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*Shakespeare's History Plays: Performance, Translation, and
Adaptation in Britain and Abroad (review)*

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moral commentary. In general, he was well disposed toward High Church and Catholic authors and scornful of the Puritans. His lives owe much to Aubrey's information but are rendered in a businesslike plain style, and although they lack many of Aubrey's engaging touches, they nonetheless offer shrewd character sketches. They are factually detailed and reliable, wonders of compression, and remain invaluable to literary scholars: indeed, they are the foundation of many of the seventeenth-century entries in the *New Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).

Allan Pritchard rounds off his survey with accounts of the group biographies of the Holles and the North families. In the course of his book, he has put a vast miscellany of lives into a serviceable framework and has established the categories and conventions of these works. He has made accessible large numbers of biographical exercises that have undeservedly fallen into obscurity. There are some omissions, inevitably. I would have liked to hear more about biographies of unusual women, for example—John Evelyn's *Life of Margaret Godolphin* merits more than a few lines, and the funeral sermons for Lady Magdalen Herbert and Lady Anne Clifford yield much that is memorable. Nevertheless, anyone interested in the cultural history of the seventeenth century would benefit from reading this book, which is full of jewels twinkling in the grass on ancient graves.

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Ton Hoenselaars, ed. *Shakespeare's History Plays: Performance, Translation, and Adaptation in Britain and Abroad*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.
ISBN 0-521-82902-X. 287 pp. + illus. \$80.00 cloth.

Ton Hoenselaars has assembled a valuable collection of essays examining Shakespeare's most politically enquiring plays. Despite the (implicit or explicit) keynote of celebration which frequently sets the tone of English major institutional theatrical revivals of Shakespeare's Histories—as when the Royal Shakespeare Company uses them as a rhetorical vehicle of self-definition—the plays themselves are, and often remain, intrinsically episodic and politically skeptical in their dramatization of hopes and disappointments which do not outlast a single lifetime, and so thwart a conventionally heroic sense of conclusion. Dennis Kennedy pertinently asks in his Foreword to the volume: “What is a nation? What is a national

history? In Shakespeare's chronicles these questions are intensely localized to England and England's provinces" (2), in the forms of plays so "directly conscious of public ideologies and private prerogatives, of dynastic and internecine angst or of the relationship of personality to power" as to provide a saga of a nation in terms of "precarious preservation shot through with torture and distress" (3). The resonances, poignancies, and ironies of these plays have a unique recurrent topicality, currently in relation to what Kennedy identifies as the "great paradox of our time," "the intense exercise of a residual form of nationalism amid a globalized economy and transnational politics" (7).

However, the collection has a further reach of ambition. Hoenselaars: "One of the aims is to study the various national responses to the plays with an eye to the process whereby different political and cultural contexts have tended to accommodate the plays' implicit 'Englishness'" (9). Notwithstanding the specifically English terms of the plays' inquiries, the contributors gather cumulative evidence of notable theatrical productions and resonances which are crucially restricted by, or to, their place of origin. Alexander Shurbanov and Boika Sokolova argue, as part of their account of the chronicle plays' productions in Bulgaria, that in "rewriting the histories the twentieth century diagnosed its own painful plight and reinscribed Shakespeare in the body of its post-World War II culture not as the author of unique dramatic creations based on old stories, but as a rich source of old texts to be reshaped for modern use—a legacy whose vigour resides in its endless susceptibility to meaningful revision and adaptation" (186). Other essays consider the plays in production in Japan, Italy, Austria, Spain, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

Hoenselaars subdivides the collection into three sections: "Alienating Histories," "The Appropriated Past," and "Stage Adaptations of the Histories." In the first section, Andrew Murphy contributes a provocative essay on how Ireland "functions as a kind of liminal space—at one and the same time foreign and familiar" (42), as part of how Shakespeare's Histories offer "a profound engagement with the issue of the uncertainties and fragmentation of national identities" (47), in which the Irish and the Welsh particularly emerge as figures and forces of "liminal disruption, serving to interrogate the easy tropes of national self-imagining" (49). This prompts us to "ask ourselves what exactly constitutes the 'foreign' and to consider the question of where exactly the boundaries between the 'domestic' and the 'foreign' can be drawn" (56). Murphy's essay leads effectively into Lisa Hopkins's analysis of how Wales figures in the plays as the "home and locus of a Britishness which is not quite Englishness" (60); "Wales's status

as physically marginal makes it prone to being treated as psychologically marginal too,” a territory of the fantastic where “rationality is prone to sudden violent, almost Gothic encounters with its Others” (66). Hopkins concludes by asking trenchantly: “Can England ... ever escape from its Welshness—or would to do so make it less than England?” (73). While the subsequent assertion by Jean-Michel Déprats that *Henry V* is “less dialectic and ambiguous than the eight history plays that preceded it” (75) may be arguable, Déprats offers a thoughtful account of his experiences in translating that play for a French audience.

The collection boasts other vigorously challenging reappraisals. James N. Loehlin proposes how “Brecht’s epic dramaturgy provided a justification for the construction of” the *Henry VI* plays “which retain the episodic narration of the chronicles in place of an Aristotelian unity” whilst providing an “emphasis on the harsh economics of war and government” which is “thoroughly Brechtian” and has served as a “keynote for modern productions” of the plays (134). There is unusually detailed consideration of *King John*—aptly described by Hoenselaars as “a play whose political stance interrogates and demystifies rather than supports a unitary notion” of England (113)—in Edward Burns’s essay on performances of Shakespeare’s plays as historical “cycles.” In what I thought the best argument of the collection, Burns points out how such epic production cycles have the advantage of providing a healthy alternative to conventional commercial theatre by requiring an ensemble; though he adds that the main disadvantage—from which arguably Michael Bogdanov and Michael Pennington’s aggressively left-wing English Shakespeare Company arguably “never recovered”—is that “it builds a male-centred, male-defined company” (155). The RSC and larger subsidized companies face a paradox in the theatrical formulation of any non-Brechtian epic sense of “this England” in a situation where:

any certainty of the value of such an enterprise is called into question by the nature and tendency of the dramatic material from which the epic style is built. It seems to me that the “history” plays question what “history” is, and show us “history in the making” in that they derive so much of their dynamic from the clash between rival characters or groups who seek to “make history” ... in their own competing terms. The battle is over what is digested, remembered, understood. The internal dramas of the plays are in themselves a challenge to the idea of an overarching “historical” structure on which the “cycles” are predicated. (157)

Thus, claims Burns, whilst a theatrical image of nation and spirit may have been formulated and affirmed, Shakespeare's plays present "history as made out of the uncontrolled, often embarrassing, emotions of a dysfunctional multinational family," in ways contrary to the drives of national integration myths: "as this happens, [Shakespeare's Histories] can be seen to mock the audience's need to pull together, to find a larger frame for the interfamilial squabbles in front of us" (164).

Hoenselaars's collection offers many examples of such lively skeptical thought to identify and counter many forms of national and theatrical parochialism, and their intrinsic restrictions. The assembled essays argue enthusiastically and convincingly for the valuable strengths of Shakespeare's Histories in opposing the restrictions of ostensibly self-legitimizing power.

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Rita Keresztesi. *Strangers at Home: American Ethnic Modernism Between the Wars*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xxii + 226 pp. \$60.

When I teach Modernism, Zora Neale Hurston is central to my course, as are Nella Larsen and Ralph Ellison. Jewish and Native American writers are also a decided part of my canon of authors. I know of few teachers whose conception of Modernism is so antediluvian as to encompass only Anglo-American authors. Innovative anthologies of American Literature such as the excellent Heath anthology transparently critique such narrow canon formations. Moreover, critics such as Werner Sollors and Houston Baker moved beyond such narrow conceptions of Modernism in the 1980s and 1990s so that Ruth Keresztesi's contention that her approach of getting beyond the canon is controversial and innovative is unsustainable. She does "rethink the project of American literary modernism from the perspective and peripheral locales of ethnic writers" (xiii) and in doing so brings some interesting critiques to bear on a wide range of authors, but her approach is hardly earth shattering. As she says, "I critique the taken for granted high modernist standards of American modernism, reread the canon from its ethnic perspectives and suggest that modernism and ethnicity were intimately connected within American version of modernism" (191). I would like to know "taken for granted" by whom? Surely