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Hamlet with a Cowboy Hat and Romeo as a Zombie: Shakespearian Genre Films

***Лівінгстон Девід.* Гамлет у ковбойському капелюсі та Ромео як зомбі: шекспірівські жанрові фільми.**

Ця публікація є рецензією на нещодавно опубліковану книгу угорського шекспірознавця Кінги Фельдварі. Книга має назву «Ковбойські Гамлети та зомбовані Ромео: Шекспір у жанровому кіно». Перша її частина складається з аналізу та обговорення вестернів, мелодрам і нуар-фільмів, інспірованих п'єсами Шекспіра. У другій частині досліджуються новітні фільми для підлітків про вампірів і зомбі, а також біографічні фільми про Шекспіра.

Ключові слова: *Кінги Фельдварі, «Ковбойські Гамлети та зомбовані Ромео», шекспірівські п'єси, шекспірівські жанрові фільми.*

What do cowboys, vampires, gangsters, zombies and American teenagers have in common? They are all the subjects of films inspired, to varying degrees, by Shakespeare. The wittily entitled book *Cowboy Hamlets and Zombie Romeos* was written by the Hungarian scholar Kinga Földváry, who is currently employed at the Institute of English and American Studies, Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest. This book is rather eclectic in its arrangement including a wide range of genres and a long chronological time-frame. The monograph is divided into two main sections, which are further sub-divided into chapters. The first section is entitled *Classical Hollywood Cinema* and includes within it chapters on westerns, melodramas and noir films. The second section, *Contemporary Blockbusters*,

focuses on teen films, vampire and zombies and finally biopic treatments of Shakespeare. Although all of these genres have been dealt with before, to lesser and greater degrees, Földvály bravely includes all of them under the umbrella of “genre readings of screen Shakespeare”¹.

I personally found most intriguing the first half of the book, it being, at least for me, a less well-known subject of analysis. The films analysed varied, understandably, in terms of the amount of Shakespearean material. Due to this fact, I found some of the material more compelling than others. I was impressed, for example, by the discussion of her second example, *Broken Lance* from 1954, in the first chapter entitled *Will in the Wild West: Western Adaptations of Shakespeare*. Partially based on *King Lear*, Földvály demonstrates innovative parallels between the, seemingly, disparate material of the two works of art: “The imbalance displayed by Matt Devereaux, who refuses to behave in a rational manner, is easy to associate with Lear’s madness as well, and his Native American wife and his servant, who remain at his side, are socially just as marginalised as Lear’s Shakespearean companions.”² The author manages to analyse the works discussed, such as Westerns set back in the nineteenth century, as not only commentaries on the politics and societal developments of the time period they were produced in (in this case America in the 1950s), but also demonstrates poignant Shakespearean parallels.

Chapter two, *Shakespeare the Tear-jerker: from Woman’s Film to Global Melodrama* amounts to an even wider range of films, once again with some more obviously Shakespearean inspired than others. While *All Night Long*, a British jazz film based on *Othello* and the Larian *A Thousand Acres*, an adaptation of the critically acclaimed novel by Jane Smiley seemed the most intriguing at first glance, I was finally most impressed by the analysis of the British/Bollywood film *Life Goes On* from 2009. Although quite different in terms of body-

¹ Földvály K. *Cowboy Hamlets and Zombie Romeos: Shakespeare in Genre Film*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2020. P. 5.

² *Ibid.* P. 44.

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count, this British-Asian version of *King Lear* manages to imbue the original with new, culturally innovative, elements and nuances. “This alteration in turn makes the mother figure a symbolic saviour of the traditions of the family, the whole of the diasporic community and even the cinematic conventions of the melodrama.”³

The films discussed in the third chapter *Dark-minded Othellos, Mobster Macbeths: Film Noir, Gangster, Gangster Noir* cover a time-period of over sixty years. Two of the films are variations of *Macbeth*: *Joe Macbeth* from 1955 and *Men of Respect* from 1990. Földvary eloquently demonstrates how the ganger/noir genre powerfully corresponds with the aesthetics and mood of the original play, while still touching on issues relevant in the present: “... these two versions of *Macbeth* exemplify how adaptations have always been able to tell their own stories and reflect their own ages, with their particular concerns and anxieties, with the help of inherited plots and genre conventions.”⁴ While initially sceptical about the argument that the fairly recent cops and robbers film *We Own the Night* drew inspiration from the *Henry IV* plays, I was finally won over and even watched the film with added pleasure and insight.

The second half of the book kicks off with a chapter dedicated to highly popular and much discussed teen adaptations and is aptly entitled *Back to School, Will: Shakespeare the Teen Idol*. The introduction to the section includes the insightful observation of there being a parallel between the stock ending of Shakespeare’s comedies in marriage and the frequent inclusion of a prom or ball in the teen adaptation. Although lesser known than the popular films *10 Things I Hate About You* and *She’s the Man*, based on *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Twelfth Night* respectively, the discussions of the queer-themed *Lost and Delirious* and *Were the World Mine* were particularly fulfilling and thought-provoking. Földvary’s discussion of the latter film points out the queer potential provided by the use of the source material: “The choice of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is no accident, since the

³ Ibid. P. 100.

⁴ Ibid. P. 134.

forest scenes of mistaken and confused identities offer the potential for the performance of queer and reimagined sexual identities, although surprisingly few mainstream films have opted for this interpretation so far.”⁵ I was slightly disappointed that the drug-addled *A Midsummer Night’s Rave* from 2002, directed by Gil Cates Jr., was not included in this chapter, although it has little original to offer apart from the parallels between Puck’s love juice and modern hallucinogenics and the inclusion of a queer relationship.

Chapter five, *Shakespeare the Undead: a Renaissance of Vampires and Zombies* includes once again films which make direct reference to the original play and those with much less obvious Shakespearian references and parallels. In her discussion of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Undead*, a spin-off of not only *Hamlet*, but also Stoppard’s classic Theatre of the Absurd play, the author provides a particularly insightful comment on the evolution of the vampire character and its parallel with the literary canon and Shakespeare in particular. “The film thus exemplifies how the former aristocratic figure of the vampire has become no more than a parasite by the twenty-first century, and more importantly, it also represents the claim that the literary corpus it keeps – if not alive, at least undead – is no longer a viable presence in itself, unless popular culture injects it with some fresh blood.”⁶ Her discussion of *Warm Bodies*, a zombie adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, is also spot-on and eloquent: “This idea of the commodified revival of the dead playwright is equally relevant for a discussion of adaptations, and we may easily equate the tons of new adaptations made every year with the masses of soulless zombies, rejuvenated in form, re-embodied to resemble their origins, but lacking the soul of their source that made all the difference.”⁷

The last chapter, *Will, Bill and the Earl: Versions of the Author in Contemporary Biopics* covers not only the most commercially successful of all the films discussed, but also those

⁵ Ibid. P. 200.

⁶ Ibid. P. 221.

⁷ Ibid. P. 242.

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most closely analysed by critics. I found myself disagreeing with some of the statements made concerning the Shakespeare biopic *A Waste of Shame*. While I personally found the grittiness and sordidness of the film a refreshing change from the overly glamorous (and clean) picture of Elizabethan England presented in *Shakespeare In Love*, Földváry argues that this preponderance of depressing details led to its commercial and artistic failure: “In presenting the early modern world as dominated by dirt and squalor, with a strong emphasis on physicality, the viewer is denied the belief in the poet’s ability to transcend the experience and sublimate it into poetry.”⁸ I thoroughly agreed, however, with her comments concerning the outrageous portrayal of Queen Elizabeth in *Anonymous* and the complete lack of a spark in Kenneth Branagh and Ben Elton’s *All Is True*, this being all the more surprising when one realises that the latter is also the author of the brilliant and highly amusing Shakespeare television series *Upstart Crow*, to say nothing of *Blackadder*. She points out how the film’s focus on the retirement back in Stratford of the great playwright fails to get off the ground and lacks (even more surprisingly) wit and exuberance: “... but what is nearly unprecedented (and rather lamentable) in Branagh’s latest enterprise is the complete absence of irony, or even a sense of humour, whether self-deprecating or directed at the local backwater of Stratford society.”⁹

The book, *Cowboy Hamlets and Zombie Romeos*, is highly readable and informative and should be greatly appreciated by both scholars and less advanced readers. Földváry’s impressive scholarship is to be commended although she does, one might argue, make reference a bit too much to the work of Douglas Lanier throughout the book. On the whole, the author writes with much energy and force. When speaking of vampire adaptations, for example, she is inspired when making the following analogy: “No wonder that the already much-abused body of Shakespeare’s work has also become food – if not always for thought, then for parasitical creatures intent on sucking out the last drops of blood

⁸ Ibid. P. 260.

⁹ Ibid. P. 279.

of the author's lifeless corpse, either for inspiration or simply to enhance marketing."¹⁰ Földvály's book and accomplishment is, however, exactly the opposite, breathing life back, once again, into both lesser-known and well-established Shakespearian film genre adaptations.

References:

Földvály K. *Cowboy Hamlets and Zombie Romeos: Shakespeare in Genre Film*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2020. 319 p.

¹⁰ Ibid. P. 160.