferson, made a pilgrimage to Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon. Adams, who was to become the second president of the United States, paid homage to the playwright, alarmed as he sentimentally observed that the British had neglected a place of such cultural significance. From that moment on, Sturgess implies, the Americans took it upon themselves to do anything they could to salvage both the reputation and the physical state of Shakespeare as cultural capital and collective cultural memory. Thus, as this book amply demonstrates, the impulse to preserve and glorify Shakespeare will become part of a project of making Shakespeare American, of claiming Shakespeare for America.

The post-independence United States history became not just a history of land and people, but the history of transatlantic Shakespeare, of an American Shakespeare. As Sturgess suggests, "America is hardly explained by the appropriation of Shakespeare any more than it is by emphasis on its immigrant nature, its frontier experience, its urban centers, its liberal constitution" (p. 9). In 1795, Sturgess tells us, America got its first printed edition of Shakespeare's works. Few nations can claim similar urgency in printing Shakespeare soon after their foundations.

Sturgess's book is a story–finely written and well researched–of how, from the Founding Fathers to Hollywood horror movies and soft porn, Shakespeare is embedded in American cultural and political fashioning. Most of the book is taken up by the history of Shakespeare's reception in the nineteenth century, which is understandable given the importance of that century for the arc of American history. Only about a third of the book is devoted (rather crammed, in fact) to modernist and contemporary appropriations of Shakespeare. Yet, Shakespeare permeates American consciousness, culture, education, and political rhetoric as much, if not more, today as he did during the formative years of the American reception of his work in the nineteenth century.

As in other nations, where Shakespeare and nation building went hand in hand (in Central Europe, for example), in America, too, *Richard III* was one of the plays that marked the first professional theater performance. Sturgess's lively narrative brings to life the circumstances surrounding the history of this production. However, there is no effort to engage in an argument, or even a plausible speculation, what it was about a play centered on an autocratically destructive ruler that made him so popular in America's first theaters and beloved by their audiences. In most parts of the book, Sturgess is good at answering crucial questions about the cultural fetishization of Shakespeare in America. On the one hand, her answers are based on the assumption that the Americans thought of Shakespeare as not only part of the British cultural heritage, but their own as well; after all, they were willing to invest more in the preservation of the material history related to him and in the cultural value that they started producing. On the other hand, the answers stem out of the belief that the Americans claimed the English language they used was closer (because it got preserved in the new land) to the language (dialect) Shakespeare spoke.

Speaking the language closer to that of Shakespeare somehow meant that the Americans solidified the cultural and civilizational beginning and endurance of a nation that, after all, continued the British imperialistic dynamic in the New World. America did so, for example,

by claiming that the North American continent should belong to English speaking people. While America rejected the British monarchy and Parliament, it inherited its linguistic imperialism in the newly founded land. In a country in which just over half of the nineteenth-century immigrant population did not use English as their first language, deploying Shakespeare (alongside the Bible) as a conduit for implementing the rule of English became a viable and, in the end, successful instrument of solidifying the effectiveness and power of the national melting pot. And so, Shakespeare became America's first action hero.

Sturgess's book reads more like a descriptive chronological narrative than the interpretative cultural history it pertains to be. It successfully promotes the idea that Shakespeare is an intrinsic part of the political and ideological inception of America, but that he also marks the beginning of American cultural institutions and popular culture. He became instrumental to the establishment of theaters, replicating, Sturgess implies, the longstanding cultural proclivities for mingling sex with theater: in nineteenth-century American theaters, prostitutes had reserved seating on the third tier. Their Elizabethan counterparts, however, were allegedly milling about the theaters and the dark alleys of Southwark, on the south side of the river Thames, where the theaters were located in Shakespeare's time.

Sturgess also writes in detail about the attempts to buy the Shakespeare Birthplace for America, and about the foundation and building of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, in 1932. The original plan was to build such a library in Stratford-upon-Avon, but Henry Clay Folger, an American oil-magnate, changed his mind at the last minute and purchased the most premier plot of land in the country and built it there. By doing so, he made Shakespeare not just more firmly embedded in, and celebrated by, the American nation, but he also made him physically connected to the centers of American power: The Folger Shakespeare Library was built on Capitol Hill, between the U.S. Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Library of Congress.

The establishment of theater festivals and the advent of the American Shakespeare-driven tourist industry in Stratford-upon-Avon, which started almost immediately after the attempt to buy the Birthplace for the United States, failed, and further extended American closeness to Shakespeare. Thus, it fell upon America to rekindle British cultural patriotism and get the Stratford-upon-Avon tourist industry going. The cultural and financial capital that the Shakespeare industry generates is enormous because, as Sturgess suggests, Stratford-upon-Avon remains one place (in Britain) that Americans do not feel alien. In various degrees and forms, many visiting Americans to the town of Shakespeare's birth have voiced this view. So the link with the mother empire symbolically continues.

Speaking of the American contribution to the salvaging of Shakespeare in and out of the United States, Sturgess (surprisingly?) fails to document the history of The Swan Theater in Stratford-upon-Avon. That theater, now considered to be one of the most exciting acting spaces in Britain, was also built (on the ruins of a building destroyed by fire) entirely by American money given by an anonymous benefactor. The splendid stage of The Swan Theater remains one British theater that Americans return to as if coming to a cultural institution, not just to see a play.

The Swan Theater's fame has not been eclipsed by yet another world-famous theater, also built through the enormous effort of yet another American: The Globe on the Bankside in London, brought to fruition by Chicago-born Sam Wannamaker. But Sturgess neglects to make the connection between yet another American who left his imprint in the long history of American Shakespeare. It may be that Sturgess does not consider American contributions to the building of the nation outside America–as in the cases of The Swan and Globe theaters–as, in fact, relevant to the topic. But in the global context of increasingly loose boundaries, such national enterprises elsewhere are made to matter as much to the nation as monuments already on its soil.

When Sturgess's book reaches the twentieth century, the author seems to have exhausted material to speak about engagingly and in detail. Yet, Shakespeare remains as crucial to the American nation-building in the twentieth century as he was in earlier times. In Sturgess's book, however, there is hardly any room left for a developed analysis and further evidence of Shakespeare's popularity after the nineteenth century. Instead, the narrative is sweeping, crammed with select facts, and full of gaps. The absence of a more developed analysis of twentieth-century uses of Shakespeare is a major gap in this otherwise splendid book. For example, a chapter on how American Shakespeare scholarship has claimed dominance in the Shakespeare scholarly industry would have completed a picture of the American cultural assimilation of Shakespeare.

That industry's ambitions are particularly driven by the prominence of The Folger Shakespeare Library in the making of a North American academic production on

Shakespeare. The Folger Library based journal, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, for example, is one of the two leading journals in the field, and the American's generation of knowledge on Shakespeare leads in volume and claims to do so in quality, too, over other nations. In a curious way, nowadays, to posses archival materials related to Shakespeare, organize major conferences on his work, publish on Shakespeare, or produce popular films based on his plays, means leading the global economy of knowledge and continuing the cultural imprint Shakespeare has had on the national consciousness and culture of America. The chapter on film in Sturgess's book is more like a coda, and more of an index of titles, than an analytical piece. It is an apt afterword to a history of appropriation of a figure that, as the dust jacket boldly asserts, "had become as American as George Washington."

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