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Kim C. Sturgess. *Shakespeare and the American Nation*.

Cambridge University Press, 2004.

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- 1 The front page of Kim C Sturges's recent book entitled *Shakespeare and the American Nation* is particularly mind-teasing insofar as it represents the famous Droeshout engraving of the bard (it illustrated the front-page of the 1623 edition of Shakespeare's works) standing out against a background that superimposes the head of the Statue of Liberty on the spangled banner. The starting point of Sturges's 234-page demonstration endorsed by Cambridge University Press is a paradox that the British author presents in the opening chapters : how can rebels possibly break away radically from their mother country and at the same time celebrate, even wish to adopt, her most prominent playwright. In other words, Kim C. Sturges proposes to account for what looks very much like the survival, even the amplification, of an unlikely love affair. But of course, one should not overlook the fact that « the course of true love never did run smooth »...
- 2 A passionate love affair indeed it seems to be. And a long-lasting one since it dates back to the early years of the history of America. The approach adopted here is chronological and it leads us naturally to the present times that are (too?) briefly evoked at the end of the book. But the author's concern is the development of a process rather than an account of its outcome. The book ends with a rich bibliography followed by a very useful index. Each chapter opens with a hand-picked epigraph. The opening chapters bear the stamp of the teacher who makes a point of defining his point very precisely : the outline of the book is presented very clearly and the paradox that serves as its nucleus (Part 1 : the paradox) is introduced almost dramatically, the author questioning its existence (« does American acceptance of Shakespeare during the nineteenth century really represent a paradox ? » 7) only to assert it more convincingly (« With this book I confirm and explain the paradox of the appropriation of Shakespeare, » 8). The suspense operates along half a dozen lines only and then is interrupted by the solemn pledge : « I will provide answers » (7). Though Kim C.

Sturgess is careful to set the limits of his demonstration (Methodology and Scope, 8-9), such assertions as «I comprehensively explore how and why Shakespeare was appropriated to the cause of creating a unifying American heritage » (10) may seem a bit too optimistic.

- 3 It is true that the demonstration is well-documented : travellers' tales, newspaper articles, official speeches, literary pieces, actors' testimonies and pamphlets abound and provide a variegated account of the impact of Shakespeare's drama on the American nation. The quotations are relevant and enlightening, but the absence of some documents mentioned in the text is unfortunate. For example, we are told that slavery was « in 1775 supported in a pamphlet by Richard Nisbet by use of selective quotations from Shakespeare » (58) but the document at issue is not included.
- 4 Part II is a wide-ranging analysis of the process(es) that led to the appropriation of the Elizabethan playwright. The following chapter deals with the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a period that was most important in the development of the American nation and that saw the first American edition of Shakespeare's plays (in 1795 by Joseph Hopkinson. [The preface to this edition is included in the book : Appendix one]). And the two, Kim C. Sturgess demonstrates, went hand in hand. Two prominent American figures stand out : John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, whose unflinching interest in Shakespeare contributed to bridge the gap that separated Washington from Stratford-upon-Avon. They initiated a series of pilgrimages to the English birthplace. As they were confident that « Shakespeare was available for adoption » (59, 65), they contributed to the involvement of the playwright's name in « the cause of *E Pluribus Unum* and Manifest Destiny » (67).
- 5 The author demonstrates convincingly that the process of adoption was taken one decisive step further during the Jacksonian era. America seemed to be addicted to Shakespeare, as the story of the convicted murderer bequeathing his skull to an actor for him to have a quality « prop » for his performance of *Hamlet* indicates (81). Kim C. Sturgess provides a wealth of such anecdotes (we learn that some mines in Colorado were named « Cordelia » or « Ophelia » (81), that the assassination of A. Lincoln in 1865 was most 'theatrical' (128), which makes his book very pleasant to read. Incidentally his account of the regular presence of prostitutes in American playhouses could have unexpectedly strengthened the link between the American experience and Shakespeare's Globe theatre, though the author does not draw upon this common feature. This chapter makes it quite clear that Shakespeare was a unifying force for the fledgling nation and that the Elizabethan cement helped keep together the American edifice.
- 6 The 19th century saw the rise of a disquieting feeling that stressed the « cultural superiority of English-speaking people, » though English was not the first language for the majority of the population (103). And Shakespeare was instrumental in sanctioning this trend. To drive his point home to the readers, Kim C. Sturgess is forced to write a rather lengthy section on the evolution of American values and creeds that enables him to get such unwieldy concepts as Manifest Destiny, *E Pluribus Unum* and Anglo-Saxon Messianism through to the readers.
- 7 In Chapter 6, the demanding reader may be disappointed not to be given access to the (unpublished) letter written by William Strachey in 1606 and mentioned in the text as a probable source for Shakespeare's *Tempest*. It is also regrettable that no picture is provided to illustrate the paragraphs on « Heroic celebrations in paint and stone »

(126). As for the following assertion: « Unconsciously, Americans considered themselves heroic, and increasingly extravagant displays of patriotism marked the national character » (124), recent history may prompt the European reader to smile wryly and to convert the preterit into simple present. In any case, Kim C. Sturges's choice of a preterit may indicate that he bears no grudge against a nation that tried so painstakingly to appropriate what is now his nation's pride and joy.

- 8 Chapter 7 accounts for later and more formal appropriations of Shakespeare in American culture, especially in schoolbooks. The (very short) chapters devoted to the African-American response to Shakespeare, and to that of the Cherokee nation, are quite disappointing. The major new phase in the process under scrutiny is now probably the rise, on the American continent, of protesting voices that denounced what they called « blind, unbridled admiration » (Melville, 159) for the Elizabethan dramatist.
- 9 The next chapter presents a survey of what was to become an international concern in the late 19th and early 20th century, namely the authorship controversy. America was the epicentre of the earthquake that still keeps some people shaking nowadays... Shakespeare, Americans suggested, is a collective noun for a group of men who « struggled for republican freedom » (172). Shakespeare is « dehumanised, » which looks very much like the first step in a process that may lead to the definition of a new identity... What is particularly puzzling about this issue is the fact that the main figure in this debate was a woman named Delia Bacon and that she set her mind on two candidates : Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Francis Bacon. Though probably a coincidence, her attitude looks very much like a microcosmic/personal version of the larger national undertaking.
- 10 The « final appropriation » chapter provides interesting information about the copies of the 1623 Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays. Following Anthony West's census, Kim C. Sturges has made an inventory of the remaining books ; he has located 228 surviving copies and 63% in the US (There is something wrong about his account since he locates 145 in the US, 43 in Britain and 27 in the rest of the world, which amounts to 215 copies instead of 228... 13 are missing!). Also included in this chapter is the amazing story of Barnum's endeavours to buy Shakespeare's birthplace and a biography of Henry Clay Folger. A map (Appendix 2, 218) indicates the position of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C.
- 11 The epilogue connects the demonstration with the present times and shows that the process is still under way : Shakespeare is still being used to serve national interests. One may add that as long as his drama and image are profitable, the process will go on, as the recent example of Disney's *Lion King*, the « animal » version of *Hamlet*, indicates.
- 12 Kim C. Sturges's book is a valuable account of one of the ingredients that permitted America to stand up as a unified nation. Like an unruly adolescent torn between his eagerness to break loose from his parents and an irresistible love that still binds him to them, America broke away from Great Britain while asserting her rights to what was dearest to her in the mother country. Asserting that the Old World was not worthy of such a literary heritage allowed the New one to pose as the rightful inheritor. The demonstration carried out by Kim C. Sturges is interesting and convincing. But it provides one facet only of a problem that should be discussed at length, taking many more aspects into account (profitability, literary approach and sensitivity...). It is indeed very difficult to circumscribe such a subject as the appropriation of Shakespeare

by a budding nation because it brings into play, among other things, the notions of literary pleasure, of the limits of politics, of the function of literature and of national identity.

- 13 I cannot resist the temptation to mention Al Pacino's brilliant film « *Looking for Richard* » which deals with the relationship Americans entertain with Shakespeare. Though the theme is discussed mainly by actors, one of the main aspects that surface now and then is the fear occasioned by his plays. When Al Pacino evokes the « American complex » concerning Shakespeare what he has in mind runs contrary to what Kim C. Sturgess demonstrates : not superiority over the British, but rather inferiority. But it is true that excessive admiration may lead to estrangement and fear... The love story is not finished between Stratford D.C. and Washington-upon-Avon.
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