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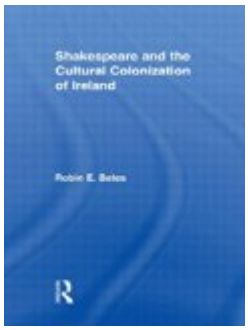
Robin E. Bates. *Shakespeare and the Cultural Colonization of Ireland.* New York: Routledge, 2008. vii + 170 pp. $95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-95816-5.



Reviewed by Meg Pearson

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Commissioned by Michael De Nie (University of West Georgia)

Robin Bates explores William Shakespeare's problematic influence upon the shared pasts of the Irish and the English in this latest installment of Routledge's Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory series. The slender volume achieves its goal by focusing its attention on three Shakespeare plays and a handful of the major Irish authors of the twentieth century.

Drawing upon the work of several postcolonial critics and Irish historians, Bates's work articulates the representation of explicitly or suggestively Irish characters by English writers as "an act of violent inclusion," one which "enlists the recorded culture in the self-defining projects of the [English] empire" (p. 17). The author reformulates this broader postcolonial concept by labeling such writing as "cultural impressment," defined as "an act ... of forcibly enlisting another in the service of the empire" (p. 27). The first chapter expands upon this bold metaphor, which is chosen because "the cultural practice of representation in the service of an empire-building project bears a similarity to the act of impressment which the English military used for recruiting" (p. 27), while contextualizing the English perception of Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Excerpts from English commentaries on Ireland by Sir Philip Sidney, Barnaby Riche, and Edmund Spenser help justify the book's contention of violence in Shakespeare's portrayals of Irishmen or characters with Irish characteristics.

Bates asserts that, rather than "attempting to decide for myself which characters and structures represent 'Irishness' in Shakespeare, I will defer to nationalist Irish writers of the twentieth century and allow them to decide for me" (p. 10). The resulting three chapters--which concern themselves with *Henry V* (c. 1599), *Richard II* (c. 1595), and *Hamlet* (c. 1601) respectively--devote half their space to readings of the plays and half to the modern Irish responses to these plays. This division helps to ground the reader in each play's context before examining the later works, but in general the author's interpretations of the Irish responses are far more persuasive.

Chapter 2 investigates the depiction of Celtic subservience to the English crown, particularly the figure of MacMorris in ***Henry V***, who famously inquires "What ish my nation?" This most obvious Irishman in Shakespeare is also the most fleeting presence on stage, but Bates, with the help of Declan Kiberd, convincingly argues that MacMorris represents a conflation of two Irish clichés: the servant and soldier. Both of these stereotypes reappear in Sean O'Casey's ***Juno and the Paycock*** (1924), argues Bates, under the guise of the unemployed drunks Joxer and Boyle, and in Samuel Beckett's ***Waiting for Godot*** (1953) as the hapless Didi and Gogo. Both pairs represent "servants in collusion ... in desperate need of a past through which to understand themselves" (p. 130).

While MacMorris identifies himself as an Irishman, King Richard II only possesses Irish traits. Some of the Ricardian flaws that would be associated with Irishness by the Elizabethans include unpredictability, being easily led by malicious people, unreliability, and impracticality (p. 65). Richard II's standard association with the medieval world is here reconfigured to mean that Richard is a distinctly Irish poet--William Butler Yeat's "vessel of porcelain"--who is doomed to fail when faced with the pragmatic Englishness of Bolingbroke (p. 72). Shakespeare's depiction of action's triumph over words inspires distaste and revisionism centuries later in the criticism of both Yeats and G. B. Shaw. Both authors associate Henry IV's matter-of-factness with Englishness, argues Bates, and both connect "the true majesty of this fallen king and his imaginative and rhetorical superiority" to the Irish (p. 79). To put Yeats and Shaw together in a discussion seems a challenge, but both men share an appreciation for the "poetic nature of the Celt," particularly in Yeats's case, and for the ability of outsiders to manipulate language (p. 80).

Bates's chapter on ***Hamlet*** begins with an intriguing interrogation of the Ghost as a "ghostly father," the figure blamed by Elizabethan administrators for many of the turbulence in Ireland. However, this interrogation vanishes like the Ghost himself, leaving behind a well-trodden discussion of Hamlet's purgatorial existence. This work has been covered by others, including Stephen Greenblatt, whom Bates references thoroughly, and the chapter flounders until the discussion turns to the burden of Irish literary parentage as articulated in James Joyce's ***Ulysses*** (1922). Bates considers Stephen Daedalus's dilemma--that the Irish are "keeping Shakespeare alive" themselves (p. 103--with great aptitude and relevance for the book's mission. Shakespeare does haunt the Irish in these readings.

It seems telling that chapter 5 may be the most compelling in the book. Here Bates focuses exclusively on Irish responses to Shakespeare, and the examples from the Derry Film Initiative ***Hamlet*** (2005), Seamus Heaney's poetry collection, ***North*** (1975), and G. B. Shaw's "Shakes Versus Shav" (1949) offer some of the most persuasive evidence for the problematical relationship between Irish authors and Shakespeare. Whether impressed by Shakespeare or not, these Irish poets and playwrights "reach for something uniquely Irish" even as they insert themselves into Shakespeare (p. 116). Reclaiming Irishness in these works clearly means negotiating the British paradigms. However, like the Bard's own work, these postcolonial reappropriations refuse resolution. Bates's thoughtful readings of twentieth-century Irish writers argue for cultural impressment, a nation of writers who are "unable to speak without quoting," even as they present a nation of readers who appear well able to discern the difference between themselves and their colonized literary past (p. 127).

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