[Review of:] Shakespeare-Handbuch (Stuttgart, 2000) / Ina Schabert (ed.)

ERNE, Lukas Christian

Available at:
http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:14561

Disclaimer: layout of this document may differ from the published version.
Literature of the Dominions”, da nur mehr Autoren aufgenommen wurden, die auf den Britischen Inseln geboren wurden oder dort lebten. Dies wird nun konsequent durchgeführt, so daß keine eigenen Rubriken mehr für irische, schottische oder walisische Literatur erscheinen, sondern die einschlägigen Autoren in die alphabetischen Listen eingereiht sind.


Bonn

Dieter Mehl


Almost three decades ago, a team of young German academics and members of Munich’s Shakespeare-Library, sharing the passion for Shakespeare with which Wolfgang Clemen infected his students, produced the first edition of the Shakespeare-Handbuch under the general editorship of Ina Schabert. At the turn of the century, the Handbuch has reached its fourth edition and has been newly revised and updated. Its original contributors, several of whom have since become some of Germany’s leading Shakespeareans, have now been joined by a second generation of contributors, many of whom had barely been born when the first edition was published.

What has remained constant in the Handbuch’s progress from the first to the fourth edition is its organization as reflected in the subtitle: Die Zeit – Der Mensch – Das Werk – Die Nachwelt. The first section takes three useful steps towards Shakespeare and his works: a new socio-historical introduction to early modern England (Bernhard Klein), followed by two revised chapters on England’s dramatic tradition (Wolfgang Weiss) and the Elizabethan stage (Helmut Castrop). The second, thoroughly updated, section on Shakespeare the man (Ingeborg Boltz) provides a good survey of Shakespeare’s life as it emerges from the scant documentary records and of the biographical writings they have triggered. It concludes with three delightful short chapters on topics of which most read-
ers are unlikely to have more than a sketchy knowledge: Shakespeare as a fictional character, Shakespeare portraits, and the authorship question, in which Boltz surveys and disposes of the various contenders from Bacon to Edward de Vere with an enviable lightness of touch.

In the third part, the discussion of the works themselves is usefully preceded by investigations of the plays’ texts (Hans Walter Gabler), of their theatrical art (Ina Schabert) and, in an entirely new chapter, of their “ideological profile” (Andreas Mahler). Taken one by one, the thirty-six First Folio plays plus Pericles and The Two Noble Kinsmen all receive brief introductions dealing with text, date, sources, interpretation, and reception history. While the discussion of the histories (Ina Habermann and Bernhard Klein) and the comedies (Manfred Pfister, Walter Kluge, and Ingrid Hotz-Davies) follows the established chronology, the tragedies (Werner von Koppenfels and Sabine Schütling) are divided into “early”, “Roman”, and “late”, perhaps not the most useful distinction considering Titus Andronicus is both Roman and early, and Hamlet can in no meaningful way be said to be late. Part three concludes with a chapter on Shakespeare’s non-dramatic poetry (Kurt Tetzel von Rosador) that gives pride of place to the sonnets – usefully situating them within contemporary poetic conventions – but does perhaps less than full justice to Shakespeare’s two narrative poems in the three pages devoted to them (604–06).

The breadth with which part four on the plays’ afterlives approaches its subject goes beyond the rest of the Handbuch. It includes not only substantial contributions on the Shakespeare reception in Germany (Günther Erken), Great Britain and the US (Ina Schabert), but it also offers shorter chapters by an impressive team of contributors about Shakespeare’s destiny in a great many other parts of the world, from France via Hungary all the way to the Caribbean Islands. This part does not confine itself to “literary and cultural” reception, but it also devotes separate chapters to Shakespeare’s reception on stage (Günther Erken), in music (Hans Walter Gabler), in film (Johann N. Schmidt), in German translations (Günther Erken) and in criticism (Manfred Pfister).

What is one of the central concerns in the revisions for the fourth edition is an adequate integration of the various theoretical revolutions that have occurred since the first edition was published, not an easy undertaking considering that post-modern theory and a Handbuch thoroughly structured around “the man and his work” are no easy bedfellows. Other important critical and scholarly developments that do not come under the heading “theory” seem to have been less well attended to, however. Arguably, the revolution that has affected Shakespeare criticism more than any other in the last thirty years has sprung from the simple insight that Shakespeare’s plays are best explored and most fully understood if we not only read them in print but also watch them in performance, a revolution that is much broader than the admittedly stimulating theoretical discussions by William Worthen and others which alone find their way into the revisions (887–89). As anyone who compares a recent edition of a Shakespeare play – for instance R. A. Foakes’s splendid Arden3 edition of King Lear – to its equivalent in the previous Arden generation will recognize, performance criticism has had a profound and generally salutary influence upon Shakespeare studies in recent decades.

Another area in which the Shakespeare-Handbuch only provides a partial and outdated picture is that of the Shakespeare canon. While the reader is told that recent scholarship does not exclude Shakespeare’s co-authorship of Edward III (196), the play is basically treated as non-Shakespearean and is not included among the plays discussed.
In fact, the question no longer appears to be whether Shakespeare contributed to *Edward III* or not, but (as in the case of *Pericles*, *Titus Andronicus*, and several other Shakespeare plays) whether or not he is its sole author. The play has been included in David Bevington’s Longman Complete Works of Shakespeare (4th ed., 1997) and in the New Cambridge Shakespeare series (ed. Giorgio Melchiori, 1998). A volume in the Arden series is in preparation. Even Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor are on record as regretting the play’s exclusion from their Oxford Complete Works (see Wells and Taylor, “The Oxford Shakespeare Re-Viewed”, *Analytical and Enumerative Bibliography*, 4 (1990), 6–20, esp. 7–8).

Surprisingly, another text that is present in several recent editions of Shakespeare’s works fails to get a single mention in the *Handbuch*. With an article on the front page of the *New York Times* (14 January 1996), a heated exchange of views in the pages of the *TLS* (1996), articles in *PMLA* (1996) and *Shakespeare Quarterly* (1997), and a special forum in *Shakespeare Studies* (1997), the controversy over the authorship of the *Funeral Elegy* by “W.S.” has not lacked visibility. While the claims for Shakespeare’s authorship may seem doubtful to many (including the present reviewer), the Norton Shakespeare—the *Handbuch’s* text of reference (xxiv)—does include the *Funeral Elegy*, as does Bevington’s Longman Shakespeare. Many scholars, especially in the US, seem to share Stephen Booth’s belief that *A Funeral Elegy* is “a long, dull poem by William Shakespeare” (*Shakespeare Studies*, 25 (1997), 237), although scholarly opinion is likely to shift again after the publication of Brian Vickers’ forthcoming *Counterfeiting Shakespeare: Evidence, Authorship, and John Ford’s “Funeral Elegye”* (Cambridge University Press).

Despite these reservations, it is good news that German-speaking students and aficionados of Germany’s third national poet continue to have access to a generally competent, updated, and handsome *Shakespeare-Handbuch*. The comprehensiveness with which the *Handbuch* approaches its subject makes it useful not only as a full introduction to Shakespeare and as a work of reference that provides answers where questions may arise, but also as an appetizer that teases its readers with just enough information to make them desire more. Who, for instance, is familiar with von Braunthal’s nineteenth-century dramatization of Tieck’s *Dichterleben* (170–71), a novella that tells the story of Shakespeare’s youth (part one) and of his friendship with Southampton (part two), bringing on stage a fictionalized Shakespeare in a process of adaptation that replicates the making of many of Shakespeare’s plays? And how many Shakespeareans have heard of *Timone misantropo* of 1696, perhaps the earliest Shakespeare opera, composed by Emperor Leopold I (777)? The bibliographical references being full and conveniently placed at the end of every subchapter, the *Handbuch* provides an ideal point of departure from which to explore some of the many areas it touches upon.

In a devastating review of J. Churton Collins’s edition of *The Plays and Poems of Robert Greene*, W. W. Greg lamented the “undesirable amusement” English scholarship afforded “to the learned world” (*MLR*, 1 (1905–06), 246). To the embarrassment of Greg and many of his peers, German scholarship on Shakespeare and his contemporaries was in many ways ahead of that undertaken in the authors’ native land. Nearly a century later, that situation has long since changed, but works such as the *Shakespeare-Handbuch* bear eloquent witness to a powerful tradition of German scholarship on England’s literary giants.