

# Recherche littéraire

# Literary Research



# ***Recherche littéraire / Literary Research***

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**Alexa Alice Joubin. *Shakespeare and East Asia.***  
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In an apt Prologue to this book, setting out the considerations that may be brought to bear on her topic, Alexa Alice Joubin explains that it is titled *Shakespeare and East Asia*, rather than *Shakespeare in East Asia*, “to signal the interplay between the two condensed cultural signifiers and to emphasize a shift away from the linear, one-way-street model of tracing the transplantation of a British ‘giant’ into a colonial cultural context” (6). This is followed, however, by the hint of an apologia, which suggests that we have not quite escaped the constraints of an Anglocentric model for Shakespeare studies. While she critiques the binary of “East” and “West,” Joubin nevertheless anticipates a question based on this construction: why should (English) readers in the “West” care about Shakespearean performance in and from the “East”? To answer (or to pre-empt) this implicit question, she affirms that “Asian interpretations of Shakespeare matter to Western readers because of their impact on American and European performance cultures, as exemplified by the worldwide recognition of the works of Akira Kurosawa, Ong Keng Sen, and Oh Tae-suk” (6). In broader disciplinary terms – if Shakespeare is still to be located within “English Studies” – Joubin states that “non-Anglophone interpretations of Shakespeare matter to readers because the expansion of English studies is currently occurring ‘outside the discipline’s traditional Anglophone ... base’” (here Joubin is quoting the suitably named James English, who has called for scholars “at the

presumptive center of things to begin paying more attention to the forms our discipline is taking at [such] sites of rapid expansion") (6).

Joubin knows her readership, but that such a justification should still be perceived as necessary two decades into the twenty-first century strikes me as a pity – not least because the 250 pages that follow it demonstrate the point that the Anglosphere is decidedly *not* the center of the Shakespearean world, and has not been for some time. It may be useful to zoom out. However much Shakespeare academics and artists might situate ourselves within global networks of scholarship and creative practice, anti-immigrant discourses in largely Anglophone countries like the United Kingdom and the United States are so stridently and shamelessly employed by populist politicians that there is a continued xenophobic, jingoistic, (white) Anglophilic counterweight in international public discourse – and we know that Shakespeare, in particular, is commonly recruited to shore up this conservative, self-important, (white) Anglonormative ideology. So perhaps the point does need to be made again and again.

The productive friction between geopolitical narratives and the smaller world(s) of Shakespeare studies or Shakespeare-in-performance emerges at various moments in Joubin's study. The reception of Asian Shakespeares outside of Asia is generally framed by what Joubin calls "*compulsory realpolitik*" – that is, "the conviction that the best way to understand non-Western works is by interpreting their engagement with pragmatic politics":

This approach may impose intentionality upon directors and imply that their works are of interest solely because of their testimonial value ... South Korean Shakespeare would be seen as allegories of the divide between North and South Korea, while mainland Chinese works on world tours would be thought to contain attenuated allusions to the Cultural Revolution. Anglophone Shakespeares are assumed to have broad theoretical applicability and aesthetic merits, whereas foreign Shakespeares – even when they focus on artistic innovation on a personal rather than an epic level – are compelled to prove their political worth. Critics are on the lookout for potentially subversive political messages in these works, which are compulsorily characterized as allegories of geopolitical issues. (7–8)

One may note in passing that Joubin's invocation of the term employed in the title of a seminal collection of essays edited by Dennis Kennedy, *Foreign Shakespeare* (1993), shows how – even 30 years later – we have yet to fully escape the notion that Anglophone Shakespeares are

normative, the standard against which everything else can be measured as “foreign.” In that book, “foreign Shakespeare” mostly meant Shakespeare in mainland Europe, although there was one essay (by Andrea J. Nouryeh) dedicated to “Shakespeare and the Japanese stage.” There is nonetheless a line of continuity stretching from Kennedy to Joubin; in a sense, the assumption that was often made about Shakespeare in Eastern Europe during the Cold War – that it had to be political – is the same one that Joubin identifies with regard to East Asian Shakespeares.

To challenge this, she makes a case for aesthetic merit to be acknowledged and enjoyed; for multiplicity and play in cultural borrowing to be discerned, instead of “the critical tendency to prioritize realpolitik in non-Western works,” which “leads to blind spots in our understanding of the logic and significance of Asian Shakespeares” (10). Joubin takes as granted Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s critique of Asia (the word, the concept, the geography, the geopolitical terrain) as “an impossible interpellation:” the “inherent diversity and incongruity” of Asia works against generalisation and categorisation. But, paired with another “cultural conglomerate” – Shakespeare, that “repository of endless recursive mimesis and theatrical repetition” – this multifarious “Asia” can be “configured both to operate as a local canon and simultaneously to project a self-image in new contexts of signification, which is particularly true at international festivals and in touring productions” (10). Shakespeare thus becomes a mechanism for recognising the global in Asia, and for representing Asias across the globe.

“Global Shakespeare” is, however, inherently political – because globalisation is political. By the time she reaches her Epilogue, Joubin has provided a wealth of examples showing that acute national anxieties give the lie to “postnational” claims. Moreover, “the rich and complex history of Asian-themed performances complicates the notion of globalization as necessarily solely global Americanization”:

For supporters of Taiwanese independence and Hong Kong’s cause in the protests against the draconian national security law, the threat of perceived Sinicization (politicocultural affiliation with, or influence by, the People’s Republic of China) is much more worrisome than Americanization. Similarly, Japanization is a real threat for Koreans who lived through Japanese colonization, and is therefore a more urgent topic for exploration. (194)

Indeed, the imbrication of Shakespeare with the national and regional politics of East Asia is schematically displayed in a concluding chronology, with parallel timelines running from 1609–2020 listing

pertinent historical events alongside East Asian Shakespearean phenomena (first textual, then theatrical and cinematic). Sometimes, the material history has a causal relationship to the Shakespearean material; sometimes, it is merely contextual. Joubin's book thus ends as it begins, with a gentle but firm reminder to the reader that foregrounding only the "political" will lead to a misunderstanding of the "aesthetic," and vice-versa.

In between prologue and epilogue, Joubin presents us with four acts. These chapters are arranged around themes (Sound and Spectacle, Politics of Remediation, Polyphonic Reception, Multilingualism and Diaspora) but also, neatly, around other clusters: particular plays, constellations of directors, variations in medium and genre. The scope is broad, ranging from Korean cinema to the masked-dance drama of *t'al'chum*, from Japanese samurai and anime films to traditional theatrical modes like Noh and Kabuki, from Chinese wuxia and kungfu films to *jingju* (Beijing Opera) and *huaju* (spoken drama). Theatre and film from Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Tibet are very specifically differentiated – challenging the sinister forms of "Sinicization" in which, ultimately, those of us who remain ignorant of East Asian cultural and political dynamics are arguably complicit precisely because of our ignorance (which has the effect of collapsing heterogeneity under a perceived China-dominant homogeneity).

One of the motivating premises of *Shakespeare and East Asia* is, then, to complicate the view from "West" to "East." To do so also entails revisiting existing Shakespearean representations (or appropriations) of the "East" in and by the "West." Prominent examples here are Kenneth Branagh's Japanesque film version of *As You Like It* (2006) and Ariane Mnouchkine's Japonoise production of *Richard II* (1982). Joubin is less interested in questions of cultural appropriation, however, than she is by the question of how culturally hybrid Shakespeare films and stage productions become "deterritorialized" and "reterritorialized" – in other words, when their national and cultural points of reference are allowed by audiences and critics to blur and blend, and when the circumstances of their reception seem to require these points of reference to be more clearly fixed. Thus, while Kennedy has praised Yukio Ninagawa as "a director who feels at liberty to appropriate Europe ... the way that Europe has traditionally appropriated Japan," effectively "turning the tables on Mnouchkine" and forging a "new eclecticism" through

Occidentalism rather than Orientalism (215n), Joubin explores how Ninagawa's famous *Macbeth* is an example of "aberrant decoding" by audiences in different contexts (123). Ninagawa's intercultural fusion introduced "unfamiliar narrative patterns" to audiences in Japan and the United Kingdom alike:

In Tokyo the production smacked of Occidentalism but was accused of Orientalism when it was on tour in Britain. The production acquired divergent meanings depending on venue: for audiences at the Nissay Theatre in Tokyo in 1980, the cherry blossoms symbolized beauty, death, and the repose of the soul; Edinburgh audiences in 1985 and London audiences in 1987 saw the cherry blossoms as a gateway to Japanese aesthetics. Scholars and directors have variously praised Ninagawa's Occidentalism as a form of empowerment and criticized his visual Orientalism as a form of selling out. (124)

Joubin discusses dozens of East Asian Shakespeare directors and countries/languages, so to dwell on Ninagawa and Japan/Japanese here does something of a disservice, but it helps to illustrate a key strand in this book: translation and multilingualism. The author quotes a critique of Ninagawa's emphasis on visual stylization – that it does not solve the "essentially aural" problem of "linguistic difficulty" (124). What is meant by this phrasing is not entirely clear. Is it a difficulty experienced by audiences? If so, which audience members – those who speak Japanese, or those who do not? Intercultural translation may be pleasurable, but is the "difficulty" of interlingual translation inhibiting? *Shakespeare and East Asia* suggests the opposite: Shakespeare in translation expands creative possibilities, adds layers of signification and enriches our collective understanding of a given play. Among the many examples provided by Joubin are Caliban's "You taught me language" from *The Tempest* ("In Japanese, it is rendered as 'human language,' as opposed to languages of the animals, or computer languages"; 188) and Viola's gender fluidity in *Twelfth Night* ("speakers of Japanese are restricted by the gender-specific first-person pronouns available to them"; 2).

The latter instance connects to a wider sub-theme running through the book – gender identity, post-gender casting and transgender representation. Here, too, context is all-important; Joubin shows how the complex figure of Gong-gil, a trans character in Lee Joon-ik's "Shakespearean" Korean film *The King and the Clown* (2005), can be better appreciated through an understanding of K-pop's *kkonminam* or

“flower boys.” Insofar as public discourse about gender fluidity in the Anglosphere would benefit tremendously from a less Anglonormative perspective, the same is true of public discourse about Shakespeare. Happily, *Shakespeare and East Asia* is a constructive intervention on both scores.

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