

*Book Review*

**Kostihová, Marcela. *Shakespeare in Transition: Political Appropriations in the Postcommunist Czech Republic*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 240 pp. \$80.00.**



For anyone who questions the efficacy of Shakespeare in the modern world, Marcela Kostihová's *Shakespeare in Transition: Political Appropriations in the Postcommunist Czech Republic* stands as a testament to the political and aesthetic importance of his works in the twenty-first century. In beautifully written prose, Kostihová argues that the Czech post-communist national identity is intimately tied to Shakespeare's plays, especially what Czechs perceive as Shakespeare's universal humanity. What makes the book important, however, is the fact that as much as Kostihová is writing about Shakespeare in the Czech Republic, the book also ponders the emergence of the Czech Republic from a communist to a democratic state—with all of its pitfalls of capitalism and its possibilities of individual freedom—including the rights of the formerly disenfranchised minorities. As Kostihová argues, artistic expression in the theatre, in particular Shakespearean theatre, becomes the site of contested political ideology. Though many scholars have recognized the importance of Shakespeare for Czechs during the communist occupation, many contend that Shakespeare is now devoid of politics; Kostihová, however, disputes these voices and argues instead that what could not be voiced as a criticism of democratization and the strife for membership in the European Union is manifested in productions of Shakespeare's work. In careful readings of Shakespeare productions spanning from 1995-2005, Kostihová demonstrates, "the wider context of postcommunist sociopolitical and economic developments, their impact on the quality of everyday experience of average citizens and the sphere of the presumably depoliticized Shakespeare" (10).

The first part of the book provides the Western reader with the necessary context to understand the political milieu and history of the Czech people, as well as their artistic appropriation of Shakespeare. Chapter one presents a concise narrative chronicling the “neoliberal practices of the neo-imperial West, particularly the European Union” (17) to reveal how Shakespeare has become a site of resistance to such policies. Kostihová shows how the policies that were purportedly supposed to better the lives of the Czech people have actually resulted in a decrease of the living standard. As various institutions were privatized and many lost their jobs, the public services that the public had come to rely on was also disappearing under the new system. A few members of Czech society have benefited substantially from the economic change but the majority of the financial benefit has actually gone to outside Western forces: “neoliberal subjects are not so much liberated as made into pawns of a socioeconomic order increasingly controlled by international corporate concerns” (28). In chapter two, the author demonstrates the complicated cultural capital that Shakespeare held in the communist era, “wherein official interpretations sought to use Shakespeare and his work as ideological tools against Western Capitalists, while many of the performers and scholars attempted to present a Shakespeare that undermined official ideology and reconnected with ‘the West’, a shorthand symbol of a ‘free’ world” (37). Kostihová reveals that since the nineteenth century Czechs have embraced Shakespeare as their own as part and parcel of their nation building process, particularly as the Czechs sought to prove themselves worthy to their powerful neighbors in the West.

Thus providing the reader with the rich political framework of Shakespeare in the Czech Republic, Kostihová then turns our attention first to the Shakespeare translation wars and then to descriptions of several Shakespeare productions that took place during the last half-decade of the twentieth century and the first half-decade of the twenty-first century. Chapter three chronicles the contentious reactions to Martin Hilský’s translation of *Hamlet*, which along with his other Shakespeare translations had become the most popular Czech versions to be performed by theatrical companies in Prague and other major cities in the Czech Republic. Ironically, the criticism came from both ends of the spectrum: for the venerable translator Břetislav Hodek, Hilský’s *Hamlet* made Shakespeare’s

work too accessible; whereas for populist translator Jitka Sloupová, his translation was elitist. Kostihová uses these varying points of view to show how all three translators are invested in the cultural capital of Shakespeare within the context of the Czech language and ideals of the post-communist nation. The biggest payoff, for this reader, however occurs in the final two chapters in which Kostihová provides vivid accounts of Shakespeare productions and equally energetic analyses of the plays in their political context. Chapter four contains descriptions of three 2001 Prague productions of *The Taming of the Shrew* and then shows how they are connected with the construction of gender and gender relationships and norms within the family and the state as the country makes the transition from a communist to a post-communist government. Kostihová argues that these productions of *Shrew* contribute to the larger “resistance to post-communist socio-economic developments that have overwhelmingly disempowered large proportions of the population,” particularly men who are “unable to exercise their expected agency as family providers” (130). The productions comment on the related and veiled problem of domestic abuse in the post-communist Czech Republic. In the final chapter of the book, Kostihová relates the details of one production of *The Merchant of Venice*, of a performance of Shakespeare’s sonnets, and two productions of *Twelfth Night*, arguing how these productions comment on the politics of desire and on non-normative masculinity. In particular, the chapter deals with homosexuality and its expression (or lack thereof) in the communist and post-communist eras and how these productions speak to the possibility and problematics of alternative sexualities and identities in Czech society.

*Shakespeare in Translation* is particularly timely, as the International Shakespeare Congress, the huge once-in-five year gathering of international Shakespearean Scholars, held its meeting in Prague this past July 2011, and any scholar who attended the meeting will find the book provides a rich context for the understanding Shakespeare in the Czech Republic. For the more general reader, *Shakespeare in Translation* will be a satisfying and enlightening read because it demonstrates the essential quality of literature and performance that allows for political discussion and change.

Amy Tigner,  
University of Texas at Arlington